

SPECIAL REPORT

The virtual meets reality

Policy implications of e-diasporas



Deirdre McKay

December 2017

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Diasporas are global social formations of people who have been scattered from their country of origin. They carry with them a collective representation, myth or imagined sense of their homeland. The connection between the diaspora and its members' original 'home' was, until the rise of social media, sustained by letters, tapes and print media.

E-diasporas originally emerged as online manifestations of diaspora communities. Although social media are just some of many technologies used by people to communicate, their rise has intensified the articulation and elaboration of diasporic identities several-fold. With social media, e-diasporas recreate and expand a diaspora's sense of shared identity and community by providing a virtual venue for affirmation and recognition. Today, e-diasporas are combinations of self-interest and identity groups that share experiences through online media. The members share their country of origin and, at times—depending on the size of the community—their host country.

Over time, e-diaspora activities can take on a life of their own and begin to reshape the offline communities that produce them. Although e-diasporas come into being online—shaped by the social networking sites and the technologies that they use—they're extensions of real-world diasporic communities.

Of the sites hosting e-diasporas, Facebook dominates the market in the English-speaking world. With over 2 billion users globally, much of the online traffic between members of diasporic communities occurs on this one, privately owned, platform.

Like all social media, Facebook is highly personalised, offering its users an extensive audience reach. That reach depends on:

- platform and bandwidth availability
- the skills of users
- national and local infrastructure.

Where resources are sufficient and people have the skills, social media enable e-diasporas to:

- increase the amount of information they share by making it easier to produce and distribute content
- improve individual members' capacity to connect with others and to express themselves
- create new forms of recognition and status
- create better opportunities for members to organise, join and mobilise as social groups
- bridge distance, strengthening members' ties to each other and to their country of origin
- offer personal recognition for community contributions by migrants who may be experiencing challenges integrating into their host nation
- personalise members' participation in groups and discussions to create intense and compelling forms of online co-presence.

While e-diasporas may be dynamic and amorphous online ‘collectivities’, they maintain their own idiosyncratic culture and etiquette. They also produce a set of informal rules for online interactions and recognitions that encompass ideas about sharing content and deferment to cultural or spiritual authority. An e-diaspora will informally recognise one or more sites that have the most authentic diasporic versions of home-nation cultures. E-diasporas enable migrant identities to remain closely tied to places and social groups in their nations of origin but also shift the cultural and political dynamics within diasporic communities.

For outsiders, even governments, e-diasporas are a new and necessary channel for communication with migrant groups and their nations of origin. E-diasporas present risks and opportunities for migration management, workforce planning, diplomacy, political engagement and the stability of governments in other countries. States are increasingly monitoring the online activities of individuals within their national borders. By no means are all the activities of e-diasporas a risk to migrants’ home or host nations, but people operating in these spaces need assistance to develop the digital literacy and critical analytical skills required to discern political manipulation and entrapment.

Opportunities

E-diasporas are venues for communication and community building, offering many policy levers for governments to support migrants’ settlement and integration in their host countries, or their contact with or return to their home nations.

The governments of migrant-receiving countries could use e-diaspora networks to better regulate migration and inform would-be migrants and new arrivals of services on offer, scams to avoid and legitimate routes to residency.

Risks

E-diasporas can be shifting and fragile networks susceptible to manipulation, scams and the spreading of false information (‘fake news’). Manipulation via social media can:

- create vulnerability and alienation in diaspora communities
- seed political instability and conflict in sending countries.

Like diasporas, e-diasporas can also keep alive cultural ‘memories’, experienced and manufactured, that can then feed into false or conflict-driven narratives.

Policy implications

Host nations can better engage e-diasporas and the broader diasporas in which they’re embedded by:

- hiring in-diaspora social media campaign designers and analytical staff to promote verified government information and map its circulation
- following the social media activity of diasporic organisations in-country
- working with community leaders on social media to address the welfare and educational needs of the migrants they serve, including through education on digital literacy that covers common strategies for political manipulation
- making e-diaspora engagement policies part of bilateral discussions with sending country authorities
- facilitating public discussion of both the fluid line being drawn between civil liberties and protecting the public and the line between freedom of speech and the clandestine manipulation of digital forums
- adopting a strategy of transparency in approaches to diasporic communities online and providing a consistent point of contact for communities to raise concerns and seek information on specific, situational regulatory and legal issues related to social networking sites.

FROM DIASPORA TO E-DIASPORA

This section describes the nature and roles of diasporas.

Diasporas

A diaspora is a group of people scattered from their origins, carrying with them a collective representation, myth or imagined sense of their homeland.¹ A migrant community meets the established criteria for diasporas when it's scattered across two or more destinations, maintains relationships, whether real or imagined, with its homeland, produces a common group identity, and has existed over at least two generations.² Not all members of a diaspora, however, are settled in their host countries for multiple generations. Increasingly, some diasporas' migrations are provisional, as they are labour migrants or asylum seekers who hope to secure membership in an established diaspora community.

Members of a diaspora may often share a common sense of alienation in their host countries, dream of their eventual return to the homeland that they have left behind, or both.³ This reflects their belief that, as migrants, they aren't yet — and perhaps will never be — fully accepted and integrated into their host society. They, or at least some of them, feel themselves to be partly separate from mainstream society in their new home, despite attaining citizenship and engaging in other forms of belonging.⁴ This sense of alienation isn't a definitive characteristic of diasporas but, where it exists and persists, it makes e-diasporas vulnerable to various kinds of political manipulation.

Diasporas maintain ongoing relationships with their origins, as well as collective ties to their host nations, and each constitutes a distinctive social field. Diasporas are recognised by their members as important potential sources of trade, capital, technology and knowledge for countries of origin and destination.⁵ However, because their members may never feel like they belong or have been integrated into their adopted home, they often express hybrid community identities—for example, Filipino-Canadian, British Nigerian or Congolese-Belgian.⁶ Those hybrid national identities reveal how members of a diaspora identify themselves as distinguished from the national mainstream by transnational ties extending beyond national borders. Such ties may be largely framed as sharing a common culture. They can also extend to offering practical support and advice for asylum seekers and irregular migrants from their country of origin. They are ties of affinity and commonality, but also of obligation or duty of care. Those ties form the internal bonds through which the diaspora is constituted. Diasporic bonds can potentially be intensified and expanded by new modes of online communication.

In the past, due to distance and limited communication, diasporas were often unable to keep up with events in their countries of origin. In their host society, under these conditions, diaspora members tended to live at a level removed from the cultural mainstream.⁷

Spatial, temporal and cultural distance from 'home' means that members of a diaspora rarely feel entirely at home in either their sending or their receiving cultures.⁸ They find that their diasporic culture becomes distinct because it can't quite keep pace with cultural shifts and dynamism in their country of origin. Diasporas thus find their strongest commonalities not with home, but with diasporic communities from their country of origin in other host nations.

Diasporic identities thus persist across two or more generations as migrants settle and integrate in host nations, and extend across different global sites. But settlement isn't the only outcome for migrants in diasporas. Diasporas tend to have a diversity of members. While some migrants settle or seek ways to do so, others are temporary migrants, working on short-term contracts or on student visas.

The distinctive social space of a diaspora is often one of 'between'. Migrants find themselves suspended between a new nation, where they don't yet feel at home, and 'back home', where they might no longer feel they truly belong. Diasporic identities emerge from the way life lived between nations creates a distinctive self-awareness among the diaspora's members. This lived space leads to the new and distinctive cultural forms that are a key feature of diasporas. The feeling of 'betweenness' isn't the same as alienation. In fact, many people in diasporas feel quite at home in that interstitial space and as if they belong to both countries.

Diaspora literature, dance, broadcast and print media, political activism and, more recently, digital and social media distinguish diaspora communities.⁹ Digital and social media have integrated these earlier cultural forms as part of the often intense virtual social interactions that create e-diasporas. An e-diaspora takes diaspora culture online.

E-diasporas

An e-diaspora is a network of connective action, where individuals can personalise their experience and thus the ways they understand their participation in groups, discussions or networks. An e-diaspora is sustained by recognition structures that rely on broader community appreciation for online activities, offer peer recognition of digital contributions, and express personal respect.¹⁰ These online networks are important organisational channels for shaping broader diasporas.¹¹

How e-diasporas form

Some diaspora members use digital and social media to build long-distance relationships that strengthen their resilience. Potentially, their e-diaspora connections can contribute to the resilience of their host country by supporting their settlement and eventual integration. The same online relationships can also amplify migrants' political and economic influence in their sending country. Migrants could, and at times do, use social media to research and negotiate investments to generate development in their country of origin. Arguably, with such opportunities, e-diaspora connections have made diasporas more important to both nations of origin and host nations.

Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Skype, YouTube, Instagram, Tinder, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Snapchat, QQ (in China), VRKontakte (in Russia) and Orkut (in Turkey) have changed the ways diasporas communicate. At the same time, like other users, e-diasporas have a fickle relationship with social networking sites; platforms that dominate the market one year can fall out of favour the next. Myspace and Friendster are now long forgotten.

It's a truism that it's easier for migrants to survive, and in time thrive, in a new community if they have connections. In this context, e-diasporas can often provide a 'kickstart' for new connections within a diaspora community in a destination country. My own research on the Filipino diaspora in the UK reveals that engagement with e-diasporas typically begins long before migrants leave their countries of origin.

Would-be migrants used to learn about their destination countries from those who had returned from abroad, or from print and broadcast media. More recently, would-be migrants researched their migration projects on Google, sitting in an internet café and searching the web. Now, they use social media to 'friend' and 'follow' compatriots abroad who are working and living in possible destination countries.

