

New Media & Society

<http://nms.sagepub.com>

'I have great desires to look beyond my world': trajectories of information and communication technology use among Ghanaians living abroad

Jenna Burrell and Ken Anderson
New Media Society 2008; 10; 203
DOI: 10.1177/1461444807086472

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/2/203>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *New Media & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations (this article cites 11 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
<http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/10/2/203>



‘I have great desires to look beyond my world’: trajectories of information and communication technology use among Ghanaians living abroad

JENNA BURRELL

University of California-Berkeley, USA

KEN ANDERSON

Intel Corporation, USA

Abstract

Using an ethnographic approach, this study sought to understand how the personal aspirations and social landscapes of Ghanaians living in London shaped their use of a constellation of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as camcorders, digital cameras, the internet and mobile phones. Two trajectories of ICT use were discovered among the individuals interviewed. One trajectory fit with the expected transnational practices of cultural continuity and ‘looking homeward’. This was evident in the way that ICTs such as camcorders supplemented or were incorporated into Ghanaian social events held in London. A second trajectory was evident when Ghanaians enrolled the internet in attempts to realize migratory aspirations, using it to explore the world, broadly searching for opportunities, information, contacts and new ideas. The use of the internet for these exploratory activities revealed how ICTs are relevant to the migration experience beyond attempts to maintain a connection with the homeland.

Key words

Accra • ethnography • Ghana • information and communication technologies • internet • London • transnationalism • United Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

One of the major issues in studies of international migration is the question of how immigrants relate to their homeland. Is it with ongoing loyalty and nostalgia or with estrangement? Early on, assimilation theories proposed that immigration was a process of permanent resettlement that involved cutting all ties and shifting allegiances to the host country. In critical response to assimilation theories, recent research has indicated that often, migrants are unwilling or unable to subsume their identities and social ties to an assimilation process due to ongoing obligations, economic strategies or prejudice and lack of acceptance in the host country. This research has yielded the concept of transnationalism, defined as 'the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement' (Basch et al., 1994: 7). Studies of transnationalism have provided convincing evidence that, far from cutting ties, many immigrants maintain close contact with family and friends that remain in the homeland, send financial remittances and/or form diasporic collectives for discussions, expression of solidarity and political activism.

It is widely accepted in the body of literature on transnationalism that new information, communication and transportation technologies have made it possible for migrants to maintain close, ongoing ties with their homeland in a way that was never possible before (Cohen, 1997; Kivisto, 2003; Portes, 1999a; Smith, 2002; Smith and Guarnizo, 2002). In our interviews with 17 Ghanaians living abroad we generated a great deal of evidence confirming the theory that new ICTs are an important part of strategies for maintaining contact with the homeland. However, we discovered forms of ICT use by Ghanaians living abroad that did not fit within the conceptual framework defined by transnationalism, which is structured by the assumption that an immigrant's social horizon is limited to host and home countries. An individual's social horizon is defined by Buttimer as the space covered by one's social contacts, ranging from those in the immediate vicinity to people living thousands of miles away (Kivisto, 2003). Ghanaians' social horizons were defined not only by co-nationals with whom they were in contact around the globe, but also foreigners. They used the internet to establish new ties with foreigners and strangers and to seek out information and ideas from outside of both home and host societies. For these individuals, internet use amplified the exploratory practices that were also part of the process of migration by making digitally-mediated pieces of the rest of the world more accessible.

This meant that ICTs were relevant to their migration experience beyond the attempt to maintain a connection with co-nationals and the homeland.

Progressing from more limited definitions of immigration, the concept of transnationalism incorporates the current understanding that migration is often impermanent or cyclic, but not that it can involve more than one host country through serial migration or even connections to multiple countries simultaneously, countries which may not be either a migrant's home or host. By drawing a boundary around home and host societies, previous studies have distinguished the concept of transnationalism too rigorously from processes of globalization. The current study found an overlap in these processes in the fluid and unbounded way that some Ghanaians living abroad orient themselves towards the rest of the world. In the popular imagination in Ghanaian society, 'abroad' is the source of innovation, opportunity and material success. Contacts and information from abroad are highly prized in Ghana and convey status to the recipient of these resources. Through both migration and ICT use Ghanaians attempted to construct more globalized, cosmopolitan lifestyles.

METHOD

An approach that is centred on the individual migrant marks this research as distinct methodologically from most other studies of transnationalism. Many previous studies have used 'ethnic neighbourhoods' as their point of origin, conducting a multi-sited ethnography looking at connections between the neighbourhood in the host country and another in the homeland (Basch et al., 1994; Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2002). In addition, a number of studies of online communities of co-nationals in diaspora have been conducted (Bernal, 2004; Boczkowski, 1999; Morton, 1999; Rai, 1995; Sokefeld, 2002; Yang, 2003). These communities exist in virtual places on the internet¹ providing strangers of a shared nationality with a place to meet to discuss issues of common interest. Both the 'ethnic neighbourhood' and 'online community' forms of study identify the community itself as the object of analysis. This particular methodological choice tends to exclude those migrants who choose not to participate actively in ethnic communities. Therefore, these studies often have overlooked the heterogeneity in perspectives among migrants from the same country of origin, neglecting the more cosmopolitan or assimilationist outlooks held by many.²

The rather eclectic recruiting strategy of this study resulted in a group of participants with few ties to one another and included many individuals who lived on the periphery of any ethnic community. In the search for willing interview participants, we began with a list of Ghanaian associations that met regularly in London. The list was published in the *Ghana International Review* magazine and was made up of hometown, clan, ethnic group, alumni and professional associations. Two hometown and two professional associations provided participants. However, it was found that this approach yielded

mostly older Ghanaians and people who were not heavy internet users. To include more internet users in the sample, a second recruitment strategy was used, contacting members of the ghana.co.uk discussion board. Younger Ghanaians were recruited also from a Pentecostal charismatic church. One of the participants was born in the UK to Ghanaian parents, but self-identified as Ghanaian and had strong ties to family in Ghana, even going so far as sending her two young sons to live for several months with a sister-in-law in Ghana in order to receive a Ghanaian-style education. Our intent was to find people of a variety of ages and life stages and from different ethnic groups and areas of Ghana.

