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(Dis)connected: Romanian-Canadians in Cyberspace

Abstract

This article explores the interaction of first generation Romanian-Canadians from Toronto and the GTA (Greater Toronto Area) with Romanian online communities developed in this city. It begins by exploring the concept of community in the context of cyberspace, and then explores the influence of online participation upon face-to-face encounters. The article will also emphasize the importance of taking the social and cultural context into consideration when undertaking an analysis of Internet use and online participation, and argue that this perspective is of particular use in the case of immigrant communities. The second half of the article shifts from a theoretical to an empirical approach, building on 30 ethnographic interviews undertaken in Toronto and the GTA (Greater Toronto Area) with first generation immigrants from Romania. The analysis of interviews will present some of the practices employed by this ethnic group when using the Internet, aiming to understand whether the persons included in the research sample consider that Romanian online communities are able to play a catalyzing role for the members of this ethnic group.

Keywords: Romanian-Canadians; community; forums; cohesion; social capital.

1. Introduction

Many Romanian immigrants complain that Romanian-Canadians from Toronto do not form a genuine community and that this ethnic group lacks leaders. Some of the questions one may hear in such conversations include: “Do you know any Romanian restaurants in Toronto, with real Romanian food?”; “Is there any Romanian area in Toronto, except for Hotel Bucharest [a low-rise building that represented a popular destination for many Romanian newcomers]?”; “Any Romanian community centre or festival?” These questions are often asked in a sceptical tone that anticipates a negative answer. For the sake of accuracy, a one-day Romanian festival does take place in Toronto, in the third week of September, but it is insufficiently advertised in comparison to similar events put on by other ethnic communities. According to the 2001 Census data, 27,180 persons who reside in the Toronto Metropolitan Area have declared themselves to be of Romanian ethnic origin (Statistics Canada, n.d.). Many Canadian colleagues have been surprised to hear that there are approximately 30,000 Romanians in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area), because the community has come across to them as largely invisible.

Considering the atomization that, apparently, characterizes the members of the Romanian-Canadian ethnic group, this article will investigate the relation they have developed with...
the Romanian online communities developed in Toronto, seeking to understand whether cyber-interaction may contribute at strengthening the bonding ties among Romanian immigrants. The article begins by exploring the concept of community in the context of cyberspace, revisiting the well-known debate on the influence of cyber-participation upon face-to-face encounters. “Cyber-optimists” (Norris, 2002) maintain that online participation strengthens the ties among users, and shifts acts of citizenship from the virtual space to everyday life, while pessimists point at the alleged disrupting effect of virtual participation upon traditional communities. The article will also refer to a third perspective on cyber-participation which emphasizes the importance of anchoring research on computer-mediated communication in a social context rather than engaging with the mentioned controversy on the effects of online participation upon ‘real-life’ encounters. It will be demonstrated that this approach is particularly helpful in the case of ethnic communities, whose Internet usage patterns should be read through a double lens: that of homeland experiences, which complement the everyday realities encountered in the countries of settlement.

The second half of the article shifts from a theoretical to an empirical approach, focusing on Romanian-Canadians’ interaction with the Romanian online communities developed in Toronto. It builds on 30 open-ended, semi-structured ethnographic interviews conducted in Toronto and the GTA (Greater Toronto Area) in 2010 and 2011, with first generation immigrants from Romania. The analysis of interviews will present some of the practices employed by this ethnic group when using the Internet, aiming to understand whether the persons included in the research sample consider that Romanian online communities are able to play a catalyzing role for the members of this ethnic group. At the same time, it will investigate the extent to which the experience of living in a totalitarian regime, in Romania, before 1989, and the contact with the Canadian everyday living practices have influenced the respondents’ attitude towards online communities and their participation practices. The annex of this article briefly presents the Romania forums from Toronto and the GTA, as well as the Romanian publications from Toronto which have an electronic version.

