11 Romanian Diaspora in the Making? An Online Ethnography of Romaniancommunity.net

Gloria Macri[1]

Abstract

This chapter presents a case study of an online ethnography which examines the Romanian Community of Ireland forum. Apart from highlighting the main challenges and advantages of engaging with an ethnographic methodology online, this chapter also showcases the key findings emerging in relation to the meanings which members of this community associate with the internet. The chapter also reflects critically on the type of community which takes shape on this online forum and, more importantly, its relation to a presumed 'offline' Romanian diaspora. Is the 'virtual' community an exact replica of the entire Romanian community in Ireland? Does it represent the online dimension of an alleged Romanian diaspora in Ireland, or does it represent a community in its own right, overlapping only partly with any offline counterpart? Findings reveal that the internet, and in particular this discussion forum, tends to occupy an important role in the life of online Romanians by acting as more than a tool for seeking information and advice, but also as the 'glue' that enhances the bonding of the diaspora members and as an essential space for debate, a 'round table' where Romanians discuss their lives in Ireland and the 'fate' of the motherland.

Keywords: diaspora, media, identity, the internet, online ethnography.

1. School of Communications, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland; gloria.macri2@mail.dcu.ie

1.   Introduction

This chapter critically explores the key role of the internet as a medium through which Romanians in Ireland communicate and interact with each other. At the same time, it discusses in detail the methodological implications of choosing an online fieldwork location. Findings presented in this chapter are part of my wider doctoral research which highlights the online construction of diasporic discourses of identity among Romanians in Ireland. The chapter thus aims to cast some light on the main challenges and advantages of doing ethnographies online, but also to reflect on the types of communities that take shape online: are such communities different from their offline counterparts? This aspect is particularly important from the diasporic perspective. By choosing to showcase the engagement of Romanians in Ireland with the virtual space, important findings emerge as to whether this 'virtual' group is representative of *all* Romanians in Ireland or at the least of those who have developed awareness around their diasporic belonging.

In order to unravel these aspects, the present chapter is structured as follows: the first section provides a background to the case study in order to bring to the fore some of the key aspects that characterise Romanians in Ireland from a statistical point of view (based on available Census data) but also in relation to their associational life and their diasporic media production. The latter aspects will help contextualise the relevance of the internet, and of the forum in particular, for this community. Following this succinct description of Romanians in Ireland, the chapter then discusses some of the main points emerging from literature on the role of the internet for migrant and diasporic communities. This section also includes a brief discussion in relation to the sometimes interchangeable (hence problematic) use of the two above-mentioned concepts in existing scholarship. The next section presents a critical assessment of the methodology used. This part of the chapter reflects on the theoretical grounding of the research method employed, namely virtual ethnography, but also on the key differences between 'traditional' and online ethnographies. The ethical implications of a study of virtual communities are also discussed in detail. Finally, the last section of the chapter discusses the

main findings of the research as it strives to uncover who are Romanians online and how they understand their online involvement.

2. Background to the case study

Ireland has never been one of the main migration destinations for Romanians, as was the case of Italy and Spain. At the surface level this may be explained by Ireland's remote location as well as the possible language difficulties, in comparison with the easiness Romanians have in comprehending Italian or Spanish due to the common Latin origin of the two languages. Another and perhaps more important aspect is the fact that by the time the Celtic Tiger was well underway, Italy and Spain were already becoming popular destinations for Romanians. Moreover, the strong networked character of Romanian migration can explain why Romanians have oriented themselves predominantly to these two countries.

Very little information is available statistically about the Romanian population living in Ireland. To a great extent all existing information is sourced from the last two Censuses[1] recorded in 2006 and 2011. The 2006 Census mentioned a figure of 8,492 Romanian-born residents[2]. This figure has been subject to change in recent years given the fact that in January 2007 Romania joined the European Union. The latest Census data indicates a figure of 17,995 Romanians in Ireland, the sharpest increase of all non-Irish residents, nearly 112 per cent increase.

The Census also indicates that Romanians tend to be heavily concentrated in Dublin, with around 35 per cent (2006) and respectively 32 per cent (2011) living in the city. The rest, according to the same data set, are spread in small communities throughout the country.

From the gender ratio perspective, Census data show that men constitute only

1. Census, Central Statistics Office Ireland. Retrieved from http://www.cso.ie/en/census/

2. Persons that are usually resident in the state and that were present in their usual residence on Census night.

slightly more than half of the number of Romanian migrants (54 per cent in 2006 and 51 per cent in 2011). Furthermore, the Census states that most of the Romanian migrants can be found in the 25 to 44 age bracket (about 62 per cent of the total) and this seems to fit the pattern of most other Eastern European migrants. This confirms that the Romanian community in Ireland is largely constituted by a labour active population. According to the 2006 Census, 70 per cent of males and 42 per cent of females were employed. This aspect also highlights the fact that the Romanian community in Ireland is a relatively new community.