In the case of Filipino migrants in the UK, my field research has revealed that before a technology-proficient would-be migrant crosses any border they will engage with social media. Social media offers them a way to actively and passively obtain answers to questions about such things as:

- first-hand experience with the legal and administrative requirements for migration
- the possibilities of work
- the diaspora community they might join
- the kinds of housing they could find
- the weather, customs, food and entertainment available.

E-diasporas support social cohesion at various scales

The casual observer could assume that diaspora communities do, or should, integrate with the community in their new homes. However, in practice, integration is uneven or perhaps even fragile and reversible. Arguably, 'integration' is, in practice, at best an undefined end point. What from a mainstream perspective may seem like a nicely integrated diasporic community is potentially felt by those within it to be an ethnic and occupational ghetto that's breeding resentment.

We might expect social cohesion within host communities to be undermined by e-diasporas because they keep migrants' focus on the culture and politics in their country of origin. This isn't always the case. Primarily, this is a feature of the uneven nature of integration across space and time. The integration of migrants into their host societies always varies with geography, demographics, culture and economic conditions. Moreover, the integration of diasporas into host nations isn't always a well-defined or agreed end point, but may be uneven and variable.

E-diaspora activities in themselves don't prevent migrants from integrating into the broader host society; indeed, they can facilitate integration. Diasporic networks and online activities can fill a social void in migrants' lives in host countries after their arrival, particularly when they take up work in isolated settings or work unsociable hours.¹²

E-diasporas sustain and inform migrants while they form offline friendships and locate sources of support and advice to help them to integrate and then broker further cultural events or volunteering opportunities that produce experiences that give diaspora communities the sense of further integration. A case in point would be the various European diasporas in Australia. Here, nation-of-origin social media groups offer integration support and advice.¹³ The diasporas also use social media to broker understanding with other Australians by promoting participation in festivals, events, cultural exchange activities and the like.¹⁴

Diasporas have always offered easily accessible pools of experiential learning and advice, acting as bridges to successful settlement. In such cases, there's more to diaspora membership than national identity. There are often cross-cutting complicating factors that prevent a sense of shared national identity: culture, religion or ethnicity. If you're a Punjabi Pakistani and an Ahmadi, you aren't going to accept advice from someone who isn't from your community, or give them advice; you're unlikely to assist a devout Sunni Pakistani from Baluchistan.

Through e-diaspora networks, newly arrived migrants can access informal advice on rules, regulations and strategies to interpret their host nation's culture. E-diaspora networks can thus aid new migrants' assimilation to their host nation's social norms. The bulk of the information that e-diasporas share online celebrates their country of origin's culture and informs migrants of events back home. Some members add in migration advice and examples of successes, along with pitfalls to avoid. However, the information shared on employment, settlement and regulatory structures isn't always current or accurate. With multi-nation coverage, e-diasporas enable migrants to compare experiences across a series of host nations.

By integrating individuals in the various host nations and their nation of origin into a single virtual space, e-diasporas shape future migration choices and establish relationships across borders. E-diasporas incorporate host-nation-based community and transnational organisations that can act as key points of contact and information.

Government agencies, educational institutions, churches and third-sector organisations seeking to build more cohesive migrant-receiving societies could benefit from leveraging e-diaspora pages and posts. They could, and sometimes do, use them as information conduits. Transnational campaign and advocacy networks benefit from e-diasporas' multi-nation contacts and use online networks to canvass opinions and share experiences. E-diasporas' networks thus offer possibilities for efficient communication across borders, languages and ethnic boundaries.

MAPPING E-DIASPORAS

E-diasporas aren't the same as broader diasporas, but subsets of members and activities from those diasporas.¹⁵ Online, their digital traces don't give the whole picture: those traces don't map the broader community; nor do they set it in context. E-diaspora activities nonetheless act as conduits for real-world relationships and politics.

With the rise of social networking sites (SNSs), there's been a huge shift in e-diaspora activities over the past decade. Previously lively diaspora networks on the open web have now largely disappeared into the proprietary realm of SNSs such as Facebook, LinkedIn and VRKontakte.

Profiles and groups on SNSs, some of them secret or closed, are used to network across diasporas. Thus, while e-diaspora activity has become more accessible and important to migrants who can access the web via low-cost smartphones, it has become more diffuse and difficult for observers to follow. Understanding e-diasporas requires extensive offline as well as online research, and 'real world' contacts are the most effective means of accessing diasporas' online activities. For this report, this means my overview is couched in the wider literature on diasporas and on social media, but my insights and interpretations are grounded in the comparative analysis of that body of work with my own research among diasporic Filipinos.

This report draws its data from an in-depth case study taken from my primary research in the Philippines and allied research on the Filipino diaspora. I integrate findings from other studies that elaborate on, contrast or extend the patterns I've observed in online networks and in communities in the Philippines and elsewhere. Much of the structure I outline is relevant to other diasporas, despite the cultural and local specificities of its content, because it illustrates the success of attempts to 'weaponise' diasporas in political struggles within countries of origin. This vulnerability among e-diasporas has become a global concern because it may prove capable of destabilising both nations of origin and host societies. Social media monopolies—particularly Facebook—offer those wishing to shape public opinion and influence behaviour access to large target audiences through a trusted media channel that's largely unregulated, or at best self-regulated.

In what follows, I incorporate research that tracks both events and opinions on social media and in the real world. Where I draw largely on my own previous and ongoing research with diasporic Filipino communities, my observations reported here are confirmed by at least one other independent published source, either in recent academic work or in reputable journalistic investigations.¹⁶

THE EMERGENCE OF E-DIASPORAS

This section describes the evolution of e-diasporas and polymedia and examines the risks inherent in integrated platforms.

From the printing press to integrated platforms

For diasporas, social media have been the latest in a series of technologies that have offered possibilities for self-organisation independent of the state. This history began with the printing press in the 15th century and extended into radio and television in the 20th century. As new technologies appeared, people learned novel things about others and created new forms of collective action. As the newest iterations of SNSs and apps have been rolled out globally, different groups have adapted them to suit their own ends, producing unique local content and a variety of network forms.¹⁷

In the 1990s, the internet greatly increased opportunities to expand social connections. Initially, those opportunities were predominantly individual-to-individual and offered users only limited ways to personalise their experience.¹⁸ Chat rooms and web forums were impersonal and required a high level of technical skill. Most members of diasporas didn't find them well suited to their needs.

When large social media platforms emerged in the mid-2000s, group-to-group and individual-to-group connections expanded exponentially. Facebook, launched in 2004, ushered in an era of cheaper access and lower skill thresholds that saw SNSs widely adopted by diasporas. Social media rapidly became necessary to share information and coordinate group activities.

By 2015, Facebook had 1.7 billion active monthly users globally.¹⁹ It has maintained a huge reach: currently, approximately 90% of internet users in key countries in the global South (including the Philippines, Mexico, Indonesia, Vietnam, India, Brazil, South Africa, Malaysia and Turkey) visit the platform.²⁰ Most of those countries also have significant or rapidly expanding labour diasporas. Some (India, Mexico and the Philippines) have the world's largest and longest-established diasporas.²¹ So it appears that SNSs have both enabled diasporas to intensify their existing global connections and assisted new cohorts of people to migrate.

With the rise of Facebook in the English-speaking world, a wider range of users have adopted social media to communicate with others, shape and express their individual identities and create networks. Initially, they accessed these platforms through websites, but the SNS platforms were soon redesigned as applications (apps), supported by a tablet or smartphone interface.

In English-speaking parts of the world, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Skype and Instagram rapidly became integral in the daily lives of diasporic communities, and were soon supplemented by WhatsApp and Snapchat. These social media platforms offer services that supplanted or absorbed SMS (short message service) text messaging and BlackBerry Messenger services and now host voice calls and video messaging. Facebook now competes with the video-streaming service YouTube, and its Messenger service competes with SMS texts. Other specialist services such as Tinder supplement this basic array of platforms, but are less relevant to e-diasporas due to those apps' reliance on geographical proximity.

Polymedia

For the purposes of this report, ‘polymedia’ refers to the shifting array of interlinked media platforms people access by smartphones, tablets and laptop computers.²² On those electronic devices, icons on the user interface allow the user to reciprocally type, voice call, video, share images and see others across a range of platforms. With icons for platforms such as Facebook, Skype, Twitter, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, YouTube and so on pre-installed on their phone, the user simply taps a digital button and a screen opens. That screen then offers them a range of possible interactions: video call, voice call, SMS text message, chat, photograph, video and so.

Polymedia has blended what were discrete web-based platforms into a suite of closely linked apps. This has been made possible by convergence between the original web platforms through corporate acquisitions and the development of new technologies by their owners. Around the world, many smartphones come with these apps pre-installed in order to maintain and expand market share. Smartphones are designed and pre-loaded with apps that will meet all their users’ communication needs—including needs that users might not yet anticipate.

Risks of single integrated platforms

There are risks in adopting a single integrated platform to access social media:

- The platform builds a wraparound social media space personalised for individual users by harvesting data from the complete array of their online activity. Offering this kind of wraparound service enables pre-loaded devices to harvest a more complete set of users’ data. The value of the data to advertisers and market research firms makes pre-loading phones with apps economically viable. This exchange gives users inexpensive access but, in the future, lacking a personal email or familiarity with web browsers, the same users may find it difficult to access online application facilities for work, travel visas, educational courses or other purposes.
- Users also risk their current security, which would be compromised if their Facebook accounts were to be hacked.
- Any one platform places system-designed limits on the amount and nature of communications users receive.

