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Cybermigration: Connections, Human Mobility and Media Culture. An Italian Case Study

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Abstract

The migration process, dependent on international interconnections and the symbolic contents of the media, now sees a new protagonist, a new social subject-nomadic, cosmopolitan, capable of redefining himself, crossing geographical and cultural barriers, sustained by the power of electronic (and digital) media, able to imagine the future and himself within new environments (online and offline), exploiting opportunities and running significant risks (fake news or digital trafficking of migrants, surveillance, for example). This individual is the cybermigrant. Cybermigration is a new form of human mobility in the digital environment and focuses in particular on two aspects: social-digital capital and online security (Buoncompagni, 2020). This research starts from Bordieu's line of thought and highlights several theories of particular importance, focusing in particular on a new form of "social-digital capital" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; De Feo & Pitzalis, 2015) that can be applied to migration and the various forms of communication involved. Furthermore, the social use of media by migrants before and after their journey to Italy is investigated. The methodology mainly used is that of the focus group.

Keywords

Immigration, Social Media, Cybermigration, Institutions

1. Introduction

In a new communication and cultural environment made up of exchanges and fragmented and alternative models based on a "new media, cultural and socio-economic order" (Appadurai, 2005; Khanna, 2016; IOM, 2018), it is possible to identify two opposing factors that are shifting the world towards singular

thought, which results in policies that are typically assimilationist towards other cultures (global) and a tendency towards (local) particularisation that accentuates cultural and identity differences. The former aims to absorb and annul multicultural distances, and the latter defends itself by strengthening the regionalisation of cultural content.

As mentioned in the introductory chapters, electronic means of mass communication have radically changed the sector of mass media and other forms of media, offering new resources and new disciplines for the construction of "imagined worlds" (Appadurai, 2001); "mediation" (here understood as media communication or conveyed by mass media) has transformed the everyday political, economic, social discourse while initially maintaining the sense of distance between the event and the observer, becoming an important resource for the experimentation of self construction in all types of societies and for the imagination of the self as an everyday social project.

Alongside these evolving communication processes, a change can also be seen in the phenomenon of human mobility, particularly in the area of migration, whether forced or voluntary, which is increasingly flanked by the flow of mass-media images and the cognitive-emotional effects they create.

Public media content and migrants are both shifting simultaneously. They cross each other in unpredictable ways and it is this unprecedented form of connection that defines the link between globalization and the modern world: both the circulation of people and digital media are changing the global scenario and everyone's imaginaries. Through digital technologies we can create and store new content which will allow us to expand our experiences or relive those we have experienced.

Technology is helping us give a new meaning to the concept of "place" by creating a culture and systems of mass communications that should not pose a threat to the construction of places and identities, but would rather favour the end of non-places, transforming those anonymous spaces into meaningful and attractive places.

The evolution of the web represents, today more than ever, the main instrument of interaction that facilitates communication between immigrant communities geographically dispersed all over the globe.

In the past, different forms of media such as letter-writing allowed asynchronous communication between immigrants and their motherland and had a dual function: to convey a message and symbolically represent a long-standing emotional bond.

Smartphones and social networks, with instant messaging and online video-calling functions, build communication bridges in real time, both personally and professionally, aimed at all types of recipients; this is why traditional infrastructures (railways, air ports, stations...) as well as electronic-digital infrastructures (tablets, apps, websites and online platforms...) are important for immigrants and asylum seekers trying to enter Europe today.

ICTs have facilitated the human mobility process and the possibility for individuals to remain in contact at all times, but only apparently reducing the costs and risks of migration (Cusimano & Mercatanti, 2017): in general terms, in fact, new forms of communication have not only produced positive social effects, but they have also become tools for the market of violence, in other words a market that encourages the violation of social and legal norms.

Technological changes (information overload, the absence of space-time boundaries, high levels of active participation of users on the Net) were so rapid that in the years immediately following the explosion of the Internet, authorities were no longer able to keep up with ensuring safe online navigation or communication because old criminal patterns were no longer the same and political security strategies proved to be completely ineffective, especially when applied to the digital space.

Therefore, new communication and information platforms are tools that facilitate the migratory experience, which includes organizing migrants' journeys. However, they are also dangerous at times because the digital traces left behind can be used by human traffickers to threaten or claim services of different kinds. This will be further discussed below.

For now, it is important to start the analysis with this consideration.

The process of migrating, dependent on International interconnections and symbolic media content, now sees a new protagonist, a new social subject – nomadic, cosmopolitan, able to redefine him or herself, crossing geographical and cultural barriers, supported by the power of electronic (and digital) media, able to imagine the future and oneself within new environments (online and offline), taking advantage of opportunities and running significant risks (fake news or digital smuggling of migrants, surveillance, for example). This individual is the cybermigrant.

