

Journal of Global Diaspora & Media
Volume 3 Number 1

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Received 21 January 2022; Accepted 24 January 2022

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Commentary: Digital diaspora as a travelling concept

ABSTRACT

This is a commentary to the Special Issue ‘Textures of Diaspora and (Post-) Digitality: A Cultural Studies Approach’, edited by Shola Adenekan, Julia Borst and Linda Maeding. The commentary reflects on digital diaspora as a travelling concept, and considers the analytic scope of the terms post-migration, post-digital and post-global for digital diasporas studies. I argue digital diaspora studies can be situated in the following continuums: universal-particular, decentering–recentering, global–local, inclusion and exclusion as well as media-centrism and non-media-centrism. Future scholarship may listen better to the sounds of digital diasporas and attend to the implications of digital platformization.

KEYWORDS

digital diaspora
travelling concept
platformization
sound
post-migration
post-digital
post-global

What strikes me about the habits of the people who spend so much time on the Net – well, it’s so new that we don’t know what will come next – is in fact precisely how niche in character it is. You ask people what nets they are on, and they’re all so specialized! The Argentines on the Argentine Net and so forth. And it’s particularly the Argentines who are not in Argentina. Or you have the gay/lesbian networks [...].

What the Net does in a certain way is break them out of their isolation. Sitting in downtown Melbourne nobody gives a whit about them. But on the Net, they are somebody. It's the same for people in Argentina, people in Germany, America, Japan, wherever. And it isn't just a hobby. You may think what you would like them to do is to pool their resources and coordinate [...] ten years ago, these were very isolated people.

(Anderson and Gower 1996: n.pag.)

The timely Special Issue of the *Journal of Global Diaspora & Media (GDM)* on 'Textures of Diaspora and (Post-)Digitality: A Cultural Studies Approach' offers a combination of conceptual and methodological tools and empirical insights to reconsider the workings and meanings of diasporas in the contemporary digital era. In combining cultural and literary studies perspectives the articles included offer fresh impetus to the evolving, interdisciplinary diaspora studies debates.

The epigraph above sees Anderson reflecting on the potential of digital networks for migrants to connect to and imagine a sense of community. These are early observations, dating from 1996, about cultural formations that later would become theorized as digital diasporas. Anderson is famous for his work on the cultural construction of nationalism, as an 'imagined community', on the basis of shared consumption of media such as newspapers (1983). Over the course of the last 25 years, digital 'diaspora community rhetoric' (Brühne and Kuhlmann 2022: 21) has proliferated widely across scholarly disciplines, but also policy, artistic, creative and corporate domains (see Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022). Understandings of digital diasporas have changed as a result of trying to keep up with 'the changing structural conditions of migrants and the proliferation of forms of media' (Andersson 2019: 142). When considering the interrelations between changing migration and media dynamics, digital diasporas can be seen as 'mutually constituted here and there, through bodies and data, across borders and networks, online and offline, by users and platforms, through material, symbolic, and emotional practices that are all reflective of intersecting power relations' (Candidatu et al. 2019: 34).

In this response I consider digital diaspora as a travelling concept to elaborate how it can be variously deployed as a critical lens to study a variety of diasporic and digital processes. Subsequently, I draw attention to the implications of the platformization of digital diaspora, and invite future research to move beyond focusing on visibility and narrative in digital diaspora studies.

DIGITAL DIASPORA AS A TRAVELLING CONCEPT: POST-MIGRANT, POST-DIGITAL AND POST-GLOBAL?

Digital diasporas have become an academic buzzword. This Special Issue demonstrates the analytic scope of the concept changes according to the evolution of digital culture and technological infrastructures and adoption across scholarly disciplines and policy, cultural and artistic domains. The articles included draw on definitions that stretch across historical, literal, religious, gender and sexual perspectives, metaphorical and imaginative understandings. We can consider digital diasporas what cultural theorist Mieke Bal termed a 'travelling concept': the term has been deployed to analyse a variety of communities, practices and media forms: 'concepts are not fixed. They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods and between the geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach, and

operational value differ' (2002: 24). While the concept travels widely, the issue productively offers the anchor-points of the 'post-migrant' (Febel 2022: 57), 'post-digital' (Vollmeyer 2022: 112), and 'post-global' (Menéndez de la Cuesta 2022: 91) to grasp particular digital diaspora iterations and manifestations conceptually and methodologically.