Since this study of Ghanaians in London was set in the context of their everyday lives, the fieldsites went beyond virtual spaces to include spaces frequented by Ghanaians within London such as homes, churches and places where social gatherings are held. We participated in a number of public and private social events, including the Notting Hill Carnival. Private social events included a meeting of the Agona clan and the Kumasi New Town club, church services at a Pentecostal charismatic church, a wedding and a 60th birthday party. Additionally, we spent time in Ghanaian cyberspace reading discussion groups and studying the websites for various clubs (such as 'Old Boys' or 'Old Girls' alumni associations) and social events (such as the Miss Ghana UK pageant and the Ghana Music Awards UK).

The ethnographic approach involved informal in-home interviews with 17 Ghanaians (see Appendix) in addition to participant observation at social events. The interview guide covered several topics, including the experience of leaving Ghana, how they communicate and interact with family, friends and other Ghanaians, what their plans for the future are and whether they intended to return to Ghana. The use of ICTs including early experiences with the internet were topics within this interview framework. We looked at a wide spectrum of technologies adopted by transnationals including mobile phones, the internet, home computers and video camcorders.

The explosion of new consumer technologies such as these share the commonality of de-professionalizing media production by making new ways of documenting, publishing, presenting and communicating accessible to ordinary people. As these technologies have diffused they have become an ongoing component of everyday life, putting the power to produce into the hands of non-professionals. By studying this wide range of technologies, we were simultaneously examining both media production and consumption habits.

Ghanaians abroad

The population of immigrants selected for study was not one in exile. Outside of some periods of political instability in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Ghanaians who migrated within the past 50 years generally did so willingly. The Ghanaians living in London that were interviewed were

part of the contemporary trend towards voluntary and often temporary migration for economic and educational opportunities leading to career advancement (Cohen, 1997; Portes, 1999a). Therefore, the type of migration that Ghanaians pursued will be described as 'aspirational'. Many of these immigrants had considered several potential destinations, choosing the one where they had family or friends to receive them and ease their transition. They held a general interest in what was outside of Ghana for the ideas, opportunities and contacts it had the potential to provide, and London was often only one point in a series of moves or travel plans that almost universally included the intention to return to Ghana permanently.

In light of this attitude towards migration, the terminology often used in research on migration is problematic. None of these terms applied to the group as a whole. 'Immigrant' implied too much permanence, whereas 'migrant' suggested too little (Basch et al., 1994). Transnational was a word that suggested an individual whose social horizon is bounded by sending and receiving countries (Basch et al., 1994; Levitt, 2001; Portes, 1999a). Terms such as 'exile', 'émigré', 'asylum-seeker' and 'refugee' refer to forced migration or the inability to return safely to the homeland (Hannerz, 1996). While some Ghanaians were granted refugee status, this was not the dominant trend. In contrast to these terms, which labelled immigrants as unfortunate victims of circumstance, the term 'expatriate' implies privilege and elite status. While some of the people interviewed came from well-to-do families in Ghana, their stigmatized categorization as migrants from a developing country in Africa made this term inappropriate. 'Expats' do not face racial discrimination and are not usually members of target groups for immigration restrictions. Similarly, 'cosmopolitan' was inappropriate in both its political definition as one with weakened allegiance to their home country and a global perspective on politics (Stevenson, 2002), or as one who seeks to immerse themselves in foreign cultures (Hannerz, 1996).

The Ghanaians that participated in this study explore the world yet resist cultural immersion; they remain loyal to (if sometimes critical) of their homeland, defending it against stereotyped representations of Africa that persist in first-world countries. Some of the terms listed above applied well to some of the Ghanaians we interviewed, but there was so much diversity within this group that none of these labels applied to all of them. For this reason, many of these terms have been used somewhat interchangeably throughout the article, particularly 'transnational', 'immigrant', 'migrant' and 'émigré', which are used wherever they seemed most contextually appropriate.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Why they migrate

Edmund was the headmaster of a school in Ghana supervising 300 students. He was only 21 years old at the time, but like many young Ghanaian men, he had

political ambitions. One night, Kwame Nkrumah, the leader of Ghana's nationalist movement and its first president, came to him in a dream. Nkrumah led Ghana into independence in 1957 and hoped to build a unified Africa. In this dream Nkrumah told Edmund that he was going to lead Africa and that he was handing Ghana over to Edmund. Galvanized by this nocturnal vision of political leadership, Edmund decided shortly thereafter to move to London. (Fieldwork anecdote).

The ways the participants explained and justified their migration out of Ghana drew upon economic, social and personal factors. This explanation was couched often in terms of a 'vision' of what they hoped to accomplish in life: sometimes to rise in politics, build a business empire, explore the world or own some land in Ghana and build a house. The aspirations that motivated these Ghanaians were complex and diverse and their reasons for migrating help to explain the ways in which they were using ICTs to expand upon the opportunities provided by migration. For most, the short-term concern was the pragmatic need for employment and income, since unemployment rates continue to be very high in Ghana. For some, a first step towards an income was a better education. Those for whom university was an option found that competition for limited places at Ghanaian universities was intense. One participant described himself as lacking the connections that could gain him admission. Instead, he sought educational opportunities abroad, where it was perceived as easier to gain admission although more difficult to fund.

