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Book Review: "Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia"

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Abstract: *Review of a groundbreaking long-term ethnographic study of Filipino women working overseas and the children they leave behind and the role of digital technology in these relationships.*

Almost 6 billion people globally now use mobile phones (International Telecommunication Union 2011) with a penetration level of 79% in the developing world. Mobile broadband subscriptions increased by 45% in 2011. The "mobile network society" (Castells 2007) is now all-pervasive.

However the time lag between academic writing on a subject, and the lived experiences of its readers is nowhere more apparent than in the field of technology: there is a dissonance between the complexity of the communications landscape in 21st century life and the disciplinary divisions of academia. Within the field of mobile communications studies, the focus is usually on a single device; rather than the role of the mobile or smartphone situated within in a complex system.

Yet a single device can enable many different types of communication – SMS, voice, instant messaging, social network update or email – each with its own audience, emotional register and style. Moreover, mobile phones are often used alongside other devices – such as landlines or laptop computers. This new communications ecology demands new theoretical frameworks.

Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and New Media (Madaniou and Miller 2011) is a study of Filipino women working overseas and the means by which they communicate with the children and families they leave behind. The study develops a theoretical framework described by its authors as 'polymedia'; moving beyond platform, channel or device. Polymedia understands communications 'horizontally': seeing how communications media complement one another.

The study is contextualised by political economy and kinship ideology: by an exploration of what it means to be a migrant in the 21st century and the care chains that bring the Filipino women to the UK in the first place. These care chains – whereby women in the Philippines employ poorer local women to look after the children so they can work as carers in the UK – are seen by the authors as exemplifying the connections between different people across the world that are based on paid or unpaid relationships of care. The authors also explore normative expectations of mothering which shape the women's lives and the range of influences by which they are conveyed: from contemporary cinema's portrayal of Filipino family life to tradition and customs.

This study looks at how relationships were maintained over long distances using technology. The work is informed by the concept of "affordances", the "functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" (Hutchby 2001, 444). This is in contrast to previous work on mobiles and migrant workers in China, which focussed on the means by which the device has increased the "mobile kinship networks" (Law and Peng 2008, 63), economic opportunities and autonomy of the migrants.

Miller and Madianou conducted the study over three years; working in the UK and in the Philippines, doing participant observation and semi-structured interviews with mothers who were working as domestic staff or nurses in the UK, and children that they had left behind in the Philippines. The depth and trust they developed in their relationships with the respondents, described by the authors as the 'natural friendship of fieldwork' is clear from the deeply personal material that is shared in the book. Miller's previous work on mobile phones – an ethnographic study of the impact of the device on the lives of people in Jamaica (Horst and Miller 2006) – showed the strength of long term, ethnographic studies in illuminating the role played by the mobile phone in creating and extending networks and relationships.

The parents in the study chose a means of communication (be it Facebook status update or meal shared over Skype) not just because it's convenient or available, but because the means of communication conveys a message too. The structure as well as the content of the message conveys a mes-

sage. A text message is a tool for 'phatic' (seemingly trivial) talk; checking in with loved ones. In the book a young Filipino uses a blog for washing dirty family laundry in public, a woman who is separated from her young baby sings songs to her over a webcam; another young woman participates in a family funeral through a laptop which a relative carries throughout the event. These are the kinds of choices about social relations and technology many of us are making (albeit unconsciously) all the time – there are people we might send an SMS to but would never email, other people who we would 'friend' on a social networking site but would never contact via Skype.

Beyond its' relevance to the field of communication studies and anthropology, this accessible and engaging work should be seen as a notable contribution to the field of mobile communications studies. This field is now rich with material, which is deepening our understanding of how mobile phones are changing every aspect of our lives (see for example Ling (2004), Goggin and Hjorth (2008), Hjorth (2011) and Katz (2008)). Turkle writes that the development of new communications devices "compels us to speak of a new state of the self, itself" (Turkle 2008, 121).

The idea of polymedia is in itself a major contribution to our ability to frame and understand communications in the modern world and a response to the need for a new thinking in response to the challenge of digital technologies to the social science apparatus. A recent paper on digital devices (Savage, Ruppert and Law 2010) called for a "heterogeneous and non-coherent understanding of the digital [...] which emphasises the contingencies by which it can be mobilised and deployed" which this study achieves. The authors make it clear that polymedia as a notion has economic constraints – that people have to have a certain degree of wealth and literacy before they are able to make sophisticated choices about communications – but claim that "polymedia is going to become an inescapable topic for almost all and any media research in the future" (Madaniou and Miller 2012, 139).

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Becky Faith is a PhD student in the Communication and Systems Department at the Open University, researching the links between mobile phones and digital inclusion: both in the UK and globally. She has been developing her professional and academic expertise in the field of the social application of mobile phones since 2005 .