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'Re-mediating' the ruptures of migration: the use of internet and mobile phones in migrant women's organizations in Ireland

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Re-mediating' the ruptures of migration: the use of internet and mobile phones in migrant women's organisations in Ireland.

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There is a common conception that new information and communication technologies have the potential to achieve greater social equity; to empower migrants, particularly in the construction of diasporic spaces and agency. However, this achievement is not uniform: media are enmeshed in pre-existent power structures. Gender, class, and 'race' mark the lines of the technological divide.

To explore these issues, we look at the case of migrant women in Ireland who are active in migrant organisations. Despite uneven access to mediated information flows, adaptive innovation in communication technology use is evident in these organisations. Mediatised communication and information are integral to their day-to-day management, in such a way as to both consolidate and expand existing 'offline' networks. While problematising notions of migrant belongings and affiliations, our research entails a critical rethinking of several commonplace preconceptions in popular discourse: the 'migrant', the 'individual' technology user, and the idea of technology access as a 'pure good'.

Keywords: Migrant women, social networks, information and communication technologies, technological literacy

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Introduction

> Because communication is the fundamental process of human activity, the modification of communication processes by the interaction between social structures, social practice and a new range of communication technologies, constitute indeed a profound social transformation (Castells et al. 2006: 246).

Computer-mediated communication appears to reinvigorate – or at least alter – 'community' and belonging: undoubtedly, the effects of networked sociality over the last 20 years have been profound. As Liu suggests:

> Among all the technological, political and economic infrastructures put in place to install the new world order and economy, just one may be mentioned as epitomising the whole: networked information technology (2004: 6).

In global circuits and cities, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been associated with the emergence of transformative and agentic spaces for some migrants (Hiller and Franz 2004). The unprecedented speed with which these

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emerged, however, can, and has, made it difficult for social researchers to perceive and articulate the historical context of these developments. One must tread warily: "the internet is not removed from the rest of the social landscape, but thrives within a set of established power structures" (Campbell 2006: 271).

Among the most significant, though least visible, power structures in contemporary Ireland are the linkages between migration and gender. Migration is a driving force for social change in Ireland, and migrant women constitute a major presence, not only in terms of the labour shortages that they come to fill. Migrant women often embody the biological and symbolic reproduction of their collectivities' boundaries. This position gives women special relevance, within their groups and families (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989), and within receiving societies. Socialised as the intercultural transmitters of 'community' traditions and customs, migrant women play central roles in the processes of settling down and forging new communities.

The questions we intend to raise here concern the communities that migrant women constitute in Ireland. Specifically, we are interested in the role of communication technologies in re-constructing women's sociability, and re-creating networks of support and rootedness dislocated by migration. We take as a case study migrant women's organisations in Ireland. De Tona and Lentin found 49 migrant women's organisations, sustained by networking practices that intersect with traditional gendered forms of connectivity and represent, *inter alia*, a response to Irish state integrationist policies (De Tona and Lentin forthcoming). Starting from these observations, we argue that networked technology also plays a role in their networking and activism, albeit a complex one. Wary of naïve technological determinism, we aim to gesture towards the subtle interplays currently occurring between social network formation, technology use, senses of identity and belonging, and ensuing potentials for organisation and activism.

There is evidence that women face constraints in accessing ICTs: the gendered dimension of the 'digital divide' remains salient, though crosscut by other distinctions. Rather than construing gender as a monolithic category, we consider how education, age and class intersect with gender in bridging the digital divide. Focusing on the agency of migrant women, we ask: how do gendered re-*mediations* of migration occur through technological media? How do migrant women positioned at the intersection of different social categories use ICTs to manage their networks and their migrant organisations?

In elaborating these arguments, this article draws on the narratives of women associated with 21 migrant women's associations. Part of a larger research project that explores the role of migrant networks in advancing integration in Ireland (Trinity Immigration Initiative), the data was collected by De Tona during 18 open-ended individual interviews and three focus groups, during which migrant women spontaneously discussed the roles played by ICTs in the daily reproduction of their organisations' activities and the networks subtending them.

The first section of this article presents a brief summary of relevant literature concerning technology use, migration, and the links between them. The second is an overview of (female) migration into Ireland and contemporary migrant women's organisations in Ireland. The third presents pertinent examples from the narratives of

women in these organisations. We focus on migrant women's daily experience with ICTs and their orientations to these technologies. The concluding section summarises our argument and indicates emergent issues for further research. Our aim, within the limits of current knowledge on the subject, is simply to open a window on this complex reality, and contribute to the formation of better-informed research questions; questions that address the "relationship between communication, technology, and society" in Ireland, "by unwiring the networks of our lives" (Castells et al. 2006: 2).

Literature Review: positioning the research

  The speed and interactive form of technological change can make it difficult to grasp its social, economic and political consequences (Castells et al. 2006: 2). Following Castells et al., we propose to construct a knowledge around technology "using traditional, standard tools of scholarly research", where this knowledge, because of the novelty of the field, must be "tentative"; knowledge in the making (2006: 2-3).

