The Moroccan Diaspora in Istanbul:
Experiencing Togetherness through Participatory Media

Christian S. Ritter
Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Abstract

This ethnographic study examines how participatory media reshape the life-worlds of members of a Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul. Based on long-term fieldwork in the Turkish megacity, semi-structured interviews with Moroccan nationals residing in Istanbul alongside evidence from participant observation online and offline are analyzed. The in-depth investigation seeks to more comprehensively understand digital communication within contemporary diasporas. Its findings suggest that the widespread use of participatory media among members of the Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul facilitates the emergence of a new realm of lived experience in their quotidian life.

Keywords: participatory media; life-world; vernacular web; Moroccan diaspora; Istanbul

Digital Devices and Life-worlds

Hicham sits at a small round table outside his restaurant in the Kadıköy district of Istanbul. Most of his lunchtime customers have returned to their offices nearby. He smokes a cigarette and has a cup of coffee now that the first busy phase of the day is over. Hicham, who is in his late 30s, moved from Marrakesh to Istanbul in 2014. He is about to make the final arrangements for the evening. To plan for the evening business, he produces his tablet and opens the Facebook page he created for his restaurant. He has three new messages which were sent to place personal orders for the evening. Communicating with potential customers and friends is a daily routine of Hicham's professional and private life. His quotidian experience has been largely transformed by digital devices.

This ethnographic investigation examines how participatory media reshaped the life-worlds of members of a Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul. The World Wide Web (WWW) has become a social force that rapidly changed the everyday lives of its users (Boellstorff 2008, 42). The common use of email and instant chat applications prompted considerable change in corporate cultures, while social networking sites and blogs altered the parameters of social relationships and civil society. Paradoxically, the web is considered both a tool for freedom and a means of surveillance. Although the web is often described as a vehicle for free expression reinforcing civil society, it is also associated with a dramatic loss of modern-day privacy. The growing influence of digital communication becomes most tangible in people's life-worlds which can be seen as the social reality in which individuals gain experiences, communicate, think, and feel (Schütz and Luckmann, 1989).

Evolving within personal networks, a life-world is a domain of immediate social existence (Jackson 1996, 7; Coleman 2010, 50). Life-worlds are furthermore divided into several fields of being, where individuals interact with one another and make sense of their social existence. Each field of being can establish its own rules and norms (Wiencke 2008, 14). A person's life-world is the context of their lived experience (Porter 1996, 31). For example, a teenager who decides to join a music club opens up a new field of being and gains new experiences by communicating with fellow club members during practice sessions and club outings. To integrate into this field of being, the teenager needs to learn how to play an instrument and develop other skills.

Documenting the perspectives of members of a Moroccan diaspora community on their use of participatory media, the main purpose of this paper is to more comprehensively understand digital communication processes within contemporary diasporas. Participatory media can be understood as networked computing devices enabling a two-way communication among their users. In the context of this investigation, the use of participatory media is conceived as a set of cultural practices involving the adding and changing of pictorial, textual, or audio-visual content in digital environments. Web users attach cultural meanings to these digital practices while using digital devices for different reasons or in varied situations. Overthrowing traditional dichotomies of media content producers and consumers, participatory media facilitated the emergence of the vernacular web (Howard 2008, 500).

Drawing on the idea of the vernacular, this investigation provides much-needed insights into the fusion of the vernacular web and digital diasporas. This article fills this lacuna by examining digital practices of members of a Moroccan diaspora community in depth. Based on long-term fieldwork in urban areas of Istanbul as well as in digital environments, I argue that the widespread use of participatory media among members of a Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul facilitated the emergence of a new realm of lived experience in their life-worlds. Following a brief presentation of the methods used during the investigation, the first main section of this article addresses the evolution of the Moroccan diaspora in a digital age. The second part describes the circulation of vernacular discourses among members of a Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul. In the final section light is shed on how digital devices enabled virtual mobility among members of the community under investigation.

Methodology
Two complementary methods were employed in the course of this ethnographic investigation. Data was collected through in-depth interviewing and participant observation during 17 months of fieldwork in Istanbul. 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Moroccan residents of Istanbul to understand how they make sense of the use of digital devices in their daily lives. Thanks to its open-ended questioning style, the interview technique elicited the cultural meanings research participants assign to their uses of digital devices. Although the vast majority of interviews were held face-to-face in Istanbul, a small number of interviews were carried out online. Snowball sampling proved to be an effective data collection

strategy. I was often introduced to further interviewees by their friends, which directly increased their trust in me. The language spoken during interviews was mainly French, which is an important educational language in Morocco to this day. However, some research participants preferred to be interviewed in English. Residents of Istanbul who identified themselves as 'Moroccan nationals' were selected to participate in the investigation. Participant observation at local events in Istanbul eased the recruitment of interviewees. For example, I attended a feast during the *Kurban Bayramı* (*Eid al-Adha*) in Hicham's restaurant in Kadıköy, and often socialized with people whom I later interviewed. My status as a newcomer to Istanbul helped me build rapport with research participants. We often shared our experiences of arrival, accommodation search, and encounters with the Turkish bureaucracy.