A secondary incentive to migrate was the status conferred on Ghanaians who have spent time abroad. Those who return to Ghana benefit from the exaggerated concept that many Ghanaians have of life in the UK and the USA. The participants commented on their own misperceptions of western lifestyles, underestimating (although rising to the challenge of) the amount and intensity of work that they would have to put in to succeed. In particular long work shifts, working weekends and nights, early morning workday starts, taking on jobs alongside full-time schooling and time-consuming transportation – and doing this without the day-to-day support of extended family – were some of the realities that Ghanaians faced while working in London that they did not have to face in Ghana. They also underestimated the cost of living in London. Council taxes on housing, utility costs and various assorted fees were the types of unexpected expenses that chipped away at the savings they had hoped to accumulate. Some young Ghanaian men who migrated alone faced the prospect of cooking and cleaning for themselves for the first time. The benefits of having lived abroad and returned built upon these imaginings of the land where 'money grows on trees' reduced the incentive for Ghanaians to describe their struggles in London in too much detail once they returned to Ghana, and so these misperceptions continue. One participant also suggested that exposure to American TV programmes, which he described as a form of propaganda, shaped Ghanaian perceptions of American lifestyles.

As the story that began this section notes, political ambitions also factor into some Ghanaians' desire to migrate. The history of Ghanaian politics and the biographies of Ghanaian politicians have set this precedent, with many political leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah doing some component of their education in the UK and/or the USA. In the colonial era Ghanaians who took up lucrative civil service careers were educated in England (Goody and Grootshus, 1977). There are also notable instances of political organizing taking place in London in the African nationalist movements. For example, the, 1945 Pan-African Congress, which catalyzed the struggle for African independence from colonial control, was held in Manchester with Nkrumah in attendance. More recently, the lead up to civilian government in 1993 was partly negotiated in London (Peil, 1995). One female participant described a Ghanaian lawyer she knew who held political planning meetings at the law firm he ran at the end of every workday to discuss potential candidates and political strategies for campaigns going on in Ghana. This was not just a case of migrants maintaining political influence while living abroad, but Ghanaians migrating in order to go into politics either by gaining a requisite education, accumulating the necessary financial capital or by making the right connections with expatriate elites.

Many others had entrepreneurial visions. Migrating into financial flows, to where money seemed most concentrated, was seen as the best opportunity for accumulating capital to pursue business projects back home in Ghana. The business ideas mentioned in interviews included a starch manufacturing plant, information technology (IT) consultancy, communications centre or internet cafe, hair products business, tourist agency, event planning business and fitness management business. For some this was a matter of overcoming the employment problems in Ghana by generating their own jobs.

Beyond wealth and political ambitions, the Ghanaians interviewed also employed reasons related to personal development in order to justify their decision to migrate. These reasons had to do with finding identity and seeing and learning more about the world through travel. Nii, who first moved to the UK and then later came to the USA as part of a touring music group stated: 'That's why I left and I feel like I have to go and find myself, find my true identity, travel to see what is coming out in the world.'

However, a number of Ghanaians migrated less voluntarily and their stories serve as a counterbalance to this portrait of aspirational migration. One participant was a refugee who had lost his business to a government takeover while he was travelling outside the country, and felt that he had no choice but to stay abroad. Many of the women who had migrated had done so as children or in order to join their husbands. For those who had migrated as children, issues of identity sparked a curiosity about Ghana and a desire to understand better and develop that part of their personal history. ICTs were

part of acting upon this curiosity through practices of looking homeward. Not surprisingly, their relationship to Ghana was different in many ways from those who had willingly and eagerly left the country.

Looking homeward

Cynthia, a young mother who migrated to the UK as a child, describes what she asks contestants in the Miss Ghana UK pageant:

Think about what you can do being a Ghanaian-based UK person. Because you can say, oh, I'll go to Ghana and I'll build at this and I'll do that, it's not going to happen. That's the reality of it. You don't spend enough time, so think of what young Ghanaians – what you can do here. What are your interests? What can you do here? How would you get young Ghanaians together to keep that cultural thing going? 'Cause at the moment, I think there's a bit of disappearing happening with young Ghanaians. So, make them more aware of what's going on. (Cynthia)

One of the trajectories of ICT use identified among Ghanaians was the incorporation of ICTs into practices of looking homeward that were central to certain social gatherings. These gatherings range from informal backyard barbeques to traditional funerals. Meetings of clan and hometown associations were most likely to attract elders, whereas club nights and concerts for touring Ghanaian hip-life³ groups were filled with young Ghanaians. Many of the older Ghanaians interviewed filled their free time with these types of activities: going from one event to the next, staying out late on Saturdays and getting up early Sunday morning to go to church. Looking homeward at social events was a way of maintaining cultural continuity, preserving something of the lifestyle and cultural symbols from home while living abroad. The quote that begins this section refers to this concern 'to keep that cultural thing going'.

The ICTs that were present at these events included camcorders, digital cameras, sound systems and websites. It was common to hire a videographer to document events and the videotapes were kept to watch later or to show to friends and family who were not able to attend. Often these videotapes were transported from London to co-nationals in other countries, passed along from hand to hand. It was also common for events in Ghana to be videotaped and for the tapes to make their way to London and other places. Websites were used in conjunction with at least two Ghanaian events in London – the Miss Ghana UK pageant and the Ghana Music Awards UK – providing a mediated experience of the event through text and photos and therefore extending the potential audience to Ghanaians worldwide. The online guestbook for the Miss Ghana UK pageant shows comments from Ghanaians in Australia, Canada, Ghana, UK and the USA. The Ghana Music Awards UK website even allows for remote participation by providing a way to vote online for the winners. These various forms of media allowed Ghanaians in many locations to witness social events and therefore served the

aim of cultural continuity by providing synchronization between abroad and home and among Ghanaians in the diaspora.

By producing websites and other documents of social events, Ghanaians used ICTs to overcome the constraints of these events that were limited to a specific time and place and otherwise could be witnessed only by a small subset of the diaspora. A distinction can be drawn between two ways of engaging with these documents of Ghanaian social events. For someone who attends a funeral, the video allows them to relive the event through a mediated experience that serves as a reminder, but is not the experience itself. This extends the experience in time for the viewer. In contrast, for someone who views a video of a funeral they did not attend or looks at the web photo album of an awards show that they missed, this is the experience itself. Rather than extending the experience in time it is extended in space, reaching more members of the Ghanaian diaspora. Whereas the compression of time and space is noted often as a function of ICTs, conversely the documents of these events were used to expand the time spent looking homeward so that it covered more geographic and temporal territory, providing a way to reconnect more Ghanaians with each other and their homeland.

