DIASPORA IS GOING ONLINE. IDENTITY, LANGUAGE AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION[1]

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Abstract: The notion of diaspora had a long journey and today it came to designate almost any group living out of the country of origin and developing a self-consciousness, an emergent identity and specific relationships with homeland and hostland. Conceived as "imagined" or real communities the revived interest in studying diaspora comprises almost every aspect of this old but also modern or maybe postmodern form of social existence.
Nevertheless a synthetic overview on the links between language, identity and communication is still useful and might bring new interpretations on a very current phenomenon and maybe offer a key of understanding the way our world is dwelling in discourse, understood as spoken or written language, if we were to paraphrase a famous line of Hölderlin:" ... full of merit, yet poetically, man dwells on this earth".
Maybe one of the biggest challenges our world is facing is to dial with the new technology and to includes it in an effective and harmonious way in daily existence, not only because media itself is the message (McLuhan) but also because media is telling us in a time when we are not only receptors and readers but also co-creators of public discourse as we can see in the following.

Keywords: digital diaspora, identity, media discourse, network.

Diaspora from antiquity to postmodernity

Any attempt to define diaspora is endangered by academic scruples, by the desire to highlight any up-to date connotations as well also the current debate on the topic, but also the characteristics the concept incorporates by its *telos* and last but not least the broad meaning of diaspora so often used nowadays in political, public and journalistic discourse. In fact, since 1990s the notion of „diaspora" has been amazing frequently used, many times in unappropriated ways and the literature on diaspora's phenomenon also has an exponentially increase over the recent decades, exceeding the original meaning[2] and the link to the Jewish, Armenian or Greek groups reference and/or religious feature.

Diaspora comes to be conceived as any national group of people scatted from their homeland to other places around the globe, national segments of population dispersed outside traditional homeland. Diaspora's discourse, political, scholar, journalistic emphasizes a lot of aspects of the phenomenon: social, cultural, linguistic, economic, politic, communicational, and historical and occurs wherever the phenomenon of population dispersion appears: „Where once were dispersions, there now is diaspora" Kachig Tölölyan (1996: 3).

The proliferation of diaspora's discourse is also related to the post-modernism in the global age (Cohen, 2008). Robin Cohen highlights the link between diaspora mobilization and

[1] This paper is part of an ongoing research project developed within the ERSTE Foundation Fellowship for Social Research 2015/2016.
[2] „The word 'diaspora' derives from the Greek *diaspeirō* 'to distribute'; it is a compound of *speirō*, 'to sow, to scatter' like seed, and *dia-* 'from one end to the other'. The term has, of course, become associated with the Jewish historical experience, and hence is associated with being a dispersed people sharing a common religious and cultural heritage". (Vertovec, 2009: 129).

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globalization, diaspora's mobilization being made by the contribution of several conditions and factors: *a globalized economy* enabling greater connectivity*; new forms of international migration* - limiting and fragmenting family ties specific other way for permanent settlements; *the development of cosmopolitan sensibilities* specific to many "global cities"; *the revival of religion as a focus for social cohesion*, linked in many ways with the diasporic phenomenon (2008: 141).

So in modern or post-modern societies we can apply the extended notion of diaspora in all those situation where we can find some common features as they were synthetized by Safran (1991), Cohen (2008: 161-162) and Vertovec (2009: 133):

1. Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions;
2. Alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions;
3. A collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements;
4. An idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;
5. The development of a return movement that gains collective approbation;
6. A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate;
7. A troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group;
8. A sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; and
9. The possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.

To this features Safran underlined the ultimate „triadic relationship" between „(1) a collectively self-identified ethnic group in one particular setting, (2) the group's co-ethnics in other parts of the world, and (3) the homeland states or local contexts whence they or their forebears came" (Vertovec, 2009: 133). These relations could be a starting point of an endeavor of explaining the vital social role which diaspora is playing as agent of development in their homeland[3] and as influential agent also in the host country from a cultural but also economical, demographic point of view. The diaspora's dynamic is also an important issue to be studied in international relation research.

