

VIRTUAL TRANSNATIONALISM: POLISH MIGRANT FAMILIES AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES

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The paper addresses the issues pertinent to a practical dimension of “virtual transnationalism”, understood as the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially phone and Internet communications by Polish transnational migrants in Norway, Germany and the United Kingdom. This article reviews the relevant literature on spatial mobility, family practices and technology, as well as their mutual connectivity. The findings first take a long-view on the historically emanated crucial change in the accessibility of ICTs to Poles abroad, subsequently moving on to a discussion of the matter with respect to the contemporary post-2004 migrant families. The wide-spread of technology is examined, with a resulting framework showing various engagements with ICTs, dependant on the capacity and motivation of the kinship members in both sending and receiving countries. The findings identify preconditions for using technology-enabled channels as tools for mitigating certain issues arising from separation, as well as the barriers that determine who, how and why uses (or rejects to use) the ICTs, adopting an intersectional perspective (age, skills, social capital) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, looking at individual alternative realizations of family practices beyond borders.

Keywords: transnationalism, families, ICTs, Polish migration

INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND TRANSNATIONAL LIVES

The family/technology/transnationality nexus remains relatively unexplored through a qualitative approach in scholarly examinations of Polish global families on the move. Nevertheless, the nascence of communication technologies, an upsurge of their availability and a decrease of their prices should be seen

as comprising one of the most important social changes affecting the lives of transnational migrants (Vertovec 2004). In the anthropological and social constructivist thought, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) should be seen as a distinguishing countenance of “cyberia” – a new socio-technological *Umwelt* (Escobar 1994), a crossroads between the personal and the social, the spatial and the temporal, which provides a broader backdrop for the arguments presented in this paper.

The paper illuminates one of the novel dimensions of the contemporary bi-located lives of the members of Polish families and looks at the role that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) plays in their daily and routine ways of communicating with those who might be emotionally important while spatially distant. The article undertakes to investigate **ICT’s use among Polish migrants in Norway, Germany and the United Kingdom as well as their families in Poland**. The engagement with ICTs is seen as **a form of (virtual) transnational family practice**. Notably, the paper only presents a fraction of what ICTs entail and rather seeks to zoom in on some examples of how migrants engage with telecommunication technologies. While making some notes on email messaging and texting, the paper presents examples which predominantly refer to Skype calls, international phone-calls and social media. It looks at what migrants say and do whenever the issue raised is that of seeking to get in touch with the members of their kinship network left-behind in Poland.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

INTERSECTION OF TECHNOLOGY, MOBILITY AND FAMILY

It appears that family studies were a bit ahead in regard to noting the salient role of technology for everyday lives. Technology was listed among the most powerful theory-driving forces for family sociology since the 1970s (Adams 2010: 501–503) and remains vital nowadays, as the modern-day Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are deemed vital for the changes occurring within family life (eg. Hughes, Hanz 2001, Wellman, Haythornthwaite 2005, Silva 2010, Morgan 2011). Together with the rise of mobile-phones’ popularity, the use of ICTs, namely email and the applications that facilitate text and voice communication (e.g. chat and phone calls via Skype and similar tools), supplies arguments for reconsidering a new dimension for the relational nature of space by highlighting beyond-face-to-face social networks built on affect (Hughes and Hans 2001: 776). The ICTs are further seen as fostering inquiries into social change and family culture, as well as becoming a crucial interface between

families and societal institutions (e.g. school – Bouffard and Weiss 2008). In accordance with the framework developed by family scholars, the study looks at non face-to-face familial exchanges over the phone or the Internet which constitute vital forms of family practices, as pointed out by Morgan (2011), Cheal (1999) or May (2011).

Continuously, ICTs use in a transnational family shall be seen as a particular set of family practices, more specifically characterized by Morgan (2011: 80–81) as being consequential to postmodern variation in temporal and spatial family relations. The current societal orders necessitate family practices among “high mobility” kinship to be “weakly bounded”, blurring distinctions between immediate kin and more distant relatives or even non-relatives (e.g. in migrant families that would be the case when, for instance, assistance is urgently needed for the elderly). Furthermore, the practices should be “relatively diffuse”, since they become contained to individual or small-group exchanges, have a low requirement for co-presence and a broader familial awareness of the practice’s content (an example would be writing an email that organizes care for a specific family member). Following migration, certain “tacit rules have to be redefined and made more explicit”, while relationships are widening (Morgan 2011: 83–85). Wilding (2006) extensively discusses an entire array of family practices that have occurred through ICTs, such as showing love by remembering about a birthday, giving advice to new mothers, helping the elderly, etc.

Zooming in onto the socio-spatial context, ICTs have been called the global drivers of migration in the Information Age, as it is now believed “normal” for people to think beyond borders (Castells 2007: 2). They are seen as facets of globalization – an interface to external forces that transform culture and identities (Hamel 2009:7, Appadurai 1996, Greig 2002: 236) and are capable of “bringing the world closer together” (Pries 2005: 167), by either reducing perceived distances between regions or blurring lines of “here” and “there” through personal experiences and public discourses (Hamel *ibid.*: 9). With the help of ICTs, we are witnessing a “death of distance” (Cairncross 1997, cf. Wilding 2006: 126) and an additional dimension of a socio-spatial-temporal quality of a space-time convergence (Dijst 2004: 39). Castells (2000: 442) deems communication technologies “spaces of flows” that represent novel “material organization of time-sharing practices”. They materially and symbolically impact our lives by operating in a “timeless time” – real-time communication is possible without any delay and at our convenience, increasingly obscuring the line “between physical and digital experiences” (Hamel 2009: 4). In the family migration context, the so called “co-presence”, “present absence” or “absent presence” means that absent people may be incorporated into face-

to-face interactions through technology (Wellman, Rainie 2012, Gergen 2002, Fortunati 2005, Pertierra 2005).

