Transnational identities and digital media: the digitalisation of Italian Diaspora in London

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Abstract

Digital media and mobile technologies have allowed migrants to keep in touch with family and friends across the world. On the one hand, the fact that communication is no longer limited to the individual's offline networks means that moving to another country is no longer associated with isolation. On the other hand, new developments in information and communication technologies are transforming the experience of migration with implications for sociality, identity, and political and cultural involvement. In this article I will explore how new transnational cultures are being initiated through the consumption of digital media, and how media consumption is specifically shaping Italian diaspora in London. Based on ethnographic data and participant observation, I intend to address two key points: first, to what extent media improve immigrants' transnational experience by affecting their quality of life; second, and more widely, whether or not media can affect the process of integration between diasporic communities and host countries. An investigation of the concept of Transnational Virtual Communities of Immigrants (VTCI) will also help to define new directions for future research.

Contributor Note

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Introduction: The rise of digital diasporas

This section examines the relationships between media and identity, and between digital media and transnational identities, as driving forces for the recent development of so-called digital diasporas. Traditionally, cultural identities are seen to have local roots: they are attached to local contexts such as values, symbols, and language, and specified historically. Nevertheless, according to many authors there are indications, on the microscopic level, of a new relation between community, culture, and identity: for migrants, businessmen, young people, scientists, artists, or Internet users, fixed geographic spaces are losing their importance as key points of reference with respect to identity and everyday life, giving way to deterritorialised communities linked by common social, professional, and private interests (see Giddens 1990; Castells 1997; Tomlinson 1999). The reasons cited for these changes include not only intensified migration processes and worldwide tourism, but also the establishment of interconnected digital communication media all over the world. We live in the so-called media age, a 'networked life' (Castells 1996) where the greatest influence on the postulated socio-cultural changes is attributed to media interlinked worldwide.

This change is even more poignant since the Internet (as a conglomerate of various applications) is not a mass medium in the classical sense of the term – as printed media, radio or television are – but a new communication technology. It allows data to be exchanged in multiple directions and over any distance. In this way, local modes of participation are stretched globally, allowing interactions

to take place everywhere and at any time, thus reinforcing the tendencies of reorganisation of the relations of time, space and culture. Social networks no longer develop only in places where people meet in the flesh at a specific point in time, but as *links* between local contexts – such as cultural identities – and global contexts, and the spread of uniform systems of symbols, lifestyles, and stereotypes.

The social and human consequences of such changes are particularly evident if we consider how migrant communities interact and maintain double relationships nowadays. For many years, international migration meant a radical detachment from one's community of origin (Faist 2000): migrants were characterized as 'uprooted' because their existing social ties had been cut. This does not mean that communications were non-existent, but they were slow and expensive: in fact, letters and packages sent by traditional mail would take months to arrive. New developments in information and communication technologies have, more recently, served as social glue connecting migrants and non-migrants all over the world, making their communications easier, faster and less expensive (Vertovec 2004). Digital media, Bruns (2008) argues, also invite participation, communal evaluation and shared production and consumption of content. Combined, these elements make communication between individuals not only easier, but also richer.

Yet despite this, most research so far has focused on the Internet providing traditional one-to-one communication tools used to maintain social ties. I am going to focus here more on the role of social media, more specifically of social

networks and online communities. In this respect, not only has the medium changed, but also the network structure in which communication takes place, as well as the amount and type of information that is accessible. Social network sites organised around individuals and communities of interest converge and overlap. Therefore, in contrast to traditional mass media, social media can serve to bridge activities, where people can look up people with whom they have lost contact and reconnect with them (Hiller and Franz 2004; Ellison et al. 2007).