Also in order to define and find the limit within diaspora might be used as a modern notion, Rogers Brubaker (2005: 5) underlined three major theoretical poles: dispersion in space („trans nationality out of the borders"), orientation to a "homeland" – a real or even a imagined one as Anderson would describe it defining the notion of "nation" and boundary-maintenance (("the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis a host society (societies)"). So here we find the necessary idea of being scattered, territorial dispersion, and a non-symmetrical relationship with homeland and host land. Diaspora is oriented and is defining itself as identity through what homeland can survive out of its borders, meaning collective memory, national myths, an ideal kinship with a homeland as a virtual possibility of returning. Preserving identity even reshaping the idea of homeland helps diasporans and it is conditioned by maintaining boundaries in and towards host country. Sometimes, according Brubaker observation this goes to a type of resistance to assimilation through several

[3] „They bridge the gap between the individual and society, between the local and the global, between the cosmopolitan and the particular. Diasporas can be used to spread liberal democratic values to their home countries" (Cohen, 2008: 174).

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processes as it is self-enforced endogamy or as a consequence of social exclusion. Hence there is in the current literature a position of emphasizing distinctive communities held together by solidarity and positions talking on a very prominent hybridization, fluidization, even syncretism. So on boundary dynamic one can notice an antinomy: boundary maintenance versus boundary erosion.

Coming back to the present meaning of the notion 'diaspora', we intend to show the main sense and signification of the concept and maybe a taxonomy. There are three aspects targeted by the diaspora's discourse, as Vertovec stressed out. Using the notion 'diaspora', one refers either to the process of becoming scattered (a phenomenological usage of the term), or to the community living outside homeland (a cultural and social approach), or simply at the geographical destination of dispersal phenomenon (a spatial, territorial and geographic meaning).

But for a log period diaspora has been a notion "associated with suffering, loss, and victimization. Do contemporary, globally scattered communities opt to characterize themselves in this way?" (Modernity linked it to the nation-state idea and post-modernism questioned the nation-state empowerment perceiving it as hegemonic, discriminatory or culturally homogenizing. Nowadays by diasporans ones are targeting in a very confusing way "immigrants, guest-workers, ethnic and 'racial' minorities, refugees, expatriates and travelers" (Vertovec, 2009: 131-132).

Following the scholarly evolution we can observe the distinction made between diaspora, migration, minority status and transnationalism[4]. Robin Cohen introduced a classification of diaspora's types. He is talking on *victim diaspora* (Jews, Palestinians, Armenians), *labor diaspora* (Indian and Chinese workers), *imperial diaspora* (British, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French during the colonial period), *trade and business diaspora* (merchant communities), *homeland diaspora* (Zionist, Sikhs), *cultural diaspora* (post-modern concept related to post-colonialism, indicating Afro-Caribbean, a cross-border culture spread to U.S., U.K., the Netherlands) (Cohen, 2008 and Lewellen, 2002).

But as much as the uses of the notion diaspora has been extended it is still linked to the idea of nation and that's the reason why almost all scholars cite the description made by Benedict Anderson on nation as "imagined communities"[5] and even extend this definition to other types of communities as diaspora is. Nations and all communities larger than "face-to-face" groups are "imagined" according to Anderson (2006), are invented because the members of these societies, however small a nation would be, will never know each other, will never meet, or hear them, yet in minds of each lives the image of their communion. Also the nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest one has finite boundaries and they are limited through the frontiers of other (neighboring) nations living around. This description is sending us to a matter of representation, a social representation of nations: "for these forms provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (Anderson, 2006: 25). In fact, Anderson's definition started up from Hugh Seton-Watson (1977:4) distinction between the concepts of "cultural nation" – a community based on "language, religion and historical mythology or other cultural bonds" and "political nation"

[4] „By transnationalism I refer to the actual, ongoing exchanges of information, money and resources – as well as regular travel and communication – that members of a diaspora may undertake with others in the homeland or elsewhere within the globalized ethnic community. Diasporas arise from some form of migration, but not all migration involves diasporic consciousness; all transnational communities comprise diasporas, but not all diasporas develop transnationalism". (Vertovec, 2009:136).

[5] „I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" – (Anderson, 2006: 5-6)

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– a community which also possesses, in addition to cultural bonds, "a legal state structure". From this point on Seton-Watson estimated the nation as a "significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one", believing in a "national consciousness". The author noticed that this is about a "fictitious nation" (1977: 5).

An important critique on the theory of nation as imagined community was made by Manuel Castells. He observed that the distinction between "real" and "imagined" communities isn't very useful from an analytic point of view and "empirical inadequate" beyond, of course, the natural demystification of ideologies of "essentialist nationalism á la Michelet" (2010: 31-32). He thinks that ethnicity, religion, language and territory cannot neither build, *per se*, nations, nor, induce nationalism, but "shared experience" can.

