Does It Matter Where You Are? – Transnational Migration, Internet Usage and the Emergence of Global Togetherness

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> The new media influence the course of communication –
> and possibly its content – in ways that are unknown to
> date. This is precisely why they can create new modes and
> types of sociality over time. Both for methodological and
> factual reasons, it is thus the task of social sciences to in-
> vestigate these new media in terms of their own logic and
> dynamics, to describe the forms of interaction and com-
> munication that they create and to show how they influ-
> ence, shape, create or hinder processes of society-building
> (Bergmann/Meier 2003: 430, *my own translation*).

Introduction

This paper contributes to the development of concepts useful for studying global complexities, i.e. the realisation of the 'World Society', by exploring emerging Internet based forms of *global togetherness*. By focusing on the complex interrelations between migration movements on the one hand and the progressive 'shrinking of distances' through communication technologies on the other, I seek to uncover some of the "global micro-structures" (Knorr-Cetina/Bruegger 2002) that constitute the evolving World Society. This paper draws on data from ethnographic research. The case study consists of www.cibervalle.com,[1] an online discussion forum that connects Paraguayans from all over the world. During the first phase of generating data from the virtual scene, the practice of interrelating local and virtual settings has emerged as a striking phenomenon within this field. In order to comprehend this multilayer techno-social formation properly, a multi-sited-ethnographic approach has been developed, which relates the data gathered on

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[1] The online-discussion forum's name and the nicknames of the users were changed as a means of preserving the participant's identities.

the online discussion forum to data, which was collected face-to-face in some of the places of residence of some of the participants, i.e. in Paraguay, Buenos Aires, California and Germany. The methodological implications of generating and analysing data in a pluri-local and computer-mediated field of research are discussed elsewhere (Greschke 2007b). In this paper I will focus rather on some theoretical and conceptual problems arising from the observations I made during my fieldwork in different parts of the global life-world Cibervalle.

Most of the members of the Cibervalle-community did not know each other when they accessed the online-forum for the first time. Over the years, however some communicative practices have developed within Cibervalle, that allude to the emergence of global forms of living together. By means of sharing everyday-life practices with their distant counterparts, the communication in Cibervalle – despite the geographical dispersion of its members – has reached a high degree of proximity and intimacy. While the degree of engagement differs from one user to the next, the formerly anonymous socio-electronic network has become a community based on solidarity and trust for many of the participants. But how can we imagine people living together although they are not sharing the same geographical space?

In the following I attempt to illuminate the meaning of "living together", while being physically apart by exploring some of the communicative forms that have been developed by the members of Cibervalle. Particularly, I will focus on the interactions between advancing technologies and the social practices of their usage on the one hand, and the relation between co-present and mediated forms of communication, on the other hand. By doing so, I hope not only to uncover the techno-social requirements for global communication but to exemplify further some of the emerging techno-social hybrid forms that enhance global togetherness. Assuming that most of the readers are unfamiliar with techno-social formations like Cibervalle I begin with a short story about an ordinary day[2] within the Cibervalle-community. As its members reside physically in different parts of the world, some travelling will be necessary to catch a glimpse of how the Cibervaller@s[3] are *doing living* (Sacks 1984) globally together.
Have a good trip!

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2   The story must not be misunderstood as an account of a factually happened day in Cibervalle. As a matter of course it is impossible to be physically at different places at the same time, as the story may suggest. This mode of story telling may be best described as 'faction'. Faction is a genre that combines facts with fiction. It was introduced by Truman Capote (1965) in the novel "In cold blood". Describing everyday-life in Cibervalle demands fictive elements as it consists of the interrelation of different physically grounded as well as virtual spaces. Nevertheless, the story is based on 'facts' as it relies on data gathered through participant observation in different places. It is in some measure a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of some of the main practices and patterns of globally shared everyday-life I could observe in the field.

