

# Telecenters as *Association Stations*: The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Migratory Processes\*

Lupicinio ÍÑIGUEZ-RUEDA, Luz María MARTÍNEZ,  
Juan MUÑOZ-JUSTICIA, María Carmen PEÑARANDA-CÓLERA  
*Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*  
Anna VITORES GONZÁLEZ\*\*  
*Lancaster University*

## ABSTRACT

The massive appearance of access points for both ICT and conventional telephones in the past decade, aimed specifically at the immigrant population, although they are not the sole end users, justifies the consideration in this article of these new socio-technical spaces as nodes for creating and maintaining diverse social networks, both national and transnational. For this purpose, we present a qualitative study using document gathering techniques and ethnographic techniques to account for these technological spaces. The results of the analysis offer a view of these telecenters as “association stations”, their importance in transnational migrant experience and, lastly, their importance in relations and the achievement of integration.

*Keywords:* 1. telecenters, 2. association stations, 3. social networks, 4. information and communication technologies, 5. Spain.

## Los locutorios como *estación de asociaciones*: El lugar de las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación en los procesos migratorios

## RESUMEN

Durante la última década, la aparición masiva de puntos de acceso tanto a las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación como a la telefonía convencional, dirigidos principalmente a la población inmigrante –aunque no sean éstos sus únicos usuarios finales–, motiva la consideración, en este artículo, de estos nuevos espacios sociotécnicos como nodos de creación y mantenimiento de redes sociales diversas, nacionales y transnacionales. Con este fin presentamos un estudio cualitativo, en el que a través de técnicas de recopilación de documentos y etnográficas se analizan estos espacios tecnológicos para conocer su función y lugar sociales. Como resultado del análisis se presentan los locutorios como *estación de asociaciones*, así como su importancia en la experiencia transnacional del migrante y, finalmente, en las relaciones y la *performance* de la integración.

*Palabras clave:* 1. locutorios, 2. estación de asociaciones, 3. redes sociales, 4. tecnologías de la información y la comunicación, 5. España.

\* Text originally written in Spanish.

\*\* Authors are listed in alphabetical order.

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

The extraordinary book *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (2004), points out some of the details of the migratory experience which, despite the time that has elapsed, have an astonishingly contemporary feel. These authors hold that immigrants' main problems are formulated in terms of individual integration or non-integration. What is expected, they say, is for the values of their society of origin to be gradually replaced by the values of the receiving society.

However, contrary to this trend, Thomas and Znaniecki (2004) believe that issues concerning individual integration are secondary. Indeed, according to the authors, the main process is the creation of a "new society" in the host country. This creation combines some of the features of the society of origin with those derived from one's insertion into the receiving society. They also hold that this process is not individual but rather collective and that integration occurs in a group context in contact with another "civilization" that influences it in various ways.

These assumptions led Thomas and Znaniecki (2004) to undertake their well-known research, a social science classic, whose aim was to determine how this new society was formed, whose result, "in its structure and attitudes" is neither that of the sending or receiving country, and instead something specific and genuine comprising the set of original traditions, immigrants' living conditions and the social values of the host society. It is not a process of enculturation into a new society but rather a process of creating

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a new society where a central element would also be the way the immigrant perceives and interprets the host society. The social setting in which the immigrant lives is not actually the host society but rather than new hybrid society. And it is into this hybrid that the immigrant is incorporated and where he has to adapt.

The construction of immigration as a problem is linked to the ignorance of these aspects pointed out in Thomas and Znaniecki's (2004) book and its approach also depends on the recognition or otherwise of these processes. What do we define as a problem? What is regarded as the nature of these problems and the way they can be dealt with yields different results depending on whether or not this point of view is considered. Thus, for example, these authors cite individualization, efficiency, abnormality, employment, relations between the sexes, social happiness, cultural conflicts and the ideal organization of culture as problems. At the same time, they focus on the negative effects that sometimes occur during the integration process, such as demoralization, which they understand as problems concerning the organization of the immigrant's personal life.

These questions make it possible to create a fascinating new agenda of analysis and eventually of intervention, regarding immigration. For example, refraining from seeing the integration process as a personal issue and one that simply involves socialization in the host society, and seeing it instead as a process, with an essential mediator, which is the creation of this hybrid society, opens up a field of analysis where the immigrant's agency is fully acknowledged, since it is his action that creates this society. On the other hand, acknowledging the creation of this society paves the way for refraining from assuming the host society as an essence that should gradually assume this new society or sub-society as an element that coexists with many other human groups, whether or not they are based on identities that occur within it. This will undoubtedly make it possible to understand and eventually tolerate and assume the change in the receiving society.

We believe that in today's societies, we are unlikely to find many variations in regard to the society analyzed by Thomas

and Znaniecki (2004). Flows of migrants from very diverse places are installed provisionally or definitively in a different society that is very different from their own while at the same time, integration processes are triggered with the same characteristics as those indicated by these authors and probably with similar if not identical effects.

