Sun Sun Lim and Minu Thomas
National University of Singapore

Migrant workers' use of ICTs for interpersonal communication
– The experience of female domestic workers in Singapore

Discussant: Mirca Madianou
University of Cambridge

20 April - 4 May 2010

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Tue Apr 20 01:27:04 PDT 2010

Dear All

Welcome to another EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar! Over the next two weeks we'll be discussing through this mailing list a working paper by Minu Thomas and Sun Sun Lim entitled "Migrant workers' use of ICTs for interpersonal communication - The experience of female domestic workers in Singapore." You will find the abstract below and can download the full paper here: http://www.media-anthropology.net/thomas_lim_migrant_workers_ICT.pdf

Minu Thomas completed her MA at the Communications and New Media Programme, National University of Singapore. She is currently working in India as an education services professional.

Sun Sun LIM (PhD, LSE) is Assistant Professor at the Communications and New Media Programme, National University of Singapore. She studies technology domestication and charts media ethnographies in Asia, having conducted research in China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore . She has articles published and forthcoming in the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, New Media & Society, Communications of the ACM, Telematics & Informatics, Journal of Electronic Commerce Research, Asian Journal of Communication, East Asian Science, Technology and Society and Science, Technology and Society. She also sits on Singapore's Internet and Media Advisory Committee and the National Youth Council.

On this occasion our discussant is Mirca Madianou who is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Lucy Cavendish College. She is the author of Mediating the Nation (UCL Press/Routledge, 2005) and several other articles on news audiences, nationalism, transnationalism and the media. She is currently engaged in an ESRC-funded project entitled 'Migration, ICTs and Transnational Families' which is a collaboration with Daniel Miller and focuses on UK-based Filipino and Caribbean migrants and their left-behind families.

As is by now customary, the session with start with our discussant's comments posted to the list later today or by tomorrow morning GMT. The presenters will then respond to those comments, after which the discussion will be open to the floor for further questions and comments.

To post your thoughts, simply write directly to the list (medianthro at easaonline.org) with no attachments once the floor is open. If your post doesn't reach the list please let me know offlist rather than resending it, as our listserv sometimes works in mysterious ways.

Looking forward to a productive session, I'd now like to invite Mirca to post her comments

John

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores ICT use by Indian and Filipino female migrant workers who are employed as live-in maids in Singapore through ethnographic interviews with twenty women. Their particular employment circumstances translate into a circumscribed and isolated living and working experience which makes their access and use of ICTs even more significant. Our findings show that these women employ a variety of technologies for everyday communication, including letters, the mobile phone and the Internet, with the mobile phone being the most crucial communication device for most of them. Mobile communications enable them to foster emotional links with their friends and family, grow their social networks and afford them greater autonomy in seeking better job opportunities and the management of their personal matters. The paper concludes by making three policy recommendations aimed at improving ICT access for migrant workers. First, upon arrival in their host countries, all migrant workers should be educated about the access, use and cost of different communication devices and services available to them. Second, contracts between employers and migrant workers should have clear provisions for the employees' rights to communication and specifically, mobile communications. Third, governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector should actively seek to narrow the technological divide between migrant workers' home and host countries so that these workers' communications with individuals and organisations in their home countries are not impeded.

Mirca Madianou mm577 at cam.ac.uk
Wed Apr 21 04:16:38 PDT 2010

[…]

First of all I'd like to thank Minu Thomas and Sun Sun Lim for the opportunity to engage with their work and John for inviting me to comment.

The paper explores migrant workers' ICT use for interpersonal communication drawing on research with 20 live-in domestic workers from India and the Philippines working in Singapore. I wish to say that this is a great topic, but I am aware of my own bias given that my ongoing research focuses on a very similar theme: together with my collaborator, Daniel Miller, we have been studying whether the explosion of opportunities in new communications technologies has transformed care and intimacy among transnational families and in particular Caribbean and Filipino migrants in the UK and their left-behind families. This is a three-year multi-sited ethnography in London, Cambridge, the Philippines and Trinidad which is funded by the ESRC and now entering its final year.

Personal enthusiasms aside, it is clear to see the significance of Thomas' and Lim's project. Migration and ICTs are two of the tales of our times and their convergence has potential consequences for a number of areas ranging from the welfare of migrants, their integration in host societies, their social and economic capital and their ability to maintain relationships of love and care with their left-behind families. There is already a growing literature on these themes (reviewed by the authors), but clearly more research is needed given the variation of migratory experiences and the relentlessly evolving nature of new communication technologies. This article represents a welcome addition in that respect.

What struck me immediately is that this paper is a reminder of the sharp differences live-in domestics experience depending on the social and cultural context in which they work. For example, the UK situation is markedly different with more freedoms and rights granted to domestic workers, although, of course, it is possible to come across stories of abuse and exploitation here, too.

I very much welcome the study's comparative perspective, which is one of its strengths. However, I feel that the authors could have made more with this opportunity; for example, a systematic comparison between the two groups would have been very enlightening given that there are very striking differences both in terms of ICT access and educational status as Table 1 suggests. For example, while only one of the Indian participants had access to a computer (I assume that also means internet access?), four of the Filipinas used a pc which is a fourfold increase and significant even for such a small sample. The Filipinas are also more educated with high school being the minimum qualification and five of the study's participants having University degrees. Based on my current research this is a pattern typical for UK-based Filipinas and Filipino migration more generally with migrants often experiencing a downward social mobility which is only compensated by higher income due to the wage differentials (see also Parrenas 2001). Conversely, only one of the Indian participants had a University degree, whilst three had only been through some primary education. The paper does not discuss these differences and whether they translate in variations of ICT consumption patterns. A comparison of migration

patterns would have also been welcome. Underlying all these questions is a need for a clearer justification as to why a focus on these two groups - and not Indonesian domestics, for instance?