2. Internet, online communities and the development of social capital resources

The concept of community has been present in intellectual conversations for almost 200 years, surviving all ‘fashions’ and changes of paradigm in academic research, thanks to the positive feeling that is usually associated to it. Echoing Zygmunt Bauman’s work on community (2001), Malcolm R. Parks maintains that using this concept “evokes feelings of friendliness, trust and belonging that are often deemed lacking in ruthless, individualistic times” (2010, p. 107). In a similar fashion, Raymond Williams observes that community seems to be never used in unfavourable terms, and “never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (1973, p.76). According to Michelle Wilson, communities are constructed on place, linguistic, ethnic, professional criteria, and are often assessed in terms of size; however, the “emotive component” (2006, p. 22) should be also taken into account. This is materialized in the ties that bind the members of a group, the factor of identity that determines them to acknowledge themselves as members of that group. It also consists of “membership, a sense of responsibility, and reciprocal obligations” (Wilson, 2006, p. 22).
With the advent of new technologies, the concept of community has been expanded to cover the space of online interactions. The two kinds of communities, the virtual, and the ‘real-life’ one, building on face-to-face interaction, have often been examined through a comparative lens. Scholars have aimed to ascertain whether online communities act as cohesive factors for their members and contribute at shifting acts of citizenship from the virtual space to the everyday life or, conversely, whether they have an atomizing effect by disrupting the ties established through face-to-face interaction. Both sides of the debate will be briefly revisited in what follows.

Optimists have often emphasized that the cyberspace fosters the development of social capital resources, i.e., the network of connections that a person can rely upon, having trustworthiness and the willingness to reciprocate at its core (Putnam, 2000, p. 19; see also Granovetter, 1973; Bourdieu, 1980; Coleman, 1998; Burt, 2001; Lin, 2008). Social capital and community are intertwined; Robert Putnam tellingly describes them as “conceptual cousins” (2000, p.19), maintaining that a society “of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital” (2000, p. 19).

Scholars of communication maintain that participation in online communities “may develop diverse networks and may cultivate general trust and the norms of generalized reciprocity among people, not only in online communities but also outside online communities”; at a social level, the possession of a rich set of networks usually translates into a more vivid interest towards public debates and civic engagement (Miyata, Ikeda & Kobayashi, 2001, pp. 209-211). Internet is particularly useful for establishing ties situated outside one’s circle of friends and acquaintances, or what Mark Granovetter names “weak ties” (1973). Granovetter distinguishes between strong and weak ties; according to him, the strength of interpersonal ties lies in the “combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (1973, p. 1361). Strong ties are usually constituted of family members, relatives, close friends, acquaintances; conversely, weak ties have a more heterogeneous structure, involving persons outside one’s group of proximity, but represent an important factor in generating social cohesion. When an individual changes her job, she is not only shifting from one network to another, but also bridging these two networks.

The laments over the effects that online communication allegedly has upon face-to-face interaction are inappropriate, Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith consider (1999, p. 16). The solid bonding ties deemed to exist in ‘real-life’ communities are rather characteristic to the rural life than to metropolitan spaces (ibid.). Wellman and Gulia also contend that “contemporary communities in the western world are quite different” (1999, p. 171), with telephone conversations maintaining personal ties more than face-to-face interaction (1999, p. 182). It was back in 1908 that Georg Simmel was deploiring the “blasé outlook” of metropolises residents: “Indeed, if I am not mistaken, the inner side of this external reserve is not only indifference but more frequently than we believe, it is a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion which, in a close contact which has arisen any way whatever, can break out into hatred and conflict” (pp. 35-37).

Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia maintain that the Internet should not be regarded as a passive source of information, but rather as an interactive space. According to them, “many Net members get help in electronic support groups for social, physical, and mental problems along with information about treatments, practitioners, and other resources” (1999, p. 172). Furthermore, online interaction provides affective support to many participants seeking ad-
vice or comfort (1999, p. 173). Tim Jordan contends that people are not alone in the virtual space, as they “have developed relations with a number of other stable avatars and have become part of a virtual community” (Jordan, 1999, p. 100). In turn, Phil Patton suggests that computer-mediated communication “connects us rather than atomize us” (1986, p. 20; for a discussion of the connectivity potential associated to computer networks, see also Wellman et al., 1996, while Doug Schuller maintains that virtual communities may “play a positive role in rebuilding community by strengthening (...) core values” (1996, p.34). The virtual space becomes a meeting place, where people “gather and narrate, by means of computer-mediated communication, their myths, fantasies and experiences” (Tsaliki, 2003, p. 163). Conversations in virtual communities provide participants with “a sense of fraternity and conviviality, rooted in an original home where everyone belonged, now reconstructed in cyberspace”, Lisa Tsaliki argues, writing about the Greek immigrants’ experience of joining online communities (p. 174). Furthermore, she emphasizes the similarity of virtual communities to real-life groupings, as people have access “to different ways of communicating, grouping, subgrouping and regrouping, including and excluding.” People join virtual communities due to personal interests or affinities, and not “by accident of birth,” Tsaliki further notes (p.174). In a similar fashion, James Bohman notes that computer-mediated communication represents a forum, “a social space in which speakers may express their views to others who in turn respond to them and raise their own opinions and concerns” (2004, p. 133).

