

The Media in Long Distance Relationships

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This is an announcement about the beginning of a research programme rather than any results. It is one of two new research projects that I will be working on over the next several years. The project is a collaboration with Mirca Madianou who teaches on media studies and sociology at Cambridge University, and it is funded by the ESRC. Our concern is with the impact of new media on the ability of people, migrants, in particular, to maintain long distance relationships. The two main groups being studied are Filipino and Caribbean migrants. We will be working largely with migrants in London and in Cambridge. Migrants from the Philippines to the UK tend to work in the National Health Service and are often here for a decade and more. Much of the concern has been with mothers separated from their children who remain in the Philippines. At one level one might think that new media such as internet and the mobile phone simply help parents to reconnect and re-establish these relationships with their children. But initial research by anthropologists such as Pertierra, Pingol and Parennas reveal a much more complex picture, and it is possible that if anything new media have negative rather than positive effects. We are also investigating other relationships such as between friends and couples.

The second research group will be people from the Caribbean and especially Trinidad and Guyana. The first wave of migrants from Trinidad were mainly working class, though more recent migrants tend to be professionals such as lawyers, accountants and doctors. In many cases they see themselves as permanent settlers though with families who are as likely to be in the US and Canada as in Trinidad. One original aspect of our research is we will be spending some time during 2008 in both the Philippines and the Caribbean looking at the other end of these same relationships. One of the aspects of this work that should be of interest to material culture studies, comes from the range of media currently available. It is already clear that different people prefer particular media such as skype, facebook, mobile phone, landlines, chat, friendster or email, either in general or for particular groups of correspondents. If time allows we would also like to work with a third group of informants, who would be uncategorised in terms of origin, but where we would hope to look in, if anything, even more detail at the specifics of how these relationships operate today. This is a different topic from most studies of migrants, but our argument is that it is the sustaining and form of relationships that is often of rather more significance to the migrants themselves than many of the more common topics of research. Obviously we would love to hear from anyone else interested in similar research.