In this article, I intend to address the following questions: first and foremost, how socio – cultural processes are sustained and enhanced through the creative consumption of media; to what extent digital media improve immigrants' quality of life by affecting their transnational experience; whether or not digital media – particularly within Italian diaspora in London – enhance the process of integration with the local community. In this respect, the focus on integration as well as on transnational identity-formation is justified by the fact that, as previous research suggests, one of the biggest issues associated with certain migrations, such as the Italian, can be the tendency to form 'ethnic enclaves' with little if any contact with natives (see Zontini 2004; Diminescu 2008; Brinkerhoff 2009; Diminescu, Jacomy and Renault 2010; Sprio 2013).

I focus on diasporic groups as these represent some of the most significant – numerically, culturally and politically – minorities in European nation-states and across the European continent. Diasporic populations are not contained within nation-states even though they live within them. Most often they sustain cultural and political connections locally,

nationally, and transnationally (Morley 2000). The concept of diaspora enables us to study some of the ways in which media users connect to different public spheres (Siapera 2010) and communities (Georgiou 2006), while sustaining particularistic, diverse and multiple trajectories (Massey 2005) within and across boundaries. In its essence, the concept of diaspora implies that ideas of human mobility and processes of settlement are not opposite elements, but conjunctures, co-existing trajectories of a world connected through flows and networks. Needless to say, these trajectories have a huge impact on socio-cultural and identity processes: within the so-called 'space of flows' (Castells 1996), the overlapping of mass media, telecommunications and connections produces complex and shifting identities and affiliations. The median point is a hybrid mix between full assimilation and full transnational connection (Levitt 2004). In the academic scenario, but also in public discourses, the terms transnationalism and diaspora have sometimes overlapped, thus complicating the process of different-iation, and clarification, of each. Particularly over the past two decades, these concepts have served as prominent research lenses through which it is possible to view the aftermath of international migration and the shifting of state borders across populations. Although both terms refer to cross-border processes, diaspora has often been used to denote religious or national groups living outside the homeland, whereas transnationalism is often used both more narrowly – to refer to migrants' durable ties across countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organ-isations (Faist and Bauböck 2010). In this

article, I use both diaspora and transnationalism as useful concepts in the analysis of social change and transformation.

Among recent contributions, Jennifer Brinkerhoff (2009) argues that digital diasporas can ease security concerns in both the homeland and host societies and improve diaspora members' quality of life, through the encouragement of feelings of solidarity, identity, and material benefits among members. In this respect, digital diasporas can be defined as electronic migrant communities whose interactions – and forms of support – are made possible through 'new' technologies of communication (Diminescu 2008; Brinkerhoff 2009; Everett 2009). Previous research suggests that diasporas often use Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to build online communities that support integration in host countries (Diminescu, Jacomy and Renault 2010), and help to fill the social void in participants' 'offline' life (Ridings and Geffen 2006). Websites, web forums and blogs can also serve as tools for community building and communication, disseminating information relative to the given diaspora, both in the 'host country' and land of 'origin' (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010). Following these perspectives, digital media are valuable in the accumulation and distribution of material and emotional benefits, the achievement of collective goals and a decrease in social marginalisation, which actively promote an improvement in the life of diasporic communities.

In illustrating the complexity of diasporic communication and the ways in which members of the Italian diaspora engage with systems of communication in shaping their sense of belonging and everyday life, I draw from data collected during a three-year doctoral investigation of seven online communities, specifically designed to include all Italians living in London or about to move.

Italian Diaspora in London

The discussion that follows draws from my doctoral research which was conducted between 2009 and 2012 on seven online communities and related social networking sites speaking Italian in London: *Italians of London*, *Italians in London*, *The London Link*, *The London Web*, *Sognando Londra*, *Qui Londra*, and *Italiani a Londra*. These were examined in relation to: the way information and links are displayed and their accessibility; the characteristics of the information provided, and the space dedicated to users' initiatives (web forums, chat-lines, social networks). A focused ethnographic observation was also conducted inside the web forums of three selected communities (*Italians of London*, *The London Link*, and *Italiani a Londra*), in order to explore a) inter and intrapersonal relationships among migrants and b) how online spaces affect the development of offline relationships. These communities emerged during the doctoral research by virtue of their popularity among users (frequency of access) and relevance of posts for the key dimensions explored (transnational identity and the role of digital media within Italian diaspora). The qualitative corpus consisted of publicly viewable posts to the three forums over the aforementioned three-year period. The analysis consisted of domain ontology and text- mining techniques, where transcripts of forum discussions were manually inserted into a dataset containing information about the user, the topic of the post, and the content included within it. This dataset was then