There are several central texts on the sociopolitical implications of technological mediation and the digitisation of communication (perhaps most significant among them Castells 1996, 1998, 2001; Lash 2002; Putnam, 2000; Thompson 1995). Much of this work can be thought of as laying the theoretical ground upon which more empirically oriented research followed. There is also now an extensive body of literature on computer-mediated communication and 'virtual community'. This is a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary field (for example, Crystal 2001; Herring 1996; Bell 2006; Hine 2000; Jones 1997). Contrary to initial, rather utopian hopes (see Rheingold 2000), some of this work details the extension of classed, raced and gendered positioning into online environments (Leung 2005; Kendall 2002; Nakamura, 2002).

However, a frequent feature of research conducted particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s is what seems, with hindsight, an undue emphasis on the online *per se*, with sometimes-scant attention being paid to the offline context in which virtuality is necessarily embedded. In some early research in this area, anonymous online interaction facilitates seemingly 'postmodern', fragmented, multiple identities (as in Turkle 1997 and Stone 1995). This work is problematic insofar as those who produce it "treat life on-line as an isolated social phenomenon, without taking into account how interactions on it fit with other aspects of people's lives" (Wellman 1997: 446).

A necessary early focus on the dynamics and consequences of online sociality is now being balanced by work with an interest in the relations between the 'virtual' and the 'real', documenting the roles played by online environments in their offline counterparts (Wellman 1999, 2007; Miller and Slater 2001). The importance of such work can only be expected to grow given the current trajectory of online sociality. The any-many exchanges of bulletin-board systems and chatrooms are being superseded by 'walled gardens'; social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, which consolidate and extend existent offline social networks rather than fostering new, despatialised groupings, emergent from the technological infrastructure (boyd and Ellison 2007).

Early emphases on the *community* in 'virtual community', and debates (with longstanding, though sometimes unacknowledged, historical antecedents) concerning

its nature, became supplanted by a growing emphasis on the notion of *network*, a conception, and indeed a mode of social organisation, which perhaps bypasses the normative associations and empirical difficulties inherent in characterising social groupings (with strong online presence) as 'communities'. This shift in orientation arises both from the evident problems around the "Community Question" (Wellman et al. 2003), and from the observable ascendance of SNSs as networked technology becomes increasingly ubiquitous. As technology-embedded networking becomes more and more diffuse, the literature highlights the need for a clear and succinct definition of networks (Holton 2008). Castells defines networks as

> Open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes (for example, values or performance goals). A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance (1996: 470)

There is much that is valuable and insightful in such a definition, but Castells generally has in mind formal, large-scale structures. Thus the examples he offers: the elite political network that runs the EU, the global narcotics industry, the network of global media organisations who produce the news. We prefer to work with a conception of *social* networks, as small forms of decentralised, flexible, often ad-hoc organisation and sociality; "lighter on their feet" and therefore "better able to learn" (Holton 2008: 35) and respond effectively to complexity.

The role of ICTs in both large- and small-scale networks is often documented in the literature on migrant and diasporic media practices. Among these are case studies concerning various diasporas from Asia (e.g. Chan 2006; Shi 2005; Yang 2003) and the Middle East (McLaughlin 2003; van Den Bos 2006; Karim 2003). A recurring theme is the affordances offered by technology for political engagement, regarding host and origin countries. Subsidiary concerns include the emergence of intranational diasporic spaces online, and the changes technology facilitates for the sense of the diaspora among participants.

This brings us to the 'digital divide'. The interest here is in those social groups (and those countries or indeed continents) being 'left behind' in the scramble to 'go digital' (Krishna and Madon 2003). Within developed regions, the digital divide is strongly associated with factors such as race, education, age, income, gender, and geographical location (Monahan 2001; Norris 2001). The conception of the digital divide is somewhat problematic insofar as it tends to suggest a binary, have/have-not model, where in actuality there are gradations of access, with some groups more 'wired' than others, and some groups 'with access through comparatively inferior infrastructure. Because many of the factors associated with these gradations perpetuate disparities which predate the existence of ICTs and would continue independently of them, it is sometimes suggested that it is more appropriate to speak of an *analog* divide (Tavani 2004: 262).[2] However, it remains demonstrably the case that a lack of access to technology and technological literacy contributes to the perpetuation and exacerbation of social, cultural and economic disadvantage (Rice and Haythornwaite 2006: 93). These texts, then, assess the various factors which produce and reinforce persistent

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[2] Following the distinction between *analog* and *digital*, the 'analog divide' refers to longstanding structural inequities. The phrase is used in a cautionary way, to emphasise both that rectifying the digital divide will not necessarily address these disparities, and that the digital divide is emergent from and compounds pre-existent disparities. Technological access alone is not a solution.

inequality of access, and explore the socioeconomic consequences of this. While there is material addressing the lack of access, efforts towards researching the implications of access for participation, and the reconfiguration of ties access engenders amongst migrants and diasporic groups are, thus far, infrequent.

