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## 'The Internet Is Magic': Technology, Intimacy and Transnational Families

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# 'The Internet Is Magic': Technology, Intimacy and Transnational Families

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## Abstract

Drawing on multi-sited ethnography and qualitative research, I argue that the visual register in particular modes of communication technology like Skype and Facebook ushers in a different quality of relationships for transnational families. Most participants in this study are undocumented immigrants unable to return to their families for long periods of time because of legal consequences that will ban them from coming back and working in the USA. On the other hand, their families in the Philippines cannot visit the USA without proper documentation. The economic necessity of working abroad and legal conditions deter family reunification. Consequently, since these families are separated their only means of sustaining their relationships is through communication technology. The new mediums of communication, given their innovations in visuality, frequency and access to one another's digital lives, present complicated issues as well as different forms of intimacy for members in a transnational family.

## Keywords

transnational family, care work, domestic workers, Philippines, Skype, Facebook, immigration, family

## Introduction

### *Manila*

It's more humid today, July, after all it's rainy season in the Philippines. I'm a bit nervous about being in Barangay 50, a neighborhood in Manila notorious for petty crime and theft. Dianne, Nanay<sup>1</sup> Vickie's daughter, hurries me through the bus terminal and reminds me to hold on to my purse. I enter Vickie's home, it is a small space, but it also has high ceilings so Vickie's husband, Mauricio, built a make-shift floor out of plywood and stairs on the side to divide the space into two 'floors'. Z, Vickie's only son, is sitting in the computer corner next to the door with a fan blowing wind directly to him. I sit down a bit

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dizzy from the heat and travel and Dianne sits right next to me smiling, this is the first time we're meeting in person. We've chatted on Facebook and have been sending messages for almost six months now. I touch her shoulder and ask her how she's doing. She answers, 'OK *naman*. I'm OK.' Dianne is 16 years old, 5'4, heavy set and maybe body conscious as she keeps tugging at all corners of her shirt while talking to me.

Despite what her Mom tells me about her shyness, I find that Dianne is quite forward, she's the one that sat next to me and she seemed eager to start to talk with me about her mother. When we start, Dianne doesn't tell me about her life, love, dreams, or struggles. She's still just a kid and the biggest real thing that has happened to her is her mother's departure in 2008. Five minutes into our *kuwentohan*, or talk-story, I'm asking her about what changed about her relationship with her mom since she left; she replies, 'Best friend *ko siya. Gusto ko siyang alagaan*. She's my best friend, I like taking care of her.' Her eyes well up and tears start to run down her cheeks; '*Pwede kong sabihin sa kanya, kahit ano. Pati nga blog ko pinapabasa ko sa kanya. Para alam niya, na kahit malayo kami, pareho parin*. I can tell her anything. I even have her read my blog. So she knows, that even if we're far away from each other, it's still the same.'

I nod. I'm surprised that she has opened up to me so fast and so soon. At that moment, the Skype phone rings and Dianne says, 'OK *lang, o, dito na siya*. It's ok, because she's here now.' I'm again surprised, confused about what she means. But a couple of moments later I understand, because Nanay Vickie is now present via Skype. Tito Mauricio, Nanay Vickie's husband, a strikingly tall man with an apron on, calls us to the table to have dinner. Everyone has a place around the table and they make sure to leave a space in between me and Dianne so that the computer is facing the food and that Vickie, all the way away in New York City, can join us.

## New York City

It's a chilly November Sunday, I'm happy to be inside Nanay Vickie's, Nanay Joan's and Ate Teresa's shared flat in Queens because it's so warm. It takes me about five minutes to peel off my winter layers. The three of them live in the attic of a house, a floor that has two bedrooms separated by screens which only two of them come home to on the weekends. Joan and Teresa have live-in domestic work employment, so it keeps their Queens apartment empty on the weekdays. They keep their place neat and the first thing I notice is the four boxes stacked on top of each other almost touching the ceiling, waiting to be sent back home for the holidays.

Nanay Vickie invites me to sit down and eat lunch with her and we start our *kuwentohan* over shrimp soup and rice. I ask her to tell me what is the hardest thing about being separated from her family. She replies, '*Di ko maasikaso yung kanilang pagaaral or igabay sila*. That I can't help them with their studies or guide them in their everyday.' As we continue our conversation, she starts to cry when talking about her daughter Dianne, who will be going into her first year in college in a month. She cries because her pain is twofold. Nanay Vickie's employer just moved away and she is unemployed. She is hard on herself as she says, '*Kung wala pala akong trabaho, de doon na lang ako*. If I don't have a job anyway, I should be there.'

After talking for an hour and a half, I hear some plates clinking together and being washed, and I have the urge to wash my plate as it has been sitting in front of me for so long. I ask Nanay Vickie to pause for a second and I proceed to an empty kitchen. At that point, I wondered where the noise was coming from and popped my head back into the room Nanay Vickie and I were in and saw that she was looking at her laptop computer screen. Her setup in a corner of her and Nanay Joan's room is complete with a mic, speakers, camera, photo printer and charger.

I discover that the whole time we have been talk-storying, the Skype has been on. The clinks of utensils on plates were sounds from someone washing dishes in the Philippines. I ask Nanay Vickie if I intruded on the time that she and her kids were supposed to talk, since it was Sunday and everything. And she says, '*Hindi, gusto ko lang marining sila kahit hindi nila ako kinakausap, gusto ko lang na alam nila na nandito ako.* No, I just like to listen to them even if they're not directly talking to me, I just want them to know that I'm here.'

These two vignettes illustrate that advances in technology are easing some of the strains that come with a transnational family. The accessibility of computer hardware, coupled with quickly developing web-based software, gives way to more digital interaction. Frequent communication, digital face to digital face exchanges, and instant updates allow families to be in sync instantaneously even if they are separated across space. The development in computer technology has changed the lives of migrants and their families left behind. As Vickie and Dianne demonstrate, technology not only allows them to be in touch more often. It also offers them a different way to relate to one another. Technology is giving a way for families who are separated over time and space to explore new intimacies through their digital lives, which have many consequences for the ways transnational families are keeping their lives together from afar.