Studying the frequency, types and tools of such family communications is no longer novel for migration scholars adopting the transnational lens, which broadly ascertains that contemporary migrants “continue to be active in their homelands at the same time that they became part of the countries that received them” (Levitt, Jaworsky 2007: 130) and seems to be ubiquitous in many recent analyses of mobility. The use of long-distance phone calls (e.g. Mahler 2001, Vertovec 2008), then replaced by the practices of engaging with technologies made available by the Internet, were largely seen as ways of maintaining transnational familial ties, later evidenced in a growing body of works dedicated to what is often called ‘Skype parenting’ – on-remote performance of parenting duties via ICTs and similar other channels (e.g. Madianou 2012, Parreñas 2005, Pratt 2012). Migrants are often universally seen as paragons of adopting new technologies in the everyday (Vertovec 2012: 67). More recently, the “Internet is Magic” (Francisco 2015) approach guided studies of transnational family and intimacy across groups and destinations, highlighting especially the views of those who migrated from South/East to North/West. Şenyürekli, Detzner (2009) describe Turks living in the American Midwest, Kang (2012) presents the case of Chinese migrants in London, and Aguila (2009) recounts issues pertinent to the Filipino diaspora, where a more nuanced perspective of two opposite stands on benefits versus negative consequences of computer mediated technologies are recapitulated. The latter voices, illuminating the difficulties of reunification and the paramount feelings of loss and resentment in spite of extensive use of communications, should also be recalled and brought to light (e.g. Pratt 2012, Horst 2006). Fewer researchers look at those left-behind and their opinions on the ICT experiences (e.g. Pearce et al. 2013 conducted such a study in Armenia).

At the same time, several research reviews pinpointed a dearth of research focused on transnational families in an intra-European context (Ryan, Sales 2013: 92, Bryceson, Vuorela 2002), perhaps explaining why it is now gaining momentum in the studies dedicated to contemporary Polish migrants (e.g. Urbańska 2009). Though relatively little has been said about the virtual spaces of transnationalization, outflows from Poland have a long tradition of being studied through a perspective that accounted for communications, such as letters examined by Thomas Znaniecki (1976). In the recent time, the breadth of studies which concentrate on the so-called post-accession migrants only marginally referred to ICTs, oftentimes offering combined conclusions on affordable mass air-travelling and availability of advanced communication technologies. Overall, this area of research findings suggests that intra-European

transnationals are in control of their movement and benefit from the perceptibly diminished “figurative distance” between the two locales, namely Poland and the UK (Burrell 2011, Ignatowicz 2011: 42–45, Botterill 2011). Nevertheless, there are also signals that the new constructions of space via ICTs can cause ambiguity and ambivalence in the migrant narratives (Bell 2013), whereas the care on remote is not a fully accepted form of family communication or care. Krzyżowski (2013: 156–163) reviews the role of new communication technologies in the practice of monitoring elderly parents, supplying examples of Poles who migrated to Austria and Iceland. He argues that technology-mediated communication provides means for compensating for the diminished presence and care. While Krzyżowski sees a differentiation with regard to the widespread of Internet across countries and generations, he generally notes a surge in technological competencies of migrants and the growing density of transnational communications as a positive development. A rare study on the role of Internet among foreigners in Poland, namely Chechen asylum seekers, was conducted by Łukasiewicz (2010). This paper seeks to contribute to the aforementioned debates on virtual transnationalism among Polish migrants in Western Europe.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical material used for the analyses presented in this article stems from two distinct yet thematically connected research projects. The data subset pertaining to the cases of migrant families in the UK and Germany originates from my doctoral research, the findings of which are presented in more detail in the thesis *Polish Mothers on the Move – Gendering Migratory Experiences of Polish Women Parenting in Germany and the United Kingdom*.¹ The study comprised a total of 37 biographic/semi-structured interviews conducted between 2011 and 2013 with Polish women parenting abroad. All study participants were female, married, between the ages of 23 and 64 (avg. = 37.9), having arrived in their destination countries between 1980 and 2010 (with an average length of stay amounting to just below 9 years) and residing outside of the metropolitan urban centres (in villages, small towns and city outskirts/suburbs). The women mostly led middle-class lives but represented an array of educational and professional backgrounds, as well as diverse migratory characteristics. The second

¹ The PhD study was funded by the 125th Anniversary Research Scholarship awarded by Bangor University for the 2010–2013 period. Supplementary funding for fieldwork was obtained from the DAAD grant (2011) and the PON UJ London short-term summer grant (2013).

dataset belongs to the Transfam Project *Doing family in transnational context. Demographic choices, welfare adaptations, school integration and every-day life of Polish families living in Polish-Norwegian transnationality*.² More specifically the interviews with Polish migrant families in Norway conducted in 2014 for the Work Package 2 – *Migrant families in Norway – Structure of power relations and negotiating values and norms in transnational families*. The respondent pool entails 40 members of 30 households (cases), which cover both individual mothers (18) and fathers (2), as well as migrant parenting couples interviewed together (10). Coincidentally, the socio-demographic portrait of this group determines an age average similar to that for Germany and the UK at 37.5 years-old and a slightly shifted 29–54 age range. The migrants settled in Norway between 1990 and 2013, which yields a corresponding average of just below 8.5 years spent abroad. In Norway the respondents also represented diverse educational and professional backgrounds, yet in that case their residence was concentrated in the capital of Oslo and its surrounding area within a 200-km radius.