In relation to associational life, face-to-face conversations with key informants in the Romanian community in Ireland (as well as several posts archived on the forum) have revealed that the first voluntary community organisations were formed around the Orthodox core of the community in the early years (1978-1981). It was only later (1998-2004) that more Romanian organisations and associations emerged, mostly on the basis of existing social ties and connections between their members. These organisations were mainly concerned with providing assistance with regard to some of the problems that Romanians in Ireland were facing at the time: asylum seeking, deportations, IBC and work permit applications just to name a few. Following Romania's entry into the European Union the activities of these organisations shifted towards the organisation of language courses, and celebration of particular events, e.g., Romania's National Day, International Children's Day, Women's day, etc.

In light of existing literature (Cavanagh, 2007; Georgiou, 2006) which invariably recognises the vital role of the public sphere in the process of shaping and 'baptising' (diasporic) identity discourses, it was interesting to note that the above-mentioned Romanian organisations in Ireland did not seem to contribute much in this respect. Furthermore, Romanian migrants, unlike some of the other migrant communities living in Ireland, did not have a distinct 'physical' place (such as a community centre or a favourite pub, etc.) where they gathered up and chatted freely about, among many other aspects, their identities. It was from this perspective that the internet community began to reveal its research potential.

Moreover, traditional forms of Romanian diasporic media production (e.g., newspapers, radio shows/stations, etc.) were rather modest and focused mainly on reproducing news from the homeland and the host society's mainstream media, thus having a minimal impact on the process of negotiation of diasporic identities. Furthermore, most of these media productions initiatives could not overcome some of the main challenges that diasporic media generally have to face, namely shortages of human and financial resources. Last but not least, forum conversations point towards numerous concerns of community members in relation to the poor quality of the material published, issues of ownership (private vs. community owned) and representation, as questions emerge about whether the so-called 'diasporic newspaper' actually represent the entire community or rather the voice of its individual editors.

The forum emerged in 2004 when the website http://www.romaniancommunity. net[1] was taken over by the members of the umbrella community Romanian Community of Ireland. Before 2004, the above-mentioned website served only as a portal of news pertaining to the community, the homeland or the host society. The forum represents the most dynamic part of the website and even during the times when the website was down due to several technical problems, the forum was always 'kept alive' through a direct link to the database of messages. It thus seems as if the forum acts as the 'heart of the community'.

The look of the forum is rather plain and functional, containing very few visual elements besides the logo and the stylised name of the community. Both logo and the website have been revamped several times throughout the years. The forum is structured around fifteen sections[2], each containing two to eight sub-sections. Furthermore, each subsection is split into threads of discussion which contain the posts made by users and the moderators on each particular topic. A brief look at the forum statistics highlights the fact that the most prolific sub-section is the

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1. In spite of the English name of the internet domain, the 'official' language of the forum is Romanian. However in some occasions a mix of the two languages is used, both in the titles of some of the sections as well as in the messages posted.

2. The sections are entitled: 1. Upgrade Issues; 2. Welcome; 3. General; 4. The Romanian Community of Ireland; 5. Romanian Embassy; 6. Offtopic; 7. Emigration (Immigration); 8. Section dedicated to the gender 'conflicts'; 9. Culture and innovation; 10. Family; 11. Advertising; 12. Medical Forum; 13. Education; 14. Entertainment; 15. For specialists.

'General Matters' category, with 512 discussion threads and 8,462 posts[1]. While the structure of the forum seems quite complex and clear cut, it needs to be noted that discussion threads are not as neatly categorised on the forum. Thus, when a new topic of discussion emerges, the thread seems to get created mainly in the 'General Matters' category, which could explain its significant size. Hence, this sub-section includes numerous messages on a great variety of topics.

In relation to the patterns of posting, it can be easily observed that while some discussion threads get no (or at best a few) responses, others stimulate a good number of posts. On the other hand, while some of the discussions may become 'abandoned' (as no users will make any posts in the thread for months and even years), these threads may be reopened at a later time, triggered by certain new events. It is also important to note that while some topics are 'kept alive' by the users through continuous posting, others are maintained on top by forum administrators and moderators by making them 'sticky' (i.e., sticking them on top of the other threads which are chronologically sorted).