Cybermigration is a new form of human mobility in the digital environment and it focuses in particular on two aspects: social–digital capital and online security (Buoncompagni, 2020).

2. Methods

Highlighted some theoretical aspects of particular importance, the part of the applied research, starting from Bordieu's thought, focused in particular on a new form of "social-digital capital" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; De Feo & Pitzalis, 2015) applying it to the theme of migration and the forms of communication adopted by them. This research starts with Bordieu's line of thought and highlights various theories of particular importance, focusing in particular on a new form of "social-digital capital" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; De Feo & Pitzalis, 2015) that can be applied to migration and the various forms of communication involved. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1) What role do the new digital media play in the various phases of the migration process?

2) Which communication channels are used to live and participate in host communities and which ones are used to engage with institutions?

3) Is technology useful for guiding and promoting network capital or would it be an ineffective tool for involving immigrants in social, civil and community life?

This study adopted a qualitative model that involved focus groups, typical of social research, which was considered the most suitable survey tool for this specific research. This tool seems to be particularly constructive for expanding the dialogue even further, since this model is able to activate participation and encourage conversation; in the case study analysed, the qualitative methodology had a dual function. Firstly, it was carried out to confirm the initial hypotheses of the research, based on an in-depth review of the literature. It was also used to analyze the information collected thoroughly.

Ten focus groups were created and conducted in a designated area in the main reception area of the Marche Region building. They sat in a circle, each sitting away from each other at the exact same distance since the setting could also be defined as a factor that can influence the course of the conversation itself. The groups were also recorded using an audio recording device.

The operators from various migrant reception facilities made themselves immediately available to provide support for the numerous interviews. They arranged small mixed groups (6 - 7 mix-aged people coming from countries of origin, aimed at encouraging more interactions and dialogues amongst the interviewees, creating more opportunities for them to speak about more "threatening" topics, reducing the risk of changing the group process (jargon, relational dynamics, etc.).

The sample analyzed was made up of male migrants including irregular migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who had joined the survey on a voluntary basis, aged between 22 and 35 years, coming from different geographical areas; both age and geographical diversity immediately proved to be rather important factors for the analysis which is no surprise considering that both factors have a significant influence on the way new media are used and on internet access. This will also be seen later.

There were a few obstacles during the initial phase as not all interviewees were fully available or willing to participate actively in either some parts of the study or in certain proposed interviews, especially those containing questions related to family and their countries or origin.

Many of them were initially suspicious of the purpose of the project even though the operators had provided them with detailed information before organizing them into the focus groups.

The most skeptical participants included those who had been in Italy for the longest time aged 28 - 35, whereas newcomers, aged 22 - 25, especially those with Pakistani and Iraqi origins, showed an immediate interest in the research and surprisingly they were enthusiastic about collaborating; in certain cases where there were language barriers, some interviewees spontaneously took on

roles as mediators or translators in order to help the participants who could not communicate.

The interview cycles showed the majority of the younger participants show enthusiasm and a marked interest in collaborating and talking to each other as a result of not having had any negative "bureaucratic or legal" experience, which also means more trust in operators and local institutions.

The younger participants, for example, have the expectation that the municipalities in the Marche Region (Italy) will be responsible for their livelihood and future employment. On the other hand, the other participants who have had negative experiences in obtaining answers to their asylum applications or who have received little or no assistance in securing a job are reluctant to engage in dialogue and tend to assume an attitude of distrust and resignation.

Based on current literature on the subject and taking into account the results obtained in the initial phases of this research as well as the focus groups' objectives, two elements have been identified and analysed: 1) network and connectivity, 2) social uses of new media and social and digital capital development. Both are considered to be present, and sometimes even overlapping, in the migration process.

Migration is a global phenomenon and can be defined by different characteristics and trends, and there may be multiple reasons why it happens, linked for example to political, economic, war, climatic or cultural factors. We have also previously seen how public discourse on migrants is often driven by prejudices and stereotypes, having at times important consequences, such as episodes of disinformation or verbal violence transmitted digitally, with a high percentage of sharing and diffusion.

However, scientific literature on the topic in Italy is still scarce, and the same could be said about Italian institutions and media as they give very little attention to the "digital dimension" of the migration phenomenon.

There has been an increasing use of new electronic-digital media, which can be considered "languages" used to build and share information, also seen in migration. As a consequence, there has not only been a rising need to investigate this field from a scientific point of view, but also a necessity to learn the languages and communication means of "digital migrants".

Migrants are in fact an integral part of digital society; they can be seen as victims or objects because of distorted representations shown by the media; they are generators and consumers of media content on the net; they possess various communication tools; they search for and manage online information independently (Cheesman, 2016; Buoncompagni & D'Ambrosi, 2020).