This cumulative approach to data analysis was dictated by the goal of broadening the geographical scope and increasing the internal validity of the data by means of observing saturation, as well as noting similarities across the narratives collected in the currently crucial destinations of Polish post-EU accession mobility of the last decade (see e.g. Burrell 2011: 9, Iglicka and Gmaj 2014). Importantly, the research designs for both studies underscored the interest in transnationality and family practices, yielding rich material on the actual daily lives of migrants, where intersections of routinized ICT-related practices could be noted. The article largely relies on both comparative and case-by-case analysis of the 67 interviews. The analytical framework stems from the focus on questions soliciting descriptions of a typical day, week or weekend in a respondent's family, as well as scattered questions about their relationship to Poland and the people that a respondent is still in touch with in the home country (both interview guides; respondents from all countries). Answers received to a follow-up question about the means and frequency of contacting significant persons in one's life, earlier identified through concentric circles (a visual tool reliant on Pahl and Spencer's (2004) approach to networks and proximity of individuals captivated within them), were also reviewed (for those participating in the Norwegian study).

² The research leading to these results has received funding from the Polish-Norwegian Research Programme operated by the National Centre for Research and Development under the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009–2014 in the frame of Project Contract No. Pol-Nor/197905/4/2013.

“NEW QUALITY” – POLES AND COMMUNICATIONS
IN THE EARLIER DECADES

Like many other highly mobile nations, Polish migrants share the experiences of historically embedded trajectories across many decades of their journeys abroad. The particular biographies of migrants who left in the 1980s highlight the vast qualitative shift and illuminate the paramount social consequences of the technological revolution. The findings concur with results presented earlier by scholars across various global destinations (e.g. Mahler 2001), meaning that they cautiously compare and link certain elements shared by mobile people originating from less privileged world regions. This debate can be linked to the Global ICT Development Index that continues to show a digital divide, often conceived intersectionally through age, global region, gender, economic status and ethnicity markers of the marginalized groups (Guillén, Suárez 2005: 683, Norris 2001, cf. Hamel 2009: 5–6).

Broadly speaking, the findings of Fairlie et al. (2006) show that the use of ICTs by migrants depends largely on the diffusion and use of ICTs in their country of origin, though an alternative supposition that migrants tend to adopt the patterns of ICTs/Internet usage in their destination location has also been put forward for the EU context (Hamel 2009: 9). In the Polish case, the individual biographies reflect the coincidence and entanglement of the particular moment in history and the disadvantaged position of the Polish migrants during the earlier decades. In essence, their experiences were marked by a tremendous discrepancy between purchasing powers and a limited access to resources, especially when compared to the later extremely profound change that entailed the technological turn and the political transformation processes in Poland, both occurring in parallel in a similar timeframe.

While the contemporary cases will be presented in the following section, the former notions of the temporally-conceived limitations are clearly observable among the respondents with longer life-stories (older) and with earlier migration (occurring in the 1980s) interviewed for the two projects. One snapshot describing the change comes from Antonina who first migrated to Norway in 1990, straight after her college graduation:

It was a tangible lack – I remember this time as missing something, because there was no Skype, no mobile phones, or rather – yes, the mobiles were huge as bricks. So the only possibility of contacting your family was to go to a phone booth. We lived at the time in a place with a specific micro-climate – very often during winter there was minus 30 degrees or even less. To this day I remember those conversations with my mom, when I stood with my husband like sardines stuck in that booth, and we were inserting 10 kroner coins, and we were holding on to the receiver, which was instantly frozen solid to our mittens, and... [laughs]

the memory I can never forget – the receiver, few words exchanged with my mom [...] I don't know, I think nobody understands it anymore, they are no longer able to get it, this is so specific, very specific, as we [sighs] awaited those calls, we waited. (Antonina, 47, Norway)³

Consequently, the stories speak volumes to how ICTs have revolutionized the lives of geographically separated families. At times, the interviewees weaved the humorous elements into their serious problems caused by the barely existing communication channels. Alina, for instance, joked about informing her husband about being pregnant by shouting the news into the phone, overheard by probably half of her small city, as the only working phone she could find was located at the busy post office. Conversely, Teresa's trajectory is particularly marked not only by a slow implementation of communication technologies in communist countries but, more importantly, the Polish political history. The respondent's migration to Germany in the 1980s was politically motivated as her husband's activism landed him on the list of those to be soon imprisoned, prompting the family's escape to Western Europe. Teresa reminisced about remembering her initial years abroad as traumatic, and attributed this situation to the fact of not being able to be contact or visit her parents. She said:

I missed my mother so much, I used to get her advice on everything and now she was so far away, they did not even have a phone then. And besides – all telephone lines, for example the one at our neighbour's, were monitored – talking to us could get our friends and family in trouble, not to mention that we were so poor that we could never afford it [...]. The worst thing that happened to me was that my father died and I did not even know... only days later... I had a bad feeling – I called and learnt he had died. Years later my sister said he asked for me, but then there was nothing they could do. I am grateful for all the progress we made – my daughter [who lives in the US] can have a minor cold and I know about it right away – in a matter of minutes she can send me a text or call. It is a different world. (Teresa, 64, Germany)

Furthermore, it is even possible that the earlier insurgence of ICTs could have altered the settlement and return choices for some families:

M: I could have stayed in Germany back in the 1980s. There were many options [work-wise], but I went there when my child was just born, my wife stayed behind and I was simply really driven to go back home. At present, you have Skype, all

³ For each respondent I am providing a coded name, age at the time of the interview and a destination country (place of residence).

kinds of other communication tools, and back then it was very difficult to even call from a payphone, the costs were tremendous, I am not even sure that we spoke once during the entire time [6 months] that I was gone...

