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# New ties, old ties and lost ties: the use of the internet in diaspora

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## Abstract

The computer represents a new resource in developing social capital that previously did not exist among migrants. The relationship between physical space and cyberspace is discussed using the experience of migrants from Newfoundland who, although dispersed from their homeland, use the computer to maintain ties with both their homeland and others in diaspora. Three phases in the migration cycle are identified (pre-migrant, post-migrant, settled migrant) and four categories of computer usage are linked to each phase. Three types of online relationships can be identified among diasporic peoples that result in developing new ties, nourishing old ties and rediscovering lost ties. The processes of verification, telepresence, hyper-reality and attribution are discovered and illustrated from online data and interviews which indicate how computer-mediated communication is related to both social networking and identity among migrants.

## Key words

attribution • diaspora • hyper-reality • migration • telepresence • verification

## INTRODUCTION: THE CYBERSPACE AND PHYSICAL SPACE DEBATE

One of the compelling aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is that it transcends the limitations of time and space. However, CMC also supports interaction that is either rooted in, or sustained by, real community. In either case, virtual community has the potential of not only linking people but also bonding them and creating emotional ties (Baym, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Whether these ties ever require a basis in physical space and real time is a question, for example, as Jones (1995) argues that in cyberspace, geography often appears irrelevant as a basis for interaction on electronic connectors.

There is evidence that CMC can support the development of social capital or social connectedness in physically-based communities. Wellman and Gulia (1999) and Koku et al. (2000) argue that it is close proximity and continued face-to-face FtF interaction that increases frequency of online contact. Blanchard and Horan (1998) note that often, physically-based virtual communities are built on existing community structures (i.e. workplaces, local town hall message boards, city halls, schools, etc) and Hampton and Wellman (1999) found that CMC reinforced ties with neighbors. CMC and FtF enhance interaction both quantitatively and qualitatively and can be mutually reinforcing. Electronic resources are added to pre-existing, place-based interaction or serve as the initiator of interaction, which later becomes embodied in physical space.

On the other side of the debate, one of the key characteristics of much CMC is that it is disembodied and asynchronous, i.e. independent of space and time. Computer usage can cross boundaries of geography and time zones and, in some sense, even makes them irrelevant. Within this framework, it is not shared location that provides the catalyst for interaction but shared interest (Alstynne and Brynjolfsson, 1996; Dertouzos, 1997; Meyrowitz, 1985). For example, studies on interest-based communities have often focused on issues of gender, race, disability or personal health issues (Ebo, 1998; Kerr and Hiltz, 1982; Mitra, 2000; Wellman, 1999). Virtual communities can be 'role to role communities' of like-minded people, based on whatever intrigues them (Wellman, 2001). Soap opera fans, for example, can form an online community, but that community is dependent on being a regular viewer of particular television soap operas (Baym, 1995). Although this type of online community is based on people who are usually unknown to each other offline, their interest online connects the two realities. CMC can build bridges between people who were previously unknown to each other and separated in time and space, and can sustain those relationships even without physical contact.

While the distinction between place-based or place-supported virtual communities and interest-based virtual communities may be helpful, it may

not always be as clear as expected. People who have common interests may have those interests because of living in a common territory or having some prior place-based identity, even though there has never been actual contact in real life. For example, Holocaust victim families dispersed throughout the world may not know each other, but because they have a common experience in Europe (a place), their interests are supported by a common heritage and experience in a common location. Injured workers in the United States may be interested in the experience of injured workers globally, but they are particularly interested in linking with injured workers in the US because they share a similar politico-legal environment. So there are clearly instances where place or territory is a defining element for the interest community in cyberspace even though FtF may never have been part of this interaction.

### **MIGRATION: THE INTERSECTION OF SPACE AND PLACE**

Migrants form an interesting case of people who have deep roots with a territorial entity but who no longer reside in that entity. A specific geographic location of origin may be extremely important to their personal identity because it is often a birthplace, generates strong emotional ties and can continue to serve as a significant community of reference (Jacobsen, 2002). For migrants using CMC, place and interest can blend in a significant way as the place of origin serves as a defining characteristic. It is not only past memories and old ties that produce a sense of belonging and rootedness in a territorial homeland, but also how new ties can be discovered and nurtured because of a common identity that is based on a former place of residence. Place then can serve as a basis for a form of inclusion not only among people still living in that territory, but also among those who have migrated. The migrated can discover or sustain that commonality with those 'back home' and with others who have migrated. The concept of diaspora implies that there is a real or imagined relationship among scattered peoples, which is sustained by some form of communication or contact (Naficy, 1999). What links people together is a common interest in their location of origin and a foundational identity that is rooted in that place which defines an in-group, in spite of the fact that people may or may not have ever personally interacted with one another in real time and space. Recognition of this fact in research on cyberspace has only just begun (Miller and Slater, 2000; Mitra, 1997). Thus place is an active factor in cyberspace that is based on a physically-defined community of origin, but which operates more like an interest community.