During the fieldwork, I was mainly referred to as a friend of male Moroccan nationals, who were often near the same age as myself. By accompanying them in their daily lives, I identified Hicham's restaurant and other field sites. The interview materials contained plenty of narratives of digital engagement, naming digital environments, in which participant observation was also conducted. Going digital has often become an essential feature of ethnographic methodologies since an increasing amount of everyday interactions take place online (e. g. Miller and Slater 2000; Murthy 2008; Underberg and Zorn 2014). The data set consisted of interview transcripts, observation records describing encounters in physical localities, and untold conversations taken from digital environments. I mainly assessed Facebook groups and forums of expat blogs which were mentioned by research participants during the interviews. The analysis of the data was committed to the techniques and procedures of the grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

The digital practices discussed in this article are thus based on systematic coding and grounded in saturated categories. The investigation into digital communication within a Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul also raised some ethical questions. A major concern was the negotiation of informed consent in digital environments. The conversations I explored on platforms often involved numerous persons and it was barely possible to inform each and every participant about the scope and aims of the investigation. To avoid exposing private information of vulnerable people and personal details, names of semi-public network locations were removed. Furthermore, continued research into digital environments can easily blur the boundaries between fieldwork and the researcher's private life since field sites cannot be left by simply taking a plane. Ethnographic researchers who get involved in digital interactions need to find the right balance between their investigative desire and the protection of their privacy.

The Moroccan Diaspora in a Digital Age

Long before the concept of nationhood emerged, populations were scattered over large territories and people who shared the same identity lived in dispersed constellations. The term diaspora can be broadly defined as a social configuration of transnational connections of individuals who identify with the same roots, practices, or languages.

Etymologically speaking, the word diaspora derives from the Greek word διασπορά, which means scattering of seeds. Recent definitions of the term still retain the original meaning of scattering and dispersion. The capitalized form of the word refers to the settling of scattered colonies of Jews outside Palestine after the Babylonian exile (Gove *et al*. 1993). In the 20th century, the term mainly referenced the paradigmatic case of the Jewish Diaspora. Within the social sciences and humanities, the term diaspora proliferated in the early 2000s. Although the meaning of the term was broadened, a strong emphasis on the homeland of dispersed peoples was initially maintained and diaspora scholars increasingly focused on further traditional diasporas, for example the Armenian, Greek, and Irish cases. Subsequently, trade diasporas and religious communities whose members were connected across national borders were also conceptualized as diasporas. A new wave of conceptual innovations in diaspora research was inspired by the digital revolution.

In 1991, the first HTML browser enabled its users to send files, such as texts and graphics, through computer networks. In the mid-2000s, the WWW underwent a major transformation. Tim O'Reilly popularized the term web 2.0 referencing a new generation of dynamic websites that simplified creation and amendment of web content. These revolutionary developments inspired many leading members of diasporas to implement digital communication methods in their transnational networks. Diasporas of the 21st century are not only connected by family networks, the physical travel of their members, and the flow of remittances, but also involve digital communication. The digital revolution created a myriad of new transnational connections and reconfigured historically developed cross-border ties. The term digital diaspora is widely associated with collections of dispersed individuals who share a common identity, engage in common cultural practices, and maintain cross-border ties online. The web provides much greater potential for diasporic connectivity than any previous method of communication. Numerous organizations supporting diasporas have created websites and blogs that enhance the dissemination of information within their circles. Many contemporary diasporas were explored with regard to the use of digital devices (e.g. Axel 2004; Whitaker 2004; Bernal 2005; Srinivasan 2006; Christie 2008; Brinkerhoff 2009; Molyneaux et al. 2014).

