"Logging into Diaspora – Media and Online Identity Narratives among Romanians in Ireland"

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Abstract

This article provides an empirical account of the way members of the Romanian community in Ireland use media (and essentially the online space) as sources for their collective feelings of diasporic identification and also to negotiate and articulate these identity narratives. Diasporic identities are here understood as ongoing processes of understanding themselves and, at the same time, being defined by others. Identities are thus constructed at the intersection of the continuously flowing boundaries between 'Us' and 'Them'. It is at the boundaries that symbolic space is negotiated and identities are fiercely debated, constructed and re-constructed.

Some of the existing studies (Nedelcu, 2000; Hiller and Franz, 2004) confirm that the Internet undeniably meets the basic informational and communication needs of an ethnic community, thus being an intrinsic part in the life of many diasporic communities. The study presented here aims to reach further and explore the complex meaning and the role of virtual space in the process of articulation of diasporic narratives of identity.

This ethnographic study focuses on the online discussion forum of the Romanian Community in Ireland. The forum was chosen as the preferred research context mainly because it constitutes a lively debate arena; it is the pulsating heart that keeps the community alive. The study presents an analysis of data collected over a six-year period (2004-2010) in the forum archives.

Keywords: diaspora, identity, media, internet, ethnography, Romanian

Introduction in the topic

Identity has become a central topic the field of migration studies and research on identity and belonging has flourished over the last two decades. Mandaville (2001) argues that diasporas often engage in a more intense search and negotiation of their identities due to the fact that they are experiencing separation from the 'natural' setting of the homeland.

Moreover media are often attributed key roles in shaping, maintaining, reflecting and performing identities. A rich body of scholarship on the topic of media and migrants' identities has emerged recently across all social sciences. This seems to confirm Appadurai's view that media and migration are *'two major and interconnected phenomena, whose relationship with each other is the key to understanding the link between the global and the modern'* (Appadurai, 1996).

This paper aims to establish the role of www.romaniancommunity.net, the online discussion forum of the Romanian migrants in Ireland, in relation to the shaping and articulation of identity narratives. This findings

presented in this article are part of my wider PhD research which maps the identity discourses of the Romanian diaspora in Ireland and highlights the role of media in the process of negotiation and articulation of these identities. The paper also provides an insight into the diverse media diet of Romanians in Ireland.

2. Methodology

Identity and belonging are dynamic processes that can hardly be quantified and measured through a quantitative approach without the risk of over-simplifying the two concepts. Hence, in the field of diasporic, ethnic or migrant identities and identifications, most studies tend to indicate a strong preference for qualitative methodologies.

Moreover, understanding the identity discourse(s) of a community as a collective and continuous process of negotiation and re-negotiation would require a long-term immersion into the life of that particular community. Ethnographic research seems thus to fit best with the objectives of this research mainly due to the fact that it allows the researcher to grasp the complete picture of a particular community and to understand the meanings which the community associates to their social world (Bryman, 2001).

In the case of the Romanian communities abroad there is a dearth of studies in relation to their narratives of identity and their media use. Hence, this research is mainly exploratory and thus, it avoids positing *a priori* a strong causal relation between media consumption and identities. By adopting a qualitative research methodology, I aim at understanding the identity narratives of the Romanian migrants in Ireland and also comprehend the process through which these identities are constructed, in particular in relation to media.

Various studies have shown that the online space plays a key role for diasporas (Chan, 2005; Elias et al., 2007). In particular for the Romanian community in Ireland, the internet and essentially the online discussion forum of the Romanian Community in Ireland (RCI) constitutes the centrepiece of the community life.

The forum is a rich source of information about Romanians as a community, the ways in which they see themselves and others. It allows access to information over a long time-span (2004-2010), thus including many key moments in the life of the community. Another important aspect is that on the forum, identity unfolds naturally, like in everyday life, through stories and experiences, without answers being prompted by specific questions.