Forum statistics indicate that at the time when data collection was completed[2] there were 883 members registered on the forum, but as the information can be accessed even without registration, the 'readership' of the forum may have been even higher. Out of the total number of registered users, about 100 members are also categorised as active. The degree of interaction between users as well as the number of posts is significant, taking into account, of course, the rather small size of the Romanian community in Ireland.

Hence, having started in 2004 as a coordinated effort of a very small group of volunteers to help facilitate access to information for those Romanian migrants who were struggling to regulate their stay in Ireland (asylum seekers, IBC applicants, work permit renewals, etc.), by 2010 (when data collection for this study finished) the forum had already become a lively arena, Romanians of various educational and occupational backgrounds meet there everyday and

1. As of December 6th 2011.

2. May 31st 2010.

approach a great variety of topics, from sharing information about life in Ireland to commenting on news stories from various sources, from complaining about daily problems to discussing complex issues such as identity and belonging. Since October 2011, the forum has been integrated with a new online platform, i.e., the *Facebook* page of the Romanian Community of Ireland. This strategy allows forum threads to be simultaneously posted on *Facebook* and the users' *Facebook* posts to be fed back into the forum as comments.

3. Old wine, in new bottles?
The roles of the internet in diasporic life

Before examining the role played by the internet in the lives of migrants and diasporeans, a few considerations need to be made in relation to these two concepts which often seem to overlap in existing literature (see Hiller & Franz, 2004; Shi, 2005). Particularly in empirical studies, groups of immigrants of an alleged common ancestry have been described interchangeably as 'migrants', 'diasporas' (and sometimes 'ethnics') without building a strong rationale for doing so and also without questioning whether these labels attached to a particular group correspond to the groups' own feelings about their belonging. Clarifying to a certain extent the similarities and differences between these concepts allows us to understand the meanings that online Romanians associate to their forum participation and to their belonging to a 'virtual' community.

The concept of 'diaspora' is, according to Sreberny (2000) a key term in the contemporary debates about immigration and identity. Safran (1991) gives probably the most well-known account of what classic diaspora is. The author points out that these diasporas: involve dispersal from an original place; have a collective memory and a vision of their homeland; feel that perfect acceptance and integration into the host society is not attainable; contemplate the return to the homeland; are committed to maintain and restore the original homeland, and feel a strong ethnic group consciousness based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, and a belief in a common fate (pp. 83-84).

Many authors feel that the classic meaning of diaspora, as defined by Safran (1991), tends to be rather restrictive, referring only to very few groups, in particular Jewish or ancient Greek. The modern understanding of diasporas includes a great variety of groups whose circumstances are quite different (Reis, 2004) and, according to Clifford (1994), these groups tend to experience 'inbetweenness', a lived tension generated by experiencing "separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (p. 311). Hence, the meaning of diasporas has changed considerably since the first diasporas were documented and, as Wieviorka (2007) concludes, there is an ongoing process of creating new forms of diasporas which co-exist with old ones. We should then re-conceptualise 'diaspora' in terms of its multiple connections and links (Tsagarousianou, 2004) with home and the host society as well as multiple 'Others'.

In spite of its limitations, Safran's (1991) definition however clearly denotes the line of difference between a diasporic and a migrant community. Hence, while the term 'migrant' generally refers to a very broad category and is applied to persons who leave their usual place of residence in order to settle in a different place, diasporas are not to be reduced to immigrant communities which tend to be rather temporary and lack a particular group consciousness. Furthermore, while migrants may form a diaspora, the latter is not necessarily made up of people who have geographically re-settled, nor is it equivalent to a group of people of the same nationality. These aspects become even more important when referring to the online involvement of these communities. For example, many studies (Hiller & Franz, 2004; Miller & Slater, 2000) signal the emphasis which migrants place on the internet as a tool for searching for information and enhancing the social networks needed in their process of relocation, both before and after their departure from the homeland.

However, from a diasporic perspective, the internet represents much more than a source of information and social contacts. A few studies in the field of media and (diasporic) identities have given prominence to the internet as the favourite medium mobilised by these communities in order to construct and articulate their identity discourses. The main reason appears to be linked to the

fact that new media technologies enable almost instantaneous sharing, identity formation, communication and publicisation (Srinivasan, 2006, p. 504). Thus, the internet undeniably enables its users to become active cultural producers and explore significant questions about their identities, often in ways which may not otherwise be possible in 'offline' life (Cheung, 2004, p. 55).

