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Diaspora/Migration

Social media provide a particularly fascinating entry point to explore diasporas, because diaspora and digital communication platforms are both characterized by paradoxical processes of space and time compression. The links between the two processes have only received increased attention during the last few years, although the current total number of transnational migrants would amount to a country that would rank among the first 10 in size globally.

Diasporas online raise questions about the core dynamics of cultural globalization spurred by the developing World Wide Web and transnational migration flows: Do they ultimately, globally connect or divide humans; enable opinion formation, voice, mobilization, and protest, or new forms of surveillance and censorship; homogenize and balkanize the Internet or promote diversity; promote democratization or reinstall hierarchies? Evidence for all these processes is emerging and movements in both directions have been observed.

Etymologically, the term *diaspora* derives from Greek words for scattering, sowing, and movement, while historically the notion was used mostly to describe Jews living outside Palestine or modern Israel. Currently, the term *diasporas* captures the dynamics of people migrating away from their homelands, to describe people living outside of their homelands and to indicate the geographical locations where these people live.

Media and Technology

Previously, migrants became largely uprooted from their origins when having to make do with letters that took a long time to arrive or costly phone calls to stay in touch with family and friends in their homelands. Recent developments of low-cost airlines, social media, and affordable long-distance telephone services allow migrants to maintain transnational ties with contacts living in the diaspora and their home countries. Indeed, although technology developers did not project them as target groups, migrants have been early adopters of technologies motivated by their desire to keep in touch with family members and friends and remain engaged with developments in their homelands.

Digital technologies are often celebrated with freedoms gained through increasing speed,

mobility, unboundedness and deterritorialization, while migrants are often found to negatively experience deterritorialization as displacement and dislocation instead of freedom. With the widespread adoption of digital technologies, those living in the diaspora may however digitally reterritorialize themselves. Being inexpensive, decentralized, international, low-threshold, easy-to-operate, and fairly deregulated, social media enable migrants to remain connected beyond their physical environments. Examples include audio- and video-chat including Skype and Viber; social networking sites such as Facebook and QQ; microblogs such as Twitter and Weibo; video sharing sites like YouTube and DailyMotion; and mobile messenger applications such as What's App, Nimbuzz, and iChat. Social media and digital technologies such as the mobile phone have thus altered processes of migration and diaspora formation, as migrants in the diaspora may experience living in a third space—a space not here or there, beyond their homeland and country of arrival. The third space sustained through social media might be of assistance in coping with feelings of dislocation and homesickness. Furthermore, it may provide an outlet for the circulation of news, identity and belonging, arranging for remittances, mobilization, protest, and activism.

Several recent large-scale research projects have explored the intricate relationships between diaspora groups and social media use. Under the heading of Mig@Net a consortium of European researchers studied how migration and gender intersect in transnational digital networks. They focused in particular on border crossings, communication flows, religious practices, education, sexualities, social movements, and conflict/dialogue (MigNetProject.eu). The e-Diasporas Atlas brought 80 researchers using digital methods together to map various processes of migrant connectivity. In particular, they traced the online presence of various groups, including “Moroccans on Facebook,” “French Expatriates,” and also Chinese, Tamil, Tunisian, Palestinian, Russian, Hmong, and Lebanese diasporas, among others (E-Diasporas.fr).

Political Implications

Several separatist movements use social media to garner public support for greater autonomy over

geographic regions. As such, global and deterritorialized social media are used by landless population subsets to manifest territorial claims. These include Tamil Eelam, Kurdish people, the Free Tibet Movement, and Uyghurs. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is estimated at 877,000 people. On the Tamil Nation Facebook group and other Web sites, blogs, and forum discussion pages such as eelamweb.com (“aimed at rebuilding Tamil Eelam”) and eelam.com (“advancing the independence of Tamil Eelam”), Tamils living in the diaspora make claims for the nation of Tamil Eelam, expressing desire for political autonomy in Sinhalese-ruled northern parts of Sri Lanka.

The “Kurdish question,” which pertains to autonomy of the region of Kurdistan in southwest Asia, is increasingly debated online by cyber-Kurds. Portions of the estimated 850,000 Kurds living in the diaspora use blogs such as kurdistanblogcount.wordpress.com (“a blog counting the blogs of Kurdistan”), Facebook groups such as the “Support an Independent Kurdish State” page, and Twitter hashtags such as #Kurdish to identify messages pertaining to Kurdish people, culture, and politics.

Young Tibetan activists in the diaspora advocate for Rangzen, an independent state of Tibet, on social media. They attract users to their cause on Twitter using, for example, the hashtag #FreeTibet. Dharamsala, the capital of the exiled Tibetan community in the Indian Himalayas, is home to an estimated 150,000 Tibetans. Social media use increased during the 2008 Summer Olympics in China and the 2011 community elections in exile. Illustratively, Tsering Choedup, an International Tibet Network Asia Coordinator, noted,

I see social media such as not just as an intermediary to relay news stories but also as an important and effective tool to directly connect individuals together and mobilize the overseas Tibetan diaspora community, and to awaken global awareness on the Tibet issue. Social media also give an opportunity for exiled Tibetans to build a link with Tibetans inside Tibet despite China's Great Firewall.

Proxy servers allow users to bypass Chinese Internet protocol-address-based geo-located filters and censorship.