Adopting Christine Hine's concept of 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000), this is a study of how users of an online discussion forum experience this technology and make use of it to articulate and negotiate their

identities. Participant observation and content analysis have been used to examine the messages posted on forum and their meaning in relation to the topic studied

Thus, data presented in this paper runs over a period of more than six years (2004-2010), totalling a number of 2,227 discussion threads and 25,151 posts[1]. This is particularly useful for the analysis as it includes many key moments in the life of the Romanian community in Ireland (RCI), such as Romanians becoming EU citizens (January 1st 2007), the Irish Citizenship referendum (June 2004) etc. and the implications that these contexts have had on the pattern of settlement, integration and identity strategies.

3. Media, diasporas and identity

There is a vast body of scholarship pertaining to media and migration. While some studies focused on the media diet of migrants and ethnic minorities, others stressed out the engagement of diasporas and ethnic minorities in the production of their own media.

It has been argued that media consumption and production could give us important clues about the degree of integration of minority groups into the host society. By wanting to connect to their 'homeland' and its culture, migrants have sometimes been assumed to remain loyal to another state. According to Deuze (2006) some policymakers perceive that the growing popularity of ethnic minority media will eventually disrupt the fabric society (: 266). Evidence however seems to indicate that diasporas rarely consume only 'media from home' and the diversity of their media diet is sometimes dismissed by researchers.

Media consumption

A complete picture of the media consumption patterns of Romanians in Ireland cannot be constructed solely from information available on the forum. However, interesting insights have emerged while looking closely at the forum discussions and at the 'media talk' which takes place online.

The forum participants seem use a great variety of media, both in terms of sources (media from homeland, Irish as well as foreign media) and also in relation to the medium (video, radio, written press, etc.).

Many forum discussion threads have started as a reaction to news presented in the media. This is particularly the case for news about the political and economic crises; news about Romanians making the headlines in Irish, British or other foreign media; news about updates to the immigration legislation, etc.

Media 'from home' are consumed by the forum users mainly in order to keep in contact with what happens in the homeland (politically, economically, socially and culturally) and also to keep an eye on what takes place in other Romanian diasporas. Many Romanian newspapers have entire sections dedicated to

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[1] Counted on May 31st 2010.

news from/about Romanian diasporic communities. In addition, many TV and radio stations occasionally discuss in their shows issues pertaining to Romanian migrants living abroad.

It is interesting to note however that not all forum participants are content when engaging with 'media from home'. Some users for example mention that they deliberately try to isolate themselves from Romanian media. This, they argue, is mainly because the realities presented by homeland media are much too painful and disappointing (especially around the time of the general elections when the country's problems are brought to the surface). For some forum participants this self-imposed 'exile' from Romanian media translates into a refusal to access Romanian TV or radio by the means of satellite dishes or even to watch Romanian TV/listen to radio online. In spite of their symbolic protest against Romanian media, many of these forum members paradoxically seem to be very informed about 'what happens at home' and this comes mainly as a result of continuing to 'take a peek' online at Romanian newspapers content.

Irish media are also extensively mentioned by the users of the Romanian forum. Almost all newspapers, radio and TV channels have been cited (countless times) and the meanings of the news have been analysed and negotiated in the online space. The topics that seem to be of most interest are: the current state of the Irish economy and the country's political affairs (budget cuts, recession and prices, elections etc.); the updates to the immigration legislation (i.e. change in work permit regulations [2]); citizenship information and requirements; and, last but not least, news and feature reports about (Romanian) migrants and the Irish attitudes towards migration.

Besides Romanian and Irish media, many other sources of information from *foreign media* are also used. This refers mainly to media from the United Kingdom (BBC, The Times, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Guardian, Sky News etc.), French (Le Figaro, Le Monde, etc.), German (Deutsche Welle, Die Presse), American (NY times, The Daily Show), Russian (Pravda), European media sources (http://ec.europa.eu/, http://euobserver.com/) and many other sources.

Accessing information from this diverse range of media sources allows the forum users to get a broader picture of the world political and economic sphere and also to take the pulse of the image of Romania and Romanians in the world. Thus they are able to make comparisons and to draw conclusions about which countries tend to be more welcoming or, on the contrary, more discriminatory towards migrants in general (and, of course, towards Romanian migrants in particular).