However, a new variable is beginning to emerge, the presence of new information and communication technologies (ICT). Although in the Chicago study (Thomas and Znaniecki, 2004), the communication link with the society of origin was letters, it is now communication mediated by ICT, in a new context of “digital ecology” (Diminescu, 2010). It obviously retains certain epistolary features, since letters continue to be written and e-mails are often written as though they were letters (Peñaranda, 2010), yet it can clearly be indicated as a new element in its own right.

As Diminescu (2008) says, immigrants are actors in a culture of links. This culture can be said to have begun within the framework of a global system of mobilities. Circulation is a sign of our times and immigrants develop networks and engage in activities, lifestyles and ideologies that link their country of origin to the host country (Diminescu, 2002, 2008). This does not mean that links used not to exist—Thomas and Znaniecki’s (2004) study clearly demonstrates their existence—but rather that this culture of links has become visible through ICT. Mobility and connectivity are inseparable from the definition of migrant in this century. Today, the break with or suspension of values, cultural norms and even roots, always possible in the migratory event, has been transformed into circulation and maintaining contact. Now is the “era of the connected migrant” (Diminescu, 2008).

As this same author points out, this statement requires a different analytical approach. It is essential to locate the migrant within a global system of mobilities rather than regarding him as an exception and to understand the relational installation as a social device whereby a migrant organizes his life in a state of mobility. Integration must be reconsidered within the specific context of the multiplication of displacements and participation in a variety

of possible worlds. During this process, ICT play a key role which must be revealed. Several phenomena such as telepresence, the establishment of virtual networks and other phenomena associated with ICT make them crucial in the evolution and changes in the practices of the migrant's relational installation.

Our research is located precisely here and offers information on the way relational installation occurs and the role ICT play in it. Immigrants not only use ICT but, as actors in what we have called the culture of links, are hybrids if not cyborgs,<sup>2</sup> since they are inseparable from ICT. An immigrant is no longer a person in the conventional sense of the term but a set of constituent parts that includes human elements, such as the person and non-human elements such as telephones, computers, telephone cards and computer networks, making him a sort of "homo cybernautus" (Dewitte, 2002). The locus from which this new actor operates is varied and multiple (Molnár and Karvalics, 2002), but its epitome in Spain in the last decade has been the *locutorio*.<sup>3</sup> And that has been the focus of our research.

Telecenters are spaces which, for the past few years, have been available in cities all over the world (Scopsi, 2003) as profit-making businesses that mainly offer a range of technological services such as telephone service, prepaid cards for using this type of communication, Internet access, photocopying and fax service, recharging mobile phones or even money sending and courier service.

It is precisely the importance of technology in telecenters that has led us to use the conception of sociological work proposed by the Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Tirado and Domènech, 2005;

<sup>2</sup> Ever since Donna Haraway (1995) published her "Manifiesto para *cyborgs*" (Manifiesto for Cyborgs), the figure of the cyborg, as a simultaneously cybernetic and organic, has become a metaphor widely used in social and human sciences (Tirado and Mora, 2004). In our societies, where technologies and person constantly merge, making it more difficult than ever before to distinguish where some begin and others end, the metaphor of the cyborg makes it possible to analyze social relations by diluting classical dichotomies, such as the difference between humans and machines or between what is physical and what is virtual.

<sup>3</sup> From now on, the term "telecenters" will be used to refer to these spaces. Although it is not an exact translation of the Spanish word, it is the closest approximation.

Latour, 2001, 2005) as our theoretical approach. The main contribution of this approach is to lend significance to technology in the explanation of social phenomena and in the production of social life. This perspective shows that social groups, organizations and institutions are created and maintained through closely related technical and social media. In short, it is not only persons that construct society, since artifacts, technical objects and what is characterized as non-human embody and structure human relations and make them endure.

The general research question has been the way telecenters link, reproduce or transform socio-technical associations. In order to answer this question, we have used ethnographic techniques, which allow us to interact, observe what is happening and listen to what is being said during the everyday activities of these businesses. And indeed, they have allowed us to study how the meanings, perceptions and practices of persons who walk through their doors and frequent them turn them into sociopetal places that reformulate the business sense of the entrance-service-exit of clients into what we have called “association stations” or fluid spaces that encourage multiple, technological, interpersonal and community links of possible stability, and the implications and effects this creates. So we will describe the telecenters as “association stations” and explain their importance in the migrant’s transnational experience and lastly, in the discussion, we will see the importance of the telecenter in the relations and “performance” of integration.<sup>4</sup>

### *Telecenters*

As we have pointed out, telecenters are urban spaces in which it is possible to access various ICT at relatively affordable prices. These spaces have proliferated enormously in several urban areas and

<sup>4</sup> We used the term “performance” to refer to the centrality of action in the construction and understanding of social reality. We therefore understand that it is in behavior and everyday work, in other words, in performance, that the meaning of integration or transnationality is observed and made intelligible.

offer the possibility of creating and participating in social networks (Richer and Doré, 2004). They are spaces like Internet cafés and telecenters that enable one to connect to the Internet and make a telephone call at a relatively affordable price.

The access to ICT provided by these spaces shows that they all have something in common that characterizes them as technological places. However, although this characteristic gives them an unmistakable family air, there are differences and peculiarities that prevent one from seeing them as a homogenous whole and at the same time, make the telecenter different from other spaces.

