
Keeping Together Long Distance Families: Technology as a Social Actor

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how communication tools became social actors for family members separated due to economic migration and for parenting from abroad. Media and movies became aware of social problem in communication within long distance families, and they are not only witnessing but support the connection within families and reshape themselves. The paper analyses video clips from artistic and political background and legal framework on child protection along with statistics on economic migration. Social actor attribution of technology is acknowledgment of two-way street in communication. Win-Win strategies in telecommunication and social assistance legislation (must) meet needs of parents working abroad, children left at home, elderly sitting households and grandchildren.

INTRODUCTION

We are people of words. We write them, we read and listen to them; we wake up and put ourselves to bed with them in mind. A word may be the name of a person, of a feeling, or of a God. Putting something into a word, giving something a name is building a bridge; it is a reaching out gesture, a connection between one's 'island' and the other's harbour.

When distance is involved, words mean a lot more. Their simple presence is a statement; looking for them is a meaningful act itself. I have been keeping in my mind words from a French magazine article referring to invisible and yet real wire of mobile phones: 'The more we use mobile phone, the more we lack affec-

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tion. We want to feel reassured all the time. We are reaching for the mother's voice. Calling is asking for love. I had called my parents for a long time, even when I knew they wouldn't answer anymore' (Rufo 2004).

Economic migration in our globalized world does not abolish parenting and homesickness. Children, parents and grandparents feel less separated due to digital connectivity and to their communication devices – smart phone, laptop, tablet, software, applications *etc.*

The paper refers to Romania's situation after country joined the EU in 2007 and how (grand) parenting from abroad is related to new technologies development.

Humans have five (traditional) senses, as well we all know – sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. When using computer or smart phone to talk to our family members, we cannot embrace them – there is no touch. We cannot sense the others fragrance – no smell. We cannot enjoy comfort food – no taste. But we have two of five: we can see and we can hear. I think it is not bad at all. And science is still young. This leads us to #2S2U Hashtag. Let us make this one the hashtag of long distance!

In this paper I use the notion of 'social actor' with meaning given by the Stanford scientist B. J. Fogg: 'social actor' along with 'tool' and 'media' are the three roles computing technology can play, 'the functional triad' (Fogg 2003: 23). As a social actor, the technology 'can be persuasive by rewarding people with positive feedback; modelling a target behavior or attitude; providing social support' (*Ibid.*: 25).

In the era of analog telephone when calling on the phone, we had to write down and to keep paper at hand or to memorize numbers. Nowadays with mobile phone agenda, we dial names or statuses. One calls Dad, one does not dial every time each figure. We do not (have to) know by heart the phone number of family members. Behavior has changed due to functions incorporated in phone's agenda and memory.

In 2003, B. J. Fogg argued: 'We have entered an era of persuasive technology, of interactive computing systems designed to change people's attitudes and behaviors. The earliest signs of persuasive technology appeared in the 1970s [...] But it was not until the late 1990s – specifically, the emergence of the Internet – that

more than a handful of people began creating persuasive technology' (Fogg 2003: 1).

Regarding 'social support' provided by computing technology, this paper would make its statement as many others to come in this generous field.

Digital technologies help overcome geographical barriers, connect family members, and ease communication in homesickness and need situations. The main categories of family members using new technologies in long distance conditions are: children whose parents work and live abroad; parents whose children work and live abroad; siblings in different cities; life partners in different cities. I have focused my research on the Romanian children whose parents work and live in Western Europe.

Both telephone and internet are, in these families, daily basis words aimed to put everyone on the side of a device, in order to feel beloved one, on the other side – through phone calls, short message service, instant messaging, or video connection. A global survey from 2014 indicates that 83 per cent of users believe that 'affordable access to the internet should be a basic human right' (CIGI 2014).

ECONOMIC MIGRATION OF THE ROMANIAN PARENTS

Let's talk numbers!

One single child missing parents who work far away from home would be enough to draw the whole world's attention. Meanwhile, 100,000 children waking up every morning in a house without mother and father are living now in the Romanian households. Browsing statistics from different years, institutions, sources and organizations only brings to this core issue: 2 per cent of Romanian children (from government data) and 7.5 per cent (from NGOs data) have at least one parent working abroad; at least 83,000 children monitored by authorities, up to 400,000 children left at home in extended family informal custody, or simply abandoned in 'siblings mutual care'.