Computer technology allows transnational families to stay involved in one another's lives in an unprecedented way (Levitt, 2001). Scholars study the relationship between the leaps in transportation and communication technology and migrants' abilities to maintain relationships from abroad: from letters (Foner, 2005; Gerber, 2001; Wyman, 1993), land lines and cell phones (Horst, 2006; Horst and Miller, 2006; Lan, 2006; Madianou and Miller, 2011), and text messages and emails (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005; Wilding, 2006). More significantly, this development has changed family dynamics in day to day life. Migrant family members in New York City who have been away for 10 or more years have also seen and experienced the shifts in technology in their family lives. Carmie, a 60-year-old migrant mother who has been abroad for over 20 years, says, 'You know, internet is magic. It's a magic because before when you write letters it takes months before they receive it. It's the internet that keeps us together. Cam to cam. When I'm not online for two days they worry. So we always talk on Facebook, Yahoo.' Carmie tells of her sustained duty abroad as a migrant mother and worker away from her family through the technological and social media developments in her career as a migrant mother. Her comment also demonstrates the changes in emotional connection that have occurred with the tide of technology. Her statement shows that, as the migrant, she is not the sole person in her transnational family that needs and craves communication; it is also demanded and initiated by families left behind in the Philippines. This article will cover the bittersweet dynamics of technology, both heartbreaking because families have to be apart and hopeful given its potential for bringing families together.

Scholars suggest that the 'quality of parent-child relations' is what needs to be assessed in the development of technology for transnational families (Foner and Dreby, 2011: 557). Therefore in this article, I ask: what types of intimacies are produced through care work mediated by technology in the transnational family? In what ways does the change in communication technology engender different social relations than before? In this article, I build on the immigration and transnational scholarship that argue that technology changes the texture of the relationships of families who are separated. As technology's role in the transnational family is generally accepted, I examine here *how* technology is transforming those relationships. By focusing on computer technology, I analyze what types of digital interfaces produce particular types of care work and intimacies.

In sharing the stories of these families, I illuminate their innovative strategies via the tools of technology in time-space compression but, more importantly, I situate these stories as contextualized accounts of families *having to* deal with technology to keep cohesion intact. The centrality of

**Table 1.** Research participants in New York City, USA.

New York City				
Migrant	Mothers/Grandmothers	Sisters/Aunts	Fathers	Total: 50
	36	10	4	

technology in transnational families is a result of migrants' inability to return to their families because they are undocumented or their children have not finished college or for a host of other reasons. Therefore avoiding an uncritical celebration of technology, I frame these uses of technology as situated in the conditions under which families have to be separated. Instead of a purely descriptive account of how migrants and their families use Skype or Facebook, I aim to contextualize these efforts as part of a larger system of induced migration and, therefore, induced separation.

In this article, I will focus on the use of computer machines and hardware like video cameras, and of website and web-based platforms like social networks and email servers, as a form of communication and relationship building for transnational families. This is a rather new contribution to the literature on transnational communication as the development and accessibility of hardware like video cameras on computers and software programs like Skype and Yahoo Messenger have only emerged in the past decade. I focus largely on these computer communication technologies because they operate with a visual register, for the most part. This is quite different from other communication technologies in past research as transnational families are able to 'see' one another unlike before. This visual register, I propose, allows for different relationships and care work to emerge in the transnational context. I attend to the ways that these new 'eyes' on one another, whether on a computer camera or social networking site, create a new degree of involvement for family members who are separated.

Further, I aim to establish that the transnational interaction and flow of information, both substantive and instructive, through computer and communication technology signals a multi-directionality of care work within transnational families. Both migrants and families left behind are using computer technology and communication technology to do a range of care work from keeping people abreast of current events or teaching one another skills to use the various computer technologies. I distinguish this interaction as 'exchange' in comparison to other technologies (i.e. phone calls, text messages) because the advance of computer technology requires a new type of mastery of technology. Family members, both left behind and migrant, are active in teaching and learning skills needed to use new and ever updating web-based software. More importantly, I highlight the fact that although this transfer of information is a practical matter it also doubles as a beginning of building intimacy among separated members of the transnational family. The exchange of information opens the door for continued conversation, relationship building and development of intimacy.

## Methods

This article draws on a multi-sited research project conducted from 2008 to 2011 that utilized qualitative methods (specifically, interviews, group interviews, and participant observation) to analyze the social processes that go into maintaining a transnational family. There are two sets of participants in this multi-sited study: first, Filipino migrants, mostly women working as domestic workers in New York City, both documented and otherwise, as they have experienced long-term separation from their families for various reasons (see Table 1). In New York, I worked with the

**Table 2.** Research participants in Manila, Philippines

Manila					
Family left behind	Children	Husbands	Parents	Siblings	
	9	5	4	7	Total: 25

*Kabalikat* (literally translated from Filipino as 'shoulder to shoulder') Domestic Support Network, a loose network of Filipino domestics, and used snowball sampling to reach other Filipino migrants from the contacts of the women I made contact with there. Second, family members of the New York-based domestic workers who participated in the study introduced me to their families who live in Metro-Manila, Philippines, including but not limited to their children, husbands, partners, siblings and parents based in Manila (see Table 2). Research was conducted back and forth from New York City and Manila primarily through interviews and focus groups for the duration of three years. The participatory dimension of my research methodology influenced the transnational dimension of this research; it was upon the encouragement and participation of domestic workers in New York that I designed the research with multi-sited methods.

I recruited families in the Philippines through the domestic workers that were already involved in the study. I met them first through Facebook or Skype, then physically by visiting their homes in Manila. I believe that by staying inside of family networks and collecting family histories through interviews from both migrants and families left behind, I am able to trace how care work is reorganized on both sides of a transnational family over time and space. This longitudinal, transnational, and multi-sited method following families' migrant members and families in the Philippines provides a basis to this article's arguments about the different types of intimacies family members build through technology.