The study of the relationship between migration and CMC is particularly noteworthy because international migration, in particular, has proceeded at astounding rates in recent years (Castles and Miller, 1998). At the same time, the widespread use of CMC has developed, which creates new possibilities

for linking dispersed peoples to their homeland and to others in the diaspora. Therefore, the computer has a powerful potential role to play in overcoming the 'friction of distance' (Champion and Fielding, 1992: 122). How does the migrant use the internet? How is the isolation of distance transformed by CMC?

## METHOD

This article examines the use of CMC among internal (or domestic) migrants in Canada. The broader research objective was to understand why, in the period from 1996 to 2001, all the Canadian provinces were losing more population through internal migration than they were gaining, with the exception of two provinces: Ontario and Alberta.<sup>1</sup> While Ontario had long been a magnet for internal migration, the western province of Alberta had a considerably higher net migration rate (Statistics Canada, 2002). In-depth interviews were conducted with 350 migrants: specific attention was paid to the migrants' relation to their community of origin and their interaction with others who had migrated also from their region of origin. For some migrants in particular, CMC was much more important to the migration experience than had been anticipated. This led to an examination of websites both suggested by respondents as well as discovered through the use of search engines using keyword searches such as 'away', 'homecoming', and 'reunion' by province of origin. Snowballing was done from the top 20 matches and message boards, chatrooms and guestbooks were discovered, often with links to other sites. Requests for websites relating to migration from a region of origin were also made through bulletin boards or chatrooms. A log was kept of all sites during a period of six months in 2002 and these sites were monitored regularly throughout the period. The data found in these web searches provided rich evidence of the role that CMC provides to persons who become migrants.

The results of the interviews suggested that those who migrated the longest distances, i.e. from Atlantic Canada, were most likely to make reference to multiple forms of computer usage. Furthermore, the result of the web searches indicated that attempts to connect migrants with their province of origin were to be found most likely among these same Atlantic provinces where out-migration has been a long tradition and where proud provincial identities were strong. By far the largest internet traffic occurred with the province of Newfoundland, which serves as the primary focus of this article.

## MIGRATION AND CYBERSPACE

Formerly, migration meant a radical break from place of origin to destination (Faist, 2000). The lack of rapid forms of communication meant that long-distance migration, in particular, was disruptive to social ties and

former cultural traits. Return visits and continuous contact were cumbersome at best and often expensive. It is from this situation that terms such as 'uprooted', 'transplanted' and 'culture shock' were developed and 'assimilation' was expected, as separation from the place of origin meant the reconstruction of a new way of life and the establishment of new social ties. The 'ethnic village' and its institutions (e.g. religion) often served as the gathering point for migrants at the destination where they served as a short-term mechanism of adjustment in the new location, particularly given the disjunctiveness from the place of origin and the difficulty of retaining ties to it. These migrant destination communities were real communities based on a previous place of residence.

More recently, the idea of a transnational community has supplanted the old idea that migration meant a sharp break from the home community (Castles and Davidson, 2000). Migrants are now much more likely to continue to retain strong ties to their region of origin, and complex transnational relationships are developed, with homelands serving as important symbolic anchors for diasporic peoples (Cohen, 1997; Faist, 2000; Safran, 1991; Van Hear, 1998). Boundaries are now perceived to be more permeable, at the same time that there has been an erosion of territory as the pre-eminent marker of community (Jacobsen, 2002). The new markers are more fluid and portable and may have both local and translocal dimensions. One of the key factors supporting this transformation is the revolution in communication. Not only is it possible to return home more often for real visits (e.g. via air travel), but it is also possible to maintain continuous contact with home by virtual visits. Reduced rates for the telephone were the first step in that direction (Fischer, 1992), but more recently CMC has played a major role in sustaining ties to ones' place of origin. Thus homelands are no longer just a memory supported by occasional contact, but can be an intimate aspect of daily living due to the choices that are available in participating in virtual communities in cyberspace.

The internal/domestic migrant does not have to cross an international boundary and movement back and forth to the place of origin might be easier, but often other dynamics of the move are quite similar. There is usually a keen sense of a place of origin and a sense of loyalty related to that place. There is the need for adjustment to a new regional culture and the sense of being 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996). It might be hypothesized that, even when they cross provincial boundaries, shorter distance moves are not likely to be as critical as longer distance moves within the same country. Indeed, our research found that, among respondents within a country as large as Canada, the use of the computer for purposes other than emailing appeared to take on greater significance the farther that the migrant had to travel to come to Alberta. This fact may not only be a function of the

physical distance from Atlantic Canada to Alberta in Western Canada, but also a reflection of the social, cultural and economic distance represented by these two locations (Burrill, 1992). As in societies with rich traditions and a strong sense of belonging, out-migration from Atlantic Canada may have a very different meaning, with at least some similarities to international migration, even though the border crossings are only provincial.<sup>2</sup> Migrants from Newfoundland claimed that CMC played an important role in their lives for the specific purposes of home contact.<sup>3</sup> A sense of cultural identity exists among Newfoundlanders, which suggests that there may be crossover value in linking our findings to international migrants as well.

