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## **TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL SPACES AND DIASPORIC PUBLICS. HOW DIASPORIC CONNECTIONS ONLINE CONTRIBUTE TO THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

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### **Paper proposal**

This paper investigates how diasporic connections online contribute to the digital transformation of the public sphere through an analysis of the impact of connectivity on the way diasporic identities and communities are formed, and of the role of digital media on the development of transnational publics as mediated and discursive arenas of (political) conversation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Research on the relationship between migrant practises and digital networks returns a broad spectrum of insights into how migrants use digital technologies to form and transform networks (Karatzogianni et al. 2016; Dekker & Engbersen 2014; Diminescu & Loveluck 2014; Georgiou 2006; Levitt 2001). This includes the debate around the emergence of so-called 'transnational public spheres' and 'diasporic public spheres' as discursive arenas that overflow the boundaries of nations and states (Volkmer 2003, 2014; Laguerre 2006; Parham 2005; Appadurai 1996). However, this discussion seems to raise a problem. The concept of the public sphere - and I am here referring to Habermas's theoretical framework - was developed not simply to understand how people communicate, but to contribute a theory of democracy, which proposed the public sphere as a space for the production of public opinion through territorially delimited processes of communication conducted in the national language (Fraser 2007). As Couldry and Dreher pointed out (2007), this framework fails to address the complexity of today's global mobility, which is characterised by the emergence of counter-public spheres, indigenous public spheres, and diasporic public spheres, which

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represent the main focus of this presentation. A contemporary analysis of the public sphere cannot also ignore how audiences shape and construct new types of public-ness (Baym and boyd 2012)

My presentation revolves around these key areas of enquiry: first, the role of online spaces in the (re)-configuration of arenas where political discourses of we-ness can take place (Wolkmer 2010); second, the redefinition of boundaries of public and private around forms of mediated public-ness. What my research brings to the discussion is how the circulation of social capital and digital togetherness create a space where Italians not only discuss and share practical information, but also where they start to perceive themselves as members of a community of equals, where they can share their opinions on integration processes, the struggles they face and the hopes they have. In doing so, I wish to emphasise that research on diasporic publics needs to contextualise the role of social capital as a crucial asset. My research also intends to stimulate a discussion on the differences between media platforms: online communities and social networking sites present disparities that need to be taken into account when we discuss the impact of transnational connections on contemporary public spheres.

## **Method**

The discussion will present evidence from a three-year digital ethnographic study that consisted of web forum analysis and observation of users' conversations online. A preliminary observation identified seven online communities as main objects of investigation: Italians of London, Italians in London, The London Link, The London Web, Sognando Londra, Qui Londra, and Italiani a Londra. Three online fora (Italians of London, The London Link, and Italiani a Londra) were then identified as main 'ethnographic objects'. The qualitative corpus consisted of publicly viewable posts that were analysed with text-mining techniques. 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 of conversation. A total of 300 posts was collected during the observation. This initial stage of research was followed by a more recent analysis of migrants' interactions on Facebook. The Facebook group *Italians in London*, which counts more than 40.000 members, was selected by virtue of its popularity among users and in an attempt to observe what social networks can tell us about diasporic publics.

## **Findings**

Research suggests that online diasporic spaces act as:

- Polycentric and polycephalic webs of solidarity and support where specific nodes (long term migrants) exercise more influence than others;
- Spaces where emotional connections are established among migrants, with the purpose of overcoming social isolation and of coping with a sense of de-territorialisation;
- Spaces where users share personal experiences and private information in a fundamentally *public* space;

- Spaces where migrants can celebrate their identity in the national context where they now live, in relation to their *homeland* and within a broader diaspora context. That said, diasporic communication can also be dominated by powerful voices – especially on social networks – that make mediated communication an area of struggle.

On the one hand, online spaces help Italians identify themselves as members of the same diaspora. The community is fundamental in providing comfort and a sense of collective identity, as it allows its members to explore their values and beliefs within environments that they perceive to be safe. In this respect, the combination of material and emotional support provides ground for the emergence of a *transnational social space* that is characterised by the accumulation and use of human (know-how, material support) and social capital (resources that allow individuals to cooperate in networks, groups, and organizations). On the other hand, research on Facebook emphasised the emergence of a critical view of diasporic publics, where conversation is more fragmented, the opportunity to organise physical meetings reduced, and the impact of solidarity mitigated.

## Conclusions

The circulation of digital togetherness and social capital are important aspects in the formation of transnational publics despite their circulation appears more problematic on Facebook. In thinking about the public/private dichotomy, research suggests that transnational communities develop a sense of public-ness as they acquire visibility (Silverstone 2002). At the same time, on-line communication is non-public in the sense that it fosters intimacy among migrants. What seems to circulate online is a sense of *mobile public-ness* where the circulation of social capital and the creation of spaces of digital togetherness contribute to the formation of discursive arenas that migrants themselves negotiate on a daily basis through their interactions, urgencies, personal and interpersonal needs. This expands the notion of the public sphere to include not only transnational connections between already settled migrants and those who access the community before leaving Italy, but also different forms of trust, accountability and legitimacy. This mobile public-ness is public as it takes place in an openly accessible arena, and private as individuals negotiate their own privacy depending on the urgency of each situation (Papacharissi 2010).

Digitality does not change the functional features of the public sphere, which still remains a space where meanings and values are produced and negotiated. However, studying online spaces allows us to focus on different aspects of this mediated public sphere. Online communities can become “a site for the production, distribution, consumption and discussion of political content on issues of societal relevance (...)” but also a space where “different frames clash, which corroborates the public sphere’s function as a stage for conflict and contestation” (Nguyen 2016:214)

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