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E-diasporas Atlas. Exploration and Cartography of Diasporas in the Digital Network

1. *E-diaspora*: the homeland of the *connected migrant*

The symbolic imperialism of internet, which ended up covering every aspect of our life, whether public or private, meant also a redefining process in terms of social space, social time and social relationships. Moreover, it contributed as a significant platform and amplifier resort to the consolidation of the 'network society' (Castelles, 1996) and its expansion to the virtual level. Each component of the social dynamics found its corollary and, in many cases, its substitute in the 'e'-reality generated by the new technologies and, therefore, we now speak of e-democracy, e-learning, e-culture etc. In this context, *e-diaspora*, which constitutes the conceptual anchor of the 'E-diasporas Atlas' project reflects 'a migrant collective that organises itself and is active first and foremost on the Web'(1). Principles of mobility and connectivity are sped up by the internet nature itself, as it provides both the platform, as well as the channel for time and space contraction, making social relations surpass the pressure and constraints of physical distance. As a heterogeneous entity, *e-diaspora* covers practices of a "community whose interactions are 'enhanced' by digital exchange"(1) and is subject to a permanent process of renegotiating its boundaries.

Part of a global *culture of mobility*, migration is one of the defining dimensions of the recent political and economic dynamics. Therefore it has risen up as a central topic for the deliberative performances staged in the public sphere, becoming a constant of the media's agenda, as well as a resourceful direction for researchers. The reconfiguration of diasporas on the web platform as a social field per se provides a research area that needed a solid path breaker on both conceptual and methodological aspects. The emergent social practices of the *connected migrant* (Diminescu, 2008) are closely linked to the overall sedimentation of new forms of proximity and social connectivity generated by the virtual platform of interaction and integration. Due to its consistency in terms of corpus and to its value in terms of insights, the 'E-diasporas Atlas' project can be given this 'path breaker' role as an unique experiment in approaching the hybridisation between 'e'-social space and diasporic communities.

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2. Mapping the drifting sands of migrant sites

The 'E-diasporas Atlas' project covers both descriptive and explicative aspects, as it is structured on a sequence of research steps that starts with selecting and archiving a consistent corpus of *migrant sites* and then exploring and analyzing their content, but, moreover, the way they connect to each other. A *migrant site* was defined as 'a website created or managed by migrants and/or that deals with them', whether personal or institutional site, blog or forum (1). An interdisciplinary team of more than 80 researchers coordinated their efforts in covering 8,000 migrant websites and providing an important data base for further research on this theme. The role of researchers in discriminating the relevant resources for a given diaspora was significant, as their expertise and high familiarity with this area of research worked as the main criterion in this symbolic gate-keeping process of corpus configuration. So, although the project presents a standardization in terms of research instruments, this is prefaced by high involvement of the researcher in the selective process of corpus building.