In and despite the crisis of legitimacy our world is facing, Castells thinks that power continues to exist and is still ruling society through new forms and "new codes of information and in the images of representation around which societies organize their institutions, and people build their lives, and decide their behavior. The sites of this power are people's minds" (Idem, 425). There are „multiform networks", there is „mass self-communication" (*autocomunicación de masas*)[6] and all of them are staying under the power of identity.

Here we are structuring the very successfully idea of nation, revisiting the idea of imagination and its critics, using as common issue the idea of representation and self-representation and as in all forms of representation we have to deal with language, because no representation could be formed outside language and lacked by words as image's vehicles.

Language, identity and media

The relevance of language in our social existence was stressed by sociolinguist and philosophers. The German philosophers emphasized the link between language and nation, the first one being the basis of the second one. The national consciousness is also related to language, even there are voices denouncing "the trend towards the creation of national consciousness based on language as 'tribalism'" (Steton-Watson, 1977:472).

Diaspora communities are linked by language which involves the communication's vehicle in its triple function: information or messaging, network and transactional or identity negotiation.

Using the internet as a media or talking about the new media one brings further evidence of the impossibility of non-communication, an axiom stated by Palo Alto current or functionalist paradigm. It is impossible not to communicate, the unavoidable feature of communication. ("*One cannot not communicate*" or *Human communication involves both digital and analog modalities* – the axioms of Paul Watzlawick turn diasporic communities and open "online diaspora" as Trandafoiu and others have been called it as an existential condition. According to Watzlawick, new media has „a tremendous effect on communicative and discursive practices" and induced new communicative styles in public sphere.

On the other hand, linking identity on reflection, perception, representations is inevitable. And even accepting that identity means perception, the concept of identity comprises and leads to other different concepts like: "how the individual perceives himself", a variable dependent on the context of perception and „how the person is popularly perceived", marked by prejudices and stereotypes (Lewellen, 2002: 92). Those reflections are often present in media products the more the nowadays society is to be conceived as media and information society. And Diasporas are communities, even „imagined communities" which construct themselves by exchanging products and through the consumption of (media)

[6] See also Constantin Schifirnet: "a new form of communication by which the individual exposes himself in front of a wide audience through new media" (2014: 260)

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images. (Lytje, 1996). Diasporic groups developed „mediascapes", how Arjun Appadurai named the „global cultural flow", using networks and a big rage of media communication tools: internet, mail, telephone, fax, film, audiotape, videotape, satellite television etc. The active construction of identities through media discourse and resources became an important area of investigation for many scholars. Diaspora can be conceived as constructed through discourse and reflected trough representations. The spaces of identity created by media imply the possibility of negotiating identity, which is not or is not anymore a given one, but is a cultural construction including notion as: home, belonging, self and community, self and nation, loyalty etc.

On the relationship between language/discourse and identity there are several studies, but the prominent approach is the *Critical Discourse Analysis* that Ruth Wodak has been developed. The author uses the idea of discourse ("language use in speech and writing) as "social practice" implying a dialectical relationship between the discursive event and situations, institutions, social structure, where there is a two-way influence every element of the relationship shaping and being shaped by the others. "That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it" (Weiss and Wodak, 2003: 13). From this point there are foreseeable consequences regarding power, ideology, unequal position of social groups, including ethnic and cultural majorities and minorities.

Significant mutations have been spent in diasporic identities once with the communication and media technology evolution as we will see in the following sections. The revolutionary changes in communications and media techniques made possible a communities deterritorialization or more accurate the possibility of virtual communities, online communities, digital communities able to develop identities and in case of diasporas, able to homeland orientation and even to social mobilization with economically and politically effects and influencing events and politics both in country of origin and in country of residence. The postmodern concept of identity deny the conventionally conceptualized ethnic group identity (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Identity is a complex construct and hybrid identity, concerning diaspora's case is more complicate, because it is an emerged one, a result of a synthesis, even an involuntary one, a mixture of cultures and loyalties, with defaults, as the feeling of being caught in an interspace like *no here, nor there* and advantages, as is the competency developed by the diasporans of "fully navigate one set of cultural norms and then the other, as required by the situation at hand" (Idem: 32). But the most important advantage is brought by the information technology, contributing in forming Diasporas, "providing solidary and material benefits, negotiating hybrid identity, and facilitating purposive objectives" (Idem: 44). There are many connections and bond mediated by internet.