The theme of synchronization between the homeland and host country or among members of a multinational diasporic community runs through many previous studies of transnationalism and ICT use. Some have concluded, unproblematically, that this synchronization facilitates unity of identity, fulfilling a sense of cultural belonging or enabling unity in political movements. However, others note that synchronization and the closeness that results when ICTs are used to minimize space and time differences can exacerbate conflict by putting the members of a transnational community face-to-face with their differences, or by forcing individuals to reconcile imagination and memory of the homeland (so often nostalgic) with contemporary realities. Closeness can shatter illusions of belonging. For example, Gladys, who has lived in London for 32 years, mournfully described to us her return to Ghana for her mother's funeral. She expressed having never felt more disconnected from her family than when she was physically with them for the first time after a long absence, saw firsthand how everyone's lives had carried on in her absence, and how she was no longer part of that.

However, we found generally that ICTs at Ghanaian social events indeed were used to promote a sense of belonging and enhanced cultural identity through synchronization with the homeland and with other co-nationals in the diaspora. Whether ICTs facilitate unity of identity or disunity and conflict relates to non-technological factors, such as the characteristics of the transnational community itself. These communities can range in size and can be small enough that most members know one another, or they can be very large and multinational. Anderson describes these large groups as 'imagined communities' composed of members who will never meet most of the other

members, 'yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1983: 6). A distinction can be drawn between studies of 'imagined' communities that often serve the purpose of building solidarity among strangers of common origin, and studies of transnational immigrant communities that are made up of members who are bound together by kinship or know one another in some offline dimension, and who therefore are tied together into pragmatic networks of social obligation and reciprocity (Faist, 2000; Kivisto, 2003). These very obligations and the dependence of members upon each other for various forms of tangible support can lead to conflict and disunity when situations arise whereby they cannot be met, and this is often the case in the unpredictable experience of migration. Beyond issues of social obligation, Levitt (2001) found in her study of a community of Dominicans living in Boston that there was hierarchy and divisiveness within that community of transnationals (more of a kinship group than an imagined community) as members sought to establish status for themselves. Similarly, the condition of exile as well as the problem of prejudice and xenophobia in the host country lends unique qualities to a transnational community. Fighting against a common enemy can be a powerful unifying force (Bernal, 2004; Portes, 1996b). These non-technological factors all explain why, in some cases, technologies might facilitate solidarity and in others conflict and disunity among co-nationals.

The type of ICT in use also must be considered as well as who controls production in order to understand how a sense of unity and belonging might follow from its use. The role of mass media such as television (where media production is controlled by corporate professionals who are often outsiders to the community) is different from that of videotapes produced within the community itself. For example, Aksoy and Robins (2000) directly critique the idea that the use of ICTs will necessarily have the effect of building unity of culture or in cultural preservation, in their study of transnational television watching patterns of Turks in Europe. They found that watching Turkish television channels in London did not lead Turks to build up an idealized, imagined community of cultural belonging. Rather, it challenged transmigrants ideas of what it meant to be Turkish by giving them a representation of contemporary life in Turkey, which included grim news stories, pop culture controversies, scandals and contradictions that illuminated Turkish society's changing social mores. Rather than provide a sense of unity or solidarity, transnational television communicated multiple ways of being Turkish (Aksoy and Robins, 2000). In that particular case transnational TV provided a synchronicity with the homeland, but this did not lead to cultural preservation, since television reflected how the homeland was always changing. Their research shows how a distinction must be made between the notion of ICTs as tools of cultural or ethnic preservation and unification or as tools of cultural synchronization; one does not necessarily imply the other.

The way that Ghanaian events were performed and the control over ICTs and production at these events are reasons why in this case ICTs served the aim of promoting cultural unity and continuity. These social events were designed as idealized cultural fiction, they were elaborate rituals of looking homeward. ICTs were used not only to document the proceedings, but also as part of the performance. For example, sound systems were used to play hi-life oldies that heightened feelings of nostalgia at a 60th birthday party. The hired DJ blasted this music so loudly that it could not possibly be described as background music. The music took centre stage and many older Ghanaians sang along. At the event, Gladys nostalgically described the memory of listening to one particular song as a teenager. Listening to Ghanaian music as a practice of looking homeward is made explicit in a quote from the Ghana Music Awards UK website:

Deep down inside me, I knew that Ghanaian music is the eternal bond between thousands of others like me and our roots, which have their foundations in the memories of motherland Ghana. Over the many years I have spent in the United Kingdom, I observed that it was the magnificent medium of Ghanaian music which was an enduring and lovable link between Ghanaians abroad and their countrymen back home. Be it following the latest stars and songs or cherishing old classics, the music lovers in UK are in close touch with the song happenings in Ghana. (Adu, 2004)

The 60th birthday party is a good example of the structure of performance at Ghanaian social events in London. Everyone arrived wearing their best traditional clothes and the virtues of the ethnic community were extolled publicly by respected community elders. Part of the performance was the complex ways that bodies were configured in space, communicating important information about status. For example, the woman whose birthday was being celebrated sat at a head table with male and female clan leaders who were ceremoniously called forward one by one to their seats. Dancing and dressing went beyond personal enjoyment, serving as a way of 'representing' and expressing group affiliations and solidarity. Presence at the event communicated respect and one's attendance was recognized, documented and remembered. In videos produced at Ghanaian events the videographer will always pan slowly around the room, capturing an image of each and every person in attendance. One main point is that performance at these events served to create spaces of cultural orderliness, not spaces for bringing out conflicts. In fact at the birthday party, this façade crumbled slightly as the children of Ghanaian immigrants began to talk loudly among themselves in the back of the room, ignoring the ceremony. Older Ghanaians noted and lamented this lack of cooperation with the performance. The video and photographic documents of these performed events were meant to provide nostalgia and solidarity rather than a reality check. Since the community that was creating

this performance also had control over the technologies that were used to produce documents of the event, the message of cultural unity was carried through. This was a contrast to the content of Turkish transnational television that was created by station producers (who were not members of the diaspora) to entertain by being provocative and to inform their audience of the news, the reality of contemporary life in Turkey.