2.1. The Use of Technology Pre-Migration

The fact that migrants are equipped with digital devices has been criticized several times by the national and local press through the publication of images of refugees arriving on the Italian or Greek coasts with smartphones in their hands,

shooting selfies or documenting their arrival, but the possession of a digital tool does not so much indicate the socio-economic status of a migrant, but rather the immigrant's need to be always connected. Refugees, for example, who come from relatively wealthy countries, migrate carrying their smartphones, already a medium in their previous daily life.

As also indicated by two participants in the first group (A):

> "Before arriving here we were 'normal' people (…) the fact that I fled my country for economic problems does not mean that I should not have a social life like all people, so the fact that I have a cell phone or you use it during the day, in my free time… I don't understand why it surprises many people here" (A1, Iraq).
>
> "In my country I also had a television in my house and a radio in my brother's car. In my room I kept an old desktop computer to study and write poetry (…) My smartphone, which I now have with me, is the same one I had before (…) shortly after I arrived in Italy I only asked the operators who welcomed me for a new battery for my mobile phone" (A3, Pakistan).

All types of mediums, especially smartphones and cell phones, are now found everywhere, even those in the southern hemisphere of the world, and have acquired clear social, economic and cultural value. They have become increasingly more relevant in everyday life and in doing business; in most cases cell phones have even become a means of survival, generating income.

In Kenya, for example, the *iCow* phone *application* is used by the majority of farmers (more than 25,000 users). It is a simple tool that has proved extremely useful because, by sending a text message to a centralized system, farmers and breeders can receive useful tailored information in real time, such as when to milk or how to treat animals, resulting in healthier cows and better milk production; another interesting example is *mPedigree,* an *app* developed with the contribution of African pharmaceutical companies which, using a smartphone with a barcode reader, allows the user to check when a drug on the market has expired or if it is counterfeit.

Thousands of mobile phones and other digital electronic devices arrive in the majority of Africa's main shopping centers; Accra, the capital of Ghana, is the heart of electronic waste disposal traffic (such as computers, televisions, refrigerators, etc.).

This phenomenon called *electronic waste* has become a business and widespread in Africa, as well as in South America, creating opportunities for the recycling network, repair shops and different initiatives that aim to regenerate or assemble old technological tools apparently out of use. The result is the growing profitable production of second-hand technologies locally made even in the most remote villages where you can informally buy, *low cost* models of entirely functional *digital devices*:

> "The area where I lived before was quite isolated from the center. There

were no smartphone shops, but small '*booths*' [3] where it was possible to buy old cell phones. I used to use them to call my father or text him when he was out of the region for work. I had no internet connection, so whenever it was possible I went to the city center where there were numerous *internet points*" (C5, Mali).

"I have bought used second-hand mobile phones several times to have access and functional tools, but surfing online for a long time is really expensive and difficult. When I moved to Dakar, in the city center, I used the wi-fi in the clubs I went to and I made international calls at the numerous internet centers" (D2, Senegal).

One of the first observations made on the use of new media concerns the interviewees' access to digital tools and internet connection, which varies considerably according to their geographical origins and their area of residence (outlying-center) in terms of the liberalisation of the telecommunications market and availability of broadband.

A recent study published by the *Web Foundation* found that the rate of growth of new internet users went from 19% in 2007 to 6% in 2017, with a sharp decline starting in 2015; globally speaking, 3.8 billion people are still not online, and the most penalized in particular are women, African countries and rural communities. Therefore, it is safe to say that access to the Internet is still an economic and social privilege, the growth of Internet access has in fact slowed down drastically throughout the world and billions of people in the poorest or most isolated countries remain fully in the *digital divide*[1].

In some areas of the world, that are isolated and difficult to reach, activating Internet connection is very expensive, but it is not just a matter of network investments or costs. Some people from the poorest communities, who also manage to have a device and can afford a data plan, do not have the necessary skills to be online or do not find it useful because the content is published in languages they do not know.

In 2017, according to the *Africa Mobile Economy* Report, the number of smartphones able to connect to a designated interface has been surging throughout Africa since 2014, especially in Sudan and Kenya.

The latter, in particular, has been one of the countries to lead the African ICT revolution, albeit with rather long times and still with rather uncertain results, by attempting to monitor political elections, ensuring that all the information produced during the elections was trustworthy and aiming to generate broad acceptance of the election result as a true and fair representation of the citizens'

[1]The term *digital divide* indicates the gap between those who have effective access to information technologies (in particular personal computers and the Internet) and those who are excluded, partially or totally. The causes of this exclusion include several variables: economic conditions, level of education, quality of infrastructure, differences in age or sex, belonging to different ethnic groups, geographical origin. In addition to the difficulties of real access to technologies, the definition also includes disparities in the acquisition of resources or skills necessary to participate in the information society.

will[2].