The first difference concerns their diversity in the various countries. For example, Internet cafés are more common in some of them, whereas in Spain, telecenters are more abundant because of the variety of services they offer (Belli *et al.* 2007; Finkelievich, 2005; Peñaranda, 2008). The spaces are also distinguished by their characteristics and the uses made of them. For example, whereas Internet cafés provide access to the Internet and games on the web and are therefore usually frequented by young people, telecenters offer a broader range of services: although they do not usually have games on the Internet, they do offer telephone service, Internet access, fax and money sending service, etc.

Barcelona is an example of this, with a considerable increase at the beginning of this decade (Serra del Pozo, 2006), and accounting for a very high percentage of services provided by immigrants (Moreras, 2007). Their presence in the urban fabric and their specific characteristics as places that provide the population, particularly the itinerant or immigrant but also the established population, with all kinds of communication, are areas of enormous interest for the study of the processes and changes taking place in our post-modern society.

In short, both the abundance of telecenters in our most immediate environment and the characteristics and uses made of them and the profile of the persons that use them mean that, together with other researchers (Scopsi, 2004), we think it is crucial to regard telecenters as an object of study. This is particularly true if we recall that telecenters are not only organized as eminently

technological spaces but also that new types of relationships and social cohesion are emerging within them (Flecha and Fernández, 2002). The social networks established in and from telecenters are not only virtual (in other words, mediated by technologies) but these spaces have also become meeting places and places to establish face-to-face relationships (Nedelcu, 2002) in a sort of double helix model (Paragas, 2010).

As Enrique Santamaría (2002) notes, it is essential to insist on the aspects that refer to these social networks that immigrants operate as well as the strategies they create within the various social settings, so that we can see the ways in which they construct their own social mobilities, in which their interactions and relationships are linked and reconfigured in a different context from their context of origin and in which they function in numerous ways. And the telecenter is an ideal place for this.

The fact that they are urban spaces that combine various heterodox elements, both human and non-human, turns telecenters into spheres of research on the sociotechnical forms produced by ICT. What links and divides people in the urban space is not only constructed through institutions and political and social practices, but also, albeit less obviously and tangibly, through the information systems that comprise and structure ICT (Winner, 1987).

Thus, we analyze telecenters as spaces where these characteristics can be expressed, since they are enclaves that necessarily imply the interaction and agency of people and technology, the coexistence, juxtaposition and assembly of numerous sociotechnical natures, the interplay between the various technosocial devices combined there and the connections, uses and practices that lead to specific forms of socialization, subjectivities and different conceptions of identity.

We carried out the study by visiting the telecenters openly, in several locales (varying in size, services and zones, and with administrators and/or users of different origins) to observe what went on there. In particular, we observed the activity of various telecenters located in various parts of Barcelona (Ciutat Vella, Sant Antoni, Fort Pienc, Sants, and Poble Sec) and in various

municipalities in the metropolitan area (Cerdanyola del Vallès, Sabadell, and Castellar del Vallès). The criterion adopted has been that of geographical proximity, either to our workplace or to the researchers' place of residence. The observations were recorded in field diaries. In the course of the observations, key informants were identified,<sup>5</sup> who agreed to be interviewed or take part in discussion groups. These interviews were transcribed and included in these diaries.<sup>6</sup>

### *Ethnographic Observation*

The researchers visited the telecenters using the ethnographic method (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1994; Velasco and Díaz de Rada, 1997), since this allowed us to enter the field of study in order to be able to see the interplay of devices in action. Ethnography is also an appropriate mean of recording the divergent, fluid nature of the place, since the ethnographic researcher seeks to understand and reveal the process followed to change the “not knowing where [one is], socially speaking” (Hine, 2004:145). Its work involves recording the multiple contingencies and actions of subjects and various technologies, and becoming involved with them in order to achieve the codes that provide a link with the setting in which it is located and the orientation of this setting. Ethnography is a means of creating a link to a place or, as Augé (1995:30) says, “a methodical, renewed reflection on the category of otherness”.

Thus, during our participation in the telecenters, we engaged in several tasks that often took place at the same time, such as: observing and interpreting the elements contained in each establishment which, together with ICT, significantly distinguish these

<sup>5</sup> According to the logic of ethnography, key informants were identified through participatory observation, a technique that makes it possible to recognize who, in the context observed, occupies a social position that implies having more information.

<sup>6</sup> These observations took place at different times. Between July 2003 and July 2005, observations were carried out at six telecenters. The rest were carried out between November 2006 and September 2008.

locales (decorative features, information panels, translocal food and beverages on sale, etc.), interacting in these sites, using their services and establishing links with their users and administrators and above all, paying attention to the explanations provided by those who frequent the telecenters.

As a result of the fieldwork, we have 16 field diaries derived from the participant observation work, 27 interviews and four discussion groups. The interviews were carried out with people from Latin America [Colombia (eight), Chile (two), Argentina (four), Peru (four), Venezuela (one), Dominican Republic (three), Puerto Rico (one), Cuba (one), Honduras (one) and Bolivia (two)]. Participants' ages were divided into the following age groups: 18-25, three participants; 26-45, 22 participants; over 45, two participants. We organized four discussion groups with profiles of various participants in order to gather the largest possible variety of information on the psychosocial processes that emerge in the use of ICT in public and collective access and connection spaces: people who have participated in a process of family reunification, immigrants from various countries and MA students at a public university.

