Does the Internet encourage people to move? Investigating Swedish young adults' internal migration experiences and plans

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A B S T R A C T

The Internet offers personalized and constantly updated information about opportunities and facilities at places far away. It stimulates distant personal contact and interaction via social media. Attention is thus increasingly being paid to the relationships between Internet use and traditional, physical forms of spatial interaction and movement. This paper explores possible associations between Internet use and internal migration, based on a 2009 survey of 750 young adults in Sweden. We explore Internet-based information seeking practices associated with actual migration experiences and with current plans to move to another place. Results indicate that many recent movers believed that the Internet influenced and facilitated their decision to move, and somewhat influenced their choice of destination. Many have also developed Internet-based communication practices that involve plans to migrate in the near future. Results suggest that the Internet reinforces intentions to move for a sizeable group, and also affects their migration motives.

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1. Introduction

Social research is increasingly highlighting the rapid spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (e.g., mobile telephony, computing, as well as the Internet and its various applications) and how the ongoing virtualization of society is affecting human spatial interaction and use of place. Most studies have so far concentrated on aspects of everyday life, not least how ICTs affect daily activity patterns, that is, people's use of time at various locations and associated physical travel and face-to-face meeting (for overviews, see, e.g., Gilbert, 2011; Haddon, 2004; Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2002; Schwanen and Kwan, 2008; Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2010). In the present study, we shift our attention to a different scale, and ask whether extensive ICT use might affect longer-term and farther-reaching spatial decisions. Our study concerns the role of the Internet in internal (inter-regional) migration, people's considerations regarding where to live, and recurrent decisions to move elsewhere.

The context of migration decision making is complex, being structured by various drivers and motives (Boyle, 2009; Cooke, 2008; Niedomysl, 2011). People migrate for work-related and educational purposes, for household related reasons (e.g., when the family situation changes), to strengthen social ties, to change their housing, or to make a fundamental life change. So-called environ-

mental motives, or quests for new milieus, are found to be increasing in importance, not least in the Nordic countries (Lundholm et al., 2004; Lundholm, 2007b). At the same time, several "sedentary" factors are holding people back: place-based attachments and identities, dependencies on local social capital, and fixed ties to work and family (Fischer and Malmberg, 2001; Gilmartin, 2008; Gustafson, 2001, 2002). In the Nordic countries, surveys of internal migrants show that the decision to move from one place of residence to another is perceived as more or less voluntary and made in response to current circumstances (Lundholm et al., 2004). People's propensity to move generally concerns the balance between gaining access to better life opportunities elsewhere and the need for place-bound stability. Arguably, this balance is affected by the enhanced information provided by the Internet, not least by information that addresses central migration motives.

Relevant to this discussion is the notion that the Internet reconfigures access to other places and regions (e.g., Dutton, 2009; Muhammad et al., 2008) and that ICTs create new spatial conditions in which people can manage their lives (Janelle and Gillespie, 2004; Kesselring, 2006; Mokhtarian et al., 2004). Combined with extended networks of personal contact via digital media, people's abilities to make better informed migration decisions – as well as more impulsive ones – could really increase. A recent qualitative case study by the authors provides some evidence that the Internet supports people in seeking new jobs, better education, and new housing, and in establishing social contacts in a wider range of more distant places than before (Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2013).

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In this way, the Internet may well act as a driver of spatial mobility, making markets for labor, housing, goods, and services perform more smoothly.

Accordingly, there is reason to believe that the Internet might in the long run affect people's perception, decision making and behavior as regards migration frequency, destination and distance. However, research into the links between Internet use and migration are scarce, at least from an internal (within a country) perspective.[1] Addressing this gap, the explicit aim of this paper is to explore evolving Internet-based communication practices[2] that might support people's spatial decisions and moves. An underlying hypothesis is that such practices affect and encourage interest in migrating elsewhere, an influence that also might impact future behavior. Our quantitative empirical study concentrates on individuals' own reflections on how Internet use and migration practices are related – both in relation to past practices and future intentions.

Our paper is structured as follows: First, we elaborate on the role of Internet-based practices in a migration context, and how migration might in principle be affected. This contributes to the theoretical understanding by adding a new perspective to migration research and the study of ICT. We then present our data; a survey of a representative sample of Swedish young adults, aged 20–29 years, with recent experience of internal migration and future plans to move. This age group was chosen because of their established high level of Internet use (Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2005) and a substantial increase in their interregional migration frequency in recent years (Lundholm, 2007a). We then retrospectively investigate the extent to which the Internet was perceived to have affected their most recent move and whether or not it was expected to influence their future migration plans. In a concluding section, we discuss our main findings in regards to evolving Internet-based practices and potential implications for migration decisions, choice of destination, and related priorities and motives.