While analysing empirical data, another interesting finding emerged in relation to the media use by Romanians on the forum. As the concept of hyphenated identities becomes more and more used in the social sciences to delineate the possibility of co-existence (rather than self-exclusion) of more alternative ethnic identities (e.g. Chinese-American, Indian-British etc.), a similar trend can be discovered in the field

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[2] Even after January 2007 when they became EU citizens, many Romanians and Bulgarians are still required to have a valid work permit in order to work in Ireland.

of media studies as some Romanians on the forum use 'hyphenated' media sources: thus several forum participants seem to prefer using English-language news websites which are produced and hosted in Romania (e.g. www.dailynews.ro), European news websites which have a Romanian emphasis (e.g. www.europeana.ro, BBC Romania etc.), and many other similar examples.

Findings presented so far seem to point to the fact that the use of such a varied array of media sources generally emphasises the diverse information needs of the forum users. Romanians online appear to be interested equally in Romanian and Irish affairs, but also international events. Moreover Romanian migrants on the forum seem to prefer using different sources of information in order to cross-check the same piece of news from more than one source.

In conclusion, if we insist on identifying a link between media consumption patterns and the level of integration (or alternatively segregation), this pastiche of media sources that Romanians online use could only indicate a rather fluid and hybrid sense of diasporic identification, rather than suggesting a blind allegiance to either the homeland or the host society. We can thus conclude that **the forum constitutes a platform where media contents from different sources are brought together and discussed while the meanings associated to these messages are collectively constructed.**

Access to media and the Internet

Romanians on the forum rely greatly on the available online media content (newspapers, TV and radio online streaming etc.) in their forum discussions. This is in spite of the fact that almost all forum users have access to the main Irish and British TV and radio channels and some even have access to transnational television channels via satellite.

The key to understanding their preference for online content lies in the pattern of interactions between the forum members: when users start a debate over a certain topic emerging from the media, they feel compelled to ensure that the topic is well-know to the other forum participants. Thus, they provide web-links where everybody can access the material before engaging in commenting the news.

This represents an interesting situation as the internet becomes a key tool that Romanians use to satisfy almost all of their media needs. Hence, **the internet (and in particular the forum) becomes a medium that seems to blur the boundaries between written, audio and visual media and blends together the varied media sources**.

Media representation

Another particularly important topic in the media and migration scholarship looks at the representation of migrants and ethnic minorities in the mass media. Much of the existing scholarship seems to conclude that

media continue to operate a racist discourse even though often publicly they commit the *'to the ideals and practices of an inclusive multi-ethnic, multicultural society'* (Cottle, 2000: 3).

Some forum participants feel that the *'media lynching'* of Romania and Romanians is now *'a thing of the past'*. They argue that foreign media seem to have generally abandoned their almost ritualistic reports about Romania as the land of orphanages and abused children. This however represents the opinions of only a very small minority of the online group.

Many other forum users felt that discriminatory images still persist in mainstream media through the continuous associations of all Romanians with criminality, begging and poverty as well as many other harmful labels, both in the Irish as well as the international media:

> '[They show] prostitutes, [...] Ceausescu and the People's House, ATM thieves and everything that is wrong with our recent history. I am not denying that these problems exist [...] but I suspect there is a more subtle cause for this attack (M19, male)

Also the forum members argue that there seems to be a journalistic ritual to use the two terms 'Rroma' (gypsies) and 'Romanians' interchangeably. Further, the forum participants feel that the 'confusion' between 'us' and 'them' (i.e. Romanians vs. gypsies) is the main source of the stigma associated to the image of Romania and 'being Romanian'. Speaking about one article published in the British newspaper 'The Mirror' one forum user complains:

> '[After they described in yesterday's paper what the gypsy/rroma delinquents did] the next day there was another article in The Mirror on the same topic and the word 'RROMA' was simply transformed into 'a gang of ROMANIANS'. So in the end all the blame falls on us like always. We already have this hard-to-shake-of label which is stuck on to our foreheads [...]' (M26, male)

Besides their usual 'chase for the sensational', forum participants point out to the fact that foreign media tend to use Romanians as scapegoats for all the negative crimes which are committed, as well as the failure of the governments to point out the lucrative effects of migration. Thus, all the evils in one society are imputed on the migrant population (e.g. pressure on the health and educational system etc.). Moreover, many forum members feel that there is a targeted campaign against Romanians in the media and to the extreme, some even seem to suspect that there are very well-hidden secret agendas which many of the powerful media agencies have to carry out (e.g. discrediting Romania as a country and its citizens).

