

Chapter 10

ICTs in Senegal: between migration culture and socio-cultural and politico-economic positioning

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Abstract

In recent years, as in many African countries, ICTs have become very widespread in Senegal, to the extent that they appear to have affected the daily lives of local populations irrespective of age, gender or level of schooling. To this end, telephone calls and the complicity of the media and telefilms are helping to promote a culture of migration while revealing strong links between the country of settlement and the country of origin, despite certain policies that seek to turn Europe into a fortress.

Keywords: capital, discursive, imagination, Senegal, telephony, ICTs

Migration at the core of Senegalese everyday life

In Senegal, migration is central to the conversations of the various populations. It has even become one of the few topics of conversation that can bring together all local fringes regardless of age, sex, ethnicity, educational level, employment status, etc. This has come about mainly because, on the one hand, phototypes often crop up when talking about migration at the level of the local system of representation and, on the other, for most Senegalese, travel is not merely synonymous with obtaining a stable job; it can also symbolise the path to making money and obtaining social prestige in the eyes of one's peers.

Thus, in the Senegalese local press, we often read stories relating to travel in the "Miscellaneous" section:

Elderly man over 80 years old faces six months in prison for visa scam ([Rewmi.com](#), Sunday 7 January 2007). *Marabout loses 2 million francs in visa affair* ([LeSoleil.sn](#), Thursday 16 August 2007). *Visa scam: plaintiff takes father-in-law to court* ([LOffice.sn](#), Friday 11 January 2008).

The recurring nature of these "Miscellaneous" stories can be explained by the fact that many local people have a strong desire to leave, irrespective of their age, gender or educational level. This desire is also very present in the linguistic system, which includes sayings - *heard in a number of different places* - that glorify travel or simply migration and migrants.

For example, among the Haalpulaar of the Senegal River Valley, it is common to hear:

- *The Haalpulaar know where they were born but not where they will be buried.*
- *If you have a son, let him go; one day he will come back with either money or knowledge, or both.*

- *It is better to suffer abroad than to remain poor at home.*
- *It is better to be poor and suffer abroad than to stay wretched at home.*

The Wolof people, on the other hand, often say:

- *He who does not travel will never know where it is best to live.*
- *He who returns from a trip and turns bad was not nice in the country where he lived.*

These maxims shape social representations and permeate the collective conscience of local populations, contributing in part, to their desire to travel. Through the mechanisms of socialisation, these sayings are repeated or sometimes newly invented to encourage certain people - mainly young male city-dwellers - to give up stable jobs in search of adventure. Recently, with the dugouts called *cayucos* that ran aground on the Spanish coast, the watchword for migrant hopefuls was "*Barça or Barsaax*" (Go to Barcelona or Die).

This sort of language highlights the determination of the travel hopefuls but it is not a recent phenomenon; in the past, when France was the dream destination of the Senegalese, the Soninke would quite often say "Go to Bordeaux or die". Now though, the determination of the travel hopefuls is fuelled by the use of information and communication technologies, and migrating from Senegal is seen primarily as "a personal adventure". In this sense, is it an adventure for those who have nothing left to lose? Is this adventure an organised, planned project? Is it financial or family-oriented? Is it also an argument of escape and desperation? Is the immigration of escape or adventure thus a gamble or a calculation? Is this migration of escape or adventure based on the suicidal logic of a man who gambles "his all", a man making his last-ditch effort, even risking imprisonment or death?

Empirical observations and interviews held both in Saint-Louis and Dakar tell us that some of those hoping to migrate by canoe manage to get the money together to pay for their ticket using savings obtained from their business activities. These hopefuls include tailors, mechanics and taxi drivers, among others, who have devised subtle strategies using information and communication technologies (telephone calls, text messaging, etc.) to escape the control of the local police and Frontex agents guarding the coastlines of Senegal.