Another striking pattern in the sample cutting across the two populations is that women seem to be divided between those who have been abroad for long periods of time (up to 19 years, presumably in the case of Filipinas made up of a sequence of short-term, renewable contracts) and those who have only been in Singapore for months, or a couple of years. It would be great to know if the length of migration determines variations in ICT consumption? Other contextual information, which would have also been useful to have is how many of these women were single and how many mothers and weather maintaining long distance primary relationships shapes the patterns of ICT use.

What is the situation with irregular migrants in Singapore? This is an issue in the UK. Our interviews with telecoms officials in the Philippines drawing on inbound and outbound call traffic suggest a higher Filipino UK-based population than the one reported in the official statistics (Madianou and Miller in preparation). Are there any undocumented domestic migrants in Singapore and were there any in the sample? I was also wondering whether the reluctance to record the interviews (p.4) was also due to the migrant's status. This matters as lack of legal documents restricts one's movements and thus increases dependence on communication media which has certainly been one of our findings (Madianou and Miller in preparation).

I am intrigued as to why the authors choose the term ritual to discuss the uses of the phone in order to maintain relationships with family members. There may well be something ritualistic about these communications, but this needs further unpacking. Do Sumanthi's marital rows over the phone (page 6) constitute performances of ritual, or are they a communicative strategy - or even the result of misunderstandings which inevitably occur in the process of mediated communication (as opposed to situations of co-presence)?

Even though the authors recognise the empowering potential of ICTs and the mobile phone in particular, they are careful not to paint an entirely rosy picture noting that communication can also be a burden, a finding that concurs with ours. To what extent would the authors agree with the argument that migration has not reversed the gender hierarchies in the Philippines and mobile phones actually tie women to the domestic sphere (Parrenas 2005)?

Although the paper discusses the economic conditions of ICT availability and consumption in Singapore it would have been helpful to have been given some context about the political and economic structure of telecommunications in the Philippines and India. Such a perspective would throw light to the reasons why ICTs can also be experienced as a burden, and also explain the dominance of the mobile phone.

I am fascinated about the continuing importance of letter-writing which the authors allude to and I would love to hear more about this. How does letter-writing compare with the new technologies? In what context is letter-writing preferred today over a phone call? We have found that some of our most poignant material comes from

people's memories of writing and receiving letters (Madianou and Miller forthcoming) and it would be great to hear more about the survival of this genre.

I applaud the paper's commitment to contribute to policy, highlighting the applicability of such research which can potentially lead to an improvement of the subjects' quality of life. I am wondering why the internet is largely absent from these recommendations: for example, the authors note that 'contracts between employers and migrant workers in general should have clear provision for the employee' right to communication and specifically, mobile communications'. Although it is understandable that the authors' research points to the clear dominance of the mobile phone, I would have thought that encouraging internet-based communication would help minimise costs of communication which emerge as significant (according to Table 2). For example, amongst our London and Cambridge participants we have a few who have been able to use their employers' pc to chat with their families in the Philippines or with their own networks in the UK. We have also witnessed the empowering potential of internet-based communication as we have worked with women who acquired digital literacy during our fieldwork (through the Centre for Filipinos in London for instance which provides IT classes every Sunday). If the reason why the internet is not as present is its low penetration in the countries of origin then this needs to be more clearly addressed in the discussion - also as there are differentiations within these countries (see earlier point about economic analysis).

Finally, I would like to ask the authors if the study's findings point, however tentatively, to a wider thesis about the relationship between migration and ICTs in the context of interpersonal communication. I realise this is a rather ambitious question, but one which we may want to address in the context of this discussion over the next few days.

Thanks again to Minu Thomas and Sun Sun Lim. I enjoyed reading the paper and look forward to the discussion. Over to you.

References

Madianou, M. and Miller, D. (forthcoming 2011) 'Crafting Love: letters and cassette tapes among Filipino transnational families', South East Asia Research, forthcoming Spring 2011.

Madianou and Miller (in preparation) 'Distant parenting: Migration, ICTs and transnational families', ESRC report and book manuscript in preparation.

Parreñas, R. S. (2001) Servants of Globalization, Women, Migration and Domestic Work, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Parreñas, R. (2005) 'Long distance intimacy: class, gender and intergenerational relations between mothers and children in Filipino transnational families', Global Networks 5 (4), 317-336

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Wed Apr 21 04:50:34 PDT 2010

Many thanks for those comments, Mirca!

I'd now like to invite the authors, Minu Thomas and Sun Sun Lim, to respond to them - after which you are all very welcome to contribute further thoughts and questions on this working paper.

John

Sun Sun LIM sunlim at nus.edu.sg
Thu Apr 22 02:25:02 PDT 2010

Hello everyone! Hello Mirca!

Thanks for this opportunity. I present our response by first summarizing Mirca's questions, followed by our responses highlighted in bold [*editor's note: the discussant's comments are shown in italics]*.

We thank Mirca for her thoughtful comments and also her questions which will allow us to clarify points which we could not dwell upon given concerns about the paper's length. I will speak on behalf of Minu and myself because Minu has left academia and is very busy with her current job. So she has entrusted me with this. The genesis of this study, which formed Minu's MA thesis, is that Minu was interested in studying technology domestication within the Indian context. Having myself conducted research on technology domestication by middle-class families in China, Singapore and South Korea, I was intrigued by how different family types, e.g. transnational families, and less "mainstream", more marginalised populations domesticate technology. Eventually, we decided that a study of Indian migrant workers in Singapore would be feasible, academically meaningful and have societal impact. I will proceed to answer each of Mirca's questions in turn:

I very much welcome the study's comparative perspective, which is one of its strengths. However, I feel that the authors could have made more with this opportunity; for example, a systematic comparison between the two groups would have been very enlightening given that there are very striking differences both in terms of ICT access and educational status as Table 1 suggests. ...It would be great to know if the length of migration determines variations in ICT consumption?