With the so-called " Arab Spring " it was possible to see how the power of digital technologies was not sufficient to revive politically and economically fragile contexts, but at the same time it is not possible to deny that mobile telephony in the daily life of millions of people, now represents an opportunity for civil growth and maturation[3].

2.2. The Use of Technology in Italy Post-Migration

Taking into consideration what has been said so far, the second part, on the other hand, analyses the social uses of new media by migrants in Italy in order to collect information and build new social forms on the net.

For some of the interviewees, the quantity of time and methods of use of the various forms of digital media changed considerably once they arrived in their host country, while for others the consumption of media content and the use of online communication services and spaces remained more or less unaffected.

However, a part of the sample, even if very small, started using some applications or specific social networks only once they arrived in their new host country, often based on suggestions coming from their peers living in the same housing facilities as them.

Three interviewees specified:

> "In my country I used to use *Imo* for video calling. I used Skype for the first time a few months ago. (…) F. M. and downloaded it to my smartphone and showed me how to use it. We initially made a test call to the facility's service manager "(B2, Senegal).
>
> "I have always used Facebook, Viber and YouTube. The first two to communicate and read information and news from Italy or from my country, while YouTube is very useful for learning Italian and watching tutorials to learn the basics of some professions "(G4, Iraq).
>
> "WhatsApp is the application I use the most. Mainly I exchange links, photos and messages with my family. With Facebook, I can also devote myself to learning more about politics and culture" (C1, Pakistan).

Common elements can be found amongst all the participants of the *focus groups*. Most notably, all of the interviewees now own a smartphone, differing in brands, capabilities and functions (only five of the interviewees have a tablet) and have access to internet connection inside and outside of the main reception offices. It is very common to find wifi in these offices as various operators and managers use it to coordinate several activities and manage administrative tasks, so it is also available for free to others present. In other contexts, individuals have their own sim cards, attained and activated once arrived in Italy.

[2]Okong'o G. (2017), "Kenya: the potential and limitations of electoral technology", text available at the site:
https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/kenya-potential-and-limitations-electoral-technology.

[3]Tufecki Z. & Talbot D. (2016), "Remaking Social Media for the Next Revolution", text available at: https://www.technologyreview.com/s/601241/remaking-social-media-for -the-next-revolution/.

Based on the data provided in the interviews, the most commonly used telephone operators are Wind, Vodafone and Lycamobile, all chosen mainly because of the gigas included, as well as the rates to activate the accounts.

> "Now I have Wind; an Iraqi guy who has lived in Italy for 4 years recommended it to me and I saw that when we are outside the facility it works very well, especially the internet, and it is fast and cheap enough to make long online group video calls (...) Whenever it is possible, however, I always look for a wi-fi connection" (B6, Pakistan).

However, it must be pointed out that those who had not yet obtained a residence permit could not buy their own SIM cards.

During one interview, it emerged that some migrants even during the second phase of reception-resort to using some virtual phone providers (such as Lycamobile) whose sims are easily found on the black market and who offer low international rates (as low as 4 - 5 euros per month)[4].

Financial conditions influencing internet access, digital literacy levels and the need to call abroad were all frequent factors that emerged from each group interviewed and were all seen as obstacles in their daily lives, at times preventing total access to the Internet and limiting their ability to communicate across borders.

In the migratory field, particular attention must be paid to digital infrastructure: having access to the internet and possessing a mobile phone are not sufficient conditions to state that a migrant has the same amount of information available to regular citizens us.

Information and connectivity, unlike some clichés still found in the daily press, should not be considered "luxury goods" in any way, but rather basic necessities, crucial for satisfying important needs and rights such as communicating and receiving correct and up-to-date news (Cheesman, 2016; Connor, 2017).

As stated by an interviewee:

> "Before arriving in Italy I was in Germany; I traveled a lot alone. Sometimes I did not eat because I had to save money to move and look for ways at all costs to recharge my cell phone battery (*e-station*)"[5] (D1, Pakistan).

In their conditions, social and digital technologies become real "survival technologies", practical for maintaining personal identities and supporting entire journeys, allowing migrants to maintain social and family ties.

The phases of migration and the daily life of an immigrant, even once they arrive in their host country, are always characterized by a digital infrastructure

[4]As specified by the managers of the facilities in the first phase of reception, "special" sims called *e-cards* (or *pick cards*) are distributed to migrants with 15 euros credit included, enabled for a single international call. This is done to allow the newly arrived person to contact their family immediately and update them on their current situation. In the second phase of reception (SIPROIMI), migrants organize and manage their own communication in a completely autonomous way, without any type of limit or external control, ranging from online services, to chats, from registration to sites to the costs of their smartphones.

