Connectedness: Support to Communities in Diaspora via ICT

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Abstract
The continuous migratory flows from Mexico to the US have yielded the creation of transnational communities. Communication is essential for these people to keep their community awareness high. Even though recent advances on ICT have enabled people to be in touch with remote family or friends, community context obtained by migrants is arguably partial. My dissertation will focus on an exploratory study of different communication channels used by migrants to communicate to and from their community of origin. The contributions of my work will provide an understanding of the nature of community connectedness of migrants as well as the information elements involved on increasing the sense of connection itself. This knowledge might be used for the better design of communication technologies.

Keywords
Communities in Diaspora, Connectedness, Homesickness, Migration, Awareness, Transnational Communities.

ACM Classification Keywords
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.
Introduction
The sharp increase on penetration of novel and affordable services and different Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has enabled people to choose from a rich variety of mediums for contacting remote family members or friends. Independently from the channel used to contact, communication is crucial for the preservation of emotional bonds over distance. This communication needs however can be accentuated when people move away from their beloved ones thus they look for closeness to prevail by habitually keeping in touch. A particular context that this work aims to address is the case of people living away from their families and their community because of migration. Of particular interest is the migratory context from Mexico to the US as every year thousands of people migrate looking for better opportunities (e.g. well-remunerated jobs). These continuous migratory flows have yielded the creation of hundreds of transnational communities. These communities are formed by people living permanently in the US with very strong connections to their hometowns so as to be still involved in political and economical local affairs. Unfortunately, extended periods of absence from their hometowns can cause migrants to miss those daily goings-on that fully characterize the community context and that might help them to feel like they would never have left home.

Migratory context: the Mexican case
Migration is a complex phenomenon reshaping societies and governments around the world [2]. Some studies have found that Mexicans migrate mainly because of economical necessity. According to the National Council of Population Mexico (CONAPO), there are more than 10 million Mexicans residing in the USA [4]. These massive movements of people are also referred in contemporary literature as communities in Diaspora. Diaspora is a term that refers to people living away from their homeland. Mexican immigrants in the US are highly characterized by the role they play on the economical survival of their home communities. According to the Bank of Mexico, in 2006 Mexicans sent remittances back home for over US$21 billion [1] which have been described as the most effective development strategy today since the money goes straight to those who need it the most [6]. In the same way, Hometown Associations, formed by migrants from the same community of origin, are becoming of considerable significance which actions are focused mainly on collective projects such as medical services and hometown beautification [6]. Sadly, distance and extended periods of absence from their hometowns can have some negative impacts on migrants.

Migration and its consequences
The individual and social implications of leaving practically everything they care about are of considerable significance although no often highlighted. The effects can be seen at different levels: individual, family and community. Firstly, individuals are very likely to experience nostalgic feelings or homesickness as a reaction after leaving one’s home [5, 9]. Secondly, Mexicans families, traditionally very attached, are affected by long periods of separation that in some cases can cause permanent family disintegration. Finally, the communities experience challenges such as the migration of young generations which might lead to population decreasing [3].

Dissertation overview
My dissertation will explore how migrants can increase their sense of connection to their communities of origin
so as to be fully engaged in local affairs and to reduce homesickness. This research will be centered on enriching community context obtained by migrants since many of them, disabled to go to Mexico by their migratory status, are limited to just experience mediated community affairs. I argue that this potential enrichment could be achieved not only by providing richer means but expanding their current communicative repertoire. Technology then should be seen as a unique opportunity to extend the scope of migrants’ senses since for some of them it may be the only alternative they have for sensing and experiencing their hometown’s quotidian life.

Theoretical framework
My research will mainly explore theories and concepts such as media richness theory, awareness, social presence, connectedness and connected presence. I believe that the inclusion of these concepts will provide an adequate solution to the aforementioned problem.

Research procedures
The study to be conducted in grouped into three main stages:

1. Data collection. Consists of an exploratory study of the migratory phenomenon. The study will be conducted with 30 members of the community of Juchipila in the central State of Zacatecas which, according to the National Council of Population in Mexico, is a municipality with very high degree of migration. Fifteen of the members are migrants residing in Southern California and the rest of them are people from Juchipila with family in the US. The interviews will be analyzed using Grounded Theory methods as proposed by Strauss and Corbin [7]. At the end of this part of the study it is expected to obtain a departure point to inform the design on the inclusion of different technologies to be used in future stages.

2. Design and implementation. This stage is intended to implement a tool that will serve to gather more information about the phenomenon. This tool, on its basic form, will consist of an enhanced web site with video content management and increased functionality that will enable users to interact to and from the hometown. The tool, in the best scenario, will consider the inclusion of different technologies and communication channels such as the inclusion of public large displays or audio broadcasting for migrants to communicate to the town. Finally, mobile phones would be definitely something to consider as their penetration and adoption can facilitate their inclusion.

3. In-situ trial and evaluation. This stage is intended, first, to measure levels of connectedness and homesickness before using the communication channels provided. Secondly, it is also intended to observe the evolution and changes on the patterns of communication and, finally, to capture the levels of connectedness and homesickness, before and after using the tool for a few months, using questionnaires for homesickness [5] and connectedness [8]. Finally, the role played by technology on communication practices and new forms of interaction with family and friends will also be observed.
Current Status
I am currently conducting the fieldwork with migrants living in California as well as their families living in Juchipila, Mexico. My next step will be to analyze the interviews to reveal an understanding of migrants’ needs and current communication practices to design the tool that will serve to explore the aforementioned concepts and ideas.

Contributions
The research will contribute by providing an exploratory study of the use of communication and expression technologies as well as an analysis of the content of information conveyed in the aforementioned context. This study will shed some light on the understanding of the community connectedness by migrants as well as how technology can help migrants to better experience the dual realities they are going through. Previous research has addressed the problem of increasing the sense of connection between persons. However, this work will be focusing on increasing the migrants’ sense of connection to their home communities.

Another contribution will be the identification of the role of information elements involved on accomplishing community connectedness. Finally, it will be also revealed how levels of awareness, homesickness and connectedness fluctuate over time and the extent to which these elements are influenced by specific events such as local festivities or birthdays.

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Citations