Z: No, I do not think so.

*M: It was horrible, not like today when one barely feels that distance.
(Zosia, 41 & Maciek, 43, Norway)*

Evidently, Poles joined other migrants in the “qualitative shift”, fairly well-reflected in the literature, for instance in Mahler’s work (2001). This is a shift from communication (scheduling and costs-related) struggles of migrants with families in remote places just a few decades ago, to a currently foregrounded understanding of the international GSM and online networks as a “social glue” (Horst 2006, Vertovec 2012: 60–64) or the virtual connectedness – performance of kinship through ICTs (Baldassar et al. 2007, Wilding 2006, Pearce et al. 2013: 2120) found across the transnational communities worldwide. Therefore, we can now observe a significant presence of virtual transnational family practices among the Poles living in Western Europe.

POST-2004 MIGRANTS’ USE OF ICTS – ACCOUNTABILITY, CAPACITY AND WILL

Today, technology is no longer an exclusive privilege of the so called “early adopters” – the members of the society who are technically-savvy, but has rather become something that is “a given” to all – an “obviously” accessible and available method of communication one incurs for little or no cost. Let us look at what Polish migrant Sylwia said about the feeling she had:

I was sitting at my desk at work and taking a lunch break, so I was on a Skype call with my mum – headphones on, I was typing as she was dictating me a recipe for her plum cake -- we were going to have guests over the weekend [and I was planning to bake a cake]. And in another window I was chatting with my cousin, who had a big fight with her husband and needed to vent. And I remember thinking to myself – it feels no different from if I were to sit in an office in Poland [...] we would probably use the same ways for talking. Somehow it feels like we might even be closer now with Skype and emails than when we lived next door, only now they cannot hassle me for stuff. (Sylwia, 35, Germany)

Sylwia’s account mirrors a conviction about accessibility shared by the migrants interviewed in all three destination countries. At the same time, her

story indirectly touches on the potential implications of “always being on call” – a constant accessibility which was earlier described by Mason in a family setting, as she believed that residing “near enough to provide help can mean being expected always to be first to help” (1999:56). It is now increasingly extended to all “always connected” society members, who are accessible via ICTs at any given time (e.g. Fioridi 2006, Dijst 2009).

On the one hand, it is surely positive that Sylwia and other post-accession migrants do not experience the hardship recalled by the respondents who moved abroad in the 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, one can wonder what it means when she says that her relationship with her family members improved because they no longer live nearby? This question perhaps draws the attention to the fact that the use of ICTs for keeping in touch with one’s family should neither be romanticized as capable of simply replacing (substituting) physical propinquity and face-to-face interactions between migrants and their left-behind kin (e.g. Pratt 2013, Parrenas 2005), nor should it be viewed as a universally implemented way of managing the lives of transnational families in a manner beneficial and welcome to all migrant and non-migrant parties involved. What transpired from the analysis is a combination of two factors – the Skill Level (capacity) of using ICTs on the one hand, and – on the other – the Motivation (will, dedication, desire) to use them, which together result in a matrix of four possible scenarios that Polish migrant families seem to be finding themselves in, implementing the same in their family practices. The typology is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.

Post-accession migrants and ICTs use							
▼ Skill level (capacity) ▼							
▶ Motivation/Interest	<table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>(A) High motivation, low skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New practices of intra-family ICTs-related “education”; • Emerging transnationalism; • Knowledge transfers; social remittances. </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>(B) High motivation, high skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemporary “global families”; • Transnationalism and ICTs as integral and routinized form of daily communications within bi-located migrant families. </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;">▶</td> <td> <table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>(D) Low motivation, low skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No ICTs use; • Limited communication with the home country; • Questionable transnationalization of practices. </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>(C) Low motivation, high skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pragmatic and purposeful use and <i>non-use</i> of ICTs for family communication; • “Ambivalent transnationalism”, questions about accountability. </td> </tr> </table> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>(A) High motivation, low skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New practices of intra-family ICTs-related “education”; • Emerging transnationalism; • Knowledge transfers; social remittances. 	<p>(B) High motivation, high skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemporary “global families”; • Transnationalism and ICTs as integral and routinized form of daily communications within bi-located migrant families. 	▶	<table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>(D) Low motivation, low skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No ICTs use; • Limited communication with the home country; • Questionable transnationalization of practices. </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>(C) Low motivation, high skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pragmatic and purposeful use and <i>non-use</i> of ICTs for family communication; • “Ambivalent transnationalism”, questions about accountability. </td> </tr> </table>	<p>(D) Low motivation, low skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No ICTs use; • Limited communication with the home country; • Questionable transnationalization of practices. 	<p>(C) Low motivation, high skill level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pragmatic and purposeful use and <i>non-use</i> of ICTs for family communication; • “Ambivalent transnationalism”, questions about accountability.
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The findings on the four types delineated above will be presented, beginning with scenario (A), and proceeding in a clock-wise manner to boxes (B), (C), and (D) for each of the specified options.