Facebook is usually pretty much the sole source of news and information on current events in the Philippines for the diaspora groups with which I work. Facebook’s high market penetration in the Philippines is related to its ease of use and the nature of its highly valued sharing culture. This also means that the platform’s algorithms are tailoring content (both news and advertisements) in response to users’ ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ and those of other members of the ‘groups’ they have joined and their platform ‘friends’. It’s not yet clear to what extent users grasp that their configuration of Facebook’s filters will allow them to block ads and conceal personal characteristics. Their default account settings locate them on the platform according to their demographics, geography and political leanings and then allow advertisers to target their feeds accordingly.

Who’s in an e-diaspora?

Age and demographic characteristics of e-diasporas on social media depend on the platforms used. Different platforms have different costs to access and different norms for a successful post, all of which are constantly changing. Facebook has made a global push to appear as an application on smartphones across the developing world, so, in English-speaking e-diasporas, it typically attracts a broad swathe of users, now largely in the 35–60-year age bracket. This reflects the age of most migrants living or working overseas. This means that Facebook has become a platform with a comparatively older demographic when compared with other SNSs.

Digital natives—those born into a world already dominated by the internet—are found on Facebook when they want to communicate with their parents’ generation and beyond. For them, Facebook is a platform for maintaining kinship and a public profile. Much of their own social life and even political activism is conducted via other platforms—Spotify, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp in the English-speaking world. These newer platforms are

where the intergenerational impact of e-diasporas is played out in peer-to-peer interactions, often through a kind of cultural shorthand centred on music and fashion. Much of this interaction isn't made public and thus has been fairly inaccessible to researchers.

Early evidence indicates that digital manifestations of self and communal identity remain very important to identity formation for second and further generations of diasporas.²³ Of course, this generalisation depends on the point at which various groups could access sufficient bandwidth and afford the smartphones necessary for access to SNSs. Consequently, this is a globally uneven dimension to e-diasporas. Each e-diaspora has a different configuration of age, gender, generation and class tying host-nation residents and citizens to migrant-sending nations.

Using social media successfully to create an e-diaspora requires not only accessible and affordable broadband, but time, education and technical skill, similarly resourced and skilled social networks already online, and money to spend.

E-DIASPORAS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

This section explains the workings of social media, examines the content of e-diaspora posts and considers aspects of anonymity and surveillance.

How do social media work?

On social media, good content posted to a page creates awareness of the network's legitimacy among a wider audience. By 'liking', 'sharing' or reposting this content, social media 'followers' spread the message to an apparently almost unlimited audience. While real-life networks tend to turn back on themselves, SNSs allow posters to pay to target demographics through sponsored posts on their feeds. Paid posts are often virtually indistinguishable from unsponsored content. Those who see the post may 'like' or 'share' it further, recruiting new followers for the originator of the content. Having more 'followers' provides greater political purchase in debates in their homeland or with other diasporic groups and their factions.

People establish reciprocal relations with 'friends' or one-way relationships in which they 'follow' a profile or a page. Over time, the online actions of 'friends' reveal some 'friend' relationships to be simply tokens of recognition.²⁴ Other social media 'friend' relationships are virtual markers for long-term relationships outside social media. Interactions on the platform can build connections that transform online 'friends' into real-world friends. They can also lead to fractures in real-world relationships.

These features of social media:

- increase the amount of information circulating, because production and distribution become easier (for example, people use Facebook Live with an iPhone, rather than shoot for YouTube with a video camera), which
- improves individuals' capacities to connect with others and to express themselves, and
- produces better opportunities to organise and mobilise groups.²⁵

However, better and more durable organisation doesn't always emerge as a result of information, capacities and opportunities.

What is posted?

E-diasporas have a shared repertoire of content posted to social media. Most posts are directed to informing the diasporic community of events in its homeland and building its members' knowledge of and attachment to places, culture and language.

Most social media content is based on images, photographs or graphics. The images enable users to review and communicate experiences with others, create shared and playful narratives, express affection and create their own art. These positive aspects of image sharing attract users and maintain their interest in others' posts. A single image can be used in various ways simultaneously.

Research has identified six ways in which images work within broader online communications:²⁶

- Some images
 - amplify accompanying text, in the same way as emoticons, cartoon characters, and so on
 - narrate, telling a story in themselves.
- People also use images to express or heighten awareness of feelings.
- Some images bind a local subculture by acting as a kind of shorthand inaccessible to outsiders.
- Other images can invite others to interact, initiating a kind of image-exchange conversation.
- Images work as objects or instruments when people send other people pictures of objects they own or of objects having, for them, a symbolic importance.

Sharing images leads to social recognition. Users' feelings about themselves are changed by their experience of recognition on SNSs. Accompanying text with images heightens the level of recognition received. Recognition is expressed through the timing and number of 'likes' and comments, with social media etiquette requiring a positive response from those socially close to the person posting. Prompt responses to posted comments, and prompt postings of visual documentation of current activities, sustain and renew feelings of trust and intimacy. Users note who in their networks has shared or reposted content that they've originated, who commented first, who merely 'liked' instead of commenting, and who commented late or not at all. These online actions indicate care, approval or disapproval.²⁷

Users can feel compelled to track activity on their preferred platforms to learn of evolving network connections and disconnections. This need to understand the evolving shape of the e-diaspora drives users to enhance their own visibility. As SNSs offer new ways to display and manipulate images, video and text—and thus relationships—users seek out more recognition online.

For the observer, posts on social media and responses to them create a virtual map of e-diasporic solidarity or fracturing. For the community and its members, however, the field is more ego-centred, and social media activities now serve as a public archive of the expansion of individuals' diaspora networks and ructions within them.²⁸

Anonymity and surveillance

Social media enable both intensified intimacies and intensified surveillance. In the online SNS environment, privacy is no longer an individual choice; nor is it shaped by a one-to-one relationship. Instead, it depends on relationships between individuals within networks. On Facebook, privacy settings mean that 'comments' and 'likes' enable a post to be seen by 'friends of friends' rather than only the intended correspondent.

Posting documentary evidence of diaspora activities—pictures from video conversations, and photographs of events, meals, celebrations and the like—represents a choice to make those events accessible to others. People can choose to make specific aspects their life in the diaspora public and able to be more widely circulated. Other diaspora users might not understand the privacy filters or have decided to use the site more for public engagement than for personal networking purposes.

The public-ness of posts is necessary to sustain e-diasporas, but it also opens members to external surveillance, not least through platform-based data gathering. Surveillance of, and analytics on, e-diaspora activities offer insights for people wishing to market services, broker migration or track political allegiances.²⁹

E-diasporas are increasingly vulnerable to targeted advertising. Unwittingly, some e-diaspora members have taken up and shared posts from members who are paid 'influencers' working for political interests seeking to influence diaspora opinions or loyalty. E-diasporas have also been targeted by 'click farms'. These are businesses that generate social media 'likes' and 'followers' through automated systems or manual clicking and thus create a false measure of popularity for certain kinds of content, causing it to trend on Facebook and thus appear on more

users' feeds. Many e-diaspora groups on social media are relatively open, so they incorporate false profiles—known as 'sock puppets'—that are controlled either by volunteer political advocates or by paid 'trolls'. Trolls working for political factions or governments can target diaspora groups to create uncertainty and division, drum up support for specific political figures, attack and undermine opposition groups, and spread false information.

Data harvesting and targeting on an integrated platform might not be a pressing personal concern for individual migrants in an e-diaspora. Collectively, however, those practices open e-diasporas to political manipulation in new—and largely invisible—ways. Other features of e-diasporas make this targeting and potential manipulation an important political concern. E-diasporas are vulnerable precisely because they're not social movements or project-focused, but composed of individuals seeking recognition.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES E-DIASPORAS?

This section examines the features that differentiate e-diasporas from other users of social media and explores resistance identities, project identities and legitimising identities.

Recognition-seeking makes e-diasporas distinct

E-diasporas aren't primarily cause or project focused. While they operate in a transnational space, it's a shared social space created by their migration, not their personal political analysis or commitments. E-diasporas don't primarily use social media to organise themselves around expressions of resistance to either their state of origin or the government of their host nation. Instead, they have a diffuse set of personal political focuses on social media. They tend to frame their social media experiences to personalise their engagements and don't necessarily feel an impetus to join in collective projects. While e-diasporas may respond to events and politics across several host nations and in their nation of origin, those responses are often subsumed into their own goals. Their members typically participate in e-diaspora social media networks to accrue personal respect, enable their own individual self-expression and expand their individual network connections. Thus, e-diaspora networks are largely motivated by personal recognition.

This distinguishes e-diasporas from social-media-facilitated social movements or social media activist groups. That is, e-diasporas aren't the same kind of groups as those groups that were the political campaigners behind the Arab Spring or the digital activists who masterminded WikiLeaks.

The Arab Spring was created by social movements facilitated by SNSs. Those groups existed first as offline activist organisations. They moved some of their activities onto SNSs to organise events and expand their networks. Their members were engaged in political campaigns to resist state oppression and focused primarily on transforming their own nation-states from within. They used the global connections and recognition offered by social media as tools in their campaigns. Social media let them expand their national and global networks and organise events while bringing their causes to international attention. Global publicity allowed international audiences to bear witness to their repression by governments.³⁰ However, the number of people protesting on the streets in the Arab Spring was usually far greater than the number of Twitter or Facebook users accessing information on or supporting those actions through online forums. Social media played a primarily facilitating role in the Arab Spring, as one of several organising tools adopted by social movements acting in resistance to the state. Those groups have resistance identities.