Lastly, given my position as a Filipino immigrant based in the USA, who operates transnationally in scholarship, research and personal life, I use my own epistemological knowledge as an instrument to theorize about the lives of families who are separated by migration and distance. I bring my insider standpoint as a woman who engages actively in transnational practice through travel and technology into my analysis of the lives of transnational families.

## Literature Review: Technology in Transnational Contexts

Global capitalism relies on the rationalization of technology and transport to produce a migration industry, as in the Philippine case, commodifying people as product. Critical media scholars argue that technology and communication have and continue to be essential to the production process, and more importantly, to the accumulation of capital (Ekman, 2012; Manzerolle and Kjøsen, 2012; Pleios, 2012). Historically, technology facilitated the rationalization of production, circulation and trade for manufactured goods and the traffic in people (Appadurai, 1990; Harvey, 1991; Marx and Engels, 2012). The use of rational technologies maximizes profit accumulation by decreasing the costs of production and advancing surplus value production (Mosco, 2009). Moreover, critical scholars argue that dialectics in the Marxist theory of communication help us understand how an 'alternative' media is emerging and challenging the hegemonic media globalization model. In particular, the emergence of open-source media, social networks and user-created content drives the democratization of communication through media and technology (Fuchs and Mosco, 2012). This theoretical framework situates the absent intersection of technology and migration in the era of global capitalism within the burgeoning field of critical media studies. Tantamount to the history

and advance of technology, migration has long been an element of a globalized economy and in the age of neoliberal globalization has ushered in an increase in international migration. Thus applying a critical technological analysis to the technological dynamics in migration situates the advances in technological innovation in the larger, historical and political economic trajectory of capitalism. This critical framing is key in understanding that the innovations in technology do not exist outside of the political and economic conditions that produce them.

For example, the complex system of recruiting, tracking and managing of migrants is facilitated through software technologies. The immediate development of international air travel that uses the Philippines as a key entry, layover and departure site reflects the advance of transportation technology. Scaffolding this lucrative industry is a secondary and almost equally profitable industry of communication technology. The globalization process that buttresses this \$20b per year migration system is the development and promotion of new media technologies to appease the sacrifice, guilt and hardship Filipino migrants face as they go abroad to work.

Migrants use the available means of communication to redefine relationships transnationally and to ensure that the resources they migrated to attain go back to the people they left behind. A relationship with a migrant and family member back home is necessarily fostered and nurtured differently if their only communication is as infrequent as a letter than if they stay in touch daily through a social network online. The types of technology engender particular types of intimacies and therefore should be scrutinized as such. The following review of the literature on migrant transnationalism and technology chronicles the maintenance of the communication espoused by migrants and the people they leave behind. However, I underscore the historicity of technology in migration as a parallel history to the development of neoliberal globalization.

The possibility of transnational life and ties is facilitated through the ways migrants and people left behind stay in touch. Migrants have kept and continue to sustain relationships with people in their homelands through letters, cassette tapes, landline phones, mobile phones, text messages, and, more recently, emails and internet services. Across this gamut, these technologies served both emotional and practical purposes. In a historical study of early European immigrants' epistolary relationships in the USA, David Gerber posits that letters operated in affirming immigrant ties to the Old World, redefining the relationships to people left behind that were left vulnerable through distance, and formulating plans of future reunion or extended separation (Gerber, 2001). These facets of transnational lives created new intimacies between people who had a relationship with one another through proximity and, given that space revised that relationship, letters were the only way to continue the relationships they wished to maintain. Practically, letters from early transnational communities expedited the exchange in information and resources (Foner, 2005). Letters were used to transmit sensitive information about remittances, costs of living, emergency situations and shipment of parcels and goods (Wyman, 1993). For the Filipino migrant women in this study letters, earlier on in their migration histories, were often their primary form of communication. Letters were breaths of fresh air between long periods of time without contact that would inform migrants of how remittances were spent or discover how a sick family member was doing. Still, the infrequency of this type of communication left migrants feeling isolated and detached from their families.

The accessibility of mobile phones influenced by the onset of higher rates of media globalization introduced a quicker and more frequent form of communication for transnational families. Filipino migrant women reported that the mobile phone gave them much more freedom to call when it was convenient for them, for example on their breaks during a work day. For their families, mobile phones allowed family members in the Philippines to call whenever they needed or



wanted to talk to their family member abroad. Scholars argue that the mobile phone substantially changed the quality of relationships for families separated by migration (Horst, 2006; Madianou and Miller, 2011). In Heather Horst and Daniel Miller's study of the impact of the mobile phone in Jamaican society, they argue that the formalities of remittances and communicating emergency situations were eased by the advent of the mobile phone (Horst and Miller, 2006). The mobile phone opens up the opportunity for family members to gain a more accurate picture of the situations at home and abroad. In this sense, connectivity allows family members to come to an understanding about the sacrifices and back breaking work in a foreign land and where money is most needed and spent in the homeland. Different from a landline phone, the mobile phone increases the frequency and accessibility of contact. Calls are initiated and returned at the convenience of family members both abroad and at home. Although the newness of anytime accessibility is comforting, the liberal access to one another's daily life gives way to surveillance and harassment. Migrants demand to know daily movements of spouses or children and relatives left behind stress their need for more and more financial support (Riak-Akuei, 2005). Additionally, the cost and maintenance of the mobile phone becomes another burden for the transnational family. Scholars have found that although mobile phones have allowed a closer connectivity between transnational families, still ambivalence about this type of access to one another remains (Madianou and Miller, 2011).

The Short Message Service (SMS), more popularly known as text messages, developed alongside the mobile phone. In the Philippines, a majority of Filipinos from different classes have access to pre-paid phones that work entirely to facilitate text messaging communication. Long before texting was a hit in the USA, Filipinos found that texting was cheap and was a viable form of communication to people in close proximity and further away. For migrants, text messages present a more covert and private method of communication to families at home or friends in their vicinity. Text messages on mobile phones can be received at any time without migrants having to physically interrupt a workday or conversation to receive information or communication (Lan, 2006). The cost of texts, their brevity and their capability to distribute information widely and quickly contributes to a more rapid updating system for migrants and their families back home. Texting is also used for more colloquial and conversational exchanges like jokes, poems, riddles and personal messages (Horst, 2006; Lan, 2006). In fact, text messages' rapidity and frequency is equally as important as their content for transnational communication (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005). Text messages allowed separated families to exchange daily banter that helped them feel closer across long distances.