Thanks for this question. We did in fact compare their ICT use to better understand the influence of respondent age, time spent overseas and educational status on their ICT use. We began by categorizing respondents into those with 'high', 'moderate', and 'low' proficiency levels in the use of technologies. In this study, workers who were comfortable with using the more complex and advanced ICT devices or services such as the mobile phone—including voice calls and text messaging options—and the Internet or any other technology like a music player were categorized into the 'high' level group. Those who were using the mobile phone for both voice calls and text messaging but not the Internet or other technologies were included in the 'moderate' level group. Workers who used only the landline or/and only the voice call option of

the mobile phone (no text messaging included) were categorized in the 'low' level group.

When comparing the Filipino and Indian domestic workers, proficiency levels were higher in the case of Filipino workers, of whom six workers had high proficiency and four others, moderate. On the other hand, among the Indian migrant workers there were five workers in the low proficiency level category and only one worker in the high proficiency level category. The remaining four Indian workers were in the moderate proficiency level category.

Our findings suggest that education helps achieve at least a moderate level of proficiency in the use of technologies. The Filipino workers interviewed had better educational achievements - five of them were graduates and five others had completed high school- and this was reflected in their proficiency levels in the use of technologies. Six of the ten Filipino workers interviewed had high level of proficiency in the use of technologies. At the same time however, the better educated did not necessarily have a high proficiency level in the use of technologies, whereas those with high proficiency levels were not necessarily the highly educated. The influence of age on proficiency levels was also unclear. Migrant workers in the 20-29 year age-group did not have markedly higher proficiency levels, and neither did workers in the 40-49 year age-group have markedly lower proficiency levels. However, age did work against some older respondents because they simply had not had extensive exposure to such technologies and their attitude was that they were too old to learn about these new-fangled devices. Instead, what was evident from the findings was that looking beyond age, years overseas and educational status, technological proficiency was clearly encouraged by the specific need for using a particular technology, i.e. they were motivated and in fact, compelled, to learn how to use a technological device or service simply because they had to. Respondents who felt the need to 'mother' their children or nurture a romantic relationship through regular contacts felt compelled to learn to use the Internet and more sophisticated mobile phone functions.

Underlying all these questions is a need for a clearer justification as to why a focus on these two groups - and not Indonesian domestics, for instance?

As Minu was conducting the interviews personally, it was important that they be conducted in the two languages in which she was conversant - English, spoken by the Filipino respondents, and Tamil, spoken by the majority of Indian respondents. Furthermore, Filipino domestics are highly accessible (for study) because their contracts mandate Sundays off and hence they congregate in particular areas. In contrast, Indonesian domestics tend not to have such a clause in their contract, and are instead paid in lieu of days off. Indian domestics resemble their Indonesian counterparts in that regard but were accessible to Minu through her network of friends who hired Indian domestics. This disparity in contracts for migrants of different nationalities is due to the different levels of advocacy by their respective countries' relevant agencies. On this note, Transient Workers Count Too is a civic organisation which has been pushing for all migrant domestic workers in Singapore to have standardised contracts through their Days Off campaign, see http://www.twc2.org.sg/site/advocacy/days-off-campaign.html

What is the situation with irregular migrants in Singapore? This is an issue in the UK. Our interviews with telecoms officials in the Philippines drawing on inbound and

outbound call traffic suggest a higher Filipino UK-based population than the one reported in the official statistics (Madianou and Miller in preparation). Are there any undocumented domestic migrants in Singapore and were there any in the sample?

Undocumented domestic migrants are not a known phenomenon in Singapore. Illegal immigrants are predominantly male and tend to work in the construction industry. To the best of our knowledge, all our respondents were documented migrants who had entered Singapore through maid agencies before being hired by their employers.

I am intrigued as to why the authors choose the term ritual to discuss the uses of the phone in order to maintain relationships with family members. There may well be something ritualistic about these communications, but this needs further unpacking. Do Sumanthi's marital rows over the phone (page 6) constitute performances of ritual, or are they a communicative strategy - or even the result of misunderstandings which inevitably occur in the process of mediated communication (as opposed to situations of co-presence)?

Our findings suggest that the respondents felt that their days were not complete without these personal rituals which gave them a sense of self, and gave them a much-needed reprieve from constantly doing chores for other people. Hence we felt that the word 'ritual' better captures the sense of an act which is performed faithfully and with some semblance of ceremony, however trivial it may seem to observers. We would not label Sumanthi's 'ritualistic' marital rows a 'communicative strategy' given that she had no other means of communicating with her husband. Although they were both working in Singapore, they did not have the opportunity to regularly meet face-to-face and the phone conversations were their main link to each other. Instead their rows seemed to be a marital 'rhythm' that she had grown accustomed to and was perversely fond of.

Even though the authors recognise the empowering potential of ICTs and the mobile phone in particular, they are careful not to paint an entirely rosy picture noting that communication can also be a burden, a finding that concurs with ours. To what extent would the authors agree with the argument that migration has not reversed the gender hierarchies in the Philippines and mobile phones actually tie women to the domestic sphere (Parrenas 2005)?