(A) ICTS AND TRANSNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSFERS

In Lee's words "the application of ICT technologies requires human capabilities to handle such technologies" (2001: 128). The first scenario of the ICTs usage pertains to Polish migrants and/or their family members who have limited technological capacity, yet are highly interested in keeping in touch and maintaining transnational bonds. Here we talk specifically about something that Dijst calls the *capability constraints* of the ICT use, which can be divided into two subsets: lacking technological infrastructure (hardware, software, network interface), and inadequate computer skills (2004: 30) among the transnationally situated users. Thinking about the demographic profile of the contemporary migrants, who are largely defined by a "young and educated" generalist characteristic, may not amount to much here, yet the inclusion of an intergenerational dimension leads to a germane point on the fact that the parents of the mobile majority may very well have had little exposure to computers and the technologies that came with them (see e.g. White 2010, Krzyżowski 2013). Karolina shared some reflections on this point:

It might be easy for those who come now and are in their 20s, but that is not the case for us – our parents are in their 70s and you cannot imagine what I have to go through when I want to convince them about every technical novelty – my in-laws believe that mobiles cause brain cancer, for crying out loud! So, like I said, and I have to admit that I am also not so great with computers – they weren't around when I was growing up. So it basically helps that my sons are there to help – recently my younger one [13] told me he's fed up with setting up stuff for me, so I need to learn how to turn on video-chat for talking with my other son [18], who is in college, all by myself. So I understand that my parents are more about phones and it is 'baby-steps' – a mobile with big buttons and screen, then a new phone with loudspeaker and conference-function, so we can have a group family talk with my sister, and last time my son was there for a visit, we talked through his laptop – my mother was fascinated – told us to zoom in on our newly redecorated kitchen. But my dad left – he seemed bewildered. (Karolina, 41, UK)

Evidently concerned about their parents, migrants are often broadly seen as not shying away from but instead trying to cope with a need to fulfil their intergenerational care obligations towards their elderly kin from afar

(e.g. Krzyżowski 2013). It also testifies to the fact that family gains (rather than loses) importance in the postmodern world, even if it changes shape and form and relies on the new ideals of “togetherness” (Jamieson 1998: 19–20, Cheal 1999: 66–67, Morgan 2011), also in a cross-border setting (Bryceson, Vuorela 2002). Notably, what migrants can use ICTs for is inspiring a socially remitted knowledge transfer, as in Judyta’s case:

I came up with an idea of having something of a ‘tutorial session’ for future grandparents when I was pregnant – it was my father in-law’s Name-Day [Imieniny] – big party – many people from the family. And we brought two laptops, turned on their old desktop, then ended up borrowing another computer from my cousin’s son because that of my in-laws’ would not work [...], and so we did funny demos on connecting via Skype, or sending email, and even ended up setting-up a NaszaKlasa account for one of the uncles – it was fun. More importantly, though, they kind of realized that it was not too hard – we bought a new computer for my parents soon thereafter and they took care of getting an Internet contract themselves. They very much used it later when our kids were born and still use it today – it is quite amazing to hear my mum read bedtime stories [to my children over Skype]. (Judyta, 27, UK)

Similarly, Krzyżowski notes that his respondents were often the ones to introduce Internet to their parents’ lives, a finding that he sees as concurrent with a broader pattern of a small percentage of Poles using the Internet in general (slightly above 50%), and a particularly meagre fraction of 5% among people aged 65 and over (2013: 163). The general claim seems to be that a high motivation of migrants to be inclusive and included in decision-making processes gives credence to a finding of a social change occurring in certain households. It can be argued that there is a certain moment in time when migrants and/or non-migrants need to make a choice about a willingness to overcome their reservations and, ultimately, acquire new skills that the use of ICTs demands:

When we came and the children stayed behind – it was the worst thing – not sure if calling or not calling was making me cry more, so maybe that’s what I associated the phoning with – being sad [...]. And my dad moved here, so there was no reason to learn to use all those Skype and Facebook stuff. But three years ago my sons went to Poland to spend the summer with my in-laws, and I said it could not be like that – not seeing them; so a friend – also Polish, she taught me how to use it [...]. It [social media] is nice – I even reconnected with some old friends and found some new ones there. You can be less lonely here, especially when you live in a remote place like we do. (Eliza, 39, UK)

It is here that the statement which Drèze and Sen (1989) had made about the link between access to information and the development applied by Hamel to the ICTs (2009: 10) appears to be correct in the idea that “the first step in overcoming challenges in our life consists in evaluating our predicament and identifying the alternatives that would make our life better”. In addition, teaching those left behind about technology signifies a novel type of flows, which constitute a form of social remittance (Levitt 1998). Though they may initially entail “interaction ritual chains”, they are – in line with Collins’ understanding (2004) – capable of creating and transforming broader social structures. With an array of available communication tools to choose from, migrants who have a desire to maintain contact may eventually move towards the second option – scenario (B) described next.

(B) ICTS IN TRANSNATIONAL GLOBAL FAMILIES

The transnational approach often accentuates the facilitative role that ICTs play in the migrants’ dealings with a need for being betwixt and between the two locations.

The fact that Polish migration increasingly means the mobility of entire (nuclear) families (e.g. White 2011, Gmaj and Iglicka 2014, Ryan and Sales 2013) has significant implications for the “new face” of migrants – no longer solely associated with temporariness and labour, but often focused on the children growing up abroad (Grzymala-Moszczyńska, Trąbka, 2014). Furthermore, a subsequent mobility of the elderly generation can be observed as grandparents are called on to join and live with their offspring abroad. The new landscape is also that many Polish families noticeably become “global families”, with members of one kinship structure (nuclear and/or extended family) representing multiple and distant localities of residence, different ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds, as well as speaking multiple languages (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 2013). In global families, the ability to communicate in real time with the people emotionally close to us, which not only includes voice/audio but also video, seems to induce a particular absence/presence condition, not only legitimizing this post-modern condition of multi-sited Polish families, but also comforting some migrants about not being around physically:

*A: [Keeping in touch] is mostly done in a way that we talk, for example on Skype. We very often talk to Ilona’s brother, or parents, it is practically every other day.
I: Skype... Skype generally gives you this feeling that we are not somewhere far away.*

A: So we turn on this little camera... [...] And you speak to your brother almost everyday

I: Precisely every day.