transferred and analysed using NVivo software, which allowed a more in-depth observation of content, frequency of words, and recurrent patterns. A total of 300 posts was collected and analysed.

Data gathered through this online observation is not considered here as merely a disembodied exchange of text. On the contrary, if online communities are capable of existing and growing through individuals who electronically gather, exchange and share information and knowledge, then it could be argued that the 'texts' they exchange have a material and productive content. Research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) has also addressed the complexities and ethical issues related to the adoption of offline social methodologies to online settings, particularly in regards to the role of the observer and issues of anonymity in online compared with offline conditions (Mann and Stewart 2000; Domínguez et al. 2007). As Kuntsman (2004) points out, in order to counterbalance the methodological risks in online environments, a new concept of the 'field' in cyberspace has to be introduced. Following this perspective, Annette Markham (2004) puts forward the concept of *discursive*, rather than geographical, boundaries of the field; in other words, we should ask not if the relationships online are real or not, but where, when and how identities are made and maintained online.

However, it is worth noting that the research suffered from a lack of responses and feedback: in particular, issues of anonymity and difficulties in asking forum users to agree to be quoted limited the final sample survey. Nonetheless, the support I received from online administrators and the decision to combine online participation with offline

interviews, where possible, helped the overall balance between research methodologies. This does not mean that results can be generalisable: instead, they must be considered only in relation to Italian diaspora and to my population of interest.

Social and connective functions of digital diasporic communication

Across the communities analysed, the first, immediate reaction that an observer might have to going online is to the richness of material support, for example: job and rent advertisements, information on how to open a bank account, how to find a local general practitioner, how to move around London with local transport, where to eat, how to find an Italian doctor, English courses. This information is always provided in the homepage, although in different places: on the menu at the top of the homepage (*Italians of London*; *Italiani a Londra*; *The London Link*; *Qui Londra*; *Sognando Londra*) or on the right and left sides of the homepage (*Italians in London*; *The London Web*). Additionally, communities also provide external links to agencies such as the Italian Embassy or the Italian Chamber of Commerce, links to the web forums or chat-lines, links to the related Facebook and Twitter pages, and links to blogs where other Italians share their experience as migrants.

Looking at how the information is provided, and which information is privileged, it is possible to argue that online communities target different 'audiences': on the one hand, Italians already living in London who might want to access the community in order to find new people to chat with, but also to find information about jobs and events going

on in the community; on the other hand, Italians recently arrived or about to move, who might want to collect relevant information before leaving Italy; but also, although less frequently, Italian tourists who might need useful information about where to go and what to do. Not surprisingly, tourists prefer to ask and receive information from accounts of the experiences of people already settled there, instead of from generic tourist sites, as the following quote demonstrates: 'I am leaving for London this weekend and I would like to know what to do once there. I am looking for top-tips from people who live in London and know where to go: restaurants, museums, clubs, parks, everything' (S.F., *Italiani a Londra*, 11 May 2011).[1] An element worth noting is the fact that information is provided in Italian, which makes the entire communicational process easier and more effective for people who might not have a good English proficiency. Among many others, S. affirms that 'reading and chatting in Italian makes you feel more comfortable, as it is straightforward; you know exactly what you want to say, you know that everyone can understand you properly, you feel more confident' (*Italiani a Londra*, 20 February 2011). Also, language seems to perform a very important role in terms of emotional support, as will be clear in the following pages.