Thus far, the examples of ICT use among Ghanaians have been in keeping with traditional notions of transnationalism as the practice of maintaining social ties between home and abroad. In contrast, Ghanaians used ICTs not only to maintain ties with family and other co-nationals, but to establish ties with foreigners as well as to access global flows of information and goods. In this second trajectory of ICT use, these technologies were used to amplify and extend the effects of migration.

Taking new territories

Anywhere in Japan or Hong Kong, I would love to live there. That does appeal to me, the whole techie culture they have there ... you always read about all these gadgets that are coming out. I'm a gadget person in case you haven't noticed, and they always come out in the Far East first and I would really love to get my hands on some of them before they actually ever set foot here. (Gabby)

The same technologies that were used in practices of looking homeward were re-oriented by Ghanaians for exploring what is outside of both home and host country. ICTs provide this possibility because they are configurable, allowing what can best be described as a choice of destination. For example, an email can be sent to a sister in Ghana or to a penpal in Australia. One can view the Miss Ghana UK pageant website or one about Japanese technogadgets. A plane can fly to Accra or Dubai. A camcorder can film a Ghanaian funeral or a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem. All of these are real-life examples of ICT use from the Ghanaians interviewed in the course of this research.

An interest in alternate destinations relates to Ghanaian migration patterns that seemingly have entered a new era. What we heard in our interviews was quite different from what was written about Ghanaians abroad in the 1970s (Goody and Groothues, 1977; Stapleton, 1978). With the changing financial fortunes of many Asian countries, increasingly restrictive immigration policies in Europe and pop culture hegemony of the USA, Ghanaians now have their attention drawn to many other geographic destinations.⁴ No longer does the former seat of colonial power exert quite the same gravitational pull it once did. Even the terminology has changed. While 'been-to' was once a slang term used to refer to a Ghanaian who had been abroad (usually to the UK) and back, the new term in circulation is 'burger', making reference to the fact that so many Ghanaians have been migrating to Germany, making them 'Hamburgers'. Certainly, previous patterns of migration mean that there are

and continue to be very high concentrations of Ghanaians in London, but great shifts are taking place in other countries. In a historical review of US census statistics, the current study found that the migration of Africans to the USA has been increasing at a nearly exponential rate since it began its upward climb in the 1950s. In this post-post-colonial state of migratory entropy many new locations recommend themselves for immigration opportunities.⁵

In fact, many of the Ghanaians interviewed were looking outward in many directions at once. They had family and friends in several countries, distributed across Europe and North America and often in Asia. When the young Ghanaians interviewed described their decision to migrate, they often expressed indifference about their chosen destination so long as it was outside of Ghana and Africa. For example, Samuel, now a single social worker living in the USA, described applying and being accepted to two universities in the USA, one in Japan and one in Germany, any of which he considered to be a suitable choice. The widely spread social networks of many Ghanaians interviewed facilitate this broad outlook by providing opportunities for migration to any of several destinations or to serial migration from one country to another. Several people interviewed were planning a second move from the UK to the USA to seek further opportunities, and one participant had already accomplished this.

These global social networks confound and complicate the dichotomy of home and host countries around which a boundary is drawn in theories of transnationalism. The ideal-typical transnational community made up of co-nationals abroad living together in a neighbourhood and its corresponding neighbourhood back home is much more regular, stable and contained than the social networks that were described in the interviews. In his theories on the new global culture, Appadurai develops an alternative to these duofocal transnational communities when he uses the notion of an 'ethnoscape', described as a

landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world ... not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks of kinship, friendship, work and leisure, as well as of birth, residence and other filial forms. But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move. (Appadurai, 1996: 33–4)

The notion of people moving through shifting social landscapes better describes the social networks that these Ghanaians (particularly younger migrants) described than that of a transnational community.

In addition, internet use among the participants was shaped by some of the aspirations that motivated migration, as described earlier in this article. These aspirations were fed by what Appadurai describes as the new and significant role of imagination and fantasies in the 'postelectronic world'. Rather than

escapism, imagination is a form of negotiation between individual agency and fields of possibility, meaning that it is a productive force that individuals use to construct and pursue their aspirations. The mass media plays an important role by producing images of new possibilities, new lifestyles and new locations (Appadurai, 1996). Appadurai also links his notion of imagination to Anderson's idea of 'imagined communities' by suggesting that the work of imagining produces collectively-held notions about group identity.

Yet Appadurai bases his theories on the study of electronic mass media such as television, film and radio and not on new media ICTs such as the internet. His use of the term 'flow' does not quite mesh with the qualities of these new media ICTs. Flow indicates that 'push' technologies are at play (such as television and radio) rather than 'pull' technologies (such as the internet). It emphasizes consumption rather than production or use. Whereas one can imagine the flow of broadcast radio waves, the contents of the internet are essentially piles of bits and bytes sitting on hard drives distributed globally, and this means that data usually does not flow unless someone purposefully, actively requests it by using a search engine or clicking on a link. 'Flow' as a theoretical concept is more applicable to older technologies such as television, where one can sit back and let the images wash over one's retina, less applicable as even new broadcast technologies such as delayed playback devices such as TiVo give people more options and more tangible control over formerly 'push' technologies such as television. While those who watch TV or listen to radio always have had the capacity for unique interpretations (meaning that mass media does not communicate the same message to everyone), with new ICTs even the images, text and audio that people are exposed to will vary substantially from person to person. Internet users have an unprecedented level of control over what images, people and information they are exposed to that television watchers never have. This has important ramifications for whether or not new media have any impact on the collective imagination of group identity. There is less uniformity or universality in the media (images, narratives) that Ghanaians are exposed to on the internet. It is not analogous to the shared experience of watching an imported American soap opera and constructing ideas about life abroad.

