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Mexican Digital Diaspora: New paradigms in transnationalism

“You don’t leave Mexico, you are virtually there”

Fernando, 29 years old

Several studies have been done about the use of communication media on the part of migrants. But particularly with the development of the Internet, the potential of this medium to further communicate migrants and their communities is being researched. This potential has led to the construction of virtual communities with a high level of interaction and immediacy among participants located in different points of the planet, and therefore could eventually result in the formation of social capital. With the integration of multidisciplinary studies, such as transnationalism and its relation with virtual communities, terminology and concepts that try to decipher this dynamic phenomenon have been forged.

Today, old approaches that pictured migrants as subjects who left their place of origin, breaking ties with their native environment and who were faced with a new destination, of the migrant as a subject who left the place of origin, breaking ties with the native environment and who was faced with the new destination, are being superseded by a portrait of migrants immersed in what Diminescu calls culture bonds. This culture is represented by high mobility and dynamic interaction taking place among migrants who bond with their communities of origin and destination, mainly due to the new communication and information technologies.

With the development of web 1.0 in the final years of the nineties, sites administered by migrants were created. These sites mainly served for communication using tools as chat rooms, instant messaging, e-mail, blogs and forums. Also, these sites turned into information centers posting what was happening in
the communities of origin, as well as spaces where history, culture, gastronomy, and community traditions, was gathered and mixed with images and narratives of migrant life in their destinations. This mix was what constructed migrant identity in cyberspace and the concept of digital diaspora comes precisely from these spaces.

With the development of web 2.0 and ICTs at the beginning of the XXI century, several digital diaspora studies anticipated an increase of users, not only of migrants generally located in developed countries, but also of their families and friends who had stayed in far and underdeveloped regions. Additionally, mobile infrastructure development, such as cellular phones, was a possibility to further connect migrants and their communities with a high level of organizational potential, as in the case of the Arab Spring in 2010.

The relative liberty of Internet and its development in ICT infrastructure gave pioneering studies certain optimism about the circulation of ideas, values and democracy. Along with a solidarity present among transnational communities, an interesting picture was drawn about an increase in wellbeing of transnational life for the millions of migrants and their communities. Brinkerhoff points out that digital diasporas have the “potential to foster democratic values, support integration in the host society, and contribute to security and socio-economic development in the homelands” (Brinkerhoff 2). However, the use and popularity of Social Networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, was unimaginable for the first phase of digital diaspora studies: currently more than 1 billion users and 757 million of them are Facebook daily active users.

In the very first studies about digital diasporas, the level of participation or solidarity was related, at some level, with the degree of a sentimento of belonging that migrants had as a group, as well as with the relationship with the communities. That is, some studies argued that there were some migrant groups or communities prone to association or construction of a communitary identity. Despite the potential for
migrants to communicate and relate in Social Networks, today what is being explored is precisely whether the structure of these networks is what is limiting the construction of social capital and therefore promoting the lack of offline activities.

The Mexican case

Even though the term diaspora is not completely applicable to define Mexican migration, the development of the concept digital diaspora (or e-diaspora) helps us with an initial framework to analyze the phenomenon of Internet use by Mexican migrants. Critical studies by Oirzabal, Alonso, Everett, Diminescu, Brinkerhoff, Ignacio and Parham show the complexity of the digital diaspora phenomenon, and therefore it can be approached from a great diversity of perspectives, located in different contexts, as well as studied through different various methodologies (webnographies). Today, the power and influence of Social Networks mark a new context for digital diasporas as in the Mexican case.

In my research I have documented the appearance, in the first years of the XXI century, of solid virtual communities related with Mexican migrants who come from rural contexts. These communities were characterized by a constant participation of migrants living in the United States and of young people situated in their native communities. Virtual communities first served as communication spaces and also as constructors of a transnational identity in cyberspace. Tierra Caliente was selected as one of the case studies, a Mexican region deeply affected by a development lack, migration and illegal drug trade. Through different multimedia resources (photos, audio, video) users tried to represent their strong regional identity, which is one of the most notorious features of Tierra Caliente. At the same time this identity reflected on the webmasters’ effort to link their sites to other virtual communities that were somehow related to the region, therefore building a network of communities: a virtual regionalism. The dynamics of the sites enriched and reinforced the relation between migrants and their families, old friendships were reunited, feelings and experiences were shared, new lifestyles were united with old ones, old and new
identities.

Due to the growing number of users and sites, formed by a great variety of webpages, blogs, visitor books and forums related to that mexican region, their cyberecosystem was highly dynamic and participative. Even though most of the pioneer sites, born between 2001 and 2005, disappeared by the end of the past decade, in 2010 almost 80 sites were still online. However currently less than 20% of the sites are still online. Most of them have migrated to Facebook, and a great part of the activities of those that haven’t are done in spaces correlated to Facebook.