Demeaning representations in the media are expected by the participants to the online forum to have strong negative effects in the long term. The forum members indicate that the key problem with negative representations is that these repeated (and over-exaggerated) correlations between Romanians and criminality are expected to eventually create permanent associations in people's minds between 'being Romanian' and 'being a criminal' (thief, rapist, killer etc.). In the forum users' views, these constant

negative representations of Romanians in the media also make it very hard to get any positive representations of Romanians and Romania in the media, since media will lose credibility if they praise the same group which was vilified just days before.

One of the most surprising research findings is that many forum participants sense that the worst type of discrimination does not necessarily occur in the foreign media content, but rather in the Romanian media. In their view, Romanian journalists select only news that reinforce a sense of worthlessness and inferiority about being Romanian: migrants are many times referred to as 'strawberry pickers'[3] regardless of their social status and educational background. Moreover, Romanian media is also criticised by the forum users for its tendency to over-report the negative actions of Romanians abroad in comparison with the positive ones. Thus, the stigma and sense of inferiority associated to the Romanian identity becomes even more deeply embedded in their sense of who they are.

Many of these negative representations are considered by the forum participants to be outside of the space of control of the Romanian diasporic communities. However it is interesting to analyse the forum users' reactions and opinions in the several occasions when the Romanian Community in Ireland (RCI) was given the opportunity to voice its issues and concerns on Irish TV, radio and newspapers.

The general views expressed on the forum are rather critical of the quality of participation and appearance of the RCI community leaders and its representatives in the Irish media. Many of the forum participants argue that these occasions have been 'wasted' as the representatives have not been properly 'exploited' these rare chances to get media coverage and to use these occasions for improving the image of the Romanian community in Ireland.

On the one hand the RCI representatives are criticised by the forum users for insufficiently preparing their answers before appearing on these shows. Thus, instead of providing clear and 'right-to-the-point' answers to the journalists' questions, the community representatives have engaged in long and unclear answers which eventually have left too much room for confusions and misunderstandings (in addition many of these long interventions had to be truncated post-production in order to fit the allocated time slots, thus adding even more to the lack of clarity). However, some of the forum participants agree that these situations are somewhat normal given the community leaders' lack of experience in speaking in public and mainly dealing with the media representatives. This lack of experience leaves the community representatives vulnerable and easy to manipulate into saying the things that the journalist wants them to say.

In many situations, the forum participants' reacted promptly to condemn the negative representations of Romanians in the media. However, very few users can envisage efficient strategies to counter such negative portrayals. In their view neither the Romanian government, the Romanian Community in Ireland

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[3] This phrase originated in the 1990s when many Romanians (especially from the country-side) were obtaining short-term work permits for Spain and Italy for seasonal jobs in agriculture (in particular strawberry-picking).

as an organisation, nor the members of the Romanian diaspora can actually control these representations and hinder the undesired contents in order to promote a much more positive image of being Romanian.

All these aspects linked to media representation have been widely discussed on the forum as the users struggle to make sense of who is to blame for the negative image that Romanians have. Moreover, forum participants also strive collectively to find the solution in relation to what needs to be done to correct this image. **The forum acts thus as a space where these collective feelings of revolt, embarrassment and stigmatised identities are expressed and diaspora struggles to mobilise itself in an effort to change the image of the Romanian community and 'liberate' the Romanian identity from the stigma attached.**

Diasporic media production and identity

Some authors argue that ethnic minority media emerge as consequences of misrepresentation or diminished attention paid to the specific issues of ethnic minorities in the mainstream media. Hence ethnic or diasporic groups are said to adopt strategies to challenge the dominant discourse and make their voices heard (Cottle, 2000; van Dijk, 2000; Alia and Bull, 2005; Karim, 1998; Chan 2005). However diasporic media production is not just a 'weapon' that minorities use to struggle with negative portrayals and lack of coverage in the mainstream media. Diasporic media is a key aspect when we refer to the process of identity construction.