Oliver Boyd-Barrett considers that the Internet “indisputably” represents the new public sphere. His approach builds on Jürgen Habermas’ canonical concept of public sphere. Habermas introduces the concept of Öffentlichkeit translated into the English editions of his works as “public” and “publicity.” This was the moment when the public sphere “first emerged and took on its function” as “a part of ‘civil society’” although at that time, public sphere referred primarily to commodity exchange and social labour (1989 /1991, p. 3). Habermas defines the bourgeois public sphere as the “sphere of private public come together as public” (1991, p. 27), with a shift from the private realm of family relations to the public realm of the relation between state and society. Boyd-Barrett praises the unprecedented informative potential of the Internet and the interactivity of content. He admits that the access to Internet is yet unequal and that some websites are dependent on advertising revenues, but suggests that the positive aspects surpass the downsides related to the functioning of the Internet as a public sphere. He also emphasizes that the Internet is less vulnerable to censorship than traditional media, and that, thanks to search engines, publications of minority groups are easier to access (2004).

Other scholars – fewer, though, than the optimists – regard the Internet as a disruptive factor for ‘real-life’ communities. Mark Slouka does not share Wellman’s enthusiasm vis-à-vis the unprecedented networking opportunities that the “digital highway” provides (1995, p. 91). The automobile, the telephone and the television were also received with excitement, Slouka recalls, but failed to fulfill their promise of unprecedented connectivity. The “mass enlightenment” (1995, p.91), as the author maliciously calls the advent of new technologies was powerless when confronted with issues of endemic poverty worldwide; in Mexico City, for instance, the myriad of television antennae on the corrugated roofs has not alleviated the poverty of squatter settlements (Slouka, 1995). In his memorable, though bombastic style, he criticizes the quasi-messianic rhetoric of technological advent. In spite of the “hodgepodge of symbols and the high-powered hype” (1995, p. 93) associated with the emergence of new technologies, societies tend to lose their differentiating features, displaying “a vast sameness” (1995, p. 93), and their members become increasingly alienated: “[a]bsorbed into ‘the anony-
mous nature of the mob’, we will quickly and gladly relinquish our will, our intelligence, and our beliefs to the glory of hive” (1995, p. 96). The plastic metaphor of the hive and the baroque suite of adjectives generate a powerful rhetoric effect; however, a quantitative or ethnographic research component would have sustained Slouka’s ideas better than his metaphors.

Robert Putnam is sceptical in regard to the various forms of computer-mediated communication, which he considers mere “simulacra of most classic forms of social connectedness and civic engagement”. Furthermore, he goes as far as to wonder if “virtual social capital” is not a contradiction in terms (2000, p. 170). He does not imply that the advent of internet cannot be held accountable for Americans’ growing civic apathy, inasmuch as “voting, giving, trusting, meeting, visiting” were already in decline while “Bill Gates was still in grade school”; however, new technologies are hardly capable of constructing a community. Communication, communion and community have the same etymological root, Putnam argues, and they are all intimately connected to the existence of “emotional connections” (see also Kraut et al. 1998; Kelly Garrett, 2006). However, new technologies are incapable of capturing the richness of gestures and facial expressions that accompany interpersonal communication, Putnam notes. For instance, emoticons like “:)” implicitly acknowledge this fact, but provide only the faintest trace of the information in actual facial expression” (2000, p. 175). He echoes the arguments of Nitin Nohria and Robert G. Eccles, who consider that face-to-face communication is usually accompanied by a fast and more profound feedback, that computer mediated communication is incapable of rendering. Furthermore, this “poverty of social cues” can hardly foster the development of mutual trust and interpersonal communication. Nohria and Eccles also suggest that social capital, understood here as the connections established at a community level, “turns out to be a prerequisite for, rather than a consequence of, effective mediated communication” (1996, p.16 in Putnam, pp. 175-176).

Communication on the Internet lacks a particular kind of diversity that characterizes real communities, Putnam argues. Another matter of controversy that Putnam identifies may seem anachronistic, in the context of the continuous technological advent. It is worth recalling, however, to give a perspective regarding the skepticism towards new technologies that populated public scholarly discourse a decade ago, when social media outlets had not yet been invented. In a dismissive tone, Putnam wonders whether the future of the Internet will be that of a “niftier telephone or a niftier television,” in other words, whether it will become “predominantly a means of active, social communication or a means of passive, private entertainment.” He is rather sceptical in regard to the cohesive potential of the Internet, correlating “extensive Internet usage” to social isolation and even depression. Putnam also cautions against the solid material orientation of the Internet, which “seem[s] destined to emphasize individualized entertainment and commerce rather than community engagement” (2000, p. 179). Putnam disagrees with overenthusiastic perspectives on new technologies, such as Barry Wellman’s idea that computer-mediated communication sustains strong, intermediate and weak ties (1996), or with the confident prophecy of Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff (1978) that the United States will become the Network Nation.

Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia disagree with the extreme perspectives in the study of Internet, suggesting that the “dueling dualists” feed with each other’s arguments, and that their “statements of enthusiasm or criticism leave little room for moderate, mixed situations that may be the reality” (1999, p. 167). In a later work, Wellman et al. recommend that the relationship between Internet and the formation of social capital should not be rendered in such dichotomic terms, suggesting that we should regard cyber-interactions as a complement
to telephone conversations or face-to-face encounters (2001). In a similar fashion, Paul Resnick
notes that we should aim to understand how Internet may contribute at reversing the declin-
ing trends in civic participation that the United States has been experiencing since the early
1970s. According to him, some of the key opportunities associated to technological social
capital include: the facilitation of interaction that “would otherwise be cumbersome or im-
possible” (2002), such as long-distance communication; the possibility to expand the struc-
tures of networks and thus facilitate interaction between a much wider group of contacts –
hundreds or thousands of persons included on a mailing list; and the ability to restrict infor-
mation on participants’ physical traits, tone of voice and thus neutralize potential idiosyn-
crasies that occur in ‘real-life’ interactions.

3. The virtual space and the construction of diasporic networks

The advent of new technologies reconfigured the relations between members of diasporic
communities, as well as transnational interactions. Exploring the cohesive potential of the
virtual space at the level of ethnic communities, Augie Fleras contends that online commu-
nities should aim at strengthening immigrants’ intra and extra-group ties, and encouraging them
towards civic participation. Multicultural media and particularly the online space should have
a double role, Fleras contends; on the one hand, it should feature information from homeland,
which is “crucial to adaptation” (2009, p. 726), and on the other hand, it should act as “form
of social capital” (2009, p. 727), by helping immigrants expand their network of bridging /
extra-community ties and thus facilitate their integration in the country of adoption (Canada,
in this case).

Musing on the connective potential of new technologies, Karim H. Karim maintains that,
different from ethnic publications, radio and televisions programs that circulate information
among the members of a particular group, new technologies allow diasporic communities to
expand conversation at a transnational level, so much so that cyberspace has become the ven-
ue where the users electronically reconstitute the relationships that existed before migration”
(Karim, 1999, p. 14). However, the proliferation of online outlets that aim to bring members
of diasporas together, such as websites of transnational businesses, alumni networks, list of
cultural events, or the electronic version of ethnic publication should not be regarded as a to-
ken of cohesiveness, Karim considers (1999, p. 13). Our understanding of diasporas needs to
transcend the myth of an “imagined community”, as Benedict Anderson rendered it (1983).
According to Anderson, the existence of communities is not contingent upon geographical
boundaries; a nation is “imagined” because it is virtually impossible for its members to know
each other, yet “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”; furthermore, in
spite of inequalities and exploitation, its members preserve the idea of communion, nour-
ished by a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (pp. 6-7).

However, Anderson renders the diasporic experience in a utopian fashion. The idyllic im-
age of books and newspapers read together transnationally leaves aside the tensions inherent
in the process of identity reconfiguration that most migrants undertake. Karim H. Karim sug-
gests that Anderson’s community should be replaced by communities: a combination of “past
alliances…, re-establishment of relations through the newsgroup, … experiences of negoti-
ating real life in the new country of settlement and interaction with other individuals / groups
in that society” (1999, p. 14). Notwithstanding its connective capacity, the virtual sphere does
not always function as a catalyst for interaction among the members of a particular ethnic group. Ideas and information exchanged in the virtual sphere do not make for genuine bonding ties among the members of a particular group. While regarding Internet as a space of “community communication, self-expression and self-representation” for ethnic groups (2002, p.10), Myra Georgiou notes that online interaction is solidly anchored in users’ everyday life, and thus the analysis of the virtual space “only makes sense to study (…) in the social context of diasporic experience” (2002, p.10). Furthermore, Tony King maintains that online communities do not stand as imagined communities, since the thrust of Anderson’s thoughts lies in the term political: “imagined political community” (2003, p. 180). In absence of this key term, the ‘imagined community’ of the people who use the Internet is “limited simply to people with similar interests using the Web and e-mail for communication (…) little different from philatelists worldwide sharing their love of stamp-collecting via the Web” (King, 2003, p. 180).

