

Madianou, M. (2018). Families *in* Polymedia. In Papacharissi, Z. (Ed.) *Networked Self and Birth, Life, Death* (pp. 89-103), London and New York: Routledge.

## **Family life *in* polymedia**

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### *Abstract*

*This chapter explores the consequences of social and mobile media for families separated because of work. The way in which transnational families maintain long distance relationships has been transformed by the increasingly ubiquitous presence of communication environments, understood here as polymedia. Drawing on long-term ethnographic work with transnational families, I will argue that polymedia become integral to the way family relationships are enacted and experienced. Although communication technologies do not solve the problems associated with long-term separation they do engender new forms of co-presence and intimacy which have powerful emotional consequences - both positive and negative - for relationships at a distance. Transnational families come into being in (rather than with) polymedia, revealing aspects of mediation that are relevant for personal relationships more broadly.*

Families are increasingly understood as 'sets of practices' as opposed to static entities. Instead of thinking about family as a thing, a noun, the emphasis has shifted to families as a verb: family members 'do family' through their daily activities (Morgan, 1996). It is these daily practices that allow members to maintain and enact their relationships. Family practices don't just take place in the physical home but all spheres of social life (Wajcman, Bittman & Brown, 2008) confirming Douglas' view of the home as 'located in space, but not necessarily a fixed space' (Douglas, 1991). The emphasis here is on the ordering role of practices and rituals rather than the salience of a geographically bounded space. Families are networked: even before the arrival of social and mobile media, families have always been the sum of all their members' relationships and practices. Just as the self is expressed as a fluid abstraction within its networked environments (Papacharissi, 2011: 304) the arrival of new communication technologies has further accentuated and crystallized the networked

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nature of the family. Family life is now constituted as the result of practices which increasingly depend on technological mediation (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Clark, 2012).

This chapter outlines the consequences of social and mobile media environments for families separated because of work. Transnational families exemplify the understanding of family as 'sets of practices'. Transnational families are constituted through practices which are geographically distributed and technologically mediated. More than any other type of family, transnational families are networked in the sense that they come into being through communication technologies. In the absence of face-to-face co-presence the family network is constituted through practices that are made possible through networked technologies and infrastructures. Making a phone call, sending a text message or uploading a photograph on a social network site bring transnational families into being.

What are the consequences of these technologies for family members? How are care and love expressed at a distance and how might digital technologies be implicated in the processes of monitoring and control? What are the types of co-presence engendered by the 'always on' connectivity that migrants and their families increasingly experience? Does mediated communication solve the problems of separation, as is often claimed in policy circles in the developing world context (Madianou, 2016b)? Transnational mothering and the family separation it often entails are considered the social costs of migration the developing nations have to pay in return for their remittances which keep their economies afloat (Parreñas,

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2001). The Philippines has come to exemplify the phenomenon of transnational mothering with 10 per cent of its population working overseas and over nine million children estimated to live without one or both their parents (Parreñas, 2008). The chapter will address the above questions drawing on long-term, multi-sited ethnographic work with transnational families. For over 10 years I have been working with Filipina migrant workers in the UK and their children and other family members who remain in the Philippines. The aim of this chapter is not to report the findings of this research, which have been published extensively elsewhere (Madianou, 2012; 2016a; Madianou & Miller, 2012), but to develop the contours of mediated family life in conditions of prolonged separation.<sup>1</sup>

My argument is that communication technologies do not only become an additional language through which family members express their emotions and manage their relationships; they are also the environments in which these relationships are enacted. This applies particularly to transnational family members who experience extended separation, often for several years. In the research on which this chapter is based, family visits occurred on average every two years while the longest period without visits was 13 years (not unusual for undocumented migrants). In the absence of physical co-presence, digital media become the environments in which relationships unfold. In other words, transnational family members 'do family' *with* but also *in* media. Further, the digital traces of communication technologies represent the actual relationship between, say, a parent and a teenage daughter. The design features of digital media visualize both actual relationships and the ways in which they depart from expectations and

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normative ideals. It is in this sense that digital media become constitutive of the relationships.