Apart from Cheung (2004), many other scholars also argue that the internet has contributed greatly to the re-invention of diasporic connections and therefore leads to new forms of identification (Nedelcu, 2000; Parker & Song, 2006). Other scholars caution against the assumption that a change of medium necessarily needs to be equated with a change in what is actually transmitted or in the types of communities that it produces (Mandaville, 2001). Thus, while diasporic groups may use the internet in the process of imagining themselves as a community and acquiring a sense of belonging to this community, this medium may facilitate and enhance but not necessarily radically transform the types of interactions which exist among members of a community offline.

Gauntlett (2004) sees the internet as key for the study of identity and argues that this is mainly because the web enhances the public sphere, it gives anonymity and also allows room for identity play in cyberspace. Foster (1996) supports this view and argues that the internet "allows each individual user an equal voice, or at the least an equal opportunity to speak" (p. 23). There are also scholars who are critical about internet's capacity to act as a public sphere. Sparks (1998, cited in Cavanagh, 2007) for example mentions that we should ask ourselves the question of whether the internet guarantees access to all and whether the citizens have the right to exchange opinions in an unrestricted manner as Habermas (1974) asserted. DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001) also question the power of the internet, and in particular the discussion boards, to allow for a rational consensus to occur over a particular matter of interest. However, they feel that the internet definitely constitutes a step in the direction of becoming a renewed public sphere.

In a similar vein, Papacharissi (2002) argues that the internet, as a public space, has indeed the power to facilitate, but not necessarily ensure, the restoration

of the public sphere. She goes on to further argue that the internet facilitates very diverse people to come together and to expand on each other's horizons with culturally diverse viewpoints (p. 23). Similarly, Cavanagh (2007) asserts that the internet is important because it constitutes a space of cohesion and sociality (p. 97). In relation to the particular case of diasporas, Georgiou (2006) argues that electronic media are more compatible with the transnational nature of a diaspora. These media "saturate the diasporic space" (Georgiou, 2006, p. 12) therefore playing an increasing role in the construction of meanings and negotiating identities. Triandafyllidou and Wodak (2003) also insist on the fact that new media technologies tend to create "a sense of immediacy and closeness among people who are physically very far and who may even not know each other" (p. 207). Its volatility and degree of deterritorialisation, in Hepp's (2004) view, favour the articulation of hybrid and transnational cultures and identities.

4.   Engaging with an online community – methodological challenges and solutions

A brief look at scholarship aimed at capturing diasporic identity narratives indicates that the great majority of these studies have favoured the interview technique in order to gather data about diasporeans' feelings of belonging (Ogan, 2001; Popov, 2010; Ryan, 2007). Interviews can be ideal research methods for topics as intricate as the study of identity as they allow the researcher to reach a deeper understanding of the meanings that people assign to their everyday experiences which contribute to the shaping of their identity. However the main weakness of the interview from this point of view is that it does not allow for identities to be studied in interaction. The missing link between the individual narrative and the collective discourse rarely emerges from a methodology based entirely on this research technique.

Engaging in an ethnographic study of online diasporic communities presents certain advantages when compared with the already established tradition of face-to-face interview-based identity research. By focusing on an interactive form of

new media (as is the case of the discussion forum) one is able to experience a dynamic understanding of how collective identities take shape in interaction.

There is still a significant debate in relation to the online-offline approaches to identity, both at theoretical as well as methodological level. On the one side it is argued that there is no ground for the formation or articulation of a coherent identity discourse online (Lockard, 1996; Mitra, 1997; Turkle, 1995). It is argued that identities online tend to suffer from some kind of volatility, thus rendering them as transient phenomena. Similarly, the 'online' focus is also deemed to bear negative (even perilous) consequences for the methodological framework of the research. Authenticity online, i.e., the certitude that you are who you say you are, has come into question at times (Turkle, 1995). However, as more and more researchers acknowledge, it appears that virtual interactions are not necessarily 'unreal' and not so different from the face-to-face interactions (Hine, 2008). Kozinets (2010) furthermore suggests that it is impossible to ignore new media and the internet precisely because our social worlds are increasingly going digital.

While the virtual world is important in today's societies, this does not imply that online social research will simply replace face-to-face research. However, as Kozinets (2010) asserts, when particular phenomena appear solely online or when the lives of certain communities only acquire a virtual dimension, it is absolutely acceptable for research methodologies to focus exclusively on the online aspects and manifestations. Thus, the choice between online and offline does not refer simply to methodological practicalities (e.g., financial costs, accessibility, and the amount of effort involved). The decision is informed by the specificities and manifestations of the phenomena to be studied. There are only a few studies which credit the internet with a significant role in the shaping of identitarian discourses and in most cases the accent has fallen on the static content of personal pages and diasporic websites (Parker & Song, 2006; Thompson, 2002) rather the dynamic interactions which take place on the online discussion fora (Chan, 2005; Elias, Lemish, & Khvorostianov, 2007). Even fewer of these studies adopt an ethnographic approach to these online community formations (e.g., Ignacio, 2005; Miller & Slater, 2000).