Research on ethnic communities should render the “continuum” (Bar-Haim, 1992, p. 207) between the years an immigrant spent in her homeland and the everyday realities encountered in the country of adoption, as the past events decisively shape a person’s “cultural interests, tastes, values and world view,” which accompany immigrants in their country of residence (1992, p. 207). Rick Bonus also notes that music, history and language are factors that strengthen the sense of belonging to a community, and help at redefining one’s identity (1997, p. 215). Analyses of the diasporic presence in the virtual space should thus take into consideration that users’ discourse, as well as their interactions bear the imprint of both past, with homeland experiences, and present, with the challenges inherent in the process of adjusting to a new country. As Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia note, the main caveat of many analyses of computer-mediated communication is their “parochialism”, with Internet treated in isolation from the social milieu, “without taking into account how interactions on the Net fit together with other aspects of people’s lives” (1999, p. 170). Researching human interaction with the Internet should take into consideration that people “bring to their online interactions such baggage as their gender, stage in the life cycle, cultural milieu, socioeconomic status, and offline connections with others” (1999, p. 170; see also Sonia Livingstone on the need to put media in a social context, in line with the ‘ethnographic turn’ of postmodern media studies 2003, p. 338; pp. 343-346).

4. Romanian-Canadians and the cyberspace. Methodology

In what follows, Romanian immigrants’ presence in the Romanian online communities from Toronto will be discussed, building on the ethnographic interviews conducted in Toronto. The ethnographic research component of this article draws upon 30 ethnographic interviews conducted in 2010 and 2011 with 30 first generation Romanian-Canadians residing in Toronto and the GTA. All respondents came to Canada as landed immigrant or visa students between 1990 and 2004. The respondents were selected through the snow-ball technique and are identified through initials. To the highest extent possible, a balanced representation of both genders was attempted. However, the class representation was homogeneous, due to the selection criteria enforced by Citizenship and Immigration Canada when selecting applicants to the Permanent Resident status from Romania. The “benchmark” system enforced when all my respondents applied for Canadian residency granted additional points for education and pro-
fessional experience, and therefore favoured the selection of university and college graduates. As of July 1st 2011, the immigration criteria were changed in order to address the workforce gaps in Canada’s economy. The new system gives preference to candidates with professional experience in the professions that are in high demand on the Canadian labour market (for instance, skilled trade positions, which were under-represented in the previous system).

The interviewees were asked whether they were familiar with online communities (forums) developed by members of the Romanian community; in case of an affirmative answer, they were asked whether they used to participate in online discussions. Furthermore, the interviewees were asked if, by their opinion, online communities were effective at keeping the Romanian ethnic group united, or at least attempted to do so, and whether forums or other forms of computer-mediated communication were effective at keeping the interviewees posted with the cultural events targeting Romanian-Canadians in Toronto (the Romanian movie festival, tours of Romanian theatre groups / pop-rock artists, etc).

5. Discussion of interview responses

The respondents were initially asked whether and how they use the online communities developed by other Romanian-Canadians. While the interviewees of a more mature age (fifties or early sixties) are not even aware of the existence of such virtual meeting places, younger persons access these communities, on a less than regular basis, though. When they do, most often they look for information rather than engage in conversations. “Sometimes I pick up some information from Romanian forums, but you cannot call this participation … The Bans had a lot of information posted, but this was seven or eight years ago” (O.S.); “I visited Romanian Singles some time ago, in 2004” (D.T.); “I went on Romanians in Toronto once, I wanted to rent a house, but this was the first and last time” (I.B.); “I used to visit a Romanian forum when I was a student, to find out about events, but this was six-seven years ago” (O.T.). “I only checked a Romanian forum when I came to Canada. I didn’t like it, it was boring, little content, too many ads, nothing to attract me…” (C.R).

Even before immigrating to Canada, B.P. used to visit the Bans website, which he considered “quite up to date with all the information I needed”. He mentions the existence of other websites such as TheRomanians.ca, or a Facebook group, Romanians in Canada, which is comprised of approximately 300 members. Although pleasantly surprised by the existence of such outlets, B.P. never participated in the discussions initiated there. He believes that there may be other online communities targeting Romanian immigrants, but due to a poor presence in the media, people do not know about them.