Let us present some more statistical data on the subject under study. On 1 January 2015 the population of the EU-28 was estimated at 508.2 million (Eurostat 2015a). On 1 July 2015 the UN estimate for the population of Romania – 19.5 million (World Population Review 2015). By January 1, 2012, the population of Ro-

mania was 20.1 million people (National Institute of Statistics 2016) including four million children (Marinescu A. and Marinescu C. 2015).

Meanwhile, one line from video clip ‘All over again’ of Romanian band Voltaj suggests in 2014 that more than 3 million people have left Romania to work in Western Europe (Voltaj Channel on YouTube 2014). One million Romanian mothers and fathers working in Italy have left back home 400,000 kids under the age of eight years. 100,000 children have both their parents away (Dumitrache 2011). 350,000 Romanian children were left home by their parents who worked in Western Europe, in 2008, data available one year after Romania had joined the EU. 126,000 children had both parents away (Association Alternative Sociale 2008: III).

Gone to Work in the EU

Mobility of workers in the EU, especially toward the West, is a well-known fact; there are economic, political and social factors – in the country of origin (push factors) and in the country of destination (pull factors) (Eurostat 2015b).

From the ‘first wave’ of few thousands in the early 2000s to more than two million nowadays, the Romanian citizens make their way in the new countries: in 2014 only, more than four thousands received citizenship in Italy, the state where the Romanian women outnumbered men in the group of economic migrants; they are the second largest group of citizens living in another EU Member State (the Romanians make 6.2 per cent of the foreign population in the EU); they send money back home – third place in group of largest surpluses in personal transfers in 2014.

- [EU] received nearly two million migrants of other EU nationalities. The Romanians were the most mobile [...] The EU-27 Member States received 384,000 Romanian citizens, 266,000 Polish citizens and 91,000 Bulgarian citizens (European Commission 2011: 18).
- In Italy and Spain women outnumbered men in the biggest group of immigrants (with Romanian citizenship in the case of Italy, and Moroccan citizenship in the case of Spain) (European Commission 2011: 19).
- The Turkish citizens make up the biggest group of non-nationals. This group comprises 2.4 million people, or

7.5 per cent of all foreigners [...]. The second biggest group is Romanian citizens living in another EU Member State (6.2 per cent of the total foreign population)' (European Commission 2011: 74).

- The outflows of personal transfers in 2014 were highest from France (€9.4 bn), followed by the United Kingdom (€6.8 bn), Italy (€6.5 bn) and Spain (€5.9 bn) [...] The highest inflows were recorded in Portugal (€4.8 bn), ahead of Poland (€2.8 bn), the United Kingdom (€2.4 bn), Italy (€2.1 bn) and Romania (€2.0 bn). As a result, the largest surpluses in personal transfers were registered in 2014 in Portugal (+€3.6 bn), Poland (+€2.6 bn) and Romania (+€1.6 bn) (Eurostat News Release 2015).

- Citizens of the EU-28 Member States who acquired citizenship of another Member State amounted to 98.5 thousand persons, accounting for 10 per cent of the total. In absolute terms, the main groups of EU-28 citizens acquiring citizenship of another EU-28 Member State were Romanians becoming citizens of Hungary (7 thousand) or Italy (4.4 thousand) (European Commission 2015).