The chapter will first examine the way in which digital affordances become the tools that facilitate the expression of emotions and the management of relationships. The starting point here is that platforms and affordances are understood as a composite environment of polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2013). Family members navigate the environment of communicative opportunities that is polymedia in order to manage care and control in the family context. Navigating polymedia is constrained by power dynamics which are key for understanding personal and social relationships. Power is also located in the politics of platforms and algorithms (Gillespie, 2014; van Dijck, 2013 among others) which have implications for privacy, surveillance, the monetization of sociality and ultimately users' experience of polymedia. As digital media facilitate different types of presence, polymedia environments become the canvas on which relationships unfold. By constituting presence and facilitating different types of co-presence media technologies become constitutive of relationships themselves.

### **Polymedia**

Polymedia is a sociotechnical approach that places equal weight on both social relationships and the design architecture and technical capabilities of social and mobile media. The basic premise here is that media technologies need to be understood as a composite environment of communicative opportunities – rather than as discrete technologies. Mobile and social media are not neutral conveyors of

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content. They have design and other software features which potentially enable or constrain communication practices and interactions. These features are theorized as affordances – essentially understood as the opportunities for action enabled by digital media platforms and applications (boyd, 2014; Hutchby, 2001). Affordances can be low level (design features such as the ‘like’ button which is common on social media platforms) or high level, essentially referring to the dynamics enabled by design or technical capabilities (Bucher & Hellmond, 2017). For example, a platform with asynchronous temporal structure (such as a messaging platform) can afford its users more control over their self-presentation (Baym, 2015). Synchronous platforms such as video calling afford users less control, but potentially increased emotional immediacy. As platforms proliferate they are treated as an integrated environment of affordances which is potentially available to users. This shift becomes evident when comparing the present with past situations when users relied on a single technology (such as letters) in order to keep in touch at a distance. For well over a century letters were the primary means through which migrants kept in touch with their relatives who remained in the sending countries (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1984). In our study of Filipino migrant families we found that while writing and receiving letters is fondly remembered – even romanticized – by migrants and their families, letter writing was also the source of frustration amongst family members who were aware of the time lag of letters (Madianou & Miller, 2011). While letters took on average three to four weeks to arrive from London to a province in the Philippines, it is possible today to experience continuous videocalling by leaving the webcam on for hours. As users have access to numerous applications, platforms and devices they

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are able to exploit the affordances of each in order to compensate for the limitations of the others. Rather than focusing on the properties or affordances of specific technologies, polymedia emphasizes how users navigate media environments and choose platforms from a range of communicative opportunities in order to suit their needs. Choosing a medium among several available ones becomes key to how people manage relationships and how they express emotions (Madianou & Miller, 2013). For example, those wanting to keep some distance from their interlocutors can choose an asynchronous platform such as email or a messaging app. In this context, social media are defined relationally within this integrated structure from a user's point of view.

Navigating polymedia is not a free-flowing practice but occurs within conditions of power. Questions of access, digital literacy and cost are hugely important preconditions for even polymedia environments to exist (Madianou & Miller, 2013). Even when these basic preconditions are fulfilled, choosing a platform over another will entail a number of constraints. Algorithms organize, select and promote content across platforms (Gillespie, 2014). Algorithms recommend other platforms anticipating the preferences of users whilst legitimating such practices under an assurance of impartiality (Gillespie, 2014). At the same time, platforms – which are private corporations operating for profit – monetize sociality by turning users' data into a sellable commodity with implications for privacy and surveillance (van Dijck, 2013). Users operate within this environment which in turn constrains and shapes their platform choices.

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Power is also present in the relationships in question. Family relationships are fundamentally asymmetrical, grounded in social, gender and cultural norms. For example, being a mother is determined by sociocultural expectations and gender roles which vary from country to country. Motherhood in the Philippines, where migration is culturally accepted and models of collective parenting have existed for centuries, is different from motherhood in Britain (Madianou, 2012). At a more personal level, relationships also depend on power dynamics which differ according to family and which in turn shape decisions about communication. The emotional consequences of polymedia depend on their uses by actual people in specific socioeconomic and cultural contexts. This is why the chapter adopts a sociotechnical perspective which places equal weight on social relationships and the design features of social and mobile media. The discussion will examine the intersection of a range of factors that include design features, socioeconomic infrastructure, cultural norms and relationship expectations.