For the analysis of field diaries, interviews and discussion groups, we used the technique of thematic content analysis (Vázquez, 1996), an encoding procedure that permits thematic categorizations of a corpus not only of texts but also of images. To this end, all the information was recorded in a textual corpus. The corpus was subsequently divided into units. Thirdly, these units were grouped into categories following a criterion of analogy. In practice, this means grouping respondents together on the basis of the similarities between them in light of the criteria established according to the purpose of the research.

The first thing that emerges from these observations is the enormous heterogeneity as well as the different characterizations of these places as a function of the neighborhood where they are located both as regards the people that run the place and those that frequent them. Thus, we find places where various populations meet, most of which are from other countries.

The registration and description of the spaces, material, technologies, events, and interactions produced during the observation sessions were carried out without establishing any primacy, predominance or exceptionality in what was observed and the data and information gathered have also obviously included the reflections, interpretations and subjective experiences we had in the telecenters. This has all shifted us from initially not knowing where we were socially to providing us with a more global vision of the sense of the space-telecenter as a place that facilitates and even promotes the establishment of social networks, in which social mobility strategies are implemented that enable its users to engage in multiple forms of behavior. In this respect, the telecenter is, as we will establish at the end, reticulated rather than physical. We will now describe our interpretation of the telecenter as an “association station”.<sup>7</sup>

*The Telecenter as an “Association Station”: A Symbolic Place*

Telephone stations are depicted as somewhat paradoxical spaces. On the one hand, like the screens, cables and immaterial waves that define the commercial activity of a telecenter, this is a fluid, anonymous space of circulation, entries and exits; in short, a “neutral” or “border” territory (bearing in mind the fact that borders are non-identity places, limits between two demarcations) that people cross momentarily in order to link up with a specific virtual or geographic place through ICT. But just as the technology people use to connect with others in the telecenters (special offers on calls or cheap calls, fax, mail, Internet and its World Wide Web) services is diverse, the connection users establish is

<sup>7</sup> Although in previous papers, we talked about a “relationship station” on this occasion, influenced by Latour, we decided to talk about an “association station”. Latour (2005) proposes practicing a “sociology of associations”, as opposed to the classic “sociology of the social” that does not ignore non-human elements such as technologies. We therefore opted for “associations” rather than “relations” (a term usually circumscribed to the links between humans) in order to explore the links between human and non-human elements and thereby acknowledge the role of material issues in the shaping and duration of society.

also diverse, since people can browse for information, engage in leisure activities, contact people they either know or do not know, join groups or carry out procedures with institutions, among other things. In this respect, we have understood and interpreted the telecenter as a “station”, because, like a station, it is a transit area that provides travelers with a link for arriving at a geographical point. The telecenter also performs the function of providing a link between two points, even though the links in it may be achieved in an instantaneous, multiple form.

At the same time, supposedly neutral, border ICT (telephones, computers, faxes, cards, etc., mediators between two poles) are not neutral if one takes into account the practices carried out by people in their interaction with them, because these practices acquire marks and meanings, which are often the same as those that users transfer to ICT devices. Thus, in ICT/user practices, we find gender marks, for example: “When they request a specific computer...one of the main reasons is because it is quicker...But another reason might be...that perhaps there are lots of people who are going to see...other types of things...It is usually men who want to do this, so they go to the far end because they want to see pornography or something like that” (Álvaro, telecenter manager, Barcelona, April 2007).

And at the same time, like national brands, cards and their prices may have to do with national communities, which people need to identify:

A woman came in and said she bought this [card] yesterday but that it doesn't say it is for Ecuador. They explained that she has to dial 900, that it is a card for the whole world and that there are no cards that say “Ecuador”. She says she's scared to use it and then for it not to work. She said, OK, if that's how it is, that's OK, but if it doesn't work, she'll be back.

I have gone to the telecenter in the square looking for a cheap card. Unlike the other times when I have been here, today I am looking for a card to make calls within Europe. They only have two choices, whereas they have different cards for calling Latin America (Burgos, 2008).

This is the most striking aspect of our observations: that far from being “neutral”, momentary spaces, with no significant interaction outside the subject-technology (beyond doubts on how it works), Telecenters are often invested with symbols and marks of identity. The marks are sometimes incrustated in the names themselves, the furniture and the decoration:

The name of this place is Locutorio Latino (Latino Telecenter) ... The decoration of the telecenter includes the flags of Latin American countries and other objects characteristics of other parts of the world such as: plates with images of Venice, Venezuelan forms of transport, dolls with Cuban clothes, ballerinas from Brazil and a map of Colombia (Burgos, 2008).

In the services and activities offered: “They announce Dinero Exprés BBVA, Telegiros Transfer, Telefónica Movistar, Vodafone, a mini supermarket with Latino products, and the ‘Latino’ newspaper” (Flores, 2007).

