The Personal and the Political: Social Networking in Manila

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Abstract

In 2001, during the Second People Power Revolution, Philippine activists used the mobile phone to help disseminate messages and coordinate actions leading to the ouster of President Joseph Estrada. At the time, the affordances of the mobile short message service (SMS) in particular made for a politically effective communications media. In the weeks that followed the death of ex-President Corazon Aquino in 2009, social networking sites (SNS) became important affective media for the expression of personal grief. When Typhoon Ketsana (called Typhoon Ondoy in the Philippines) struck in 2009, both social media and SMS were appropriated for effective and affective purposes.

Although the deployment of SNS extends earlier modes of civic engagement and media, it departs from older media by providing various forms of visual and aural communication with greater affective personalization. Moreover, within the highly networked and personalized worlds of SNS, the capacity for politics and its relationship to the personal take on new forms. In this article, we ask how a media designed and promoted for the conduct of interpersonal relations is deployed in the local expression of national politics and civic action and in the global politics of exported labor. In the areas of national party politics and global labor politics, can we think of the personal as political in the context of SNS and the Philippines? In turn, how would adopting such a perspective affect our understanding of communications culture?
Introduction

The Philippines has a rich history of innovative and sometimes subversive mobile technology being used for both political and social ends—from the jeepney (mobile in an older sense of the word) to the mobile (in the word’s newest sense) phone. Yet, as social networking sites (SNS) have become part of everyday life in many countries—including developing ones—the literature on SNS has focused predominantly on its social use by middle-class youth in Anglophonic contexts (boyd and Ellison 2007; Goggin and McLelland 2008). The appropriation of SNS is global, though, and global appropriation of SNS does not imply uniformity of motivation, experience, or outcome. Around the world, SNS are being appropriated in new and surprising ways. Therefore, SNS can no longer be exclusively interpreted as spaces for socializing. As they become globally quotidian, they are also becoming sites for emerging forms of civic engagement, participation, and politics in addition to socializing, relationship management, and identity construction (Bennett 2008; Ito et al. 2008; Rheingold 2008; Bennett and Wells 2009). Many of the SNS studies that focus on socializing distinguish between “friendship-driven” and “interest-driven” forms of participation, but other forms of affective interpersonal intimacy are part and parcel of political and civic participation in this new public sphere. This is evident in the case of Manila.

Manila has been heralded as the texting (or short message service, SMS) capital of the world and, not by coincidence, for its political deployment of mobile phones (Ellwood-Clayton 2003; Rafael 2003; Pertierra 2006). In the Second People Power Revolution, which led to the ouster of President Joseph Estrada, mobile phones became both a symbol and a tool of democracy, and texting was prominent in the political application of communications networks (Pertierra et al. 2002; Rheingold 2002; Rafael 2003; Pertierra 2006). As Rheingold (2002) notes, the “people power” deployment of mobile phones to bring down President Estrada was an example of “smart mobs”—that is, the use of technologies to merge and help harness human agency through cooperation and collaboration.

More recently, the Philippines has become the SNS capital of the world (Roumen 2009). The deployment of SNS expands earlier modes of civic engagement and media seen during the 2001 revolution (Rafael 2003; Pertierra 2006), but it also departs from earlier media by providing various modes of visual and aural communication with greater affective personalization. Within the highly networked and personalized worlds of SNS, the capacity for politics and its relationship to the personal take on new forms. While extending Rheingold’s notion of smart mobs, SNS also provide new spaces for networked, effective civic responses and affective interpersonal responses. As an SNS and SMS capital, Manila provides a key example of the political efficiencies and affective possibilities of these different yet convergent media.

One might assume that SNS in Manila are dominated by those with time and money on their hands; that is, by young professionals. However, they are not the only significant user demographic. Uptake has occurred across generations. Parents and even grandparents from all classes are starting to use SNS to stay in contact with family and friends—particularly those who are overseas. The female “care workers” who form a significant part of the large Filipino diaspora have played an important role in the rapid uptake of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Mobile phones and other such devices have been pivotal in aiding the geographic and socioeconomic mobility of Filipino care workers in Hong Kong (McKay 2007), for example, while at the same time helping these workers keep in contact with family. The significance of this diaspora to Filipino society, the strength of traditional Filipino family life, the widespread deployment of mobile SNS technologies in the Philippines, and the history of Filipino deployment of technologies in political ways together suggest that the Philippines offers an important opportunity to develop our understanding of new ways of maintaining intimate copresence (especially with family and friends abroad), our understanding of mediated sociality more generally, and our understanding of sociotechnical modes of political engagement.