[5]*The e-station* or *phone charging stations* are stations with battery charging function for electronic-digital devices and/or public stations that allow you to connect and surf online, publicly available in certain urban areas with more tourists.

that deserves to be explored.

Scientific literature has for a long time described international migration as a radical and traumatic phenomenon (Achotegui, 2005; Buoncompagni, 2020) responsible for breaking down migrants' social ties and relationships with their communities of origin.

In addition to being a necessity, communication technologies have taken on an even more important role, that of "community technologies", virtual environments capable of socially, cognitively and emotionally connecting geographically dispersed subjects, able to maintain transnational networks and create information/global communication (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012; Cheesman, 2016; Connor, 2017).

These new tools not only facilitate and help with organizing journeys but they also keep migrants "connected" during their entire migratory experience. However, the security issue should not be underestimated: the unconscious use of *devices* can determine, as will be seen below, different levels of technological risks.

Migrant networks, mainly created and supported by social media, can be interpreted as a set of links and relationships that case be divided into three categories, the first being *"stronger" ties,* as they are mainly based on kinship or a shared source community. The second would be *"weak" or "dispersed" ties* because once you leave your country, relationships are less binding than traditional ones and embrace different social groups. The last would be *"new ties"*, as, thanks to the web, the available information is considerably enlarged.

The digital dimension within migrant networks guides the transition from an "asynchronous-punctual" type of communication to a "synchronous-widespread" communication, forms of communication that fall within the concept of *Connettography*, a neologism indicating the geopolitical weight of factors like ICTs that cross state borders (Khanna, 2016).

The electronic-digital era has given rise to a phenomenon called "migration chain"[6]: for a long time, many economists have described the decision to migrate as an economic issue (how much money a family earned at home compared to what they could earn by migrating abroad) instead of investigating the role of family relationships, social networks and the media.

Large-scale processes, such as climate change, and poverty are not the only factors that have pushed people to see and go beyond their borders, but the interactive and transparent nature of new media has also driven it, giving migrants the possibility to build new connections with others outside of their own families and communities. The new forms of media have inspired many young people to move and choose their destination in a selective, informed and rational way, following paths suggested to them on digital platforms; paths that had been already taken by other migrants (Cheesman, 2016; Cusimano & Mercatanti, 2017).

[6]Lind D. (2018), "What chain migration really means and why Donald Trump hates it so much", text available at: https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/12/29/16504272/chain-migration-family-how-trump-end

Based on what has been described and on Bordieu's school of thought, a sort of "social-digital capital" could be recognized within migrants networks, which could be defined as a set of resources. One resource would be represented by the relational networks of individuals born and raised within digital spaces, and the other set would be the migrants (in this specific case) who invest a lot of their time online, absorbing media content and accumulating knowledge and skills (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; De Feo & Pitzalis, 2015).

Two previous studies on the subject (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012; Cheesman, 2016) identified four ways in which migratory *networks* are related to new media. In other words, these new forms of digital media have four functions in relation to the migrant experience: 1) *maintenance of personal networks* (strong ties), 2) *strengthening personal networks* (weak links), 3) *activating personal networks* (new links) and *open source information spaces.* The first three concern the activation, reactivation and maintenance of the capital-digital share, and the fourth deals with the information infrastructure of new media which allows migrants to search for news, get training and find information on the Net.

The first function of new media is to provide geographically dispersed migrants with the possibility to maintain direct contact with their own family/friendship networks through digital, synchronous communication without space-time limits. There are now numerous platforms or applications that allow this and many are used by the interviewed sample for different purposes.

Skype, for example, is an instant messaging program that offers the possibility of chatting, making calls, exchanging files and saving conversations for free through a *peer to peer system*; it was created in 2003 in Estonia by Jaan Tallin, Ahi Heinla and Pit Kasesal. Today it is one of the most frequently used remote communication systems in the world, also playing a crucial role for migrants:

> "Skype in my opinion is the best platform I have used so far and it is my favourite for long distance communication; it is an important tool" like gold "because it allows me to contact my mother and my sister when I want, and I can talk to them for as long as I want while looking at them in the eye" (F2, Nigeria).

Other respondents also used Skype previously to contact their friends and relatives in their home countries, but they now prefer to use Viber[7]:

> "Yes, I know Skype, but I prefer Viber for video calling most of all. It seems much safer to me than many other platforms" (A3, Iraq).

The topic concerning online security emerged several times during the majority of the interviews with the groups as it affects the choice of the platform to use.