Who Loves You? Mommy Loves You / Te Iubește Mama/ La Mamma Ti Vuole Bene

'La mamma ti vuole bene' project was created along with Romanian local public libraries in order to facilitate audio-video communication via Skype™ software¹ between children from Romania and their parents from Italy. The purpose is to prevent and diminish social and emotional problems of children left back in Romania, to offer support for children and their family, and to improve school attendance. Silvia Dumitrache, coordinator and initiator of the project, wrote on her site:

I have found out that in Northern Italy only, there are more than 130,000 women over 40 who left back in Romania their children with fathers or other relatives. There are as well children left alone who can connect with their mother extremely rare and difficult [...] A Romanian child whose mother works in Italy can connect free with her via Skype™ software, by Biblionet Program, in any public library from his / her village or town.²

In Italy the network of libraries involved in project is developing, a first example is Biblioteca Gallaratese from Milan, by ‘Face to face’ @Biblioteca finestra sul mondo program.³

‘La mamma ti vuole bene’ was initiated by Association of Romanian Women from Italy – ADRI in partnership with National Association of Librarians and Public Libraries from Romania – ANBPR, and Irex Foundation Romania.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

World Bank's Development Report 2016 emphasises how mobile phones are more used and spread than clean water and how use of the internet focuses on social networking and sending e-mails.

High prevalence of mobile phone access is due to low cost and no requirement of much literacy, numeracy or Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills.

[...] 8 in 10 people in the developing world own a mobile phone. [...] More people have access to a mobile phone than to secondary schooling, clean water, or sanitation. Internet adoption lags behind mobile phone access, but has tripled since 2005. [...] 28 per cent of the population reports access to the internet at home, and in advanced economies, 80 per cent. [...]. Low-cost mobile phones – which can be shared, prepaid, billed in prices per second, and do not require much literacy or numeracy for basic use – [...] are the technology of choice among the poor. [...] Personal computers and the internet, by contrast, require literacy and often foreign language (especially English) skills. [...] Communications, entertainment, and searching for information are the most common uses for mobile phones and the internet. In African countries, social networking, sending and receiving e-mails, instant messaging, and checking facts and definitions are the most common uses of the internet. This is similar in [...] the EU countries, especially with social networking (between 50 and 80 per cent of all internet users) (World Bank 2016: 101)

For improving digital literacy, seniors have become interested in taking courses. In Romania, regional programs run by authorities in last five years and current Information and Communications Technology (ICT) companies offers manage to put pensioners online – first as ‘students’, eventually as users.

- ICT courses for pensioners in Sângeorgiu de Pădure (town in Mureş county), on February 2012. In Bezid (town in Mureş county) same kind of training was organized in 2011. Managers of project Europe Direct had expected ten people to attend but so many seniors were interested in learning ICT that organizers had to schedule two sessions per day.⁴
- In same national program in 2010, people over 60 in four counties – Alba, Dâmbovița, Caraş Severin și Timiș – were expected to attend ICT courses in PAPIs (Public Access Point to Information). They were offered free lessons about emailing, browsing, digital photos and printing. In two counties, ‘Hai pe net’ program (Let's go online) incited children to bring along in PAPIs one senior from their family.⁵
- ICT companies organize training for seniors. Here is an introduction text: ‘ICT courses for seniors are offered to elderly people who have found in computer their latest hobby or necessity. More and more of our children have chosen to work and to live abroad. The best way to stay in touch is communication via computer [...] Others may have other reasons – reading news, booking tickets, networking *etc.* Courses take up to eight weeks (INFORM 2016).

The data confirms that 81 per cent of households in the EU-28 had internet access in 2014 (Eurostat 2015c). Romania and Italy are among countries who recorded between 2009 and 2014 increases of 20 per cent or more in household access to the internet. In Romania, internet penetration increased to 60 per cent in 2014.

New EU roaming rules made the cost of phone calls when abroad substantially cheaper than in 2007 (European Commission 2016). Starting from 15 June 2017, roaming extra charges will no longer apply, as long as one is using their phone abroad temporarily (European Union N.d.).

On What We Talk?

In 1991, Mark Weiser proposed ‘tabs, pads and board’⁶ as the three basic forms for ‘ubiquitous’ system devices:

Ubiquitous computers will also come in different sizes, each suited to a particular task. My colleagues and I have built what we call tabs, pads and boards: inch-scale machines that approximate active Post-It notes, foot-scale ones that behave something like a sheet of paper (or a book or a

magazine), and yard-scale displays that are the equivalent of a blackboard or bulletin board (Weiser 1991).

Through What We Talk? Top 20 Social Networks

Global statistics below provide information on the most popular networks, ranked by number of active accounts.