WikiLeaks, in contrast, was created by a group of digital activists and expresses a kind of project identity. The group is an online collective that uses a variety of digital technologies to unmask corruption and activities that its members consider to be part of shadow governments. WikiLeaks brings together a diverse and international group of people who share high-level technical skills and have access to sources of classified information. They work remotely, having in common the goal of reshaping public debates on cybersecurity and classified information and, through that, government policies and actions. They organise from project to project, and the group's membership is dynamic. WikiLeaks thus has a project identity that is very close to the kinds of project identities that observers envisioned would emerge from online interactions at the inception of the internet.

Amorphous and dynamic, but not apolitical

E-diasporas aren't apolitical. Being motivated largely by individual-level recognition, they tend to be dynamic, amorphous, politically conservative and vulnerable in comparison to other online groups.

E-diasporas tend to either broadly oppose or support the policies of the current government in their country of origin. Much of the content posted and shared on e-diasporic social media has local or national political relevance in the country of origin. But this political content is usually mixed in with individuals' personal, religious and special-interest 'shares', building a picture of each individual user 'in the round'. For organisational pages and groups, the political content is consistent, evident and less mixed with personal items, although that content may contain more commercial, promotional or marketing material than individual profiles. But there's an important caveat here: a diaspora's use of SNSs is diverse.

Different platforms within the polymedia environment have different uses. Choosing one over another expresses a choice to balance distance and intimacy, public-ness and privacy.³¹ People searching for work will activate e-diasporic networks through LinkedIn, while those planning a surprise family birthday celebration use WhatsApp. People might join in a public discussion on a news item circulated on Facebook via a group's page or publicly accessible profile page, but might also respond to current events via Twitter.

The choice of platforms depends on where co-ethnics are posting and the e-diaspora audience that members wish to reach. The scope of the e-diaspora, in turn, depends on the affluence of the diaspora and the availability of bandwidth and mobile devices in the host nation and country of origin. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter host much of the political content shared by e-diasporas, and members often bracket their political activity and 'shares' or posts to one platform.

Looking at these 'political' platforms to consider the collective identities enabled by social media, we would expect to see three kinds: resistance identities, project identities and legitimising identities.³² Resistance identities turn the tables on power structures, expressing the solidarity of those marginal to power, as in the Arab Spring. Project identities try to bring into being values that transcend or challenge the boundaries of power structures, as in WikiLeaks. Legitimising identities support the current structures of power. E-diasporas, whose members seek recognition, are vulnerable to being manipulated and split by efforts to reconfigure them into groups with legitimising identities. They're popular and effective targets for paid advertising campaigns designed to shore up support—and bring in donations—for social-media-savvy governments and political factions.

HOW E-DIASPORAS INFLUENCE THE OFFLINE WORLD

This section discusses the political implications of e-diasporas, with special reference to their use as soft power platforms by governments and in efforts to counter violent extremism.

Political implications

While we're now 13 years on from the initial launch of social media platforms in 2004, there's still no definitive evidence for generalisable e-diaspora user global trends. However, researchers are increasingly attributing political change—particularly the global shift towards populism—to the influence that social media have had on voters and publics around the world.³³ Experts haven't reached consensus on the impacts of social media on diasporas in terms of their ability to organise for collective action.³⁴ It's likely that social media will play an influential role in driving political change via online networks around the globe in the future.

From clicktivism to engagement

It's not yet clear whether social media always support traditional forms of collective action or generate new types of action.³⁵ E-diasporas on social media show new kinds of networked activities that can form new political collectivities offline. The potential for offline activity, however, remains largely latent—people often do no more than share information and seek recognition.³⁶ Interestingly, there's an argument here that, for Generation Y digital natives, there might no longer be a clear intellectual, psychological or sociological line between online and real-world activity.

The underlying idea, for older users, is that social media offer a light-touch way to maintain relationships, preserving the potential to activate them in the future. So, for those users, the potential of their online relationships permeates other online and everyday activities. Only in certain circumstances will events galvanise an e-diaspora into action. Which event will do so depends on the shape of each e-diaspora and its individual members' relations to their sending nation and host nation and the broader community of co-nationals they interact with online.

Initially, observers used the term 'slacktivism' to describe the phenomenon of online commitments to low-risk, non-meaningful advocacy activities shared with (largely) online 'friends' whom individuals don't know offline.³⁷ Usually, these activities have had very weak effects or no effect at all on the 'real world'.

Technology has meant that all social-media-based organisations (bar WhatsApp) can produce digital footprints that can be exploited for surveillance of their members. This has made it difficult to turn the 'likes' and 'shares' of so-called 'clicktivists'—those who simply click to 'like' a comment online—into more meaningful commitments to action in the real world, or into a contribution to more aggressive kinds of debate online.³⁸ More recently, however, new approaches to surveillance and political manipulation online have been politicising e-diasporas more effectively.

‘Weaponising’ e-diasporas

While it has been argued that identity in the 21st century is largely subjective, migrant experiences reveal a resurgence in ascribed identities. Migrants find they are restricted in the ways they can choose to identify and are increasingly associated with larger collectivities with which they have personally ambivalent relations. For example, ‘Muslim migrant’ does not capture the complex personal identity of a UK-born Brick Lane Bengali-speaking feminist activist, yet that is how she comes to find herself characterised by others. This experience of identity as ascribed by external institutions, not self-defined, is particularly the case for diasporas that are visible in terms of physical stereotypes or cultural characteristics. For significant diasporic populations, the question, ‘No, where are you *really* from?’ continues to deny them full belonging in their nation of residence. Where diasporas have developed a sense of ongoing alienation, or have perceived their integration to have come to a halt at an undesirable point, e-diasporas can make members of diasporic communities vulnerable to radicalisation or political extremism of various kinds.

What from a mainstream perspective may seem a nicely integrated migrant community can be felt by its members to be an ethnic and occupational ghetto. Those who feel alienated appear to be largely a subset of migrants who have difficulty integrating economically and socially, even in that in-between diaspora space. This often appears to be the case because the opportunities migrants find in their host nation don’t fit with their concept of themselves and their social standing. Typically, these people are younger and male and were either child migrants or second generation (born in the host nation). More often than not, they have turned back into the diaspora space to seek recognition there, and that’s made them vulnerable to radicalisation.

Where the nascent sparks of resentments exist, there’s potential that this discontent can be fanned by online manipulation in chat rooms, via YouTube videos and through SNSs. Initially, Facebook and Twitter were channels for diaspora manipulation, but recent crackdowns on extremism have seen extremists’ communications move onto more secure channels on the ‘dark web’ and highly secure applications such as WhatsApp.

Different strategies are used by state and non-state actors to engage e-diasporas to take up causes or generate social cohesion in migrant communities.

The UK’s PREVENT strategy

The UK provides a particularly interesting case study of a Western liberal democracy that has sought to use social media targeted at e-diaspora communities to shape behaviour. The UK Government has embarked on this program in response to two particular factors:

- The first, and broadest, is the hypothesis that Islamic diaspora communities in the UK from the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation.
- The second is that social media are catalytic factors in the radicalisation, or self-radicalisation, of members of those communities.

In the UK, engaging e-diasporas has become part of the government’s ‘PREVENT’ strategy to combat radicalisation and terrorism. The strategy, which was launched in 2003, encourages citizens and residents to report suspicious activities and opinions among groups vulnerable to radicalisation (that is, diaspora communities from the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa and converts to Islam) to the authorities.³⁹ The aim of PREVENT is to make pro-radical activities visible to the state and thus to discourage them within diasporic communities. According to the government, PREVENT aims to:

- ‘respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat we face from those who promote it’
- ‘prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they are given appropriate advice and support’
- ‘work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation which we need to address’.⁴⁰

A revised version of PREVENT appeared in 2011, in part because the government could no longer easily access the platforms and user records of second-generation or young first-generation migrants considered vulnerable to online radicalisation.⁴¹ The initial 2003 version of the strategy (Prevent 1) was controversial. Academics argued that it was creating further alienation by stigmatising diaspora communities and in the process producing unintentional outcomes.⁴² Government funds were directed towards conservative and traditional elements in diasporic groups practising Islam, thus reinforcing generational tensions.

Because Prevent 1 conflated community cohesion with counterterrorism measures, e-diasporas were problematised in the public imagination. The idea was that social media gave young British Muslims access to the ‘cyber caliphate’—recruitment platforms for the so-called Islamic State—through SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and then one-to-one encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp.⁴³

Over time, PREVENT shifted from its initial focus on young, potentially disaffected British Muslims at risk from extremist ideologues to address concerns over their radicalisation through university and college campus organisations, and finally on to the same dynamics as encountered in social media forums—first in public forums, then in clandestine ones.⁴⁴

Prevent 2 made three changes in response to criticisms of Prevent 1. PREVENT now:

- works to intervene or advise only transparently and overtly, rather than covertly
- works only in the non-criminal space to divert individuals whose actions and engagements may be directing them towards criminality
- cooperates with formal and informal intervention providers who work at the local authority level with PREVENT coordinators.⁴⁵

In PREVENT, there appears to be an underlying assumption that, while those being radicalised are manipulated, they’re broadly aware of the identities and motivations of the people they interact with online. The online threat persists, according to the UK Government, and this is producing tensions between civil liberties and surveillance on SNSs, particularly web-based encrypted and one-to-one messaging apps. However, the extent to which new forms of digital manipulation may play a role in radicalisation is not evident. Radicalisation online, as offline, involves the elements of grievances, ideology and mobilisation and requires a situational response.⁴⁶ For e-diasporas, those who respond need to be familiar with the kinds of posts, memes, etiquette and actors found on SNSs.