In this article we focus on a sample group of politically active young people and explore how they use SNS, in order to understand some of the ways SNS—in departing from and yet rehearsing older media practices like SMS—function in the everyday performance of sociality and politics. The links among youth, new media, and public participation has become a key rubric to understanding SNS practices as part of broader emerging media ecologies and politics (Ito et al. 2008; Bennett and Wells 2009). This article advances research into the ways in which the personal, the political, and the social—and their various shades of
publicness and attendant media literacy—are married within the context of SNS usage in Manila.

Fieldwork for our research was conducted in August 2009 and involved 40 students who attended one of Manila’s main universities, the University of the Philippines (UP). Our choice of the UP was guided by the fact that it has a policy of drawing students predominantly from outside Manila and from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Unlike universities that recruit students from the wealthiest families (e.g., Ateneo de Manila University), the diversity of the UP cohort is striking and thus represents a better demographic cross-section of the young Filipino population as a whole. In three three-hour focus groups, with approximately 16 young people in each group, participants talked individually and as a group about ICT and SNS usage, shared their theories and conclusions about that usage, and explained their motivations for using SNS. We also asked participants to share their views on changing notions of sociality and politics. In addition to these discussions, an online survey polled nearly 100 other students, inquiring in less detail about their ICT and SNS usage and motivations.

The conversations revealed two key motivations for use: a desire to maintain family relations in the context of global and national migration and a desire to be politically and personally engaged in the context of relationship maintenance and identity construction. Among Filipino youth SNS are valued for their effect in these projects—that is, for their instrumental efficiency as communicative media. They are also valued as affective media—that is, as media with a capacity to mediate emotional relationships and responses.

Social Media, Politics, Identity, and Interpersonal Relations

In the weeks after the death of ex-president Corazon (Cory) Aquino, the marks left by public mourning were ubiquitous. The yellow ribbons adorning most objects (cars, phones, street poles), as well as perpetual references in the media, made the sense of loss palpable. Cory became president three years after her husband, Benigno (Ninoy) Aquino, was assassinated in 1983 at Manila International Airport upon his return from exile in the United States. Ninoy’s death pushed Cory into the political limelight and was a precursor to the original People Power Revolution that led to the end of the Marcos regime in 1986 and the elevation of Cory to the presidency. In contrast to the public’s perception of Marcos as corrupt and decadent, Cory’s image was that of a “good housewife” who claimed no political knowledge and whose priorities were justice and equality. Important to a consideration of SMS during the Second People Power Revolution and of SNS in the events that followed Cory’s death is the fact that her power base was relatively distributed rather than narrowly concentrated among elites. Cory thus became the symbol of the People Power Revolution, and yellow became the signature color of her reformist initiatives and the new power relations.

Reflecting the phenomenon Sennett (1977) calls the “tyranny of intimacy,” Cory was cast as an ambiguous figure, playing a highly public and institutionalized role as president but also embraced by many in personal, emotive terms, as “Cory.” During the national mourning following her death, pages on SNS such as Facebook were dominated by yellow ribbons. Such pages became an important medium for the expression of public grief and for the personal expression of identity politics. Many Filipinos used profile pictures and status updates to express personal grief across many forms of SNS, including Facebook (the dominant application), Multiply (dominant before Facebook), Friendster (the precursor to Facebook and Multiply and many Filipinos’ first SNS), and Plurk (similar to Twitter). The response to the ex-president’s death was self-consciously affective, expressing a sense of loss that was represented as a personal blow, not just a blow to the body politic.

In the context of this vivid response to political events, we consider the arguments surrounding the oft-noted decline in political participation, particularly among the young (Putnam 2000; Bennett 2008; Bennett and Wells 2009). The disengagement of youth from conventional political activity, what Castells (1997) identifies as “legitimizing” political activity, has been noted as a serious problem for civic life in the United States, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and other nations (Bennett 2008). This problem, observed in many Western democracies, may be seen as a disconnect between identity construction and political activity. That is, the identity politics of young people in particular is not translating into political participation through activities such as voting, joining political parties, or participating in civic institutions. The disengagement of people...
from traditional political participation through the institutions that legitimate power is often blamed on these institutions themselves. For example, political participation through conventional party politics is structured and organized in ways that many people find frustrating and inauthentic—particularly when people sense that their participation is used as a resource to advance a set agenda rather than as a source of power to shape an agenda.

