Social media and migrant workers in Taiwan

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‘Facebook pose….smile…. ready….’ click! This is the usual line these days of migrant workers here in Taiwan when you see them taking group or individual photos. Then they upload pictures on their Facebook account at the very first chance they have access to the computer and internet for the whole world to see. Then others who have viewed these photos post comments on them.

According to the January 2010 statistics of the Bureau of Employment and Vocation Training, Taiwan has a total number of 353,805 migrant workers with Indonesians as the largest group followed by Vietnamese, Filipinos and Thai. They are mostly employed on a contractual basis as care givers and domestic helpers, construction and factory workers.

The migrant workers in Taiwan involved in social networking sites are just a small part of the more than 500 million active users of Facebook on this planet. This is only the Facebook launched in February 2004. What about the other social networking sites like Friendster, Flickr, Habbo, Multiply, Twitter, Vkontakte, or MyChurch to name but a few? There is practically a social networking site to join depending on your language, interest or hobby, civil status etc. to connect with other people with the same interests.

A virtual community you may call it, but in a sense it is homogenous. You can plug in anytime to your own chosen group at your own convenience as long as you want or pull the plug. It all depends on you.

The social landscape of the world is shifting into a different culture through the explosion of digital gadgets and platforms propelling social networking sites. And apart from them, there is cloud computing, search engines, mobile telephony and many other elements. And within that framework, social networking is just one chapter.

Social media use Web 2.0 applications that facilitate interactive information sharing. Content can be created by the users themselves and published for everyone to see. These factors explain to some extent the overwhelming popularity and impact social media has on migrant workers.

Flashback…

As I was sitting on a bus one Monday morning on my way to work thinking what to write on this topic, memories came to me of how I was always fascinated by communications and gadgets 25 years earlier when I used to play CB radios and VHF/UHF. We were then identified on air with a ‘call sign’ and tune in to a particular frequency. We used to have ‘morning shows’ when we chatted all night on air usually at weekends. Voice chat only though with some splatter in the background if your setup was weak. And limited distance too as this depends on your antenna height, direction and design, and radio wattage.

It was around that time when the beeper or pager was introduced. A small rectangular black box a bit smaller but thicker than an iPhone. In order to send a message to someone carrying a pager or beeper you had to make a phone call to an operator who relayed your message to the person carrying a particular numbered pager. If you were driving on the road, you had to stop and make a call from a public phone just to speak to the operator. Voice message only.
Not too long afterwards, pagers evolved with a small screen display that could receive text messages, but still relayed through an operator. And then cellular phones were born in the form of ‘bag phones’. Then an external antenna on the roof of your car or house was needed if you were too far from the ‘cell site’. Not to mention the phone’s physical size that looked and weighed like a real heavy bag. Very bulky.

Until the explosion of cheaper cellular phones that are even smaller than the size of a palm. This era was the beginning of short messaging services (SMS) or ‘texting’ without going through an operator. You can talk directly to a party or simply just send and receive SMS right to your fingertips even while on the road.

And of course the computer came and then the internet where once upon a time voice chatting only on CB or VHF radios were overtaken by combinations of voice chatting and text at the same time with icons and avatars plus video displayed on a monitor right in front of the user. No more relay stations or operators needed to call to connect to the other party. No boundaries. It’s just a mouse click away to reach someone on the other side of the world.

But for the migrant worker who is cut off from all that is familiar and loved, has this frenzy of new communications technology helped ease their circumstances?

**Bridging the digital divide…**

‘I want to see my son in Vietnam.’ This is what a Vietnamese migrant worker staying at the Hope Workers’ Center (HWC) staring at a blank computer screen told me when he asked me to help him turn on an old broken computer in 2003. ‘I saw someone in front of a computer talking with his family and looking at them back home,’ he added looking frustrated.

This man is just one among many unlucky migrant workers who had legal problems with their employer. He came to seek assistance and had been living at HWC shelter for nine months. No migrant worker staying at the HWC or other social work institution with a pending court case is allowed to work during that time. Therefore, no income to send back home. To add to the misery and uncertainty there was also hardly any contact with family and friends.

This sad encounter deeply affected me. I promised myself that given a chance, I will put up a computer training center for the migrants, especially those staying at the HWC shelter. In July 2005 after much struggle and hard work, an opportunity came and I managed to start the first basic computer course at HWC. Twelve sets of computers with tables and chairs were acquired at minimum cost from a bankrupt office in Taipei. This was a dream come true.