As some users confirmed to me, while material information is undoubtedly crucial during the very first stages of the migration experience or during the migration decision-making process, what seems to acquire more importance - at least in the long term - is emotional support, meaning the ability to turn to

the community in moments of stress and discomfort or adjustment to the new life (Cutrona and Russell 1990). The following quote explains this point particularly well:

> I moved here, and I was alone. No friends, no family, no one to talk to. My life was just work-school-home, over and over again. Then I found this community online, and I immediately felt welcomed. It's not just sharing common experiences, but the idea that there is always someone online that is willing to talk, or simply to have a laugh with. It totally changed my life. (P. *Italians of London* forum, October 2011)

In this respect, if homepages are naturally used to gather all the information Italians might need, web forums seem to work better as places where emotional support is given. According to Nancy Baym (2010), there are at least five characteristics that can be found in both online groups and many definitions of community that make the term 'community' resonate for online contexts: the sense of space; shared practice; shared resources and support; shared identities and interpersonal relationships. Altogether, these qualities may account for the definition of these communities as groups of mutual aid and support. First and foremost, the sense of virtual space and shared identities seem to go hand in hand: being Italian and, more generally, being a migrant, makes the difference. What is shared amongst the group is, in other words, a peculiar feeling of being alone in a foreign environment, with no certainties, no stable horizons, and no ontological securities (Giddens 1991). Going online, therefore, accounts for a unique 'need to belong', meaning a need

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[1] Quotations have been translated from Italian to English.

to form positive and significant inter-personal relationships, but also to engage in conversations and information gathering, along with the possibility of gaining social approval, expressing opinions, and influencing others (Baumeister and Leary 1995). The community, in this respect, represents a sort of safe haven where, regardless of personal situations, everyone speaks the same language, lives the same experience, and shares the same cultural identity. This is probably the reason why many users, especially those who access the community for the very first time, refer to others as friends, or family:

> Hello Italians! I just arrived, and I do not know anyone here. I need to make new friends as soon as possible, is anyone here who wants to go out with me? Please, I am missing my family and my friends so much already, I need to know that there are other Italians in the same situation who believe in friendship and want to be my new family here! (I Love Italy, *Italians of London* forum, 20 May 2012)

As the level of need to belong varies from person to person, there are different attitudes and degrees of willingness to join and participate in web forums or chat-lines. There is at least another level of participation that is worth noting here, since it is established during the migration-making process, involving Italians who access the forum to find others living in Italy who might want to share the whole 'transnational experience package', such as flying from the same airport or sharing the first bedroom:

> Hey guys! I am looking for someone who is planning to move to London this summer. I don't

want to go through everything by myself; it will be so much easier with other people! Please email me if interested. I live in Milan and I am looking forward to meeting new people and starting this adventure together! (I., *The London Link* forum, 17 October 2010)

In this respect, online communities seem to work as *hubs* where multiple forms of engagement meet and match. The fact that the other person is a complete stranger does not appear really to mitigate against the need to belong: being Italian, and being a migrant, is a sufficient condition to establish trust and overcome traditional concerns regarding safety and privacy. As such, the sharing of a common nationality is a very powerful variable in how and why Italians (and other diasporic communities) access and use the online world.

Alongside participation, shared resources and support might take different forms, such as *altruism*. Among forum members, there is a desire to share information based on one's own experiences and research, and to help other people to avoid fraud such as investing their money in fake estate and employment agencies. In his post, M. argues:

> It is very important to have someone who understands the difficulties you are going through, whether it is getting a job, a decent apartment to live in, the nostalgia for Italian food, the nostalgia for your family and friends. You know that these people online have already experienced the same troubles, or they are in the same situation. It is comforting, in a way, it makes you feel less alone. (M., *The London Link* forum, 15 January 2012)