Newfoundland is unique in a number of ways. The province joined Canada in 1949 somewhat reluctantly after a history of responsible government and much later than confederation, which occurred in 1867 (Jackson, 1984). The intense loyalty which Newfoundlanders feel to their homeland has produced a nascent or emergent ethnicity that is rooted in distinctive speech patterns and word meanings, vibrant myths and folklore about the past, a strong sense of history and a pervasive group consciousness (Hiller, 1987; Overton, 1996). All of this has occurred in the context of economic underdevelopment and dependency and frustrations over political and economic control (House, 1985; Matthews, 1983; Sinclair, 1988). While out-migration has long been an issue, although more seasonal or short-term (House, 1989), the fishing moratorium which was imposed in 1992 (Ommer, 1999) ultimately led to a stronger wave of out-migration in subsequent years. Thus, Newfoundlanders are a people with a strong collective sense of belonging who have become vulnerable to pressures for relocation at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

## UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNET IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

The migration experience can be understood by classifying the different types of CMC with each phase of migration. For the purpose of this study, only CMC that enables a sender and receiver to connect are used. Four categories of internet usage can be identified (search tool, email, bulletin board systems and chatrooms) which are part of a computer-supported social network (CSSN) (Wellman et al., 1996) and of relevance to migrants.

The search tool is a totally instrumental means of obtaining information using websites, search engines or online stores. Email is an asynchronous but private form of CMC which is free of the limitations of time and space, since messages can be sent and received at any time from anywhere. Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) are also asynchronous because messages can be posted for a long time and have large audiences, but they lack privacy. Readers and senders on BBS appear to be more proactive in their attempt to recruit and build relationships, so they not only announce but also serve more as a chat.

Finally, chatrooms are synchronic because they run in real time and are organized around topics or themes, but only continue as long as the participant is in the room. It is important to note that these four categories all connect to each other. For example, search tools lead to BBS and chats often lead to private emailing among users. CMC is not used in one exclusive format and the use of one format often enhances the use of other formats. Yet all formats have a distinct function, and these can be described and analyzed for the migrant.

The use of the internet and its functions vary at different points in the migrant experience, which we have divided into three phases. The *pre-migrant* has not yet moved and is still located in their place of origin. The pre-migrant is considering the possibility of moving and typically is seeking information and linkages to assist in making the decision to move or has already made the decision and is looking for informational supports to facilitate the move. The *post-migrant* has completed the move but has been away from the community of origin, or conversely located in the new destination, for less than five years. While five years is a somewhat arbitrary timeframe, it suggests a reasonable period of adaptation. The third phase focuses on the *settled migrant* who has been located at the destination for more than five years. Obviously, not all migrants move only once and some may return, while others who return may repeat the migration. Nevertheless, this typology did seem to represent the majority of our study participants, but as a typology it is only meant to provide a framework for interpretation. It is also important to acknowledge that not all migrants use the internet and, even when they do so, not all migrants use the internet in the same way or at all phases of the migrant cycle. However, the purpose and experience of online usage characteristically changes with each phase and it is our goal to sketch the functions, roles and abilities of the internet particularly to support the migrant experience.

Central to our argument is the fact that the computer provides a resource to migrants that was previously unavailable. Obviously, email makes it possible for migrants to communicate with a wide range of people in a speedy and cost-effective way, both for instrumental (e.g. jobseeking) and affective (e.g. contact with relatives and close friends) purposes. But the use of the computer as a search tool is perhaps one of its most powerful functions and from here bulletin boards and chatrooms can be found.

All four of these computer uses were relevant to all categories of migrants, but one reason why we were able to determine that the computer was specifically important to Newfoundland migrants was the identification of bulletin boards created specifically for Newfoundland expatriates. Another important variable is the existence of some permanent entity to help maintain the site over a long period. In the case of Newfoundland, the existence of a magazine and cultural trade organization called the *The*



*Downhomer* ([www.downhomer.com](http://www.downhomer.com)) fosters the preservation of cultural artifacts and music, for example, but exists to help sustain Newfoundland ties with expatriates through a monthly magazine. One of the unique aspects of Newfoundland culture is the importance of the kitchen as a place for warm interaction. So the existence of a BBS called 'The Kitchen' provided a location in which we could monitor computer-based interaction over a period of several months and where we could find ample evidence of how important the computer was for migrants from Newfoundland and what role it played in their lives. Much of the data presented in this article was obtained from this site. From this location, it was also possible to find chatrooms and both observe conversations and engage in conversations between Newfoundlanders at home and abroad.

## THE COMPUTER AND THE MIGRATION CYCLE

Table 1 identifies 12 cells relating the four types of computer usage with the three phases of migration.

