

Media and the limits of transnational solidarity: Unanswered questions in the relationship between diaspora, communication and community

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Abstract

In this article, I critically analyse the relationship between media and conceptualisations of diaspora as a form of imagined transnational community. Despite the central place of transnational media in understandings of diasporic communities, there is yet to be a sustained dialogue between theoretical understandings of diaspora and diaspora media studies. I argue that the role of transnational media in conceptualisations of diaspora is too often reduced to the facilitation of cross-border communities. Not enough attention is paid to the alternative possibilities, including the potential of media to challenge cross-border solidarities in ways that fundamentally undermine prevalent understandings of the media and diaspora relationship. As a way to address this issue, it is important that studies of diaspora and media incorporate non-diasporic media into their analyses.

Keywords

Communication, community, diaspora, media, transnationalism

Introduction

In this essay, I critically evaluate the role of media and communications in understandings of diasporas as imagined transnational communities. I argue that the potentially diverse roles of transnational and diasporic media are often reduced to the construction of

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transnational spaces, with little attention paid to alternative possibilities (Aksoy and Robins, 2003). This problem is exacerbated by studies of diaspora and media that exclude non-diasporic media from their analyses and, in the process, artificially isolate transnational media practices from more localised, parochial or mundane forms of media consumption that may in fact challenge diasporic solidarities. Debates have raged over how to define diaspora and how best to employ it in academic research and writing, as well as its relation to, and difference from, related concepts such as exile, migration and transnationalism (Anthias, 1998; Brah, 1996; Braziel and Mannur, 2003; Brubaker, 2005; Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1996, 1997; Gilroy, 1994; Hall, 1990; Karim, 2003; Safran, 1991; Tölölyan, 1991; Tsagarousianou, 2004; Vertovec and Cohen, 1999). Indeed, several authors have mapped the contested terrain of definitions of diaspora, heralding a shift from rigid categorisations that rely on a set of criteria to definitions inspired by postmodernism and cultural studies that emphasise hybrid identities and imagined transnational communities (Anthias, 1998; Braziel and Mannur, 2003; Dufoix, 2008; Vertovec and Cohen, 1999).

When this latter understanding of diaspora is examined in relation to research on transnational media, important conceptual and theoretical issues emerge. Specifically, understandings of diaspora as a form of imagined transnational community are yet to engage sufficiently with research that emphasises the diversity of migrants' relationships with media. The role of media and communications in discussions of diasporic communities tends to be restricted to the facilitation of cross-border synchronicity, with scant attention paid to the media's role in fracturing transnational solidarities and challenging diasporic identities (Tsagarousianou, 2004). Also, in focusing predominantly on transnational media and diasporic forms of behaviour, diaspora media studies have yet to fully investigate the range of possible outcomes when transnational social actors engage with non-diasporic media, instead taking the existence of diaspora as a pre-given fact through which media consumption habits can be explained (Aksoy and Robins, 2000). There is yet to be a sustained dialogue between definitions of diaspora and diaspora media studies, despite the latter increasingly playing a constitutive role in the former.

So-called diasporic communities are built around a diverse range of transnational connections, including economic trade, physical travel, the formation of transnational representative bodies and institutions and the undertaking of collective political action (Portes et al., 1999). The focus of this article is the transnational media networks that are an increasingly important part of the formation and maintenance of transnational communities. Indeed, the communication technologies of the late-20th and early-21st centuries, such as satellite television and the Internet, are said to contribute greatly to the distinctions between postmodern forms of diasporic transnationalism and earlier forms of migration and exile (Tsagarousianou, 2007). Modern communication technologies have increased the ease with which dispersed populations can maintain a sense of collective identity and cooperative action via networks that expand beyond geographical location. With this in mind, it is important to critically investigate the precise role of media in understandings of diasporic communities and to ask whether the full range of possibilities is being appreciated (Aksoy and Robins, 2003).