It is important to note that forum data cannot simply be conceived of as plain text. Besides its rich archived content, the forum also represents a community with its own culture and norms, a community of members that are interacting on a daily basis, exchanging messages and negotiating meanings. Hence, an immersion into the collective identity discourses constructed on a diasporic forum requires a methodological frame that is sensitive to such intricate aspects which often go beyond the textual level. For this particular purpose, this study engages with a qualitative methodology, a virtual ethnography (Hine, 2001) of the online discussion forum of Romanians in Ireland in an effort to achieve a deeper understanding of the formation of this community, and to answer the question of whether this aggregation of Romanians around the virtual space constitutes (or has the premises to constitute) a diasporic community.

Moreover, in comparison to the small number of similar studies, the methodology employed by this research takes advantage of the tremendous amount of information contained in the archives of the forum by including all this material in the analysis[1] rather than selecting only some threads of discussion deemed relevant to the topic of diasporic identity. The result is a study that reveals an image of the online community as a whole, pointing towards more than just a few salient identity-related aspects emerging from several discussion threads, but rather to a deeper understanding of the community with all its relevant moments. This approach allows the researcher to take more than a snapshot of how members of a community define their cultural identities (as tends to be the case of many studies focusing exclusively on interview-centred methodologies), but rather to capture 'the motion' as well, namely the process of negotiation and collective construction of identities. It is a matter of following in the path of the 'offline' ethnographer and becoming deeply immersed in the studied community, even if in this case that is to be achieved by innovatively adapting the traditional ethnographic methods.

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1. Data presented in this chapter runs over a period of more than six years (2004-2010), totalling a number of 2,227 discussion threads and 25,151 posts. This is particularly useful for the analysis as it includes many key moments in the life of the Romanian community in Ireland (RCI), such as Romanians becoming EU citizens (January 1st 2007) etc. and the implications that these contexts have had on the pattern of settlement, integration and identity strategies.

From its origins in nineteenth-century Western anthropology, when the term was associated with the study of 'the distant', a descriptive account of a community or culture (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Oberhuber & Krzyzanowski, 2008), ethnographic research has grown to be increasingly applied to contemporary communities or societies and the definition of this method is generally flexible. There is often little consideration for the differences between online and offline ethnographic research. To a great extent, these discussions overlap with the conundrum of studying 'virtual' vs. 'real' communities, online vs. offline identities. Hine (2001) notes that while a 'traditional' ethnographer is generally with a particular community in the long term, in the case of online ethnographies this aspect is rather difficult to uncover. In other words, how could long-term involvement be 'quantified' in an online research? Hine (2001) seems to argue however that even in the case of 'traditional' ethnographies, the researcher could not be involved in absolutely all aspects of the community's life. Thus, the ethnographer's notes could only capture snapshots in the life of that community rather than pay a holistic attention to all practices as constitutive of a distinctive culture (p. 20). If anything, the online researcher is more fortunate due to the archival facilities that the internet allows. Hine (2001) concludes that online ethnographies have so far contributed significantly to a changing relationship between the ethnographer and participants as they "no longer need to share the same time frame" (p. 23). Moreover, she argues that 'traditional' ethnographies have become a rarity today due to the manifold time and budget limitations.

Ethical considerations in relation to the process of data collection and analysis have also been comparatively discussed. While in the case of 'traditional' ethnographies the researcher was physically present among a community whose members accepted his presence, the internet has often been considered the perfect research environment because it allows the researcher a privileged position, i.e., according to Paccagnella (1997) "to become a *lurker*, an unseen, silent witness to the meetings of the community" (cited in Senjković & Dukić, 2005, p. 46). He feels that lurking tends to "reduce the deformation of the veracity" produced by the researcher's presence during face-to-face interaction (Paccagnella, 1997, cited in Senjković & Dukić, 2005, p. 46). Other scholars have also suggested

that since the internet sites are free to read (thus not requiring a username or password in order to log in) their content is safely regarded as a public domain (Parker & Song, 2006, p. 183).