### The Pre-Migrant

The first column identifies the *pre-migrant*, who is essentially information-seeking and finds the computer enormously useful in obtaining information, making contacts and obtaining assistance and advice about the possible move. It is in this phase that the computer as a search tool is particularly valuable. Simple things such as learning about the destination, its weather, tourist attractions, dominant industries and job postings through both narrative discussions and pictures help to stimulate pre-migration excitement. For example, The City of Calgary website ([www.gov.calgary.ab.ca](http://www.gov.calgary.ab.ca)), which includes links to employment and information on 'Living in Calgary', reported to us that more than 50 percent of its visitors were from outside of the province. In particular, the number of Newfoundland visitors to the site increased at five times its normal rate on the pages that included job postings.

Email addresses of contacts could be found using search tools, but email addresses shared about someone who has successfully relocated and may assist with housing and/or employment, perhaps as a distant relative or simply as 'a friend of a friend' was also important. Chatrooms are especially useful for informal interaction in jobsearches and in attempts to find accommodation. Potential migrants could lay out their problem or concern, and many people responded with advice, suggestions, and offers for contacts. It became clear then that these chatrooms are not only for the exchange of information but often for discussion of feelings and sharing of observations with earlier migrants and with those back home.

The desire to give and receive information online supports precisely what Jones (1995) considered to be the basis of a virtual community. In almost all

• Table 1 Types of computer usage in the three phases of migration

	PRE-MIGRANT	POST-MIGRANT	SETTLED MIGRANT
Search tool	Searching for a wide range of information about the potential destination. Function: exploration and discovery to facilitate migration destination adjustment.	More skillful use of internet to obtain information about new community. Mechanism to obtain news from home. Function: facilitate integration to new community and retention of ties to home community.	Using the internet to research for connections to place of origin in multiple forms. Function: rediscovering an eroding identity in diaspora.
Email	Formal and informal contact with previously known or unknown persons. Function: evaluate migration prospects and mobilize assistance. Establishing new ties.	Primarily used to maintain home contact and to establish/retain contact with other migrants. Function: retaining ties to home but helps build ties among migrants.	Communicating with people from home particularly to share life histories and genealogies. Function: reconnect with family/community ties.
BBS	Obtain information regarding contacts, employment, housing, or other basic needs. Function: information-gathering through formal postings.	Making announcements that reconnect people where migration broke ties. Function: response to loss of real attachments by being proactive in trying to connect.	Locating friends and family from home and reviving aspects of home culture. Function: rediscovering, reattaching and searching for new relationships.
Chat	Obtain advice from earlier migrants and discuss feelings and observations. Function: informal interaction in preparation for migration.	Maintaining contact and sustaining home ties. Function: seeking substitutes for real presence.	Finding old friends and creating new friends based on shared background. Function: seeking the warmth of personal observations and assessments of others.

cases, these discussions were between people previously unknown, or if by email, perhaps only distant relatives. But as Granovetter (1973) has noted, often these weak ties are more important than strong ties because they bridge social groups with different pools of information and contacts and play a key role in enhancing social capital and opportunity. The opportunity to discuss feelings and concerns about migration in a personal manner, particularly in chatrooms, suggests that there may also be cathartic value in

this kind of interchange. Later in the migration cycle, often, illnesses were discussed in a way that mobilized support and birthdays were celebrated. In general, however, the pre-migration experience online is purely instrumental: i.e. what can be learned that will assist with the decision to relocate and to facilitate the relocation itself. And the computer is particularly useful – as opposed to the telephone, which is more likely to presume a prior and more meaningful relationship – when the relationship between sender and receiver is more distant and remote.

### **The Post-Migrant**

The post-migrant adds a new dimension to the use of the computer, in that while the pre-migrant uses the computer to look forward in anticipation of the move, the post-migrant uses the computer not only as a tool to integrate into the new community but as a means to look backward and stay in touch with that which was integral to life in the community of origin. First, however, the migrant is now in a position to use the computer more skillfully to learn about the new environment because personal contacts and site visits complement what is learned via information and pictures on the internet. For example, information about potential employers and gossip about them are now available in real time, which then makes the use of the computer for the exploration of websites much more purposive. Even leisure activities (e.g. hiking trails, entrance fees) at the new residence are facilitated by the information contained on the internet. Whereas often, telephone information calls are either automated or difficult to access, internet information is quicker and more immediate.

The backward 'gaze' of the computer facilitates the maintenance of old ties. The acquisition of news about the place of origin was particularly important via newspaper websites. Many of our study participants read the home newspaper every day on the internet not only as a way of staying in touch, but as a way of dealing with homesickness. The frequency of such newspaper reading online seems to drop off over time, but many indicated that even three or four years later they still occasionally read the local home paper on the internet. Some respondents referred to visiting government websites (e.g. civic, county or provincial) for information on what was going on back home as well. Migrants that hoped to return to their region of origin were interested specifically in keeping up with what was going on at home, not only in terms of news in general but also about employment or the economy. This was often a supplement to gossip or information received via telephone which often was sketchy but which could be confirmed or given more substance through internet surfing.