The onset of the internet in the late 1980s and its tremendous, sweeping impact in the world changed transnational life along with everything else. For migrants, the virtual world has intensified what the aforementioned communication technologies already provided and it has provided more ways for migrants to stay involved in transnational activities. Transnational internet initiatives have facilitated support for hometown associations (Levitt, 2001), political campaigns (Smith, 2006), and cultural diffusion (Vertovec, 2009). The internet's entry into the lives of people who live in a transnational context accurately describes the simultaneity in which they live, together yet apart. Yet, the nature of technology is that of rapid advancement. The swiftness of changing internet interface and computer communication technology parallels the changing dynamics of social relations produced from them. I am sure by the time of publication of this manuscript, major communication shifts will have already given way to new forms of social interactions and relations. Still, today, there is a lacuna in the existing literature examining the impact of computer technology in the lives of transnational families. I fill that gap in this article.



### *Intimate Family Relations and Transnational Technology*

Researchers of the transnational family have argued that although migration provides a type of independence for women migrants, power asymmetries along the lines of gender in the family are maintained in the transnational context (Horst, 2006; Mahler, 2001; Parreñas, 2005). In examining the role of communication technology, Sarah Mahler argues that phone communication and the withholding of information in that interaction, in the case of male Salvadorean migrants in Long Island, NY and their wives in rural El Salvador, maintains men's power in their relationships (Mahler, 2001). Rachel Parreñas, in what she calls 'long-distance intimacy', argues that although communication eases the strain in transnational families, it also exacerbates existing gender imbalances in the Filipino family. For both the migrant mother and daughters left behind, Parreñas suggests that women's domesticity stays intact. For migrant mothers, in fact, migration is a no win situation. Technology opens up the opportunity for migrant women to do the care work from afar and they are able to instruct women at home to assume their roles. Thus, mobile phones, text messages and emails become a constant reminder of the absence of mothers and produce ambivalence for daughters left behind.

Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller make the case that communication through mobile phone allows migrant mothers to negotiate their ambivalence about wanting to go home to assume their domestic duties and to stay abroad to continue to assume the role of breadwinner for their families. Instead of affirming gender roles, Madianou and Miller suggest that the mobile phone as a communication technology empowers migrant women to feel more confident about their duty away from home (Madianou and Miller, 2011). The dynamics of intimacy and family relations established in these studies are based on utilitarian and logistical matters of family operations. Moreover, the definitions of emotional labor are mostly considered from the migrants' perspective instead of a transnational exchange between migrants and families left behind. I agree with the perspective that technology gives resources to migrant women to delegate their tasks but I find that women and men in the Philippines also use technology to negotiate and adjust who takes up work and roles of caring in the family and more. Although, like Parreñas, I have found that technology facilitates the continuation of gendered division of labor in the household for migrant mothers and the women in their families left behind, I find that it is important to examine and analyze the multitude of meanings new technology brings to transnational families. I argue that the changes in technology also reflect the concepts of intimacy for all members in the transnational families, both migrant and non-migrant. I argue that the concept of intimacy must be deepened from the standpoint of migrants and their families left behind.

### **Degrees of Intimacy: Presence and Surveillance**

The presence of a family member is being rearticulated through the use of rapidly developing computer technologies like Skype, Gmail video chat and Yahoo Messenger video chat. The visual register on these computer programs opens up a window into the lives of family members who are separated. Although scholars argue that technological interaction often makes it difficult to create and maintain intimacy, especially with girls (Pea et al., 2012), I find that the conditions of transnational families produce different results even if families are using similar types of technologies. The conditions of long-term separation leave transnational families little choice to pursue building meaningful relationships with family members who are away from one another. Technology, at times, becomes the only viable option as transnational families face forced migration and increased criminalization of immigrants through nativist immigration policies.

For migrant mothers in New York City, their absence from their homes in Manila is compensated for by their presence online, a sometimes creepy but comforting surveillance of their families through these venues. In Joanna Dreby's research about Mexican migrants and their families in the late 1990s and early 2000s, she found that managing separation relied mainly on unreliable phone calls, gifts and remittances. Dreby's ethnography uncovered the painful reality of migrant parents sending gifts of clothes and toys that were age inappropriate or could no longer fit their children, signaling a parents' inability to provide anything other than just financial support for their children. But today, as in Vickie's example, Skype breaks this dynamic down. Although Vickie cannot touch her quickly growing children, she can at least see them face to face on a daily basis and watch how tall or skinny they get.

The fact of Vickie's absence in the Philippines adds another dimension to the maintenance of the family at home in Manila. At Vickie's request, '*Buksan ang online pagdating sa bahay*', they turn on the internet once they get home. Since New York City is exactly 12 hours ahead of Manila time, when Vickie's children get home from school at 4–5 p.m. in Manila, she is up and getting ready for work early in the morning in New York. Many of the domestic workers maintain this schedule, whether it is early morning in Manila and late in New York or vice versa, they insist on being 'in the room' when mundane things are happening like dinner time, washing up or getting ready for school. Rose, another *Kabalikat* member and migrant mother, says, 'I just like hearing them move around.' The presence of migrant mothers through technology in this way allows their absence to be a bit bearable.

Web camera and video conferencing technology not only ushered in a more rapid exchange of capital, communication and goods for corporations, but has restructured material and intimate relations for transnational families. Marxist scholars of communication and technology argue that the use value of media technologies enabled global communication, creation of culture and exchange of information for capital circulation (Manzerolle and Kjösen, 2012). The exchange value of media technologies, however, translates into monetary accumulation in the hands of capitalists that profit from the horizontal and vertical diversification of media technologies. So even though new media technologies provide constant communication and connection for migrants and their families left behind, the profit obtained from migrant remittances and from the technology industry attached to the migration industry necessitates the separation of family members. As families in a transnational arrangement use video technology to organize practical matters such as remittances, both money and packaged goods, these technologies are facilitating the continued remittances from abroad and normalizing migration as a form of breadwinning for Filipino families. Both remittances and migration as livelihood naturalized through technology keeps a particular class elite in the Philippines comfortable, and further reinforces the structural hegemony of a global power elite.