Other observers, though, question whether disengagement from legitimizing institutions can be read as disengagement from politics as such. Bennett (2008), for example, addresses this problem by pointing to a generational shift from the “dutiful citizen” to the “actualizing citizen.” The dutiful citizen identifies with a generalized sense of the public, feels a social obligation to that public, and expresses that obligation through voting, following public affairs through the media, debating public affairs with friends and associates, and joining civil societies. Bennett’s actualizing citizen identifies not with a generalized sense of public duty but with a higher sense of individual purpose and perhaps self-entitlement. For the actualizing citizen, self-expression through consumerism and through interaction with networks of friends and associates is a more meaningful form of social engagement than discussion of public affairs. Mass media and conventional politics are not trusted and are not relevant.

The legitimizing identity seems no longer to be catching hold, at least not among the actualizing citizenry. Important though dutiful citizenry, legitimizing identity, and conventional political activities are, however, the problem of political participation takes on a new shape in the light of other forms of identity politics and political participation, and in the light of non-Western experiences. Our research in the Philippines illustrates forms of political participation that are mediated by SNS and bring together networks of interpersonal relations that not only are politically charged and emotionally affective but mediate the construction and presentation of a personal identity that is also politically charged and emotionally affective.

SNS proffer great possibilities for understanding the relationship between the personal and political and for understanding the power of identity politics. On SNS, political participation is not only outward looking, expressing a desire for social and institutional reconstruction through resistance to other people’s projects or through the prosecution of one’s own projects; it also turns back and reconstructs affective relations and personal identity in political terms. One of our male respondents, Immanuel, age 19, explained it this way:

I would argue that the personal is political. Everything we do is political. Even if we are talking about a telenovella we are already talking about something that matters . . . most of my profile pictures are to promote a cause. It depends upon your personality. If you are an introverted person you might use your pictures to show different sides of yourself. Whereas if you are an extravert you might just keep the same profile picture and then use other functions and features to express yourself . . . . I used an image of myself speaking at some political convention because I am shown doing something political. And I’m leaning into my laptop and it had a logo of my organization. So the image shows that I am someone working for this organization. As for my other profile pictures, it has to be the most aesthetically pleasing image [laughs]. But usually they are pictures of me doing something political—like holding a flag of the organization.

Immanuel’s comments suggest that the particularities of SNS provide new forms of personalization that are directly linked to one’s political context and agendas. While extending the affective technologies trajectory of mobile media such as SMS, SNS are also strikingly different in the way they perform networked personalization. With Immanuel we see that the cartography of personalization (Hjorth 2009) mapped by the user takes on new multimedia and networked efficiencies—in short, sketching new types of personal-as-political practices.

For Anita, age 22, SNS provide new ways to mediate the reflexive relationship between her own identity politics and its meaning for her personally, and identity politics as it provides meaning for the formation of collectives. Her SNS postings allow her to feel the affect of community and are an effective means to relate to others individually and collectively through public affairs. In the case of Twitter, the deployment of both the political and personal has been phenomenal—as evidenced by Twitter’s role in the 2011 protests in Iran and in the uptake by celebrities and
politicians (Kwak et al. 2010). Twitter provides the compressed micronarratives and textual economies of SMS, but with greater networking and personalization possibilities to create new types of convergence between the personal and political. Anita noted,

For example, with the recent death of Cory, we were able to create forums and threads of discussion that allowed people to pick up or enter the conversation at any point. You know what people are thinking about certain issues. I also use Twitter to follow various groups and personalities.

Personal political identities are constructed through political action and the appropriation of political symbols on SNS. However, positive though these developments may be in Bennett’s terms, the mixing of SNS, politics, and identity construction is not unproblematic. Many respondents in the focus groups remain skeptical about how much impact this solidarity and online political discourse can have in the offline world. Like Putnam, Bennett, and others, these respondents worry that a symbolic display of identity politics does not translate into political action, political engagement, or political participation beyond the symbolic.