Using Anthias' (1998) categorisations of understandings of diaspora as a general roadmap, I provide a brief recent history of diaspora as a working concept. Beginning

with a discussion of attempts to define diaspora through a relatively stable measurable or observable set of criteria, I move on to definitions of diaspora inspired by cultural studies and postmodernism. It is these latter approaches that provide the foundation for understandings of diasporas as imagined communities and as communities that have incorporated media and communications into their framework most extensively. The essay then critically interrogates the relationship between media and understandings of diaspora as a form of community built on transnational connections. It is argued that as definitions of diaspora are increasingly tied to transnational communications, there is a growing need to acknowledge the complexities of a media environment that can be both highly localised and global.

Theorising and conceptualising diaspora

Discussions of diaspora are far from neatly categorised. However, in order to understand the shifting meanings of the term and contextualise this analysis, conceptual approaches can usefully be split into the ‘descriptive typological’ and the ‘social condition’ camps (Anthias, 1998: 557). The ‘descriptive typological’ approach is in part the outcome of a desire to strengthen the analytical clarity and purchase of diaspora (Anthias, 1998). According to several researchers, diaspora, especially since the early 1990s and its incorporation into the fields of media and cultural studies, has been deployed far and wide with little in the way of conceptual rigour. For Brubaker (2005), the situation is one in which there is now a diaspora, a loose scattering of the term between different disciplines, approaches and uses. Tölölyan (1991) argues that the term has been used to refer to any number of loosely connected populations living in more than one bounded territory. And for Vertovec (1997), the term is used to describe almost any group of people who have undertaken some form of transnational relocation, forced or voluntary, permanent or temporary. The result is that the term is in danger of losing all analytical power and specificity. What is needed is a stronger, sharper definition in which certain key characteristics allow for the critical evaluation of transnational communities and the comparison of various groups thought to constitute a diaspora. The search for a more refined and analytically clear definition of diaspora is explained by Vertovec and Cohen (1999) as a way of ‘trying to arrest the tendency whereby the continuing potency of the term is threatened by its misuse as a loose reference – conflating categories such as immigrants, guest workers, ethnic and “racial” minorities, refugees, expatriates and travellers’ (p.xvii).

The descriptive typological approach takes up this challenge by attempting to define an ideal type of diaspora through the identification of a set of definitive criteria (Anthias, 1998; Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991; Van Heelsum, 2003). The approach revolves heavily around the classic Greek definition of diaspora as (forced) dispersal from a homeland, followed by nostalgic longing and a commitment to return to, and somehow politically affect, the homeland (Safran, 1991). The work of Safran (1991) is often held up as the archetype of this approach. Safran (1991) proposes six criteria for the definition of diaspora, the first of which is the dispersal from an original centre to two or more peripheral regions. Other criteria include the retention of a collective myth or memory of the homeland; a feeling of partial alienation from the host-society; a view of the ancestral home as

one's proper place; a commitment to the defence and restoration of the homeland; and the maintenance of relations of some sort with the homeland which define an 'ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity' (Safran, 1991: 84).

Although there is a general focus on the homeland, and an implicit understanding of an ethnic community present in descriptive typological approaches, it is important to acknowledge that these definitions of diaspora are far less monolithic than many critics imply (Tsagarousianou, 2004). For example, Cohen's (1995, 1996, 1997) conceptualisation expands upon and differs significantly from that of Safran (1991), providing room for collective trauma, cultural flowering and a sense of community based on transnational ties, rather than simply a longing for the homeland. Cohen (1995) begins his discussion of diaspora from its early roots in antiquity and, in doing so, reminds the reader of just how long a history the concept has. Diaspora's early incarnation and application to Jews revolved around 'enslavement, exile and loneliness', a catastrophic displacement and forced scattering of humanity (Cohen, 1995: 252). However, Cohen (1996) seeks to transcend the 'victim tradition' and argues for five types of diaspora based on the nature of their emigration – victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural (p.513). Furthermore, Cohen's (1995, 1996) discussions of diaspora are far from simple ethnic essentialism, but also acknowledge hybridity, imagination and communication. As he says, 'In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through shared imagination' (Cohen, 1996: 275). Indeed, Cohen's (1995, 1996) expansion upon the classical victim diaspora and his emphasis on diasporic success in the host-land speaks to the cultural studies' celebration of hybridity and transnational imagination as modes of resistance to the strictures of the nation state (Braziel and Mannur, 2003; Hall, 1990).