Number of active users in millions (Statista 2016):

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Facebook 1,550 | 11. Skype 300 |
| 2. WhatsApp 900 | 12. Viber 249 |
| 3. QQ 860 | 13. Sina Weibo 222 |
| 4. Facebook Messenger 800 | 14. LINE 212 |
| 5. QZone 653 | 15. Snapchat 200 |
| 6. WeChat 650 | 16. YY 122 |
| 7. Tumblr 555 | 17. VKontakte 100 |
| 8. Instagram 400 | 18. Pinterest 100 |
| 9. Twitter 320 | 19. BBM 100 |
| 10. Baidu Tieba 300 | 20. LinkedIn 100 |

Family around the Tablet. PROs from Pro

Long distance parenting and grandparenting are real and possible. Adults can keep their place in kids' lives through smartphones or tablets and through social networks and applications.

Some apps from thousands all over internet are listed in a Mashable's article (Mansour 2014). *Keepy* is for sharing kid-made art with family who can respond by posting a video. With *Kindoma* app, the kid picks a fairytale from the library for his/her uncle or grandmother to read. They can both see each other in the corner of the screen. With *Scout and Doodle*, people may have 'face-to-face' session of drawing and designing. In *Draw Something*, one person draws a random word while the other person guesses. *Meet Me* app allows people to watch their favourite family member while they are in different places. *Tweekaboo* and *My Baby Book* record digital photos and allow printing. *Red Stamp* app lets you upload photos and turn them into invitations or greetings cards even on paper for postal mail.

Scholars from University of Edinburgh (Hancock and Plowman 2016) argue that technology can support social interaction and communication skills for children who can learn this way 'to take

turns, to take account of their conversation partner and to explain things [to] somebody who isn't in the same place' (*Ibid.* 2016).

Exposing kids to screens is not a problem in itself if adults consider balancing activities for their children – outdoor play, conversation, trip, sleep, book reading *etc.* Conclusion would be 'the lack of concrete evidence to show any harm done by moderate screen time'.

ARTS AND POLITICS SHOW THEY CARE (IN VIDEO CLIPS)

Music

Romanian band Voltaj has initiated and is running for more than five years 'All over again' program, focused on troubled children, along with World Vision Romania and Habitat for Humanity Romania.⁷ One of projects in this program was their song in Eurovision Contest 2015 'De la capat' (All over again). Despite finishing 15th from the 27 finalists, the song has succeeded to raise awareness of children whose parents work abroad.

Song's video clip shows a boy writing a letter to his parents. When letter gets back with no reply, no toy; and no solace from grandfather can comfort him. He waits until the Danube reaches right water level to navigate and he takes a boat to get to his parents in Austria.⁸

Advertising

Main telecom companies operating in Romania are Orange Romania, RCS & RDS, Telekom Romania Mobile Communications, Vodafone Romania. As open and mobile our world is, all of them are active and persuasive on the market. Words as *Unlimited, free of charge* for some period of time, and so many other appealing offers put together people, communities, and money. Everything comes with a price and the more we love and miss, the more we are willing to pay in order to be in touch.

For example, inter-generation connection and promotion for tablets and internet connectivity had as result a video commercial that shows Christmas holidays in three-generation family in traditional Northern Romania village; the gift grandparents had received was a tablet with post-it indications for use; grandparents can be in touch with grandsons in an extended holiday.⁹ Help Line

for elderly people ‘Senior Phone’ – free calls for people aged 65 and over – is a project of Principesa Margareta a României Foundation and Vodafone Romania Foundation. Project has started in November 2015.¹⁰ So far more than 1000 people had asked for help and counselling over the phone.

Movie

Short film ‘Fața galbenă care râde’ (The Yellow Smiley Face¹¹) of Romanian director Constantin Popescu Jr. tells the story of parents connecting one evening through computer with their son living in the USA. Mother is insecure about using machine and follows with care and mistrust instructions left by the son, step by step written procedures. Father has no more ICT knowledge but he compensates with confident attitude.

