

Some tentative thoughts on diaspora and the emergence of voice and video over the internet

Andrew Clark

Based on a series of observations and conversations with friends and family over the four months about their use of voice and video over the Internet (VVOI). This is not an ethnographic study nor is it an academic piece. Its modest aim is to start the reader thinking about how different people quietly go about ‘appropriating’ technology to meet very specific needs, using the diaspora as an example. This reality, I believe, is not yet recognised by most people, as it has been normalised very quickly and integrated into people lives.

Those who, like myself, are interested in this silent revolution, are startled and intrigued. Both because of the resilience of people—Why resilience? And their need to maintain links with others as well as defying common held views about who appropriates technology.

The comments made here and the reflections I make, are based on a very small sample of four different families living in New South Wales, Australia. Three of the families have come to Australia as migrants. One family is from Greece, one from Italy one from Britain. While a fourth is an Australian born family with a son overseas. What they all have in common is the use of VVOI to maintain contact with friends and family living out side of Australia.

The reasons why these people migrated or left their place of origin are many. The people I spoke to left because of a range of reasons including political, economic and social. The relationships that these people maintain to country of birth and peers are complex, multidimensional, and linked to a notion of ‘home’. For this reason I believe the discussion should and must be shaped around the notion of Diaspora and its meaning for people.

The notion of diaspora is a contentious one. Wikipedia describes it as:

The term: diaspora (in Greek, διασπορά—“a scattering or sowing of seeds”) is used (without capitalization) to refer to any people or ethnic population forced or induced to leave their traditional ethnic homelands; being dispersed throughout other parts of the world, and the ensuing developments in their dispersal and culture.

While this definition is broad, I believe it is rooted in the notion of ‘Home’ that is the place from which a person’s original culture emanated. This significance of home, was in part driven by the belief one could never return home, or home was an idealised memory to which one hoped to return to one day.

I believe this definition is less relevant now, as it does not capture the dynamic ongoing translational relationships people now have. Both because of relatively cheap and quick travel as well as improved communications. Roza Tsagarousianou, in an article on diasporas and modern globalised world argued that:

diasporas should better be seen as depending not so much on displacement but on connectivity, or on the complex nexus of

linkages that contemporary transnational dynamics make possible and sustain. What is more, I suggest that diasporas should be seen not as given communities, a logical, albeit deterritorialized, extension of an ethnic or national group, but as imagined communities, continuously reconstructed and reinvented¹.

I believe this is an important observation, as it understands diasporas as dynamic entities that have grown from limited shared experience in a geographic setting, to dynamic and 'connected' transnational identities, based upon common and shared experiences. Consequently, ICT has an important role in the formation, maintenance and shaping of diasporas. This is consistent with my own observations of the people I have observed and had conversations with about these issues.

In essence, I believe diasporas are moving from individual ones with linkages to the idea of home to linkages across different geographic locations that often bypass the homeland completely. That is, the notion of the identity of diasporas is the experience

of shared memory by all of its parts not just of the home country. I have attempted to demonstrate this move in figure 1. What you see is a move from one to one relationship to many to one or one to many. The many relationships are embedded in a complex

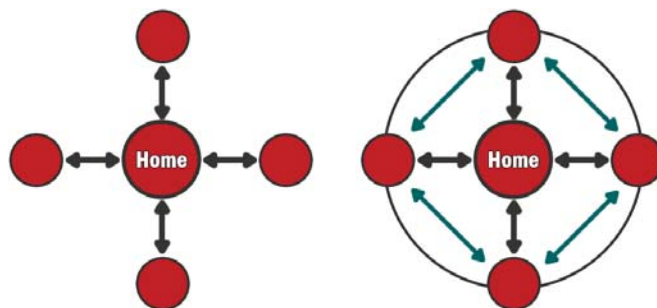


Figure 1 - Shift from 1:1 to bypassing homeland.

web of transactions. These new relationships would have been previously impractical, for example, using letters, telephones or both because of the cost and physical effort to do so.

I will now briefly explore how four different the Internet and VVOI to maintain there links within and across Diaspora.