3   The suffix @s can be used in written Spanish to include both the masculine and the female gender in only one noun.

Everyday life in Cibervalle:

Monday morning, 8 o' clock: In a small California town Angela is getting up. On her way to the bathroom she casually boots up her computer. After brushing her teeth she goes back to the bed room and logs herself into the instant messenger program she is using. Having a quick look at her buddy list tells her which of her friends are online at present. When she starts the browser she directly enters "Cibervalle", the Paraguayan virtual community she belongs to. A brief glance over the current topics is sufficient to catch up on what has happened within her community while she was asleep. Then she starts her daily work routine with getting the children up. She is sitting in the kitchen having breakfast with the kids when she suddenly hears the familiar sound that notifies her of someone who is trying to communicate with her through the messenger. As she approaches the computer she finds a private conversation window popped up on the screen. Her brother sends his greetings to her. He recently left Paraguay and went to Spain and he wants to tell her that he was able to get a job as a construction worker. They have a brief chat until she has to interrupt the conversation to look after her bickering children.

At the same time, in Paraguay's main city, Eduardo is making himself comfortable in front of the computer screen at his work place. He enters Cibervalle and looks briefly through the current topics. After a busy morning at work he takes advantage of his lunch break to get ahead with this year's fundraising campaign. The online community usually organises one at Christmas time. Suddenly a private conversation window pops up on the screen, it is Angela saying hallo. The kids are absorbed in their game, so she uses the opportunity to get current information about the Christmas fundraising. This year, Eduardo tells her, the fundraising campaign will be in support of a children's home in Asunción. Some of the local Cibervalle – members went there yesterday to meet the person in charge and some of the children. Through their messenger-conversation he sends her the link of the topic he just created, so she can have a look at the images Eduardo took during the visit. Underneath the photos she finds the list of food and basic utilities, which are most urgently required at the children's home. After checking some details, she asks for his bank data and agrees to support the campaign financially. They say goodbye and Angela closes her conversation window feeling slightly sad because this year she won't be able to attend the event personally.

In Buenos Aires, Iwashita bangs the door to the apartment she shares with her Argentinean boyfriend. Impatiently she waits for her computer to boot up just to directly enter Cibervalle. Disregarding the new topics, which were being discussed while she was taking the last exam of this term, she immediately writes a new topic. She almost cries while expressing what happened to her just one hour ago. She does not even care about typing errors but just opens the thread. Then she walks into the kitchen and prepares some Tereré.[4] She approaches her computer again and pushes the refresh button. She already finds answers from some of her friends in Paraguay, USA and Argentina. They all feel sorry for her and try to comfort her because she failed the exam. Especially Belen, one of her compatriots in Argentina supports her impression that she failed the exam because of being a Paraguayan migrant and she advises her to make a complaint

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4   Beverage on the basis of Paraguayan herbs. Drinking Tereré is usually considered as one of the Paraguayan's main cultural practices.

about her examiner. After reading the comments Iwashita feels somewhat relieved. She turns to a private IM conversation with Belen in order to talk over the possibilities of disputing the result of the examination.

At 1.00 p.m. Irén enters a Cyber café in Asunción and logs herself onto the messenger-program. She is going to meet her boyfriend Tomás in New York. They usually spend their lunch break together. Asunción and New York share the same time zone, so time-coordination is no problem at all. While waiting for him to show up, she examines the current topics in Cibervalle. In Eduardo's topic, she writes her name into the list of participants for the Christmas campaign. Suddenly she realises that the current contributions of her boyfriend are signed with the IP of his home access. Maybe he has not gone to work today? Immediately, she sends a message to his mobile phone, which he uses to keep himself logged onto the messenger permanently. Her mobile phone rings promptly. Tomás tells her that he went to the doctor this morning, because he had suffered from stomach pain the whole night. They have a brief chat, Irén suggests (that he) take some of the yuyos[5] she had sent him recently for preparing Tereré and they arrange to meet at the same time as every night to chat before they end the conversation. There is still some time left to create a get-well-topic for Tomás. Promptly there are some responses from other members expressing get-well wishes and concerns about their friend. Right at the moment when she is about to log herself out of the messenger a window pops up on the screen: Rafael from Switzerland is worried about Tomas after reading her topic and asks her for more information. She tells him everything she knows as quickly as she can type, logs out of the messenger and hurries back to her work place. In the evening, when she arrives home from work, she enters her room straight away to boot up her computer and to log onto the messenger. Tomas is already waiting for her. He rests on his bed with the computer in reach. Irén is able to see him, because he is using a web cam. So she activates hers as well. They chat about this and that. There is trouble again, with a new member on the electronic bulletin board. They assume that it is not really a new person but a regular member, enrolled with an unknown nickname, making waves and messing around with the community. Then they start to play chess through the messenger-program. At the end it is Irén who wins the game. Triumphantly she glances at the webcam, Tomás returns her look laughing with a twinkle in his eye. Tomorrow she won't stand a chance, he presages. They wish one another a good night, before Irén logs herself out of the messenger, shuts down her computer and switches off the light.