In the Irish context, some earlier studies have demonstrated how gender impacts on and limits women's access and use of ICTs, although the gender gap is narrowing (Ward, 2002; O'Donnell et al, 1998; Lohen 1997). However, the gender question is rarely addressed in the study of *migrant* use of ICTs in Ireland. Aphra Kerr argues that migrant mediascape and in particular the internet, texting and phoning have a central importance in the lives of migrants in Ireland; her work raises significant questions concerning their role in defining and reconstituting migrant identities (Kerr 2007).

Bringing together these lines of research, this article explores the role of ICTs in the formation and maintenance across gender digital and analog divides of *local* migrant organisations in Ireland, This is where the analysis of technologically mediated connectivity among migrants has heuristic potential: monitoring the development of affiliation from 'natural' and given, to networked group; where this shift in turn has implications for conceptions of group membership, and thus for senses of solidarity and the scope for social and political organisation and change.

Migration and migrant women organisations in Ireland

   Although migrant inflows into Ireland show a relative decline in recent years, migrants continue to be a strong presence. Their economic, social and political input is significantly changing the character of Irish society, and redefining modes of belonging and membership (Fanning 2007)

Since the mid-1990s, immigration to Ireland has accelerated and diversified, with migrant women accounting for more than half the migrant population (52.3%, according to the 2006 Irish Census). Diverse in age, status and class, migrant women also vary by provenance. Between 2004 and 2006, migrant women accounted for 36% of inflow from the EU accession states, 42% from the UK, 53% from the rest of Europe, 79% from the USA and 49% from the rest of the world (Pillinger 2006). Notably, while the figures for net inward migration fall, the percentage of women is increasing. Between 2006 and 2008 the percentage of net inward migration by women increased from 42% to 68% (Charlton 2009). Women account for fewer asylum seekers than men: in 2007, 37.7% of asylum applications were made by women (ORAC 2007). However, no data is available for appealed rejections, successful or otherwise. Among migrant women entering with an employment permit, the majority work in feminised sectors: catering, domestic work, the care and health sectors and so on. This trend persists despite evidence that migrant women have higher educational profiles than Irish women (41% with 3rd level education, vs. 18% among women born in Ireland; Pillinger, 2007).

While the Irish government has recently started to promote integration policies to better accommodate migrants' diversity (Office of the Minister for Integration 2008), there are still no gender-based policies to target the specific challenges women face settling in Ireland. On the contrary, migrant women are subject to legal frameworks

that perpetuate a state of dependency and vulnerability (Pillinger 2007; Lentin and Luibhéid 2004). The 'temporary', ad hoc nature of Irish migration policies (routinely imagining migration as a finite, short-term phenomenon) further limits migrant women's independence and autonomy; compounding their isolation, marginalisation, and vulnerability to exploitation and deskilling (Pillinger 2007).

Migrant groups, however, are actively engaging to promote their own integration, using their organisations and networks to create institutional spaces to pool and disseminate information, services and resources. Partly a product of primary forms of socialising, partly a response to institutional barriers produced by state services' incapacity to address difference (Fanning 2007: 254), the expansion of migrant-led organisations in Ireland has been striking over the last decade. A 2008 study found that there are now 190 migrant organisations in the Republic (Prospectus 2008). However, it does not distinguish the gendered nature of these groups, subsuming instead women under men's categories. Like others (such as Feldman et al. 2005), this study glosses the fact that many migrant organisations are de facto *men's* organisations.

In 2009, De Tona, Lentin and Moreo found 432 migrant organisations and networks currently active in Ireland, showing the continuing growth of the sector. Of these, De Tona and Lentin (forthcoming) identified 49 specific migrant women's organisations, typically based on flexible organisational structures and independent, often informal, female networks of support and care. These organisations were usually formed after 2001, by women migrants with secure legal status, who were involved in political and women's groups before migrating to Ireland. De Tona and Lentin argue that these associations are networked in complex ways, re-creating new local networks of support with other home country women, but extending to multi-ethnic and multi-faith groups. After an initial phase of consolidation, their networking expands beyond the local and national: they link with other migrant women and NGOs in Europe and globally, to access resources, information and space for agency and mobilisation. Formal membership ranges from five (NOUR) to 2,250 (AkiDwA), the average number of active members being 20-25. Migrant women's organisations have both formal and informal membership, and their networks are flexible and inclusive, embracing also those who are isolated, constrained and rendered invisible by linguistic, educational and socialisation barriers.