The first is an Italian family that migrated to Australia in the late 1940s for economic reasons. They come from a small village south of Naples. Many of the villagers came to Australia at the end of World War two, so they had a ready made extended network of friends and family. The husband and wife are now in there early 1970s and they have only returned to Italy several times. By any measure, they have established a good life in Australia, are well connected to the community and are financially well placed. However, their English language skills are not that proficient. In

discussion over lunch one day with the husband, he told me that he had been talking to a range of people about his migration experience and reminiscing about Italy. When I asked whom he was talking to, he replied it was other Italian people living from across the world, who had migrated at the same time as he had. When asked how he did this, he said he was using video conferencing on his home computer and had been doing this for several years. When asked how he had found these people, he gave a quizzical look and replied "Italian Google". He said he now had Italian friends in United States of America, Canada, Argentina and Poland. When asked if he spoke to friends in Italy, he said they were nearly all dead, the remainder had moved on with other experiences in Italy and therefore not as interesting to talk to. His wife used video conferencing but preferred only to talk to her sister in Italy, "family", she said, "is the most important thing".

The next person is a Greek man, who came to Australia in the 1970s, at the time of a military coupe in Greece. In essence, his reason for coming to Australia was political. He lives permanently in Australia, went to University in

here and is employed as an engineer. He and his Australian born Greek wife have several children. Using the Internet, he speaks and videoconferences to fellow members of his village who left Greece at the same time he did to escape political persecution. These groups of people are now spread

across the world; including Scandinavia, Canada and United Sates of America. Through this network of friends, he has met more people who share the same experience and he now regularly talks to them as well. He also uses VVOI to talk to his mother, this has enabled he and his mother to talk to each other for extended periods. In particular when they are both watching the same football game live on TV. He in Australia; she in Greece.

The next is a husband and wife who migrated from Britain for economic and career advancement opportunities; he is a lecturer and researcher at a university in Australia. They have been in Australia for approximately a decade. When discussing contact with her family, she replied that her family now regularly videoconference each other every Sunday. She sits in front of the computer here in Australia with a book, magazine and knitting while linked up with her mother. One of her sisters physical joins her mother at her home, while the other, is linked in from another geographic location to form a group videoconference. When asked

1 Tsagarousianou, R. (2004). Rethinking the concept of diaspora: Mobility, connectivity and communication in a globalised world. WestminsterPapers in Communication and Culture. 1(1):52-65.

what do they do online together, she replied, “we just sit and chat and have cups of tea together”. She felt that this routine had made a significant difference to her life and she felt more connected and richer engagement with those at home.

This Christmas she said they set the computer at one end of the kitchen table in Australia and, in Britain, the family set another computer up on the end of their kitchen table and shared opening Christmas presents together via video conferencing. This lasted for four hours.

The final family is Australian-born whose son is traveling around Europe for a year for social reasons having recently graduated from University. Once a week the family all have dinner together. They achieve this by setting a computer up at the end of the meal table in the family home and the son videoconferences in from where ever he is, using a local internet café. This routine has become a significant part of the traveling experience for the son and the family.

I believe these four stories demonstrate the powerful need people have to share similar life experiences, linked to a place and experience they would define as home. The nature of the video conferencing entails high emotional content, which is you can see and hear the person. Thus, people are exposed both to verbal and non-verbal interaction.

The importance of these observations, I believe are four-fold;

1. People will appropriate new technologies if they meet their functional and emotional needs, that is, connecting to people with similar life experiences even though they have different backgrounds.
2. That preconceived ideas about age, gender and cultural background and the use of ICT do not stand up to close examination in new emerging areas of Internet usage.

3. That the use of ICT to form and maintain intimate relationships over large geographical distances demonstrates that the ‘traditional’ concept of diasporas is changing to accommodate the dynamic and changing nature of diasporas in a way that we have not seen before.
4. The debate about affordable and accessible broadband needs to consider that it should not just about being able to download the latest movies but about connecting people and communities.

I believe this is an area that needs further examination and reflection, it is clear from my conversations that people are using the technology this way every day around the world.

Lastly, I am struck by people’s resilience and determination to maintain and explore relationships and give their lives meaning. Equally, I am struck, by the ongoing notion of ‘home’ and its power to transcend time and geographical location. Any debate on social inclusion and the migrant experience I believe must address and recognize this idea of home and its unquiet meaning for people, no matter where they come from.

Andrew Clark has been involved in the development and implementation of ICT projects in the Australian Community Care sector over the last 10 years. This includes the development of common intake tools, data management, the development of online projects including, digital story telling project, Aboriginal community of Practice, HIV/AIDs community of practise and the online management of people with complex care needs. He has worked as an Aged and a Disability service provider within government and non-government Organisations. Andrew has a long interest in the use of Information Technology and community care sector receiving a Churchill Scholarship in 1993 to investigate the use of Computer Mediated Communication and NGOs. He has recently co-authored papers on Content Management Systems for NGOs, and presented within Australia and internationally. Andrew is soon to undertake postgraduate study to investigate the role of collaborative social networks and digital photography to measure community participation.