There are authors however who insist on the need to ensure anonymity of the online subjects and to obtain the informed consent prior to engaging with the data in our research (Hine, 2001). Several scholars however assert that this is difficult and not always possible online (Eynon, Fry, & Schroeder, 2008) mainly because it is difficult to assess whether online users have actually understood the context of the research. Thus, while the presence of the ethnographer needs to be accepted by those who inhabit the setting (Hine, 2008, p. 259), many questions still emerge: how to gain the consent of the members, who owns the data, how do we handle the information, and how do we address the members' vulnerability (due to exposing their opinions) (Kozinets, 2010)?

Eynon et al. (2008) argue that online research is, from an ethical perspective, not that much different from offline research in that a balance always needs to be achieved "between the potential and significance of harm to the participants and the benefits of the research to the individual and society more generally" (p. 27). In relation to the present study, great consideration has been given to the recommendations made in the report prepared by Ess and the AoIR ethics working committee (2002). The authors of the above-mentioned report draw attention to several important aspects which need to be considered when making ethical decisions about internet research. Firstly, Ess and his colleagues (2002) point out that an assessment needs to be carried out in order to reveal any website privacy policy or statement related to privacy of the information stored. In the case of the website (and forum) of the Romanian Community of Ireland, no such document was identified.

Furthermore, according to Ess and the AoIR ethics working committee (2002) attention needs to be paid to the research participants' awareness and expectations of privacy online. On the one hand this implies that if a research project involves the online participation of children, minors or any vulnerable individuals, the researcher's obligation to protect their subjects is heightened. On the other hand,

the researcher also needs to assess users' expectations and awareness of the private/public character of the online content. According to Ess and colleagues (2002), if the assumption of participants in an online environment is that their communication is private, then there is a greater obligation on the part of the researcher to protect the identities of the subjects (p. 7) and also to clearly inform them about the nature of the research.

A long term observation of the profile of the users, their interactions and the conversations taking place on the Romanian Community of Ireland forum revealed that no participants to the discussion were under-age or vulnerable adults. Furthermore, on numerous occasions, users of the forum indicated that they were well aware of the public content of their conversations: a first clue in support of this statement is the fact that during the registration on the forum a great majority of users do not give any indication in relation to their name, address or any other personal details (some exceptions refer to gender and age); secondly, on many occasions direct references were clearly made by participants on the forum in connection with the public character of their posts online. Even under these circumstances, the internet researcher still holds a tremendous responsibility to ensure that the use of the online material does not imply any risks for the authors of the posts or for the online community (in this case the Romanian Community of Ireland forum).

Thus, several measures were implemented in order to ensure that the anonymity of the forum users is at all times protected during the data analysis and reporting on the findings. While the publication of findings of this study frequently involved making references, paraphrasing and direct citation from the forum material, the names, usernames and/or nicknames of the subjects were never used in any reporting or publication. Instead, a unique code containing the gender and a random two digit number was attached to each user in order to correlate the posts of a person throughout the report. It is also worth adding that, due to the significant number of posts on the forum as well as the fact that the original language of posts is Romanian (which implies translation into English when used in any publication), it means that the chances of recognising users are slim.

The issue of obtaining the informed consent from the forum users was deemed as unattainable in this particular situation. This is purely because, by accessing information from the last six years, many of the forum users whose posts I have read no longer contribute to the forum. Thus, I have opted for informing the forum owner and administrator about my intentions to study the group. Only following his permission to access forum data did I engage in any form of data collection and analysis.

Apart from the important decisions related to the ethics of internet research, several key aspects also need to be discussed in relation to the insider-outsider dilemma. The 'dangers' of engaging with research on people with a similar background or which are part of the same group is, according to Turnbull (2000 cited in Ryan, 2007) mainly related to a sort of superficiality, i.e., skimming over things which we all assume to be shared and which are 'taken for granted'. However in relation to my own position in this research process it needs to be stated that while I am clearly a cultural insider (I too am a Romanian migrant in Ireland), this aspect was also key to decoding part of the cultural context which might otherwise lie hidden. This also reflected in the ability to translate the forum material as closely as possible to the original meaning. This was particularly the case of translating traditional sayings or Romanian idioms whose meanings would otherwise be inaccessible to non-native or computer-generated translators.

Moreover, it also needs to be noted that while I am a cultural insider based on my nationality and ethnicity, the same cannot be said about my belonging to the forum community. Before starting out on this research journey I was not a member of the forum, thus, in this respect, I was still 'an outsider' just like almost all ethnographers at the onset of their fieldwork research. This mix of being both an insider and an outsider brings multiple advantages as it allows me to be at the same time sensitive to the hidden meanings in the members' discourse and to the cultural context from which their discourses originate, while at the same time keeping a certain distance between myself and the members of the group, a particular detachment which allowed me to maintain the neutral attitude which a researcher is supposed to hold.