Although there is, as indicated above, an emergent body of literature investigating the role of mediated communication in sustaining transmigrations and global diasporic movements, lacunae persist regarding how migrant women's technology access varies with social position and how they use it to enact localised forms of activism, mobilisation and resistance. While both migration and ICT impact studies are often gender-blind, in this article we advocate an exploratory qualitative analysis of the uses of technology in the formation and maintenance of migrant women's organisations and networks in Ireland. Through considering the interview data in this way, we aim to sketch a picture of what migrant women's narratives indicate about contemporary material practice around communication technologies in the migration context.

'Technology has made life a lot easier for people like myself': a discussion of women's narratives on re-*mediation*

With varying degrees of institutionalisation, migrant women's organisations are engaged in a range of activities, from grassroots politics, to advocacy, to service provision. They aim also to defeat isolation; recreating a new fabric for the sociality disrupted by migration. With limited funds, the migrant women's organisations operate largely as voluntaristic and 'traditional' solidarity networks. While they represent something women "occasionally 'do' rather than something they permanently 'are'" (Cockburn 2007: 2), the networks that sustain them constitute a solid, albeit adaptable ground for their existence.

Leadership is central to the groups' formation, but limited by resources, decision-making tends to remain diffuse and non-hierarchical. Members network simultaneously with each other and with other individual and institutional actors, pursuing multiple courses of action at the periphery of more formalised communitarian encounters. These networks are inherently gendered, influenced by migrant women's life experiences, struggles and aspirations.

In Ireland specifically, they are responding to the lack of adequate service provision, to racism, and to social isolation (De Tona and Lentin, forthcoming). Networks are active at certain times (for example, while preparing 'intercultural' events), dormant at others (until new events prompt their reactivation or dissolution), and sometimes sediment into more structured associations.

In these networks, migrant women demonstrate a day-to-day reliance on ICT systems, which shape the formation and structure of their organisations and networks. In their interviews, migrant women commented frequently, albeit tangentially, about the use of ICTs for social, personal and collective ends. Their narratives show that their networking is intrinsically linked to "voluntary, reciprocal and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange", that are reliant on communication and information technologies, particularly email and mobile phone (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 8),.

Communication and information technology allow networks to be "less centralised and bureaucratic than other forms of organisation" (Holton 2008: 35). Technology sustains flexible and dynamic networking; however, it does so in complex ways, particularly in relation to who uses technology, to what end, and to how online and offline intersect (Whelan 2008: 309).

Embedded in face-to-face interactions: emailing and mobile phone use among the leaders of migrant organisations
The most significant characteristic in the narratives of both the leaders and the members of the migrant women organisations is the importance of *face-to-face interaction*, which remains the primary mode of interaction and one of the primary purposes of their networking. One example among many: the leader of a multi-ethnic group, formed in Balbriggan, County Dublin, in 2001, explains that:

> The main aim [of our organisation] is to reduce social exclusion for women and to get them involved in society and take them out of their homes and you know kind of improve their self-esteem … they were isolated … they don't have support … they can't afford childcare … they depend on the government and I think our group is aimed to provide a platform to find out ways how we can get out of this trap (Professional/African/Leader, 35-40 year old, Women of Multicultural Balbriggan 2008)

Despite the ultimate objective of challenging isolation and bringing women together 'out of their homes', specific social practices and organisational patterns have emerged between ICTs and migrant women's organisations. An African activist involved in several migrant organisations, including the Women of Minorities Network in Louth, explains that she is in contact with *leaders* of other migrant women groups, *members*, and *stakeholders* from various NGOs primarily by email (Women of Minorities Network 2007). Emailing facilitates especially communicative speed. While digital and technological literacy divides are still impinging on women's e-inclusion (as we show below), we have found that emailing is extensive and frequent between the majority of migrant women leaders and other stakeholders, to the extent that, as this activist claims:

> There are people I have chatted over the email that I don't know. We would have been talking for a while, by email before I get to meet them in person, so it's very handy. Technology has made life a lot easier for people like myself. A lot of arrangements are done by email or text before you get to know the people physically (Professional/African/Leader, 35-40 year old, Women of Minorities Network 2007).

Accessing information about activities, services and entitlements is also done online. Several leaders reported sourcing information for their groups through websites, this practice is thoroughly integrated into offline modes of retrieval. This requires a degree of technological literacy that often only the leaders of the groups possess. Significantly, our interviews also indicate that relevant information concerning state services is not necessarily available online, and is not easy to find.

The migrant leader of a community-based group, FM WEPON, started through a local partnership project in Tallaght in 2005 and counting over 30 members of diverse backgrounds, explains:

> I think with government departments the information is [sometimes] there, I mean, if they have the information it's there! Unless they don't have it, which is my experience (Professional African Leader, 40-45 year old, FM WEPON 2008).

This leader also highlights the limitations of email. She explains that she doesn't have 'patience' with it:

> If I get an email and I don't respond to it there and then… I forget to respond to an email and then something goes missing along the line.

Aside from the tendency for emails to get 'lost in the shuffle', she suggests another limitation to email:

> Government [agencies] tend to have information online but then the problem is that if you want to contact them, it is difficult. [Because sometimes I would prefer to call them] rather than emailing and all that (Professional/African/Leader, 40-45 year old FM WEPON 2008).