However, because the family is a different sort of social organizational unit, the outcomes of this technology reach beyond the practical into emotions and intimacy. In this section, I discuss the visual register of webcams and video conferencing software as it changes the texture of the communication migrants have with their families and loved ones at home. Seeing a face on a screen changes the physical and figurative 'presence' of migrant family members living abroad. I hope to illuminate the ways that Skype or Yahoo Messenger, or what I will from now on call 'webcam technology' or just 'webcam' – as the migrants and their families refer to it – produce an effect of integration, presence and surveillance.

In her research on Mexican transnational families, Joana Dreby found that phone calls alleviated some of the strain of separation, but they also brought up feelings of shame and guilt for migrant parents who were not able to see their young children grow up (Dreby, 2010). Webcams answer this desire of migrants to actually *see* their family when they are away. Early on in my

research when I asked migrants and their family members the hardest thing about being separated, people in New York and Manila often answered in tears: '*Hindi ko sila nakikita*. That I can't see them', 'I can't see them grow up', 'I can't see Mama's face', '*Hindi ko alam ang itsura nila*. I don't know what they look like anymore.' Comments like these narrated the sadness in failing to see or witness the physical growth of family members. Therefore with the spread of visual communication technology, I found that the actual practice of seeing and witnessing growth was important for both migrants and families left behind. The webcam's ability to provide a visual reproduction of people's faces and bodies mattered a great deal to everyone in a transnational family.

### Presence

The Santos family is a tight knit family. With seven sisters and one brother close in age, they are more like best friends than siblings. They joke around with a scathing sense of humor, using street slang to insult one another with laughter following shortly after, in a way that only loved ones can. They all share the understanding that they only have one another and that they are all parents to all the children in their family. Rita, like three of her sisters before her, emigrated as a single woman in her early 20s to support her aging parents and the nieces and nephews in her family in 1992. In a staggered pattern, the Santos sisters migrated for work to take turns as the breadwinner of their family. Rita, unlike some of her sisters, never managed to return to the Philippines to live. She settled in New York City, got married and bought an apartment with her husband in the Bronx. Still, her relationship with her siblings has not changed. Leslie, Rita's sister closest in age, is a single mother who lives in the family house in Metro Manila; she tells me that Rita has a special affection for Leslie's son, Kela, as he was the first child born to the group of siblings. Rita is the primary financial support for Kela. Leslie describes how the webcam allowed Rita to become integrated into Kela's growth:

*Yan ang drama dati. Yung voice tape, [dramatic voice] boses lang, eh ngayon, hi-tech na. Pero kasi ang problema dun, hindi mo mavisualize, mavisualize yung bata, ang maganda ngayon, nakikita mo yung bata lumalaki, sa internet di ba? Kahit papaano.*

That was the drama back then. The voice tape, [dramatic voice] only her voice, but now, it's high tech. Because the problem back then is you couldn't visualize, visualize the kid, what's nice today, is you can see the kid grow up, on the internet right? At the very least that.

Leslie notes that the webcam allows Rita to *see* Kela grow and therefore she may not feel as alienated as she had felt before when she could only send her voice back home or only hear Kela's voice. Leslie's statement of '*Kahit papaano*. At the very least that' suggests that Rita's communication and, now, visual communication is a reciprocation, a sort of pay back in exchange for Rita's migration and continued support for Kela. As an engagement in multi-directionality of care, Leslie understands that the communication through computer technology allows Rita to stay up to date and therefore allows her to feel reassured in supporting Kela's growth. Still, the visual component of their relationship is key here. Leslie points to the difference between the cassette tapes that were the communication technology of the past, where people would record voices on tape and send them. But now, webcam allows Rita to *see* her beloved nephew grow taller, bigger and more mature. This slight difference in actually being able to see her nephew's face grow and change may not seem like much, but for a long-term, serial migrant like Rita, the face of her nephew the last time they saw one another is what she clings to. And now, Skype allows her to not only cling to his face but to see it grow.

Rose left her husband and four children when the children were one, two, five and eight years old. Her youngest son, JJ, was a new born when she had to quickly pack up and leave to work for a diplomat who was moving from Manila to New York City. Now, JJ is almost 10 and she has been away for most of the formative years of her children's lives. Rose remembers the first years of her duty with the diplomat:

*Kasi nandoon ako sa diplomat noon, kasi almost two years din ako nandoon sa may trabaho tapus wala naman akong laptop wala na man. Di ko sila makita katulad ngayon, kung hangaan ano lang tawag, phonecard, text ganyan. Nung first year ko dito siempre gabe gabe akong umiyak.*

Because I was with the diplomat then, because I was with them almost two years working for them then I didn't have a laptop, nothing. I couldn't see them like I do now, it would only be through calls, phone cards, text, like that. My first year here, of course, I cried every night.

Rose's first job in the USA with a diplomat was a severe case of abuse, exploitation and isolation, which I will return to in a later section. Rose endured difficult work conditions because her undocumented status led her to believe that making claims about better wages and work conditions or a better quality of life was out of the question. She thus surrendered her ability to communicate with her family in her first two years in the USA; she notes that in that time she could not get a laptop, which prevented her from seeing her children. But here, it is important to note that it was of utmost importance to her to 'see' her children, understanding that 'seeing' them means talking with them through a webcam. Her statement above privileges webcam communication over phone calls and texts because her online relationship with them through the webcam allows her to *see* them and for them to *see* her. In this situation, where Rose is unable to return to her family until her promise of all of them finishing college is fulfilled, the visual register of the webcam is often the only thing Rose has as a way of being with and keeping up with her children.