Although the burgeoning body of scholarship that delves into the use of new media within diasporas has significantly advanced the understanding of contemporary diasporas, not enough is known about diasporic strategies on the vernacular web. By combining approaches from folkloristics, anthropology, and media studies, this article makes a case for studying present-day diasporas and transnational mobility in an interdisciplinary manner. First, the Moroccan diaspora is examined through the lens of the vernacular. Participatory media, which are increasingly used by members of diasporas, are hybrid entities conflating vernacular discourses and institutional structures. The vernacular and the institutional are interdependent entities forming a dynamic relationship in participatory media (Howard 2008, 498). Paradoxically, vernacular discourses can empower themselves by interacting with institutional forces. The advent of web 2.0 technologies, that enable the exchange of complex

data, including texts, photographs, and audio-visual content, heralded a new era for transnational connectedness. Social networking sites create a plethora of hybridized texts that incorporate vernacular and institutional content and agency (Howard 2008, 501).

The set of participatory media that is explored in depth in this article can be conceived as an interface between institutional structures and vernacular discourses. These network locations are sustainable nodes in the vernacular web. Participatory media empower their users to articulate their opinions and alterity. On social networking sites and blogs, vernacular discourses can circulate across borders. In addition to facilitating the circulation of online content, the vernacular web can be considered a gigantic apparatus generating local, translocal, and transnational ties. The development of diasporas depends to a large extent on their ability to generate strong local and transnational connections. Second, this article is anchored in an anthropological take on life-worlds (e.g. Coleman 2010, 50). The focus on the use of digital devices in the life-worlds of members of the Moroccan diaspora makes an in-situ assessment of media practices in both physical and digital localities possible. Third, the study also integrates an approach from media studies by placing emphasis on participatory media literacies (Rheingold 2008, 97). Such literacies are at the bottom of establishing new public voices.

In order to understand how digital communication works within contemporary diasporas, this investigation into the use of participatory media among Moroccan residents of Istanbul is put in the context of the recent evolution of the Moroccan diaspora. The Moroccan people have a long-standing history of dispersal. Since its independence from France in 1956, the Kingdom of Morocco has experienced significant levels of emigration (e.g. Aslan 2015). In the 1960s, Moroccan-born 'low-skilled' workers came to various countries in Western Europe after the Moroccan government had reached bilateral agreements on labor migration with Belgium, France, then West Germany, and the Netherlands. Since the 1990s, Moroccan nationals increasingly settled in Spain and Italy. In the early 21st century, highly skilled Moroccan nationals tended to emigrate to the USA and Canada (Bourkharouaa *et al.* 2014). In 2012, about 3.3 million Moroccan citizens lived abroad, some 10% of the total national population (MPC 2013). Turkey has only recently become a notable destination for Moroccan nationals. Much evidence suggests that they predominately considered Turkey as a temporary transition zone. Many Moroccan residents of Istanbul whom I met in the course of the investigation aspired to move on to other destinations. The free trade agreement between Turkey and Morocco, which came into force in 2006, prompted an increase in Moroccans traveling to Turkey. Subsequently, visa requirements were lifted for Moroccan nationals in 2007. The number of Moroccan arrivals in Turkey increased from 11,791 to 77,884 between 2001 and 2012 (TÜİK, 2013; quoted from İçduygu 2013, 45). Although current Moroccan newcomers to Istanbul come from various socio-demographic backgrounds, the vast majority of Moroccan nationals who took part in this ethnographic investigation identified as middle-class (Ritter 2015, 54).

Members of the present-day Moroccan diaspora engage with various online

platforms to facilitate the communication among communities located in different countries. These platforms can be understood as nodes of the vernacular web which enhance the circulation of information among members of the Moroccan diaspora. Two main types of digital engagement in participatory media can be distinguished. First, representatives of the Moroccan state created digital environments that seek to connect Moroccan citizens living abroad. Second, numerous Moroccan nationals residing in Morocco or abroad increased their participatory media literacy and expressed vernacular discourses online. As early as the 1960s, the Moroccan government acknowledged the potential of its expatriate population and launched several campaigns aiming to reconnect Moroccan citizens living abroad to their homeland. The Moroccan state expected its emigrants to make remittance payments to their families, which often conflicted with integration policies in the receiving countries. The skills and knowledge of emigrants were considered a driving force for the economic development and modernization of Morocco (de Haas 2007, 4). In the 1990s, the Moroccan government changed its attitude towards its emigrants and began to court them (de Haas 2007, 20). Although the government maintained its interest in emigrants' economic development potential, it embraced dual citizenship and welcomed Moroccan emigrants who returned to their country of origin for holidays. Like many other countries with high rates of emigration, the Moroccan state adopted a policy that encourages diaspora engagement among its emigrants. The digital engagement of the Moroccan state is one element of this new strategy.