A: And there are also phone calls, I phone my mother, for example, very often. I talk to her; I try to call at least two or three times a week, even if it is for a conversation that lasts just a few minutes. (Ilona, 41, Adrian, 41, Norway)

In discussing spatial and technological opportunities, Dijst (2004) focuses on the central feature of accessibility, or, more importantly – “virtual accessibility”. Drawing on Coucelis’ works, he underscores “that human activity in post-industrial society is becoming increasingly person-based as opposed to place-based”, separated from a fixed and physical (ibid.: 27). Indeed, for some migrants the questions about staying in touch were self-explanatory, as they did not see being constantly available to their friends and family in Poland as anything strange or unusual:

“Skype, Facebook, telephone – I actually have two SIM cards – one with a Polish number, so that I am clearly up to date. I have a phone payment plan for Poland, of course I am in touch with people there. (Klara, 31, Norway)

For many mothers, the Internet functions as a tool for getting parenting advice and this persists in a post-migration context, but extends beyond the “community” and relies equally on being “listened to” about one’s daily, routine, and often isolated practices of migrant parenting:

R: I have a very close relationship with my mother [...] my husband always complains and [mocks me] that I am always on the phone with ‘my mummy’. Because on Skype, yes, now on Skype, and earlier on the phone as well, I would sit down and recount everything, with all details, you know – what her grandchild’s poop looked like that day – colour, consistency, you know. (Antonina, 47, Norway)

More importantly, the pervasiveness of ICTs crosses status and gender boundaries, as men can be just as prone to sharing their concerns about raising children abroad with their family back in Poland. Cyryl, a single parent who works in Norway in unskilled labour and has parents who live on a farm in a small village near Warsaw, responded to the following question in a manner that confirms the above assumption:

B: How often do you get in touch with [your parents and relatives]?

R: Practically every day. [...] By Skype, by phone – it varies, but it is every day. At the very minimum every other day. [...] Both parents, they sit in [front

of the computer]. Or over the phone, I just call and ask what is going on, ask about stuff, you know. (Cyryl, 32, Norway)

In the times when migration is a popular marker of many Polish citizens' trajectories, technology-centred lifestyles often operate as a direct pragmatic response to the prevalence of migrant kin members in one's extended (or actually "global") family:

Summer is this one time in the year when we see each other – I mean actually see each other in real life. My cousins live all over the world – one in Canada, another one in Australia, my brother is mostly in Austria, but his wife normally stays in Warsaw. And my parents here, in the southern part [of Poland]. But of course there are things to take care of during the year – grandmother needed some help with medical stuff, uncle got in trouble for not paying taxes – we needed to exchange emails about it with my brother and cousins as our parents sometimes shelter us from that, only tell half-truths. So we normally have an email thread, or more recently a chat on Facebook, and we would try to get a coherent full picture of what's going on based on what parents tell us on the phone individually [...] I never really go 'offline' – I even check mails and Facebook at work, just in case that something happens in Poland. I would not want to be the last to know! (Joanna, 34, UK)

Furthermore, Joanna's example shows that using ICTs together with her generation of kin members is a very comforting method of feeling "included" in family matters. It also relies on the fact that her sibling and cousin have the technical acumen different from that of their parents, who they only speak to on the phone, while making a significant use of being tech-savvy and utilizing instant messaging across multiple geographic locations and time zones. In a way, the latter part of the argument points to a blurry but visible borderline between those who, due to their "connectivity", have limited versus extensive participation in and access to kinship decisions. At the time when almost everyone engages with ICTs to some level, the question remains about those who choose NOT to reveal their skills or utilize them in family contexts. The latter situation will be discussed next.

(C) "DISTANCING YOURSELF" REGARDLESS
OF HIGH TECHNOLOGICAL CAPACITY

In this section I return to the opening quote by Sylwia and develop further arguments about what can be called an "escapist strategy" of migrants. The term itself has yielded quite a significant number of works on Polish migrants,

especially women, who were said to leave their country of origin in search of an adventure or a change that would help them “change their life” (e.g. Slany et al. 2008). For many future migrants the life in Poland was mundane and marked by few opportunities. Furthermore, especially Polish women abroad often talked about the omnipresent and various facets of gender discrimination, as well as feelings of “entrapment” in connection with their obligations towards the family and other societal constraints. Here the notion of not wanting to be “accessible” for the left-behind kin members is connected with a selective use and a deliberate non-use of ICTs, despite a high competence and, quite often, extensive use of communication technologies in other areas of one’s life. For Basia this can be observed in the following two interview quotations:

[As graphic designers] we like to experiment with new technologies – with our girls [daughters aged 5 and 8], we always download funny apps, record funny voices, let them play with artsy programs for drawing and print crazy art projects downloaded from the Internet [...] “I more or less have rules on when we call grandparents – once a week – that’s sufficient. Because my mother-in-law, she always has some things to talk on and on about – I waste time that we could spend going for a walk or something, and instead it is an hour of Polish complaining – her arthritis, an idiot doctor, the drama around the increased price of butter, and, of course, what the priest said in church on Sunday. It’s absurd. (Basia, 33, UK)

It is perspicuous that a physical separation from one’s family is a welcome setup for this respondent and proves that there is no causal connectivity between skills and willingness. Some migrants consciously or latently contest the norm of being “available” and “accountable” for the left-behind family, while others use physical distance as a subversion of sharing their lives with others – an escape of sorts that would not be possible had they stayed in Poland. This argument was made by Dijst as applicable to the broader ICT/accessibility discussion, as she observed that “[i]n our private lives, the extent to which we want to be accessible, is debatable. We might like to have some off-line periods in which we can relax undisturbed” (2004: 35). He correctly classifies this particular problem of the ICT use under the *authority constraint* heading, meaning the often unpredictable matrix of what is socially permissible, desirable and actually practiced (or rejected) by agents. In the example above, Basia somehow navigates between not debunking a cultural norm (permissibility; she does stay in touch) and setting her own threshold of what she wishes to convey and accomplish through her individual practice (desirability; boundaries). A corollary is to acknowledge the controversial statement of Floridi’s, who

stated that being on call 24/7 is “a form of slavery” (2009: 9) that people are normally seeking to flee from.