The Making of the World Society Real on the Level of Interaction – the Role of Transnational Migration and Means of Global Communication

In 1998, Appadurai already spoke of "a growing number of diasporic public spheres" (22), produced by electronic media, which link together individuals across national boundaries. Three years later Karim still had to claim that "the application of new communication technologies by diasporic groups has largely

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5   Paraguayan medicinal herbs, used for preparing tea and Tereré.

escaped scholarly scrutiny" (2001: 645). More recently, the new media has been addressed in some studies in the field of transnational research which seek to illuminate various diasporic public spheres. Accordingly, the potential of the Internet for political empowerment and as ways of negotiating ethnic or national identity has taken centre stage in these studies (Graham/Khosravi 2002; Panagakos 2003; Adams 2004).

Despite this, not every person involved in migration, or having transnational ties and practices, necessarily engages in politics. And concerns about belonging to a specific ethnic or national group are just one possible aspect of the transnational population's everyday-life. Besides being a technological tool for creating public discursive spheres, the Internet consists of an advancing set of means of communication that is used increasingly for creating and maintaining social relations at a distance. Referring to the increasing use of e-mail for maintaining relationships in dispersed social networks, Georgiou (2002) stresses the significance of sharing everyday-life experiences for maintaining a sense of community. Miller and Slater assume the Internet constitutes "an inexpensive way not only for families to be in touch, but to be in touch on an intimate, regular, day-to-day basis that conforms to commonly held expectations of what being a parent, child or family entails" (2000: 56).

In other words, it may be helpful to widen the perspective in this field in order to account for the implications of the increasing internet usage of transnational populations. This is helpful not only in terms of political practices but rather to show the consequences for everyday-life. How, for instance does the specific use of the Internet alter senses of love and attachment, family life and other kinds of intimate social relationships? Drawing on the Trinidadian case Miller and Slater (2000) demonstrate how the Internet facilitates the reintegration of the Trinidadians basic social institution 'family' which at first had been challenged by mass emigration. As these studies demonstrate, the Internet turns out to be a convenient tool for the translocal maintenance of formerly locally embedded intimate relationships, which were formed on the basis of co-present interaction.

In the case of Cibervalle however, any kinship between the participants is unlikely. On the contrary, users from all over the world incorporate themselves into the socio-electronic network even when they do not have any personal relations within the group. Furthermore, in contrast to the above mentioned studies which tend to assume the existence of a community with common interests regarding political issues and future perspectives of the 'homeland' as a starting point of the virtual performances, the Paraguayan online discussion forum started neither with a thematic focus nor to reach a common (political) goal. The beginning of this community was an electronic bulletin board, linked to a Paraguayan web portal, provided by an entrepreneur who did no more than provide the platform. One of the principal users explains:

"The first time I entered the forum there were only five users. I have the number 6 *haha.* There was nobody, not even a hair moved. I began to invite friends, that's how the forum began to grow."[6] (Manuela, Asunción, *e-mail interview, my own translation*).

More astonishing appears to be the fact that over the years the members have made themselves comfortable within Cibervalle. They have not only turned the former anonymous socio-electronic network into a community, basing on solidarity and trust, they also have intimately connected the electronic bulletin board with their physically embedded life-worlds thereby transforming the virtual space into a globally shared part of their everyday-life-worlds.

So far it has become obvious, that the development of 'World Society' is neither imaginable without the actual movement of people nor without the use of communication technologies. Particularly in the context of migration, the availability of distance-shrinking communication technologies becomes crucial in terms of creating and maintaining links between sites of being and sites of belonging. The complex interactions between the various means of communication in use and the specific communicative practices developed in transnational migration contexts in turn, seem to engender various forms of social life and bring about new global types of social relations and sociality. Therefore, these kinds of social relations at a distance are considered as a fundamental source for comprehending the growing global linkages between individuals – that is to say, the realisation of World Society on the level of interaction. From a system theoretical point of view however, interaction is supposed to occur only between physically co-present counterparts. The presence of the body is considered a particular condition that needs to be differentiated from other forms of communication. Physical co-presence according to system theory implicates not only perceiving the other but the reflexive awareness about mutual perception as a condition that almost necessarily leads to communication between co-present actors. This is because the bodily presence delivers extra information that is perceived by the counterparts. In order to avoid that this information is being interpreted in an unfavourable manner the actor has to correct his self-presentation according to the assumed perceptions and expectations of the co-present observers (Kieserling 1999: 122).

