



MONASH University
Information Technology

Maintaining Social Networks

The use of ICTs by Chinese and Italian migrants in Melbourne

Tom Denison and Graeme Johanson
Centre for Community Networking Research
Monash University

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Maintaining Social Networks: the Project

Maintaining Social Networks: the use of ICTs by Chinese and Italian migrants in Melbourne is one of two pilot projects being undertaken by the Centre for Community Networking Research.

The purpose of the project is to investigate the ways in which Chinese and Italian migrants use technology in general, and in particular to identify the ways in which they contribute to the maintenance of social networks.

Maintaining Social Networks: the Project

The second pilot project, a study of the use of Chinese owned Internet Points in Prato, Italy, was undertaken in October 2007. A preliminary report of its findings will appear in the next issue of *Around the Globe*. (Johanson, G. & Denison, T. (2008) Islands in the Stream: Chinese Internet Points in Prato)

The results of both projects will inform the design of a larger project investigating the role of ICTs in contributing to social cohesion. That project will commence in 2009.

Project methodology

The current project is not a statistical survey but a series of in-depth interviews which are being analysed using the Grounded Theory techniques of Glaser & Strauss.

Interviews with Italo-Australians are nearing completion.

Interviews with Chinese Australians have commenced but it is too early to reach any conclusions. These interviews will be completed by the end of June 2008.

Project methodology

To date, we have interviewed 13 Italo-Australians

- 2 recent migrants (1 male in his 60s, 1 female in her early 30s).
- 6 who emigrated in the 50s as young children (4 male, 2 female) all but two of whom were educated here.
- 2 who were born in the 1950s (1 male, 1 female), soon after their parents arrived.
- 3 second/third generation Italo-Australians (2 male, 1 female).

Technology in use

Italians in their 50s and 60s (and all those younger) seem very comfortable with the technology.

Older Italians

- **use satellite and cable TV, email, the web, webcams, mobile phones (essential) and are comfortable with managing digital photos.**
- **use ICTs to re-connect with their identity, for example, by researching their family history or making contact with people from their native villages.**
- **maintain comparatively frequent contact with relatives and friends overseas, more so than their parents or their children.**
- **visit Italy comparatively often, which in part can be attributed to their stage of life, but which is facilitated by the ease of travel and their ability to maintain their contacts using ICTs.**

Technology in use

Younger Italians used all of the above plus SMS, social networking sites, blogs, files sharing sites for managing their photos, listening to and sharing music, instant messaging, skype and so on.

In general, younger interviewees used a wider variety of devices, although one of the older migrants had a blackberry and one produced video for television.

Technology in use

Older Italians were not interviewed but those in their 50s and 60s were asked about their parents. They reported that they made little use of the technology themselves, maintaining overseas contacts by more traditional means, such as letters and long-distance telephone calls.

Most reported that the older generation tend to ask children and/or grandchildren to access information on their behalf.

Medical information and Italian news, in Italian, were most frequently sought.

Reasons for use

Most people reported using email and other technologies for keeping in touch with extended families and friends around the world, particularly in Europe and North and South America.

This included sending of photos and the occasional video, and the occasional use of webcams.

Those involved in business also make extensive use of email and to a lesser extent telephones, but the relative proportions of the two methods varied according to the size of the business.

Use of the World Wide Web

Information commonly accessed via the World Wide Web included:

- **Medical information**
- **Family history**
- **Information about the home village**
- **Study**
- **Visa and migration arrangements**
- **Travel information and bookings**
- **News and sport**
- **Banking and financial services**
- **Business related information**

Issues and preferences

The most frequent problem mentioned was that of differing time zones.

The need to use different methods for contacting different people was a common theme. Net access is not universal and only the younger generation seems comfortable with Skype.

Telephone or email are both in common use but many people commented that telephone was always preferred, because it led to more satisfying/successful communications.

Issues and preferences

Most migrants expressed a preference for face-to-face or telephone contact. SMS is popular, but more so with the young.

For the members of the largest business, email was preferred because of the ability to keep a record of transactions and the potential inconvenience and cost of telephone calls.

Older Italians favoured one-to-one communications.

Younger Italians used Facebook and other social networking sites. They had a more open attitude to allowing information about themselves to be accessed by others.

Issues and preferences - Language

Language does not seem to be an issue because recent migrants are professionals who speak English already.

For those conducting business in Italy, English was often the language of business, but in order to socialise with business associates, Italian was seen as being important.

Most thought that the ability to speak Italian, and to a lesser extent other languages, was very important. Most second and third generation migrants had taken steps to either improve their own language skills or to ensure that their children learnt Italian.

Issues and preferences - Language

There were some comments to the effect that it would be easy for those who could not already speak English, or who might be more isolated from mainstream English-speaking society, could retreat into Italian and so weaken their English language development. This would primarily apply to those not in the workforce.

A recent migrant, who had lived in the USA for 3 years during the 1970s, commented that international communications are now so easy that there is a tendency to concentrate on maintaining existing relationships, rather than throwing yourself into your new culture and life.

General observations

A definite sense that the world is shrinking came through, due to both improved communications and international travel. Most older Italians have quite strong connections with family and friend overseas, communicating with them regularly and travelling often. This has developed in the last 10-20 years and is now at the stage where it is now regarded as the norm.

There appeared to be some decline in support for ethnic social clubs, in part due to the lesser level of need of well-established migrants, and in part due to the ease of maintaining other links.

Where to from here?

A new project - Community Connections: a comparative study of the role of social networks and ICTs in social cohesion among migrants in Italy and Australia – is to be undertaken in 2009.

That project will research the social networks maintained by the Chinese community in Italy, and the Chinese and Italian communities in Australia. Its purpose is to investigate the opportunities and issues raised by changing patterns of migration and communications, what role ICTs play in those changes, and whether there are strategies capable of influencing outcomes.