After a year of conducting computer classes alone for migrant workers on Sundays, the IT Team was born. This is a group of volunteer migrants who are willing to share their time and expertise by teaching computer classes to other migrant workers.

The computer room in the HWC is mostly used on weekdays by those staying in the shelter. It is an educational and at the same time entertaining way for them while waiting for the outcome of their legal battles. They can also connect and chat and see their families back home as several webcams were donated by a generous benefactor.

For over five years now since our first computer class at HCW, we’ve received numerous emails from former migrants who have stayed at the shelter before and those who have attended and completed our courses. They are now back in their home countries or in another country and have found a better job because of the computer skills/knowledge acquired while they were here in Taiwan.

**Other real life scenarios…**
Most if not all migrant workers in Taiwan buy a mobile phone with their first salary. Not just an ordinary phone but one with built in camera, mp3 player and all the other added apps like smart phones. Then next is to buy a computer.

There’s a bicycle factory that I visit once in a while that has 21 migrant workers from the Philippines. Their dormitory is about 1 km. away from their workplace. Each room has four occupants with his own computer wired to the internet. Of course, with a webcam. They can see and chat with their families back home whenever they are not at work.

Most of the migrant students in our Sunday computer class at HWC know how to chat and webcam on Yahoo or MSN messenger. Most of them have Facebook accounts. All they know is chatting using only their forefingers for typing. They come and learn a basic computer course which includes proper typing, MS office, software installation and trouble shooting. MS power point and Windows movie maker appeals greatly to them.

Once I went with a friend to a freight company. Most migrant workers send door to door boxes to their loved ones back home filled with gifts from shoes to kitchen ware bought from their hard earned dollars in Taiwan. The lady at the counter mentioned that a lot of migrant workers use Facebook to give details of their dormitory address where the freight company truck can pick up their boxes. And the lady added that they can locate any address no matter how remote it may be because of internet, mobile phones and Facebook!

Recently, I received a notice on my e-mail account saying that someone had sent me a message on Facebook. And I thought, wouldn’t it have been simpler if that person just sent an email directly to my email address instead of leading me to sign in again in another account just to read that email?

An Indonesian caregiver in our neighborhood is not allowed by her employer to own a mobile phone. She is always asked to work extended hours. She’s now the 4th caregiver to the same old couple for the past 2 years. She’s a mother of 3 kids all expecting her monthly salary to finish their education back home.

My reflections…
It is undeniable that social media have enormous possibilities and challenges for migrant workers in Taiwan and for all of us as individuals or groups or communities. Human contact and interaction are basic needs. This is most especially true for family members, close friends and loved ones.

Today’s communications technologies have made the world a global village. The virtual world has no boundaries. We can now connect with each other through various social media platforms which were unthinkable in the past. This has enormous implications for the migrant worker who is a stranger in a strange land.

The conditions of some migrant workers here in Taiwan are better than others. Some get lucky and end up working with a more empathic and generous employer. They may be allowed to have a computer with internet access in their rooms. Others end up at the HWC and all their dreams and ambitions of finding greener pastures abroad turn into a nightmare like the Vietnamese migrant longing to see his son back home.

Working in a foreign land away from family and friends is not easy. Adapting to cultural differences and language is no joke. Social media for migrant workers here in Taiwan and other parts of the world work like a mobile phone charger. They plug in to the net whenever possible and connect with families and friends, check the pictures of their growing children back home that they have missed through years of separation and thus acquire more energy to keep them going. It is an antidote to homesickness, boredom and loneliness.
Social media for migrant workers in Taiwan are also a way for them to express themselves more openly. It is where they find more freedom within the confines of their factory and dormitory daily routine. It is like a 7/11 convenience shop open 24 hours daily where they can log on after day or night shift work.

It is indeed poignant that migrant workers take to Facebook like a duck to water. After all, the effect of being a foreign worker in a predominantly affluent society of a totally different language, culture and mindset can result in a sense of being ‘faceless’. A sense of being invisible, dispensable, mere wheels in a gigantic machine churning out products and services.

It is perhaps inevitable that social networking sites in particular have become a safe haven for the displaced, a place of refuge, for affirmation, to share successes and mourn failures and disappointments and not least, for connection with loved ones far away. A place where what you had for lunch matters to someone. A place where you virtually belong.

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