The relationship between the expression of outward-facing effective action and inward-facing identity construction is not without its tensions. The former implies direct action, engagement, and participation and needs to find significant expression beyond SNS, whereas the latter can be achieved symbolically, with SNS as the media of choice. These tensions were expressed by several informants:

Carlos (age 27): For me, Facebook makes you feel that you have to do something. For example, if the status of your friend is sad then you tend to comment. But if that person is really your friend you have to make time to meet the friend and talk it out. Saying something on Facebook doesn’t mean as much. It’s easy. For example, when Cory died everyone posted a yellow ribbon—as if that were enough to show your feelings. But there are more essential issues that are being missed out of this process. Facebook makes it seem like your action is enough, but in truth you need to go beyond that box-ticking and do something.

INT: So you think it trivializes emotions and politics?

Diego (age 24): Yes.

INT: So do you see it as weakening social and political action?

Carlos: It puts them in the wrong light.

Eva (age 23): It’s basically not enough just to post something online; you have to do it in real life.

INT: So it makes things more superficial?

Carlos: Yes.

Gonzalo (age 21): I’m thinking posting political things is not a disadvantage on Facebook; it’s more of an advantage because it creates better support for events. But the disadvantage would be that people these days tend to be more dependent on the sites [SNS].

The respondents were careful to note that online symbolic expression and self-identification with a political movement should never substitute for offline action. Our informants view the online world as paralleling and intersecting with the offline in terms of authentic identity politics, and they see consistent offline identity construction as a prerequisite for authenticity. Many also noted that the mode of dissemination proffered by SNS affords an easy and convenient way to communicate about events and experiences and thus to connect to a collective identity constructed around public affairs. SNS are in this sense effective as well as affective media. The respondents’ comments illustrate three types of relationship—that between personal identity politics and collective identity politics, that between online political action and offline political action, and that between the use of effective and affective media—across which a fourth relationship, that between consistency and authenticity, is asserted. Javier, age 23, remarked,

I believe that social media are public. They are part of the way we act in the public. So even if you don’t have contacts, you have Google and different search engines that help search out information—sometimes information that was intended for private use. So cyberspace is a public space. So what images you put on social media is a reflection of your personal ideology. But the problem is that some people see it as completely separate to who they are offline. Some people act completely differently on social media and online than offline—I don’t believe it should be that case.
Especially if your career is very public—like an actress—you have to wear your ideologies on your sleeves . . . social media and new media in general has made communication much more efficient and easier as opposed to before when distribution was just one way. Now you have an interactive environment. You are producer of information at the same time as being a recipient of information. It creates a better means in which for people to understand each other, in the personal and especially in the political arenas. So, for me, the benefit of social media is that it makes it very easy to access a particular segment in the Filipino population.

For León, age 25, the expression of identity politics in the Filipino context is not just about collective sociality and the public projection of a self-image; it is about life and death, and SNS are not media for identity symbolism but for effective, controlled, strategic action:

I still think it is important to maintain privacy around you. In a place like the Philippines, if you leave one form of sensitive political information open you can die. You still have to have a means to keep private some of the things you want. For example, we have encryptions for files or documents, but the problem is that the people you want to hide it from are the people who have access to decoding encryptions. So I think the easiest way to protect sensitive information is to go offline.

Political dissidents go missing in the Philippines. Conservative estimates report that 141 activists have been murdered since 2001 (when Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo came to power), but according to the Philippine human rights group Karapatan approximately 902 labor leaders, journalists, local politicians, priests, and peasant organizers have been murdered in that time. Like our respondents, the state also believes in consistency between what happens online and what happens offline: online networking and symbolic identity construction can and should be accompanied by offline effect—in the case of 141 individuals, the offline effect being assassination. In the context of such extreme concomitant effects, the aphorism that the “personal is political” becomes more than a cliché. Whether the case in point be Filipino activists, the Mississippi civil rights activists of the 1960s, the Red Brigades of the 1970s, or the mujahideen of Afghanistan, “High-risk activism . . . is a ‘strong-tie’ phenomenon” (Gladwell 2010, n.p.).

SNS were again used to effect collective action in the context of life and death when, in the month following our fieldwork, Manila was struck by typhoons and subsequent floods that left sections of the city under water for weeks and killed hundreds. The nation’s institutionalized politics declared a “state of national disaster” and pressed emergency services into action, while many citizens used social media to contact friends and family in Manila and abroad and to recruit local and international assistance. Just as SNS had been deployed to mourn the death of Cory, they were deployed again to marshal personal, affective networks and to engage in effective collective action that was both personal and sociopolitical.