It is possible to view this attempt at a stronger definition of diaspora in two ways. One is that it is a much-needed antidote to the loose overuse of the term (Tölölyan, 1991; Vertovec and Cohen, 1999). A second view, however, is that it is too rigid and essentialist and has squashed all the diversity, difference and contradiction that is part of diasporic life under the weight of restrictive, defining criteria. Thus, descriptive typological accounts of diaspora, while encompassing an important diversity of positions and acting as invaluable starting points for debates over the concept, have been criticised on several fronts (Anthias, 1998; Clifford, 1994; Tsagarousianou, 2004). Rather than repeat them in detail, it is sufficient to point out the main themes of these critiques. Predominantly, descriptive typological approaches have been condemned for their failure to appreciate the diverse and ever-changing nature of diaspora. The over-emphasis on the homeland and the nature of dispersal in the work of Safran (1991), Cohen (1996) and others result in the conceptualisation of diasporas as monolithic ethnic communities, moving between the two stable and predefined cultural spaces of the home and host-lands. A homogeneous ethnic group, one that is bound by primordial ties, is implied, and questions of gender, religion, politics and class are glossed over (Anthias, 1998; Clifford, 1994; Tsagarousianou, 2004). In attempting to provide an ideal type, descriptive typological approaches assume the existence of an ethnic community without looking into the ways that community is imagined, challenged or rejected by its members (Anthias, 1998; Clifford, 1994).

The diasporic condition

As a response to these weaknesses, studies of diaspora have been increasingly influenced by postmodernism, cultural studies, post-colonial studies and scholarship, which emphasise the unfinished nature of identity (Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994; Gilroy, 1993, 1994; Hall, 1990; Tsagarousianou, 2004). A conceptualisation of diaspora as based on ethnicity and geographical dislocation has ceded ground to one that emphasises communicative practices, transnational imagination and cultural and social change and adaptation (Anthias, 1998; Georgiou, 2005; Gilroy, 1993, 1994; Hall, 1990; Tsagarousianou, 2004). The focus shifts from definitively categorising diaspora to understanding the 'social condition' or 'type of consciousness' that diaspora entails (Anthias, 1998).

The diasporic condition is not simply determined by ethnicity, dispersal and nostalgia. Rather, diasporic identity, consciousness and experiences are maintained and transformed through the production, exchange and consumption of mediated and unmediated symbols, ideas and materials. The multiplicity of experiences and the indeterminacy of identity prevalent in postmodern cultural theory is reflected in studies that position diaspora as allowing and requiring multiple ways of imaging and enacting identity, homeland and community (Hall, 1990). Far from becoming fixed through ethnicity and an allegiance to the homeland, the diasporic condition allows migrants to expand the possibilities of how they imagine themselves and those around them. Diaspora thus becomes a celebration of difference in which the shackles of nationhood and ethnic identity are broken to allow for a more cosmopolitan, hybrid social agent. As Stuart Hall (1990) says,

The diaspora experience as I intend it here, is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (p.235)

Diaspora is far too fluid to be definitively categorised (Clifford, 1994; Tsagarousianou, 2004). The complexity of the diasporic condition is experienced, played out and articulated within spaces no longer over-determined by the spectre of the homeland (Volkmer, 2008). The neatly defined territorial spaces implicated in the typological approach are replaced with third spaces of potential (Bhabha, 1994), spaces of intercultural positionality (Gilroy, 1993) and spaces of syncretism and hybridity (Hall, 1990). The homeland as a central definitive characteristic of diaspora is made problematic. In its place is an 'understanding of diaspora that makes central culture – its formation, transformation, multiplicity, and complexity – rather than place' (Field and Kapadia, 2011: xiii).

It has almost become taken for granted that conceptualisations of diaspora have moved 'from essentialist notions of homeland, national or ethnic identity, and geographical location to ... terms of hybridity, *metisage*, or heterogeneity' (Braziel and Mannur, 2003: 5–6). In the next section, I discuss the way in which a self-imagined, transnational diasporic community is articulated as inhabiting a diasporic space in which new experiences of identity and community are said to unfold. Transnational and diasporic media are seen as pivotal parts to this diasporic community, enabling as they do the formation and maintenance of complex connections across borders and oceans.

