

Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community

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The Immigrant Worlds' Digital Harbors

An Introduction

Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal

I couldn't take it anymore when we found ourselves alone in that small boardinghouse without love, or any friend to talk to, and release my pain.

--Santiago Ibarra (1954), quoted in Santiago Ibarra: Historia de un inmigrante vasco, by Ángeles de Dios de Martina

Santiago Ibarra was born in Bilbao in the Basque province of Bizkaia in 1899, and at the early age of fifteen immigrated to Argentina with his seventeen-year-old brother. The chapter epigraph recounts his first day in Buenos Aires, according to a 1954 autobiography. It addresses his loneliness, nostalgia, and the overall impossibility of communicating with the loved ones who remained at home. In a sense, according to Grinberg and Grinberg, "migration requires a person to recreate the basic things he thought were already settled; he must recreate another work environment, establish affective relations with other people, reform a circle of friends, set up a new house that will not be an overnight tent but a home, and so on. These activities demand great physic effort, sacrifice, and acceptance of many changes in a short time. But to be able to carry them out gives one a sense of inner strength, an ability to dream, a capacity to build, a capacity for love" (1989, 176). One can only wonder how different it would have been for Santiago or any pre-information society immigrants, refugees or exiles, if they had had the possibility of connecting to the Internet and establishing not only instantaneous communication with parents, family members, and friends but also a digital network social world shared with others of common affinities.

At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, poet Antonio Machado defined Madrid as "the breakwater of all the Spains"--as the final destination of the incessant waves of refugees seeking protection as well as a solid barrier to repel attacks by Generalissimo Francisco

Franco's fascist troops. In contrast to historical points of entry for immigrants, such as the emblematic Ellis Island in the United States, the Internet (along with satellite television and cellular phones and other mobile devices) is becoming the new harbor for contemporary immigrants. For many, the Internet is the first window or point of informational entry into their new destinations, prior to physical arrival, as well as a new interactive link back to their homelands. Even more, cyberspace--the communal space digitally created by the interconnection of millions of computerized machines and people--has become the virtual home for many diverse and dispersed communities across the globe. It is another space to reconnect with fellow natives around the world as well as with those remaining at home. It is a new space of hopes, desires, dreams, frustrations, and beginnings.

To appreciate the significance of diaspora creation and diaspora interaction with information and communication technologies, it is necessary to consider the spectrum of meanings of the term diaspora, the extent of the diaspora phenomenon, especially its political dimension, and the different ways that diasporas interact with technologies.

Contested Diasporas

In general, the Greek term for diaspora (diaspeirein, "to sow" or "to scatter") refers to the dispersal of any population from its original land and its settlement in one or various territories. This definition originally had a positive connotation but was later redefined to include the collective expulsion of Jews from the Holy Land. The diaspora concept thus gained a negative meaning in relation to the destiny of Jewish people.

According to Tölölyan (1996), the defining elements of the Jewish diaspora conceptualization entailed the destruction of the homeland or the collective expulsion from it or both, a homeland-return movement, traumatic and coerced departure and collective trauma (victimization), a clear identity in the homeland and collective memory, and the

maintenance of communications with the homeland and with coethnic members in host societies. These common elements were then applied to other realities, such as dispersed African populations as the result of slavery and Armenians as the result of genocide in 1911, constituting along with the Greeks the so-called classical diasporas (Chaliand and Rageau 1995, 4). In other words, the "Jewish experience" became "the blue print for interpreting diaspora as a concept" (Reis 2004, 44).

Tölölyan (1996) argues that the Jewish paradigmatic definition of diaspora prevailed until the late 1960s. Since then, an emergent body of literature (see, for example, Cohen 1997a, 1997b; Laguerre 1998; Papastergiadis 1998; Braziel and Mannur 2003; Kokot, Tölölyan, and Alfonso 2004) has departed from the Jewish paradigm to explore contemporary diasporas formed after World War II. Tölölyan (1996) and Schnapper (1999) maintain that the term diaspora needs to retain the diverse meanings borrowed from the Jewish, Greek, Armenian, and Chinese diasporic experiences while advocating for the expansion of its classical semantic notion to enhance its effectiveness as an analytical concept and to accommodate it to new contemporary transnational realities.

On the one hand, new redefinitions of the diaspora concept have been created in order to accommodate almost all forms of dispersed minority populations scattered across the globe, including migrants, exiles, and refugees. For instance, Connor considers any "segment of people living outside the homeland" (1986) to be a diaspora, whereas Sheffer defines modern diasporas as "ethnic minority groups of migrant origins, residing and acting in host countries, but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin" (1986, 3). Cohen (1997b) broadens the traditional view of diasporas by introducing the following clear-cut typology of diasporas: victim (Jews, Armenians, Africans, Irish, and Palestinians), labor (Indians, Chinese, Sikhs, and Italians), trade (Venetian and Lebanese), imperial

(ancient Greek, British, Spanish, and Dutch), and cultural (Caribbean).

Analysis of the diverse conceptual proposals elaborated by the aforementioned scholars provides the following basic comparative features of diasporas. There is a traumatic (forced or voluntary) dispersal to two or more locations and an active maintenance of a strong collective conscious ethnic identity, which might exist before leaving the land of origin or homeland. Tölölyan (1996, 14-15), Schnapper (1999, 249), and Butler (2001, 192) assert an extreme importance in maintaining collective transnational ties between dispersed coethnic communities, their homeland, and their host societies. These attachments and relationships are the most distinguishing aspects that differentiate diasporas from other dispersed minority ethnic groups. Vertovec refers to diaspora as a social form, as "the emphasis remains on an identity group characterized by their relationship-despite-dispersal," as well as a type of social consciousness (1997, 278). That is, there is a "particular kind of [multilocal] awareness said to be generated among contemporary transnational communities" (281). The final feature refers to a possible troubled relationship with the host society, creating dilemmas concerning dual loyalties to the host society and the homeland.

On the other hand, scholars such as Safran (1991, 1999) view this conceptualization enlargement process as a way of emptying the authentic meaning of diaspora and argue that the concept of diaspora is losing its analytical utility. Safran (1999, 278-80) states that diaspora status can be applied only to Jews and Armenians, denying Greek and Chinese dispersed communities status as diasporas, whereas Sanjek (2003) does consider the African dispersed population to be a diaspora. In this regard, Schnapper raises the following concerns: "Has the almost indefinite extension of the concept emptied it of all intelligibility? . . . Concepts themselves must not be essentializing. The meaning of "diaspora" can obviously change. The question is

whether the change helps to clarify historic evolutions or whether its uncontrolled application ends up grouping together under a single term phenomena with different significance or meanings" (1999, 249).

Despite the many attempts to readjust the meaning of a concept dating back two millennia to contemporary's global realities, we do believe that the term diaspora still provides some useful insights into the understanding of transnational communities within a global context. Nevertheless, those attempts should go beyond determining the distinct elements that constitute a diaspora. In all cases, the term diaspora carries a sense of displacement. Sökefeld conclusively argues that "the multiplicity of different definitions of diaspora notwithstanding, all [are] based upon a decisive condition of space: the spatial separation of the diaspora community from 'its' homeland. Diaspora is about not being there" (2002, 111).