

The use of social Web by migrants

By Arthur Devriendt – Greta du Velay – June 2009

Migrants are increasingly using more information technology and communication (ICT) to maintain relationship with their homeland and their distant relatives. Dana Diminescu, sociologist and director of the research program - Migrations and IT develops the emerging concept of the "connected migrant" instead of the former image of the immigrant without roots. Many studies on the topic of migrants and IT have focused on forums, websites and blogs run by migrants, but there are very few surveys related to the use of Web 2.0 tools such as "social networks" by migrants. In the continuation of a previous work devoted to the appropriation of ICT by Malians in the Montreuil municipality, we decided for this article to focus on the uses of Facebook by people coming from Mali on a recent migration (i.e. themselves or their parents).

Facebook.

Founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg and then reserved for students of Harvard University, Facebook gathers today more than 250 million members" (Source Wikipedia). Presenting itself as a service providing its members a way to relate with people located anywhere on the planet (as suggested by the illustration of the homepage, see below), Facebook seems a powerful tool power to maintain links within diasporas and other transnational communities.

The importance of migrants.

Through its search engine and the use of different general keywords (like "Migrants", "abroad "...), it is possible to get a general idea of the importance of migrants on Facebook. A wide variety of nationalities represented abroad run specific groups, which involve thousands of users, as is the case for Zimbabweans, Bulgarians, Malians and others.

"Groups" of Malians.

The group created on Facebook with the largest number of individuals recognized as the "Mali" is the group called "Maliens de Facebook" (*Maliens from Facebook*) (1,063 members). Its objective is "to gathers all Malians who are on Facebook to make a great network and be able to find people you lost."

This group, like "Maliloveur / Maliloveuse" (416 members), "La Malienne connection" (*The Malian Connection*) (400), "Mali puissance" (266) and "A tous les Malien's et Soninkes ..." (*To all Malians and Soninkes*) (52), do not only target migrants from Mali. However, looking at the profile of subscribers, we note that most of these are located outside of Mali. We are facing what we call an 'extraversion' of the presence of Mali, or more broadly Africa, on Facebook, which is certainly not without consequences regarding the exchanges and the imaginary on the network (aspect that deserves to be explored more deeply).

Other groups target specifically Malian emigrants, and on various scales.

At the global level is the group called "La diaspora malienne" (*The Malian diaspora*) (180 members) whose slogan is: "The Malian diaspora is increasingly active on the internet (including blogs!) So why not on facebook?". Its creator, leaves in Montreuil, and writes as follows: "it's cool to see all these Malian children gathered in a group!"

Some target places of residence. Among them, groups refer to the host country, such as "Malians in France" (33 members) or "2nd Generation" (254 members, group targeting the young Franco-Malians). Others refer to the city of residence such as "Malians in Paris" (113 members).

A group refers to the place of origin, namely "Les Maliens de Diouncoulané" (*Maliens from Diouncoulané*) (38 members).

Finally, a group was formed based on a family: "The family Niakaté (115 members), whose purpose is to bring together its members located in several countries.

What happens on these groups?

Creating a group on Facebook is a constraining procedure, which explains the great similarity between the different groups. Thus we find on almost all the groups studied all the topics: "forum", "wall", "photos" "videos" and "links".

The discussions that occur on these groups are mainly concerning leisure (while in forums and blogs, political discussions are common). We have not seen discussions related to employment. Moreover, the image of the country given through stories, photographs and videos is usually pleasant and positive. It combines elements of "tradition" with more "modern" ones (monuments and major buildings).

Expression and visibility of a plural identity

On Facebook, group membership is not exclusive. Individuals combine multiple affiliations, each reflecting faces of their identity without being the central element. For example, the young SD shows his hobbies online, that are related to football, TV series, cars and rap music in addition to its stated attachment to Mali.

The advantage of Facebook, compared to blogs and forums, is thus to be able in a unique "place" to show and display multiple identities. Therefore more research should be devoted to such services in order to understand better the multiplicity of practices and the bundles of relations in which migrants are belonging to.