I asked Rose's two youngest children, Grace and JJ, who are 10 and 11, about how they kept up their relationship with their mother and they said,

JJ: *Dati po telepono.* In the past, telephone.

Grace: *Nanibago nga po kami noong makita namin siya kasi ang taba niya!* [laughs] We were shocked when we first saw her because she was so chubby! [laughs]

JJ: *Tumaba siya eh!* [laughs] She got chubby! [laughs]

Grace: *Payat kasi, ang payat kasi niya noong umalis siya dito. Tapos payat na maitim.* She was thin, she was thin when she left here. Then, she was thin and dark skinned.

JJ: *Ngayon pumuti!* [laughs] Now she's white! [laughs]

Grace: *Pumuti siya.* She got lighter.

JJ: *Sabi nila ng mga friend niya dito tumaba eh tumaba tapos puma, pumuti sabi ng mga friend niya dito.* Her friends here said that she got fat, eh fatter, then, whi-, whiter, said all of her friends here.

Grace: *Marami nang changes.* Lots of changes.

JJ: *Lagi niyang tinitingnan yung height naming apat. Kung gaano na daw kami katangkad, tapos yung ano yung head tapos yung ano lagi talaga niyang binabantayan lagi yung height namin.* She always looks at our height, us four. How tall we're getting, then measuring our heads, then um, she always keeps track of our height.

Grace: *Parang ano, gusto niya makita kung gaano kabilis kaming lumaki. Sabi ko nga, gaano siya kabilis tumaba? Para lumaki tayong lahat, sama sama!* [laughs] Its like um, she wants to see how fast we are growing. I told her how fast are you getting chubbier? So we can grow together! [laughs]

In this conversation, JJ and Grace remember the years that their family transitioned into webcam technology. They note that seeing their mother for the first time surprised them and her appearance was the first thing they spoke about. Of course, JJ and Grace's memories of their mother's physical appearance when she left are probably an amalgamation of pictures from the past, stories from their father, siblings and family friends but in their recollection of this transition in their family, they deemed it important for me to know that they knew the difference between their mother then and now. Their comments on how much chubbier and lighter she became during her time in the USA points to their ability to know their mother in a much more intimate sense than if they were just talking on the phone like before. Further, the story they are telling about physical growth, height and weight are dimensions of family life that, in the past, would not be the first priority to be tracked by phone call or letter writing. Tracking how tall or fat one another is becomes a sign of a physical closeness, an intimacy that the distance of migration could not allow before. Now, because of the visual register of webcams, being able to see one another gives families an opportunity to be integrated in a way that is taken from them after migration: the ability to see one another.

For Rose, the actual ability to see her kids grow taller and bigger is not only a change from her former avenue of communication; for her, it is a way to enact the responsibilities that she could not attend to because of her migration. Grace's last comment about growing fat and tall together brings this point home; the visual component of the webcam provides an opportunity for transnational families to be together in a way that they could never be before. Perhaps because of Rose's undocumented status and her inability to go home and see her children for over nine years, this type of technology means more to her and her family as they are at least together through the webcam. In this case, the webcam assisted Rose in fulfilling a care task that she could not continue because of her location, but it also calls on JJ and Grace to interact with their mother so as to show her that she is fulfilling that task, whether it is by measuring themselves or each other or also tracking their mother's growth in weight. Webcams' visual aspect provides a way for this interaction in care to be reciprocal, with each family member doing their part in creating the intimacy they desire from one another.

The ability of migrants and families left behind to see one another online produces an effect both of presence and also of surveillance. Heather Horst found that mobile phones allowed migrants to stay involved in the day to day affairs of their families, but that communication also always relied on the watchful eye and self-reporting of the voice on the other end (Horst, 2006). Webcams serve the purpose of keeping family updated on day to day affairs. As I continued to research the new effects of the webcam on the lives of transnational families, I found that that the visual component of the technology *integrated* the lives of families' daily developments. Leslie continues to discuss how the webcam opens up a whole new world for migrants and their families left behind:

*Pero ngayon, parang nandun sila sa internet, Skype, kahit wala silang sinasabi, yun na ang trend ngayon. Naka – naka-mic lang sila, parang lang nililive nila yung – kagigising lang nung bata, naghomework, naghuluto si Tatay.*

But now, they're there on the internet, Skype, even if they aren't saying anything. That's the trend now. They – they're on the mic, and it's like live – they see us live, when the kids get up, when they're doing their homework, when Tatay is cooking.

Leslie notes that the banal life becomes a consumable and enjoyable part of transnational families. Being 'live' on the webcam invites migrants to be around, close and present from afar. Maya, Rose's eldest daughter, says:

*Noong simula noong nakakachat naman namin siya sa webcam lagi naman kaming nagkikita parang ganoon na rin parang lagi na rin siyang nandito.*

When we started chatting with her on the webcam, we always see each other. It's like before, it's like she's always here.

The idea of streaming someone else's daily life 'live' and instantly allows family members in the Philippines to imagine that their migrant family members are 'here'. The dynamics of presence are facilitated here by the visual ability of webcams because as migrants are able to watch, witness and take in the daily happenings in their homes, emotions like trust, closeness and familiarity begin to be the basis of the intimacy created through webcams.

Vickie talks about the feeling of closeness and integration she feels with her family in Manila:

*Pagnakaonline kami, alam mo ung lahat nangyayari, sa araw araw. Nasisiyahan ako pagalam ko na araw araw na gumagawa sila ng rebyu o nakikisama sa isa't isa. Parang nakikita ko sila matured. Your believe in yourself that you are not a fail as a mom.*

You know when we're always online, you find out what's going on, you start to know what's happening every day. It makes me feel better when I know every day they are doing homework and taking care of each other. It's like I see they're maturing. You believe in yourself that you didn't fail as a mom.