For some of the women, gender hierarchies had indeed been reversed as they had left their husbands and children behind and were the family's sole breadwinners. They were consequently also held in high regard given their financial prowess and 'overseas experience'. As for women whose husbands were also working away from home, they had the dual responsibility of remote parenting and being a breadwinner since fathers were less inclined to undertake remote parenting. Either way, ICT-mediated communication made it easier for these women to continue to be involved in domestic affairs back home, and for better AND worse, they felt tied to the domestic sphere.

Although the paper discusses the economic conditions of ICT availability and consumption in Singapore it would have been helpful to have been given some context about the political and economic structure of telecommunications in the Philippines and India. Such a perspective would throw light to the reasons why ICTs can also be experienced as a burden, and also explain the dominance of the mobile phone.

This point is well taken. However, given the constraints of a paper, it would have been difficult to present a sufficiently comprehensive picture of the political and

economic structure of telecommunications in the Philippines and India because of the geographical diversity of the sample, e.g., the Filipino workers interviewed were from different parts of the Philippines including Luzon, Manila, Abra, Mindano and Candon city. Even within the small sample therefore, the respondents originated from different rural and urban cities in their home countries, each with their own sets of circumstances and constraints.

I am fascinated about the continuing importance of letter-writing which the authors allude to and I would love to hear more about this. How does letter-writing compare with the new technologies? In what context is letter-writing preferred today over a phone call? We have found that some of our most poignant material comes from people's memories of writing and receiving letters (Madianou and Miller forthcoming) and it would be great to hear more about the survival of this genre.

For the Filipinos, letter-writing tended to be reserved for special occasions, e.g. birthdays. But for their Indian counterparts, letters were written due to practical exigencies, i.e. to communicate with relatives back home who did not have telephone access.

I applaud the paper's commitment to contribute to policy, highlighting the applicability of such research which can potentially lead to an improvement of the subjects' quality of life. I am wondering why the internet is largely absent from these recommendations While the Internet is indeed readily available in Singapore, our respondents did not always have the access or the skills. Furthermore, they did not particularly enjoy or see the need for the Internet given that most of their relatives back home did not have access. The exceptions were those who had to use the Internet to communicate with relatives who were living in countries such as the US. Instead, on their days off, they preferred to simply sit and chat with their friends. Interestingly however, the growing trend in Singapore is toward smartphones, with 80% of handsets sold being smartphones. Although this trend may not have reached people in lower income groups such as migrant workers, it is very likely to percolate to them in the not-so-distant future given the sheer scale of smartphone penetration. This would certainly open up opportunities for them to access online services via their mobile phones, even if not to communicate with their loved ones, at least to obtain information or entertainment.

Finally, I would like to ask the authors if the study's findings point, however tentatively, to a wider thesis about the relationship between migration and ICTs in the context of interpersonal communication. I realise this is a rather ambitious question, but one which we may want to address in the context of this discussion over the next few days.

This is an interesting question which comes at the perfect time. I have recently commenced research on the concepts of 'the right to communicate' and 'safe migration'. The former is a multi-faceted term that argues that the right to communicate should be considered a basic human right, and although advocacy for this right has been stymied over the years, it has seen some resurgence in the discussions of the World Summit for the Information Society. The latter departs from the assumption that documented channels of migration provide the greatest legal protection to migrants. While this assumption can itself be contested, research on 'safe migration' tends to be dominated by a focus on labour laws and their implementation. In my next paper, my collaborators and I are pushing for a greater

salience of the 'right to communicate' within the concept of 'safe migration'. As we have only conducted some very preliminary research into these two concepts, we would appreciate any insights that our readers may have.

Look forward to more questions!

Best,

Sun

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Thu Apr 22 03:08:45 PDT 2010

`Many thanks to Sun for her prompt response to Mirca's comments!`

The floor is now open to questions and comments from the list. To post, simply write directly to medianthro at easaonline.org, with cc. to me.

John

ps If for some reason your post doesn't get through to the list, please let me know offlist rather than resending it. Thanks!

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Fri Apr 23 01:42:42 PDT 2010

I have a question for Sun about class and ICTs. Sun wrote:

"Having myself conducted research on technology domestication by middle-class families in China, Singapore and South Korea, I was intrigued by how different family types, e.g. transnational families, and less "mainstream", more marginalised populations domesticate technology."

I was wondering if you could say a bit more about this comparative dimension across classes and countries in the region, as I find it really intriguing.

The idea that families 'domesticate' technologies has been long used and debated within media and communication studies (e.g. Silverstone and Hirsch 1992, Berker et al 2006) but I didn't see it applied in the paper. Does the domestication model work in the case of foreign maids? By this I mean the messy process whereby technologies are acquired, objectified (turned from anonymous commodities into familiar objects), incorporated into family members' routines and converted into social currency.

Many thanks

John

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Silverstone, Roger, Hirsch, Eric (Eds.) (1992). Consuming Technologies : Media and information in domestic spaces. London/New York: Routledge

KATRIEN PYPE k.pype at bham.ac.uk
Fri Apr 23 01:54:34 PDT 2010

Dear Sun,

Dear all,

First of all thanks to the authors for an interesting paper. The topic of this work shop intrigues me because within a few months, I will be starting a project on ICT use and the impact of those technologies on social and religious life in Kinshasa, especially among elder people.

What I find most fascinating in the paper is the intersection of space and social belonging, but I am also curious about ICT aesthetics – and my questions to the authors deal with these issues.

1. Concerning space and ICT use: I wonder in how far ICTs such as mobile phones fully blur the public/private divide. This is not an argument the authors make, but it is something which many take for granted. We often hear (usually in the form of a complaint) that these new ICTs facilitate a constant invasion of the various spheres of life. What is fascinating is that the article shows how conscious actions are taken (either by the maids or by their patrons) in order to (re-)install these boundaries, while on other occasions, for example when the women use the mobile phone to "escape" out of the works sphere, a deliberate blurring of the spheres is sought after. Here, I am not only interested in the maids' uses of mobile phones but also their visits to phone shops. An ethnography of "phone shops" would open up a totally different dimension of space production via ICTs. Could the authors maybe say something more about the various correlations of space and ICT use?