The movie is a kind comedy where the director manages to ‘talk about’ this technology without showing application itself, only by filming faces of characters and eventually showing the screen with beloved expat. Mother worries about how skinny her poor baby is, because he is not eating enough. On the other hand, father is discontent that America is more far away than ‘Germany or France’ and it makes so difficult for their son to visit them more often.

Politics

In politics as well, everybody is aware of importance of new technologies. This paper does not aim at analysing how political world has re-shaped itself in digital era. Nevertheless, one example of facilitation in long distance families' communication finds a place in presentation.

A month after being elected the President of Romania, and on the Christmas Eve 2014, Klaus Iohannis offered tablets to four children. Family raising these children had a new member, Ana-Maria, whose mother works in Italy. President Klaus Iohannis's Facebook Page has a post from 24th December 2014 where text reads:

Ana-Maria is 14 years old and she is one of tens of thousands of Romanian children living apart from their parents who left to work abroad. I have visited her at family with four children where she is living now. I have considered the best gift she could get for Christmas would be seeing her mother more often, even on Skype™.¹²

LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON ‘LEFT ALONE’ CHILD PROTECTION

Back in 2008, only 7 per cent of migrant parents used to inform local authorities (Association Alternative Sociale 2008: IV) about their children's situation. That fact led to 2013 modification of child protection law from 2004, with a special chapter regarding child whose parents work abroad (Romanian Government 2015).

Parents intending to leave the country must notify their decision to local social assistance authorities minimum 40 days prior to the date of leaving. Penalties for not filing a notification can be up to 200 Euro fine (500–1000 lei). The parent has to designate a person responsible for looking after the child left home, and this person must fulfil some criteria: 18 years old, member of extended family, proper material condition (housing, hygiene *etc.*) and ‘moral guarantees’ (no criminal record, no drinking history *etc.*).

National authorities admit that these children's situation affects their emotional well-being, school marks and attendance, in some cases children reaching dropout (Romanian Government 2015).

Official data say about 83,000 children have at least one parent working abroad, and acknowledge that previous surveys of NGOs indicate more children in this situation (*Ibid.*). Government Decision 691/2015 regarding procedures for monitoring child care in case of parents working abroad applies since September 2015. Children with parents working abroad must be monitored by representatives of social assistance public service, concerning every child's marks, health and circle of friends. Following their visit and report, social assistance representatives notify and ask for help, where necessary, from medical services, police or school. Person who has custody of children must provide all contact information of the parents, and prove that he/she stays in touch with them. If many children are raised in same household, report of social workers must refer to every child, including those of pre-school age (Boiciuc 2015).

Since October 2015, Help-Line and website copiiisinguriacasa.ro are available and have been created by Save Children Romania Organization and National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption. Help-Line is offered by Digi and calls are free.

Children, their families and persons taking care of the children are entitled to services such as: counselling and psychological services, after-school support and tutoring, leisure activities (for children); counselling and psychological services, legal assistance for administrative and juridical issues (for adults). Services are provided by social workers, psychologists, teachers, and volunteers in 16 centers from 15 towns: București, Pitești, Mangalia, Tîrgoviște (2 centers), Craiova, Reșița, Timișoara, Lupeni, Petrila, Brașov, Piatra Neamț, Sighișoara, Negrești, Iași and Suceava.¹³

RESULTS

Our world has managed to turn the internet into an intra-family-net. Digital integration has an inter-generation dimension – we have seen it on ‘Hai pe net’ program, child bringing a senior; on commercials with grandchildren and grandparents; on bedtime stories applications.

Parents physically absent from the house their children are raised can nowadays participate, and keep places in their lives due to technology. Economic migration is not a barrier in itself to parenting. In the same time, new technology and social media request a new level of literacy, and even new ‘emotional alphabetization’ as in changes of behavior on screen time.

All communication devices will be cheaper, not only as consequence of their spread but as description of the fact made by World Bank (‘Digital technologies have dramatically expanded the information base, lowered information costs, and created information goods’ [World Bank 2016: 8]) or as the fact has been anticipated by B. J. Fogg more than a decade ago: ‘In the coming years, it will become significantly cheaper to create persuasive devices’ (Fogg 2003: 246–247).

Movies and advertising are aware of social trends; topics and theme are inspired by the current fears, desires and needs of spectator/consumer.