The 'post-' in post-migrant, post-digital and post-global – similar to the 'post' in 'postcolonial' – refers not to a simple state of affairs following a bounded period that has ended, but refers to the ambivalent complexity where historical lineages, ideologies and material conditions shape the present. It is also a shared 'post' that 'challenges earlier legitimating narratives' (Appiah 1991: 353).

The post-migrant society refers not to a bounded period following migration but as an analytic concept it (1) invites on an 'empirical-analytical' level research into how societies change resulting from migration; (2) on a 'critical-deconstructivist' level it promotes challenging discourses and knowledge production that reproduce hierarchical divisions between migrants and non-migrants and recognizing forms of solidarity and alliance and (3) on a 'normative-ontological' level moving beyond isolating the 'migrant condition' in studying migrants and seeking to level interrelated and intersectional systems of societal stratification (Foroutan cited in Kruse et al. 2019: xvi). To weigh structural power relations and room for agency of digital diaspora in post-migrant societies, Kruse et al. suggest researchers to assess the conditions of 'access' to resources and conditions, 'interaction' to address who can speak and who can be heard, 'participation' to scrutinize who is able to make decisions and 'collaboration' to study how forms of living together are shaped, realized or contested (2019: 14).

The 'post-digital' refers not to the end of an era of analogous media, but invites researchers to avoid dividing our world into authentic societies on the one hand and on the other hand technologies as the imposition of an external force. Rather it assumes societies and technologies are co-constitutive. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White alert us that digital media differ from analogue media representations, they argue that we scholars 'must attend to how race operates as set of parameters and affordances, ideological activities, and programmed codes' (2012: 8). In parallel digital diasporas extend to what is visible on a screen, what is narrated: a post-digital approach demands us to attend to how diasporas have become a technology – a digital way of doing things – as digital diasporas are encoded, performed and interacted with digitally.

The 'post-global' invites scrutiny to the political and cultural consequences of globalization, its aftermath 'and how those on the bottom survive it' (Lopez 2007: 1). Everyday lives are increasingly taking place in a post-global network, which is not an external force, but a banal dimension of our everyday environment with its own cultural norms, mind states and ways of life (see Levina and Kien 2010). A word of caution is also necessary as 'post-' something perspectives can also be co-opted to falsely pretend social justice concerns have become irrelevant. Think for example about colour-blind claims societies having become 'post-racial' before the global anti-racist Black Lives Matter movement emerged (see Goldberg 2015) or similarly about a 'postfeminist' era before the global #MeToo movement (Henderson and Taylor 2019). However, with sensitivity to the lineages of the terms and explicit commitment to critique and social justice these terms hold potential, in other words for example the post-digital is '[a] term that sucks but is useful' (Cramer and Jandrić 2021: 966).

We can take cues from the post-migrant, post-digital and post-global concepts to grasp the complexities of digital diasporas as manifested in the following four continuums: (1) the continuum of the universal and the particular: digital diasporas share common aspirations including a search for belonging, identity and community, but they are also inherently context, history and geographically specific manifestations. Adrián Menéndez de la Cuesta (2022) argues how a global queer diaspora encompasses various communities with their own specificities and remains connected by shared discourses; (2) The continuum of decentering and recentering community: as horizontal transnational communities digital diasporas can de-centre power relations beyond the level of the nation state, however internal strife, gossip, surveillance and control may re-centre power. Danae Gallo González's study on the Afropunk community on Instagram reveals members of the Afro-diaspora feel 'digital gratification' from its subculture but also face race-based micro-aggressions resulting from non-normative bodily, sexual, gender or cultural expressions (2022: 77–79); (3) The continuum of the global and the local: digital diasporas disrupt boundaries between the nation states as members come together from across borders, simultaneously they localize differently as Fortunat Miarintsoa Andrianimanana and Carles Roca-Cubere demonstrate in their research with Malagasy migrants using Facebook groups in France (2021); (4) the continuum of inclusion and exclusion: imagined as a new home for people with a shared migrant ethnic, racial, religious or other background digital diasporas are commonly theorized as utopian, progressive spaces, however as recent research with diasporic women in Rome, Italy demonstrates digital diasporas are shaped by the intersections of gender, social class, generation, among others (Minchilli 2021); the continuum of media-centrism and non-media-centrism, as indicated in the research with Somali women in Amsterdam, the Netherlands that reveals strategic non-use of digital platforms (Candidatu 2021).