### **Doing family 'with' polymedia: care and control in distributed family life**

By exploiting the affordances in polymedia environments users discover additional tools to express emotions and manage relationships. Choices may be constrained by algorithms and platform policies, but even within this constraining context users are able to choose platforms to suit different communicative needs. In this sense polymedia become tools for emotional expression. The following example from my fieldwork with Filipino transnational families will help illustrate how

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navigating polymedia can be understood as an emotional language. The story of Janice and Lisa will reveal how transnational family members express emotions *through* and *with* polymedia.

Janice arrived in London in 2006, as a domestic worker. She had previously lived in Hong Kong for several years where she also worked as a live-in domestic. Janice left three children behind in the family home in a province near Manila. Her children, who were aged between 3 and 5 years old when their mother left, are all adults now. For almost two decades, Janice could only be mother to her children through mediated practices: from the weekly phone calls and later the daily SMSs, to the day-long skype sessions and the constant stream of status updates and photographs on social media platforms. Of course, Janice's care was also expressed through the regular sending of remittances (McKay, 2007) as well as her annual visits. But on the whole, in the absence of physical co-presence, this family, just like millions of other Filipino transnational families, came into being through mediated communication. The letters, phone calls, emails, texts, instant messages, status updates, video calls and digital photographs are all fragments of family life that is distributed across continents.

This is not to say that Janice family's experience with transnational communication was necessarily successful. As was typical among my participants, while the mother was particularly enthusiastic about the ability of technology to allow her to practice intensive mothering at a distance, the children were rather ambivalent about the consequences of this remote mothering. Even among Janice's children there was significant variation in the experience of remote mothering. For



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example, her two youngest boys were moderately positive about the way mobile and social media enabled communication with their mother. By contrast, their eldest sister, Lisa, was initially very negative about transnational communication. For Lisa this was down to her fraught relationship with her mother. Lisa's experience reflects about half the left-behind participants who found that communication technologies didn't help in improving the quality of family life at a distance and even amplified conflicts. However, even Lisa's experience wasn't static, but changed over the years – as the story below will reveal.

Janice's story is particularly poignant because of the conditions that propelled her to migrate. Having suffered an abusive relationship with her ex-husband migration was not only an economic lifeline, but also a way out of gender violence and personal humiliation. Janice left for Hong Kong without telling anyone about her plan to migrate – to do so would risk thwarting her plans as she was sure her husband would not let her go. Instead Janice told her children that she was going shopping. She never came back. Lisa, the eldest daughter, was five years old at the time and for a long time was unable to forgive her mother for not keeping her promise to return that day. Lisa's recollection of her mother's departure generated emotions which were still raw when I met her at the age of 21.

For years Lisa refused to speak to her mother on the phone. This changed when Lisa was in her late teens and discovered the reasons why her mother had to go and why she kept that decision secret. This understanding engendered empathy; yet Lisa found it hard to share her feelings with her mother. When I first met Lisa in 2009 she was only starting to maintain regular communication with her mother,

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mainly through emails and text messages. Over the 10 years that I've been following the two women's lives I have been able to observe the gradual melting of the ice through a number of mediated practices.

Shortly after I first met Lisa, she started scanning old family photographs and letters which she turned into collages. She sent these pdf files to her mother, who in turn displayed the artwork in her bedsit where I first saw the laminated collages on the wall. Lisa had found a way to retell the family history which was cathartic. The process of selecting the photographs, juxtaposing and assembling them helped her emotional healing process. Every time an email delivered her daughter's digital artwork, Janice felt the ice melting bit by bit. When Lisa's emails became longer and her messages became more frequent Janice was overcome with joy. Was this the way her daughter told her 'I understand'? Not long after that period both mother and daughter acquired smartphones and immersed themselves in an 'always on' culture of connectivity. Apart from communicating with several friends and relatives, both mother and daughter used their smartphones to keep in touch with each other.

Mother and daughter are heavy Facebook users and their interactions over the years reveal an increasingly warm, witty and playful relationship. Janice has discovered a friend in Lisa and Lisa knows her mum is her strongest supporter. When Janice posts selfies of herself dressed up before going out in London, Lisa makes playful comments about her mother's looks. Lisa offers relationship advice to her mother, who is involved in a long distance relationship with another Filipino overseas worker whom she met in an online forum. Janice reposts Lisa's posts about her new business in the Philippines. Two years ago Janice walked Lisa down the aisle

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at her wedding and when Lisa's difficult pregnancy meant she had to stay in bed for months she spent hours on Skype on a daily basis in order to offer moral support and relieve her daughter's boredom. Janice works as a live-in cook and keeps her smartphone on the kitchen counter all day long. Mother and daughter often exchange dozens of messages during Janice's morning shifts when she prepares meals for her employers.