Communication on new media, the new journalism and the new reader

Regarding the internet as a channel of communication and a host for new styles of journalism we can notice that it's offering a very personalized message and an instrument of feedback from the reader. The online journalism creates a new reader, one who can examine the information and, instead the classical one, who is just a consumer of the product delivered by journalist, now became co-creator searching for documents, documenting at ones turn, participating in debates, formulating observations, objections, point of views. The long distance between the journalist and the reader is shortened by the "active reception" (Ulmanu, 2006: 244). The interactivity of the online journalism and the closeness to the readers explain heavily the great success of bloggers fighting redoubtable journalists, surmounting even the paradox of "media" as non-direct discourse by its one name. But, on the other hand "media is message" (McLuhan) and media built and rebuilt representations in a construction and

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deconstruction of reality. Goffman: in media one doesn't discover reality but is inventing it and every reader is reinventing and re-signifying it with one's other meanings. The online journalism offers the possibility for the reader of transcending the status of a simple user, consumer, to the one of a transmitter in the formula of "*consumer (user) generated content*" (Balaban, 2009: 161). There are people naming the phenomenon "*citizen journalism*", other are using the term "*produsage*" wanting to underline the blending of producing and consuming information. Another formula is "*participatory journalism*", capturing the idea of "collaborative and collective – not simply parallel action" (Singer et all, 2011: 2), where people from and outside the classical newsroom are participating in media creative ongoing process, even only by comments, discussion forums, user blogs, social networking sites etc., questioning even the *gatekeeping* status of old media and transforming the linear relation with former audience into a non-linear relation with the new co-creators, which are the former audience. The audience-driven consumption is a relevant element of interactivity, functioning between many actors as are the consumers and, the providers able in the online journalism to change roles in media creation process. (Ward, 2002).

On the other hand, according to McLuhan, every communication technology configure and recompose in a different way our perception on world. That's another reason why "media is message". On the other hand in this "global village" (McLuhan) we are living in due to the internet everyone is or may be a journalist. Is an amazing and instantaneous journey of communication from "one to one" (synchronic communication) to "one to few", "one to many", to "many to many" when internet means social networks, chat, forum inducing civic activism etc. (Momoc, 2014:35). Still, Trandafoiu doesn't believe that 'web 2.0.' represents a civic activists' space but rather social and cultural one, lacked by traditional structures and by leadership (2013).

With respect to diaspora's online presence, "the internet is the quintessential diasporic medium" (Bernal apud Trandafoiu). Here online communication comprising "old new media" – online newspapers and magazines, but also new media, websites, blogs, forums ensure all three functions of media: information network and transaction, negotiating identities. Not ultimately websites, press, forums enable linguistic practices, involving a fictional and virtual returning home through language.

The migrant needs of acclimatization through useful information are the prime incentive of being online. Also being a migrant the problem of identity become a critical and imperative one. Diasporans have to readjust their representations about self and about others accordingly and media helps in crystallization of self-conscience and the conscience of other.

Diasporans need to relate or to redefine relations with home and homeland. As Tönnies, in his comprehensive *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft (Community and Society)* defined "home" as physical location but also living body of "kinship". The need for homeland and the home sickness, the homeland nostalgia is linked to the representation of happiness as being at home, surrounded by his family and "his own circle" (c*hez soi*) (Harris, 2001: 28). The feeling of being deprived by this strong environment, losing home and homeland, make diasporans to compensate ones lost and being online is a way of recuperating some bearings; being online isn't equivalent with being at home but it isn't either being elsewhere. Being online is a third option, is being in a virtual space where language practices enable diasporan to feel like being home and the need of networking with people feeling the same, experiencing the same, understanding the privations which ones face in diaspora is satisfied through a new media environment.

So new media satisfy in different ways different networking needs reestablishing and redesigning connections with the family left at home, creating new connections with other diasporans, preparing new connections in host land by using information from media in order to adjust ones behavior in order to integrate in the new world. So if from one point of view

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media has an escape function, like art or culture, offering a fiction to stand for reality for a short time, with respect to adaptation process it's making the link between the past and the future and from an interiorized, already acquired world to a one to acquire. Media is out of space and out of time: is interregnum, recces and for this reason it's a privileged reality. Imagine for a moment the metaphor from Hölderlin's poem *Abendphantasie*: "Outside of his hut, the ploughman sits/In the shade, his hearth comfortably smoking,/The evening bells graciously welcome/A wanderer into the peaceful village"[7]! The ploughman, the one who stays, has the infinite comfort of being at home, with a warm hearth, while the wanderer is only welcomed but he is not staying, he is a wanderer.

Digital Diasporas: communication, community, identification

„The Internet is a communication medium that allows, for the first time, the communication of many to many, in chosen time, on a global scale. As the diffusion of the printing press in the West created what McLuhan named the 'Gutenberg Galaxy', we have now entered a new world of communication: the Internet Galaxy." (Castells, 2001: 2-3).