Vickie likes to set up her webcam as she gets home from work and keeps it on as she does chores around her apartment in Queens. Her webcam does not necessarily need around the clock attention but being on the webcam, she makes herself available in that way. When she interacts with her children as they are doing homework or she listens in when her daughter, Dianne, makes breakfast for her brother, Z, Vickie is present to watch her children, like she did when she lived with them. I asked Dianne about her mother's online presence and she answered,

*Everyday naman nagoonline. Minsan pag magisa ako okay lang basta ka-chat ko siya. Binubuksan pag gumagawa ng work niya, gumagawa ako ng work ko. Pagka may work siya, every day time dito tapos night doon. Ngayon kasi wala siyang work kaya every day at every night kausap namin siya.*

Every day we're online. Sometimes when I'm by myself, I just chat with her. She turns it on when she's doing her work and when I'm doing my work. When she has work, every morning here and night there. But now, she has no work so now we talk to her in the day time and at night.

The frequency of interaction via webcam between Vickie and her family in Manila mimics her physical presence in their home. Because she is available and around so much, the transnationality of their family seems seamless because of her ability to stay present, integrated and knowledgeable about the daily routine of her family. This presence, however, is maintained by two parties, Vickie in New York and a family member living in her home in Manila; the very action of turning on Skype becomes a form of care that Dianne and Z participate in as they know that being present on webcam gives Vickie a feeling of relief. Instead of the distance defining the relationship between mother and children, the webcam and the responsibilities of children to turn it on, keep it on and talk with their mother become a form of care work that they do for Vickie. This exchange underscores the importance of simultaneity as Vickie and her family, literally and figuratively, let one another into their daily routines even as they are occurring thousands of miles apart.



## Surveillance

The presence of migrants via webcams also gives way to an eerie affective background, as if someone were always watching. A few of the respondents reported that they feel like they are being watched. They understand that, for migrants, the use of the webcam can be a way to ensure that families back home are not spending their hard earned money on lavish things or that work around the house gets done. They were doing the watching. For families left behind, that sort of surveillance can be exasperating. The cousins, Dianne, Z, Melann and Chris, children of Vickie and Joan, discuss with the author (V) how they sometimes find reprieve when their mothers are 'watching' them:

V: *Anong sinasabi niyo sa kanila pagbukas ng online?* What do you tell them when they first get online?

Dianne: *Ah, yung reporting namin? Minsan... hindi kumpleto...* [laughs] Oh, our reporting you mean? Sometimes... incomplete? [laughs]

V: What do you mean?

Z: *Kailangan may konting pagtatago!* [laughs] There's gotta be some secrets! [laughs]

Chris: *Like minsan, ano umm... pupunta ka sa ganito o tamad ka, so may konting ano yun, na sabihin gagawa ka ng project. Minsan hindi ka gagawa ng project. Ituro lang ang webcam pababa ng konti!* Like sometimes, um... when you wanna go somewhere or you're just lazy, just say you have a project to do. Sometimes you don't work on the project. Just point the camera a little downward!

Dianne: *Uy! Hindi ako ganun!* [laughs] Hey! I'm not like that! [laughs]

Melann: *Uy! Lahat tayo ganun!* [laughs] Hey! We're all like that! [laughs]

Similarly to children in families that live under the same roof, these children create strategies to evade their parents' gaze. Although the mothers of Dianne, Z, Melann and Chris live thousands of miles away, the game of cat and mouse still continues. As we continued our conversation, I found that the purpose behind this is that the presence of migrants via webcam is of course transformative for family cohesion, but it also maintains the power hierarchy between children and parents. A similar dynamic happens with husbands and wives and the shifts in the care work in the household.

Vickie's husband, Mauricio, a bus driver before Vickie left, has taken over many of Vickie's tasks at home like cleaning, cooking, paying for bills and caring for the children. This shift in roles of who the breadwinner is, and who the breadmaker, is suffused with power reversals also. Vickie, along with other migrant women, feel entitled to certain power shifts in the home as they are bringing in the income. However, in the patriarchal schema of the Filipino family, most men – husbands, fathers and brothers – have a hard time with that shift. Mauricio says:

*Pinagtiyagaan ko na lang habang nag-mamaneho ako. Pero ngayon every ano every Saturday mamimili tapos kung kaya lang ng oras mo naglalaba. Pwede sa linggo. Pero lunes hanggang miyerkules namamalantsa ako. Vik, ngayon ko lang naranasan yong nagluluto na naglalaba. Doon ko narealized na ang nanay pala sa bahay ang trabaho mahirap. Ang mas mahirap doon ay pagnandiyan siya. Sa webcam. Ang kaba ko, SUS.*

I endured being a driver. But now, um, every Saturday groceries, if time allows it laundry. I can do it Sunday too. But Monday through Wednesday, I iron the clothes. Vickie, now I've experienced how it is to cook and clean. That's when I realized that mothers at home, their work is hard. What's even more difficult is when she's there. On webcam. My nerves, geez.



Mauricio shares with us how his transition was a huge realization about the gendered work that was the norm when Vickie lived with them. Differing from other scholars' conclusions about husbands left behind in transnational families, Mauricio and the other men in the study were often quick to pick up where their women counterparts left off. The men who participated in the study recognized that the women that left their family made a sacrifice and holding up their end of the deal was in taking up the tasks of the household. This finding surprised me at first, as it is the opposite of what many researchers conclude about men in transnational families. However, in this case, technology allows us to see perhaps a different dimension in the men left behind.

Husbands of migrant women often used webcam technology to learn their new tricks of the trade. Peter, Melanie's husband, said,

*Basta kung ano yung pinapakain ko sa kanila dito, natutunan ko sa tulong ng webcam at ni Mel. Pero kung di masarap, di niya alam!*

Whatever I cook here, I learned with the help of the webcam and Mel. But if it isn't good, then she won't know!

But at the same time, the gaze of the webcam pushes them to assess if they are doing their tasks properly. Although the husbands never talked about any judgmental comments they received from their wives, the mere presence they feel from the webcam is enough for them to feel as if they are being watched.