In the 10 years that I have known Janice and Lisa I have witnessed the transformation of their relationship. Although social and mobile media did not cause this transformation they have been integral in this process. From the reluctant phone calls and the scanned photographs and collages sent as email attachments, to the daily Skype calls and playful banter over a series of messages, mediated practices have both revealed the relationship dynamics, but also helped to shift them. It is possible here to see how platforms and their associated affordances became the language through which Janice and Lisa have expressed emotions and managed their relationships. When the frequency of Lisa's messages increased, this in itself was a sign of care – irrespective of the actual content of the messages. Text messages and emails initially gave Lisa more control over the process of reconciliation when a phone call, or videocall would have been too intrusive. Having control was vital for the daughter who had been hurt at a young age and was treading carefully in her attempt to reach out to the mother. Lisa's scanned photos were not just digital photos, but also signs of rapprochement and healing. More recently, the playful banter and generous Skype calls enabled the consolidation of newfound mother-daughter solidarity.

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Janice and Lisa's story is one example of how family members do family with polymedia. Choosing platforms within the composite environment of affordances that is polymedia becomes a way – a tool – to express emotions and manage relationships. The language of polymedia isn't only a vocabulary of care. Lisa and Janice's story may be a narrative of progressive rapprochement, intimacy and care, but there are several other examples where polymedia become tools for monitoring and control. Greta's story below illustrates how transnational communication occurs along the continuum of care and control.

Greta arrived in the UK as a domestic worker leaving three children behind. Greta practices intensive mothering at a distance using a range of platforms. A constant flow of messages and video calls with own mother and sister, who care for her three boys, enable her to micromanage her children's homework, the weekly shopping lists and the house renovations for which she pays with her remittances. Mobile messaging apps allow for multi-sided communications with several family members thus intensifying practices of microcoordination (Ling & Lai, 2016). Greta maintains regular contact with her youngest son's tutor who helps him in maths, his weakest subject. The messages from the tutor allow Greta to be in control of her son's education and in turn inform her own interactions with the boy when she supervises his homework. Once her sons were old enough to have mobile phones of their own Greta got them smartphones and they exchange messages through Messenger and Viber. However, in order to 'really feel close' to her sons Greta prefers video or voice calls through platforms such as Viber or Skype. When her sons were younger they often left the webcam on for hours, almost achieving a sense of

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co-presence, but as the boys became teenagers they are less available for long chats. Although Greta misses the long calls, she has found some comfort in the constant stream of information available through social media which provide rich cues about her sons' everyday life. Even though Greta may not speak to her oldest son for almost a week she still knows a great deal about his daily life through his status updates which appear on her news feed. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Greta is constantly logged on to her Facebook account which she checks several times each day. Scouring her sons' profiles for cues about their lives is a form of monitoring. Any concerns will be reported to her sister and mother as well as the teenage boys themselves in the form of admonishments and advice. Other participants told me that they had access to their children's social media passwords so that they could have more control over their interactions. Care and control are deeply enmeshed in 'doing family' and polymedia environments are utilized as much for intimacy as for monitoring and disciplining.

The visibility of social and mobile media is key to processes of control. Migrant mothers often stressed their need to see whether their children are being fed and looked after or whether house repairs are being done properly. The importance of being in control becomes evident when we compare the older situation when migrants left their villages and returned after several years only to find that their children were wearing the same clothes, the house had never been rebuilt and the remittances had been siphoned to other causes or people. Having access to visual evidence is reassuring for mothers who toil away abroad in order to offer a better life and education to their children and build a family home (the two

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most important goals of migration). The sense of being in control and micromanaging the household at a distance is also linked to gender expectations about what a proper mother should be in the Philippine context. Supervising weekly shopping lists and the children's menus is a way of performing motherhood and caring at a distance. Rather than emancipating women, polymedia environments tether mothers to these more traditional gender roles as has been observed in early studies of mobile media among US women (Rakow & Navarro, 1992), but rather than resent the 'double shift' (Hochschild, 1989; Parreñas, 2005) my participants welcomed the additional caregiving role in addition to their breadwinning duties. It was striking that amongst most of my participants migrant mothers were the main household breadwinners whilst also performing a great deal of care at a distance. By contrast, the fathers who often remained in the Philippines, were largely absent from their children's lives (for a discussion see Madianou & Miller, 2012). This attests to the strong hold of gender norms and expectations about motherhood in the Philippines – what Parreñas calls the force of domesticity (2008). Polymedia were fundamental in the negotiation of ambivalence that is at the heart of migration but also motherhood (Madianou, 2012).