From ICT development to migration strategies

Some people consider the success of these trips in "canoes of fortune" for making money in Europe to be down to the use of information and communication technologies such as GPS, often purchased extremely cheaply on black markets selling equipment from China. It can also be explained by the skills and strategies used by the migrant hopefuls, guided remotely by telephone calls from touts with a better control of the migration networks. With coded messages, the migration networks are organised over several areas through the use of mobile telephones, thus allowing migrant hopefuls to circumvent the laws and control mechanisms put in place by Frontex.¹

In Senegal, the desire to migrate has recently been given a boost with the influence of information and communication technologies. Foreign television programmes with large audiences give many young people the opportunity to feed their fantasies about life in Europe and the dream continents of America. The images identified by prospective migrants are often far removed from the reality, though they are kept alive by the information obtained through telephone calls.

Telephone calls have become more accessible to the people of Senegal as a result of lower consumer prices and occasional discounts strategically offered by telephone companies to impress their customers. The accessibility of telephone calls has also

¹ Frontex, which takes its name from the French *frontières extérieures* ("external borders"), is a European border control agency for the European Union.

been made possible through competition between telephone companies with marketing techniques that circumvent the regulations, as is the case of the system for selling telephone cards - sometimes unauthorised - by hawkers.

Illustration 10.1. Advertising sign hung on an electricity pole.



In recent times, the street peddling of telephone cards has grown significantly in Senegal. The scale is such that it represents a golden opportunity for employment among many young migrants from the sub-region who are seeking in Senegal the possibility of joining a canoe heading for Spain. We learnt from empirical research that some of these young vendors of telephone cards are from Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, etc. They come to form part of this informal sector that does not require professional experience. On the streets of Dakar and Saint-Louis, these young people often show local newspapers reporting occasional discounts made by telephone companies.

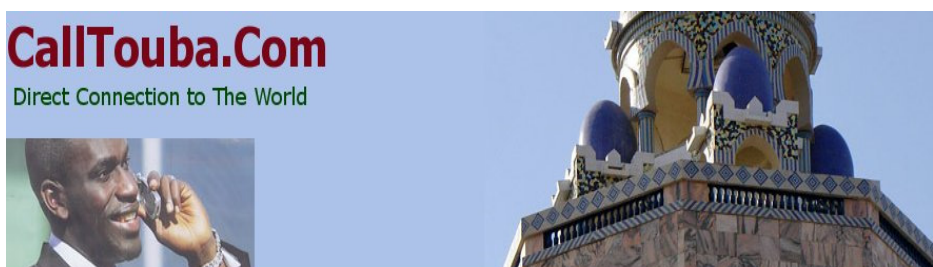
Illustration 10.2. A telephone card street vendor with a local newspaper in his hand highlighting a special offer



Other marketing techniques have recently been devised for telephone card sales, which are highly visible on websites such as www.rewmi.com, www.seneweb.com and www.leral.net, frequently visited by the Senegalese living abroad.

In this system of sales, the brotherhood dimension is very important since, as shown by the medium, the minaret of the mosque of Touba (a symbol of the Mourides) is used by telephone promoters to establish a rapport with the members of this community, which is famous for migrating to Europe and the United States.

Illustration 10.3. Advertising on Seneweb.com



Both in Senegal and in the destination countries of its peoples, we find an intensive use of mobile telephones and other information and communication technology tools in the migration plan. This has allowed many Senegalese to contact people residing abroad in order to build networks to facilitate their trip.

On the subject of migration strategies, previous research shows that many people go to the Internet cafes sometimes visited by migrants in order to find the friends or knowledge that will enable them to travel some day. In this sense, we have observed that women use the Internet to formulate marriage strategies with migrants or other populations, mainly European. They are sometimes encouraged by parents who consider it distinctive to have a Western or migrant son-in-law. As a result, many marriages in Senegal are arranged via e-mail, telephone and the Internet.