She therefore prefers to receive practical information directly from service providers, often by phone. The choice for her is between face-to-face enquiry or the phone; not through official websites. She continues:

> Unless there is something you don't understand and you go for a meeting, but most times it's on the phone. Like you are indirectly, if you are ringing from an organisation and you are looking for something, you are more likely to get a proper response rather than an individual ringing. On the phone works very well for me and the most cases I know exactly what I am looking for. I only go for a meeting if I need to, like what I am doing for the research, I prefer to do face to face (Professional/African/Leader, 40-45 year old, FM WEPON 2008).

Representing an organisation is presumably more effective because it is easier for service providers to disregard individuals' queries; there is a greater sense of service provider accountability to organisations. Representing an organisation thus 'authorises' and validates migrant women's voices, at least as far as such enquiries are concerned. This phone-mediated information is then redistributed through the network. There are therefore complex iterations and flows of information, with information and resources moving through groups across multiple channels, often simultaneously. A somewhat similar process at a more macro level has been labeled *extended mediazation*, where it is "common for media messages to be taken up by media organisations and incorporated into new media messages" (Thompson 1995: 110). The process we are describing is quite distinct, in that it occurs at a much more local and specific level, and that neither the organisations, the channels, nor the communications addressed in our research would conventionally be thought of as 'media' or even micromedia.

Several leaders discussed having their own websites, to publicise their activities and keep members updated. This is indicative of the extent to which many categories of migrant women *do* have internet access, and so can learn about the group and its activities online. One leader stated:

> We use internet a lot, we are actually developing our website. We have had a web blog, but now we want to develop it and own a website. So this is what we are doing now, we are gathering information. Even the book I said to you, the book of pictures, we are going to have some of the pictures up in the website, we hope we have it up and running before the year runs out. And we are getting as many links as we can. So that people can have links to other women's groups, or other even, not just women's groups but external groups as well (African/Leader, 35-40 year old,WIN 2008).

The heterogeneity of migrant women and of technological literacies
Even though the gender divide in technology literacy is striking, with many cohorts of migrant women having limited access to email, this is by no means true of *all* migrant women. Migrant women are a diverse, heterogeneous group. Well qualified, professional women in the organisations we have studied, often coming to Ireland independently, but also in family migratory projects and as refugees, are adroit online and with mobile phones in their personal and social lives. The organisations they helped to establish (and continue to contribute to) are testimony to their technological literacy. This literacy, we believe, represents a conduit channelling resistance, empowering women to *re-mediate* the ruptures of migration. Although the argument is counterfactual, many of these organisations would not have withstood the constraints, lack of resources and structural power they face were it not for ICTs and women's technological literacy.

However, significant differences exist between internet/email and mobile phones/text. Concerning email, a large number of migrant women involved in the organisations have access and are conversant with the technology. For example, the Women Integrated Network (WIN), a multi-ethnic group formed in Athy, Co Kildare, in 2006 with 68 members, states that "slightly more than half" of the members use internet/email to keep updated with the organisation's activities (African/Leader, 35-40 year old, WIN 2008). Other groups' leaders reiterate the widespread use of email by their members. In the case of the Louth African Women's Group we know that

> There are not that many people who don't have email. The percentage is definitely smaller than those who have access to emails, even those living in the hostels [asylum

seeking and refugee women], they have access to emails as well and the computer as well (Professional/African/Member, 35-40 year old, Louth African Women's Group 2008)

More formalised groups with larger memberships and participation, and, contrary to common assumptions, those based in rural areas (for example, County Donegal's Parent's Time in Buncrana, formed in 2007, and the Polish Mothers and Toddlers Group in Longford, formed 2006), tend to be led by women with higher technological literacy, who structure their communication around email. Less formalised groups, operating close to traditional networks of connectivity and support, and often based in County Dublin (for example NOUR and Dublin 12 Ethnic Minority Group), have fewer members with email and internet access.

Despite these variations, all the migrant women organisations we have studied have some members with no internet access, who cannot use email. A member of NOUR, an unaffiliated Muslim women's group set up in 2002 and counting around 10 formal members and many more informal participants, emphasises that *age* and *education* are critical factors (Homemaker/Algerian/Member, 35-40 year old, NOUR 2007). She explains that even though the majority of women in her group are relatively young, between 20 and 30, there are also older women involved who tend to have lower levels of formal education, and who are unlikely to have internet skills. Moreover, social conditions in their countries of origin determine their levels of technology literacy. She says that:

> It is different for Arabic women, different from European women. Arabic people, especially older people and especially women, have not completed their study like secondary school. Maybe they have one or two years of school. [This is true] especially for women, so that's why some old women can't write and can't read. So how could she open the email all together? That's why we do contact [our members] through the phone, because they can't use the computer and internet (Homemaker/Algerian/Member, 35-40 year old, NOUR 2007)

Age also plays a significant role in the direct provision centres, where women do usually have internet access, albeit limited by the number of computers and their condition. These groups are often younger, and therefore often better educated and more technologically literate. Our interview data also suggests that older women, particularly those who are comparatively isolated, living in the outskirts of Dublin and rarely leaving their homes, don't have computer literacy.