An example of the digital strategy is the website www.maghribcom.gov.ma, which was launched in 2013 by Abdellatif Mâazouz, the Moroccan Minister for Moroccan Citizens Living Abroad and Migration Affairs. The initial idea behind this site was to connect members of the Moroccan diaspora to their country of origin and harness their expertise for the development of the various sectors of the Moroccan economy. Maghribcom also created a Facebook page, where posts can reach anyone who 'liked' the page. On December 21 2015 the following message was posted:

> The Minister for Moroccan Citizens Living Abroad and Migration Affairs is pleased to welcome you to his social media space. The use of social media by the Minister complements the use of traditional means of communication for the diffusion of official information and information that is essential for the success of his mission. Please join us on Facebook (URL is added, C.R.) and Twitter (URL is added, C.R.).

This post illustrates the interconnectedness of network locations. Many members of the Moroccan diaspora experience this network location as a portal to other nodes and media. The web developed into a multi-layered environment, in which users can rapidly switch from platform to platform. Members of the Moroccan diaspora managed to reconfigure the interconnectedness of diaspora communities and homeland by accessing platforms with smart phones and tablets. These mobile devices profoundly reshaped how people who reside in distant locations interact with one another. Since smart phone users are potentially available anytime and everywhere, they can access online platforms on the go and can simultaneously get involved in local events. Two

further websites were popular with members of the Moroccan diaspora community under investigation: larbi.org and yabiladi.com. Both digital environments intended to connect Moroccan emigrants to their homeland and were also interlinked with Facebook and Twitter. The digital environment yabiladi.com published news about Morocco and invited its users to get involved in online forums. In addition to these 'official' digital environments, numerous research participants visited further websites that enabled the circulation of vernacular discourses. For example, some interviewees expressed their appreciation for the blogs riadzany.blogspot.com, which regularly posted stories from the Moroccan city Fez, and altasmedias.com, which was created by Moroccan residents of Montreal, Canada.

The digital revolution rapidly altered life-worlds around the globe and is often considered one of the most significant societal transformations since the industrial revolution (e.g. Rheingold 2008, 99). Despite optimistic outlooks, unequal access to the web persists within numerous societies and on a global level. Many members of the Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul under consideration here made use of participatory media on a daily basis thereby changing the ways in which they communicate. By creating content on the vernacular web, they transformed how symbolic meanings of cultural heritages were constructed within the Moroccan diaspora. Traditionally, many social and cultural anthropologists explored solely the ability of Moroccan people to press Argan oil, prepare food, and produce handicraft in terms of cultural heritage. These tangible heritages include the making of material objects, for example tagine meals and lamps. In recent years, numerous Moroccan nationals have participated in constructing the symbolic meanings of their cultural heritages by referring to material heritage objects in digital environments. Comprehensive digital skill sets are required to create and alter born-digital 'materials', such as code, images, contributions to online forums, website architectures, blog content, and posts on Facebook.

In stark contrast to traditional heritage practices, these materials *originate* in digital form (Economou 2015, 224). In other words, digital heritage materials emerge in and circulate through digital environments. Participatory media invite everybody to get involved in the interpretation and construction of heritage (Fairclough 2012, xvi). The construction of cultural heritages involves both things and words. The interpretation of artifacts in museums is often guided by signs placed next to the object. A song performed during a festive event or other intangible expressions can become objects after being recorded by a smart phone. Cultural heritages are constructed through the manifold negotiations of their symbolic meanings. Participatory media complicate this process. It is possible to assign meaning to a ritual dance by sharing a photograph of it on participatory media. Words and things take on new lives as digital surrogates, copies, and remixes (Hennessy 2008, 346). The ethnographic evidence from this investigation suggests that a large number of Moroccan residents of Istanbul acquired digital skill sets and variously created born-digital materials. In doing so, they established many network locations, where vernacular discourses could be expressed. In the next section, light is shed on these nodes of the digital Moroccan diaspora and

the perspectives of Moroccan nationals on digital devices are examined.

Facilitating Local Networks among Moroccan Nationals in the Turkish Megacity

The Moroccan diaspora can be explored as a social configuration that primarily consists of various dispersed communities and a homeland. Members of Moroccan diaspora communities are often loosely connected and seek to establish meeting places where they can create support networks. Community can be seen as an aggregate of individuals who share a common culture, are conscious of their distinctiveness, and develop a sense of togetherness. Ever since participatory media became popular with Moroccan nationals living abroad, connections with fellow Moroccan citizens have been created in physical and digital environments. Various overlapping systems of circulation evolved within the Moroccan diaspora in recent decades. Traditionally, the movement of people, capital, and goods could be observed within these systems that held the homeland and the numerous diaspora communities together. With the emergence of new media, these three forms of movement were complemented by cascades of texts, videos, and images.