According to Habermas, public sphere needs to be understood as a realm of our social life (Habermas, 1974), *'a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matter of general interest was institutionally guaranteed'* (Habermas, 1989: xi). The public sphere is a 'space' where cultural meanings are circulated and negotiated and Habermas highlighted its key role in the construction of identities. The circulation of these cultural meanings requires specific means for transmitting information. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television are, according to Habermas, 'the media of the public sphere' (Habermas, 1974: 49).

Building on Habermas' argument, Dayan (1998) views that diasporic media and communication are of key importance when we refer to the emerging 'micro public sphere' in which diasporic identities are constructed and re-constructed.

In the case of the Romanian community, there have been several initiatives in the last couple of years to edit Romanian language newspapers and informational newsletters. Unfortunately most of these initiatives could not overcome some of the main challenges that diasporic media has to face, namely shortages of human and financial resources. The Romanian Community of Ireland website and its forum however stood the test of time and this is mainly because it requires fewer financial costs for maintenance and update.

Members see the forum as representing much more than just a pool of available information, advice and social contacts for pre-migrants, newcomers and settled migrants alike. The forum is perceived by its users as an essential space for debate, a "round table" (in their own words) where Romanians discuss about their lives in Ireland and the 'fate' of the motherland. The forum also acts as a place where Romanian migrants can release some of the tensions and frustrations which are inherent to the first stages of the integration into a different society.

For many, the forum is also a source of Romanianness as they argue that the forum is accessed most likely *"because it is in Romanian rather than solely because it offers information"* (F01, female). Besides allowing Romanians in Ireland to practice speaking Romanian, the forum also allows them to *'keep the language clean'*, i.e. without contaminating the language with too many foreign words and then eventually speaking what the forum members call 'Romglish' (a mixture of Romanian and English words in the same sentence).

Moreover, the forum constitutes a 'sacred' space where respect for Romanians and Romanianness is of key importance. Many arguments have emerged on the forum when the newcomers to Ireland or even pre-migrants begin their posts with critical assertions about Romania and Romanian people. It is viewed by many forum users that it is absolutely essential to keep the forum as an oasis of respect at a time when Romanianness has become such a despised identity. Thus, this online space seems to help the participants to create a sense of unity of Romanians as a group and it gives them an opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions in an environment where they feel excluded or disrespected by others:

> *"[…] the role of this forum is to at least slightly bring us together and to feel a little respected between ourselves if others don't respect us"* (M20, male).

It becomes evident that the Romanian community forum represents a space that is produced and re-produced everyday through the contributions of members of the Romanian community. It represents a lively arena for the circulation of information and collective negotiation of cultural meanings and identities of Romanian diaspora in Ireland. These findings are consistent with data from similar research (Miller & Slater, 2000; Chan, 2005; Elias, Lemish & Khvorostianov, 2007) arguing that internet and in particular discussion forums play a complex role in articulating diasporic identifications and feelings of belonging.

On the forum of the Romanian community, 'identity talk' is everywhere. Messages posted provide an insight into how Romanians define themselves and how they are defined by others. In conclusion, **the Romanian community forum represents a public sphere where members of the diaspora negotiate and articulate their sense of Romanianness while also striving to envisage solutions to address the challenges of a stigmatised diasporic (or ethnic) identity.**

5. Conclusion

This article highlighted some key aspects emerging from empirical research on the Romanian online diaspora living in Ireland and their use media in order to negotiate symbolic identity spaces.

Findings indicated that Romanians consume media from a wide variety of sources. However many of the views expressed on the forum argued that most of the representations of Romanians in the media tend to be very negative and this fact impacted quite significantly on their identities: feeling humiliated about the negative stereotyping and developing feelings of inferiority about who they are as a diasporic community.

For many of the members, the forum represented a retreat into a safe place where they could recollect the positive aspects of Romanianness and use these symbols to regain the lost respect for their homeland, their language and culture and ultimately for their co-nationals. Thus, the forum as a public sphere where identities and meanings are negotiated, may eventually lead to a major reconfiguration of what it means to be Romanian.

In line with existing literature (Karim, 1998; Tsagarousianou, 2004), these findings seem to confirm that the reconstruction and re-negotiation of identities takes place through everyday interactions, such as the daily posts on the forum. In the light of these findings, the Romanian community forum stands out as one of the key arenas where cultural meanings are constructed and reconstructed in everyday talk and diasporic identities are shaped and articulated.

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