Given that some cohorts of migrant women don't have internet access, the organisations use email but invariably also send texts, to ensure everyone knows about their activities. Ultimately, emailing and websites are always integrated with conventional telephony and texting. For example, the leader of a County Louth group indicates that:

> Some of the women really do not have emails. Because they don't know how to use the internet … so with such women I don't have a choice but to get in touch with them through the phone (Professional/African/Leader, 35-40 year old, Women of Minorities Network 2008)

Similarly, the leader of NOUR explains that 'we have an email list and phone numbers, so sometimes we contact our member by phone number, and sometimes by email. When we have a meeting, we just send an email and make sure if they are coming or not by phone' (Algerian/Leader, 35-40 year old, NOUR 2007).

The founder of the Integration of African Children in Ireland, Dublin, explains that even though the members of her organisation meet regularly on Saturdays and keep in contact though emails as well:

> The majority of time we keep in contact through the mobile, text messages, so like right now, we're having our Dundalk food fair, and members of the Dublin branch would be going there, so we have texted every parent now that we have 20 spaces in the bus, if your child is coming let us know, it is truly texted (Professional/African/Leader, 40-45 year old, IACI 2008)

In all the above cases, mobile phones minimise temporal constraints and resource limitations, and maximise the range of connectivity and scope of action. We have identified several reasons for the continuing relevance of the phone and the growing use of texting. First, as mentioned above, email is limited where significant cohorts of members, typically those who are most vulnerable and in whose interests the organisations are often formed, simply have no internet access.

Second, email is time-consuming, while texting is extemporaneous and fast. Being largely voluntary and maintained in parallel to professional and family life, leaders and convenors explain that they don't have time for emailing. Third, familiarity with texting appears a key factor. Many of the migrant women members of the organisations we have studied come from developing countries, particularly in Africa and South East Asia. Because of the infrastructural limitations of 'fixed' services (landline and internet) in developing countries, in these women's previous experiences with technology the phone and text messaging are central means of communication. This is not surprising: just as email is the 'killer app' for networked technology, text messaging is the 'killer app' for mobile telephony: mobiles are now superseding landlines in uptake globally (Fortunati 2005: 155).

Fourth, texting emerges as a dominant form of mediated communication because of common assumptions that it is 'closer' and more co-present than email, less intimidating, instantaneous and faster to use, albeit more expensive. In this sense, text and phone fit better with the migrant women's organisational mode, largely based on informal, traditional gendered networks of closeness, care and support.

While men were early adopters of texting, research suggests that women text more than men (Ling 2005, Hjorth 2005). Women are also said to write longer messages, use more salutations, and express a greater variety of logistical and emotional content in their texts (Ling 2005). Our data doesn't allow us to assess the merit of these claims, but we suggest that in the case of migrant women in Ireland, text messaging is certainly not merely an emotional act but a pragmatic and purposive response; largely linked to limited time and resources in the management and development of these organisations.

Our interviews reveal that text messages are sent from 'the centre' or central node to a group, and also from peripheral nodes to other members of the network. Texting is multi-directional and pluri-functional. For example, a text can also function as a reminder; once the message is in the phone's memory, responsibility for keeping the arrangement rests with members (Professional/African/Leader, IACI 2008).

Despite their empowering capacity, texts remain expensive: the leaders of the networks invest not only time and social capital, but also economic capital.

Leadership is dependent on the leaders' capacity to assume this communicative role, aside from their motivation and charisma. The leader of Women of Minorities Network complains, for example, that:

> I don't really have the time to begin to calculate what they cost me to contact my group members, I just do it because it has to be done. Thank god for electronic media, these days they are at the tips of your fingers, and you can get something, on internet, and do what you have to do (Professional/African/Leader, 35-40 year old, Women of Minorities Network 2008).

Texting and mobile telephony in general seem to occupy a key position also due to lack of confidence for some members; an enduring condition that travels with them and in many cases is aggravated by migration and marginalisation. Like many of the women Cooper and Weaver refer to, migrant women live with gender stereotypes that "result in a pattern of attributions that make self-confidence very difficult" and "computer anxiety very likely" (2003: 85). Limited formal education, isolation, and patriarchal structures shape some women's relationship with technology, particularly those entering Ireland through family reunification and as asylum seekers.

For these cohorts of migrant women, lack of confidence translates into a lack of motivation to engage with email and the internet. Our interviews indicate that some migrant women have computers at home but do not use them, because they feel intimidated by technology and claim to prefer to let their children have full use of the computers (Homemaker/Algerian/Member, 35-40 year old, NOUR 2007). Conversely, women migrants highlight the autonomy and degree of independence they gain through using mobile and text.