The respondents’ interaction with the Internet appears to divert from the perspective of Internet as a space of “shared commonality” (Georgiou 2002, p.12), able to “bring together friends and families, develop consumption networks and political fora (…) of community communication” (Georgiou 2002, p.13). Instead, they have an instrumental relationship with these virtual spaces, seeking information rather than engaging in conversation with other Romanian-Canadians. The interviewees’ motivations for not shifting beyond this ‘utilitarian’ approach need to be further investigated; however, several respondents consider online communities as a second-best alternative to face-to-face interactions. While aware of the Romanian-Canadian online communities created in Toronto, of whose existence he has found out from ads in Romanian publications, T.P. has never participated in any online discussion: “I have a
quite big group of Romanian friends, so we have all our conversations there. We don’t need a forum.” C.R. also considers that forums have an informative role, not a coalescing one: “if you want to socialize, you go to the church; you don’t go on forums to get together or to tie friendships”, while R.C. does not consider that media can create a community: “this is not its role; its role is to inform and provide some kind of landmarks. Media cannot showcase something that doesn’t exist.”

When it comes to cultural events that are of interest for Romanian immigrants, such as music, film or theatre tours, emails facilitate the fast circulation of information. All respondents receive information via email, from friends, and then forward it to other friends and acquaintances. “If I hear something, I tell everybody … or our friends tell us … or through Facebook: I found out about the Romanian movie festival in Toronto through Facebook.” As T.P. observes, the Internet-mediated communication is the most effective; although the information is transmitted via computers, the rapidity with which it circulates reminds T.P. of the oral traditions of folklore. A.M. also prefers to receive emails: “I sometimes buy the Romanian newspapers, but if they start advertising the concert in May and the concert takes is in December, chances are I’ll forget about it. So I prefer to set an alert in my computer when I receive the email”. B.P. mentions that he always shares information on events with his friends and acquaintances. He recalled a concert of a Romanian pop star, stating that the information on this event was sent to him directly from Romania, and he quickly circulated it in his interpersonal network, before the announcement was published in the diasporic media outlets of Toronto:

However, more could be done here in order to inform people…there are so many things happening in the Romanian community, but people never find out about them. These events are not presented in the Canadian press, and perhaps more people get their information from there, while in the Romanian [diasporic] press or on forums these events are often advertised too late.

Circulating information by email and, more recently, by various social media outlets is a common practice for immigrant communities (Karim, 2002; see also other studies on diasporas’ interaction with the cyberspace: Georgiou, 2002 on the Greek diasporas from New York and London, King, 2003 on Rhodesians, and Tsaliki, 2003 on Greeks). As Georgiou notes, many immigrants use the emails as a fast and convenient way to communicate with family and friends living in the same area, in homeland or in other areas of the globe (2002, pp. 13-14).

The Romanian-Canadians included in my research sample would welcome email alerts sent by Romanian diasporic publications or online communities when a significant event takes place; however, this only happens, according to R.T., “when they want to advertise their $150 New Year’s Eve party … Then, yes, they send you ten emails, but otherwise you never hear from them.” Some of the respondents mentioned that they prefer to get the information from the Internet – “We, the younger ones, prefer to get our news from the internet … newspapers and magazines seem to me a little passé” (O.T.) – but continue to buy the Romanian press for their parents who are visiting from Romania.

Many of the respondents complain about the disconnection between their interests and the content provided by the Romanian press and websites in Toronto: “If I want to read news online, there is Romania Libera, Gandul, TVR or Antena 1. There is no point in getting your news from the press here [Romanian diasporic press, my note], as all the information is copy-
pasted from the Romanian newspapers” (G.H). “On the Romanian websites from here you’ll often find yesterday news” (O.T).

As mentioned, the respondents have an instrumental relation with the Romanian online communities, since they prefer to interact with these spaces when searching for information. The cases of shifting virtual conversations to ‘real-life’ interactions are thus isolate. R.C. and R.T. experienced a strong disappointment, but A.V.’s wife transformed online dialogues into a real-life friendship. Upon his arrival in Canada, R.C. got in contact with one of the persons that created the first Romanian forum in Toronto. “The moral quality of the person was dubious,” he stated. R.C. wanted some professional counselling for computer courses that his wife could take, but discouraged by the arrogant attitude of the interlocutor, he never visited that forum again. “I was no longer interested in what a guy like this had to say”, he concluded.

R.T. was also disappointed about her experiences:

I am familiarized with online communities, I participated in the events organized by them, but I gave up doing so three years ago … some people don’t change their mores even if they change the country, and that’s why I left Romania in the first place. They act as if they were in Romania, and that’s why I left Romania … I always felt gossiped, criticized and stared at when I tried to organize something. There was no response from the community.