The desire for free expression and the potential for reaching out to a global audience are often motivations to use new media. However, the movement of digitized information cannot be completely detached from its materiality. Technological infrastructures enable or hamper the circulation of information. The use of digital devices within contemporary diasporas and therein the internal circulation of discourses can be observed in semi-public digital environments. Improving their participatory media literacy (Rheingold 2008, 99), numerous Moroccan residents of Istanbul regularly engaged in conversations on digital environments and learned how to administer such network locations. Vernacular discourses can occur on social networking sites, where they merge with the institutional into hybrid texts. Two digital environments frequented by many Moroccan nationals who took part in this study illustrate the circulation of vernacular discourses within the Moroccan diaspora and provide crucial insights into the fusion of contemporary diasporas and the vernacular web.

The first digital environment that exposes the patterns of digital communication among Moroccan residents of Istanbul is a Facebook account that Hicham created for his Moroccan restaurant in Istanbul. The restaurant, which was opened in the Kadıköy district in the early summer of 2015, quickly became a central meeting place for many Moroccan nationals living in the vicinity. A 50-year-old teacher described how he experienced the restaurant:

> Before I started to go to this restaurant – I have been here for almost 16 years – before going there I didn't contact any Moroccans. I didn't have any relations with Moroccans at all. I was invited to that restaurant. I didn't meet... I only met Moroccans when I went to Ankara, to the embassy and the consulates there. This restaurant is really an important place. The owner became a friend of mine. We became friends. It's like… I mean, I go there. We sit down. We talk about our lives. About our problems, you know.

> You feel you can go to a place where you can talk to people. They can understand me much better.

The interviewee became a regular in the restaurant and enjoyed the company of his close friends. He considered the restaurant as a place where he can reflect on his life.

In addition to people living nearby, Moroccan residents scattered all over the megacity sporadically came to the restaurant to meet friends. The place is not only frequented by Moroccan nationals, but also very popular with people from other backgrounds who appreciate Moroccan cuisine. The restaurant, however, facilitated the emergence of a local Moroccan diaspora community since its increased online visibility via Facebook quickly came to the attention of numerous Moroccan residents of Istanbul. According to an Arab Social Media Report (DSG 2011), 7.5% of the Moroccan population used Facebook in 2010. Four years later, the figure had leapt to 86% in the country (DSG 2015). Hicham's digital engagement was initially driven by commercial interests, but the digital environment he created quickly developed its own dynamics:

> Initially, we had the idea to open a Moroccan café. We made Moroccan coffee and everything. But then Ramadan began and many Moroccan communities came to me and asked: Why do you not make the Iftar? It is the dinner during Ramadan. So we started with the idea of Iftar. It worked out well. During Ramadan the restaurant was full every evening. We didn't even find enough space for the people. After Ramadan some people asked me: Why do you not make Moroccan dishes: tagines, couscous, pastillas, and things like that? I started to think about it. I created a Facebook page and many people came… I think sometimes it's good that I opened this place here. In this way, Moroccans can meet and talk. We can speak Arabic. We can joke in Arabic and all that. You miss this, when you are abroad…

> I have this [Facebook, C. R.] page and the people who come send me a message. I will show you a message… [He opens the Facebook page on his tablet.] For example, here: "We will come for dinner Tuesday evening." They all order through Facebook. They send me sometimes photos and tell me what they were doing. We share stuff on the internet. Here is another one: "We are two persons. We would like to eat a beef tagine and couscous with chicken. Thanks." This is important for me. That's why I am always online. People can always order and ask questions or make suggestions for dishes...
> 100 people like the page.

The Facebook account, first and foremost, enabled Hicham to advertise his restaurant and post information about the prepared menu. For example, in order to reach out to his customers he posted images of tagines and tea glasses alongside a Moroccan proverb. He also posted photos of events that took place in the restaurant and tagged the visitors. As a result, social ties with and among visitors were strengthened and mediated in digital environments, with restaurant visitors and friends engaging with posts and photographs taken.