When I came out of the booth and went to pay for the time I had used, I realized that on the counter, they had bracelets woven from colored thread, with the names of people, countries and signs. I asked how much they cost and whether they brought them in from somewhere ... I ordered a bracelet with the colors of the Mexican flag and the name of one of my flatmates (Burgos, 2008).

And in the references to time and space: “They have clocks with the time in different countries: 1) Peru, Colombia, Ecuador; 2) Senegal, Morocco; 3) Bolivia, Paraguay” (Flores, 2007).

And so, not all of them, obviously, but many of the telecenters observed are preferred by a specific national or cultural community: “I like the idea of meeting up with people from South America and if they are Peruvian, all the better. It cheers me up and sort of makes up for my family who aren’t here” (Mena, 2005).

And they reflect this identity in the space through material symbols. In this respect, the telecenter is a place for remembering one’s country and the referents of belonging to a place or a

community, a place where the nation is constructed (Garay, Martínez, and Peñaranda, 2004), a “virtual homeland” (Diminescu, 2010). Moreover, Telecenters are “national” in two respects: first of all, as we have just pointed out, because there are spaces that recreate the country of origin of those that attend them and secondly, because they are physically located within the territory of a specific nation. In this respect, we understand that the (re)creation of the nation offered by the telecenters acquires meaning within the framework of the idea of “banal nationalism” (Peñaranda, and Feliu, 2009). As Michael Billig points out (1998), even in stable nations, without explicit discussions of identity, citizens are constantly reminded of their nationality. Although the political leaders of these nations may not be nationalistic, in the militant sense, nationalism is always present: not only in the explicit policy that recalls one’s nation, but also in cultural products, textbooks, the streets of towns and cities, the balconies of official buildings and even the structure of newspapers. Because of their innocuousness and familiarity, this recollection goes unnoticed by the majority of citizens. However, this is not the case for recent arrivals, who are not only constantly reminded of their foreignness in their interactions with official institutions and other everyday relations but also perceive the diffuse signs that recreate the existence of the country in which they are located, on a daily basis. What they perceive is the way in which the nation is imagined, in the words of Anderson (1993). This is something to which many telecenters, as we have noted, respond by offering their own style of (re)creating nations.

### *Transnational Performance*

Thus, on the basis of these experiences, telecenters can be said to constitute, as a result of the demands, needs, uses and appropriations of the people that frequent and inhabit them, transnational spaces, in other words, no longer user/ICT border spaces, but rather spheres of cultural interpenetration. That is why we understand telecenters less as connective spaces than as linking spaces and as

a sort of “association stations” where the connections made not only show specific decontextualized person-machine links but a certain collectivity of shared or linking interests through which various flows such as exchanges, information, contexts, services and other appropriations are conveyed. And we are not using the term “linking” here in the sense of permanence or force, because, as we have seen, the links made in these spaces do not have to be central, nor do they necessarily affect more than one dimension of existence. They are, for example, specific relations linked to work.

Let us see some of the examples we have recorded on exchanges, information, contexts, services or other appropriations shown by the telephone station as a station and agency of associations:

Thus, for example, the space emerges as a vehicle of important information: “I start to observe the telecenter and see that it has a cork notice board where people put up messages, announcements and all kinds of offers: from rented accommodation to people offering cleaning services, car hire, cheap moving and discount flights” (Burgos, 2008).

It also becomes a space for the construction and distribution of knowledge:

I saw a woman sitting down, looking at people. When I came out of the booth and was going to pay, she stopped me and said: “Excuse me, do you know how to get to the civil registry office in Barcelona?” I said that I didn’t, so she smiled and said thank you. I thought that if there was Internet, I would ask for some time and find out with her. Then she asked another young woman who was coming out of another booth if she could tell her. She explained it to her and asked if she knew what documents she needed to apply for Spanish nationality, to which she replied that she only knew how to apply for a study permit and that she did not know, which is the same answer I gave her when she asked me. Moreover, I realized that I did know the place. I once went with my father to help him with his paperwork but I did not know that that was the civil registry in Barcelona. So I asked José to help us to look and I looked for the information on the documents needed to apply for Spanish nationality on the Internet on his PC. He said that he was filling in exactly the same application

and that the information was not available on the Internet and that she would have to go there to get it. I was struck by the fact that the woman did not consult directly with José and that instead she had asked the other clients, in this case, the young woman and myself. I don't know whether she had asked other people beforehand. In the end, I was the intermediary between her and José (Corredor, 2006).

It also occupies a central place as regards life beyond the misery of everyday life. Thus, for example, in these "association stations", which are telecenters, shared interests can also involve investment or even establish forms of interaction in the location, whether specific or established: "Today there are six users in the locale, apparently divided into teams of three. Some are at one end of the locale and others at the other; apparently, they are also sharing a Counter Strike game" (Burgos, 2008).

The promotion of formal and informal relations is continuous:

Trying to strike up a friendship with me because he thought we were the same age, he said: "You must know about this, how old are you?" ... These young people joke with each other and talk loudly and although there are users in the telephone booths, they do not tell them off, either because of their music or because they are talking loudly (Burgos, 2008).