2. Theoretical approach: the potential role of the Internet in migration decision making

Approaching the potential relationships between Internet use and migration requires an initial understanding of migration motives and the role of information in the decision making process. In the large body of migration literature (see, e.g., Boyle, 2009), there are various theoretical perspectives which make various assumptions as to the key motives that trigger people's decisions whether or not to move. Influential neoclassical theories and human capital approaches view migration as an individual strategy to obtain higher income and/or improve one's employment opportunities and career prospects. Migration decisions are assumed to be well-informed rational choices between economic opportunities at various locations (Greenwood, 1975; Yankow, 2003). Other perspectives stress the importance of non-economic factors in determining migration decisions (Courgeau, 1995; Golledge, 1980; Graeme, 2007). Empirical research continually demonstrates that migration patterns are also heavily influenced by social networks, environmental considerations, and location-specific contexts (Fischer and Malmberg, 2001; Lundholm, 2007b; Warnes, 1992). These are complex factors, and their relative weights change over the course of a person's life (Beige and Axhausen, 2006; Niedomysl, 2011).

Regardless of the motives that are supposed to trigger or constrain people's decisions to move, these decisions are always shaped by people's access to information about opportunities at various locations. In reality, available information is not perfect or unbiased (DaVanzo, 1981; Gibson et al., 2010). Furthermore, information gathering is an activity that entails costs (in terms of time, money, and cognitive effort), explaining, for example, why many potential migrants may consider only one or a few destinations. For some years, however, the Internet has provided an alternative way of accessing relevant information; an alternative that could affect or even potentially transform migration decision making (Kuhn and Skuterud, 2000; Stevenson, 2009; Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2013). As a node and channel for information, the Internet is characterized by large volumes of information, easy access anytime and anywhere for most people (at least in societies like the Nordic countries), low transaction costs, high interactivity, and often instant updates or feedback. Information can be personalized on demand and matched to individual preferences in relation to central motives for migration – labor markets, housing markets, education, available leisure options, local environmental characteristics, and local social networks and contacts – in principle, for almost any place. This could reduce the friction of distance and encourage migration, alter migration intensity and distance, and change the ranking of motives and preferences.

Focusing on decision making practices helps improve our understanding of the role and implications of Internet use. Halfacree and Boyle (1993) claim that the decision to migrate is not made while placing the rest of one's life on hold. Migration decisions are predicated on action and activities in time and space, not contemplation, and these practices crucially involve information gathering, social communication, and interaction with other people. These activities are performed in the social settings and routines of everyday life and are central elements in exploring, fulfilling, and implementing the potential migrant's aspirations, plans, and decisions to move. It is reasonable to believe that Internet-based practices play an increasingly vital role in these activities. The Internet has dramatically changed how people access information and provides central support for many life decisions, not least among young people; when leaving high school for further education, planning for longer international journeys, or looking for a job (Frändberg, 2010; Thulin, 2004). A recent study of international migration demonstrates that the Internet plays a crucial role in producing images of new possibilities, lifestyles, and locations, fuelling aspirations and desires to move (Burrell and Anderson, 2008).

An important question is whether this development also more profoundly changes our perceptions and understandings of place. According to Dutton (2009), the Internet "reconfigures" access to people, services and information in two important ways. First and most obviously, it changes how people do things, such as seek information and communicate with others. Second, the outcomes of these activities also fundamentally change: the sort of information we obtain and how frequently, what we know and understand, and the people and places we know and keep in touch with. As information flows more freely online, even across regional and national boundaries, making it much easier to explore employment and education opportunities and attractive places of residence, it is reasonable to assume that individual migration horizons will expand. For example, in a study of job search activity and labor mobility, Stevenson (2009) demonstrates that Internet use actually intensified people's information seeking activities, causing them to read more ads, apply for more jobs, and expand search beyond their local labor market area. By changing people's understanding and knowledge of places, online activities and routines could thus affect their migration propensity, frequency, and destinations and change their motives for migrating. Certain migration motives

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[1] An exception is a number of studies of the role of ICT in international migration, for example, how mobile phones and the Internet enable regular contact between labor migrants and their homes, facilitate the development of transnational families, and have implications for the nature of being a migrant (D'Haenens et al., 2007; Diminescu, 2008; Paragas, 2008).

[2] We here define Internet-based communication practice as the regular use of the Internet for information seeking (i.e., about the surrounding world) and personal communication.