In September 2015, the author of a popular Moroccan cookery book gave a

presentation in the restaurant. This too was mediated digitally, pre-advertised and then documented on the restaurant's Facebook page. The Facebook thread also connected its 'followers and friends' with other network locations, such as news websites and blogs. About 150 people were linked to Hicham's Facebook page, either as friends or through its like-button. Born-digital materials could be created and shared on the thread. For instance, Hicham compiled a photo album portraying the 'blue city' of Chefchaouen. The nostalgic photo album of the UNESCO immaterial world heritage is part of the born-digital materials Moroccans living abroad created about their cultural heritages. The series of photographs was created with the GIF animation application Picasion and posted on the Facebook thread. The photographs showed the tight alleys of Chefchaouen, including carpets and pottery laid out in front of blue doors and walls. This album epitomizes how material heritage objects can be transformed into digital surrogates and how their symbolic meanings can be renegotiated in a digital context.

Vernacular discourses on Moroccan food and Moroccan cities took place in untold network locations, which were often facilitated by social networking sites. Facebook accounts, like the one Hicham created, can constitute the social realities of users since online stories and imagery may influence how they experience their physical environments. For new arrivals from Morocco, digital environments were a vital source of information that helped them get oriented in the megacity. Another digital environment in which vernacular discourses could occur was the Facebook group *Le Maroc A İstanbul*. This network location was primarily initiated to connect new arrivals from Morocco to other more experienced members of the Moroccan diaspora or further local communities. The description of this Facebook group, which had about 630 members, encouraged potential new members to get involved:

> If you are a Moroccan living in Istanbul, or you had already lived in Morocco for some years and moved to Istanbul, come and join our group to share your experiences and opinions, and give advice and support to new arrivals… Solidarity, sharing, enrichment, meetings…

This extract indicates how digital environments can mediate the creation of local communities. Numerous research participants reported that they experienced their neighborhoods as highly anonymous upon first arriving in the megacity. Many reported it was very difficult to get in touch with neighbors, living in six-storied accommodation common in Istanbul. However, the Facebook group *Le Maroc A İstanbul* could be found easily with a quick search on Facebook. This Facebook group eased the first steps in the new environment for many new arrivals. The most common initial information requests in this digital environment were regarding accommodation, job opportunities, and schools in Istanbul.

The analysis of the two network locations on Facebook revealed the perspectives of members of a Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul on participatory media. They considered social networking sites as tools to create and maintain local networks with fellow Moroccan residents of Istanbul. Born-digital materials, including texts,

self-made videos, and photographs, circulated on the network locations that linked Moroccan diaspora communities and their homeland. Both digital environments described above were nodes of the vernacular web and facilitated the circulation of vernacular discourses. Participatory media have transformed the life-worlds of members of the Moroccan diaspora community under study since their arrival in the Turkish metropolis. Many research participants reported that digital devices became considerably more significant in their lives after their move to Istanbul.

Life-worlds between Local Involvement and Virtual Togetherness

Members of the Moroccan diaspora community under investigation did not only make use of participatory media to create local networks but also to engage in virtual mobility. The concept of virtual mobility is often associated with communication structures of multinational corporations that seek to influence the behavior of their employees in geographically distant subsidiaries. However, many other individuals established virtual connections and communicate within dispersed communities. The ubiquitous use of digital devices has transformed the ways social relationships are sustained. Digital devices are not only technological gadgets but increasingly gain significance as social objects and sites of sociality (Germann Molz 2006, 377).

Numerous members of the Moroccan diaspora community under discussion in this article intensively used digital devices in their everyday lives. They often bought new smart phones upon arrival in Istanbul to be closely connected with family members and friends they left behind in Morocco. Their digital devices can thus be considered sites of sociality. In the context of this investigation, virtual mobility is defined as the ability to be present and participate from a distance (Buescher and Urry 2009, 101). By using digital devices, individuals can be present in two or more locations, yet exert their influence on remote situations. Thanks to the use of mobile technologies, information can instantaneously move within digital environments (Cocq 2016, 147). By communicating on Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, Instagram, and Viber, members of the Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul managed to influence decisions of their families back in Morocco. A 41-year-old hostel receptionist described how he used these online platforms:

> I usually use Facebook, Viber, and Skype. Facebook is the best for social networking. I use Viber to make free calls and to write messages to my contacts. Mainly to friends and family in Morocco. I use Skype more to chat with and write to my professional contacts who live all over the world. They are from various countries: from Turkey, from Canada, from the United States, from Australia, from the Arab world, from Morocco and Algeria.

Participatory media made it possible to maintain many facets of social relationships while being geographically distant. Logging on to Facebook, emailing friends and family back in Morocco, uploading photos, sharing hyperlinks to websites, and sending text messages across continents were daily routines of many research participants. Such virtual mobility involves a type of sociality that revolves around movement,

communication, and technology. Digital devices enable individuals to be both here and there, absent and present. Almost always carrying smart phones, whether in their professional and private lives, members of the Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul experienced perpetual contacts on the move. When perpetual contacts with distant people are maintained, time and space are reconfigured (Katz and Aakhus 2002, 12).