For Lucía, age 23, SNS were pivotal in resisting isolation and maintaining connections during the disaster, for both pragmatic, effective reasons and for the affect of a shared experience with intimates:

Our apartment is not equipped with television, and cell signal was down or fleeting at the height of the typhoon [the telecom companies later reported that this was due to extreme traffic]. So we mostly relied on the Internet—specifically by following Twitter and Facebook since they get updated so quickly—for news and updates. . . . SMS/texting is still more efficient for immediate messages for help, but SNS was/is useful for sharing stories and pictures, updating people about how you are or what you’ve been doing to help, and asking them to help as well.

When asked about the types of usage of SNS she observed, Lucía noted,

Mostly calls for help [addresses/locations and names of people needing to be rescued] and updates on the situation from people who were getting bothered by rising waters and those who have friends/relatives who were. For example, a prolific tweeter named mlq3, who was not directly affected by the flood, kept up a literal minute-by-minute update of the situation by re-tweeting other people’s calls for help and posting updates he himself received from well-connected friends. He also
shared links to the latest news stories, pictures uploaded by ordinary citizens and contact numbers of government and non-government organizations/agencies who can help people in need.

Lucía provides us with an opportunity to unpack SNS media and differentiate their affordances rather than conflate them as we have done thus far and as most SNS research does. Tweets, SMS, and mobile multimedia sit to one side, with SNS to the other. These media differentially embody technical characteristics that enable, constrain, and shape each medium’s effect and its capacity to affect. Communications sent via mobile SMS are much more time sensitive than those sent via SNS, the former conveying an urgency and immediacy not typically evident in the latter. Communicative acts mediated by mobile SMS are transient and of the moment, whereas postings to SNS aggregate on the site to mediate a more sustained and ongoing narrative. The mode of distribution on mobile SMS is more direct, individuated, and purpose-specific than the group audience formed around SNS. These affordances mediate different applications. Mobile SMS communications lend themselves to effective pragmatic responses to events such as Typhoon Ondoy, the events of 2001, and the death of Cory, whereas SNS are more suited to providing for affective responses and for collective affect. As Lucía noted, news items and details about the floods were virally disseminated through tweets and images captured with camera phones, as well as through personal experiences and accounts captured in prose and uploaded to SNS. In both of these applications we see examples of new forms of the “personal as political” and of effective and affective uses of social media emerging through user-generated content.

The political institutions of the state have also become aware of the political efficiency of social media. In addition to surveilling social media to identify potential threats, state actors use social media to effect their own political action. Many politicians, celebrities, and public figures have their own Twitter accounts and SNS pages. In response to Typhoon Ondoy, the government set up a Twitter account to disseminate relevant information and deal with the disaster. However, as Lucía notes, this was not always as effective as it might have been:

The National Defense Secretary has a Twitter account [giboteodoro], and people used it to directly post the names and addresses of people who needed rescue and relief. The mistake, however, was in him or his staff not checking the account immediately on the day of the flood. He or his staff only checked it a day after. This was acknowledged later because maybe they underestimated how useful the Twitter account could be for their work/duties. They then replied to most tweets (posted mostly by relatives/friends of typhoon victims) and either forwarded the numbers to call or the persons to look for or informed them that help is on the way.

The everyday use of social media to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships between friends and intimates is an important precondition for the effective use of social media in political and civic contexts. The political and the civic map onto the interpersonal in effective and affective ways through social media.

This interweaving of the political and the personal, the effective and the affective, was also evident in our respondents’ use of social media to maintain contact with family and friends in conditions of globalized labor.

Globalized Labor in an Age of Social Media and Affective Technology

One important use of social media in the Philippines is to maintain relations with geographically distant family and friends. This phenomenon is most often interpreted in interpersonal and subjective terms rather than political terms, but the personal and the political are not so easily bifurcated, and the deployment of SNS in the context of intimacy is, in the case of the Philippines, inseparable from the politics of globalization.

At one level globalism is a high-level abstraction that points to the changing set of power relations and interactions implied by new flows and forms of capital, material and cultural products, institutional influences, modes of communication and control, population movements, and forms of labor. At another level globalism is not an abstract macroeconomic model but is part of daily life. At this level the politics of globalism are expressed when ordinary people engage with capital, consumption, institutions, migration, and forms of labor. For our Filipino respondents, SNS is appropriated and implicated in the day-to-day lived politics of globalized labor.
According to an analysis of Filipino workers in Cyprus, “two-thirds of all female migrant workers from the Philippines are domestic workers” (Panayiotopoulos 2005, p. 105). Most of these women work in the newly industrialized Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as in the Gulf States and Europe. This distribution of workers occurred during various economic shifts in globalization.