Email is a quick, efficient and cost-effective way to keep in touch with relatives and friends back home, especially by sending group emails to cousins, aunts/uncles, former classmates and friends, etc. When the migrant

knew of others who had also migrated to the same province or even other places, email was an important means to stay in touch. In sum, email and the use of attachments, including documents and pictures, in general played a key role in this stage in retaining ties to the community of origin. Email addresses are one of the easiest pieces of personal information to obtain (Mann and Stewart, 2000) and as such can be found through search tools, BBS and mutual friends in chatrooms, in order to retain or rediscover old ties. Young adults who often lived in a variety of places for short periods of time until they settled down found this form of communication particularly useful. Announcements on bulletin boards were also helpful in finding others with similar origins. Chatrooms take this process further by providing an opportunity for synchronous discussion between people who share a common background. These discussions, often using Paltalk (one Paltalk group name was 'Newfie buddies'), might include both migrants and non-migrants, migrants only from a specific location, or migrants who have settled in a given location. This often occurred through roll calls or general appeals to persons using the internet from specific locations (e.g. 'Hart's Cove Roll Call', 'Hello to Anyone In Alberta From Central Newfoundland', 'Looking For Friends', 'Anyone from Happy Valley-Goose Bay', or 'Eastport Here'. 'Welcome 2 All Newfies from St. Lawrence who R Living Away'). One appeal to people with ties to the community of Seal Cove produced 16 responses in four days from different people who were from Seal Cove or were currently living there. Another chat was labeled 'Baie Verter's in Alberta, Come On Down!', which drew 21 responses from people from the town of Baie Verte in Newfoundland who were living in Alberta. The sense of a common background and culture legitimizes the chat and provides substance to the discussion.

The backward gaze of the post-migrant is a powerful element of computer use in this phase of the migration experience. There is a sense of rebuilding by emphasizing continuity between the new and the old. The desire for virtual contact with home might be a mechanism of adjustment to a new place or it could be indicative of a desire to return home. For example, migrants sometimes noted that the posting of pictures on the internet from scenic spots back home would increase homesickness, whereas for others it only fed a sense of nostalgia. The virtual aspect of the computer led some respondents to claim that it helped them to feel that in a significant sense they were 'at home' ('I love being able to go back home right in my own living room') when physically they were at a considerable distance. The existence of webcams at significant Newfoundland locations and available on the internet heightened this sense of telepresence. 'It is great because while I'm not there, it sort of makes me feel like I'm there' (interview #820).

For both the newly-settled migrant and the well-settled migrant, CMC is powerful particularly in creating a perceptual illusion of non-mediation, in that reality is not mediated but real. The cyberspace Newfoundland Kitchen is introduced online with these inviting emotional overtones:

The Newfoundland Kitchen has always been a meeting place for family and friends to exchange thoughts and news, the center of any social event, sing-a-long or party. We would like for you to use the kitchen to meet new friends and keep in touch with old friends, thank people for random acts of kindness, wish them a happy birthday or anniversary . . . So come on in, help yourself to a cup of tea, pull up a chair and enjoy the company!

The concept of a kitchen in cyberspace that seems real enough that participants can pretend that they are drinking tea in the kitchen, reminisce about past memories and life and still not bother with having to make a meal or doing the dishes is striking. Participants could visualize going 'back home right in their own living room'.

The chatroom gives the migrant a sense of being connected to home, if not actually being at home. One interviewee from Newfoundland noted that Downhomer.com keeps them together wherever they are in Canada (interview #747). As Lombard and Ditton (1997) have noted about telepresence, CMC creates not only a sense of personal warmth and realism but its ability to transport the migrant back ('You are there'), or to bring another place to where the migrant is ('It is here'), or to bring migrants together ('We are together'), making it a particularly useful tool for the migrant who seeks to retain or rediscover ties with their place of origin.

### **The settled migrant**

If the backward gaze of the migrant in the post-migrant phase is often borne out of a longing to return, homesickness, or at least a desire to stay connected, the *settled migrant* is usually reasonably well-adapted to their destination and now wishes to rediscover a lost or neglected connection or to sustain a connection to home that is driven more by nostalgia. If returning to home had been a lively option before, it is dimmer at this point and may have been deferred to retirement or even abandoned. Yet the glory of the past connection is sustained or revived into a lively tie. For migrant Newfoundlanders of earlier eras before the prevalence of the internet, the online community was not discovered until later in life, after they had been away from home for many years. For those whose former identity had lapsed, rediscovering genealogical roots is incredibly important and there are many sites that attempt to assist migrants in locating family members, whether known or unknown. Search tools are particularly helpful in this regard and bulletin boards are primary mechanisms for rediscovering and reattaching.