2. Concerning aesthetics and belonging: although it was not a main focus of the researchers, I am curious to learn in how far the fields of belonging that those ICTs generate or strenghthen are mirrored and/or maybe realized by the mobile phones themselves, in particular by the way the informants "work" with the mobile phones, in the sense of embellishing or stylizing these objects. Here we can think in the very first instance of the pictures, colours and other stylistic markers 'in' the phone. Even cheap phones can store images or very simple virtual drawings. Do these women do this? But also other ways of fashioning the mobile phone and transforming them into 'materialities of affect' are at hand, like putting them in small socks that protect them/ hanging small cords on them/put stickers on them etc. Would the informants use any of these strategies to realize the affective bonds that mobile phones can produce? And if so, what do these look like? And how do these women talk about it/use it?

Best,

Katrien

Francisco Osorio Francisco.Osorio at manchester.ac.uk
Mon Apr 26 03:26:46 PDT 2010

I would like to thank Sun and Minu for this interesting paper (and good luck to Minu in her new job). Foreign female domestic workers aren't a group that appear often in the literature review of mobile phone studies, if hardly as the authors say.

I think Glazebrook (2004) can be a contribution to Sun's discussion, by considering the Hazara refugees from Central Afghanistan living on temporary protection visas in Australia. From Glazebrook's research, I am going to considerer only one aspect: language. She describes the case of a Hazara man that found himself lost in a shopping mall. Because he didn't speak English, he phoned an English-speaking Hazara friend, passed the phone to a sales assistant in a shop, who talked to his friend to give the exact location and passed back the phone to the lost man, who found his way out of the mall now guided by his friend who knew how to navigate him out.

This is an example of how mobile phones give security and help to migrants by allowing them to reach family and friends in the own language in critical moments. Now, going back to Sun, I would like to ask about language and the workers. As Sun says in one of her replies, Filipino workers used English and Indian women used Tamil, but what language did they communicate with their employers? What about Chinese language? Did they experience any language problem? Did it matter? As the authors say, most the workers did not own mobile phones when they started working. In the case of the Hazara, it was vital the mobile phone to relate to friends and family, but also to the Australian government and possible employers. I think this is also related to Sun's interest in 'safe migration' research.

I would like to highlight that Benitez (2006) and Sun both show that migrants accelerate the adoption of mobile phones among relatives. Salvadoran transmigrants in the case of Benitez (p.191), and an Indian migrant with Sun and Minu (p.8) buying mobiles to her children back home.

As a final comment, I would be very interested to read about the use of smartphones by migrant workers because of what other possibilities that devices could give them, other than voice and SMS (being the later a well study subject).

All the best,

Dr Francisco Osorio
Mobile Livelihoods Programme
Sheffield Hallam University
http://mobilelivelihoods.wordpress.com/

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Benitez, J. L. (2006). Transnational Dimensions of the Digital Divide among Salvadoran Immigrants in the Washington DC metropolitan area. Global Networks, 6(2), 181-199.

Glazebrook, D. (2004). Becoming Mobile after Detention. Social Analysis, 48(3), 40'58.

Ken Banks ken.banks at kiwanja.net
Mon Apr 26 03:54:59 PDT 2010

Hi Francisco

If you're not aware of this already, this is a great example of mobile/SMS being used by OFW's: http://mobileactive.org/sos-sms-text-helpline-philippine-workers

The project uses the FrontlineSMS software which I developed some years ago (and am still working on), so if you'd like to connect with Bobby please let me know.

Good luck with this.

Ken

Ken Banks
Founder
kiwanja.net

"Where technology meets anthropology, conservation and development"
Twitter: http://www.twitter.com/kiwanja

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Tue Apr 27 01:29:20 PDT 2010

Many thanks to Sun once again! Please keep those brief comments and questions coming by writing to medianthro at easaonline.org

John

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Tue Apr 27 03:59:38 PDT 2010

Dear all

I'm forwarding this response from Sun as it appears that it never reached the list

John

From: Sun Sun LIM [mailto:sunlim at nus.edu.sg]
Sent: 27 April 2010 03:33
To: Postill, John; medianthro at easaonline.org
Subject: Migrant worker seminar

Thanks to John, Katrien and Francisco for their comments and questions, each of which I will address separately. Again questions are in plain text followed by answers in bold:

Katrien: Concerning space and ICT use: I wonder in how far ICTs such as mobile phones fully blur the public/private divide. This is not an argument the authors make, but it is something which many take for granted. We often hear (usually in the form of a complaint) that these new ICTs facilitate a constant invasion of the various spheres of life. What is fascinating is that the article shows how conscious actions are taken (either by the maids or by their patrons) in order to (re-)install these boundaries, while on other occasions, for example when the women use the mobile phone to "escape" out of the works sphere, a deliberate blurring of the spheres is sought after. Here, I am not only interested in the maids' uses of mobile phones but also their visits to phone shops. An ethnography of "phone shops" would open up a totally different dimension of space production via ICTs. Could the authors maybe say something more about the various correlations of space and ICT use?

Sun: We did not conduct an ethnography of phone shops. But on the point about the blurring of public and private space, we did find some instances, and in fact one often sees it in public areas in Singapore, domestic helpers who are out on their own while performing chores e.g. fetching children from school, marketing etc. and engaged in private conversation on their mobile phones, thus carving out for themselves private space in public arenas.