However, an element of 'flow' persists both in the experience of living in London and inhabiting the internet does provide, at times, the serendipitous encounters of being in a flow, the fortuitous connection made on the street or in a chatroom, a connection only possible in these fast-moving global flows of money, people, information and opportunities that move through a world city rather than the backwaters of Ghana. Infrastructure comes into play as well. The bandwidth running through Europe is over a hundred times greater than the bandwidth running through Africa, which means that the flow of images and information literally is moving at much, much greater volume and speed through London than through Accra

(see: http://www.cybergeography.org/atlas/telegeography_2001_bandwidth_large.gif). In this way, London provides a better vantage point from which to see the rest of the world. Despite the fact that the internet exists both in Accra and in London and provides access to the same websites and chatrooms, internet access is more feasible and internet use more effective in London.

Although many ICTs can be used for exploration activities, the tendency was most pronounced in the way that young Ghanaians used the internet. What they did on the internet was an extension of what they were doing by migrating: that is, attempting to get access to global 'flows' of media, information and, most importantly, people. Internet use served to turbo-charge migration by putting them within easy reach of people and information in every country simultaneously. One participant said this well when she described the internet as:

Your link to the world ... it's a *place you go* and it links you up to basically everywhere else in the world. Anything you want to know about, any part of the world, any country, any company ... It's a whole world of information, I mean, almost no limits to what you can find on the internet. (Margaret; emphasis added)

In their exploratory practices, Ghanaians expressed a personalized form of imagination. Rather than imagining either individual or group identity, they were busy imagining and developing a 'vision' of where they would like to be in five, 10 or 15 years. While it was often difficult to get Ghanaians to speak about their identity (individual or group), it was not difficult to prod the participants to speak about their aspirations, and it was clear that they had already given the matter much thought. They had many aspirations – to travel, build business empires or become powerful.

In relation to aspirations, fantasies and imagination, both migration and internet use were perceived as providing similar and interlinking opportunities for 'expansive realization', meaning that 'contradictions concerning one's ability, in practical life, to be who one thinks one is seem capable of being resolved on the expanded scale and terrain of the Internet' (Miller and Slater, 2000: 11). One participant mirrors this notion of 'expansive realization' in his eloquent explanation of why he left Ghana:

There are two [options in Ghana], either you be fair and be eradicated or you are assimilated to ruin the country ... So I had to come and move and find another way. It is better for you to run away to amass the intelligence and to see the light that you want to progress ... That is my philosophy in life. (Nana)

The use of the internet was important in both realizing aspirations and as an outlet for certain fantasies. These fantasies often related to further migration and the internet sometimes served as an approximation of desired migration experiences. For example, in the quote that begins this section,

Gabby, a young programmer and technology enthusiast, expresses his fascination with the technology culture in Asia. Although he could not at present realise his dream of living in Japan or Hong Kong, he mentioned reading the weblog of an American man living in Hong Kong. Glimpsing titbits from this weblogger's daily life satisfied his curiosity to know more about what it was like. His fantasy was not one he shared with other co-nationals, but was developed through his own unique forays on the internet. Samuel, a single social worker living in the USA, told us that one day, if money were no object, he would like to have a house in Brazil, one in Australia and one somewhere in Europe. He used the internet to read Australian, American, British and Ghanaian news websites as well as German sports news and Al-Jazeera. He wished to have multiple outside perspectives on the news, rather than being exposed only to American news by American journalists. Internet use paralleled his desire for living in multiple places, it allowed for reading about events taking place in different locations and the same events (such as the war in Iraq) from different national viewpoints.

Yet the internet also provided a place to pursue one's aspirations rather than as merely a substitute for fulfilling them. What seemed to be most important among the young internet users interviewed was the possibility of either making or maintaining foreign contacts on the internet. When they lacked contacts abroad, some of the young Ghanaians interviewed sought to remedy this by using the internet to make contact with foreigners and strangers. For example, Kofi was a typical case of a 'penpal collector'.⁶ He began using the internet to meet foreigners when he was still in Ghana using Yahoo! personals primarily to make contact with foreign women. Later, after moving to London, he continued to communicate with many of them, including the first woman he contacted, an American whom he says he has no expectation of ever meeting. Some of his friendships progressed to other communication channels including instant messaging and phone calls, and he has even met a few in person. He commented:

Thanks to [online] personals and things, I have friends in so many countries around the world ... the internet is a really nice place, you know? Yeah. I mean, you meet different kinds of people. I mean, I really never thought I'd be good friends with a person from Trinidad, Australia, Jamaica ... US, you know?

Similarly, Gabby, who programmed and managed a community bulletin board and wrote a popular weblog, seemed to revel in how many friends he had made around the world in the course of his online programming pursuits, which were largely focused on community building.

While some desired foreign contacts for their own sake, other participants saw a direct connection between making foreign contacts and fulfilling other migratory aspirations such as getting a job or starting a profitable business. A couple of young Ghanaians interviewed were actively searching for jobs on

the internet, visiting corporate websites to submit their CV. Eric, for example, explicitly described an association between the internet and personal success when he said: 'The internet is something that can help you to go far.' He wished to learn everything he could about IT with the ultimate goal of starting an event planning business back in Ghana providing desktop publishing, graphic design and digital videography services for funerals, weddings and other social gatherings. London, to him, was a place of substantial IT diffusion and accessibility, making it a good place to learn more. Friends of his who had already moved to London reported back to him that IT was everywhere and that computer access was free. His search for IT knowledge extended to a desire to talk to people all over the world. He commented:

I want to get exposure to people from different countries. That was why I just wanted to come and do these things because I feel I need to know more ... Because IT is such that people are coming out with different ideas ... it will help me if I want to, probably, establish myself anywhere and build my own business because I'm planning on ... getting my own business back home in Ghana.

Eric viewed foreigners as a resource for information on new technologies but, unlike Kofi, not as inherently interesting in their own right.