Extraterritorial talent—China

E-diasporas aren’t always sites for radicalism or threats to the state; indeed, they can become channels of a state’s soft power. For example, the Chinese Government has proven very adept at using SNSs to influence Chinese diaspora communities and migrants sojourning abroad. The government uses Facebook, Twitter, Google Groups, MSN, QQ and websites as a route to manage ‘extraterritorial talent’, which it considers one of the obligations of a caring and protective state.⁴⁷ It’s one of the governments that use social media engagement to collect data on their diasporas and work with groups to understand how citizens living beyond the nation’s borders maintain their cultural and economic ties.

Many of the Chinese Government initiatives launched on social media operate based on monetary incentives to return to China and, in lieu of that, to remain strongly connected to the Chinese state. Migrants, however, are more often than not somewhat suspicious and try to engage pragmatically, preferring to offer work emails rather than personal Facebook or QQ account details. In other contexts, social media engage migrants and their children in a greater ‘Cyber China’ in which they’re encouraged to express pro-government and nationalist views on issues such as Tibetan independence, the status of Taiwan and coverage of China by Western media companies.⁴⁸

E-diasporas and electoral politics

Beyond the risks of online diaspora radicalisation through e-diaspora SNSs, and the control and influence of national governments, other, more subtle, forms of manipulation are emerging in e-diasporas.

Currently, there are widespread attempts to monetise activity on social media as forms of digital labour emerge. People can now find work producing fake ‘likes’ and false ‘shares’ and to pay for boosting posts on Facebook and other platforms. Political groups can hire paid trolls to set up fake social media profiles that comment on rivals’ posts and stir up debate on contentious issues. For example, the recent elections in Catalonia were, in part, shaped by discussions on Twitter that were directed by troll accounts.⁴⁹

In other electoral contests, large operations (click farms) using smartphones with false profiles can be hired to generate ‘likes’ on SNSs. Teams involved in electoral politics ‘black ops’ can hire designers to build fake news stories. The stories usually have salacious or false headlines that circulate as social media posts with a link that takes the would-be reader to a paywall. All the reader sees is the headline and the false message is retained. E-diasporas are now often specifically targeted for, impersonated by or otherwise entangled in these activities.

Migrants in the diaspora can find recognition and community by joining in public discussions on social media pages. There, their opinions can have additional cachet because of their presumed affluence (because they’ve apparently succeeded in migrating abroad), supposed global orientation, higher earnings and employment-based skills or expertise. But those same features can be mimicked in fake profiles. Committed activists in the diaspora can act as advocates for causes, but it isn’t always clear whether they’re doing this for money or for future political consideration, or whether they’re even the migrants they claim to be. E-diaspora users are becoming adept at reading profile details to separate the likely verifiable profile from the probably false influencer or troll profile.

E-diasporas, rather than producing new project identities, can tend to fissure into subgroups that shore up long-established political divisions in their sending nations. A detailed look at the Filipino e-diaspora, based largely on my own research, shows how this works.

CASE STUDY: THE FILIPINO E-DIASPORA

As early adopters of mobile phones and social media, and with a long-established labour diaspora, Filipinos have been in the vanguard of e-diaspora innovations. From about mid-2007, Filipinos living outside the Philippines began to use Facebook to remain in touch with those ‘back home’ and with each other, whether that was to set the time and place for rice planting in communities in the northern Philippines or to coordinate friends meeting for a drink in Canberra. By 2016, 96% of Filipinos on the web were on Facebook and there were 47 million active Facebook accounts in a population of 100 million.⁵⁰ At least 10 million Filipinos live and work overseas. Social media appears to have integrated the Filipino e-diaspora even more tightly into national politics and daily life in the Philippines.

General features

Social media afford users new ways of connecting across long distances. Social media connect Filipino migrants with people elsewhere when they’re physically absent. For them, polymedia creates a sense of intimacy which, if not the same as that of face-to-face relationships, can sustain relations across distances during long separations.⁵¹ SNSs make these intimate relations public or quasi-public and available to fellow platform users, ‘friends’, or both. The public-ness of social media then offers migrants in the diaspora, and their families back home, new routes to social mobility.⁵²

Social media create a hierarchy of privacy and intimacy. People find emails, like letters before them, to be comparatively indirect and asynchronous, but still very private. The same is true of asynchronous text messages and messages accumulated in a Facebook Messenger inbox.

The form of this point-to-point communication matters, too. An email feels more formal than a spontaneous SMS text exchange sent via phone or a chat exchange using Facebook’s Messenger function. So, SMS texts, emails and Facebook chat messages tend to convey private information—financial matters, intimate exchanges and hot gossip.

Video calls, voice calls and real-time chat—using Skype, FaceTime or Messenger—feel even more intimate because they offer simultaneous co-presence and create free-flowing interactions. The platforms that feel most intimate of all are those that can sustain a free flow of interaction and incorporate a video element, an audio element, or both. However, their success often depends on bandwidth ‘back home’. Some people will ‘all-day Skype’, which involves keeping a channel continuously open using a phone in their pocket that feeds into audio on a computer elsewhere, in order to share the day’s sounds in parallel.

Snapchat is the most private, but ephemeral, platform. It’s valued by a younger generation because of the fun of sending private photos, but isn’t considered useful for conversations. Other text-based platforms are another step towards public-ness. WhatsApp is group oriented, while Twitter is public and Facebook is semipublic. Real-time chat on Facebook Messenger is occasionally semipublic, with multiple people present at both ends of the conversation.

People have multiple ways to communicate a message and share or store it. Some save emails and text chats and show them to others as evidence of specific events, sometimes ignoring expectations that they would remain confidential. In contrast, Facebook’s record of photographs and comments serves as a quasi-public archive.⁵³

Facebook has become a public front channel. Simultaneous private conversations are sustained by backchannelling on WhatsApp, Snapchat, Messenger, Skype and SMS and, occasionally, by voice calls. Twitter isn't that popular, because it requires sustained access to bandwidth in the Philippines to be effective. Interestingly, Facebook comments between e-diaspora members—with some significant exceptions—have been generally positive, supportive, anodyne, or joking, posted in acknowledgement, not discussion.

Photographs and posts form a new kind of archive. They document how, and how regularly, people in the diaspora are in contact with friends and family living in the Philippines, Filipinos elsewhere in the diaspora and Filipino community organisations. They also document how often photographs are picked up and shared, thus amplifying stories from the Philippines press or Filipino diasporic newsletters, Facebook groups, blogs and websites.

Facebook is important because of its public-ness. The platform is used by all ages, both in the diaspora and by families in the Philippines with migrant members overseas. Facebook hosts debates about culture, community and allegiance. Migrants use it to strengthen their relationships across the diaspora and with people in the Philippines. It supports them in raising their children in the diaspora as 'properly' Filipino.⁵⁴

Being in contact with the e-diaspora enables people in the Philippines to engage migrants and get involved with their investment plans. Would-be migrants use the e-diaspora to research their own migration plans. For instance, would-be migrants in the northern Philippines who are considering immigrating to the UK will find themselves directed to pages from Igorot UK or the Filipino Domestic Workers Association (London). These pages give them much of the information that they might need to make a migration decision, while also showing them that they will have networks for advice and support and a social life abroad.

E-diaspora Facebook use is characterised by a lot of posting by users from a self-constructed perspective of their migration status: 'as if'. People post content 'as if' they were permanent residents or citizens of their host countries, rather than contract workers or irregular migrants. Posting 'as if' becomes evidence of a person's social mobility, in turn helping them to borrow money and exert political influence in the Philippines.

The open nature of social media platforms such as Facebook makes users and conversations prone to surveillance by anyone, from family members to governments. People use Facebook profiles and networks to keep tabs on others' activities and status. When migrants overseas donate or help, it's often tied to political loyalties back in the Philippines. They expect that they'll be able to control votes, donations of labour or participation in political campaigns. People in the Philippines compete to attract, redirect and manage their donations and investments as a way of shoring up their own political influence. This creates a kind of 'ambient surveillance' in the e-diaspora.⁵⁵ People expect to be watched by a global community and act accordingly. This ambient surveillance is generally explicit in the user agreements and implicit in becoming part of a social media platform. Migrants expect their host nation's government, their family, their village of origin and other nation-of-origin groups to watch posts on Facebook. They recognise that those groups need access to judge performances of allegiance and political nous on social media.

Much practical (mis)information on migration circulates through social media. Filipinos share tips on 'cross-country' migration strategies, in which work experience in one country (for example, Hong Kong) should deliver a migrant worker a higher salary rate in another (for example, the UK), often without reference to current visa and wage regulations or salary scales. Posts also promote the possibility of 'visa-switching', in which a migrant arrives holding one visa but is then able to convert that to a second visa (for example, from a study visa to a work visa, or from a work visa to a fiancée visa). Often these possibilities are illustrated through historical examples—stories from people who were navigating the migration regimes of the late 1990s, rather than contemporary regulations. What isn't mentioned is that these 'switches' can only be approved by either returning to the Philippines to source and file additional documents, applying from a third country, or both. Thus, the e-diaspora's advice can add additional expense and doesn't match up to expectations or even reality.