Katrien: Concerning aesthetics and belonging: although it was not a main focus of the researchers, I am curious to learn in how far the fields of belonging that those ICTs generate or strengthen are mirrored and/or maybe realized by the mobile phones themselves, in particular by the way the informants "work" with the mobile phones, in the sense of embellishing or stylizing these objects. Here we can think in the very first instance of the pictures, colours and other stylistic markers 'in' the phone. Even cheap phones can store images or very simple virtual drawings. Do these women do this?

Sun: Our study showed that the Filipino and Indian domestic workers interviewed were not concerned about the model, brand and color of the mobile phones they used. Neither did they personalize their mobile phones with the whole range of accessories available in the market, due in part to their paucity of free time and limited financial resources. Instead, the mobile phone was a functional tool for a majority of the domestic workers interviewed. In the words of Dale, 45, Filipino:

'I have a very old model of the Nokia brand and I am quite content with what I have. It serves the function of a communication device and this is all I require. I do not care about the colour or model, as long as the phone helps me to keep in touch with my family and friends in Singapore and the Philippines.'

Francisco: Filipino workers used English and Indian women used Tamil, but what language did they communicate with their employers? What about Chinese language? Did they experience any language problem? Did it matter?

When the post-independence government under Lee Kuan Yew took over from the colonial British rulers, it decided that in multi-ethnic Singapore, the language of no one would be the language of everyone. Hence English is the lingua franca in Singapore, along with Chinese, Malay and Tamil - the dominant languages of the three main ethnic groups. Filipino maids are thus sought after because the likelihood of communication problems within the household is greatly reduced given their fluency in English. As for maids from India who are Tamil-speaking, they tend to be hired by Tamil-speaking Indian families. Hence the language barrier was not salient

for our sample. News reports do point to communication breakdowns between Indonesian maids and their Singapore employers because they speak Bahasa Indonesia which bears a strong resemblance to the Malay spoken by Malay Singaporeans. However, Chinese or Indian Singaporeans would not be fluent Malay speakers and hence breakdowns in communication can and do occur.

John: I have a question for Sun about class and ICTs. Sun wrote:"Having myself conducted research on technology domestication by middle-class families in China, Singapore and South Korea, I was intrigued by how different family types, e.g. transnational families, and less "mainstream", more marginalised populations domesticate technology." I was wondering if you could say a bit more about this comparative dimension across classes and countries in the region, as I find it really intriguing. The idea that families 'domesticate' technologies has been long used and debated within media and communication studies (e.g. Silverstone and Hirsch 1992, Berker et al 2006) but I didn't see it applied in the paper. Does the domestication model work in the case of foreign maids? By this I mean the messy process whereby technologies are acquired, objectified (turned from anonymous commodities into familiar objects), incorporated into family members' routines and converted into social currency.

Thank you John for this interesting question. We did in fact develop the interview questions and analyse the findings using the domestication framework. However, with regard to the unique circumstances of live-in maids, we found that the incorporation, appropriation, objectification, conversion framework, while not necessarily limiting, was less able to bring out the salient dimensions of technology use by live-in maids than the framework which we eventually used in this paper. In my upcoming conference paper (Lim, 2010), I will be comparing the findings of this study with those of my study of Chinese middle-class families (Lim, 2006) which was published in Berker et al (2006) which you'd mentioned, and those of my Korea study (Lim, 2008). In so doing, I plan to discuss some possible future shifts in domestication theory, especially vis-à-vis more circumscribed populations. For example, the incorporation, appropriation, objectification, conversion framework may work well for people with the liberty of autonomy and agency in their technology use, but less so for those whose skills and resources restrict them to a good-enough, 'satisficing' approach in their acquisition and use of ICTs. As for the issue of class, in Lim (2008), I compared the experiences of middle-class families in China and Korea. I found similarities in the two societies' valorisation of academic excellence and technological prowess, and that middle-class Chinese and Korean parents are united in their belief that their children have to be technologically adept in order to succeed in life. Similarities could also be noted in how these middle-class families in both countries are media-rich and weave ICTs (indispensably) into their daily routines, and have also discovered the value of mediated communication in expressing intimacy or alleviating discord. It is in Lim (2010) that I will attempt to compare the experiences of middle-class parents with the maids in our current paper who are low-waged transnational parents. Preliminarily, some similarities can be discerned in the deployment of and appreciation for mediated communication, and with some stark differences in how co-location, financial wherewithal, quality of communication infrastructure etc. can have a very significant impact on the nature and quality of intra-familial communication.

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Dr Stephen M. Lyon S.M.Lyon at durham.ac.uk
Tue Apr 27 04:01:42 PDT 2010

I found this a fascinating paper and am very pleased that Minu Thomas and Sun Sun Lim have chosen to share it with us. I suppose, like everyone on this list, I have been in a position to watch the meteoric rise of the use of ICTs and especially mobile phones around the world over the last 15 years. I have enjoyed the sorts of ethnographic accounts provided in this paper and in the work of people like Horst and Miller. They offer a very rich account of how social connectedness may be rather dramatically affected by the media. So I certainly welcome and applaud this contribution.