It is quite typical to find BBS that contain multiple messages in each string of persons recounting old relationships (For example, 'If you're from Brighton I knew your mother'). Sometimes bulletin boards announce a search for certain people or people from a certain location. At other times, Newfoundland cuisine or the desire to use Newfoundland lingo serve as the basis for discussions in chatrooms. The chatrooms create a new sense of virtual community among Newfoundlanders, whether at home or abroad in diaspora.

It is also important to note that respondents seldom identified the computer as a replacement for telephone communication, even though it may have been cheaper. Telephone usage appeared to be particularly significant with family members such as parents and sometimes closest friends, where intimacy in hearing a voice and its tone was important (Wellman et al., 1996). However, there were respondents who had gone to great lengths to overcome the intimacy barrier of the computer, even to the point of purchasing webcams so that not only could people talk to each other on the internet but also see each other. Second, the telephone might be a more intimate way of interacting with old friends but it is not nearly as effective in developing new relationships as the computer (Putnam, 2000).

### THREE TYPES OF ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

The argument presented to this point suggests that migration produces new evidence of how online and offline relationships are supported by CMC (Garton et al., 1997). Three types of relationships occur among migrants online: new ties, old ties and lost ties. *New ties* refer to the first need of the migrant to establish new relationships, in which the computer plays a pivotal role. Almost always, new ties are essentially instrumental in that they are important in both the decision to relocate and the mechanics of adjustment. The pre-migrant establishes new ties to assist in finding housing or employment. The post-migrant needs to become established and integrated into the new community, which includes not only developing new ties with persons at the destination but also other expatriates at the destination. The settled migrant seeks to establish new ties with people who share a common heritage. The computer is extremely useful in developing new ties online.

The computer is helpful also in retaining and nourishing *old ties*, as it is an important mechanism to sustain identification with the home community. Keeping in contact with family and friends from the region of origin helps to perpetuate a sense of belonging, regardless of whether return is contemplated. Old ties are easier to maintain in the post-migration phase because the real basis for the relationships is still fresh and vibrant. So if new ties are essentially instrumental, usually old ties are primarily expressive and affective, dealing with emotional linkages, reminiscence and often childhood

and family history. In the settled phase, old ties are often harder to rediscover, although they always have the potential of being lively once again.

CMC also plays a valuable role for the migrant in rediscovering *lost ties*. We heard many times about how people had lost contact with one another, especially when both parties to a relationship had relocated. Internet users mentioned using search engines, message boards, guest lists and chatrooms as ways in which they found lost ties and reconnected with them. They noted it was 'so easy to use the internet to find people . . . and I have been found that way as well by people I have lost touch with' (interview #833). The internet helped migrants to rebuild old relationships, regardless of how long they had been away (one participant said it had been 26 years). The potential for rediscovery of lost ties through the computer is probably the most effective new development of the cyber age. We found little evidence that online relationships produced new real-time relationships. But the evidence was overwhelming that online relationships helped to sustain earlier and/or continuing offline relationships. Furthermore, online relationships based on place of origin in themselves were considered often as real as real-time relationships, due to the affectivity related to in-group feelings.

## THE INTERNET AND THE VERIFICATION PROCESS

The creation of relationships online (particularly in chat and BBS) is not without complications, primarily due to the anonymity of the internet (Walther, 1997). Participants can present themselves in any way they so desire and issues of identity concealment and deception are crucial (Donath, 1999). At the same time, there are some means of authentication available, which Donath refers to as 'signals of identity' (1999: 30). Signals of identity are used online but are considered to be more interpretive and prone to deception. The fact that CMC users frequently build stereotypical impressions of their communication partners with relatively meager information, but with whatever signals they are given, is known as 'overattribution' (Walther, 1997: 346). Within the virtual community, connections are made based on the assumption of truth and honesty, but these connections are subject to various forms of verification.

It is significant that Newfoundland migrants and non-migrants using the internet develop their own system of verification, which allows the interchange to become more pro-social and even hyperpersonal (Walther, 1997). Verification is accomplished through a series of questions eliciting information that a person would know only if they had come from Newfoundland and its specific communities. In the Newfoundland chatrooms, authentication occurs through place of origin questions and the first question is invariably: 'Where are you from?' The assumed response is a

particular town in Newfoundland and not just Newfoundland. In one chatroom, new members were virtually ignored or ostracized until their place of origin was revealed. Further verification then occurs via an additional hierarchy of questions that attempts to identify specific things about that community that are likely to be known only to an insider. One of the most reliable methods to accomplish this is to ask who their parents are or to ask if they know particular people who are named. Landmarks, Newfoundland talk and aspects of Newfoundland culture are discussed in a manner in which being an insider is critical to being part of the conversation. Once this process of verification occurs, it is not unusual for the communication to move to a deeper level in discussion of things that are often quite personal.