Socializing with remote friends and family online, members of the Moroccan diaspora community experienced what can be described as virtual togetherness (Germann Molz 2012, 70). Numerous research participants sustained social relationships with locals in their neighborhoods and at work. At the same time, staying connected with family members back in Morocco was a further pattern of their daily routines. Through the screens of their smart phones, many research participants got in touch with their family members during work breaks, on the bus, and in their homes after work. In doing so, they influenced members of their families. Moroccan expats, who often stayed in Istanbul for a predetermined period of time, had to make the choice to leave their close community behind, but remotely continued to engage in the education of their children and the provision of emotional support for other members of their family. A 28-year-old employee of an architectural office reported how her digital device was filled with sociality:

> Thanks to my phone, I can actually keep in touch with my family. When I have time I respond. Otherwise… I am not all day in front of the screen, but during certain times I check and if my father or mother have called. When I have a bit of time, I call them back. Luckily, there is the internet.

By staying in touch with friends and relatives living in Morocco, she created a life-world in which her lived experience and sense of togetherness were also constructed in digital environments. The instantaneous character of communication on participatory media facilitated this type of social existence.

A further means of engaging in virtual mobility and promoting the circulation of vernacular discourses is administering a blog. By writing blog entries, a web user can keep in continuous touch with a dispersed community while on the move (Germann Molz 2012, 5). In addition to personal interactions in physical environments, such as face-to-face discussions at work, or perhaps interactions at checkouts in supermarkets, members of the Moroccan diaspora community under investigation consistently participated in digital storytelling both as authors and readers. They could access photographs and vernacular stories about geographically distant events. A blog of a Moroccan expat residing in Istanbul epitomizes how vernacular discourses could reach a potentially global audience. Picture and word, seeing and telling, narratives and photographs are intrinsically linked on blogs. Audiences are often invited to see authentic and unfiltered experiences through the eyes of the blogger. MumInCasa.com, The Tribulations of a Moroccan family expatriated to Istanbul, is a blog written by a Moroccan national who moved from Casablanca to Turkey. This blog is a digital diary, primarily on her experiences in Istanbul. At least five entries explicitly addressed her

relocation to and stay in Istanbul. Six months after her move to Istanbul, she reflected in a blog entry on her life in the megacity. The following passage of her blog exemplifies how virtual togetherness works within her transnational networks:

> I didn't think that I was able to relocate with my family to a country where nobody speaks French nor English. Never would I have thought that I was brave enough to leave the comfort of my life in Casablanca behind. Never would I have thought to say goodbye to all my dear ones, when they asked me, if we would see each other again. Never would I have believed that I would leave... with two children. Today, I reside in Istanbul. My life changed in the space of a few days. I will tell more about it on this blog...

The author encouraged her readership to follow her entries. The most popular narratives of the blog elicited comments from up to seven readers. Although there is no official visitor count on the blog, thousands of endorsements on social networking platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, indicate its influence. The interactivity on the blog and its connectedness with social networking sites created a virtual togetherness between the blogger and her audience. On the thread of the Facebook account of MumInCasa.com a snippet of a new entry of the blog, in which she assigned meaning to a holiday trip to Morocco, was posted in July 2015:

> 10 days in Morocco.
> In the beginning, it was like wearing contact lenses inside out. Everything is the same but blurred. Everything is the same but at the same time different... (URL of the blog entry is inserted.)

This post illustrates the dissemination strategy pursued by the author. Although blogs are stand-alone websites, the circulation of their content depends to a large extent on their interconnectedness with popular social networking sites. Participatory media are often part of multifarious experiences as users share hyperlinks to further network locations. Semi-public messages on social networking sites can direct audiences to further network locations and interlink different platforms. MumInCasa.com variously promoted her vernacular blog content on social networking sites. Numerous people living in Morocco and elsewhere commented on her posts on social networking sites, which indicates how this virtual community unfolded. The possibility of 'following' a remote friend in digital environments generated an intersubjective togetherness between people living far away from one another.