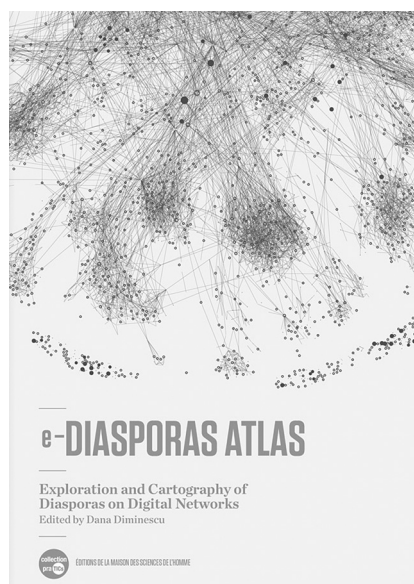
On the methodological level, the mapping and analyzing of diasporas' presence on the web was structured into four 'intertwined steps: 1) equipped web exploration and corpus building; 2) data enrichment (location, languages, text-mining); 3) network visualization, manipulation and graph interpretation; 4) collaborative sharing of (raw) data and findings' (1). If the researchers' high degree of involvement in the selection of migrant websites can act as a possible source of vulnerability and contestation on methodological grounds, the *network visualization (Gephi)* can be seen as the most valuable methodological contribution of this project. Developed by Matthieu Bastian, Matthieu Jacomy and Sébastien Heymann, *Gephi* is a software of graph visualization and provides two types of visual representation: one based on the physical principle of attraction/repulsion (related to the presence or absence of a link between two nodes of the network) and the other one based on a geographical spatialization, which involves 'geocoded data' such as location of websites' owner, websites' addressees, language of the websites etc. What this approach manages to fulfill is a correlation between the tools of research, the nature of data collection and the overall thematic focus of the project. The e-diasporas' maps outline the dynamics of connectivity and the network structure of these communities on virtual level. The final outcome of the project, *maps.e-diasporas.fr collaborative platform*, was developed for hosting the e-Diasporas Atlas and its *chapters*, which act as structural units, corresponding to the e-diasporas that made the subject of the researchers' interest. As a collection of e-diasporas study cases, this platform covers different types of data, from graphs and statistics, to texts, interviews and videos, providing both a wide set of elaborated materials to be consulted, as well as an important corpus that can be the object of further analyses.

As for the findings of the e-Diasporas Atlas project, they are not the mere product of the network analysis of migrant websites configuration, but rather an integrated analysis which combines these elements with researchers' previous studies developed around diasporas' dynamics, whether on online or offline social contexts. However, if we were to identify some general coordinates, as the research team itself admits, the e-Diasporas Atlas proposes at least two keys of interpretation: a topological one and a triangulation of quanti-qualitative approaches. If the first one is focused on the connectivity and the network structure of e-diasporas' actors, outlining the visual representation of e-diasporas' spatiality and relational dynamics, the second one is centered on an in-depth approach of the migrant websites' content itself. Although they are all circumscribed to the general framework of the project, integrating the mapping process and the network visual representation, each component of this

project is, in the end, a consistent and autonomous research unity. Therefore, different aspects of e-diasporas' ethos are stressed out by the individual working papers gathered on the project's platform.

3. The *E-Diasporas Atlas*' path breaker share

All in all, what 'E-Diasporas Atlas project' manages to outline are the new forms of co-presence and community multilayered integration of migrants. Spatiality is inherent to diaspora, as migration is all about distance and connectivity between people and social contexts. The conceptualization of e-diaspora, but, moreover, the operationalization and the visual representation of its dynamics make this project a valuable path breaker towards a resourceful, yet underexplored research area. The e-diaspora is not just an instrumental means of creating and maintaining social connections; it gains also an ontological dimension, as it becomes a significant level of migrants' existence and social performances, helping them surpass the physical and emotional gap between two worlds that they are simultaneously part of: the host state and the home state referent. As the inhabitant of this e-diaspora, the *connected migrant* is the representative figure of this culture of bonds and of the hyperconnectivity that defines the nature of today's network society. The 'E-Diasporas Atlas project' not only describes and explores these migrant e-communities, but rather attest their existence as an institutionalized social phenomenon and, moreover, as a social field per se which, in turn, justifies the legitimacy of its analysis for and beyond a mere scientific purpose. Besides the undisputable value attached to the conceptual and the methodological aspects brought by this project, there is this gateway that it provides to a resourceful field of research, along with some useful tools and data collection for those who want to discover and further analyse the e-diasporas dynamics. On both connotative and denotative sense, 'E-Diasporas Atlas project' can be seen as a pioneer research expedition towards the first collection of e-diasporas maps, which integrate the spatial and the social cartography of the connected migrants' e-lands.



References

1. Diminescu, D. (2008). The connected migrant: an epistemological manifesto. *Social Science Information*. 47(4), 565-579.
2. Castells, M. (1996). *The Rise of the Network Society* (Volume 1: *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.
3. Information found on the official online platform of the 'E-Diasporas Atlas project': <http://www.e-diasporas.fr/>.