

Chapter 46

The Use of Internet by Diasporic Communities for Political Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes how the Internet enables social and political mobilization of diasporic communities. Two diasporic communities—the Eritreans and the Iranians—form the empirical basis. The Eritrean diasporic community has used the Internet in their fight against Ethiopia and in their efforts to establish Eritrea as an independent country. The Iranian diasporic community used social networking, blogging, and other methods to politically mobilize amongst themselves in the host society and to mobilize their fellow countrymen in their homeland in the recent 2009 elections. The case studies illustrate how the Internet enables political mobilization that transcends time and space. Yet, the success of political mobilization depends on the diaspora's relationship with the homeland's government, their ability to create linkages, and their power relations.

INTRODUCTION

I've been waiting a long time for this moment: to be able to sit down at my work table (a wobbly little table underneath a mango tree, at the rear of the yard) and speak calmly of Haiti, at length. Better yet: to speak of Haiti in Haiti

The above quote from the novel *Down Among the Dead*, by the Haitian-Quebecois author, Dany

Laferriere, describes the writer's feelings of nostalgia for his homeland while visiting Haiti for the first time in twenty years (as cited in Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p. 10). The nostalgic sentiment is a common feeling exhibited by many in the diaspora. Internet and related communication technologies have enabled the diasporic communities to fulfill such nostalgia virtually by keeping in touch with their homeland. Diasporic communities are able to communicate with their

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fellow countrymen regardless of location. This is a significant change from the traditional mediums of communication (i.e. letter, telephone, etc.) that were prevalent before the Internet revolution. The Internet enables people of common interest to unite, communicate with one another, and exchange ideas and information across a mass of people regardless of location, thus “breaking the bond of geography” (Issa-Salwe, 2006, p.55). The Internet is a venue in which diasporic communities are able to construct political identities and “social meaning by articulating and identifying with alternative discourses” (Issa-Salwe, 2006, p. 54). The use of Internet and other communications technologies by the diaspora to construct political identities and mobilize collective action is illustrative of cross-boundary collaboration to influence political processes in the homeland. The diaspora could be an engine to foster e-government through financial and technical assistance, despite limited Internet availability within the country (e.g. Rwanda, see Mwangi (2006)). Yet, extant literature on e-government exploring the role of the diaspora’s influence on cross-boundary collaboration of governance processes is limited. Examining the diaspora’s role is significant since they maintain intimate ties with the home country, partly emanating from their political identities.

This chapter analyzes the role of the Internet in enabling social and political mobilization of diasporic communities to influence the governance processes in their home country. Social and political mobilization involves the collective action effort of the diasporic communities to influence the social and political processes in their country. The expatriates’ deep interest is partly a result of the nostalgia referenced above for development of the country. The Internet enables collective mobilization by transcending time and space that distances the diaspora. Two diasporic communities—the Eritreans and the Iranians—form the empirical basis for the chapter. The Eritrean diasporic community has used the Internet in their fight against Ethiopia and in their efforts to

establish Eritrea as an independent country. The Iranian diasporic community used social networking, blogging, and other methods to politically mobilize amongst themselves in the host society and to mobilize their fellow countrymen in their homeland in the recent 2009 elections. The case studies illustrate how the Internet enables political mobilization that transcends time and space. We argue that a successful political mobilization depends on the diaspora’s relationship with the homeland government, their ability to create linkages, and their power relations.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. The next section provides a literature review of the use of the Internet in establishing identities of diasporic communities, particularly with respect to social and political mobilization. This is followed by a brief background on the historical context of Eritrean and Iranian diaspora. After this, the use of Internet for social and political mobilization of the Eritrean and Iranian diaspora is analyzed. The last section concludes with the lessons of the study for the role of the Internet in mobilizing collective action.

DIASPORIC IDENTITIES AND THE INTERNET

The etymological root of diaspora is *diasperien*, where “*dia* means across and *-sperien* is to sow or scatter seeds”, (Braziel & Mannur, 2008, p. 1). Diaspora refers to a group of people scattered throughout the world. The term “diaspora” was first used in “the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures” whose intended readers were the “Hellenic Jewish community in Alexandria” (Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p. 1). Greeks used *diaspora* to refer to “Jews living in exile” from Palestine. Subsequently, the term was used to describe Jewish population outside of Palestine addressing specifically the struggles of Jewish people throughout the world (Braziel & Mannur, 2003). In its current form, the term diaspora is not only used to

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