5.   Discussion of the findings

The internet, and in particular this discussion forum, tends to occupy an important role in the life of online Romanians, given the relative absence of other means of diasporic participation. Hence, the forum emerges as the main platform for community interaction and the collective negotiation of identities. Findings emerging from the users' postings indicate that the forum acts as an important tool for information, advice and support for the community. However, the 'newcomers' and the prospective members of this online community often have their limits tested by the more senior and established members. It emerges that through information and advice given, the forum sometimes acts as a symbolic Ellis Island, where migrants are tested and filtered before they are finally given the 'go ahead' into Ireland.

> If you went to the university just to have an engineer degree, then you are not needed here in Ireland. They have enough engineers with degrees. What they need are people able to do the jobs. If you are good you can own the market. […] nobody gives you anything for free. You have to work and make compromises. So you need to re-analyse yourself. I know that my words may be tough, but this is reality […] Wake up! (2006 - M03).

At the same time the forum emerges as 'the glue' that enhances the bonding of the diaspora members, thus impacting positively on the process of collective identification and community construction. The stories of love (and hate) for the motherland and the rich descriptions of challenges as well as benefits associated with their new lives in the host community act as common points of identification in the diasporic discourse and they bring the forum members closer together[1]. For example, almost all Romanians on the forum seem to have an intricate relation with their country and their co-citizens. At times they lament their homeland's slow progress and they describe its economic and political situation as extremely sad, calling their ancestral home 'the

1. For a detailed account of these aspects see also Macri (2010, 2011a, 2011b).

Valley of Sorrows'[1]. However, on other occasions forum members argue that an important distinction needs to be made between Romania as a country that needs to be loved and the people that live in it. This resonates with one of the most popular sayings in Romania: 'Romania is a beautiful country, too bad it is inhabited'. Hence, this complex bond with their homeland unravels continuously through their discourse and it seems to resemble a puzzle with many different facets, some good (which make them proud), and some bad (which bring stigma and shame):

> For me there are two Romanias. One is written with capital 'R' and the other one is written with small caps 'r'. In the (R)omania (with capital letter) I include the Romanian university graduates, those people that work hard and are very appreciated in their workplaces and the communities they are part of. On the other hand we have the (r)omania (with no capital letter) that includes those that steal from ATMs and shops, those that beg on the streets, the bureaucracy that makes one waste their time […] and those Romanians that are not open to other opinions than their own (2007 – F07).

This double-voiced discourse integrates most of the definitions and perceptions of 'home' expressed by online Romanians and it contains the key to understanding the interplay between stigma and pride in relation to their country of origin. Their experiences and opinions of 'home' act as common points of identification in their diasporic discourse, but so do their narrations of their process of integration in Ireland. For some subjects integration was achieved with significant sacrifices, for others with relative ease, yet almost all online participants to the forum revealed similar experiences with the Irish society and comparable frustrations inherent to the integration process into the host country.

These stories of love and hate for the country of origin and the one of destination seem to create the premises for bringing forum members closer together in a

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1. The 'valley of sorrows' is a reference to one of the most popular Romanian children stories by Petre Ispirescu and entitled '*Tinerețe fără bătrânețe, și viață fără de moarte*' [Youth without old age and life without death]. In the story, the 'valley of sorrows' represents the liminal space between two different worlds: the world of the living and the world of the immortals. It symbolises the trials and tribulations that one needs to surpass before achieving a superior state) in this case, immortality.

shared exercise of imagining 'the home' and 'the host'. For many participants, the forum also constitutes a source of Romanianness. For some, this aspect is strictly language-related as the forum allows them to 'practice' the language everyday. For others however, the forum constitutes a 'sacred' space where respect for Romanians and Romanianness is of key importance. For them, this online space seems to help the participants to create a sense of unity of Romanians as a group in spite of its heterogeneity

> […] we are here firstly because we are Romanians and that should be the most important thing. Each of us is different, we have different opinions to each other and maybe this is what makes dialogue possible. If we would all be the same then maybe we would have nothing to talk about (2006 – M01).

References to the host society are also manifold. Thus, the majority of forum participants also highlighted the role that this online medium played in constituting a space where collective feelings of revolt, embarrassment and stigmatised identities are expressed. It is a space that allows its participants to relieve some of the tensions and frustrations experienced in the process of integration in the new country. In this space, diaspora struggles to mobilise their efforts to change the image of the Romanian community and 'liberate' the Romanian identity from the perceived stigma attached to it. These alternations of references to 'the home' and 'the host' in their online discourses also constitute important clues to their transnational belonging. Online Romanians are neither fully 'here' or 'there', experiencing at times a connection to both the homeland and the host community, while at other times feeling rejected by both.