Content analysis

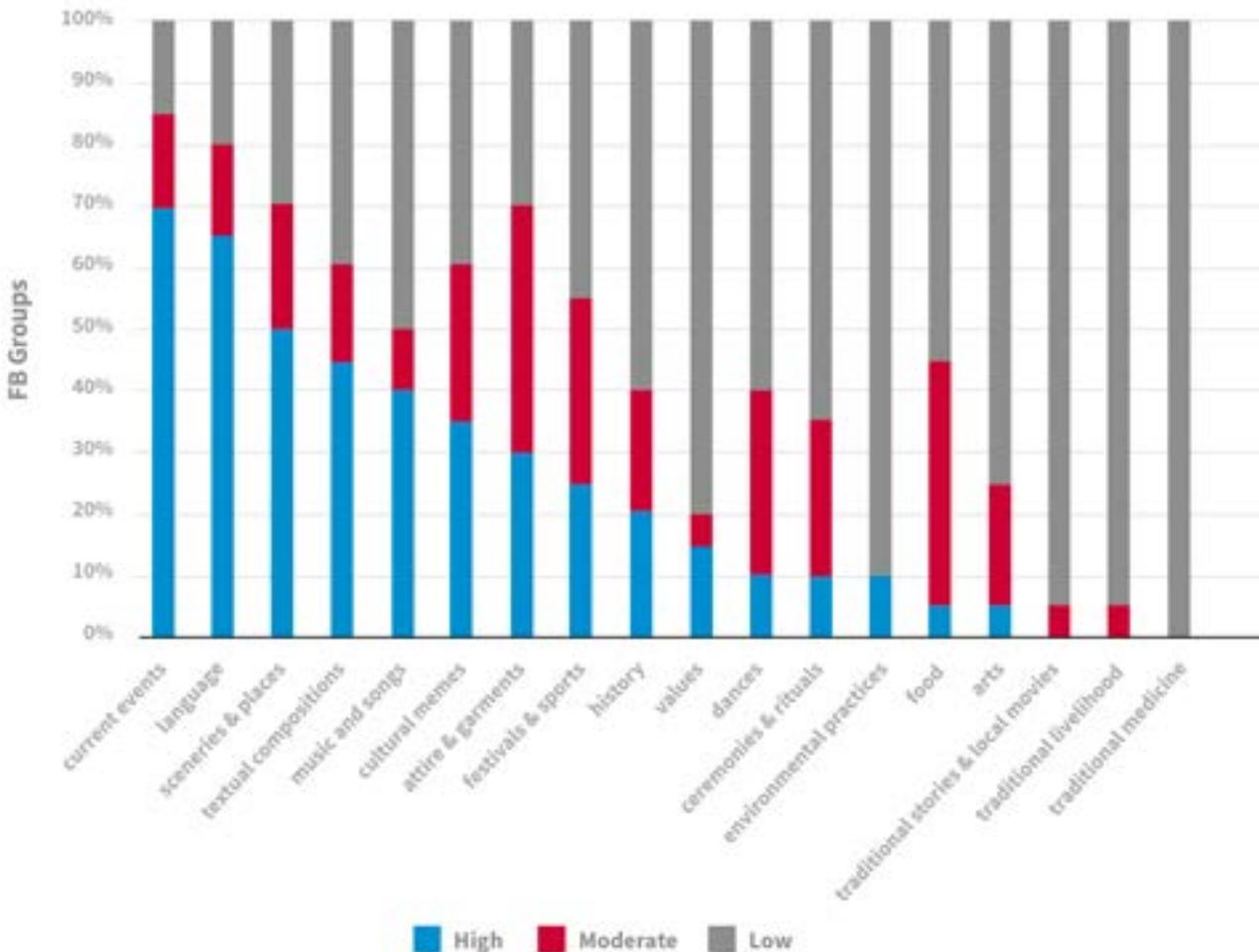
My research and that of others allows a detailed description of social media use among the e-diaspora.

What is posted to the e-diaspora?

In the Filipino e-diaspora from the Cordillera region,⁵⁶ which I have followed in the Philippines and in the UK, researchers have found that migrants liked Facebook posts on the following topics (the top six, in descending order of frequency):⁵⁷

1. Current events (including local, regional and national Filipino politics)
2. Language
3. Landscapes and localities in the Philippines
4. Literature and journalism
5. Music and songs
6. Cultural memes.

Figure 1: Popularity of post categories on Filipino diaspora Facebook pages



Source: K Botangen, S Vodanovich, J Yu, 'Preservation of indigenous culture among indigenous migrants through social media: the Igorot peoples', *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2017, online, p. 2308.

This research describes what this specific e-diaspora ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ from the pages its members follow in their communities of origin in the Philippines. Most of those pages have a greater proportion of their named administrators based in the Philippines, not in the diaspora (Table 1).

Table 1: Facebook groups created by country of origin nationals to engage the diaspora

Group name	No. of members/ followers	No. of administrators/ managers
Igorots / Cordillerans got talent / <i>Talentadong Igorot / Cordilleran</i>	69,400	24
I LOVE Cordillera Group	56,100	27
<i>Rambak Cordillera</i>	37,500	14
Igorots @ Facebook	32,800	7
Benguet in Pictures	25,000	8
Igorotak	22,200	3
Cordillera (beautiful as paradise)	21,850	9
Igorot Clan (<i>Tawid a Kultura, Tradisyon ken Kannawidan</i>)	21,000	9
Sons and Daughters of the Cordillera	14,800	4
Proud of Igorots (<i>Shy kito umali kayo sina tako</i>)	6,800	10
InterActiveCordillera	4,100	8
Cordillera <i>ay Kalalayadan</i>	3,950	12
ICS The Igorot Country Sound	2,780	9
I'm proud to be Igorot (<i>Kailyan esna tako man-istorya</i>)	1,800	4
Bibaknets	1,480	1
Full-blooded Igorot by heart	1,200	1
Igorot kami	1,100	1
<i>Dap-ayan di Cordillera South of France (DCSOF)</i>	220	6
Igorot Norway	80	10

Source: K Botangen, S Vodanovich, J Yu, ‘Preservation of indigenous culture among indigenous migrants through social media: the Igorot peoples’, *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2017, [online](#), p. 2307.

Here, networks in the nation of origin develop pages and build and share content to map out their e-diaspora and strengthen connections within it. Migrants follow those pages and share that content to affirm their ongoing allegiance to their nation of origin and its networks or subgroups. People devote time and energy to creating and curating this cultural content. A detailed look at the pages reveals that many of the ‘follows’ for the pages come from accounts belonging to Philippines residents. However, residency is difficult to determine, as people don’t always update their profile information when they migrate and their Facebook privacy settings may limit location data.

There are 1.72 million people living in the wider Cordillera Administrative Region, but these specific pages are designed to serve about 850,000 from the Kankanaey and Ibaloi ethnic groups.⁵⁸ Some 30% of the administrative region’s population is under 15 years old and is likely to have only limited access to the internet, and so is unlikely to be engaging with the e-diaspora via Facebook. The most popular of these pages has thus captured about 11% of the region’s population. The ‘resident’ category doesn’t include migrant members, who might or might not be recorded in official census data. That record depends on both their date of departure and the vagaries of local census implementation in predominantly rural areas.

What does the e-diaspora post?

The content that people in the e-diaspora make public, ‘share’ to those back in their country of origin and produce for other migrants differs.

I found that Filipinos in London mainly posted photographs documenting social activities in the UK. Pictures of daily domestic life featured most prominently in migrants’ posts. Popular posts incorporated photos of activities in employers’ homes, at church, in community centres, in migrants’ rented flats, at basketball games and on the street. Almost all images showed migrants in the company of kin, friends or wards. Migrants intended some of these images to tell stories about cosmopolitan spaces and sophistication that would gain them recognition for their career success. However, they put much more effort into documenting their ongoing relationships with fellow migrants and with people back in the Philippines.

Migrants regularly ‘shared’ images of the graves of deceased family members in the Philippines to mark the anniversaries of deaths. Some even led circles of diasporic electronic remembrance, posting photographs from digital collections they held for that purpose.

To document their stay in the UK, e-diaspora members also posted photographs of themselves taken at British landmarks and images of their employers and places of work.⁵⁹ Much of the text commentary that travelled with the images is posted in Kankanaey SMS ‘text-speak’ shortcuts that don’t follow any standard orthography.⁶⁰

Their social media profiles incorporate activities and feelings from virtual space back into their daily lives and relationships. Most of the ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ on the bottom five of the Filipino e-diaspora themes in Figure 1 reflected virtual-world activities that influenced real-world life. For instance, e-diaspora members used music or videos to introduce their children or grandchildren to places, language terms, melodies, stories and myths from their culture and to score dance performances or research new dance styles. Current events, however, had a more polarising and ambivalent engagement. Some people tried to avoid political engagement with their homeland, while others found (via social media) motivation to take to the streets in protest in their host nation or to send money or goods home in support of political actors.

E-diaspora fractures over political loyalties

With the election of controversial presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte in 2016, the Filipino e-diaspora showed signs of fracture. Duterte was supported by political elites who funded both covert and overt social media campaigns, circulating fake news on competing candidates. This has continued under his presidency. The same sources have also funded paid online trolls who post pro-Duterte messages on publicly accessible Facebook pages.⁶¹ The social media campaigns have been particularly appealing to Filipino contract workers abroad, some of whom have taken up their own online ‘advocacies’, joining so-called ‘keyboard warriors’ back in the Philippines.