Interestingly, migrants who may be afraid to share their plans for departure with relatives and friends seem to reveal their private selves to the online forum, a place where they feel safe enough to post about their hopes and fears. In the online community, these expressions of uncertainty and vulnerability are accepted, perhaps at a time when close others in the offline world are less available or supportive. In a very enlightening post, G. affirms:

> I heard conflicting opinions about living in London and the difficulties migrants go through. I really do not know what to do, and I really trust you guys. What do you suggest? Shall I leave everything for the unknown? How is the life there? Are you happy? (G., *Italians in London* forum, 20 August 2011)

Here, the development of a migrant identity online is premised upon membership of a cohort of people with shared or similar experience, and this factor is strongly interlinked with the *normalisation of risk*. An effect of having so many members posting about their migration experiences is to foster a perception among forum members that moving to London is a perfectly normal thing to do, given the political and economic situation in Italy. Support from the online community helps to contain the highly risky endeavour that is leaving home, family, friends and job for an unknown country where one does not have employment or any guarantee of happiness. Furthermore, online comm-unities can potentially encourage a *breakthrough* from the 'virtual' to the 'real' world. According to McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002), people who express their true selves online are more likely to form close relationships with those they virtually interact with, and many of these

relationships continue offline. The forums contain evidence that members use the Internet to develop offline friendships. For example, in my case-study, forum members seem to develop their network via social networks (mainly Facebook), where individuals are more easily socialised. Migrants' participation on Social Network Sites (SNS) is also encouraged by the administrators, who actively try to convince people to move from the forum to the social platforms, as they are more widely used, easy to control and manage, and more 'immediate'. To mention just one example, Giancarlo Pelati, administrator of *Italians of London*, repeatedly urges forum members to move to the Facebook group page, where events are more detailed in description, pictures of events and photos of London are posted, and members can more easily share information.

In moving towards a conclusion, it is necessary to ask how is this combined use of web forums and SNS actively affecting migrants' quality of life and integration processes? As my respondents confirmed, being a member implies learning the dos and don'ts of the new transnational identity. The online interactions foster a sense of community and a feeling of belonging that facilitate the migration process. The forum members frequently refer to the process of migration as being a 'roller coaster', with many moments of elation as well as fears and disappointment. In this respect, the Internet works as an open information source, making official information publicly available as well as offering access to information through non-institutional and discrete sources: a sort of 'backstage', 'streetwise' know-ledge. Furthermore, the sharing of the migration process with others who are either going through it at the same time,

or have already been through it, tangibly changes the experience from something isolating to a socially-supported experience. More specifically, the combination of material and identity benefits is evident in the representation of the online community as a sort of safe haven in a rather complex and foreign environment. Material benefits, such as news and information about the homeland and the host society shared online, and identity benefits, such as the comfort provided to prevent – or lessen – the trauma of displacement, seem to enable the reproduction of a specific diasporic identity. Additionally, trans-forming online participation into offline opportunities to meet and engage in leisure activities not only encourages the establishment of long-term friendships, but facilitates escape from the work/home routines that many consider as mainly responsible for their social isolation.

> Before I became a member of the community I was literally dying. No friends, no opportunities to go out, my life was just home and work, end of story. You know, you feel the nostalgia a lot more in these situations; you just want to go back home, and find your friends. My life was a trap: living with strangers, working with other strangers who sometimes I did not understand, I wanted to give up. But then, I found out the community, and it was a relief. Now, I can chat with other Italians on Facebook, I can ask other people some help if I have a problem, I come here, and I find nice people, good food, and a great atmosphere. (P., *Italiani a Londra* forum, 18 September 2011)

Social media enables migrants to maintain contact with friends and relations who have remained behind, as well as those friends and relations who, like themselves, have left their home community. In this respect, social media, partly due to its 'media rich' content and interactive capabilities, enable a common experience supporting a shared commitment and common identity, even though that experience is technologically mediated.