When attempting to organize a charitable event for a Romanian man who needed to have surgery abroad, R.T. met the suspicion and even the resistance of various Romanian enterprises in Canada: “except for some really nice Romanians at Campul Romanesc, next to Hamilton, I only heard ‘let me talk to my husband, let me talk to my wife', in fact a way of subtly refusing me.’ While A.V. had a story to share with a happy ending, the other two interviewees – R.T. and R.C. – were disappointed by this attempt, and decided to no longer participate in online discussions.

The interviewees are sceptical about the contribution that Romanian online communities may have at strengthening the ties among Romanian-Canadians. Their responses indicate two potential motivations for their less than solid interest in virtual interaction with other Romanian immigrants. First, online conversations cannot compensate for the absence of interpersonal trust that perpetuated from the communist era and could not be alleviated by the years respondents spent in Canada. Eric Uslaner remembers the generalized suspicion that dominated interpersonal relations before 1989, arguing that “if people are wary of strangers they will limit their social activities to close friends whom they do see as trustworthy” (2003, p. 81). In a later contribution, Eric Uslaner and Gabriel Badescu note that “putting trust in strangers must seem a quaint (or even dangerous) idea to people who are afraid to trust all but their closest friends. An oppressive state terrifies all of its citizens” (2004a, p. 38). In a similar fashion, Marc Morjé Howard notes that the surveillance enforced by the communist authorities made many Romanians turn towards “close and trusting ties to friends and family” (2003a).

The absence of interpersonal trust persisted after 1989 as well. Gabriel Badescu and Eric Uslaner maintain that that the 1989 Revolution could not determine a rapid change of people’s attitude towards civic participation: “the strong arm of state was replaced not by a trusting civil society with open markets but rather by a largely apathetic society where people did not trust their governments or each other” (2004b, p. 31; see also Trond Gilberg, 1990; Howard, 2003b; Raiser, 2008). As Marc Morjé Howard points, the collapse of communism “did not
create a *tabula rasa* by erasing people’s prior experiences, but rather that those very experiences influence people’s current behaviour” (2003b, p. 173).

Elsewhere (Visan, 2012, p. 19) I discussed in detail the absence of interpersonal trust that still governs the relations between Romanian-Canadians, as reflected by the interviews I conducted. It turned out that most respondents trust their immediate circle of Romanian family members, friends, acquaintances and colleagues but are reserved, if not outwardly hostile towards other Romanians, whether residing in Canada or in Romania. It has been suggested that Romanians from Toronto do not form a community, but are organized in “groupuscules” who rarely, if ever, interact. Respondents connected this attitude with suspicion: “I think this has very much to do with communism: people are suspicious and then prefer to stay away and not interact with other persons who may harm them” (E.L.) (Visan, 2012, p. 19).

A second motivation for Romanian-Canadians’ reluctance towards online interaction with other Romanian immigrants may come from the process of identity reconfiguration that usually accompanies the experience of migration and the process of settlement in a new country. “I met immigrants who were so willing to integrate in Canada that they wanted to cut all their ties with Romania” (E.L.). Other interviewees are unsure that Romanians wish indeed to connect with other Romanians from Canada, and are therefore unsure whether Romanian online communities have the capacity to strengthen the ties among Romanian-Canadians from Toronto. Although, in theory, Romanian forums aim to bring Romanian-Canadians together, in reality this is difficult to achieve, T.P. considers: “The Romanian group in Toronto is very diverse now, same as home. It is no longer as in 1992, when we came to Toronto, when we all had the same aim and we were, more or less, at the same level. The Romanian community is fragmented, wherever you go you will most likely meet a Romanian or hear somebody speaking Romanian”. The respondent considers that online communities cannot do much for a group that is already atomized. A.C. also believes that Romanian-Canadian forums may attempt to enhance cohesion, but personal priorities change and immigrants lose interest in the events they used to enjoy: “every time Nicu Alfantis toured in Toronto, a lot of Romanians came, it was super nice. The thing is that we changed, or at least I changed and react different than before to all these Romanian events, shows, festivals. I am no longer that active as I used to be in the club of Romanian students at the University of Toronto. We made our group of friends and we interact a lot with them. We only rarely participate in the events of the Romanian community.”

D.C. and B.P. agree that the efforts of online communities are commendable but insufficient, emphasising that, in absence of a more active involvement of Romanian immigrants, things cannot change.

