NEW MEDIA, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION: SLOVAKS IN THE UK

BARBARA LÁŠTICOVÁ

Abstract: This paper investigates Slovak migrants’ use of new media to build social capital. It draws on data from a pilot study with 36 Slovaks living in the UK, and on content analysis of the main Facebook page for Czechs and Slovaks in the UK. The data suggest that Facebook is used for sharing emotions rather than to build a community and share practical information. While Facebook and Skype are used to maintain preexisting strong ties in the country of origin, face-to-face contact and mobile phones are used to maintain ties within the UK. However, social media do not seem to facilitate the formation of weak ties prior to migration, with face-to-face contact being dominant upon arrival. Transnational migration experience forms a separate dimension within the participants’ identity, independent from social capital. The data are discussed in relation to findings from previous studies about Slovak migrants in the Republic of Ireland.

Key words: new media; social capital; transnational migration; Slovakia; UK.

Introduction

With the advent of Facebook and other social network sites, there has been a renewed interest in the use of information and communication technologies by migrants; especially regarding the extent to which these technologies facilitate migration and integration within the host society (see McGregor & Siegel, 2013 for a review). Mobility and connectivity are among the defining features of the 21st century migrant, ensuring continuity in migrants’ lives and in the relationships they have with their environments at home, in the host country or in between (Diminescu, 2008). Therefore 21st century communication and transportation technologies facilitate the creation of transnational social fields by virtue of their low cost and rapidity (Glick Schiller, Bash, & Blanc Szanton, 1995). Transnationalism can be defined as “the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement (…), take actions, make decisions and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously” (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, pp. 1-2). From a social psychology perspective,
social networks and (multiple) identities are key in this definition (see also Deaux, 2006; Morawska, 2003). Dekker and Siegel (2013) note that in later operationalizations, integration within the host society sometimes disappeared and transnationalism was solely defined as the migrant’s engagement with their country of origin. This is the definition we use in this paper, focusing on the social networks linking our participants to Slovakia and to ethnic ingroup members living in the UK, and on the role of new media in this process.

The role of new media in facilitating transnational migration

In this paper, the term “new media” is used to encompass both the digital technologies facilitating private communication, such as Skype or mobile phone applications, as well as the so-called social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define the social media as “a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. This definition encompasses web logs (blogs), collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn), content communities (e.g. YouTube), virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life), as well as virtual gaming worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) (Mc Gregor & Siegel, 2013).

McGregor and Siegel (2013) have identified four key areas where the social media in particular have implications for migration research: 1) the use of social media in triggering and facilitating migration in both positive (networks) and negative ways (human trafficking); 2) the role of social media in migrant integration; 3) the use of social media with regard to diaspora engagement; and 4) the use of social media in conducting migration research. While in our previous research on Slovak migrants in Ireland we focused mainly on the third area—civic engagement and participation of migrants—, this paper deals predominantly with the first area.

Various theorists agree that migration is mediated by a range of interacting macro- and micro-level structures and not solely by economic factors (see Morales & Giugni, 2011). Micro-level structures refer to social networks of migrants that may facilitate migration by lowering its transactional and psychological costs. Concepts such as ‘cultural capital’ and ‘social capital’ are often applied in this context (Castles & Miller, 2009; Dekker & Siegel, 2013). Several researchers conceptualize the relationship between social media and migration precisely by considering whether and how it facilitates the formation of social ties and social capital (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Hiller & Franz, 2004; Komito & Bates, 2009; Komito, 2011; Dekker & Engbersen, 2012).

There has been a presumption that in chain migration people go where they already have contacts (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964). But with the new technology, contact may be made in advance of travel, so risk and cost no longer prevent migration (Komito & Bates, 2009). Indeed, Dekker and Engbersen (2012) argue that social media are not only new communication channels, but also transform migrant networks and lower the threshold for migration. Using new media (1) helps migrants to maintain strong ties with family and friends; (2) establishes a new infrastructure consisting of latent ties; (3) provides a means of communication with weak ties that are relevant in organising the process of migration and settlement; (4) gives a rich source of unofficial insider knowledge on migration (Dekker...