In any case, in the telecenters, as can be seen from the extracts from our experiences reflected to date, the "organizations"<sup>8</sup> and the connectivity of linking or shared interests acquire particular importance for people who are "obliged" to leave their "place" physically for a lasting, uncertain time. Norma Kleinubing (2004) reminds us that although migration entails advantages for the community of origin, it is not fair or permitted to forget that it also entails the erosion of the right to remain in one's country of

<sup>8</sup> In social and human sciences, the term "organization" is used to translate the French notion of "agencement" as used in the philosophy of Deleuze, and Guattari (1988). The term is used to describe a form of arrangement or organization of a set of heterogeneous elements. The unity of these elements and their consideration as an organized set is due precisely to the fact that they operate together as a functional unit.

origin. And that is why it is mainly these same people who, in their interaction with the space and technology, form temporary or stable networks and develop the telecenter as a sign of the adaptation, adjustment and experience of being “between two worlds”.

Researcher 1: What do people do when they go to a telecenter?

Telecenter manager: Well, what people usually come in to do is make phone calls, as the name suggests. Apart from that, they come in to use the Internet, buy cards and send money. They also send packages and send faxes and part of that involves meeting other people from their city of origin. That is the main thing. Just as Spaniards use bars, immigrant people use the telecenter to meet people.

I imagine 99 percent of immigrants go to telecenters, all the immigrants have been to a telecenter at least once, every single one of us. Maybe one of them hasn't gone but that is very rare... There are hardly any people who have not been, but 99 percent of people just have one telecenter, and they will probably go to use or see something and even if they do not use their services they go to feel good (Álvaro, telephone station manager, Barcelona, April 2007).

So connections and networks are set up according to migrant users' specific needs. These needs are related to their host society (contacts, papers, information, paperwork, relations), but also to their society of origin (remittances, family and affective ties). The telecenter can handle specific demands by activating and linking the migratory experience with putting people in touch with their fellow countrymen. This is the case of housing (announcements which target a specific cultural community), legal assistance and aid, services (the food or decorative objects offered by the telecenter, job offers, spiritual offers), affective relationships (friendship, sex), weak links (acquaintances, colleagues), work (job-seeking), and even leisure (concerts, dances, meetings), which may be designed to meet people's specific need for belonging to a certain cultural community. “Nearly all the immigrants here, particularly Latin Americans, have obtained help or housing through a telecenter, because we have these notice boards ... which say, ‘Room-mate wanted’ or ‘Flatmate wanted’ or ‘Room to let’, so

immigrants usually find what they want” (Helena, telecenter user, Barcelona, January 2008).

The search for like-minded people, the creation of a community atmosphere and the reconstruction of one’s “own” social environment are everyday actions that take place in the telecenter and with ICT.

Because they were also Peruvians, like me, we had more in common, we spoke the same way. We used the same sort of slang...They understand and say, “Hey, you’re from Lima too”.

The difference is that we have experienced or experience the same things. We feel the same...I think that’s the difference, we have very similar feelings, whereas people here do not understand you, or understand you but don’t feel the same, because they have not gone through the same thing...they don’t feel it (Eva, telecenter user, Barcelona, March 2007).

Existing networks, the significance attributed to them and the marks of identity create new connections that keep the network alive and extend it.

There was a boy from Peru, who came from Peru and...a man from Argentina and this person from Argentina needed someone to work as a bricklayer, someone to help him. So this other boy from Peru had just arrived and didn’t have any work and read the announcement and they met, they practically met at the telecenter and I think, although I’m not sure, that they’re still working together...The last time I heard of him, he was still working for the man ... And there are girls who don’t have jobs and...lots of people who have been here before and they call Mother María, a nun, who gives them work and there are a lot of people that meet in the telecenter or have been recommended. “Go and see Mother María, she’ll get you a job...” (Álvaro, telecenter manager, Barcelona, April 2007).

In short, they link local and transnational modes of connection:

So this [the telecenter] is a place where you get lots of things and above all, a place where you get work. For example, a woman who

already works as a maid, in the case of women, when they already known that Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Colombia or...Venezuelan girl or whatever, through her, they recommend someone to work for a relative or a Spanish boss or here, a Catalan family and then, "Look! Get me someone like you", and she brings more and more people... and that is how they get work. A girl who has been recommended to them by someone else ... helps them to get another job by recommending other immigrants (Helena, telecenter user, Barcelona, January 2008).

### *Discussion*

As we have pointed out, links with people from the same country are very common among migrants in telecenters. In this respect, our study coincides with considerations such as those of Massey (1986, in Martínez, 2004), who believes that links between fellow countrymen, together with kinship and friendship links, are the main types of relations in the creation of migratory networks.

However, our study shows how different types of networks are created and extended towards groups, organizations or "physical" institutions outside the telecenter and towards specific groups and persons located beyond the waves or cyberspace (the maintenance of the "transnational family", and of the affective-economic links of the family and linking network existing at a distance is one of the fundamental practices of telecenter users) and also towards the groups of presences that frequent these stations and despite being unknown, manage to keep the subject in interaction and linked to a network (Alvarado, Martínez, and Peñaranda, 2004).