During the mid-1990’s Saudi Arabia accounted for nearly a quarter of all Filipina foreign domestic workers employed overseas. In Singapore, of the 100,000 migrant domestic workers employed, an estimated three quarters are from the Philippines. In Malaysia, Filipina and Indonesian female domestic workers increased in number from a few hundred in 1970 to about 70,000 by 1994. . . . In Hong Kong, less than a thousand Filipina domestic workers were employed during the mid-1970s. During the four-year period of 1990–1994, their number doubled to 121,000 and they appeared to “monopolise” the occupation in Hong Kong, accounting for more than 90 per cent of all foreign domestic workers. In Rome, it is estimated that over 50,000 Filipino migrant workers are employed, with the “overwhelming” majority of them concentrated in the domestic service sector. The Philippines is a concentrated example of a labor sending country that actively encouraged the expansion of foreign migrant labor markets. (Panayiotopoulos 2005, p. 105)

One of our respondents, Airan, explained,

[People migrate or look for jobs elsewhere basically because the government pushes them to do so. It’s all integrated in the informal education sector where out-of-school youth become “scholars” and are trained as construction workers, caregivers, cooks, etc. for deployment to countries with high demand for labor. Meanwhile, those unemployed are integrated into [the] national workforce as potential OFWs [overseas Filipino workers] for the international labor markets, not the national one.

Overseas work is an important source of family and national income, but it is not a matter for unqualified celebration, with or without SNS. A short story written in 1992 by a Filipino domestic worker returning from Hong Kong speaks of the impact of alienation in the absence of convivial communications: “After being away from home for eight years now, Diane felt like a stranger in her parents’ home. The whole house was no longer the same haven from which she used to derive so much comfort” (Constable 1999, p. 205). Despite, or perhaps because of, this alienation, Constable argues that many Filipina workers in Hong Kong derive genuine satisfaction from their work and would rather be in Hong Kong than at “home.” A study of Filipino workers in Canada paints a darker picture, arguing that

the inability of “live-in” domestic workers to immigrate to Canada with their spouses and children results in the destruction of traditional family roles, creating serfdom-like work situations in which family relations are maintained transnationally, from afar, for many years. When, and if, family members of domestic workers are finally unified, they are often plagued by tension and conflict. (Cohen 2000, p. 76)

Drawing on studies of transnational mothering and emotional labor, a third scholar concurs: “The pain of family separation creates various feelings, including helplessness, regret, and guilt for mothers and loneliness, vulnerability, and insecurity for children” (Parreñas 2001, p. 361).

For Hochschild (1983, 2000, 2001, 2003), the rise of globalization can be seen through the role of the service care industry (epitomized by Filipinos) whereby women, especially from developing countries, are exploited for their emotional labor. She notes that with the increasing commercialization of human feelings and intimate relations, distinctions between work and home have blurred. For Hochschild, who extends Goffman’s (1969) pioneering work in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, we not only change our outward expression to perform the particular duties and functions required of us in the labor market; we change our emotions. She calls these requirements for emotional and performative adjustments to the work-home context “feeling rules” (1983), in which the type of “emotion work” one is required to perform varies according to numerous, often unspoken, factors such as sensitivity toward cultural context.

In The Managed Heart, Hochschild (1983) focuses on women within the service care industry and the types of “right” emotional labor they must perform
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In order to fulfill their job. The theme is continued in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, in which Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003) argue that emotional labor is increasingly going global. Through a global process of care culture, women from the South (the developing countries) must leave their families at home to service families in the North (the developed countries)—a process whereby rich countries import love from poorer ones. The pervasiveness of emotional labor can also be seen in developed countries—especially in the case of affective technologies and their growing use to exploit labor in the name of building and using social capital.