The affectivity of the time was also related to the duration of the online relationship. The same Newfoundland online users were found often in the same chatroom at the same time every day. When a short-term relationship occurs, it is usually purely instrumental. The pre-migrant, for example, may log on for help with their move and once they have relocated, they may not log on again. This short-term contact will never reach the hyperpersonal stage. But the overattribution based on Newfoundland origins enabled the migrant to gain help easily, because the virtual community of Newfoundlanders online had a strong territorial identity. Just as Mitra (1997) identified discursive strategies among South-Asian Indians on the internet, so language was an important means of creating boundaries of exclusion and inclusion among Newfoundlanders. The use of 'Bay talk' (the dialect of people from outport Newfoundland communities) is part of some messages (e.g. Okay b'ys, I's heere. I gots to tell ya, me new puter says 'ello to me and everyt'ing) and is a real badge of authenticity and patriotism. The somewhat humorous identity of one chat leader as the Codfadder was an ingenious reference to Newfoundland's historic dependence on codfish and adapting it to virtual interaction. Reference to local dishes such as seal flipper pie, Newfie stew, 'weggies' or cod tongues are elements of Newfoundland culture known only within. Loyalty to 'The Rock' (as Newfoundland is affectionately called) and the wistful desire to return are expressed repeatedly. All of these elements build in-group solidarity and warmth. As one chat participant put it: 'This place reminds me of the Cheers song, "sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came". You always get a warm welcome in here.' Another participant said the chat made her feel closer to her homeland even though she did not see herself 'being able to visit anytime soon', but it helped her to feel a part of Newfoundland. Thus in an interesting way, the virtual community and the real community are blended *in absentia*.



## THE DIASPORIC ONLINE COMMUNITY

The very nature of CMC is that it supports the existence of a 'digital diaspora' with homesteading on the internet, as it were, as 'new communitarians' (Naficy, 1999: vii; Rheingold, 1993). But is there any difference between diasporic online communities and other forms of online communities?

Diasporic peoples have an acute sense of being removed from an original home with which they have a vivid memory and to which they continue to relate either personally or vicariously (Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991). This is not to suggest that all migrants necessarily have a diasporic consciousness, but that for those who chose to relate to the homeland, CMC can be particularly useful. If Bromberg (1996) is correct that isolated individuals especially desire this connectivity, isolation may be particularly strong for migrants who come from a place with a strong culture and collective identity that is considerably different from the new home. While we have little evidence that Newfoundlanders felt isolated in Alberta, it is true that they all had strong place attachments to Newfoundland and many of them longed to return someday. While this place attachment was rooted in accumulated biographical experience (Gieryn, 2000), it was also the case that earlier migrants or second-generation migrants possessed a sense of rootedness that was based on Newfoundland being a parent's place of birth. So it is clear that place of birth and previous residence are compelling factors in establishing a virtual community for Newfoundland migrants. This implies that no previous FtF interaction was necessary because place of origin was the defining characteristic for participation.

The second characteristic of the Newfoundland virtual community is that it links people in place with those who are out of place. In other words, the migrant is connected with the non-migrant, the diaspora with the homeland, almost seamlessly. There is a telepresence (Steuer, 1992) that literally allows the user to feel present in alternate space through the interactivity and vividness that the internet provides. On some websites there are images of home and pictures of family and friends, which enhance the vividness of the computer experience for the migrant. Migrants are encouraged to listen to Newfoundland radio stations online, particularly if they are dedicated to Newfoundland music and culture. Newfoundland music, videos and cultural artifacts are available for purchase online. Steuer's (1992) concept of telepresence helps us to understand how and why migrants might become actually 'addicted' to visiting message boards, chatrooms or posting messages. CMC takes the migrant back home by creating and sustaining images through recipes, slideshows, community profiles and humor – all of which create an atmosphere of hyper-reality. As has already been noted, sometimes the interactivity and intensity of the communication is so high, as it relates both to the relationship and the ties

to the homeland, that virtual connectivity is perceived as real and not only online.

It is possible that these unique characteristics of the diasporan migrant make them more predisposed to involvement in online communities. Diasporic peoples may at times feel isolated, homesick or feel that they have a marginalized identity that is misunderstood by others. Miller and Slater (2000) have shown how expatriate Trinidadians used the internet as a platform to deal with their marginalized position on the global stage. Similarly, Mitra (2001) has shown how South-Asian Indians who are marginalized in western cultures use the internet as a mechanism to be heard. CMC may be a vehicle of empowerment, but it can also be a counterpoint to loneliness and sometimes depression by feeding nostalgia, rediscovering roots and providing a mechanism for connectivity. The online community sustains the prior identity (even if only in a fragmented sense) and may also empower that identity. Instead of being the alien outsider in a strange land, the online community allows the migrant to belong and be a member of a shared community. As one chat participant stated:

Here I am living in Edmonton for 4 years now and I am looking at Newfoundland through a computer screen. I miss home very much and would like to visit again soon. I didn't understand what my grandfather used to mean when he said 'you can take the man out of the bay, but you can't take the bay out of the man.' Now I do know what he means. Everyone that is from Newfoundland should put there [sic] shoulders back and hold there [sic] head high like I do and be proud of where you are from.