The diasporic space: Media and imagined transnational community

The movement to a more open, culturally informed understanding of diaspora is concomitant with the understandings of diasporas as imagined transnational communities based upon communication, connectivity and the formation of collective institutions, movements and narratives that transcend borders (Field and Kapadia, 2011; Hassanpour, 2003; Karim, 2003; Mandaville, 2001; Tölölyan, 1991; Tsagarousianou, 2004, 2007; Werbner, 2002). Rather than a primordial devotion to a collective ethnic movement or single homeland, diasporic communities are maintained by physical and symbolic communication across borders and built on a diverse set of meaningful connections to different publics, communities, politics and geographical and cultural spaces (Silverstone and Georgiou, 2005). The heterogeneous transnational networks central to diaspora provide the foundation for solidarities beyond the framework of national societies (Sakr, 2008; Volkmer, 2008).

This is indeed what is unique and special about diaspora and what distinguishes it from related terms such as migration and exile. Diaspora speaks to issues of globalisation and transnationalism in ways that migration and exile, with their terminology of nostalgia, integration and homeland/host-land duality, cannot. This distinction is important as it reveals much about the way in which diasporas are understood and the claims made regarding the transnational framework of diasporic communities. Diasporas are distinctive due to the multiple connectivities and spaces through which complex understandings of identity and community are formed (Tsagarousianou, 2004). They exist beyond the homeland or host-society and involve an array of transnational relationships between different geographical, social and cultural spaces (Tsagarousianou, 2004).

Thus, diasporas are not pre-given communities dispersed from a homeland that can be defined via a set of stable criteria, but continuously changing, self-realised, imagined communities based on complex cultural flows and connections (Georgiou, 2005). The constant flows and movements of the diaspora network transcend the specificities of distinct migrant groups based in different states and allow them to imagine themselves as part of a wider transnational community (Mandaville, 2001; Tsagarousianou, 2004; Werbner, 2002). As Werbner (2002) argues, diasporas are 'deterritorialised imagined communities which conceive of themselves ... as sharing a collective past and common destiny ... existing beyond the nation state with its fixed boundaries ...' (p.2) They form through connectivity rather than ethnicity and, as imagined transnational communities, are 'continuously reconstructed and reinvented' (Tsagarousianou, 2004: 52). They are the 'exemplary communities of the transnational moment' (Tölölyan, 1991: 5).

As perhaps the most prevalent form of transnational connectivity and exchange, transnational and diasporic media are a vital part of the networks and connections that enable a self-realised transnational community to take shape. These media include products based in the homeland as well as those produced in diasporic centres around the world. They are disseminated through satellite television, the Internet, radio and even print and are aimed at various imagined incarnations of a transnational community through language, culture, politics and religion. These media allow for the

creation of new spaces for the intense forging of solidarity (Hassanpour, 2003). They enable the synchronous sharing of experiences across vast geographical distances, permit imaginative travel around the world and help groups in different countries to transcend national boundaries and time zones, form collective movements and identities and articulate and understand themselves as being part of a complex transnational group (Mandaville, 2001; Werbner, 2002).

Diasporic and transnational media are produced and consumed in ways that overcome the geographical and social dispersal of migrant groups around the world. Media symbols, narratives and stories are used to deconstruct borders between separate groups of migrants and to establish common cultural, political and ideological aims and values. In particular, the electronic media's time- and space-compressing capabilities are central to the synchronous sharing of experiences and the establishment of transnational social and political movements (Hassanpour, 2003; Mandaville, 2001). The tyranny of distance and the heterogeneity of migrant experiences in different cities, countries and regions around the world are subsumed into an overarching diasporic space built, in part, on the back of transnational media such as satellite television, the Internet and radio. Diasporic media thus allow the imagining of transnational community through a process of 'suppressing or neutralising internal differences, of establishing the context in which common experiences can be developed and past experiences can be interpreted in similar ways' (Sofos, 1996, cited in Tsagarousianou, 2004: 60).

These common experiences are not closed off to change and alteration. They are constructed through symbolic materials and narratives that can be redefined and reinterpreted. Localised experiences of different sections of the diaspora do not disappear. Indeed, the diasporic experience often involves the process of settlement into a distinct local community (Brah, 1996; Tsagarousianou, 2007). As Mandaville (2001) says, diasporic media spaces are 'spaces of communication in which identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and re-imagined' (p.169). Diasporic and transnational media provide frameworks within which the nature of diasporic community can be debated and fundamentally reformed.