PLATFORMIZATION OF DIGITAL DIASPORAS

Digital diasporas have mostly been studied from an agency-centric perspective, addressing everyday experiences of belonging, community, identity and engagement from the perspective of migrants. From the perspective of critical political economy, diaspora can be considered as a significant digital (niche) market. As a cultural product, it is produced and consumed in specific platforms. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter have in common that they offer communicative services for 'free'. Corporations draw on the metaphor of the platform to sustain this illusion, as Tarleton Gillespie explained 'figuratively, a platform is flat, open, sturdy. In its connotations, a platform offers the opportunity to act, connect, or speak in ways that are powerful and effective [...] a platform lifts that person above everything else' (2017: n.pag.). Beyond marketing rhetoric, proprietary platforms each have their own technological infrastructures, business models and services offered to users. Behind the surface, corporations thrive by monetizing user data and time spent on platforms; users commonly unknowingly pay with their user data which is sold to third parties.

Digital diasporas both share general features across online platforms and also manifest in specific ways resulting from interactions and appropriation of particular interfaces, settings and technological affordances. Ricarda de Haas (2022) considers storytelling and community formation on Twitter, Gisela Febel studies identity formation on diasporic website portals (2022),

while Julia Brühne and Hauke Kuhlmann (2022) focus on cooking videos on YouTube and space making in videogames such as *Minecraft*. There is strong potential for additional scrutiny of the implications of what we can describe as a ‘platformisation’ of digital diasporas: the ‘penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms’ (Poell et al. 2019).

The commercialization and professionalization of digital diasporic cultural production can be addressed further by researching migrant influencers on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. The short video platform TikTok’s user norms and features show the emergence of particular roles. A key role is that of influencers that attract large followings, which can be studied from the perspective of ‘attention economies’ (how fame/infame can be sustained/transient), ‘visibility labours’ (curating one’s presence vis-à-vis algorithmic workings of the platform) and celebrity-status (Abidin 2020: 77). Migrant influencers are important nodal points in cultural production, and both researchers and humanitarian agencies are beginning to consider their potential impact. Hispanic migrants living in Spain and the United States were found to turn to TikTok to express through creative combinations of video and audio new forms of ‘platformed belonging’ (Jaramillo-Dent et al. forthcoming 2022: n.pag.). The International Organization for Migration has initiated the #IamaMigrant campaign to ‘combat negative discourse against migrants through the creativity of migrant YouTube influencers, who are digital ambassadors of their countries of origin’ (Mora 2017).

LISTENING TO DIGITAL DIASPORAS

The important role of the circulation of music to sustain diasporas, for the purpose of memory-making and belonging has been documented (e.g. Gunaratnam 2020), however the role of sound, music and the auditive remains largely overlooked in digital diaspora studies. Besides musicology and sound studies, this scholarship is commonly ocular centric, taking what can be seen as the most important source of knowledge production.¹ Laura Marks has questioned this ‘sensory hierarchy’ and has pled for researchers to think culture through ‘multisensory’ registers (2008). A focus on the aural senses offers a promising line of inquiry, both to study diaspora as geographically located as well as universal. For example, Reginold A. Royston from his interviews with diasporic-podcast makers argues these podcasts reflect a particular ‘techno-aesthetics’ and offer new insights on the imaginary of technology and enterprise from Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and South Africa and their diasporas (2021). *The Messenger* podcast which features voices from refugees detained in Australia’s offshore processing site of Manus Island in northern Papua New Guinea demonstrates opportunities for ‘earwitnessing detention’ (Rae et al. 2019: 1036): drawing attention to human rights abuses and evoking empathy in listeners through the affective modality of voice.