Today there are hundreds of sites related to Tierra Caliente in Facebook, and they continue growing, motivated by taking their communities, their gastronomy, their music, characters or even their governments to Social Networks. It is important to underline that in most of these sites migrants participate, even from different generations. The number of friends of some of these Facebook pages or groups, exceed by a great deal the number of visitors the most popular sites of the past decade ever reached. At the same time, the amount of friends and relations that spurge in these spaces is immensely greater than in conventional sites. To set some examples, one of the most popular virtual communities in Tierra Caliente reached around 30 daily visits, today a mere image publication reaches more that 200 likes in only one day. A popular forum related to the Tierra Caliente community had about 60 members in 2005, currently that same community’s Facebook profile has around 5000 followers. One of the sites that had the highest number of pictures, reached the publication of 50 photos in a lifespan of 5 years, today the amount of images uploaded or posted, only by the administrator, reaches an average of one per day.

To compare the use of Internet by mexican migrant groups, particularly with Social Networks, I recently disseminated an invitation to answer a survey. The invitation was published in about 100 spaces, mostly profiles, pages or groups related to migrants or mexican migrant organizations. The spaces were selected in relation to migratory destinations in Canada, in order to obtain information from migrants with
different characteristics from those of Tierra Caliente. That is, Mexican migrants from diverse local communities (rural and urban contexts), with different cultural and identity characteristics, and who had traveled to new destinations. It is important to mention that Mexican migration began since the Second World War, mainly to the United States. Since the 1990s, Canada was consolidated as the second destination country for Mexican migration, so much so that in 2009 the Canadian government imposed a required visa for Mexicans to enter that country. The justification of the visas was based on the growing number of Mexicans that were traveling to Canada and staying illegally, accompanied with the fact that Canada became the country with the highest number of citizens that required refuge. For 2009, one of every four applications came from a Mexican.

62 answers were received, even though the number of questionnaires does not represent a significative sample of the number of Mexican migrants who use Internet and Social Networks, there are some interesting data about the Mexican digital diaspora. The great majority of participants confirm they have migrated at least once, and 87 percent is currently living outside Mexico. Even though some participants answered that they had lived in several countries, 40 percent confirmed they had lived or continue to live in Canada, 31 percent in the United States and 26 percent in Europe. 55 percent of the sample are women; the total of participants average 33 years of age, and 98 percent were born in Mexico. It is critical to note that the participants have high degrees of education, given that 39 percent answered they had a bachelor’s degree and 45 percent had obtained a graduate degree. From the data and personal comments of the participants some assumptions can be derived, it seems that the invitation to be a part of a study and the time it takes to answer the survey could have discouraged some “other” migrant groups like those with a lower level of education or those who have full time jobs. The participant professions and occupations vary greatly to a degree where the first and only majority with only 11 percent are students, the rest are homemakers, entrepreneurs, employees in service jobs, construction

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and professionals. Only 8 percent established having migrated illegally, and 64 percent said they did it legally, being the student visa the most recurring with 33 percent.

Almost in their entirety, participants mentioned having Internet in their home, and that they access mostly in their laptops, and to a lesser degree in a desktop computer. Only 24 percent has Internet service in their mobiles. The great majority accesses their Facebook profile daily. Even though most of the participants assured they visit or have profiles related to migrant groups and/or communities of origin, their interaction is only as observers. One of the main reasons to be connected with those sites apart to communicate with their families is the nostalgia they experience for their communities of origin. Even though 80 percent said they present themselves in Social Networks as migrants, mainly due to pride or as a part of their identity, 14 percent mentioned they did not do this because they were not interested or they do not find any reason to do it. Most of the users, even though they value the communication potential of Social Networks, maintain a cautious stance or they limit their activity because of security or privacy, they criticize the excess and velocity of information, as well as its poor quality and superficial nature. Most of the participants assured feeling motivated by doing activities related to their communities of origin, very few confirmed their participation.

At this moment in my research and as preliminary conclusions, it can be said that Social Network sites related to Tierra Caliente maintain have a high degree of activity in their contents, of participation on the part of users (likes, comments or sharing contents). However, in comparison with the reports on old sites, activity in Social Networks stays in an online level, few offline activities have taken place. That is, most activities can be related to a nostalgic sentiment or memory. The same happens with the mexican groups in Canada, however, the information circulating in these networks could be of greater use for transnational life. Job opportunities, places to live, explanation of migratory laws or of places of destination, sales, or other specific doubts are being published in these sites and it is really important to
point that information provided by users, especially about personal experiences, are of great use.

Nevertheless, the social capital constructed through cyberspace, expected by the pioneer studies, remains to be seen. A year ago the Tierra Caliente region was hit by terrible floods, and even though support gestures were shown through Social Networks, several administrators and users complained of the lack of real support by friends, members and followers of the region. On the other hand, although most participants in the other case study mentioned being related to migrant web groups, only 45 percent has contact with sites related to their places of origin and 27 percent mentioned having participated in an offline activity organized online such as a national festivity or music festival.

The abundance and saturation of information, closed spaces, the appearance of adds on walls, the limitation of configuration or programming of networks, security and privacy problems, are probably influencing in the increasing detachment between migrants and organization. That is, migrant identity is being diluted only as another aspect of facebook identity and performativity, instead of being the catalyst of social capital, and is furthermore used as an opportunity to implement market strategies online. To investigate this more, in the current stage of my research I am interviewing Facebook space administrators to get an idea about their perceptions related to social mobility among migrants (whether it exists or not) promoted by social networks. Furthermore, these interviews will allow a deeper exploration to understand whether the spaces, where digital diasporas continue to exist, are changing, or if they are migrating to other spaces beyond Social Networks and Facebook.