Some young people also go to Internet cafes to find European pen pals, in the hope that they will be invited to travel abroad one day; others visit games rooms on computer

networks where, in addition to entertainment, they sometimes hope to find people in their dream countries (France, Spain, USA, etc). Thus, these tools offer ways of circumventing the legal-state devices developed by the destination country.

These visits to social sites have been fuelled by the publishing of sites created in Senegal over the past few years. Examples include www.setsima.com, www.jiguenyi.com, etc., which boast considerable daily connection rates.

Illustration 10.4. Setsima.com flyer²

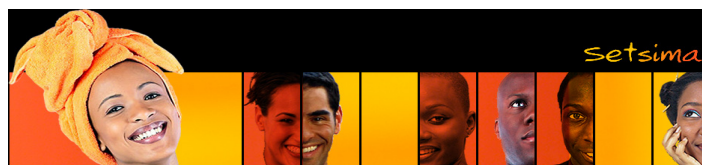


Illustration 10.5. Jiguenyi.com flyer³



Other migration hopefuls also strategically download pre-registration forms for admission to foreign institutions. This is a fairly common approach among those who plan to visit France some day and who come from Senegalese institutions that have scientific cooperation agreements with French universities.

² *Setsima* means "come and see me" or "come and visit".

³ *Jiguenyi* means "women".

Previous observations indicate that many of these young people drop out a few years after they arrive in order to work as security guards or to pursue a career as dishwashers in restaurants.

Although information and communication technologies are credible resources for the successful migration of Senegalese students able to secure a place at a European university, they do not offer these students the opportunity to escape the degeneration of the knowledge that they have acquired in their country of origin by means of long academic and professional experiences.

On another empirical subject, the intensive use of information and communication technology media has revealed that this is an important resource for combating the social pressures faced by some young people from within their own families.

Illustration 10.6. Senegalese woman at the offices of the Association of the Senegalese in America



In the context of previous research, this is the case of Ablaye, a young student at the University of Dakar, who said in an interview that despite how much he loved studying

in Senegal, he was unable or unwilling to resist the temptation to migrate because a relative kept telling him *"You young people like school very much! Why do you study for so long? You can succeed in life without books! After your higher education, go to Italy and you'll soon become a millionaire one day!"* He would also be reminded about *"This guy from the neighbourhood who lives in Bergamo or another who has just come back from Turin has bought a house in Parcelles-Assainies or is building a beautiful house in Nord Foire for his parents"*.⁴

Ablaye's remarks highlight the relevance of the work of Aminata Diaw, who pointed out in 2002 that *"school is no longer really seen by the Senegalese as a vehicle for social advancement and national values"* (Diaw, 2002). Hence, going abroad has become one of these strategies of social advancement, which is increasingly affecting the bulk of Senegalese social classes. Migration has become one of these vectors reducing the gap between lower social classes and upper social classes - simply by eliminating it.

In the light of these remarks, which took the form of an exhortation, Ablaye finally obtained a subscription at an Internet cafe where he was able to download the pre-registration forms for Le Mirail University in Toulouse.

Besides strategies that continuously mobilise travel hopefuls, there are many migrants who use information and communication technologies to make and receive orders and track transfers remotely; in other words, to monitor their financial investments. Thus, through telephones and the Internet, migrants are closer to their business and no longer have to entrust it to relatives, which means that blood ties and marital links are increasingly less of a requirement for their financial activities to prosper.

In New York, empirical observations have shown that men do not have a monopoly on the use of the Internet to monitor their financial activities. Many women go to the offices of the Association of the Senegalese in America, where they can connect to the

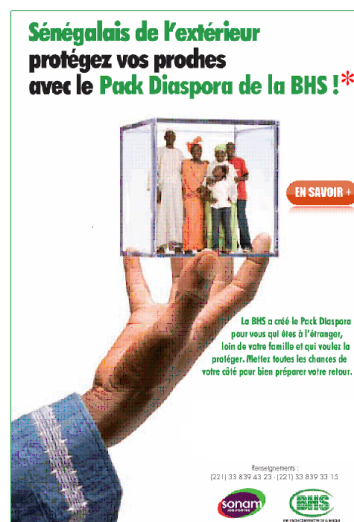
⁴ The Parcelles-Assainies quarter is located in the most cosmopolitan neighbourhood of Dakar.