Global connections and relations on the other hand, are impossible to imagine without mediated forms of communication. With regard to World Society studies this narrow concept of interaction poses a problem. If interaction is always based on physical presence, how are we supposed to analyse global patterns on the level of interaction? The daily practices by which the Cibervaller@s organise their community-life across any distance suggest reconsidering not only the meaning of interaction and co-presence but also the relationship between presence and ab-

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6 "Cuando entré la primera vez al foro había solo 5 usuarios yo tengo el numero 6 jaja no había nadie ni las moscas volaban empezé a invitar amigos y así empezó a haber más gente".

sence, interaction and communication and different modes of mobility. As will be demonstrated in the following, the communicative forms that I have observed in Cibervalle do indeed conflict with the system theoretical concept as they contain crucial elements of interaction, even without fulfilling the condition of co-presence of the bodies. Social life in Cibervalle relies on a complex relationship between different means of communication in use, including different technologies on the one hand and occasional physical encounters of co-presence on the other hand. In this regard I refer to Urry, who claims that central to sociology should be both the analysis of those processes by which such co-presence is only on occasions and contingently brought about, and the forms of socialities involved when one is *not* involved in ongoing daily interaction, but with which a sense of connection or belonging with various 'others' is sensed and sustained. One should investigate not only physical and immediate presence, but also the socialities involved in occasional co-presence, imagined co-presence and virtual co-presence (2003: 256).

Let us take a closer look at the communicative practices in use in order to identify the patterns that constitute this kind of "strange and uncanny life on the screen" (Urry 2002: 267) and hence to qualify how senses of co-presence are altered by virtual communication.

The Techno-Social Architecture of Global Togetherness

Online-forum. It may be helpful to begin with examining the system infrastructure of the online discussion forum as a source that influences computer-mediated communication and the social organisation of the users (Baym 1995). At the time of writing, Cibervalle has existed for more than six years. The forum is open to the public, that is to say everyone can read the discussions anonymously, but only registered members are allowed to contribute comments. In other words, besides the active participants in this social setting, there is another social role involved, the *anonymous observer*. This refers to the participants' reflexive awareness about a potential global public, which somehow influences their social actions. Furthermore, the moderator's role and status differ from the other participants as he or she is authorised to make sure that every member obeys the rules. In order to accomplish this task, the moderator is enabled to delete topics or particular contributions, as well as to ban a nickname, that is to say, to prevent his or her active participation in the forum. To register, a nickname and an e-mail address are required. There are two ways of contributing. One can propose a new topic for discussion by starting a new thread or participate in ongoing discussions. On the forum's main page there is a list of currently debated topics. This provides the users with some information about the topics, like title, the author's

nickname and the country of access,[7] as well as the number of contributions to the topic and the number of visits. The topics or discussion threads provide more information about the participants. Below the particular comments the author's nickname and again the image of the national flag reflecting the IP-address is displayed, as well as the date of issue, and the total number of the nickname's contributions in the forum.

Unlike other internet-based communicative genres like chat or e-mail, the discussion forum provides temporal freedom and the choice between synchronous and asynchronous communication. Users, who are online at the same time, are able to communicate with others in real time. However, users – if they do not spend so much time on the Internet or they are not able to be online at the same time as their counterparts – are still able to reconstruct ongoing discussions and to make contributions. This is because the discussion threads remain displayed and the postings can be read in their chronological order as long as the discussion goes on. In brief, the condition of asyncronicity allows for global communication between actors who live in different time zones (Stegbauer 2000: 25). Synchronicity, on the other hand, leads to time and space compression, and enables real time communication regardless of the distance between counterparts. In the case of the Paraguayan online-forum, it seems as if these features have provided the technological conditions for the development of a global community. The forum bridges temporal and geographical distances. It is able to unify people despite different degrees of involvement and may hence create a sense of togetherness, even under the condition of geographical dispersion.