Despite the recognition of conflicts and contestations over the nature of the diasporic community, as well as the articulation of localised differences within the diasporic space, the role of media in the diaspora is still predominantly tied to issues of transnational community. Many authors point to the complexity of diaspora, the way in which a transnational consciousness is never stable or homogeneous, and the way in which the engagement with different types of diasporic media can bring forth ethnic, gender, political and ideological divisions (Hassanpour, 2003; Ray, 2003). Yet, these discussions usually take place within the context of a broader focus on transnational media and the establishment of diasporic communities within which any conflict, diversity and heterogeneity can be understood as occurring. Seldom is the recognition of diasporic diversity taken to the point where serious attention is given to the potential of media to fundamentally challenge transnational solidarities and, in turn, raise important questions regarding the conceptualisation of diaspora as a form of community. As a result, the relationship between diaspora and media is too often one of convenience, wherein insufficient analytical focus is placed on forms of media engagement that speak to a non-diasporic framework (Aksoy and Robins, 2003).

There are two issues at play here, both of which I focus on below. First, transnational media's role in the understandings of diasporas is too easily reduced to the facilitation of diasporic community, with little serious concern for alternative possibilities (Aksoy and Robins, 2003). Second, I argue that to appreciate these alternative possibilities further, studies of diasporas and media must extend beyond their preoccupation with transnational and diasporic media and focus on the role of national and local media among migrant groups (Hopkins, 2009).

Transnational media and diaspora: Beyond community

In order to fully investigate the relationship of media to diaspora, there is a need to examine forms of media and experiences of communication that fundamentally challenge the stable yet flexible trans-local connections central to conceptualisations of diaspora as an imagined, transnational community. For Anthias (1998), the situation is such that discussions of diaspora need to begin with a focus on difference, and the way in which these differences are transcended, before we can talk about community, even imagined. As well as talking about the facilitative role of media in the diasporic condition, we also need to think about the role of media in challenging notions of a collective diasporic identity. Media open up opportunities not only for the self-realised imagining of diaspora community based on the continual affirmation of transnational ties, but also for the articulation of fragmenting hierarchies, religious differences, gender inequalities and both inter- and intra-diasporic tensions and antagonisms. These are conflicts, divisions and antagonisms that cannot always be explained away under the rubric of difference, re-invention and imagination, but go to the heart of understandings of the role of media in diaspora and indeed the nature of diaspora itself as an imagined community.

The complex relationship between transnational media and localised relationships and experiences is informative here. Transnational connectivities inform localised experiences of place, identity and community, but are also shaped by them (Grewal, 2005). The transnational nature of diaspora is continually contextualised by the localising and nationalising tendencies of political, cultural and social systems that are increasingly globalised, yet still built upon the ideal of a distinct geographical territory (Sakr, 2008; Samad, 1998). This does not constitute a replacing of the transnational with the local. Rather, it involves the different understandings of identity and community that emerge from local, national and transnational connectivities (Grewal, 2005; Shome, 2006). As transnational mediated relationships 'manifest themselves in situated local contexts', they are also incorporated into a set of local and parochial spaces, identifications and relationships (Shome, 2013: 154). This incorporation may dramatically reconfigure the impact of transnational media to the extent that experiences of transnational community are contravened.

For example, referring to a study of Turks living in Europe, Aksoy and Robins (2000, 2003) and Robins and Aksoy (2001) question the assumption that diasporic and transnational media provide a sense of synchronicity and simultaneity to internationally dispersed groups. Rather, they say, the use of transnational media may result in reminders of dislocation and different experiences based on local geopolitical contexts (Aksoy and Robins, 2000). As such, Turks in Europe are more than simply diasporic agents

consuming diasporic media. They also consume media for the same reasons non-migrants do – because it speaks to them and their local, geographically embedded experiences. Even in using transnational media, understandings of community, place and identity are based on difference from, rather than solidarity with, co-nationals around the world. The stronger connectivities are those that tie Turks in Europe to their immediate social environment. This is not a necessary or permanent state of affairs, but it means that the automatic conflation of transnational media with imaginings of cross-border communities and solidarities is challenged.