Other public commentators on social media took the high road and refused to engage, ceding the online space. As a result, e-diaspora groups are now riven by political debate. Increasingly, users are reporting others’ profiles to Facebook as ‘fake’, either as a technique of harassment or in the belief that there’s inconsistency in the public information, suggesting that the profile is one of multiple avatars belonging to a troll. Profiles are now being scanned—at least through their public information—to see where someone lives and where their friends are. In these practices of authenticating a user’s right to express their political opinions, a location abroad, such as in the e-diaspora, can undermine the viewpoint that they’re expressing. Contentions that migrants can’t know what current conditions are in the country are met with assertions that migrants shape political campaigns, at the local level, through their remittances. As debates over whether migrants have a right to influence political agendas or should follow directions from those in-country continued, users in my UK Filipino e-diaspora research case study began to ask for stronger checks on the veracity of profiles.

Duterte's 2015–16 election campaign targeted Filipinos overseas as one of four key constituencies for his Facebook campaign. Since the election, the president's paid and volunteer supporters have maintained a focus on producing and sharing content for e-diaspora groups set up and maintained by overseas contract workers. Workers leaving the Philippines are particularly vulnerable to targeted posts and paid political advertising. Arguably, that vulnerability is born from the strong drive of this cohort and its focus on garnering migration information, in the process reducing the emphasis on critical analysis of the messages.

Working with Filipino migrant arrivals in Hong Kong and London in early 2017, my colleagues and I found that migrants were no longer travelling with personal email accounts.⁶² They were using Facebook's integrated Messenger platform for email. Facebook had come pre-installed on their phones in the Philippines. It offered them Messenger for email, and using that app didn't incur data charges. If they had opted to set up a cloud-hosted email account via Gmail or Yahoo, data charges would have applied.

Facebook was both the cheaper and the more familiar option. Consequently, Filipino migrants in Hong Kong used their Facebook Messenger accounts for virtually all their communications with the Philippines, with each other and with migrants in other diaspora sites. As an integrated platform, Facebook was convenient. It allowed them to keep all their correspondence in one place and tie those conversations to their social media activity on the platform. It also kept them tied into news and current events information from the Philippines that was tailored to Filipino audiences.

Feeling pressured to continually prove their cultural credentials and loyalty, migrants often 'liked' and 'shared' political posts in what was an initially light-touch exercise of clicktivism. This content was then echoed back to their e-diaspora groups as a reflection of broader opinion and experience in the Philippines. Reciprocally, members of the e-diaspora enjoyed credibility and admiration as rich and successful and able to influence politics in the Philippines, so 'friends' in the Philippines 'liked' and 'shared' these political posts.

Duterte supporters have set up fake profiles as e-diaspora members and joined e-diaspora groups as a way of shoring up their own credibility and gaining influence.⁶³ Our Facebook-dependent respondents were members of several groups being targeted by pro-Duterte pages and posts. Some had thus developed a shared sense that their president needed their unquestioning support and was being unfairly attacked for his policy decisions. They had taken up, through social media, a legitimising identity created, in part, by targeted advertising and paid campaigns.⁶⁴ Other members of the e-diaspora, often longer settled or more media-savvy, were dismissive of this as naïve or horrified by the propaganda being shared. The diaspora began to split into polarised pro- and anti-Duterte factions. Other members began muting group posts on their newsfeeds, unable to maintain engagement with what were fractious exchanges.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF E-DIASPORAS

A number of catalytic factors provide accelerant for the formation of diasporas. Those factors, such as culture, religion and migration push and pull factors, ensure great variance in the form and function of various diasporas. This is hardly surprising, as people who had been forced to flee their homeland and thus form their own community, such as Liberians in the US, have different diasporic needs from, say, Mexicans who have travelled legally or illegally for economic purposes. Beyond those drivers, there are many strong religious and cultural belief systems that maintain diasporic connections across multiple generations (for example, among ethnic Chinese communities in the Southwest Pacific). Even within diasporas, there are significant differences between generational approaches to ancestral homes (for example, among first-, second- and third-generation South Asians in the UK).

We now have a workable definition for a diaspora—a migrant community scattered across two or more destinations that maintains relationships with its homeland, whether actual or imagined, produces a common group identity, and has existed over at least two generations—and an understanding of the catalytic factors that influence the development of diasporas. While this presents as a chaotic and complex system, there are underlying patterns in the formation of diasporas. Those patterns are related to the desire for ongoing relationships with ‘home’ and the creation of a distinctive community with cultural similarity or collective sameness.

E-diasporas create community through communication. In practice, e-diasporas are often driven and shaped by a few motivated individuals. Those people may have a real capacity to motivate behaviour and influence thinking in their networks, but the networks they build may also be open to hijacking by other political interests. This is evident in my work on the Filipino diaspora, but also in research on PREVENT and on the Chinese diaspora.

Being active in an e-diaspora doesn’t mean migrants aren’t integrating or settling where they are. It does mean that they keep one foot in their country of origin. As ongoing family and personal ties, hopes of retirement and investments in business or education ‘back home’ eat into their earnings in their host country, social media offer them a way to stay in touch and shape the context into which their money flows.

Much of what’s debated, shared and posted on social media in e-diasporas is about identities, futures and achieving a sense of belonging. To have a stake in those debates, migrants need to demonstrate their commitment by regularly following, ‘liking’ and posting content themselves. Social media thus become spaces where migrants’ commitments to their pre-migration identities and relationships can be measured and tested. Similarly, e-diaspora SNSs can become key spaces for establishing the ethnic or hybrid identities of second- and further-generation members of diasporas. There, they can find important sources of cultural information, such as contemporary home-country trends to adopt or new forms of music, dance and literature. They can also find themselves manipulated into new political or activist movements in their search for diasporic belonging.

Because e-diasporas are amorphous and shifting networks, the academic literature is in agreement that they need to be approached not at the level of the single post or message, but through more general prevailing trends in content and interactions.

THE FUTURE OF E-DIASPORAS

Based on my own work and my review of the published research, e-diasporas are likely to become increasingly politicised as their data is privatised. Much of the information of interest to policymakers will come from the SNSs and other platforms that host e-diasporas' activities. Researchers will need data on the content, context and geolocation of posts, and that data will come largely from within the platforms. There are ways to extract bulk data (at cost) from SNSs, but the extraction is resource- and time-intensive and requires a great deal of sifting to separate 'signal' from 'noise'. Methods developed for mapping e-diasporas on the open web will have to be adapted to cope with what's now a 'web-within-a-web' situation.

Work is already underway to develop methods to:

- geolocate tweets and other social media posts where possible (however, it remains difficult to attach posts to locations on Facebook and other platforms)
- verify profile users' identities
- better identify the activities of click farms, trolls, 'black ops' and fake news developers on e-diaspora networks and offer people ways to counter those activities.

Much of this work is being done by digital technology specialists. Their technical knowledge doesn't necessarily come together well with the cultural and contextual knowledge of area specialists. At the same time, social media users can be expected to attempt to subvert platforms in ways that will enable them to retain their autonomy and anonymity. Some of those strategies will be best seen by in-context observers. It will be necessary to combine both technical and cultural knowledges to learn what content really means in e-diasporas and to discern their influence on politics.

Bringing my work to bear on the example of the UK's PREVENT strategy, it's evident that policymakers can't simply assume that the experience of an e-diaspora is transparent to its members; that is, that e-diaspora members can recognise that they're in an 'echo chamber' and vulnerable to political manipulation in the context in which they're subscribing. It may be necessary to work with well-situated community members to conduct public education campaigns online, via social media and in several languages. Likewise, the Filipino e-diaspora case shows just how much cultural content is being tailored by groups in the home country to engage members of the diaspora. Once such groups are well established, access to them can be sold or traded to political campaigns via the entry of paid influencers or trolls. Not all content on these pages is 'cultural'; some is much more politicised or campaign-oriented.

Again, working with page moderators and group members can help to raise awareness of just how limited the scope of single-platform news items can be and how 'fake news' posts are formulated and targeted to specific demographics. Arguably, everyone using SNSs has a right to know how the information they receive is being shaped by the platforms' algorithms and by paid advertising. Where there's manipulation by 'grassroots' user groups, public education is necessary to produce discerning SNS users and information consumers.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The complex, amorphous nature of the e-diaspora phenomenon will continue to present policymakers with ethical, political and conceptual challenges. An e-diaspora is more than a community communication channel, intelligence source, or social or technological phenomenon. E-diasporas are also neither good nor bad. Theoretically, e-diasporas can be influenced, but not commanded or controlled. However, there are some very significant cultural barriers to influencing some e-diasporic groups. Specifically, a diaspora community composed of illegal immigrants won't work with the government directly and will be suspicious of any efforts to influence its members' behaviour or to provide them with information.

The social cohesion of multigenerational migrant cohorts will be influenced by e-diasporic connections. This influence will shape and affect cohesion and settlement patterns in receiving countries. Government policy in this space needs to move beyond rudimentary intelligence collection and advertising campaigns. While policymakers, especially those responsible for domestic and national security, might be drawn to an e-diaspora as an intelligence source, to be exploited using, for example, the intercept powers provided for in Australia's *Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Act 1979*, there are far more challenging policy implications.

Even using e-diaspora connections for active covert or clandestine undercover or intelligence operations or for passive (web scraping) collection needs to be done with extreme caution. The unintended consequences of such activities, should they be discovered or suspected, could be significant. The possible unintended consequences are endless, but disrupting social cohesion in receiving countries, accusations of foreign influence in sending countries and driving e-diaspora to new and more secretive or encrypted SNS platforms seem fairly likely outcomes.