The cues available in polymedia environments enable more direct forms of monitoring. Low level affordances such as the 'online status' and 'seen status' which are popular in messaging platforms and social media are often used to convey information about the movements and practices of significant others. Over the years such information is available in an increasingly indirect way and not the result of direct interaction. My participants experience a peripheral awareness of their

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children's daily lives through status updates, location services, postings on friends' walls, photos they're tagged onto and their 'likes'. Parents are not the intended audience of much of this communication, yet this is a rich source of information and knowledge about their teenage or young adult children (Madianou, 2016a). Some participants explicitly exploit design features of social media such as 'online / seen status' in order to keep track of each other. This was more common amongst those in romantic relationships at a distance. For example, Maria Theresa and her Filipino boyfriend (an overseas worker in the Middle East) have agreed to turn their status to 'available / online' as soon as they return home from work. This gives each other a sense of their daily rhythms but is also a form of monitoring: any deviation from the regular pattern raises questions about the other's whereabouts.

Unsurprisingly, processes of control are often contested and lead to conflict. Social media are known to complicate or collapse social boundaries, often with embarrassing or unpleasant consequences for those concerned (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Participants often develop their own strategies in order to manage their parents', or relatives' monitoring gaze. This is another example of how the affordances of polymedia can be exploited to manage social surveillance and attempts to control. Participants sometimes change their privacy settings (although on the whole my participants tended to use the default settings suggesting different norms about privacy compared to Western contexts). More common was for participants to have two social media accounts; given it's almost impossible to refuse 'friends' requests from relatives, as this would go against established Filipino norms, the solution is often the splitting of accounts for different purposes (Madianou &

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Miller, 2012). Resistance and control are negotiated through the power structures of polymedia. More broadly, the architecture of social and mobile media valorizes surveillance which occurs at different levels (from state, commercial to personal) therefore normalizing everyday interpersonal practices.

### **Doing family 'in' polymedia: presence in media environments**

Doing family enmeshes practices of care and control enacted through polymedia. These are messy, complex processes and some families cope better than others. As elaborated extensively elsewhere, social and mobile media do not solve the problems of family separation (Madianou, 2016b; Madianou & Miller, 2012). The outcomes of transnational communication depend on a number of factors such as the age of the child at the time of the mother's migration, the media available for communication at that time, the quality of the pre-existing relationship and the quality of the caregiving arrangements (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Even though communication technologies do not solve the problems of separation they become instrumental in the expression of care and the management of control within the family context. Here I argue that in conditions of prolonged separation such as those experienced by my participants, polymedia environments become the space in which relationships are experienced and enacted. This is evident if we return to Janice and Lisa's story. Although several factors played a role in the increasing intimacy between mother and daughter, the polymedia environment that gradually became available to them was instrumental in the unfolding of the relationship. It is hard to imagine how mother and daughter would have been able to develop their bond without access to a range of platforms, from social media to messaging apps



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and from text messages to videocalls. Since moving to London in 2008 (which is the period that mother and daughter developed regular communication) Janice visits the Philippines every 18 months on average. In the absence of face-to-face co-presence polymedia provide the environment in which co-presence can be experienced.

Lisa's digital collages of family photographs can be understood as 'co-presence by proxy' where material objects and digital forms come to represent absent others (Baldassar, 2008). This example echoes a study of Karen refugee children in Melbourne who use digital photographs to construct a 'family imaginary' which signifies 'the persistence of family against all odds' (Robertson, Wilding & Gifford, 2016: 233). The family imaginary in Lisa's digital artwork was a reunited family, where generations coexisted in one symbolic space. The digital nature of the artwork (its replicability and retrievability) meant that this imaginary could be shared across family members. The family imaginary exists in a digital space.