Viber, in fact, does not necessarily require you to register and create a personal account, but you must enter your phone number to chat and make calls; moreover, while Skype can be used on both a mobile phone and a computer, Viber

[7]This is an owner who offers' application VoIP to instant messaging. It is one of the most popular platforms that allows, completely free of charge, to make phone calls and send text messages, with high-definition images, via WiFi or networks that are at least 3G.

was designed mainly for smartphones and has greater stability on non-broadband devices which certainly allows for better management of the signal and audio-video calls.

The second function allows migrants to strengthen their network of contacts; the most commonly used *digital devices* were WhatsApp and Facebook, which are both communication spaces that can be easily activated by connecting them to a phone's contact list, free and fully functional with active internet or wi-fi. Unlike the previous ones, these applications are used as "internal" and "external" communication systems.

WhatsApp, in particular, is not only a communication medium to be used with peers in a facility, but it is also used as an "official means" of communication between migrants and social workers for for sharing information (attachments, audio files, *news* links, pdf decrees, regulations, etc.). Groups are also frequently created using the app:

> "If our daily schedules change, the manager sends us everything directly to our WhatsApp group: files, photos, audio (...) We rarely use email. I mean, I don't even have a personal address. All communications regarding residence permits, business hours, appointments, everything ends up in the group so we are updated in the same way" (I3, Iran).

Facebook, on the other hand, is a tool that encompasses all the functions reported so far. It is used to keep in constant contact with friends and relatives who live far away, as well as with acquaintances nearby in the Marche region. Users are able to stay updated by viewing photos and messages published on profile pages or by simply scrolling through a "friend's" *timeline*. At the same time Facebook is also like a window to the world because in a matter of seconds migrants can read the news (using the translation tools), follow the pages of famous singers or actors from all over the world including from their homelands, click on articles in Italian on issues that interest them or check out public figures that they had heard about from peers or case workers.

As stated by two interviewees:

> "A friend of mine, who lived not far from my house, posts something on Facebook every day: a video with my nephew, a song, a family photo (...) By following his profile I know if he and his family are fine, even sometimes, by scrolling through his bulletin board, I come to know the facts that are happening in my country even before calling him" (G4, Senegal).
>
> "I use Facebook a lot (...) every time I connect I know everything about the world in a few seconds. Some days if we are not busy I spend at least an hour or two reading the posts and notifications that come to me" (C6, Pakistan).

Facebook is also the main instrument for *activating personal networks,* which is the third function:

> "Every few days I get messages on the Facebook Messenger app from people who want to come to Italy, or who are like me in other facilities, but in the north of the country (...) we often check in with each other and discuss our experiences and dreams." (B1, Ghana).
> "As soon as I arrived in Ancona I didn't know anyone. I found open online groups of people with similar situations and stories on Facebook. We talk to each other every day, we exchange information on how to find work, on how we will return home to our families soon" (F2, Nigeria).

In addition to strengthening online relationships, social networks allow migrants to meet new people, even from different countries and even more importantly living in the same host country, giving them an online platform where they can share their stories and life experiences. Migrants involved in the research often come into contact with others very similar to them through online groups.

What emerges is a form of socialization inspired by principles of solidarity and mutual support which occurs in a digital space, which is reminiscent of traditional meeting places for foreigners such as squares and stations. In the past, before the digital era, newcomers would go to these places to get initial information about their country of reception by interacting with people who perhaps spoke different languages, but had the same social status.

The older family ties and new friends networks you maintain or build at back, with and within digital environments.

In the three functions analyzed so far, two aspects emerge that characterize the network of "digital migrants": strong cohesion and a high level of "ethnic solidarity". When migrants interact with each other online, it only takes place within groups or either with family and friends or with facility operators. All interviewees reported that they interact in chats or initiate online dialogues exclusively with people who are among their personal contacts (also met online) or with people who have backgrounds or life stories similar to theirs. On the other hand, when they receive calls, messages or other forms of content from unknown sources or from people who do not have characteristics similar to the migrant experience, the interviewees ignore or delete them even before viewing them (Buoncompagni & D'Ambrosi, 2020)[8].

The fourth and last functions of the new forms of digital media allow migrants to use the open information space to get informed or learn a new skill. The relationship with information, partly mentioned above, is a theme that often emerges during interviews.

[8]These statements, however, are valid only for what concerns the reception of calls or messages once arrived in Italy and inserted in the reception facilities. In this regard, the question arose about the use of the web for the organization of their journey to the country of destination, but most of the respondents refused to answer or replied in the negative. Only two Malaysian respondents in the second group (B) claimed to have used Facebook to "speed up departure" from their home country without providing further details. However, one of the managers of the reception facilities confirmed that all the hosted subjects had somehow taken illegal routes to get out of their country as soon as possible. Although they were aware of the risks, many of them organized the journey using the information received through word of mouth or exchanging messages via chat with subjects unknown to them, whose contact info had been suggested by their peers already traveling.