If the transmigrant subject,<sup>9</sup> by simultaneously "belonging" to two or more worlds (physical and/or virtual) can, at a point located on various planes, connect some to others, by multiplying

<sup>9</sup> The concept of transmigrant refers to those persons who, residing outside their country of origin, develop and maintain multiple relations (familial, economic, social, organizational, religious and political) that transcend geographical borders (Kleinubing, 2004). Transmigrants "perform actions, make decisions, feel concern and develop identities within the social networks that connect them with two or more societies simultaneously" (Glick-Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton, 1992:1).

and expanding networks, in this operation, technology becomes yet another agent in the network, since it connects, expands and opens it to others. And the Telecenter reveals its “transnational” nature precisely in this way, by permitting the union of “networks of relations” of the migratory phenomenon, by linking those that already exist in the immigrant’s place of origin to those located in the migratory place of destination—sending and receiving, in the words of Martínez (2004)—; in short, by producing new networks that join the two spaces by relativizing and blurring their limits and therefore the demarcation of national or cultural borders. According to Martínez (2004:83), “People often move and once migratory processes are set in train, the division between origin and destination tends to become blurred”.

At the same time, since the creation of social networks can increase the social capital<sup>10</sup> of migrants, it would form part of the survival and adjustment strategies they use and implement to cope with needs that are not purely economic and may also refer to the individual’s loneliness<sup>11</sup> or the weakness of his relations. And the function of the network, of whatever kind (more or less informal, specific or stable) offsets this to a certain extent.

“There are times when I go in and don’t talk on the phone and I spend two hours talking...about nothing specific, but talking. So it is a place where I go in to talk and meet people, but not only with the people there but also by phone...I talk to my friends. I almost feel a sense of relief” (Eva, telecenter user, Barcelona, March 2007). “Here [the telecenter] is a place where you can meet all the people that come here and they are nearly all friendly. This helps us to get over our problems. We all have different problems but in the long run, I think that the main problem is surviving” (Helena, telecenter user, Barcelona, January 2008).

Our aim is to make the telecenter important for understanding the migrant experience and studying the social setting in which

<sup>10</sup> The sum of actual or virtual resources that an individual or group possesses in order to form part of a lasting network of relations of mutual knowledge and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Loneliness is a metaphor for precariousness and a specific way of defining it.

the migrant lives (this new hybrid society consisting of the way they perceive and interpret the host society). This aim, as borne out by what we have seen so far, is based on considering it as something more than a container of technologies or a scenario for practices. The point is to fully understand their role in the production of associations. In order to understand this role better, it is useful to examine the distinction between intermediaries and mediators made by the theory of the actor-network (Domènech and Tirado, 1998; Latour, 1998, 2001; Tirado and Domènech, 2005).

This theory shows that there are entities (usually considered “non-human”, in other words, the techniques, spaces and materiality in general) that we tend to think of as mere intermediaries: elements that transport, conduct or connect. The important thing is what they transport and who they connect, not the elements themselves. However, in view of this consideration, the actor-network theory considers this type of entities as mediators, “actors with the capacity to translate what they transport, to re-define, deploy and even betray it” (Tirado and Domènech, 2005). In other words, entities that not only connect but transform what they connect, create associations and provide stability, meaning and direction for this network of associations.

In this respect, it is more common to regard a telecenter as an intermediary and to view it simply as a context of action or a connector between discreet entities: such as persons, families, societies and nations. However, when regarded as a mediator, we can acknowledge its active role in the production of associations and ask about the role of material aspects, spaces and techniques in the establishment of relations and realities. The telecenter not only enables people to relate to each other, and connect with those in this country and elsewhere or to share experiences and resources. It is more than that. If we examine it as a mediator, we can see it as a coordinator of meanings and relations, as an agent that links and permits actions and realities. The telecenter is capable of linking and guiding other entities (persons, groups, techniques, networks, imaginaries, nations) and of helping them to remain linked as a meaningful set. In short, thinking about

the mediation of telecenters enables us to study the creation of identities (transmigrants), groups (transnational families, support networks) and societies (the new hybrid society in which the immigrant lives).

Given the nature of telecenters as relational and linking spheres and meeting points in which various connections are made and affective and material social networks are coordinated (and not only networks at a distance that ICT “reduce” but also within the space of the telecenter itself and the city), we can interpret these establishments as sociopetal spaces, to use a classic concept from the literature on environmental psychology. In an *avant la lettre* sociotechnical study, Osmond (1978) compared the concepts of sociopetal and sociofugal spaces, understanding the former as those that encourage meeting and the establishment of stable interpersonal relations, in other words, those that foster relations between people. On the other hand, sociofugal spaces are those that prevent or discourage the formation of human relations, in other words, that encourage people to remain separate or not to relate to each other.