Web forums and SNS provide *social capital* that improves migrants' quality of life. Developed through the work of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1993), social capital is a multidimensional construct that often includes cognitive (mutual trust) as well as structural (social networks) components. Based on my research, it appears that participation in groups and networks – online and offline – can increase access to information channels and multiply one's social support resources, as well as diminishing some of the disadvantages associated with a lack of knowledge and expertise regarding the new environment. Within this specific case study, media seem to encourage the production of a specific capital, a *bridging social capital*. As Wellman (1999; 2001) points out, computer-mediated communication is particularly suited to support weak ties among loosely-bounded, sparsely-knit networks. For migrants, information on new destinations is more likely to spread through relatively weak connections than through close contacts (King and Wood 2001). Weak ties may allow those in destination contexts to function as 'pioneers', providing information or assistance to new migrants – for instance, to find housing or employment. In some respects, this represents the first reason why Italians access online

communities: to seek informational support. In some cases these weak ties evolve to become strong ties, where online community migrants also move in offline environments to help nurture their connections.

Social capital theory assumes that building social networks, trust, and cohesion leads to active participation outside the digital walls, thus contributing to the establishment of a well- connected and integrated community (Putnam 1993). Within the Italian contemporary diaspora, the potential in this sense still has a long way to go. On the one hand, we can presume that once online media improves migrants' quality of life – because problems are solved within a community perceived as reliable or because social isolation is contained – then the process of integration is easier and smoother. Once a network is established, Italians should, it seems, be able to integrate into the local society with less stress and anxiety. However, on the other hand, being a member of the Italian online diaspora community is also an exclusionary act of participation, where it is necessary to speak one language and share one cultural identity. This may do little to assuage a sense of detachment from the lived host environment or to encourage belonging. Further research might usefully explore whether this infrastructure, consisting of strong and weak ties, strategic information and interconnected spaces might, in the long run facilitate the integration process with the local community, or whether it sustains a sort of *double consciousness*, perpetually reviving memories of the homeland through connections with other Italians in London. At least in the short period considered here Italian migrants' engagement with diasporic web forms

and social networks seems to work most effectively as a driving force for the development of a migrant identity and a projected sense of belonging, intimacy and proximity with a community of similar people.

Virtual transnational communities of immigrants

The relationship between digital media and transnational identities can be enriched by the use of Navarrete and Huerta's concept of *Virtual Transnational Community of Immigrants* (VTCI) (2006). VTCI are hybrid communities of interest where participants use offline and online channels of communication to create new ties around common interests concerning life abroad (2006). Given the peculiar combination of online environments and grounded relation-ships, these communities are described as capable of bonding and sharing values more effectively than communities that rely upon only one or the other mode of communication. For the Italian migrants of my case study, there is some evidence of VTCI. The combination of material, informative and emotional support that derives from the aggregation of social capital (networks), cultural capital (knowledge of the host environment) and human capital (skills and abilities acquired while living abroad), is indeed responsible for an overall improvement of immigrants' everyday life, which seems to be less hit by phenomena of social isolation, marginalisation and exclusion. Shared emotional connections and ontological security are a result of a shared history – the migration process – and continuous interactions developed both online and offline. A certain level of intimacy is also necessary, which is nurtured and maintained through dynamics of trust

and the exchange of material and psychological support.

This article aimed to provide a preliminary understanding of how the hybrid nature of virtual communities of immigrants facilitates the (re)production, expansion and reinforcement of a sense of commonality across distance through affective senses of belonging. Beyond the specificity of the case here considered, the study of VTCI and the circulation of social capital in transnational communities of immigrants should lead future research towards discussion of the social, economic and political effects communities of immigrants may have in both the host and the home country. The growing shift away from singular spaces of communication and controlled information will increasingly be associated with the complexity and diversity of the media environment that minorities occupy. The challenge for researchers, now, may be to understand how the different forms of organisation of transnational communities online will impact the lives of community members in the host and home societies and what kinds of politics will arise as a result.

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