Another possible explanation pertains to what Bell (2013) discovered among Poles in Belfast who did not want to Skype with their family in fear of being judged on their self-evaluated “mediocre” performance as migrants. One of my respondents has also reflected on that matter through memories of her initial years in the United Kingdom:

In the beginning I was feeling ashamed – I would not go online on Skype, pretended our webcam was broken or we were out, so I cannot get the phone. It was very difficult for us here – only [husband] worked, there was a new baby and we lived in a tiny apartment, with mould and a messy garden. Everyone in Poland believes that you live here like a king, it is hard. Now I have a lovely house, we both have great career prospects, children are healthy and happy [...] I would say we actually contact our family more now than when we used to in Poland [...] it is also less stressful this way. (Daria, 27, UK)

It might therefore be that a fear of being judged is often countering a desire to maintain contact with family, especially for those who are held up to a high expectation of a migratory success but nevertheless believe that they are struggling. International scholars also confirmed that withholding information from one’s family by taking advantage of international borders was very common, even despite maintaining constant communication (Aguilla 2009, Pertierra 2007). In the two recounted studies many migrants used ICTs in a perfunctory manner for small-talk and chit-chat. They would explain that this was an “expected” (or in Dijst’s terms – “desirable”) behaviour, yet by no means a profound or meaningful communication. As such, it perhaps can be tied with what Krzyżowski found out about spontaneous contacts, in which migrants engaged when they were feeling ashamed for not being there, and seemed to use such contacts as “quick-fixes” – excuses for not staying in touch (2013: 162). All in all, the situation described here signifies a contraposition to the earlier described scenario (A), where the powerful familial connectivity exalts investments into development of skills among the transnational kinship members. In a way, when there is no affinity in the first place, the ICTs are unlikely to suddenly change the ways of “doing family” and foster propinquity across borders.

Finally, there is also a long-term perspective regarding the noticeable effects of the combined temporal and spatial distance that invariably results in the process of “growing apart” affecting certain migrants and their relationships, regardless of what has been said about the “magic powers” of the Internet on diffusing distance and absent presence:

– How do you contact friends and family in Poland? Which channels do you use?

R: Via everything that is available – telephone, computer.

– And how often is that?

R: Well, you know, with some we get in touch quite frequently, but with others – it has become rather rare. I noticed that, [the contact] is diminishing even with very close friends that you went to hell and back with. You lose it, even when there are reasons to get in touch. You still remember their birthdays, holidays. But you no longer have this multiplicity of topics in common, like you would have if you'd been in one environment, in the same place. So there is some weakening of [ties], though not with everyone. (Agata, 39, Norway)

Agata gives a counter-narrative to the Polish familialism and a value of emotional attachment to family (Slany 2013) – her family practices reflect the contemporary characteristics of functioning on a “rolling contract” basis – the family members that are important get invited to partake in the communication exchanges about family life, a process greatly facilitated by the ease of ICTs use and usually entailing a clear pronouncement of who the migrants feel accountable for. Those excluded, however, become and/or remain distant, regardless of the ICTs’ ubiquity.

(D) LOW MOTIVATION, LOW SKILL LEVEL

Among the interviewees, the cases of low ICTs use attributable to a combination of limited technical capacities and no motivation to keep in touch, either via modern technology or more generally, were rather uncommon. Primarily, the biographies of migrants belonging to an older age group (45+), and often those with a rather low educational attainment (vocational training) appeared conducive to a persistent rejection of technology use in a transnational familial setting. Additionally, for certain Poles, the dominance of English medium (and thought structures) within the cyberspace can be an additional deterrent and a barrier, as suggested by Hanson (1998) with regard to other migrants.

The above held both for mobile individuals (especially first-time, later-in-life migrants) and the left-behind kin members, as already illustrated in Karolina’s contradistinction of her mother’s and father’s behaviour during Skype calls. It is also clearly articulated by Mariola:

This is normal for me – I sit on Facebook and use MyPolacy [Polish migrant portal in Germany], I talk to my sister on gadu [Gadu-Gadu – a Polish instant messenger] and it’s like we still live next door [...]. But for my mum, it is

different – she does not consider calling it a “real” meeting. If we do not come visit her for a month or so, then she gets offended, stops talking to me. And I really cannot afford travelling so often, and especially now when he’s [son] in school. [...] She would only text in emergency, usually saying only that I must come at once. And I pleaded with her, and I tried, but it leads nowhere. She feels betrayed, so I don’t think there’s anything I can do except just let it go. (Mariola, 38, Germany)

For Mariola’s mother, the requirement for physical co-presence could not be mitigated, even if it meant that her relationship with her daughter and grandson was becoming increasingly strained and ultimately distant. Additionally, Mariola is ambivalent about texting in urgent situations – unlike Krzyżowski’s respondents who used short messages as a way of ensuring that someone who is in the area can be contacted to step in, saw it as means for reducing guilt and retaining control over the lives of one’s parents (2013: 162–163). Accordingly, she associates texting with a failure and crisis.