Internet to check their e-mail and send orders to their partners in Senegal, Europe and Asia (China, Dubai, etc).

For these traders, the use of information and communication technologies represents an opportunity to avoid paying frequent trips to their supplier country. They are often aided by touts who track the orders and ship the goods to their destinations. Conversations with these women reveal that information and communication technologies are important aids for transferring money back home to their families in Senegal.

This is also the case with migrants who send money back to Senegal to build or restore a private or family home. Previous research tells us that the use of information and communication technologies means that some migrants are more likely to work with property developers or contractors who continuously inform them of the development of the buildings.

Illustration 10.7. Bicis flyer on Seneweb.com



Property developers or contractors are increasingly encouraged to send photographs to migrants because they can help to avoid financial embezzlement. However, this is not always the case: we sometimes read in the "*Miscellaneous*" section of the local

press about migrants whose close relatives cheat them by sending them pictures of homes that are not theirs.

Migrants have realised the effectiveness of the Internet for making money from their business, to the extent that even those with little mastery of this IT tool can open an in-box to enter or receive orders. On New York's 116th Avenue, it is astonishing to observe the e-mail addresses on the signs of shops run by Mourides, the majority of whom did not go to school.

Illustration 10.8. Signs of Senegalese businesses on New York's 116th Avenue



Information and communication technologies are also increasingly used by migrants for money transfers. The tools commonly used are the fax and the Internet. It is simply a case of sending money to a Senegalese merchant located in Europe, who will send a fax or e-mail to a correspondent in Senegal to send him or her the address of the person who will pick it up. This transfer system is useful for migrants from villages in the valley of the river Senegal, Diourbel and Lougal, where there is no post and some banks do not exist.

The success of this transfer system is explained by the accessibility, low costs paid by the sender and the understandably competitive exchange rates of financial companies such as Western Union, Telegiros, Money Gram, etc. While this mode of informal

transfer represents an opportunity for many migrants who do not have the necessary residence permits to send money, it means that we have no accurate knowledge of the remittances sent to Senegal.

The use of information and communication technologies such as Skype and Messenger also offer many families of migrants escape from the mental suffering that can result in loneliness and isolation. While intensive use of these tools can make people forget about the length of the stay, some argue that they can be used on occasion when a decision needs to be taken. Others, however, believe in using them sparingly to avoid exposure to financial temptation.

We need to remember that, through their messages (e-mails and texts), telephone calls, money transfers and property shipments (cars, domestic appliances, etc.) and especially their visits to different countries, the Senegalese already living abroad largely determine the image that the community of origin has of European or American life. This subsequently creates a culture of migration in the community back in Senegal, which fuels new departures. Should we then speak of networks or a migration chain with the use of information and communication technologies between migrants living in Europe or the Americas and the populations back in Senegal?

ICTs as tools of promotion and differentiation

While information and communication technologies may allow some migrants to monitor their property and financial investments remotely through photographs and e-mails, they are sometimes used by migrants with a different profile to other migrants. The first is Ibra, a senior technician who became a skilled worker in Como (Italy).

After completing his initial studies at the *École Nationale Supérieure Universitaire de Technologie* (ENSUT) of the University of Dakar in 1985, Ibra completed a two-year internship at Colgate Dakar. Upon completion of this contract, he then re-enrolled at the University of Dakar, specifically at the *École Normale Supérieure d'Enseignement*

Technique (ENSET), where he was awarded a scholarship by the European Development Fund. After qualifying as a senior technician in mechanical engineering from ENSET, he then carried out a second internship at Colgate Dakar, followed by one at *Industries Chimiques du Sénégal* in Thiès.

