I n the ever-expanding era of digital media, Kruiv-Leander, associate professor of language and literacy, is examin- ing concurrent changes in new media and migration, along with research partners from Utrecht University.

The program, Wired Up, studies Moroc- can migrants in the Netherlands and Mexican migrants in the U.S. Leander and his collaborators, Sandra Ponzanesi and Mariette de Haan, hope to shed light on how new digital media practices (social networking, instant messaging, chat, Web logs, and multi-media) impact the lives, identities, learning, and socialization of migrant youth.

Wired Up has a long tradition of part- nerships both domestic and international, but this is Leander’s first project on this scale. Leander and de Haan first worked together in 1998 when they were both members of the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) and shared a common interest in socio-cultural theory. This led to several writing collabora- tions and ultimately prompted De Haan, who was visiting work on the project, to approach Leander to fill a grant-consulting role because of his literary and ethnographic expertise. Later he was approached to be a joint researcher on the project.

“I am thrilled to be a part of an inter- disciplinary project that spans the globe,” Leander says. “I never entertained the idea of taking part in a project overseas, but it sounded fascinating and something I wanted to be a part of.”

Wired Up is funded through Utrecht University’s High Potential Programme, which affords promising young researchers the opportunity to undertake a five-year, innovative research project. The project builds on the faculty’s expertise, creating new linkages between studies in post-colonial theory, intermediacy, and gender studies (Ponzanesi); the cultural and transforma- tive nature of socialization (De Haan); and digital literacy practices (Leander). There are two Ph.D. candidates also working on the project, Aslı Ünitasyo and Koen Leurs, both from Utrecht.

“We are interested in the notion that new virtual geographies can change our experi- ence of space and time, even during the process of migration,” explains Leander. “In a model that excludes new media, migrants receive information through letters, televi- sion, or radio. However, with the introduc- tion of digital and participatory media, there are different relationships between space and time, including speed and how migrants par- ticipate in new media practices.”

The research group hopes to better understand how youth communicate with each other over local and national boundar- ies and how media shapes their experience of being a migrant. The team also wants to know how youth maintain connections to their home countries after migration and how they develop relationships with their host countries.

Wired Up consists of three main projects. The research methodology—based on large-scale online surveys, the monitoring of Inter- net use and electronic diaries, video-recorded interaction analysis—and ethnographic research—will enable the researchers to gain insight into the dynamics between these global digital spaces and traditional contexts of socialization.

The first project, supervised by Ponzanesi, focuses on the impact of new digital appli- cations (the Internet, social networks such as Facebook and Twitter) on the identity construction of young Dutch migrants. Leurs, the primary doctoral student for Ponzanesi on the project explains, “We intend to show how digital media creates an alternative interactive space between the culture of origin and that of immigra- tion, and how issues of identity, gender, and ethnicity are negotiated and articulated between online and offline worlds.”

Additionally, the project explores how migrants take an active part in, and are tar- geted by, the cultural industry.

“It is interesting to look at how Moroc- can youth will take traditional Moroccan symbols, combine them with symbols and pop culture, remaking media for their own forms of identification,” Leander explains. “I have been struck by the particularity of those hybrids. Kids have one foot in tradi- tional culture and another in corporatized or media culture.”

The second project highlights the effects of “mediatization” on the learning and social- ization of migrant and Dutch youth.

U 니타시요, the primary doctoral student working with de Haan on this project, explains, “We are studying if and how learning and socialization are enacted dif- ferently in what is called ‘new ecologies of learning,’ compared to how this is done in traditional settings.”

Leander is leading the third project, which analyzes the everyday digital literacy practices of Moroccan migrant youth to bet- ter understand how these practices are used to produce identities and learning networks. While the project is still in its early stages, the group is already intrigued by some pilot findings.

“The Moroccan youth seem to have very large numbers of online contacts and associations and contacts internationally. They had relatively weak contacts and associations when you look at the levels of regional and national contacts,” says Lean- der. “I am really curious about how that will play out in the later data.”

Collaborating internationally presents its own set of challenges for these researchers.

“How [can we] translate a survey given to Dutch or Moroccan youth, to Mexican youth in Nashville?” asks Leander. “There seems to be a certain cosmopolitan culture among youths, but there are also very specific cultural issues that are not just language- centered, but manifest through really under- standing the culture.”

Not to mention the simple logistical challenges that a cross-Atlantic relationship manifests, most notably communication gaps. “The seven-hour time difference has caused everyone involved in the project to adjust schedules,” he says. Memoirists of doc- toral students is primarily conducted online or over the phone. Despite the challenges, everyone involved feels the project is well worth the effort.

In addition to their research findings, members of the Wired Up team are moti- vated by other forces.

“In the current context of Islamophobia and increasing-stigmatization of migration in Europe, there is a lot of talking about migrant youth, but little talking with these kids. My ambition was to do the latter to learn more about their world,” says Leurs.

“Communities in social networking sites offer youth a platform for self-expression, cross-cultural exchange, and active encoun- ters. Online social networking sites may, in this sense, be an example of how youth culture can work against ethnic absolutism, nationalism, and racism in our contempo- rary society,” he added.

Not to mention the humbling attempt of changing the dusty image of university schol- ars and their academic work.

By carrying out studies on the topic of digital media and youth culture at schools, the kids learned that scholars could also be interested in their everyday life concerns and experiences,” Leurs added.

With new digital media platforms seem- ingly introduced weekly, the relevancy of Wired Up continues to grow as more research dollars are being poured into the subject.

Leander is proud of being early in the movement to research migrant and digital media because of the increasing interest on the subject. However, he cautioned, “There is a certain sense of urgency to continue the work in an efficient manner since other researchers are releasing results.”

Leurs, also an avid music fan, is looking forward to the possibility of visiting Van- derbilt for future research on a three-month comparative case study on digital media use of Mexican migrant youth in Nashville.

“Hopefully a team outing to the Bonnaroo Music Festival can be part of my Nash- ville experience,” he joked.

Wired Up collaborators, Mariette de Haan and Sandra Ponzanesi of Utrecht University and Vanderbilt’s Kevin Leander, shown remotely through a web camera.
In the ever-expanding era of digital media, Kristi Leander, associate professor of language and literacy, is examining concurrent changes in new media and migration, along with research partners from Utrecht University.

The program, Wired Up, studies Moroccan migrants in the Netherlands and Mexican migrants in the U.S. Leander and her collaborators, Sandra Porzanesi and Mariette de Haan, hope to shed light on how new digital media practices (social networking, instant messaging, chat, Web logs, and multimedia) impact the lives, identities, learning, and socialization of migrant youth.

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For more information about the Wired Up project, visit www.uu.nl/wiredup.