Research that has found the consumption of transnational media to be highly specific and contingent upon localised concerns is also supported by literature on the continuing importance of national politics in the transnational media environment (Samad, 1998). As Sakr (2008) argues, ‘power over territory and power over symbols’ (p.296) have not yet been completely separated, meaning that real political, ideological and ethnic conflicts are a major part of the transnational media environment (Werbner, 2002). Reasons for producing diasporic and transnational media can vary and may be influenced by the specificities of the social contexts in which different migrant groups find themselves. The audiences that are imagined and targeted by diasporic and transnational media producers can also be highly differentiated (Budarick, 2013). The effects of nationalist fundamentalism, religious and regional differences, and political lobbying on the production and consumption of media by migrant groups from Turkey, Iran, the former Yugoslavia and the Kurdish diaspora, have been highlighted by several authors (Aksoy and Robins, 2003; Budarick, 2013; Hassanpour, 2003; Kolar-Panov, 1997). The danger of seeing such matters as simply examples of diversity within the diasporic community is the implication that these issues are of minimal importance to transnational communities who draw freely from symbolic material untethered from geographically embedded political concerns. It is to articulate the unifying roles of transnational media as being more important, and more powerful, than the many ways (related to both production and consumption) in which engagement with media fails to correspond to experiences of transnational community.

Anthias (1998) has argued that ‘[t]he emphasis on the transgressive potential of the diaspora is certainly worth exploring: the problem is that it is often asserted’ (p.567). This assertion often comes via the preoccupation with the transgressive capabilities of transnational media. Transnational media are too often predetermined as facilitating diversity and conflict, but always within a transnational space that can be defined as diasporic, whether religious, political, ethnic or sexual (Mandaville, 2001). For Aksoy and Robins (2003), the problem is that other possible outcomes of migrants engaging with transnational media are simply ignored. The diverse behaviour of a migrant audience is reduced to the predetermined category of diaspora, with little analysis of the ways in which media use results in experiences that are not diasporic:

The enquiry is brought to a premature halt with the ready acceptance that transnational broadcasting does in fact, and quite unproblematically, support the long-distance cohesion of transnational ‘imagined communities’ – and without ever confronting what it is that might be new and different about the experience of transnational broadcasting. Because it has been principally concerned with acts of bonding and belonging, the diasporic agenda has generally

been blind to what else might be happening when migrants are, apparently, connecting in to the 'homeland' culture. (Aksoy and Robins, 2003: 93)

Although Aksoy and Robins are here focusing on the role of the homeland in diasporic bonding, their critique highlights the assumption, present in discussions of diaspora and media, that the most significant role of transnational media is the formation and maintenance of transnational communities. In the next section, I argue that, in order to avoid the limiting view that 'migrant audiences are all behaving as the conventional and conforming members of "diasporic communities"', there is a need for studies of diaspora and media to expand their range of analysis (Aksoy and Robins, 2003: 93). Specifically, there is a need to place the use of transnational media within the context of a complex media environment by focusing more attention on the way migrants engage with non-diasporic forms of communication.

Non-diasporic media and the diasporic community

A central issue in studies of diaspora and media is that there is yet to be a sustained analysis of mainstream, global or generally non-diasporic media and its role among audiences thought to inhabit the diasporic space (Hopkins, 2009). Studies of transnational media use need to expand beyond analyses of media consumption practices that conform to a pre-existing view of what diasporas are and what they do (Aksoy and Robins, 2003). Migrant audiences draw on a diverse diet of media – including the national media of the host-land, the local media of their area or community and globally syndicated media produced by large transnational corporations – that meet a variety of needs within a range of geographical and social contexts (Budarick, 2013; Gillespie, 2007; Sreberny, 2005). Despite this, studies of diaspora culture and media pay insufficient attention to the effects of non-diasporic media. It is important that '[i]nstead of simply studying how ethnic audiences consume ethnic media, researchers ... understand the sophistication of some of these ... audiences, which are at once globalized and highly specialized' (Hopkins, 2009: 24).