Social dimensions in managing companies, bands or brands relies on human ‘giving back’ side along the two-way street of communication.

CONCLUSION

Since 2007, after Romania has joined the European Union (EU), citizens could travel and study and – most of all – live and work abroad, due to EU acts and regulations. Left home families find in

technology a cheap and quasi-permanent instrument to stay in touch with their beloved ones. This contact became even a condition mandatory by law, in order to maintain custody when parents work away from households.

Working abroad used to be an illegal option in previous decade and not so large numbers of the Romanians could make this choice. But once they were gone, written letters for postal service or by messengers and landline phone calls were narrow – and expensive – options. Those ways limited time sequences (calling when someone must be at home) and extended gaps in communication (days or weeks for a letter to reach destination).

New conditions in migration and technology change family interaction in terms of contact (daily basis update) and finance (more money sent back home; less money spent on connection because market rules cheapened costs).

Laws in social protection and connectivity as well as topics in arts or in political marketing are influenced by new reality of long distance families, as this paper has examined.

Further research may be performed on many other topics such as ‘Long life learning programs online’, ‘Costs in travel and communication’, ‘Children and social media’. Questions answered through future related research and articles can enrich our global digital heritage.

Last but not least, some consideration on offline/online complementarity.

Internet and its communication technology maintain prior feelings. If there is no genuine need to be in touch, all technologies connections are only noisy or expensive tools. Technology keeps together online those who are together offline.

Facebook boycotters and quitters have among their reasons the desire to keep apart their offline life and online life, because being online sooner or later would interfere with real/traditional offline life. Their high sense of privacy emphasises the risk that real life could get its way through internet.

Simply put, as they say in joke ‘How could I be in Second Life if I don't have a First Life?’, one can call or write e-mail to a family member only if there is a family. Telecommunication is just a nice and modern way to be together, no matter how far anyone lives.

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NOTES

¹ Skype™ is a trade mark of Skype and author of this document is not affiliated, sponsored, authorized or otherwise associated by/with the Skype group of companies.

² <http://www.teiubestemama.it/> ('Te iubește mama' Project, Associazione delle Donne Romene in Italia, 2011).

³ <https://teiubestemamasilviadumitrache.wordpress.com/about/> ('Te iubește mama' Project' blog, Associazione delle Donne Romene in Italia, 2011).

⁴ ecomunitate.ro (eComunitate, Ministry of Communication and Information Society, 2012).

⁵ ecomunitate.ro (eComunitate, Ministry of Communication and Information Society, 2012).

⁶ Tabs: mobile phones, smartphones, wristwatch computers, sensor motes, MP3 players, car navigation systems, smart cards; pads: reading appliances (Amazon Kindle), tablet, iPad, laptop; boards: video screen, horizontal surface computers.

⁷ Voltaj, #Delacapat. Un proiect Voltaj. All Over Again Program (2016). Available at <http://delacapat.ro/en/theproject/>.

⁸ Voltaj Channel on YouTube (2014). Voltz Media / Cat Music (Producers), Voltaj & Deepside DeeJays (music & lyrics), De la capat (official video clip). Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZF8jCgUQFI>.

⁹ Vodafone Romania on vodafonebuzz YouTube Channel 2015, November 20, #DaruiesteBucurie – Tableta. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XaAc4gzxeQ>.

¹⁰ Principesa Margareta a României Foundation, and Vodafone Romania Foundation – 'Mobile for Good' Program, Telefonul Varstnicului. 2016. Available at <http://www.telefonulvarstnicului.ro/>.

¹¹ Kelemen O., and Teodorescu A. (Producers), Popescu Jr. C. (Director). 2008. Fața galbenă care râde. (Short). Romania: Saga Film.

¹² Iohannis, K. 2014. Public Figure, Facebook Page. December 24. Retrieved from <www.facebook.com/klausiohannis/?fref=ts> (page) or <www.facebook.com/>

klausiohannis/videos/vb.632184113535510/752211221532798/?type=2&theater> (video).

¹³<http://copiisinguriacasa.ro/> (Salvați Copiii România, 2015).

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