Family life also exists in social media and message threads saved in messaging apps. The digital traces of interactions create a tangible presence of family members. Lisa and Janice's playful banter on Skype and Messenger is proof of their evolving relationship. Lisa's messages bring her to life which is why Janice often rereads them on her phone, for example when on public transport. As mother and daughter only meet face to face once every 18 months the messages become Lisa – they embody her which is why Janice once told me that she could almost hear her daughter's snarky voice when reading her messages. In this case we can observe what Licoppe termed 'connected presence', an ongoing 'dialogue' through short messages and calls which helps 'maintain the feeling of a permanent connection'

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(Licoppe 2004: 141), turn into proxy co-presence. The content permanence and retrievability of social and mobile media turn the fleeting flow of daily messages (an essential feature of 'connected presence') into a permanent relationship archive. As the mundane nature of daily life evident in practices of microcoordination (Ling & Lai, 2016) becomes an archive ready to be searched, it acquires additional emotional salience. Lisa's messages become her when the mother re-reads them conjuring up her daughter's voice whilst travelling on a bus through London.

Family members also exist in the digital traces that they leave behind: the status symbol and 'last seen' signs on Skype, Viber or Messenger or the posts on social media. For mothers such as Greta and Donna such signs constitute a digital spectre of their children as they come online and interact with their friends. For a mother who can't see whether her child has returned home at the agreed time, the status symbol on a platform is a type of presence. Digital cues come to represent significant others who appear in and fade from polymedia environments. I have theorized this type of co-presence as 'ambient co-presence' in order to refer to the peripheral awareness of distant others made possible through the popularization of smartphones, tablets and wireless services which have engendered an 'always on' culture of ubiquitous connectivity (Madianou, 2016a). Functionalities of social media such as the 'news feed' and location services combined with the portability of internet-enabled devices means that users can be peripherally aware of the actions and daily rhythms of their family members on a constant basis and whilst on the move.

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The content permanence, retrievability and visibility of social media interactions also facilitate how family members aspire to present themselves to their wider social circles. This is why several messages are aimed at projecting a certain image of family: united, successful and loving despite prolonged separation. Posts containing photographs from family reunions or school graduations often serve the purpose of normative representation of the family. Similarly, photographs of school reports or of goods sent as gifts tell a story of successful migration as well as family life: a straight-A school report signifies that the project of migration has paid off (as remittances are typically used to pay expensive private school fees), while photographs of gifts sent by the migrant are both proof of her economic success and the fulfillment of duty to her family. When these images are posted on semi-public social media sites they become projections of how family ought to be. Needless to say, such normative ideals are not shared across all family members. Projections of a harmonious and prosperous family life may be privately contested, especially by teenagers, although I've never come across any public expression that even attempts to undermine the official family narrative.

It is possible to discern the ways in which presence is constituted in polymedia environments: presence by proxy (Baldassar, 2008), connected presence (Licoppe, 2004) and ambient co-presence (Madianou, 2016a). All these forms of presence and co-presence co-exist and supplement each other as well as physically co-present communication during the annual or biannual visits. By constituting presence through polymedia environments we begin to see how family life occurs not just with, but also in polymedia. Polymedia environments are the vital space for

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relationships to unfold. Regardless of their nature, relationships are lived in the symbolic space made up of technological affordances, algorithms and APIs. In the absence of regular physical co-presence, family members navigate this complex space in order to enact and experience their children, partners and relatives. The affordances of polymedia environments visualize both actual relationships and family imaginaries – the normative projections of relationships. At the same time polymedia serve as reminders of the ways in actual relationships depart from expectations and normative ideals. It is in this sense that digital media become constitutive of the relationships.