Another potential entry point could be the study of how digital diasporas are constructed and imagined through streaming platforms. Consider for example the Spotify platform, the world’s largest music streaming service. Launched in 2016, the platform currently serves over 381 million active users, including 172 million paying subscribers. From a search query,² we learn there are over sixty artists that include the term ‘diaspora’ as part of their band’s name offering their music through their platform. There are over three hundred

1. Here I would like to thank Noor Sloterdijk for drawing attention to this important lacuna in media and migration scholarship in her paper ‘Scholars, “take off those ear-muffs”: Music, migration, affect and meaning-making’ written for the *NOISE Summer School on Borders, Boundaries and Politics of Belonging, Feminist Digital Cartographies* held at Utrecht University in August 2021.
2. Search query ‘diaspora’ in the search box of the Spotify platform, 1 December 2021.

Spotify playlists, that are curated either by bands or by fans. These playlists represent among others (1) particular geographic, ethnic and/or homeland affiliations. Common labels combined with diaspora include 'Pan-Asian', 'Pan-African', 'Afro', 'Afro-Caribbean', 'Desi' for the South-Asian diaspora, 'ChicanX' and 'Latin' diaspora, 'FilipinX', 'Indian', 'Tamil', 'Ethiopian', 'Eritrean', 'Yoruba', 'Uganda', 'Vietnamese', among others; (2) Diaspora in combination with particular language affiliations including 'Afro-French' and 'Korean'; (3) Diaspora in combination with politics and activism, including 'Fight the power'; (4) Diaspora in combination with religious and political affiliations, including 'Christian reggae diaspora' or 'Christmas in the African diaspora'; (5) Diaspora in combination with music genres, including 'dance', 'clubbing', 'guitar', 'beats', 'poetical', 'jazz', 'psychedelic', 'Dabke', 'oriental rock & roll' and 'rap'. Spotify and podcast platforms present us with important spaces to study digital diasporas and consider questions of identity, representation, affectivity and materiality, alongside interactions within and among diaspora groups, as well as other communities.

TO CONCLUDE

The broad explanatory power of the digital diaspora concept explains the wide travel of the concept across academia, policy, arts, culture and corporate domains. This Special Issue demonstrates the strong potential of digital diaspora scholars to embrace dynamism, heterogeneity and multiplicity in addressing how a variety of historically situated communities engage with a wide range of (digital) media forms and genres. Aisha P. L. Kadiri has recently called for scholars to attend to diaspora narratives as a source of knowledge production about prehistories, the present and possible futures of the digital. Following this train of thought, digital diaspora scholarship can find inspiration in Afrofuturism to challenge the status quo of Eurocentric visions of technologies, 'by looking towards African mythology and mysticism, it is now upon us to fill the knowledge gap that characterizes our conceptions of data and the digital world' (2021: 19). I would like to end by reminding readers that as many people across the world are learning to cope with staying at home as a result of the COVID-19 global health pandemic, we actually have a lot to learn from digital diasporas that have a long history and vast experience with having to make do with technologies to maintain connections, relations and community across distance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you Shola Adenekan, Julia Borst and Linda Maeding for your guidance on this Special Issue, and for inviting me to deliver a keynote at the digital workshop *Diaspora and (Post)Digitality: Imagined Communities in Cyberspace*, organized at the University of Bremen, between 28 and 29 August 2020.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Leurs, Koen (2022), 'Commentary: Digital diaspora as a travelling concept', *Journal of Global Diaspora & Media*, 3:1, pp. 139–47, https://doi.org/10.1386/gdm_00029_1

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