I always find it a bit boring to just say I liked a paper, however, so at the risk of being a bit critical (which I don't mean to be), I want to pick up something that I think is a bit neglected in the paper. The policy recommendations are starkly pro mobile phone use. The accounts from the women in the paper are, likewise, very positive about the potential for the women to maintain familial and friendship connections despite very restrictive working environments. The section in the paper which deals with the downsides of increased mobile phone usage seem to be rather too superficial, however. I don't want to pretend that mobile phone usage doesn't have an upside because clearly the women represented in this paper would disagree (as would many of friends in Pakistan), but it seems to me that the downside isn't just one of financial burden on poor people or on potentially increased mutual obligations over distance from friends and family. One of the things I noticed about how employers and servants interacted with mobile phones in rural Punjab, Pakistan, was that employers used mobile phones with those servants who had them as an added means of control over them. In 1998 and 1999, when I first lived in rural Punjab, there were very few mobile phones and servants and sharecroppers didn't have them at all. There seemed to be lots of space for servants and sharecroppers to be invisible back then and they could avoid doing some tasks just by being inaccessible on the right day. the last time I went to rural Punjab, in 2007, this seemed very different. I met employers who gave their servants mobile phones so they could keep track of them and expected their servant to answer immediately at any time of day. Most employers didn't actually give phones to their servants but if the servant or sharecropper had a phone they demanded to know the phone number and would use that to contact the person at their whim.

I know that it's possible to turn off a mobile phone and batteries do run out and there are a lot of excuses one could use to avoid answering the mobile phone, but the

mobile phone also has a record of calls. For the IT non-savvy, this record could be used against them by employers. The man who looked after me in the little village for example, didn't have a clue how to clear his call history and so if he declined to answer a call from one rich person at a similar time to when he either made or received a call to someone else, then it could be used against him. In the 'old' days, in heavily gender segregated Pakistan, a male servant/sharecropper might be able to hide out among his female relatives since his male employer probably wouldn't dare to barge in on the women's area of a person's home without a very good reason. Now of course male employers can gain virtual access to those women's areas via the mobile phone.

I could go on with more examples, but what I'd really like is to hear what the authors of this delightful paper think might be the downsides of mobile phone usage in terms of the potentially increased capacity for employers to control, track or monitor their migrant servants.

Thanks again for the paper!

Steve

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Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Thu Apr 29 01:27:48 PDT 2010

While we're waiting for further questions and comments from the floor, I thought I'd raise the issue of the moral anxiety/panic that seems to surround maids in Southeast Asia (and elsewhere).

When I was researching local internet activism in a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, I soon found that maids were good not only 'to think with' but also good to worry about. Stories of maids (many of them Indonesian) who had sexual relations with their employers, or bewitched them so they could elope together, of maids who ran off with the gardener and the family silver, of maids who physically abused or neglected their young charges, of maids who were themselves abused by their employers, of Christian employers reluctant to employ a Muslim maid, and so on, were the stuff of everyday suburban conversation and a news media staple.

Was that the case, too, in Singapore? If so, and following on from Stephen Lyon's point about ICTs and power relations, how does this wider societal context shape maids' mobile phone practices?

John

Dr Stephen Lyon S.M.Lyon at durham.ac.uk
Thu Apr 29 02:25:20 PDT 2010

Can I also just add a question about the actual legislation in Singapore.

When you say that employers are responsible for the behaviour of their home servants, what exactly does that mean in practice? Could an employer receive a custodial sentence if their maid took up an illegal activity like prostitution (I'm assuming prostitution is illegal in Singapore-- forgive my ignorance!). Are there financial penalties? Would they no longer be allowed to employ migrant home servants? How are such transgressions policed in practice?

Thanks,

Steve

Sun Sun LIM sunlim at nus.edu.sg
Thu Apr 29 07:45:09 PDT 2010

Hi Steve and John,

Yes, office water cooler talk can and does revolve around 'maid issues'. It would not be unusual to hear people complaining about their maids' incompetence, their personal problems impeding their job performance, poor work ethic, difficulty of finding a good maid etc. Conversely, people are also known to speak about how they have wonderful maids whom they treasure. (For the record, I have never myself had a maid and cannot speak from experience.) At the same time, when maids meet one another on their days-off, they can and do talk about their employers and working conditions. People who employ maids will thus offer each other advice on how to 'deal with' their maids and maids will do likewise vis-à-vis employers. In this 'wider societal context' that John refers to, employers may be concerned that when maids have their own mobile phones, they are better able to connect with other maids and to compare their own working conditions with those of their peers and thus demand parity and so on.

Regarding liability, employers are held liable only if their maids go missing but are not liable if their maids engage in criminal activity. When one employs a maid, one has to pay a security deposit of $5000 in the form of an insurance/banker's guarantee. Should the maid go missing, the employer will have the security deposit forfeited. You can read the details here:
http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/work_pass/foreign_domestic_workers/employers__guidelines/Termination_of_Services__Repatriation_and_Security_Bond.html This policy is likely to have been introduced to prevent illegal immigration scams, i.e. person comes in under pretext of being maid, employer allows maid to disappear under mutual agreement. Anyway, in my search for detailed information on the security deposit, I chanced upon a discussion forum for expatriates living in Singapore where an employer sought advice on dealing with her errant maid. It will give you an inkling of the water cooler talk that I mentioned earlier
http://forum.singaporeexpats.com/ftopic68138.html&sid=5aa9aa2c966f7852b58cce235e9e8d1b If I look harder, I'm sure I can find a discussion forum where maids (most likely Filipino) exchange notes. I'll keep you all posted.

Sun

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ivan kwek quack2 at singnet.com.sg
Thu Apr 29 19:21:58 PDT 2010

Hi Sun Sun, and all,

I am stealing some time off my much overdue writing, so my response will not do justice to Sun Sun's paper. Please accept my apologies as well as for coming on board so very late.

