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A Virtual Home Away From Home

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A virtual home away from home

Staying in touch with home while living abroad has never been simpler, but does it make the emigration experience any easier? Emigrants and immigrants discuss the challenges of keeping up with home while living abroad



IAN KILROY

FOR DOROTHY IN *The Wizard of Oz*, it was always a matter of just clicking her heels together three times and repeating to herself: "There's no place like home; there's no place like home." These days, it's just as simple.

Skype, the internet, satellite television and other newer technologies mean it's now possible to live your life in a virtual version of your homeland – no matter where you are.

Take Françoise Letellier, a former French honorary consul in Cork, for example. After 43 years in Ireland, she still watches the French news every day, speaks more French than English, and reads French newspapers whenever she can.

"When I first came in 1969, you could get a French newspaper once a week, and that was that," says Letellier. "Now I have 21 French television channels; I can watch the coverage of the forthcoming presidential elections just as if I were in France."

Originally from Normandy, Letellier now lives in Carrigtohill, in a rural area near Cork city. Her house is called Ma Normandie, and although she overlooks the lush greenness of the Co Cork landscape, she could just as well be living in rural France – to which she is returning in May, after 43 years. "I probably never left France anyway," she says.

Ryszard Piskorski will not be returning to his native Poland, however. Unlike Letellier, he has dual citizenship, Irish and Polish.

He was forced to leave his home at the age of nine by Russian forces, "on the 10th of February, 1940", and made his way to Ireland after deportation to Siberia, time spent in Uzbekistan, the Middle East and London. He arrived in Dublin in 1966.

"I was forgetting my Polish," he says, "until I got Polish satellite television, then it all came back to me." He still follows Polish politics and current affairs through internet radio, and knows more about his native country now, with the proliferation of communications tech-

nologies, than he did throughout the 1970s and 1980s. "It really is fantastic for me," says the 82-year-old.

A much younger Pole, 28-year-old web designer Igor Kochajkiewicz, has an entirely different relationship with his native land. After seven years in Ireland, for him, access through media is something he can take for granted.

"I don't feel that connected to Poland," he says. "I'm part of this generation that feels we can go where we like, settle down where we like. Nationality isn't really that important to me." Clearly, there is a massive divergence in degrees of connection to home among the non-Irish nationals living in Ireland (the 2006 census put this number at approximately 420,000). But the same can be said of Irish nationals living abroad.

For Galwegian Danny Darcy, who left Ireland for Majorca almost 20 years ago, reading *The Irish Times* and listening to Galway Bay FM is an important part of his weekly media diet.

"Emigration is just totally different to when I first left," he says. "I used to get my mates from home to post me out video recordings of hurling games; now I can have breakfast on a Sunday downtown in the sun and listen to Galway football matches on my phone." Irishman Dermot Arrigan, who has lived in Barcelona for nine years, is another one of the 1.3 million or so users of *The Irish Times* online every month. "When I want to find out what's going on, I just throw myself at *The Irish Times*," he says.

It is this very engagement with the home and culture left physically behind that can lead to migrants being distrusted. There is a presumption that allegiance to the adopted home is lacking; that one cannot feel tied to more than one place at a time. This is a serious misunderstanding, says Prof Han Entzinger, director of Migration and Integration Studies at Erasmus University, Rotterdam.

"We've done some research on that," says Entzinger, "and we've found that the fact that they can maintain ties with the country of origin does not mean that they are less likely to integrate in the country of residence."

Indeed, Prof Entzinger says, "transnational identity" is increasingly becoming the norm, and the move by most countries to allow dual citizenship reflects that. Ireland is no excep-

tion to this, but where it does lag behind is in allowing its citizens overseas to vote in national and presidential elections. The French abroad will be allowed vote for 11 overseas deputies in the forthcoming national elections, for example. What the accessibility of modern technologies means is that the French voting in this election will not only be well informed, but they'll also be able to vote online for the first time. Their virtual France in Ireland is becoming more real all the time.

This is one of the reasons why Dr Alan Grossman of DIT's Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice does not accept the term virtual at all.

"What they inhabit is very real; it's a very real home," he says. "It's informing me where I am, it's informing what I think. The proliferation of media technology fundamentally challenges the established space between here and there."

The simultaneous identity that's supported by easy, transnational access to media is also something of a double-edged phenomenon, says Dr Áine O'Brien, director of DIT's Forum on Migration and Communications. It is something Irish people participate in themselves by consuming media from other places. Clearly notions of identity and citizenship are much more fluid and complex than they first appear, which is challenging for a national broadcaster such as RTE, says Dr O'Brien.

"You've got the national broadcaster who believes their remit is to create a kind of cohesive narrative," she says, "according to very clear conventions guided by notions of accent and belonging and so forth." It's almost as if the "home" presented on RTE is the one that's virtual, not the one inhabited by immigrants at home and abroad through Skype, online news sites and internet radio.



Image: Irish Times Premedia,
Getty Images

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