It may indeed be that e-diasporas are more than amorphous social phenomena; each may be a whole new relationship ecosystem that transcends the geographically limited jurisdictional space of the sovereign state. As Generation Y digital natives mature, the line between virtual and real-world life won't just blur: the two will seamlessly merge. In this conceptualisation, e-diasporas could indeed become supranational communities. Policy analysis in this environment needs to look beyond jurisdictionally based enforcement and regulatory measures to the application of soft-power influence.

Policymakers will need to consider how they might shape migration cohorts' use of e-diasporas and respond to foreign interference and the misinformation of those cohorts. In doing so, they'll need to consider:

- the threshold for policy responses to e-diasporic challenges, risks and opportunities
- whether the traditional rules for government information and advertising campaigns might no longer apply in this space, or need further amplification or amendment
- the multijurisdictional challenge of e-diasporas, which might make the extrajudicial or judicial targeting of e-diasporic nodes in an offensive sense illegal or technically difficult
- the absence, in many international jurisdictions, of legally defined offences in relation to social media and e-diasporas, which makes mutual legal assistance or police-to-police cooperation unlikely
- the need to ensure that e-diaspora members have the necessary critical analysis skills to understand the validity and reliability of specific communications.

Policymakers also need to consider the limits of jurisdictional thinking. If e-diasporas are indeed supranational ecosystems, they'll need to consider the global impact of domestic social cohesion or surveillance initiatives. This becomes particularly important if policymakers decide to use self-learning algorithms to target information campaigns to users. They should also consider whether the artificial intelligence used for marketing on social media platforms ought to be used in government information campaigns.

Opportunities

E-diasporas offer opportunities for governments of receiving countries. Governments can access e-diaspora networks to better regulate migration and inform would-be migrants and new arrivals of services on offer, scams to avoid and legitimate routes to residency.

Risks

Those who seek information through e-diaspora social media are often ill-informed and thus vulnerable:

- Much social media content is unverified, based on misinterpretation or second-hand information or even faked by people involved in migration scams.
- Official information on current regulations for visas, employment, housing and education is infrequently circulated.
- Much online government content is designed for websites and thus doesn't 'share' well on social media.

In the absence of official information, the social media space is largely shaped by migrant-support groups and activists, many of whom portray government policies according to their own agendas, and content may also be out of date. As a result, would-be migrants and new arrivals can be misled by online advice.

Social media platforms can foster networks of migrants, dual citizens and host-county nationals who are supporting or funding opposition to a regime or trying to undermine an unpopular government. Some of this activity may extend to supporting, funding or being otherwise involved in terrorism. Where the individuals involved are located inside national boundaries, states may be required to take action against them.

At present, it's often very difficult in some jurisdictions to enforce national laws on hate speech. Where fierce laws do exist, such as in the US, successful investigation and prosecution for criminal offences is often prohibitively expensive in terms of mutual legal assistance.

While the Western world's intelligence services continue to web-scrape social media for warnings of terror risks, the successful disruption of criminal plots, without extrajurisdictional powers or defined offences, is at best incredibly complex. The West's social media platforms are privately owned, and their business models are often based on security against both bulk and targeted information access. Much pressure has been applied to the companies that operate these platforms to tighten up their verification and regulatory procedures, and that's beginning to happen.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments can and should design overt, and at times covert and clandestine, e-diaspora communication strategies focused on promoting social cohesion. This will require the adoption of new forms of information architecture more appropriate to the platforms that e-diasporas use (for example, effective Facebook posts with embedded web links).

For information to be circulated effectively, it needs to be delivered in the modes and structures that have become the norm on social media:

- the 200–300 character text post with an image
- the 2 minute, 30 second video grab.

Policymakers will need to be clear in their strategies about when and where overt, covert and clandestine messages will be used and for what purposes.

Because e-diasporas differ internally and in scope, governments will also need to develop new sets of research skills. Those skills can help them work with communities to locate e-diaspora advocates and influencers who can help distribute their messages.

Host nations can better engage e-diasporas and the broader diasporas in which they're embedded by:

- hiring in-diaspora social media campaign designers and analytics staff to promote verified government information and map its circulation
- following the social media activity of diasporic organisations in-country
- working with community leaders on social media to address the welfare and educational needs of the migrants they serve, including for education on digital literacy that covers common strategies for political manipulation
- making e-diaspora engagement policies part of bilateral discussions with sending-country authorities
- facilitating public discussion of the fluid lines being drawn between civil liberties and protecting the public and between freedom of speech and the clandestine manipulation of digital forums
- adopting an ethical strategy of transparency in approaches to diasporic communities online
- providing a consistent point of contact for communities to raise concerns and seek information on specific, situational regulatory and legal issues related to SNSs.

CONCLUSION

E-diasporas are a new and necessary channel for communication with migrant groups and their nations of origin. E-diasporas offer risks and opportunities for migration management, workforce planning, diplomacy, political engagement and the stability of governments in other countries. States will be increasingly expected to oversee and evaluate the online activities of individuals within their borders. By no means are all the activities of e-diasporas a risk to migrants' sending or host nations, but people operating in these spaces need assistance to develop the digital literacy required to discern political manipulation and entrapment.

These risks mean that the online space occupied by diasporas requires the same kind of facilitation, supportive oversight and regulation of freedom of expression as the national public sphere. Complexity arises, however, when this transnational space is largely hosted on privately owned platforms. States nonetheless need to find ways to engage with their residents who use these platforms both to improve the support they offer migrants and to strengthen social cohesion.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Clicktivism: An online version of activism that uses SNSs to advance social or political causes, involving creating content, posts and relationships driven by web analytics (counting the number of ‘clicks’ or ‘likes’ content receives). This may include web pages, social media posts, petitions, memes and so on.

Diaspora: a community formed by migration and scattered across two or more destinations, which maintains relationships with its homeland, whether real or imagined, produces a common group identity and has existed over at least two generations.

Friend/follower: Another user profile that subscribes to a user’s regularly updated series of posts. A friend has a reciprocal relationship—both profiles have access, at least to read, to aspects of each other’s pages. A follower receives content from a page, but the page owner typically doesn’t have full access to the follower’s profile page, so the reciprocity is limited.

Like: An expression of engagement, interest or assent. A ‘like’ is evidence of online engagement with content posted on social media. It doesn’t always signify approval or full agreement. Instead, a ‘like’ is an electronic trace, visible to others, presented as a ‘thumbs up’ or an emoticon (a small pictogram of a heart, smiley face, frown or other sign of emotion). (Strangely, a frowny face is counted as a ‘like’ because it shows the post has been read).

Meme: On social media, typically an image with associated links, video, websites or hashtags that is a catchphrase or visual summary, often mimicking, mocking or humorous, which spreads rapidly from user to user (‘goes viral’).

Polymedia: The shifting array of interlinked media platforms that people access by smartphones, tablets and laptop computers. On these electronic devices, icons on the user interface allow the user to reciprocally type, voice call, video, share images and see others across a range of platforms. With icons for platforms such as Facebook, Skype, Twitter, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, YouTube and so on pre-installed on their phone, the user simply taps a digital button and a screen opens. That screen then offers them a range of possible interactions—video call, voice call, SMS text message, chat, photograph, video and so on.

Post: An item of content, either shared or original, published on an SNS by attaching it to a user’s profile or group/activity page. A post is the basic unit of SNS content.

Share: The activity of reposting content from one social media account or profile or web page to another, or the content so shared. A ‘share’ expresses approval or disapproval and spreads the message more widely than a ‘like’.

Social networking site (SNS): A web-based platform (a website or application) that allows its users to become members or followers and thus to interact with content (information) and with each other, forming online communities around shared interests or affiliations. The groups formed in this way may be public (visible), limited-access and moderated, or hidden.

Troll: An SNS profile that intentionally makes inflammatory statements directed towards eliciting an emotive reaction from other users. Trolls may operate accounts under false names—‘fake profiles’—as part of self-motivated activity or as members of campaigns or activist groups. Trolls may also be hired operatives for various political factions or campaigns.

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WHAT'S YOUR STRATEGY?

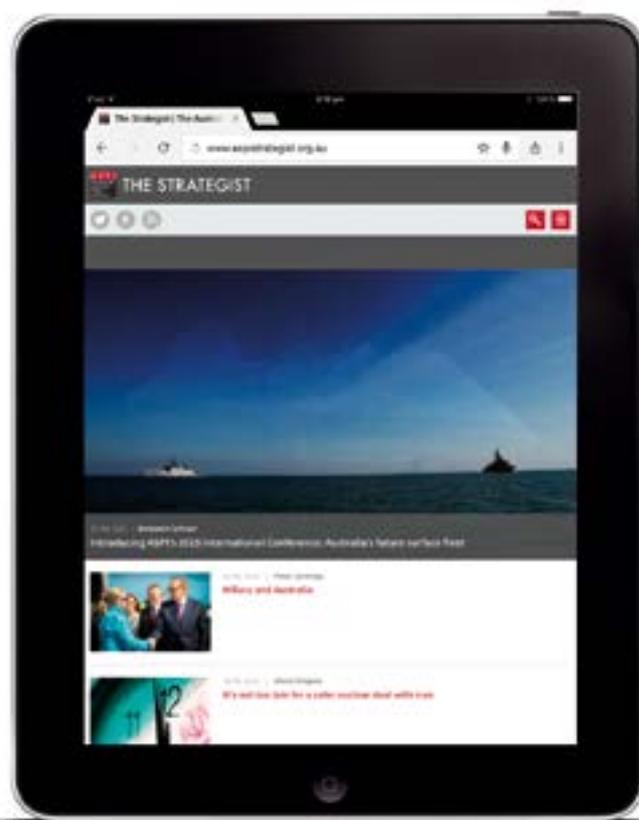


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