A participant who lives in Spain posted the following quotation. She addressed the forum's community to share a difficult moment in her life. She found out that a person she loved had died and on the same day she lost her job. Her topic received many responses, all of them expressing compassion and support. This is the response that she posted as she entered the forum two days later:

"Without you, what would I do?!!! THANK YOU A THOUSAND TIMES! ... today I start work in an Italian restaurant and after reading this page again and again I am now going there full with energy and power.. Now I feel like I have many brothers and sisters all over the world. Kisses for all of you!! I love you a lot and whatever I may be able to do for you, do not hesitate to ask for it!" (Betty, Barcelona, Cibervalle-forum, *my own translation*).[8]

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7   In fact, the image of the national flag reflects the IP-address of the provider in use which does not always coincide with the participant's place of access. In any case many users do not know this and assume that the national flag indicates the place of residence of the participants.

8   "¡Sin ustedes.. que haria?!!! MIL GRACIAS!... hoy empiezo a probar en un restaurant italiano.. y despues de leer y leer y leer otra vez esta pagina me voy llena de energia y fuerzas.. ahora me siento como si tuviera muchos hermanos por todo el mundo un beso a todos!! les quiero mucho y lo que yo pueda por ustedes no duden en pedirme!"

This statement exemplifies a second important aspect of the online forum, namely its basic orientation in the members' every-day lives. Unlike other online discussion forums, the Paraguayan virtual community does not limit the postings to any thematic focus. In fact, most of the activities in this forum reflect shared everyday-life concerns: talking about the film one saw last night, discussing where to get the most authentic ingredients for preparing *sopa paraguaya,*[9] telling jokes and laughing together, inventing forum-games and playing together, teasing each other, debating forthcoming elections, exchanging opinions about homosexuality, abortion, or religious beliefs, sharing happy or difficult moments in life, discussing concerns about the future perspectives of Paraguay, and so forth. In short, the forum reflects a wide range of topics and socialising activities that usually take place in families at lunch time or, among friends who meet each other on the *plaza central*, on the town square. Many of the users consider Cibervalle a central part of their life-worlds, where a significant part of their socialising activities take place.

"It's true that, unconsciously, Cibervalle turns into your everyday-life. At least once a day you have to stop by, in order to know what's going on. You enter because you need to know if everybody feels fine or if someone's having heartache, or because you want to see Eduardo' s current hairstyle ...etc. etc. ..." (Carmen, France, Cibervalle-forum, *my own translation*).[10]

However, the participants do not spend all their time in front of the screen, observing the scene or posting comments. Once Cibervalle is entered and the current activities are reviewed, the actors usually leave the website open and get involved in their daily tasks in their physical environments. Every now and then they approach the computer and push the refresh button in order to update the news. In other words, the users engage at least in two different social contexts at the same time and they have to coordinate their activities in the virtual and the local setting.

Instant Messenger. The members of Cibervalle do not only communicate via the online forum. For more private chat, as well as for specific requests that need to be discussed instantly, they also do *instant messaging*. Instant messenger (IM) defines a program that enables instant communication between two or more people over a network such as the Internet. Most programs can be downloaded from the WWW as freeware. The IM program used by most of the Cibervalle members enables one to add and remove the e-mail addresses of contacts who one likes to network with. When logging into the IM, a window pops up (the so called buddy

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9   A typical dish in Paraguay.
10   "La verdad que sin darte cuenta cibervalle se convierte en tu dia a dia, por lo menos una vez al dia tenes que pasar a ver que hay , si estan todos bien , si no le duele el corazon a nadie , si como se peino hoy Eduardo para ir al trabajo ... etc etc .."

list) in which the collection of names shows which of the contacts are currently online. When clicking on one of the names, a second window pops up (the private conversation window) which is used to send instant messages to one's counterpart. On the screen of the addressed counterpart another window pops up displaying the message that has been sent. Besides the visual information, the program emits a sound every time a message is received or one of the contacts logs in. IM is also used for discussing current topics 'in private' and events both of the counterparts can follow simultaneously on the discussion forum. For example, one sends the link for a topic through the IM to other members, because he or she wants the others to read and post a comment or to exchange opinions about the respective topic before commenting on it. The communication displayed in the public forum thus tends not only to be influenced by private conversations. By combining different technologies, common interests are produced, which in turn constitute a shared social space.