Uyghur people are a Turkic-Muslim minority group living in the northwestern Chinese Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. An estimated 600,000 Uyghur are living in the diaspora. Uyghur language Web sites Diyarim.com, Salkin.com, and Shebnem.com were tightly monitored after July 2009 mass mobilizations by Uyghur protesters in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. In September 2009, Xinjiang authorities approved Internet monitoring legislation, blocking Internet access for 20 million inhabitants in the region. In addition, the surveillance of these sites eventually led to the arrest of hundreds of moderators and contributors living in China.

Sites maintained by Uyghur people living in the diaspora have also been blocked by the Great Firewall of China: Reporters Without Borders found in October 2009 that 85 percent of Web sites dedicated to the Uyghur community were blocked. Nonetheless, a transnational Uyghur political/cultural space is maintained on platforms like Facebook (the “Uyghur Community” page), Weibo, and YouTube as emotional responses and calls for mobilization circulate alongside Uyghur language folk songs and Islamic-themed videos.

Social media are also used to mourn dissolved geographical entities. For example, former Yugoslav countries are digitally reunified on Titoville.com and other sites that disseminate Yugo-nostalgic and retro-socialist discourses. Discourses published on such sites may downplay the atrocities and traumas of war and conflict.

Furthermore, diasporic media, increasingly visible on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, not only connect diaspora audiences with their homelands, they may also provide bottom-up interventions in Western-dominated international news media flows. During protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, postings on Facebook played a chief role in circulating news about political discontent from homelands and the diaspora to mainstream media such as CNN and Al Jazeera. The Jasmine Revolution of 2011 in Tunisia was fuelled by digital alignments between the homeland and the Tunisian diaspora sustained through Twitter, YouTube, and DailyMotion and blogs such as Nawaat.org. In addition, ElectronicIntifada.net, set up by U.S. citizens of Palestinian origins, has become an important global English-language news outlet providing alternative coverage on Palestine issues.



Members of the Tibetan diaspora in the United States march past New York's Grand Central Station on October 10, 2009, on their way from the United Nations to Times Square. The cultural parade marked the 50th anniversary of exile from Tibet.

Beyond rallying for support and providing news, digital technologies are also used for activism and even sabotage. Tamil cyberactivism, for instance, included electronic disruption of Sri Lankan embassy Web sites that Tamil activists felt disseminated propaganda. In a similar vein in early 2013, Twitter user “@ThisIsGameOver” defaced the official Web site of Sri Lanka’s Media Center for National Security. Palestinians living in the diaspora have aligned themselves digitally with the “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions” movement by campaigning against Israel on the popular Facebook group page “BDS movement.” The international Anonymous hacker collective has assisted activist diasporic groups during the Arab Spring by hacking into government Web sites in 2012.

Other Uses and Concerns

In addition, everyday use of social media among people living in the diaspora provides migrants—who are often marginalized in their country of arrival—opportunities to assert their voices, provide alternative depictions of minorities, identify themselves with fellow diasporic subjects as well as their homelands, express belonging, and show solidarity. Living in the diaspora, Indian migrants (nonresident Indians or NRIs) may, for instance, turn to the three-dimensional virtual game environment of *Second Life* to articulate a Desi identity (diasporic south-Asianness), interacting with avatars (game characters) that, for example, combine Indianness and American popular culture. As the popularity of dedicated discussion forums such as *AsianAvenue.com*, *BlackPlanet.com*, and *MiGente.com*, frequented by Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latino Americans, respectively, showcase, social media may be perceived as safe space to gather, articulate hybrid identities, and circulate alternative community knowledge.

What remains unclear in the emerging literature on digital media use among migrants are (1) the disparities in technology ownership and Internet access between diaspora communities living in first world countries and those remaining in developing countries; (2) the role of social media in financial transactions and remittances; (3) differences and similarities between economic migrants and refugees; (4) the implications of tracking and data-mining migrant activity by government and state regimes; and (5) the role of social media in human trafficking, circumventing border patrol, and policing.

Considering the role of digital technologies in diaspora and migration underlines the urgency of contextualizing social media use. Social media do not exist in isolation and use in the diaspora is shaped by the sociopolitical history of the different homelands, the variety of motivations for displacement or migration (which may be political, economic, social, or religious), and the present living conditions and social, political, and economic status of diasporic people in their country of arrival.

Koen Leurs
Utrecht University

See Also: Activists and Activism, Digital; Arab Spring; Developing Nations; Immigration; International Online Communities; Race/Ethnicity and Social Media; Reporters Without Borders.

Further Readings

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Digerati

The term *digerati* is a label used to refer to the technological elite. Digerati are distinguished innovators and opinion leaders of information technology, cyberspace, social media, and the technological hardware industries. The digerati have come to fruition in an environment in which the intersection between information and networked technology continues to grow. People considered members of the digerati are technological elites who are professionals at the forefront of the Information Age. The digerati both understand and advance the economic focus on technology and, as such, have immense control over the flow of digital information. Control over the means of communicating digital information is a decisive responsibility that could plausibly influence the way people understand and interpret politics throughout the world. In essence, digerati is a class of people both economically and ideologically.

Economically, the digerati develop, finance, and generate the innovations and products characteristic of the Information Age. The economic underpinnings of the digerati class are distinguished from more traditional business elites first and foremost by their business philosophy focusing on information as a valuable resource rather than any material product. In addition,