There was no better illustration of how a migrant might feel as an outsider in a new society than the discussions found on the internet on how Newfoundlanders felt about being labeled 'Newfies'. Chat strings were examined in which participants discussed their feelings about this term, differentiating its use by outsiders as a putdown from its use by insiders as a term of endearment, but also expressing pride in this identity in spite of what others would say.

The frequency with which this topic occurs suggested that CMC played a significant role in helping Newfoundlanders to deal with their unique identity and perhaps negative stereotypes, and provides a sense of solidarity in meeting these challenges.

In some ways, then, forming an interest community on the basis of place of origin promotes a form of 'cyber-balkanization' (Alstynne and Brynjolfsson, 1996). There is a sense of exclusivity based on prior residence and/or place of birth, meaning that there are rigid requirements for belonging to the virtual community that prevents others from joining and separates the in-group from the out-group. We found no clear evidence that participants in the Newfoundland virtual community substituted interaction with others in their new place of residence with in-group interaction in

cyberspace, similar to Bromberg's (1996) argument about the isolated individual, or Dimaggio et al.'s (2001) discussion of hypersegmentation. But at the very least, it can be hypothesized that the Newfoundland virtual community provided a vital thread of continuity between the old residence and the new residence, and assisted in the identity issues that this migration raised.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the internet here is not used to build a virtual community that previously existed based on FtF interaction. But neither is the online community independent of a larger community that exists in physical space. Instead, CMC builds an online community from a generalized sense of belonging (as slippery and mythological as it may be) based on a group identity and a territorial homeland and reinforces it through online interaction. An online discussion yielded this observation:

When you are of Newfoundland descent, you are born into a very large geographical family that goes from one end of the island to the other. You never have to worry about meeting a stranger or of being alone. You only have to say you are from Newfoundland and you will immediately be contacted by Newfies everywhere to ask how they can help you and will be treated as one of the family because in the eyes of the true Newfoundlander, we are all family no matter where we may roam. Newfoundlanders never think of people as strangers but as friends they haven't met. It is a great feeling to know that you are never alone and that there's a whole island and world of Newfs out there waiting to talk to you a total stranger as if you were family. It's hard to explain because it's a feeling and people just react to the feeling.

This sentiment, if widespread (and we believe it is), is easily supported by CMC and is particularly conducive to interaction and reinforcement in cyberspace. Consequently, it is no surprise that internet usage may be more common among these migrants than among migrants from other provinces. It is this strong in-group feeling that is enhanced by computer usage.

The continuing importance of the internet over time and through the various stages of the migrant experience as developed here is consistent with the notion in migration literature that migration is not just an event but also a process that continues over time (Moon, 1995). Our evidence also reinforces the emphasis in migration literature on the role of networks and contacts, rather than economic factors in fostering and facilitating migration (Boyd, 1989). What we have added here is the new role CMC plays in the different phases of migration and, in particular, how it may play an enduring role for the migrant long after settlement at the destination. Not all migrants are computer users, however, but it is clear that for those who choose to use the computer for this purpose, it is a powerful resource and reality that migrants previously did not have available to themselves. Online

participation is an important means to increase social capital. CMC clearly strengthens the capacity of individuals to command resources because of their participation in networks, which the internet engenders (Portes, 1995). Virtual social capital means that there are offline advantages, which contacts online give to a virtual community participant. While Wellman (1999) and Blanchard and Horan (1998) have different views about its effect on FtF interaction, it is clear that the virtual community provides a variety of forms of social capital, both online and offline, which assists in the migration transition. The use of the computer by migrants at each stage of the migration process clearly demonstrates the nature of the network society (Wellman et al., 2001) with its loosely-coupled and spatially-dispersed ties of networked individualism.

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### Notes

- 1 The argument here is not that Canadians are more mobile than they have been in the past, but that when they are internally mobile, they are choosing a limited number of destinations. Just as Fischer (1992) found that rates of internal mobility have declined for Americans over time, so Statistics Canada (2002) found that the percentage of Canadians who did not move at all has increased as well.
- 2 We were able to discover two guestbooks online that were directed explicitly towards people from Cape Breton island in Nova Scotia. One of them was maintained by *Cape Bretoner* magazine. These guestbooks operated like a bulletin board but without the same organization and detail as on the Newfoundland sites. While the sense of loyalty and group identity in Cape Breton approaches that of Newfoundland, we were unable to discover a similar community in cyberspace. We were also unable to find a similar cyberpresence for Quebec expatriates. An electronic newsletter distributed by the Calgary chapter of the French-Canadian Association of Alberta was used to announce events for French-speakers but did not include opportunities to interact online. It also sought to promote ties between French speakers whatever their origins, rather than to link only those from Quebec.
- 3 It is interesting that the Household Internet Use Survey, 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2001) indicated that Alberta (along with British Columbia) had the highest (65%) regular internet use of all households in Canada and Newfoundland had the lowest (50%).
- 4 Compare Miller and Slater (2000), who discuss a similar phenomenon in migrants from Trinidad.

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