Migrant women launching surveillance of husbands and households do so to keep control of the kind of household they would want if they were still in the Philippines. They watch because they would like their children to do homework and their husbands to prepare meals for the children. They look into their homes because they like order and cleanliness. And yet for some, surveillance also keeps out a popularly known trend in infidelity for Filipino husbands left behind. Infidelity had always existed in Rose's relationship with her husband, even when she lived in the Philippines. As her stay in New York becomes longer and longer, she has been hearing that her husband is up to his old ways again. Rose recounts how she found out about her husband Mike's cheating:

*Pag nagchachat kami nagkamamali sya na wrong sentence imbis na sinned sa babae niya, napunta sa akin kaya. Hindi yung lang, yung anak ko may sumbong sila sa akin. Lalot yung panganay ko. Kasi sabi ko sa kanya okay lang kung may babae ka, wag lang pakita doon sa may bata. Kasi yung mga bata baka kasi lumayo sa kanya o baka siya yung mag tulak para may sinungaling yung manga anak ko sakin. Alam mo, hayaan ko na lang na nakawebcam ako magdamag. Kahit paano, alam ko kung anong nangyayari sa pamamahay ko, sa mga bata.*

When we used to chat he would send a wrong sentence to me instead of sending it to the other woman. Not just that, my kids would tell me. Especially my oldest. So I told him, it's okay if you have a woman on the side, just don't show my kids. Because my kids – what if they get angry at him and distance themselves or he might even push them to lie to me. You know, just leave the webcam on all the time. At least, I know what's happening in my house, to my kids.

The surveillance program Rose instituted is concerned with two things: keeping watch over her husband's trysts and also to undergird her idea of a home for her children, one where kids never have to lie to her about another woman in the house. This surveillance is on one hand a positive form of connection to the Philippines, for Rose. It provides her with some control over a situation that quickly gets away from her. However, on the other hand, surveillance can easily be turned off by any person who knows that technology in her home. Moreover, her presence on Skype can color

other technologies (i.e. chat, emails, Facebook) as a form of surveillance as well. When Skype becomes surveillance, computer technology attenuates anxieties for migrants abroad, but it can provide new causes for anxiety as well.

Skype's visual register adds a different dimension to communication, staying present and keeping order in a transnational family. Here, the frequency of communication is not so different but the technological interface of webcam technology mediates the type of care that results from it. For many families, an added facet of their digital lives together also operates with a visual component but increases the frequency and accessibility of family interaction. If the webcam covers the basics of keeping up with daily activities and disciplining the household, Facebook makes room for a different type of relationship building.

## Conclusion

In the stories of transnational family members, I have highlighted that technology opens up the potential for friendships, intimacy and closeness. The exploration of computer communication technology and exchange illuminates the ways in which transnational families are engaging in multi-directional care work. I argue that the visual component on webcam technologies like Skype, Yahoo Messenger, etc., allows for a different type of care work to be exchanged both by migrants and by families left behind. The act of turning on a webcam or maintaining a live feed for households in New York and Manila holds an intention of integrating far away loved ones in everyday life. Yet it also can become a visual system of surveillance. Issues of boundaries and policing emerge in the technology of updating, and yet, this technology also encourages the development of intimacy and friendship between separated family members. I find that the visual register of Skype gives husbands and children left behind and migrant parents equal opportunity to provide care for one another by inviting one another into their digital social life. Transnational families are demonstrating impressive strategies to keep their families intact.

However, I want to underscore that the very development of technology lauded by the family members in this study was made necessary by the conditions of migration in the era of globalization. It is the case that, despite the conditions of separation and migration, transnational family members are working hard to be there for one another, to be good to one another, to help one another's spirit get lighter, albeit from afar. Still, the elephant in the room is that this study is an exploration of the absurdity of technology as an instrument of intimacy. Technology as a tool of global capitalism for profit accumulation has transformed its use-value of communication and information into a fetish commodity – a natural, fact-of-the-matter aspect of migration (Fuchs, 2009a, 2009b). The fetishism of technology as a rubric of mass migration has blunted the critique of a systematic, lucrative export of people. Families left behind in the Philippines alongside (potential and current) migrants hold up the tool of technology as consolation to their difficult life situations. Furthermore, the Philippine state – the very architect of a multi-billion dollar industry of selling its own citizens – also praises (and profits from) the potentials of technology to keep transnational families together.<sup>2</sup> Although these stories are reminders that, because of the pressures of globalization, people make creative use of what they have, they are also a reminder that people just have no other option than to do so.

David Harvey reminds us that the contemporary moment in neoliberal globalization requires high-speed everything: financial capital, transportation, information and communication (Harvey, 1991). Induced migration and the Philippine labor brokering state (Rodriguez, 2002) are also products and processes of global capitalism. The demands of the global economy for low-wage, precarious workers and the flinging of workers to different parts of the world are all aspects of the

rapid development of technology. Many can and have spun this as a positive example of worker internationalism, autonomy and freedom to choose one's own future. But as Doreen Massey reminds us, 'the ways in which people are inserted into and placed within "time-space compression" are highly complicated and extremely varied' (Massey, 1993: 63). Although globalization can celebrate the mobility of migrant workers and their ability to stay in contact with their homes left behind, it is followed by the shame of pulling migrants from their homes and witnessing them use technology to retain the very bonds they had to leave behind.

The above exploration of families' technological dexterity in maintaining the family is both remarkable and depressing. Instead of solely celebrating the innovations in transnational family life arrangements, I am also reminded that these families *have* to think outside of the box to keep up with one another because they are apart. The opportunity to innovate these strategies of family life is mediated by the fact that families have to be apart to do so. I believe that we have to see these strategies in care and technology as a contextualized use of tools—tools that are part and parcel of the tools of capitalist globalization. It is important to understand that forced labor migration in the contemporary moment is a facet of life in neoliberal globalization. And therefore a necessitated use of technology, as innovative and impressive as it is, is the result of an induced geography for families who would otherwise not choose to be apart.

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### Notes

- 1 *Nanay* is the Filipino word for mother.
- 2 During the holiday season of 2011, Coca-Cola in partnership with the Overseas Foreign Workers agency produced a short film called 'Where will happiness strike next?' that followed three migrant workers who were sponsored and united with their families in the Philippines. In a tearful and emotional short film, the film showed how technology and transportation bridges the gap between transnational families despite long-term separation and long distances.

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