Regarding Italian current affairs or information, all the participants in the *focus group* declared that they got information either through Facebook or through the websites of RaiNews 24 and Skytg24, which were often suggested by their operators.

As already revealed by previous findings of the online survey conducted on the relationship between young people and information, young immigrants also tend to use traditional media such as radio and television during the day; Mediaset and Rai channels are popular for watching and listening to the news while channel La7 is popular for *talk shows* where immigrant children and entrepreneurs are frequently either interviewed or guests among the public:

> "On Thursday evening, if I'm not mistaken, there is a program that I really like (...) In winter, when it's cold in the evening, we stay at home and, instead of always calling our families, sometimes we get together to comment on politics on TV on channel LA7 which often talks about migrant arrivals or Salvini" (A3, Senegal).
>
> "Usually at breakfast we all watch Rai 2 or Rai 3 news programs together because it talks a lot about immigration. There are numerous services with images and therefore we manage to follow what they say well even if we do not understand some words. We try to learn Italian even in this way" (E1, Ghana).

Most of the stories reported in the Italian media, which deal with immigration, usually focus on the stories of immigrants arriving from their countries of origin, mainly Central and North Africa. It is no coincidence that when this issue was addressed at the focus group stage, the most critical participants in this regard were from Nigeria, Mali, Ghana and Gambia and Senegal.

Most of the interviewees contributed to the discussions in their own way despite language barriers. Migrants often perceive racist ideologies and behaviors coming from the political/institutional world. However, they underline that they do not experience cases of xenophobia in their daily lives because, where they live, in small towns, there is very little interaction between foreigners and natives.

> "Sometimes on television they say we steal money and work. We help each other here by following the directions of the operators. We do not bother anyone, also because we do not know anyone and hardly ever speak to the Italian people of our host cities, unless we are with our operators" (C2, Gambia).

The interviewees reported that obtaining information regarding their country of origin is even more important. Many follow Facebook pages or *newsletters* from local media sites (Pakistani, Senegalese, etc.) in order to stay up-to-date and participate in conversations with family members regarding current affairs or family problems. They are aware of the current economic and political problems in their homelands. Some have sick family members; others said they learned

of the death of a loved one during a Skype conversation.

As one Malaysian boy points out:

> "My sister has been ill for some time and the government is not providing any help. In the village where I come from there is no security, sometimes there is not even any water to wash (...) I hope they will help me quickly to find a job here or in a year I am going to Germany, (...) now we need money at home" (B3, Mali).

Social media and the Internet in general are also used to learn new skills and look for jobs independently. YouTube, for example, is not only used for listening to music, but it is also for learning or improving languages like Italian, in addition to official in-house language courses organized by facility managers and operators. Many social channels offer free video tutorials that allow users to study basic Italian grammar. They can then practice it in real-life situations. For higher level learners, it is possible to download a variety of material to increase their level. Cards with stories, articles, short stories or manuals can easily be found online even as ebooks. Other learners take advantage of free online courses or subscriptions to gain computer skills or learn about Italian culture and cuisine.

Once the administrative procedures have been completed to regulate the migrants, all of these digital tools have been proven to be very effective so that they can enter the workforce in the Marche region.

However, administrative procedures and bureaucracy can be slow, so in order to speed up the process of looking for a job, many interviewees reported that they usually subscribe to *newsletters* provided by recruitment or employment websites advertising jobs, *Infojobs* and *Indeed* being the most used sites.

As stated by an interviewee:

> "Italian has many sounds and I learned many of them by repeating them from YouTube (...) If we know Italian well, they told us, the job placement will be faster. (...) The other day I received an online notification regarding a one-month course for pizza chefs in Senigallia; I have to understand now if and when I can start "(G1, Pakistan).

However, not being able to speak about these topics or put into practice the skills that they are learning, the same interviewees admit that they feel alone at times, especially when making important decisions on which path to take or which skills they need to learn in their current situations. For this reason, the majority of the work that they do is done in an inconsistent and autonomous way over time, which makes migrants feel even more distrusting of communities and local institutions. Those who have already had this type of experience of waiting have nourished this form of skepticism and have formed contrasting visions of an Italy that was different before their departure:

> "What some of my friends told me was that Italy would somehow help us (...) On television we heard news of rescues at sea and of people who were

able to start living again with simple jobs (...) Alright, the important thing now is to be able to start working" (H1, Senegal).