Considering this conceptualization and continuing with the characterization of the telecenter as a station (journeys towards links) of associations (links in the connection, various sociotechnical and trans-local sociotechnical networks) that we have developed, we can conceive of telecenters as sociopetal spaces, in that they encourage one to remain inside them, since they stimulate and boost the establishment and/or maintenance of social relations. Indeed, if human relations define a sociopetal space, we should regard a telecenter as one since these relations constitute the basis of its reason for being, lending it symbolic consistency and even identity stability. As long as relations (whether familial, work-based, friendly, virtual or face-to-face) are maintained, the telecenters will continue. Sociotechnical organization and relations mediated by various information and communication technologies are a crucial element in the combination of linking traffic and fluidity that defines the telecenter, from our point of view, as an “association station”. In our view, the definition of a

telecenter is nodal and network-based rather than physical. What we mean by this is that a telecenter is not defined as such because of its physical characteristics regarding its architecture and arrangement of features but rather because of the plastic and fluid nature of these elements themselves. The telecenter is a dense space of stable or unstable connections, that are either specific or consistent and of a diverse nature (virtual, analogue, physical, distant or not).

If we have so far observed how technological spaces such as telecenters are organized as meeting points and places for the revitalization of social networks, we can also point out, as a result of our research, certain technological uses that are significantly intervening in the construction and maintenance of social and multicultural networks. Our fieldwork has also shown how, as technologies are incorporated into households (due to new forms of communication such as prepaid phone cards, Skype and Messenger, that significantly contribute to exerting control over and economizing in regard to consumption), the frequency of visits to areas such as telecenters may be affected. The comfort and intimacy of one's home are two key factors when it comes to engaging in communication from home, restricting the number of visits to the telecenter to the purchase of prepaid cards, recharging mobile phones or meeting one's peers.

The emergence of new forms of communication has exerted an enormous influence on the means of communication and maintaining relations at a distance. The reduction of the cost of international calls (either through the use of prepaid telephone cards or the emergence of discount rates for calling from mobile phones, etc.) is also contributing to this, sharply increasing the number of phone calls and contributing to the consolidation and strengthening of social and family networks at a distance. At the same time, the speed of e-mail or the instantaneous nature of other forms of communication (such as Flickr, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) is permitting the emergence of virtually synchronized communication and not only because it occurs virtually simultaneously but because of the possibility of sharing information and making

comments on the subject by virtually simulating “face to face” interactions.

But wherever this happens, in the home or the telecenter, the ICT-person link constitutes a hybrid agent, capable of creating actions, meanings and new associations. That is why we believe that the study of social networks is a suitable, innovative method for the psychosocial study of the integration and coexistence of new citizens in our cities. The methodological procedure used in our research has enabled us to deal with the way citizens’ social networks are coordinated and to see the presence and mediation ICT have in this sphere of relations. Although family links and being among equals continues to form an important part of the contacts comprising personal and social networks, other forms of civic participation are being created through the mediation of ICT. For example, the Internet is emerging as a powerful tool for increasing the visibility of social movements and civic initiatives which in turn, permits participation and involvement in the latter (Diminescu and Renault, 2009). In this respect, ICT use, as well as the transformations experienced in this context, are also creating new social processes that create identity and citizenship. The exercise of citizenship (either of the citizenship exercised regarding the country of origin or that which begins to develop in the host country) has a powerful ally in ICT, since this not only makes it possible to be informed about an event or an initiatives but also permits participation in political and social practices as well as the possibility of sharing and constructing personal, collective and even national identities at a distance. The Web is therefore becoming an ideal place for the dissemination of information and the creation of new forms of exercising citizenship.

Assuming the linking nature of migrants, or, as Diminescu (2002) said, seeing migrants as actors in a culture of links and regarding ICT as the constituent axis of links in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, telecenters in particular and ICT in general can be seen as central elements in the processes of social integration. And if we also assume the proposal of Thomas and Znaniecki (2004), whereby integration is not regarded as a process in which the immigrant should become enculturated into the host society but rather as

immersion in a cultural context constructed in the performance of transnationality, then we can see the telecenter as the “laboratory” in which this new hybrid culture is created and where individualities are inserted in a common base.

The loss of the specific importance of the telecenter in this process, derived from the lowering of prices, does not reduce the importance of ICT in the migratory processes and experiences of our time. On the contrary, it shows that the central, defining element of this process is none other than ICT. And this is so because ICT and the telecenter are not merely intermediaries but also mediators. ICT are simply a factory of social relations.

Rather than seeing telecenters as merely a product of migration needs or as another effect of the proliferation or ubiquity of ICT in globalized societies, we should see them as part of the plot that helps us understand migration in what are known as ICT societies. Telecenters bring us back to a set of socio-technical relations in the center of which they acquire significance. Telecenters help stabilize these relations and make them last (Denis, 2010).

In short, if Latour (1998) says that technology is a society made to last, we believe that telecenters are also largely societies made to last: the societies of that connected migrant to which we referred at the beginning of the article. Studying the social mobility of the migrant in a different context to the one in which he originated and his role in the creation of the society in which we live, implies, now, more than ever before, studying ICT, specifically entities such as telecenters. And, if we want to avoid falling into the trap that from a sociological and psychosocial point of view notions such as enculturation or integration imply, we must focus on the way the migratory experience is defined in its development, in social interactions. Nowadays, more than ever, these interactions are not only affected but mediated by ICT.

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