Global Interaction? – The Relation of Global Means of Communication and Global Physical Movements in the Evolving World Society

Angela's practice of using the messenger, as described in the short story above, exemplifies another pattern of use I observed during my fieldwork in the places of residence of some of the users: the users do not only log into the messenger when they actually want to chat with someone. Rather they log in to know which of their contacts are currently online and also to be communicatively reachable for the others. Then they turn to their daily routine and come back to the screen from time to time to have a brief chat, or to see who has logged in, when they hear the sound. For these cases, the IM program provides some tools for communicating the actual status of the user. On the buddy list one can choose between "coming back soon", "out to lunch", "away", "on the phone", etc. Before leaving the screen the user communicates his or her temporary absence. This is in order to avoid confusion in the case that someone would address her while she is not able to answer.

Logging oneself into the instant messenger means seeing who is online as well as being aware that one is being "seen" by the others. Whether one is sitting in front of the screen exchanging messages the whole time or not, the very fact of being within reach, accompanied by the reflexive awareness of mutual perception enhances a sense of proximity and the impression of sharing the same space. This reflexive awareness, in turn, entails the need for correct self-presentation according to the assumed perceptions and expectations of the co-present observers. More precisely, when a user feels the need for communicating her temporary absence from the screen she anticipates that the counterparts will perceive her as

present and that she could be addressed by someone who in turn may misinterpret her missing answer.

Entering Cibervalle is like opening up an additional techno-social space with globally shared common interests that overlay the users' local environments and which has to be coordinated with the social relevant details at face. The practice of keeping the page open and refreshing the screen from time to time, may enhance the imagination of approaching and distancing one's self (but not leaving!) a social space created and maintained by the communicative activities of its users. This virtual space and the social activities within it, however, go on independently of the actual participation of the individual user. Chatting with other members via IM about what is going on in Cibervalle as much as joint travel through the online forum may even strengthen the perception of sharing the same space. In fact, this spatial formation is structured through timely coordination rather than in geographical terms. Both, instant messenger and the online forum enhance the sense of being together even if the counterparts are actually separated by thousands of miles.

At the first glance, it seems as if computer-mediated communication has been superseding co-present encounters. The Internet technologies in use enable the users to be in touch on an intimate, regular and day-to-day-basis not only with distant friends and family but also with the social life going on in their place of origin. Apparently, there is no need to travel; the communication within the shared virtual space seems to be a functional equivalent of being physically together in the same place. From a system theoretical perspective on the current state of globalisation, there is nothing astonishing about this assumption. Stichweh argues that

"communication is becoming world communication to the extent that communication substitutes migration for the communicative accessibility of the world. In this respect, world communication is considered as a functional equivalent for the incessant movements of persons across the globe" (Stichweh 2005: 5, *my own translation*).

The central meaning of communication in system theory leads Stichweh to the assumption that, even if the historical realisation of World Society at first was based upon migration, distance-shrinking communication technologies are now considered to be the fundamental carriers of the global social system. Although Stichweh exemplifies his argument by drawing on working practices in transnational enterprises and scientific contexts, he presupposes that "it could be demonstrated that in many other social systems communicative networking has been replacing travel and migration" (ibid: 12, *my own translation*).

However, people still travel. Current statistics allude to an increasing travel and migration movement across the globe. The International Organisation for Migration states that "without the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the number of international migrants worldwide would have risen by 18 million in

1970-1980, 27 million in 1980-1990, and 21 million in 1990-2000" (IOM 2005: 380). Drawing on the worldwide increasing scale of traveling in the last 50 years – e.g. 25m in 1950 to 700m in 2000 international passenger arrivals each year – Urry points to the apparently contradictory simultaneity of increasing global movements and the spread of global communication (2003: 157).

Local Meetings. Even in Cibervalle the virtual activities are just one side of the coin. This is because the members regularly meet each other face-to-face. Locating each other in order to meet personally in fact is one of the fundamental practices I was able to observe in this field. The forum provides the chance for networking with compatriots who may currently live at the same geographical location or nearby, not only for emigrated Paraguayans. For both those at home and abroad, the virtually formed relationships seem to stimulate the need for face-to-face encounters. By organising, regular meetings in their respective localities of residence, so called *encuentros*, the virtual relations are translated to local contexts whenever possible.