"They (the operators) go to great lengths for us every day. But sometimes we find ourselves doing nothing or chatting the whole afternoon online with our family. We would like to organize ourselves independently and be able to work immediately, we have been waiting for answers from the government for years" (F5, Nigeria).

As previously mentioned, relations with local institutions and with local communities are rather scarce in the area; there have been some intercultural initiatives but with negative outcomes. Often it is the operators and managers who keep migrants up to date on any news regarding employment opportunities, residence permits, training projects or ongoing intercultural events that can actively involve them.

3. Conclusion

The web and social media are configured to be open and interconnected spaces and for this reason they facilitate constant and meaningful contact with friends and family, decreasing the level of culture *shock* caused by the frequent sudden departure and abandonment of loved ones for economic or political reasons. However, our research has found that network communications and development are apparently open in theory yet closed in practice: in fact, there is an evident paradox based on what emerged in this last aspect of my research.

Messages, information and various types of content are exchanged and shared exclusively amongst subjects who know each other and who have similar backgrounds (history, language, country of origin, etc.). It is important to note that no migrants from the *focus groups* attempted to build a line of communications beyond the working environment whether online or not—with any of the operators or with any of the native residents of their hosting municipalities.

The relationship between migrants and their host municipalities in terms of social media is clearly lacking, and these are the places where migrant children spend their day and carry out their assigned activities.

Facility operators and managers manage all the relations with the local administrations and institutes. The interviewees do not have any particular feedback regarding any specific town or area in terms of events or initiatives. However, it is important to note that they take part in occasional organized projects and events offered by the cooperatives, even if there are very few events that promote social inclusion or give migrants an opportunity to meet local natives.

Migrants are aware of their conditions and know about Italian politics and Italian public opinion on migration as a result of conflicting information obtained from national-local media, as well as from word of mouth from their peers on social networks.

The media is therefore useful for guiding and promoting "network capital", defined as a set of links and relations with countries of origin, but it is still not

very functional in involving immigrants in either social or public life as it risks aggravating already existing sentiments of isolation. This situation is quintessential of the phenomenon called "inverted tribalization", where it is not the natives who reject the immigrants (as it is often done through public discourse), but rather it is the foreigners who exclude and isolate themselves due to the lack of employment and adequate financial support, the absence of family members, and language, cultural and technological barriers.

Immigrants recognized as "new" citizens, are no longer passive subjects of communication dynamics. However, through their own "taking of the floor" in the communication space (Moores, 2012; Raffini & Giorgi, 2020; IOM, 2020), they are able to exercise their right to freedom of speech, one of the most radical rights that comes with citizenship.

The need to be informed and maintain links with one's origins are translated into useful strategies to avoid invisibility, participate in collective life and communicate with institutions, supported by traditional and digital media, even if often with unsatisfactory results.

The Covid-19 pandemic, still ongoing, has shown (or rather, reminded) us that we live not only on a single planet, but also in a strongly interconnected world.

The conclusion of this research was written during the most critical months. However, during this time it was possible to observe various structural problems that some local areas are currently experiencing and how the effects of some policies adopted at national level produce often unexpected results. On the other hand, communication and information across borders are now primary needs of everyone, which must be satisfied and managed in a strategic and coordinated way.

The health crisis has also represented a major risk factor for migrant populations in Europe, not only for the possibility of coming into contact with the virus, but also for the possible negative health outcomes linked to barriers in accessing health services.

A particularly high risk concerns populations who live in crowded conditions, due to the inability to self-insulate and maintain social distancing (e.g. in migrant facilities), and poor hygiene conditions. Moreover, it should be pointed out that in the Marche region, chosen as a research case study, migrant groups and minorities differ from each other in terms of education and access to information on COVID-19. From March to April 2020, during full lockdown, some did not have the necessary social-economic or technical means (such as access to the Internet) to "take care" of themselves or their families during isolation.

In 2020, during the emergency, the World Health Organization's Communication Office drew up a document entitled Interim guidance for refugee and migrant health in relation to Covid-19 in the WHO European Region containing some specific guidance on assistance to refugees and migrants. It is recommended to health and policy institutions and NGO leaders, and the document

proposes allowing all migrants access to national health initiatives, translating information materials into the languages spoken, identifying the most appropriate means of communication to comprehensively inform all migrants arriving in the host country, giving them information on how to access services and collecting health declarations and contact details (IOM, 2020).

To conclude this research, it is important to note how the marked presence of institutions in the media space (from local to European ones), the access to the Net and to information and the use of digital channels by the public have become some of the main tools for promoting specific behaviours aimed at containing the pandemic.

Faced with the health and economic crises that have arisen, we can perhaps say that two developments seem possible: a widespread increase in protectionism and anti-immigration policies or greater solidarity and collaboration at an international level between different populations and institutions on all levels.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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