Summarising the arguments presented so far, the forum is perceived by many of its users as an essential space for debate, a 'round table' where Romanians discuss their lives in Ireland and the 'fate' of the motherland. But does the forum reflect a diasporic 'offline' community or are they simply migrants in search for information who are brought together on this forum solely by their shared nationality/country of birth? Is the forum conducive to the formation of a

diasporic community or not? In order to establish the answer such questions we need to understand who Romanians online are.

Statistically speaking, online Romanians are a minority compared to the total number of Romanians in Ireland. One of the main challenges is that there is insufficient information emerging from the forum in relation to the profile of its users (i.e., their gender, age, occupation, etc.). However, their demographic characteristics are in most cases revealed through their posts on the forum. Thus, by parsing through all messages on the forum, several general insights could be drawn: the forum tends to be populated mainly by a male audience and their age seems to reflect the 2006 Census profile of the Romanian community in Ireland, with most people found in the 25 to 44 age bracket. While most of the forum users live in Ireland, there are also those that visit the forum from their locations in Romania (mostly in search of information about their imminent trip to Ireland) or from other countries such as Italy, Spain, UK, etc. Amongst those that connect to the forum from Ireland, a great majority seem to live in Dublin, thus in accordance with the findings of the Census (2006, 2011).

Nevertheless there are categories of Romanians in Ireland who are significantly underrepresented among active members (as is the case of women) or entirely absent from the forum (as is the case of Romanian gypsies). Hence, the forum is not statistically representative of *all* Romanians in Ireland. Besides these demographic characteristics that build the profile of the forum users, there were also multiple instances on the forum when members talked about themselves in a collective manner, by evaluating their identity in opposition with their 'offline' counterparts. On these occasions, it became evident that forum participants perceive themselves as an elite: a group of well-behaved, intelligent, informed and well-educated people. Furthermore they are the ones who succeeded in their goals and are 'still there' [i.e., on the forum and in Ireland] after recession hit the country. According to the exact words of one of the forum users, they see themselves as the 'upper class' among Romanians in Ireland.

It is interesting to note that some users perceive the forum as a close-knit community, or even a family. The high degree of familiarity between members

can be explained by the long time they have spent together on the forum which has allowed them to get to know each other gradually, just like in everyday life. Moreover, forum users tend to meet each other offline, however this happens only in very small groups and at family level. As previously mentioned, forum postings reveal that many online participants to the forum articulate complex feelings of belonging in relation to the home and the host community. Benchmarking this online community against Safran's (1991) discussion of the defining elements of a diaspora clearly shows that, even if it does not represent the mirror image of all Romanians in Ireland, this online community nevertheless represents a diasporic community. Online Romanians underwent dispersal from the homeland, even though it was not experienced at the same traumatic level as the 'classic' diasporas. Furthermore, they showed evidence of a collective memory and vision of their homeland as they tried to propose solutions for improving the Romanian image abroad. Last but not least, online Romanians developed consciousness surrounding their group as a (diasporic) community. In addition to these aspects, transnational belonging, an element which was rather ignored in Safran's (1991) account of the features that define a diaspora, emerged as an essential characteristic of Romanians online.

6.   Conclusions

Taking all these aspects into consideration, it can be noted that the forum of the Romanian Community of Ireland acts as a public sphere, understood in a broader sense than Habermas's (1974) rather strict definition. It represents a space that allows Romanians to come together and discuss the matters that they consider of utmost importance and to attempt to correct some of the problematic issues. Furthermore, by facilitating the participation of Romanians from various locations in this virtual space, the forum has the potential to enhance the transnational dimension of the Romanian diaspora.

Last but not least, it represents a lively arena for the circulation of information and collective negotiation of cultural meanings and identities of the Romanian

diaspora in Ireland. These findings are consistent with data from similar research (Chan, 2005; Elias et al., 2007; Miller & Slater, 2000) arguing that the internet and in particular discussion forums play a complex role in articulating diasporic identifications and feelings of belonging. In the effort to determine the position of this online community in relation to the wider community of Romanians in Ireland, I took note of the forum members' very own definitions of themselves. It emerged that they imagined themselves as rather different from the 'offline' side of the Romanian community in Ireland. Social class emerged as a key identity marker from this perspective as forum members often portrayed themselves as the elite part of the community: they saw themselves as more educated, more in control of their destiny and of the 'Romanian project', namely the restoration of their homeland and the reconstruction of the image of Romanianness on more positive values.

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