Among the interviewed men, Jan’s story is an antithesis of Cyryl’s account of using ICTs for constantly being involved in family matters back home and involving the left-behind parents in his son’s life in Norway, as presented in section (B):

– You mentioned you have a son in Poland from your first marriage [...] Do you keep in touch?

R: Well, so-so, you know, some phone calls, maybe 2–3 times a year we see each other. He is normally studying a lot at school; it is at [inconvenient] times, when we are not available. I rather use the phone, I rarely use Skype. We are normally busy and Skype requires some discipline on one’s part, so that you are there 20 minutes every day. People who use Skype all the time, I don’t know, I think they have too much time, because during the time you spend there you could actually do so many great things. (Jan, 53, Norway)

It is difficult to determine to what degree Jan has a (perhaps generational) issue with the use of Skype in general, and how much he simply relies on his dismay for the time-wasting nature he perceives in ICTs in order to justify his lacking engagement in transnational fathering (see Pustulka, Struzik, Ślusarczyk 2015, forthcoming, an article dedicated to the analyses of Polish fathering in Norway).

Finally, there is of course a group of migrants for whom refraining from the use of technologies comes as an expected follow-up to a behaviour that would not be so different had a person not migrated at all in the first place:

I don't have time for calling, talking – I work a lot in the shop, there is, [there] are lots of responsibilities that come with part-owning the place [...], I have three children, busy, always busy [...] and it is also that, you know, we built our life here, there is less and less reason to go back, and to keep in touch – the family there is fine without me and we are doing great here. (Celina, 34, UK)

There are two things crucial here, the first being the impact of educational and professional status which prevented Celina from ever learning about computers, and is, presumably, treated as even more “foreign” by her family members in Poland who live in a small village and display comparably low levels of educational attainment. Secondly, Celina’s story otherwise forefronts her nuclear family’s (meaning – family of procreation) connections to Poland through traditions and customs, a certain national pride and care over transferring heritage to the now teenaged children. However, looking at Celina’s broader kin structure, it can be observed that she somehow felt “used” by her parents (who made her work in their store without a contract, then went bankrupt leaving her with no documented experience to capitalize on). She further discussed stilted bonds with her siblings, ever since a feud over an inheritance, from which Celina felt unfairly excluded. In that sense, it is clear once again that the engagement with ICTs and migration do not always go hand in hand, and the technology is neither able to repair pre-existing lack of propinquity, nor is as “obvious” for all social groups as one often assumes.

CONCLUSIONS

The article showcases the importance of following Urry’s conceptual argument that “[o]ne should investigate not only physical and immediate presence, but also the socialities involved in occasional co-presence, imagined co-presence, and **virtual co-presence**” (2002: 256), as the latter can be used as a new entry way for uncovering layers of complexities in the collective biographies of transnational families.

From the analysis it was clear that acknowledging what Escobar called and critiqued as the “arrow of progress” (the modern is always better) logic is vital. The assumptions behind modernization and “magical” impact of technologies may have deleterious consequences through a universalization, in all actuality, of greatly nuanced experiences. Rather than simply supporting Krzyżowski’s claim that “migration can sometimes lead to an exclusion and marginalization of those left behind, [and] technology can reduce the probability of this situation taking

place” (2013: 163), this paper also sought to identify some patterns and nuances in the array of outcomes that the intersection of mobility, kinship and ICTs may bring. It is quite self-explanatory that the use of ICTs is tied to opportunity sets for various individuals, for whom *accessibility* may often be inextricably tied to *ability* (Coucelis 2000, cf. Dijst 2004: 28), as well as to desirability/motivation.

Interestingly, there was less of a comparative value that could be attributed to the three different destination countries of Germany, United Kingdom and Norway. It appears that a more traditional “East-West” and development-centred line could be drawn. Converging personal stories illustrative of all categories emerged for migrants residing in all three countries. It could suggest that while many dimensions of migrant families’ lives should be seen as particular and context-dependant (e.g. conditioned on the numbers and types of diaspora organizations and networks, actual physical/geographic distances and transportation routes in place, as well as broader differences in healthcare system, schooling systems and their evaluations) in their impact on transnational family practices of intimacy, the realm of virtual space somewhat “levels the playing field”. In other words, the accessibility of ICTs arguably results in the “death of distance” so grave that it is seemingly able to disregard nation-state borders (and inner-differentiation) *within* Western Europe.

At the same time the paper finds that although the majority of Polish migrants may be exposed, capable and skilled in using the technologies, not all of them benefit from the opportunities they offer. The findings highlight the applicability of what Horst and Miller (2006: 86–98) wrote about the processes of “linking-up” and the technological boom’s effects on families that are not unidirectional and may thus lead to either improvement or worsening of relationships. The reasons for the lack of ICTs use are diverse. First and foremost, one must agree with Dijst (2004) and Scott (2000) that a distinction between the so called *captives* (with no access to ICTs at all or only via very slow information modes) and *non-captives* (who are “always connected”, have means and skills to freely choose from a complete selection of different ICTs options) becomes more and more obtrusive. The lack of competence (for *captives*) sometimes might be mitigated by learning – for instance with a transfer of knowledge as a particular social remittance, but remains implacable for others. Besides, there is this other issue of will and dedication on the part of migrants who might be (or in time become) indifferent and susceptible to paying less attention to the everyday lives of those left behind. In Morgan’s words, closeness is “not determined by geography or genealogy as much as by personal preference and the extent to which the two biographies are interwoven” (2011: 88). Conclusively, while the advent of globalization added new methods of communication (Hamel 2009: 7)

and resulted in the new framing and practices of “virtual transnationalism”, the ICTs cannot be seen as replacing the need for visits and physical presence voiced by the members of Polish transnational kinship networks.

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