Off line there were many parallels to this behaviour of collecting foreign contacts. Antwi was someone who avoided contact with other Ghanaians in London because he said he could 'learn more' from the foreign friends he was making at school. Gabby also avoided Ghanaian social events, feeling that nothing new was ever discussed, only reminiscing and endless discussions about politics. After an interview with Eric, he asked for help with job references in the USA. Not only did he hope to gain information and assistance from foreign contacts online, but offline as well whenever the opportunity arose.

Not to be discounted in the realm of migratory aspirations is the symbolic role of some new ICTs. We found in a charismatic evangelical church community of Ghanaians in London that computers represented change and transformation in a way that was abstracted from their utility. Eric was one of the young men at his church who managed a laptop and projector to display song lyrics and event announcements. Like many charismatic churches, his church preaches the 'gospel of prosperity', presenting itself as an antidote to stagnation and tied into the global political economy (Meyer, 1998). The church is a community promoting exploratory thinking. The pastor describes this in his goals for the congregation:

We are looking at raising up a group of people that will become very creative in their thinking, development of their thinking, people who are looking at investing into the future ... by placing value on their lives and by increasing their value. So we are emphasizing a lot on training, education, is still very much the thing, you know? We are still very much into that, most of the

sermons I preach is [sic] *very much challenging to begin to look beyond just where they are.* (Daniel; emphasis added)

Brochures handed out at services describe the church's mission as 'changing destinies and taking new territories'. The pastor described the issue of changing destinies as related to overcoming negative family legacies such as alcoholism and poverty. Church services are a site of collective ICT use. Whereas this use of the laptop and projector to display information to the congregation was quite practical and not particularly revolutionary to the functioning of the church, it represented something more. Eric comments on the role of technology in churches: 'It helps them to be a bit modernized, if I should say. We don't do things in the old way'. The technology is symbolic of this new way, it represents what is on offer in the world outside of their families and communities back home, what one might find through exploration and self-development and is part of the church's coherent message about personal success.

The word *aburokyere* is the Twi word meaning 'abroad', but more literally it means 'beyond horizon'. The Ghanaians interviewed have managed to move beyond the horizon, but from their new vantage point many continue to look to the horizon and beyond and to use ICTs to orient themselves in this way. Daniel describes this tendency in himself:

I have great desires to look beyond my world, you know, broaden my horizon and learn from other environments, other communities and it's always been there.

CONCLUSION

Studies of transnationalism have shown that rather than assimilate to their host society, cutting all ties to their homeland, many immigrants maintain close contact with family and friends, co-nationals in diaspora and an awareness of events taking place back home. New ICTs are thought to be key in the maintenance of these ties. A central debate in studies of ICT use among transnationals is whether these ties lead to a sense of solidarity and unity, or rather to a sense of estrangement and discord. However, this article has argued that the relevance of ICTs to the experience of migration goes beyond connecting transnationals to one another and their homeland. In particular, the use of the internet approximated some of the functions also served by migration by putting immigrants into flows of people, information and images originating from many points around the world. Instead of using ICTs solely for the purpose of reconnecting with the homeland, Ghanaians were using them to break out of the boundaries of their sometimes insular communities of co-nationals in the diaspora. By examining approaches to ICT use, this study has been able to uncover broader themes in the attitudes of some Ghanaians towards migration and the experience of being abroad.

The description of Ghanaians abroad in this article demonstrates that they cannot be characterized easily as forming a transnational community in the traditional sense, as defined in significant early studies on the topic. The Ghanaians interviewed were a diverse group including several students, one refugee, one touring musician, people who migrated to join family members, people who had been abroad for almost their entire lives and some who had been abroad for less than a year. Their motives varied, although all were essentially voluntary migrants and all (save one) intended to return to Ghana permanently one day. Since migration was voluntary, aspirations were an important part of how some of the Ghanaians oriented themselves in the world and guided their activities both online and offline. Aspirations were about imagining and pursuing possible futures. The internet provided a space for exploring possible futures and indulging fantasies about migration. It also provided ways for Ghanaians to expand their social horizons by making contact with other Ghanaians, strangers and foreigners in many countries. Some young Ghanaians expended an extraordinary amount of effort on maintaining their vast social networks by phone, text messages, chatting online and email.

Going forward, research on transnationalism could benefit from considering the ways in which migrants orient themselves not only to the homeland, but to the rest of the world. This study has raised the question of whether the wanderlust and quasi-cosmopolitanism of the study participants was a unique characteristic of the Ghanaian migrant community, or whether it is a more general trend in attitudes towards migration in an increasingly globalized world, where the concepts of 'centre' and 'periphery' and first, second and third worlds are breaking down (Appadurai, 1996; Gupta and Ferguson, 1994; Nonini and Ong, 1997). By being sensitized to this possibility, our hope is that going forward, future studies will seek to understand the creative ways in which individuals and communities in diaspora conceive of and move about the world. Using cross-cultural and multi-sited ethnographic approaches, these studies may examine more effectively the adoption of ICTs, exploring how those living outside the homeland consume, produce and distribute media through their global social networks.

Notes

- 1 These virtual places included web bulletin boards, newsgroups, mailing lists and websites.
- 2 Kivisto (2003) also points out that an assimilationist perspective persists among migrants but is often neglected in research on transnationalism.
- 3 Hip-life is a recent syncretic music form combining Ghanaian hi-life music with American hip-hop music.
- 4 While conducting fieldwork among internet cafe users in Accra we found this interest in Asia (in particular Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore) was even more

pronounced among Ghanaians with migratory aspirations who were denied or had no hope of obtaining visas to countries in North America or western Europe because they lacked the necessary financial, social or human capital such as close family abroad who could 'invite' them, or a good education that could lead to acceptance into foreign universities. At one internet cafe the migration of one internet cafe 'regular' to mainland China sparked a chain of migration, leading four or five young men to follow suit.