A turn to technology to mediate intimate relations across global labor markets provides a new example of the feminist adage that the personal is political, especially because many of the types of immaterial forms of labor—affective, emotional, social, and creative—emerging around ICTs are traditionally demeaned as women’s or domestic work. According to Lasén (2004), the increasing significance of mobile media is predicated on its role as an affective technology in which emotional labor becomes an important currency. In this light, understanding the various technocultures of intimate publics could be conceptualized as “emotional capitalism” (Illouz 2007) and mapped by cartographies of personalization (Hjorth 2009) that are as much emotional and sociopolitical as they are geographic and spatial. These topographies are marked by interior, intimate, and contingent practices that can both challenge and reinforce notions of labor and intimacy. Under the rubric of cartographies of personalization, labor takes on various affective modes—a phenomenon that can be witnessed in contemporary SNS usage.

When asked to consider how SNS have changed their lives, if at all, our respondents first noted how important SNS were for keeping in contact with people not geographically close—relatives and families overseas or, in the case of the many UP students who are not from Manila, keeping up with activities at home. For example, Maria, age 25, noted,

> The Internet and new media are very important, because most of my relatives are abroad—they have migrated—so this allows me to keep in contact with them. Also for my organizational work as I work for a youth organization here in the Philippines, so the Internet is where we get updates and connect with each other because we usually don’t meet as we are scattered all over the Philippines.

For Joseph, age 19, the effectiveness of SNS make them a necessity:

> For me, these days it [SNS] is a necessity. Everybody is on there using it, the only way to survive is to also use it. As for the mobile phone, if I don’t have it I would feel disoriented in regards to schedules and stuff. And in regards to the Internet, because it’s really important as other people here have said, nowadays people—especially students—really use the Internet a lot. The SNS like Friendster, Facebook, and Multiply are useful in that they help to communicate more faster and efficiently than before with old friends and long-distance relatives.

In these and many other cases, SNS are playing an important effective and affective role in the maintenance of familial and friendship ties characteristic of the Filipino diaspora. Most respondents to our survey stated that the main purpose for using SNS was to be efficiently affective.

**Cathy (age 26):** The Internet is very important for me because of the communication aspect. I have friends from different walks of life and parts of the world.

**INT:** So is it particularly important for you to contact people living away from Manila?

**Cathy:** Yes, living away. Away from Asia actually. The Internet is also important for information. But for me that’s secondary.

**Janus (age 19):** I also use it to keep in contact with my relatives abroad. Cell phones are equally as important as I’m a member of a lot of organizations and basically we communicate a lot using cell phones.

SNS play a crucial role, extending the networks and rituals of precursor technologies such as the mobile phone and SMS in catering to the particular forms of mobility—geographic, socioeconomic, temporal, and spatial—encompassed by the Filipino diaspora. Miguel, age 22, described how SNS help him:
I think that with these online systems—or whatever they are—makes me aware of other people’s [pages/lives]. I don’t really comment that much, I just read what friends write and say. It’s like I can feel what they feel. When I used to have my Multiply account, I think it’s the most important thing online to happen to me. Because when I transferred here—I come from outside of Manila—I felt like an outcast because I don’t have friends and everything. But through Multiply I can access my friends’ and classmates’ accounts, and I can read what they are doing. And I feel that life should move on and I should move on. So it basically helped me.

Emotional labor blurs boundaries between the objectivities of work and the subjectivities of home, between places of production and places of consumption, and between motivations that are instrumental and those that are emotional, whether that labor is performed by overseas care workers or by distributed networks of political activists. In these contexts the success of ICTs has been their paradoxical ability to efficiently deploy the affective and personal.

**Conclusion**

Sociality and personal presence mediated by SNS address multiple forms of labor, political participation, and identity construction through multiple modes of presentation, across diverse contexts. To express oneself through SNS is, for our informants, not just a matter of maintaining authentic affective relations among friends but means continuing to be engaged in political and civic action on a national stage that is simultaneously personal and interpersonal. For our informants, social networking in Manila is personal and political, and social media are effective and affective.

After this study was conducted, the political environment and attendant media ecology of the Philippines were transformed again with the election of Cory’s son, “Noy Noy” Aquino, in March 2010. On our next visit we hope to see how the political and personal play out online and offline, in the Philippines and abroad, in this new era of political optimism.

**Acknowledgments**

We thank Airah Cardiogan for all her great research assistance.

**Note**

1. The deployment of SMS to develop, enhance, and strengthen personal relationships as well as to create new types of intimacy has been explored in great detail by Filipino anthropologist Raul Pertierra (2005a, 2005b, 2006).

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**Appendix I: URLs of Websites Cited in the Article**

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**References**