The paper concluded with some policy related recommendations; including further specifications concerning maids' right to communication. If by policy you mean forms of intervention by the state, it is noteworthy that the language of 'rights' in Singapore (and perhaps several other places) is often viewed with suspicion and often rejected outright as an inappropriate 'Western ideal'. Here (Singapore, which is where I am based), you cannot get very far talking about rights, whether it is about citizens' access to education, health care, housing, free speech, information, etc, what more when talking about a marginal(-ized) group of migrant workers. The state's arguments against 'rights' are constructed in terms of some supposed Asian values that privileges 'society' over 'families', and in turn 'families' over 'individuals' - and the state sits on top of the pile as its wise arbitrator, allocating access - according to 'merits'. It produces endless talk about 'meritocracy' and marginalizes the notion of rights. To put it crudely, rights is understood in very specific senses that is seen as pertaining to individuals and inherently contra-the-social.

I am not suggesting that the analysis should succumb to the dominant discourse, in fact, its value is in revealing how it might have been otherwise. However, against the history of rights discourse in Singapore, how has this right to communication have been received, imposed, negotiated, resisted, ignored, and defined by the state (which has by and large taken a 'light-handed' approach in instituting the protection of maids; e.g., it assumes that contracts should be freely drawn up by employers and employees, ignoring existing relations of power)? How is this notion of the right to communication encountered - and on what terms - on a day to day basis by employers, the domestic helpers, NGOs, maid agencies, press reports, etc? (you have of course alluded to some of these in various parts of your paper). Should we be asking whose discourse is the discourse on the right to communicate anyway? What alternative frameworks (other than rights) have been encountered in the course of your ethnographic interviews that may make a more persuasive argument in a context that is suspicious of rights. One that strikes me is how mobile phone use by migrant workers has also been constituted as a highly profitable market segment. Sadly, it is in the constituting of maids as a market - complete with 'communication needs and wants' - that we find the most proactive agents in promoting this 'right?'.

Thanks again for an excellent paper,

Regards

Ivan

Dr Stephen Lyon S.M.Lyon at durham.ac.uk
Fri Apr 30 01:15:25 PDT 2010

Dear Sun,

Thanks very much for the crash course in Singaporean labour relations. Having never heard of the No Days Off campaign I did a quick search on the web and discovered a

number of very interesting examples of how domestic servants organisations are using a number of media to try and effect some improvement in employment conditions. I don't know what the radio programmes are like, but the WWW sites look pretty slick (http://no.dayoff.sg/ for example).

Are mobile phones being used in that particular campaign? In your paper you mostly seem to concentrate on the personal relations that become possible to maintain and the psychological benefits (combatting loneliness for example). I realise that it must be a very sensitive topic, but are there more unionising/protesting activities being managed or created via mobile phones as well?

Thanks,

Steve

Sun Sun LIM sunlim at nus.edu.sg
Fri Apr 30 01:27:22 PDT 2010

The No Days Off campaign is not organized or fronted by domestic workers but by a civic organization called Transient Workers Count 2. Its volunteer corps comprises professionals from different industries which would help to account for the professionally-run campaign. To the best of my knowledge, I cannot recall any unionizing/protesting activities in Singapore organized by maids themselves, much less coordinated by mobile phone.

-----Original Message-----
From: medianthro-bounces at lists.easaonline.org [mailto:medianthro-bounces at lists.easaonline.org] On Behalf Of Dr Stephen Lyon
Sent: Friday, April 30, 2010 4:37 PM
To: medianthro
Cc: John Postill; Sun Sun LIM
Subject: Re: [Medianthro] Maids are good to worry about

Sorry, that URL in my last post should have been: http://no.dayoff.sg/

Without the 'for example' as part of the hyperlink.

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Sun May 2 03:56:23 PDT 2010

Dear all

A kind reminder that our e-seminar around Minu Thomas and Sun Sun Lim's working paper on Singapore domestic workers and their ICT practices ends this Tuesday at 9 pm GMT, so there's still time for a quick round of comments and questions. The list address is medianthro at easaonline.org

Many thanks

John

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Tue May 4 13:33:41 PDT 2010

Dear All

The e-seminar is now closed. I'd like to thank Sun Sun Lim and her co-author Minu Thomas, our discussant Mirca Madianou and those of you've contributed to the discussion. Many thanks to all of you. There will be a PDF transcript of this session on our brand new site shortly (more on the site tomorrow).

Our next seminar will take place from 15 to 29 June 2010. Jenny Cool (University of Southern California) will present a working paper on the group known as Cyborganic entitled "Co-location, Phatic Communion, and Presence-casting: the Mutuality of Online and Onground in the Social Construction of Networked Social Media". Toni Roig (Open University of Catalonia) will be the discussant.

If you wish to present a paper or suggest a presenter for the Autumn term please drop me a line offlist.

Abstract

Cyborganic, the subject of this study, was a San Francisco community whose members brought Wired magazine online, launched Hotwired; led the open source Apache project; and staffed and started dozens of Internet enterprises—from Craig's List to Organic Online—during the first decade of the Web's growth as a popular platform (1993-2003). The imaginaries, practices, and genres of networked social media developed in this group figured in the initial development of Web publishing and prefigured contemporary phenomena such as Facebook and a host of other media collectively known as "Web 2.0." While my ethnography examines the symbiosis of online and face-to-face sociality in the growth of Web publishing, this paper focuses on that symbiosis at a more micro-level, looking at specific forms and practices of networked social media in Cyborganic that have become predominant on the contemporary U.S Internet. Anthropologists have challenged the assumed "isomorphism between space, place, and culture" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 34) and have theorized "technological infrastructures as sites for the production of locality" without a necessarily geographic referent (Ito 1999:2). Despite this decoupling and the tendency to associate online sociality with fragmentation and dematerialization, my Cyborganic study demonstrates that the intermediation of online and onground can work to consolidate and extend, rather than attenuate, affiliations based on place and embodiment that anthropologists have long seen as defining sources of identity and cultural difference.

John

End of seminar