Family life in polymedia is a form of ‘media life’ (Deuze, 2013). The polymedia approach outlined here describes the contours and micro-workings of media life as a process of mediation. Here I have offered an ethnographic grounding of polymedia life which details the deep entanglement of family life with technology. For migrant mothers and their children who remain in the sending countries, family life emerges through one’s entanglement with polymedia. This process of mediation ‘becomes a key trope for understanding and articulating our being in, and becoming with, the technological world’ (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. xv). Relationships unfold through a human and nonhuman (technological) assemblage. Presence comes into being through and in the sociotechnical assemblage that is polymedia. It is in this sense that doing family occurs with but also in polymedia.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that polymedia environments do not only become an additional language through which transnational family members express and manage care and control; they are also the environments in which family relationships are enacted. Transnational family members 'do family' *with* but also *in* media. For families whose members experience prolonged separation, often for decades, polymedia become the vital space in which relationships unfold. For parents and children who haven't met for years polymedia provide the canvas on which the relationship is built. Without this environment, the relationship, of course, might still exist, but it would be a different one. Doing family life in polymedia under conditions of accentuated separation is also linked to the ways that affordances conjure up different forms of presence and co-presence. Content permanence and retrievability mean that mundane everyday practices such as the playful banter on messaging apps become permanent, searchable relationship archives. For a mother who hasn't seen her daughter for over a year, her messages or digital photographs conjure up her presence – they become her. Likewise, for a parent who is not at home to see whether their teenager has returned home at the agreed time, their status symbol on social media becomes a spectre of presence. I call this peripheral awareness of distant others made possible through the popularization of portable internet devices and wireless services, ambient co-presence (Madianou, 2016a). The affordances of polymedia environments make both actual relationships and family imaginaries – the normative projections of relationships – tangible. At the same time polymedia are reminders of the ways in which actual relationships depart from expectations and normative ideals. It is in this sense that digital media become

Madianou, M. (2018). Families *in* Polymedia. In Papacharissi, Z. (Ed.) *Networked Self and Birth, Life, Death* (pp. 89-103), London and New York: Routledge.

constitutive of the relationships. This is a fundamental process of mediation which reveals the deep complex entanglement between family life and technology.

The aim of this chapter was to outline the contours of transnational life *with* and *in* polymedia supported by ethnographic examples from 10 years of research with Filipino transnational families. Although I have aimed to retain the integrity of ethnographic examples, inevitably, in such a short chapter, the nuanced and complex context of migration, motherhood and inequalities in the Philippine context is not fully expounded. Ethnography here is subservient to illustrating the wider thesis. A fuller account of the ethnography, including a detailed discussion of the structures and motivations of migration, gender politics and digital and social inequalities can be found elsewhere (Madianou, 2012; 2016b; Madianou & Miller, 2012).

The chapter has focused on a particular type of family: transnational families whose members experience prolonged separation. I am aware that not all migrants have access to the rich communicative environments of my Filipino participants.<sup>2</sup> Digital inequalities (including inequalities in digital skills and literacy) continue to exist and further disadvantage already marginalised populations (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013). Still, there is enough evidence that supports the view that migrants, because of their strong communication needs, are sophisticated users of new media (Fortunati, Pertierra & Vincent, 2012). More broadly, I argue that the case of transnational families and the conditions of prolonged separation and accentuated dependence on media environments bring to light aspects of mediation which have wider relevance for understanding the mutual shaping of technology and social life.

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The polymedia approach outlined here describes the contours and micro-workings of mediation which may be relevant for other types of families and social relationships more generally.

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<sup>1</sup> The chapter draws on participant observation, online ethnography and over 200 interviews with Filipina migrant women in London and Cambridge and their family members in the Philippines. The research took place between 2007 and 2010 and has continued intermittently to the time of writing (2017). Apart from participant observation in physically co-present settings (such as participants' homes, cultural centres, churches, barrio fiestas, cafes and malls among others) I have also conducted online ethnography on social media platforms, especially Facebook. The findings discussed here are informed by my long-term immersion in the lives of these families, some of whom I have known for over a decade. My writing is also informed by interviews with various stakeholders in the migration process including government officials and representatives from migration agencies, advocacy groups and Philippine telecommunications companies. Fieldwork in the early stages of the research, was conducted jointly with Daniel Miller. I would like to acknowledge the support of the ESRC in funding the study 'Migration, ICTs and the Transformation of Transnational Family Life' (RES-000-22-2266).

<sup>2</sup> My participants like many other Filipino overseas workers (OFWs) employed in the care sector would be considered middle class in the Philippine context. Migrants are already typically middle or lower middle class prior to migration as they have college degrees in nursing or other professions (Constable, 1999). It is those who already possess the economic, social and cultural capital who can undertake the expensive project of migration (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Migration increases OFWs financial status as remittances are used for children's private education as well as consumption (including communication devices on which transnational families invest heavily).