Internet was on the one hand due to the creation of new forms of community dispensed by the idea that pre-internet territoriality was a necessary condition for the formation of communities. On the other hand fictionalizing Internet is a form of virtual community invading our real life. The emergence of all new electronic form of communication, including internet, changed for good our culture. We are living in a media environment and new media is now part of our lives, bringing new patterns of social interactions.

Digital diaspora is a relative recent phenomenon, and its evolution is linked to the electronic communication one, given the possibility offered by the Internet for the scattered as they are the diasporans. For diasporas online communication and the use of cyberspace has been signified not only the possibility to maintain relationships with family friends left behind and to find out news from the country of origin but it is also being a great opportunity for forming and strengthening de-territorialized communities.

Expressions like „digital diaspora" or „online diaspora" reflect the engagement of those communities, as defined above, in activities circumscribed to information technology. Michel Laguerre defines virtual diaspora as „*an immigrant group or descendant of an immigrant population that uses it connectivity to participate in virtual networks of contacts for a variety of political, economic, social, religious, and communicational purposes that, for the most part, may concern either the homeland, the host land, or both, including its own trajectory abroad"* (2010: 50). He considers the digital diaspora as an interface of the real diaspora. The use of cyberspace by diasporans for the purpose of participating or engaging in online interactional transactions is not depending if concerns virtual interaction with members of the diasporic group living in the same foreign country or in other countries, with individuals or entities in the homeland, or with non-members of the group in the hostland and elsewhere. In Laguerre conception virtual diaspora is „the cyberexpansion of real diaspora". And our world „connectivity" achieved by IT tools, made possible the affirmation of diaspora's digital identity.

On the other hand a lot of studies based on online forums revealed that Internet is offering not only a "virtual togetherness" but actions and interactions going on there are also closely intertwined with participants' projects and pursuits in their offline lives" (De Leewe, 2007: 188). So the online and offline existence are not necessary separated by an ontological border, they are interfering plans, continuous poles of diasporans existence due the pressing need of "keeping in touch".

[7] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Abendphantsie/ Evening phantasy*, translated by Maxine Chernoff and Paul Hoover.

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We can underline the following dimensions of digital diaspora communication: informational, interactional, of identification, transactional and escapism. There is a strong connection between this dimensions, so it is hard to treat them separately.

The first one refers to the ability of finding useful information due Internet, using conational' experience. Diasporans' narratives talk on their own specific local experiences, but also exchanging information on homeland politic and economic situation (Trandafoiu, 2013). The information is vital for the transition process for every person out of own environment, facing with new experiences: legal information on labor, housing, identity documents, health and social insurance etc. Beyond the pragmatic layer of practical and accommodation information, digital diaspora is focusing on cultural information too. There are numerous cultural association organizing meeting and events and their presence and activity is signaled by forums and websites, online newspapers, all in all, information is provided by diaspora's media channel.

From here it's easy to follow the second dimension of digital diaspora, the interactional one. Diasporans they need not only information but also ties, relations with other members of diaspora and with those left at home. The network dimension is a very important one both psychologically, but also social. It is the dimension stressing the triad diaspora-homeland-hostland.

The third dimension concerns identity and online identification. It has been said that online identity is a fictive one, and for this reason it doesn't prove anything. I am thinking there are a lot of useful information to be obtain even from a fictive online identity, because diasporans narratives are often more sincere of anonymity, when a person just use online channel to express emotions and states and stories that otherwise would not share. Diaspora's communication is sharing identities and reshaping identities even expressing and performing "digital identities".

The transactional dimension concerns any type of exchange, information exchange, emotional exchange (sharing), but also negotiating identities. Online diaspora is a form of social contract with rights and obligations, with rules, where diasporans engage in social, emotional and civic exchanges.

The escape function of digital diaspora refers first of all to the empowerment model. "Digitization empowers marginal peoples in many different ways, as the initiative may come either from within or from without. Those who must stay at home because of family obligations (taking care of children, elderly parents, or handicapped persons) have been isolated from the labor force, but with computer access they are able to look for jobs that do not require physical presence in the workplace" (Laguerre, 2010: 55). The empowerment concerns not only economic and labor issue, but is also a social, communicational, cultural, religious, political empowerment. This dimension offer the possibility of demarginalizing disadvantage people but is also an escape strategy of being under an online identity anyone you want to be anytime you want to, being at just a "click distance" from anyone, covering a serious source of frustration, the one of being scattered.

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