These training periods enabled Ibra to save some money and help his parents in Kelle, a village near Louga.⁵ After this training, Ibra wanted to prepare for the national examinations to become a high-school teacher, but due to the influence of a trader friend on the market of the HLM district of Dakar, he decided to leave for the United States and continue his studies in mechanics. So his bana-bana friend from the HLM market in Dakar gave him 4.580 Euros (3 million CFA francs) to continue his studies in the United States. According to Ibra:⁶

He eventually gave up on this plan because "besides being very complicated to obtain all the papers, my parents did not want me to (...) You know with some families, it is very difficult to take the other side! For my father, there is no question of me continuing my studies in the United States. According to him, when you go to the United States, it's to work! It's simply to make money. He was not interested in the content of the studies, only in the money that could be made. Uh. So there it is! That's how I have been forced to give up my dream of studying in the US.

Following the disagreement with his father, Ibra turned to his trader friend to give him a helping hand with his business. So they worked together on the HLM market and he sometimes took care of the shop alone when his friend went to Europe to buy goods. On his return, his friend often told him about the lives of the Senegalese in Italy, where he regularly went to buy shoes and cosmetics. His friend told him about Senegalese

⁵ Louga has played a vital role in the traditional migration flows of the Senegalese. With the regions of Kaolack and Diourbel, Louga was one of the "peanut basins" that witnessed a farming crisis in 1970-80, which resulted in the economic marginalisation of the local people, who opted to migrate in order to support themselves. The populations of Louga account for a significant number of Senegalese migrants in Spain today.

⁶ Trader.

businesses in Italy and their opportunities for being hired by companies. So Ibra decided to go to Italy to try his luck.

In Italy, specifically in Como, Ibra is using the Internet to renew his engineering knowledge. The Internet keeps him up to date with the latest inventions, "particularly in an area such as mechanics" where, he says, "things change very quickly!". He quite often downloads information relevant to his profession even though he is working in Como as a simple factory employee making wheels, while in Senegal he studied at the École Normale Supérieure d'Enseignement Technique, where he qualified as a senior technician in mechanical engineering before carrying out internships, first at Colgate Dakar and then at Industries Chimiques du Sénégal in Thiès.

Ibra also explains that, for him, the Internet is a great support as he hopes to one day be able to use his knowledge and no longer lament the qualifications he obtained and overcome his job insecurity. By renewing his previous professional skills, he can set himself apart from other African and Senegalese migrants who have settled in Como and work chiefly in industrial activities where they hold subordinate positions. The Internet is a way of rejecting professional deskilling that often places many migrants in a frustrating situation of economic vulnerability.

Our second subject is Ndiaga, who worked for a long time as a civil servant before becoming a security guard in Toulouse (France), unlike some of his peers in Toulouse who traded in Place de Capitole, Place de Saint Sernin and many other places where ethnic trade was developed in the Midi-Pyrénées region.

In Saint-Louis, in Senegal, Ndiaga had been a staff sergeant in the national fire brigade group. Over his paramilitary career, he worked in several cities, including Louga, Diourbel, Thiès and Dakar. In Dakar, he worked at Camp Malick Sy before joining the Guédiawaye fire brigade, where he worked in the fire safety and protection rescue service. At the end of his paramilitary activities, he was appointed to the Chamber of

Commerce of Saint-Louis by the fishermen's association of Guet Ndar in Saint-Louis. Three years later, Ndiaga joined the Economic Commission for African Integration as a representative of the Chambers of Commerce of Senegal.

At the same time as he performed his duties at the Chamber of Commerce of Saint-Louis, Ndiaga became involved in politics, backing an unsuccessful candidate in the last presidential elections. This electoral defeat was seen as a failure because of the slander and ridicule that he was constantly subject to in Saint-Louis. A few months after the elections, the Chamber of Commerce of Saint-Louis organised a series of trips to Europe, and the members of the delegation, which included Ndiaga, were to go to Paris, Toulouse, and then Brussels. For Ndiaga, these trips were a golden opportunity to escape the ridicule he faced in Senegal after the elections, especially with the defeat of his friend.