Interestingly, several migrant women's organisations facilitate members in using computers and the internet. In some cases, migrant women's organisations provide computer courses, or use other organisations to deliver them. For those organisations with no resources or formal offices, computer training remains a common aspiration:

> Some women don't have email in first place, but when we open an office we want to teach how to use the email, how to send email, how to get by with it (Algerian/Leader, 35-40 year old, NOUR 2007).

Often members are encouraged to use computers and resources in public libraries (WIN 2008). Where group members are not able to avail of the support offered by library staff, in terms of both technical issues and finding information, other network members provide that kind of support. In this way, those without access 'bootstrap': in the very process of sourcing information for personal and collective purposes, they increase their skills base and thus their capacity for further participation and further resource assembly.

In all these cases, technology literacy emerges as a strategic aspect of the organisations' self-development training (Professional/African/Leader, 40-45 year old, AkiDwA 2008), and as a key tool of empowerment. On the one hand, it empowers women to overcome personal limitations; on the other, it allows women to access a range of information about activities, services and entitlements that can significantly improve their living conditions and integration strategies in Ireland.

Information thus traverses multimodal lines of diffusion. Not only does technological literacy facilitate the survival of the groups, it also contributes to their extension and

expansion, and to a growing reflexive awareness of commonalities. The voluntary, flexible and comparatively horizontal organisational structure of the groups facilitates the assembly and distribution of information by individuals within the group; this occurs simultaneously with the emergent development of ties to other organisations, and thus other resource pools. This sort of active, collective approach involves uses of technology at some distance from conventional ideas of the solitary reader, privately browsing from 'self-interest'.

Having addressed the scope of email and text messaging, we conclude our analysis by reiterating that ultimately, technology remains grounded in face-to-face sociality. A striking feature of all our interviews is that media literacy is itself a form of *meta-information*, a *meta-resource*, which the women's organisations are distributing. This was evident both with texting and email. Yet migrant women's organisations are ultimately oriented to offline activities, lobbying and service provision that, whilst drawing on and traversing mediated network/information structures, is always purposive; a means to an offline, 'real world' end.

There are also persistent limitations facing some migrant women. A migrant leader explains that:

> The women I work with have poor English, if you are giving them a leaflet to read is not going to work... it can be a bit intimidating if you have language barriers ... Sometimes it is just by word of mouth that works out... So the word of mouth, actually works a lot and then integration really is just about providing information (Professional/African/Leader, 35-40 year old, Women of Multicultural Balbriggan 2008).

New technologies enable women migrants to connect nationally and globally across geographical distance. Their connectivity remains essentially gendered, grounded in face-to-face interaction, yet bringing together the public and the private; macro structures and the agency of individuals.

There is a mutually reinforcing feedback loop between participation and technological literacy. While everyday face-to-face ties are reinforced by technology, migrant women's organisations and networks increasingly rely on communication and information technology for their management and development. Moreover, while technology allows women to be an email or text away from each other, it also allows their collective forces and social capital to be pooled and enacted together.

Conclusion
In this article, we aimed to investigate the activism of migrant women's groups constituted by leaders and members who settled in Ireland over the last decade. We wanted to explore the role of ICTs in supporting and shaping the formation of migrant organisations and networks. We had an interest in differential access to technology and information, where that access is structured by social distinctions such as class, ethnicity, education, age, relations to the host culture, features of the culture of origin, and so on. As 'Kranzberg's First Law' has it: "Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral" (Castells 1996: 65, Kranzberg 1986: 50). Technology and the uses to which it is put vary socially and culturally. The determination of technological 'neutrality' or otherwise does not occur in a social or political vacuum, and customarily the diffusion of technology and technological literacy is intended to

follow the patterns imagined for that technology by elites. However, it is also common for consumers to put technologies to innovative and unanticipated uses.[3]

Technology is a key component of the broader social structures that characterise migrant women's networks and organisations in Ireland. Technology re-mediates migration experiences, in two interrelated senses: it facilitates the *redistribution of information*, enabling an intervention in informational flow. The simultaneous correlate of this process is the emergence of *mediated* social networks, and with them a *reconfiguration of the experiential rupture* of migration. ICT use sustains independent and autonomous activism and mobilisation, even though power inequalities are not eliminated; particularly in relation to the hegemonic structures of Irish society.

While we would reiterate the relative paucity of research into the gender/race interplay in the racialised digital divide within developed economies, we want particularly to indicate the *intersectionalities* between these various modes of differentiation. We also want to highlight the varying effects of these intersections on technology uptake, and on social network formation and consolidation.

We have seen that despite the persistent digital gender divide, some groups of migrant women share the benefits of their proficiency with ICTs with their off-line networks. Extended, technologically-mediated networks are emerging *between* women's organisations, servicing often quite disparate memberships. The organisation and structure of migrant women's collective self-identity and sociality is thus being *re-mediated*. Re-mediation implies two distinct processes in our analysis.