By exploring the particulars of mediated vs. co-present communication, Urry demonstrates the significance of co-present encounters for creating and maintaining social networks. As face-to-face encounters afford access to the eyes of the other, they are considered the most direct and reciprocal form of interaction. "Eye contact enables and stabilises intimacy and trust, as well as the perception of insincerity and fear" (2003: 164). The informational thickness of physical co-presence is reached because

"conversations are made up of not only words, but indexical expressions, facial gestures, body language, status, voice intonation, pregnant silences, past histories, anticipated conversations and actions, turn-taking practices and so on" (Urry 2003: 164f).

Besides the embodied particulars, Urry highlights place and time aspects of co-presence. Sharing the same location in a specific moment and experiencing a place with one's own senses, "physically walking or seeing or touching or hearing or smelling a place" (2002: 261) is considered to be a crucial base of co-presence and explains the increasing need for physical travel enhanced by the spread of global means of communication.

Nevertheless, in Cibervalle the face-to-face-relationships, initially enabled by the electronic network, by no means substitute for the virtual ties. Rather the local sub-groups which have been evolving along the way in different parts of the world share the events they organise at the local levels afterwards with the global community. That is to say, soon after a local meeting occurs, the group reports about it on the electronic bulletin board on the basis of some images of the participants and their activities. The distant members of the global community respond, expressing gratitude for sharing the event with them and they usually add some charming or funny comments to the images. In so doing, the events that are first

enacted by local sub-groups are reconstructed on a global level as a collective experience of the whole community.

In this regard, I want to highlight one of the main findings of my research, namely the fact that the sense of the local events seems to be strongly shaped by the delayed reconnection with the virtual level. Particularly, the meetings in Paraguay may be taken as performances of everyday-life in Paraguay which are addressed to the people abroad. Accordingly, many of the users living abroad describe Cibervalle as "a window to Paraguay", through which they not only keep themselves up to date regarding current political and social issues but rather keep themselves involved in their socio-cultural context of origin on a regular, intimate and day-to-day basis. With Cibervalle, Paraguayans in Spain, Japan, USA, France, etc … find an easy and inexpensive way to take daily trips to Paraguay, irrespective of their actual geographical distance to their place of origin.[11]

Again, although "virtual travel" (Urry 2002) may "ease nostalgia" and "make one feel closer to home", as some participants explain, it seems also to enhance the need for occasional meetings. For not only the members located geographically near-by have the habit of meeting each other personally. Whenever one of the distant members spends his or her holidays in Paraguay, the local groups organise welcome meetings for the visitor. These meetings, again, are collectively reconstructed and shared with the whole community.

In brief, "meetingness" is assumed to be a fundamental feature of the Cibervalle-community, since

"moments of physical co-presence are crucial to patterns of social life that occur 'at-a-distance' […] 'Meetingness' and thus different forms and modes of travel, are central to much social life, a life involving strange combinations of increasing distance and intermittent co-presence" (Urry 2003:156).

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that social life within Cibervalle is based on a complex relationship between different forms of communication, enhanced by specific combinations of physical, imaginative and virtual travel. The practice of interrelating local events (the meetings) with virtual events on a global level (the meeting's collective narrations) transports the members of the group imaginatively to the localities of residence of their counterparts. The possibility for daily travel to the places of one's origin is assumed to be particularly important for Paraguayans abroad, as it is hard to obtain any images or information about this country through the mass media. The specific use of IM and online forum at the same time, enables joint travel through a shared virtual space in real time, as well as creating experiences of virtual co-presence encounters. This kind of computer-

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11 These findings are elaborated in detail in my doctoral thesis (Greschke 2007b).

mediated co-presence seems to dissolve the boundary between physical presence and total absence.

The specific use of internet technologies in the context of Cibervalle, in brief, entails new technologically mediated forms of sociality, which are challenging classical concepts of interaction and co-presence as well as altering senses of space and living together. Instead of drawing on apparently clearly bounded concepts, my research calls for a closer examination of the complex interactions between global means of communication, social practices of usage, co-present encounters and various means of mobility, in order to explore the ongoing process of global structuring.

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