Thus, in 2001, Ndiaga arrived in Europe. The first days of his "professional" trip were very rewarding, particularly in the context of bilateral trade between France and Senegal. Together with his colleagues, he was received by the Mayor of Toulouse and the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce of the Midi-Pyrénées, who requested that Senegalese companies be invited to the annual tourism fair held in Toulouse. Following his meetings with the authorities in Toulouse, Ndiaga asked his companions to go on to Paris and Brussels without him. He opted to stay in Toulouse where he had already met up with friends from Saint-Louis. They suggested he stay and make the most of the opportunities for work in Toulouse.

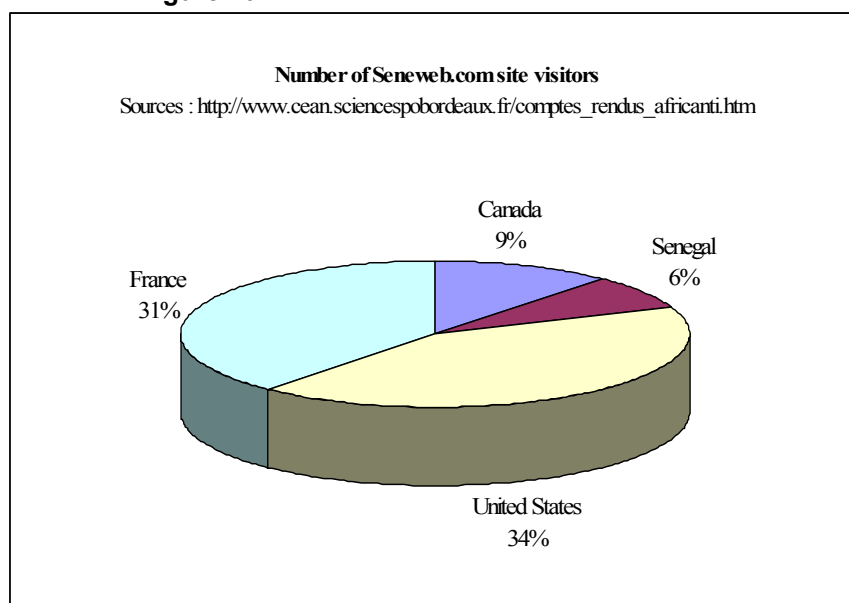
Ndiaga thus became a security guard at the Instituto Cervantes in Toulouse. He takes advantage of the Internet connection at his post to read Senegalese newspapers online. Thus, the Internet is a way for him to distinguish himself from other Senegalese migrants who are traders. In our diverse meetings with him, he constantly reminded us

of his "*mastery of computing*", which provides an effective contribution to his knowledge of the changing political situation in Senegal. In his words,

Unlike other Senegalese migrants who trade in Toulouse, with the Internet, I am aware of everything that happens in Senegal and around the world! It's wonderful! I can share it with my fellow citizens and other people with an interest in politics.

With the Internet, we can read newspapers published online and also listen to certain radio stations that were created for and by the diaspora. This is true of the radios on www.senexeb.com, www.xalima.com and www.leral.net, among others, which broadcast political debates, accounts, etc.

Figure 10.1. Number of Seneweb.com site visitors



These sites have forums for the diaspora based in France and Canada, which uses them to participate in political debate. For example, on the Seneweb.com site, analysis of the discussion boards reveals that 37% of its members are based in France, with 38% of subjects published, compared to 26% and 23%, respectively, in the United States. Of the 300 subjects covered, 23% concern religion, 20% politics, 17% IT, and

just 6% of discussions are in the national language, although 67% of the subjects covered relate to Senegal.⁷

With such diverse forms of participation, the political debates entered into by the Senegalese abroad on discussion boards and other information and communication technology platforms reveal a political transnationalism that mobilises certain compatriots with different profiles. In online newspapers, we most often find people with solid or acceptable educational capital while the radio stations available on the Internet are widely listened to by those without formal schooling in French or of only a short duration. Despite their strong educational background, we have observed that some migrants reaffirm the existence of Senegalese political transnationalism in their discourse.