The Bans website, The Romanians … they tried to unite the Romanian community by bringing together all Romanian associations. ARC, *Asociația Românilor Canadieni* [The Association of Romanian Canadians] organized meetings with all these associations, hoping to unite all initiatives. The Romanian school [at the All Saints Orthodox Church] was present on Romanians.ca till two years ago. Yes, the community could be much more united, but right now I don’t see anything like that.
6. Conclusion

Building on 30 open-ended interviews, this article cast a light upon the interaction of Romanian-Canadians from Toronto with the cyberspace, seeking to ascertain whether computer-mediated communication may contribute to strengthening the bonding ties at the level of the Romanian ethnic group. The article does not intend to be sentential regarding Romanian immigrants’ participation in the cyberspace, as firm conclusions need to be grounded in a wider qualitative research framework of these persons’ everyday life contexts; it rather aims to point towards several patterns, as they resulted from interviews.

The respondents seem to have an instrumental relation with the Romanian online communities, which they access predominantly in search for information, and not because they are searching to connect with other Romanian-Canadians. It has been also suggested that computer-mediated communication represents a second-best alternative to face-to-face encounters and the role of press is to inform, not to create cohesiveness among the members of a particular community. As it happens with most other ethnic communities, Romanian-Canadians actively exchange emails on cultural events, such as tours of Romanian actors and singers or Romanian movies playing in Toronto cinematographs. The interviewees would welcome a system of email alerts on such topics from the Romanian publications or forums in Toronto but, according to them, there is a clear discrepancy between the content of such outlets and the users’ interests.

The Romanian-Canadians interviewed for this article are sceptical about the cohesive potential of Romanian online communities. This is due both to the absence of interpersonal trust that perpetuated from the communist era of Nicolae Ceausescu and could not be alleviated by the experience of living in Canada – an interviewee stated that Romanian-Canadians do not form a community, but mere groupuscules which rarely, if at all, interact –, and to the experience of immigration. The process of settling in a new country is a strenuous one, which sets immigrants in the position to redefine their allegiances and, sometimes, to atomize from former co-nationals.

The literature review section of this article presented in detail two antagonistic perspectives on Internet and community formation – “cyberoptimism” vs. “cyberrpessimism” (Norris, 2001). However, the responses of the Romanian-Canadians interviewed for this article indicate that, before extolling the connective potential of online communities or, conversely, criticizing them for their alleged atomizing influence, social context needs to be taken into account. As emphasized throughout the article, this context is particularly important in the case of immigrants. Analyses on ethnic communities should thus incorporate both personal histories and socio-cultural background from the country of origin, and of the everyday realities in the country of settlement.

Studies of other ethnic communities’ presence in the cyberspace indicate similar patterns to those of Romanian-Canadians. However, a preference for emails over other forms of communication, or a critical online discourse towards the country of origin represents only a surface similarity, but the motivations of these attitudes are different in the case of each ethnic group, and require investigation. As Karim H. Karim notes, scholarship on diasporas and new technologies is yet in an incipient stage, which “would not allow for definitive statements” (1999, p. 16). Further research will need to explore the use of new technologies by ethnic communities, particularly the effect of new media “on issues of citizenship and social cohesion” (1999, p. 16). At the same time, it will need to research the use of Internet by second gener-
ation immigrants. Engaged in “symbolic emotional labor of ethnic identification” (Garrido, 2010, p. 178), these immigrants tend to fathom ‘homeland’ in a different –often romanticized – light than their parents. Research should cast a light on how participation in online communities will be influenced by such reconfigured allegiances.

Rezumat: Acest articol prezintă modul în care imigranții români din Toronto și GTA (Greater Toronto Area) se raportează la comunitățile online românești create în Toronto. În prima parte vor fi discutate conceptul de comunitate în contextul ciberspațiului, precum și influența pe care participarea online o are asupra interacțiunilor din viața ‘reală’. Articolul evidențiază faptul că studiul participării virtuale trebuie ancorat într-un context socio-cultural, cu atât mai important în cazul comunităților de imigranți. Perspectiva teoretică va fi completată de un studiu etnografic, bazat pe 30 de interviuri cu imigranții români de prima generație din Toronto și GTA. Vor fi discutate poziția repondenților față de participarea în comunitățile online românești, precum și motivele care iși determină să ia sau nu parte la conversațiile inițiate în spațiul virtual. De asemenea, articolul va încerca să determine dacă spațiul online poate avea un rol de catalizator pentru membrii acestui grup etnic.

Cuvinte-cheie: Românii din Canada; comunitate; forumuri online; coeziune; capital social.

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