- 5 The wide range of destination choices among Ghanaian emigrants is also noted by Peil (1995).
- 6 Among Ghanaian internet cafe users in Accra, collecting foreign penpals was the most widespread use of internet cafes among 75 participants. It was even more common than communicating with family or friends living abroad.

References

- Adu, E.M. (2004) 'Ghana Music Awards UK', URL (consulted August 2004): <http://www.ghanamusicawards.co.uk/>
- Aksoy, A. and K. Robins (2000) 'Thinking across Spaces: Transnational Television from Turkey', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 3(3): 343–65.
- Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Basch, L., N.G. Schiller and C.S. Blanc (1994) *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-states*. London: Routledge.
- Bernal, V. (2004) 'Eritrea Goes Global: Reflections on Nationalism in a Transnational Era', *Cultural Anthropology* 19(1): 3–25.
- Boczkowski, P.J. (1999) 'Mutual Shaping of Users and Technologies in a Virtual National Community', *Journal of Communication* 49(2): 86–108.
- Cohen, R. (1997) *Global Diasporas: an Introduction*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Faist, T. (2000) *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goody, E.N. and C.M. Groothues (1977) 'The West Africans: the Quest for Education', in J.L. Watson (ed.) *Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain*, pp. 151–80. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gupta, A. and J. Ferguson (1994) 'Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference', in A. Gupta and J. Ferguson (eds) *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, pp. 33–51. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hannerz, U. (1996) 'Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture' in U. Hannerz (ed.) *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*, pp. 102–11. London: Routledge.
- Kivisto, P. (2003) 'Social Spaces, Transnational Immigrant Communities and the Politics of Incorporation', *Ethnicities* 3(1): 5–28.
- Levitt, P. (2001) *The Transnational Villagers*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Meyer, B. (1998) 'Commodities and the Power of Prayer: Pentecostalist Attitudes Towards Consumption in Contemporary Ghana', *Development and Change* 29(4): 751–76.
- Miller, D. and D. Slater (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.
- Morton, H. (1999) 'Islanders in Space: Tongans online', in R. King and J. Connell (eds) *Small Worlds, Global Lives: Islands and Migration*, pp. 235–53. London: Pinter Publishers.
- Nonini, D.M. and A. Ong (1997) 'Chinese Transnationalism as an Alternative Modernity', in A. Ong and D.M. Nonini (eds) *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, pp. 3–33. New York: Routledge.

- Peil, M. (1995) 'Ghanaians Abroad', *African Affairs* 94(376): 345–76.
- Portes, A. (1999a) 'The Study of Transnationalism: pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22(2): 217–37.
- Portes, A. (1999b) 'Conclusion: Towards a New World – the Origins and Effects of Transnational Activities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22(2): 463–77.
- Rai, A.S. (1995) 'India On-line: Electronic Bulletin Boards and the Construction of a Diasporic Hindu Identity', *Diaspora* 4(1): 31–57.
- Smith, R.C. (2002) 'Transnational Localities: Community, Technology and the Politics of Membership within the Context of Mexico and U.S. Migration', in M.P. Smith and L. Guarnizo (eds) *Transnationalism from Below*, pp. 196–238. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Smith, M.P. and L. Guarnizo (eds) (2002) *Transnationalism from Below*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Sokefeld, M. (2002) 'Alevism Online: Re-imagining a Community in Virtual Space', *Diaspora* 11(1): 85–123.
- Stapleton, P. (1978) 'Living in Britain', in J. Ellis, P. Stapleton and V. Biggs (eds) *West African Families in Britain: A Meeting of Two Cultures*, pp. 56–73. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Stevenson, N. (2002) 'Cosmopolitanism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship', *Sociological Research Online* 7(1), URL (consulted September 2005): <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/7/1/stevenson.html>
- Yang, G. (2003) 'The Internet and the Rise of a Transnational Chinese Cultural Sphere', *Media, Culture and Society* 25(4): 469–90.
-

JENNA BURRELL is an assistant professor in the School of Information, University of California-Berkeley. Her PhD thesis, conducted at the London School of Economics, was an ethnographic examination of internet cafe use in Accra. Previously she worked with a group of engineers, anthropologists, psychologists and designers in the People and Practices Research group, Intel Corporation.

Address: School of Information, University of Californias, Berkeley, 102 South Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-4600, USA. [email: jenna@ischool.berkeley.edu]

KEN ANDERSON is a design anthropologist at Intel Corporation in the People and Practices Research group. Prior to coming to Intel, Ken was at AT&T Broadband, MediaOne and US West, where he worked to bring a better understanding of people's everyday lives into corporate product and strategy development. He has been on the research faculty at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Bethel College and Seminary, the University of Minnesota and Brown University. As a graduate student Anderson led ethnographic efforts of Brown University's Institute for Research in Information and Scholarship (IRIS) around people's practices, education and technology in a hypermedia world.

Address: People and Practices Research, Intel Corporation, 2111 NE 25th Avenue, Hillsboro, OR 97123, USA. [email: ken.anderson@intel.com]

APPENDIX: TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

NAME*	AGE	YEARS ABROAD	OCCUPATION
Solomon	Early-20s	8 months	Graduate student
Margaret	29	8 months	Graduate student
Eric	~ 23	~ 2 years	Undergraduate?/ security guard
Kofi	24	2 years	Forklift driver
Gabby	22	4 years	Undergraduate/ computer programmer
Kwabena	25	6–7 years	Graduate student
Daniel	35	13 years	Mental health counselor
Nana	50	18 years	Banking
Ransfort	??	19 years	Electrician/technician
Ama	26	20 years	Paralegal
Cynthia	30	20 years	Social work
Samuel	40	20 years	Social work
Mr Asare (and wife)	49 (43)	20 years	Refugee – supervisor at a cleaning company
Nii	50s	32 years	Musician/traditional music and dance teacher
Gladys (and husband Edmund)	~ 57	32 years	Registered Nurse
Estelle	56	33 years	Mental health counselor
Rita	43	43 years	Lawyer

Note: *Pseudonyms are used throughout this article