With SenewebRadio which offers a variety of programmes revealing support for Senegalese migrants, we noted a high number of weekly broadcasts on politics, community, culture, etc.⁸ During the recent political consultations in Senegal, voting recommendations were received by migrants through SenewebRadio.

Illustration 10.9. SenewebRadio flyer



In contrast to others, members of the Mouride brotherhood of the Muslim community took an early interest in online radio. This is the reasoning behind Lamp Fall.FM radio,⁹

⁷ Sources: http://www.cean.sciencespobordeaux.fr/comptes_rendus_africanti.htm#_ftn1.

⁸ <http://www.seneweb.com/radio/prog.php>.

⁹ Lamp Fall FM is a Senegalese religious radio that deals exclusively with the cause of Mouridism. It spreads the Islamic word by popularising the teachings of Sheik Ahmadou Bamba, known as Serigne Touba. His broadcasts are in Arabic and Wolof (see <http://lampfallfm.net/>).

which broadcasts internationally from lampfallfm.sn and many other websites, including www.africatel.sn, www.xalima.com, www.khassaide.fr.

Conclusion

It has been noted that migrant departures are currently on the increase due to the "blessing" of information and communication technologies in Senegal (proliferation of Internet cafes, easy Internet access, use of e-mail or text messaging, cut-price international calls, scanning of official documents, dating site registrations, etc.), which allows them to surreptitiously reach new destinations.

While the use of information and communication technologies allows some migrants to progress in their economic activities, it is nonetheless a concern for some migrants, who feel that it is difficult to turn down telephone requests - often financial - from their relatives back home in Senegal. Quite rightly, a young Senegalese we met in Madrid told us:

Calls are cheap here! We can call home every day to pass on news and learn about the family, but I don't do it because I am sometimes wary of what the call can lead to. We do not know what will happen or what news we might receive! We are sometimes told bad news or asked to send money, but the conditions are not right these days! With the financial crisis, some of us can go several weeks without work.

As this young migrant living in Madrid points out, requests for money in the context of the financial crisis have led some migrants to change their telephone number or refuse to take calls. One Senegalese migrant, after extolling the virtues of information and communication technologies in migratory situations, reveals the strategy he adopts when he receives a call from an unknown number:

With my mobile, I believe that I have the world in my hand! I can reach whoever I want without leaving my bed. I can be reached at any time and am informed of everything that happens at home. However, with the financial crisis, I only take calls from my family (...) I often don't answer a call if I am not sure of the number. I can always listen to the message anyway (...) You know, sometimes, it is virtually impossible to say no to some requests, especially when you are told them directly!

Nowadays, although the Senegalese use mobile phones more, the fact remains that the Internet has recently been given a boost that has interfered with the habits of both urban and rural populations. Some migrants originating from remote villages no longer think twice about combining the telephone with an Internet connection to interact directly with loved ones.

This is partly due to the fact that in Senegal - and in Africa in general - the new information and communication technologies are among those leading Africa to globalisation, more so than others. The number of countries offering broadband Internet (ADSL) is growing rapidly and the rate of penetration has exceeded all expert expectations (Amédé, 2009).

This widespread use of information and communication technologies is mainly due to the fact that "in the first quarter of 2008, the African continent, with over 280 million mobile telephone lines, surpassed the US and Canada, which have 277 million. Today, therefore, over 380 million Africans use mobile phones on a regular basis", according to the World Cellular Information Service. Since 2002, the African market has recorded a growth rate of 49%, making it the fastest growing region in the world, ahead of the Middle East (33%) and the Asia-Pacific region (29%). Most booming markets are located in the north and west of the African continent, accounting for 63% of the total connections in the region (Amédé, 2009).

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