First, social networks become mediatised and information is being re-mediated, through informal, *ad hoc* processes for information transmission and resource collection. The migrant women's networks act in this sense as rhizomatic 'dis/organisations', rectifying problems in access to information, technology, and technological literacy, and innovating in presenting solutions to issues which the state and other agencies are unwilling or unable to address. Second, re-mediation implies that migrant women act collectively to create space for themselves in their new country of destination, to remediate the dislocations and fractures of translocation, creating institutional space for self-representation and agency. Our use of *re-mediation* is, therefore, rather specific, and departs from that originally elaborated by Bolter and Grusin (1999).[4] Our emphasis is rather on the social consequences of media use, and particularly on the double logic described above.

We believe that women migrants' use of ICTs suggests a conception of networking as a mode of organisation and sociality that privileges the reconstruction of more dynamic, extended affiliations and proximities, no longer articulated in terms of a strictly bounded ethno-national belonging, but instead contingent, strategic, yet always cognisant of gender. Our experience of the migrant women's networks we

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[3] It is also common, however, for Western elites to predictably overestimate the significance of Western technology in political change in other cultures, as when recent events in Iran were described as the 'Facebook revolution'.

[4] For Bolter and Grusin, *remediation* describes the representation of one medium within another, and particularly the tendencies towards *immediacy* (a medium purporting to be a direct representation, erasing traces of its mediation) on the one hand, and *hypermediacy* (media which draw attention to themselves as such) on the other (1999: 41-45).

have discussed suggests that they are increasingly invested in multi-ethnic and multi-national alliances.

Although our research is exploratory and the field concerned complex, the strategies developed by the migrant women's organisations suggest several significant issues warranting further exploration. Migrants are not a homogenous group. Their history of migration is often multiple. Some of the women interviewed had moved country more than once, and some had picked up some of their technological skills elsewhere. However, in terms of public discourse and policy, migrants are invariably construed as a unitary entity.

Who is counted as a migrant is a political manoeuvre, and we can see in relation to it the classed and racialised inflections to the construction of migration as 'problem'. Our awareness of this is one of the reasons why we are interested in the communicative innovations migrant groups are engaging in.

The re-mediation of resources by these organisations, when taken in historical and cross-cultural perspective, is actually representative of an extremely longstanding collaborative approach to media/technology and to content distribution and consumption. This context renders such 'distributed' technology use not 'deficient' or a 'problem', but actually pragmatic, effective, efficient, and successful at that.

A consequence of this is that government agencies and other interested parties may not be doing all they could in assuming that simply because they have a website or a leaflet, they have done enough to reach potentially vulnerable social groups. When service providers and other agencies make this mistake, they are ignoring the way technology is actually used, and thereby limiting their own efforts to communicate. It is also these problems that the migrant women's organisations are working to overcome.

These various features of the discrepancies between actual uses of technology and common conceptions of users also lead us to strike a note of caution regarding the notion of technological literacy as 'pure good' (that is, as a non-rivalrous benefit to society at large). The simplistic approach to ICT access and literacy is that they are in the best interests of the group and of the individual; that they increase the prospects of both. But the historical record regarding print literacy provides compelling evidence of the analog divide:

> Certain ethnic groups were disadvantaged, whatever their literacy rates, while others maintained disproportionate claims on skilled jobs, despite their higher 'illiteracy' rates … the extent to which literacy was an advantage or disadvantage in relation to job opportunities depended on ethnicity. It was not because you were 'illiterate' that you finished up in the worst jobs but because of your background (Street 1984: 106).

This entitles us to ask: in whose interests *exactly* is technological literacy? What if, as Slack and Williams suggest (2000: 319), the function of ICTs is merely to "enable communities to be interpolated by the concerns of global capital"? As Chun argues:

> Corporations also have no problem with the digital divide … By defining technologically produced racial equality as the 'ideal,' they argue for increased technology adaptation until such racial (consumer) equality is reached, effectively giving themselves an unending 'mandate.' This mandate to eradicate inequality begs the question, Why exactly is Internet access valuable? Indeed, narratives of the digital divide and digital empowerment form a circle that circumvents questions about the

value of information, or the value of access alone, since the Internet – redefined through issues of social justice – becomes inherently valuable and desirable (2006: 147).

We have described the innovative use of ICTs among migrant women, and indicated the effects of ICT use in terms of the extension of migrant networks and a concurrent shift in senses of 'belongingness'. Technology is not a neutral medium, it is a social process with particular impacts, which is ascribed particular values, often without regard to actual use, and without consideration of the broader context, including the context in which technology is itself ascribed value. Our empirical data shows both that particular groups constituted as 'problems' are themselves orienting to technology in innovative ways, and that the emergent, often unintended values of specific technologies are always already social, and always already political.

Acknowledgments

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