After an extensive analysis of observation records and interview transcripts two main patterns of virtual mobility could be identified. First, the continued acquisition of participatory media literacy opened up new ways of experiencing friends and relatives within the affordances of digital environments. Digital devices evolved into sites of sociality where togetherness can be meaningfully experienced. Second, digital practices of interconnecting various network locations enhanced the circulation of vernacular content, including storytelling, video and photo sharing. Access to digital devices reshaped the ways social relationships were maintained among members

of the Moroccan diaspora. Embracing virtual mobility, they integrated a system of participatory media into their everyday lives. In doing so, they constantly sustained contacts with remote persons and generated a togetherness at a distance (Germann Molz 2012, 2). The blog MumInCasa.com came to life in a social configuration that mainly consisted of the transnational networks of members of the Moroccan diaspora and their participatory media. The ubiquitous use of participatory media among members of the Moroccan diaspora community considerably transformed their life-worlds. Their focus of attention shifted constantly between digital and physical environments as they mediated their lives between virtual togetherness and local involvement. Although they were anchored locally, an important part of their social lives evolved in online environments where they communicated with remote family members and friends. Mobile devices facilitated the switching between local and digital worlds, since they quickly connected their users to the web, regardless of their location.

Conclusion

Exploring a Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul in depth, this study sought to more comprehensively understand digital communication processes within contemporary diasporas. Numerous members of the Moroccan diaspora community under study have recently improved their participatory media literacy to configure network locations and create born-digital materials. In addition, a large number of Moroccan residents of Istanbul extensively used participatory media to create and maintain local networks with fellow Moroccan citizens. Many members of the Moroccan diaspora community also experienced perpetual contacts with friends and family living in Morocco or elsewhere through social networking sites and blogs. Their lives thus unfolded between two forms of sociality. While they became involved in local events in Istanbul, simultaneously they developed a sense of virtual togetherness with kith and kin in Morocco.

The evidence from long-term fieldwork in digital and physical localities frequented by the Moroccan diaspora community under investigation suggests that the widespread use of participatory media among its members generated a new realm of lived experience in their life-worlds. In other words, the use of participatory media created a new field of being, where they made sense of their lives and social relationships. Prior to emigration, their life-worlds primarily consisted of physical environments in which they mainly interacted with members within their local networks. Their engagement with participatory media remained relatively low. Upon arrival in Istanbul, many research participants increased their digital engagement and were driven by two often conflicting desires. Having left Morocco in the hope of a better life in Istanbul, they sought to establish local networks in the Turkish metropolis to increase access to professional and educational opportunities. Furthermore, they wished to remain in touch with their family and friends left behind. For these reasons, their lives existed between local involvement and virtual togetherness. Having one eye on local events in Istanbul and the other one on online updates from their distant friends and relatives,

they gained lived experiences in both physical and digital environments. The physical world constituted one realm of lived experience, and continued interactions in digital environments generated a second realm of lived experience. The digital world emerged as an additional field of being in their life-worlds. As participatory media enable the circulation of vernacular discourses, their users can experience meaningful stories and interactions with other users. Through such first-hand involvement, users gain lived experience and personal knowledge of the world. A digital field of being can develop its own dynamics and reach a certain degree of autonomy, increasing the agency of its users.

The case of the Moroccan diaspora community in Istanbul confirms previous research emphasizing that the web serves as a vehicle for free expression. The blog MumInCasa.com indicates that participatory media reinforce the free circulation of vernacular discourses among members of the Moroccan diaspora. Digital environments increase the access to manifold sources of information. The outcomes of this inquiry, however, call into question clear-cut distinctions between experiences in physical settings and digital experiences. The evidence from the case of the Moroccan diaspora rather indicates that the lived experience of its members is constituted by interactions in both physical and digital worlds. Despite long-term fieldwork and the collection of a comprehensive data set, the findings of this study are limited by its local focus and choice of platforms. This qualitative study reveals some patterns of participatory media use, but other stories could be told about further network locations and diaspora engagement in other cities.

The findings of this investigation imply that the conditions of experiencing the world were considerably changed in the early 21st century. The emergence of a new realm of lived experience among research participants makes a rethinking of theories of experience necessary. The instantaneous character of digital communication generates new forms of immediate experience and first-hand involvement. Everyday experience is no longer restricted to physical settings. Various forms of digital experience and intersubjectivity have 'real' consequences. Although participatory media content often refers to events unfolding in physical settings, digital entities take on their own lives and provide new avenues for experiencing culture and sociality. Ethnographic researchers should take the structural transformations of life-worlds into account when formulating epistemological assumptions and crafting methodologies. Future investigations into the use of participatory media within present-day diasporas can more intensively assess the underlying social processes of contemporary lived experience within the digital-physical continuum, portray the global diversity of participatory media use in diaspora communities, and explore the qualities and contours of lived experiences that originates in the digital world.

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