Without a more thorough analysis of the way so-called transnational communities engage with different forms of media aimed at different audiences, understandings of the media's relationship to diaspora are based on a partial view. The use of transnational media is analysed in isolation from the surrounding media environment, which now more than ever contains a potentially diverse array of products, symbols and narratives. As a result, diasporic forms of media engagement are artificially segregated from media use that speaks to non-diasporic concerns. Other than the role of negative host-land media coverage driving migrants towards diasporic and ethnic media, the interplay between different forms of media engagement is ignored. With a few notable exceptions (Aksoy and Robins, 2003; Gillespie, 2007; Miladi, 2006), the way that diasporic forms of media use coexist with media engagement that informs a variety of other self-understandings, some of which challenge diasporic connections, goes largely unexamined.

While experiences of transnational relocation may shape attitudes towards non-diasporic media, at issue here is the role of media in contributing to a self-imagined transnational diasporic community. Even when experiences of local or national media

are contextualised by transnational factors, there is still the potential for stronger, localised connectivities and relationships to emerge (Grewal, 2005). Analysing non-diasporic media allows an appreciation of media experiences that contribute to solidarities at a level other than the transnational (Aksoy and Robins, 2003). As such, various migrant groups, thought to make up part of a wider diaspora, have been found to engage with a diverse range of media in ways that both correspond to, and conflict with, a diasporic framework (Budarick, 2013; Gillespie, 2007). These groups negotiate local and transnational connections in ways that evidence complex and shifting identities and experiences of community that cannot always be defined as only diasporic or transnational.

The case of Iranian migrants in Australia offers an example of the potential outcomes when non-diasporic media are engaged with. National and local media products provide a space within which the transnational becomes localised and in which Iranians address, think through and articulate experiences related to life in Australia. Other migrant groups around the world share these experiences, but through Australian media, issues such as racism, multiculturalism and belonging are localised and embedded within a distinct social and political environment. It is also through a careful engagement with Australian media that Iranian–Australians manage these issues and articulate different identities and forms of community based on religion, politics and local relationships. Certain forms of Australian media are critically engaged with or avoided in order to negotiate what it means to be an Iranian–Australian and to belong to a community based within a specific country or city (Budarick, 2013).

As a part of this process, Australian and Western news media are intertwined with discourses in which divisions along lines of religion, political affiliation, gender and age can be articulated and expressed (Budarick, 2013; McAuliffe, 2007). For example, western media coverage of Iran provides a space through which Iranian–Australians can articulate different attitudes towards, and relationships with, the Iranian state. These differing attitudes are often informed by, and reinforce, distinct religious or political identities. Baha'i Iranians may interpret Western news coverage of Iran in distinct ways that facilitate understandings of identity and community based on local religious networks and distinction from a wider Iranian community (Budarick, 2013; McAuliffe, 2007). Any sense of an Iranian transnational community is made problematic by other subjectivities and connections that are foregrounded during certain moments of non-diasporic media consumption. It is not a case of transnational connections disappearing, rather of other understandings of identity and community emerging through different forms of media use.

Examining different forms of media highlights the diversity and unpredictability of the relationship between media and diasporic community and the way in which forms of media engagement that correspond to a diasporic frame of experience are contextualised by media use that is non-diasporic. Just as media can play an active role in forging transnational solidarities, so too can they offer resources for imaginings of different identities and alternative communities. It should not be assumed, then, that imaginings of a transnational diasporic community are necessarily stable or eternal in the face of diverse symbolic material capable of speaking to any number of identifications and relationships. Other potentials must also be examined (Aksoy and Robins, 2003; Hopkins, 2009).

Discussion

In order to explain, rather than assume, the existence of a diaspora, diaspora studies need to be concerned with 'the process of the making of a diaspora, the conscious and subconscious ways in which communities, networks and identities are formed and transformed' (Tsagarousianou, 2007: 5). The role of media in this process is conceived in a piecemeal way, wherein certain forms of transnational media use and production are taken as contributing significantly to a self-realised transnational community (Aksoy and Robins, 2003; Hopkins, 2009). It is clear that transnational media networks do contribute greatly to the maintenance of many diasporic communities. However, to avoid the reduction of media to only a facilitative role, studies of diaspora must also be concerned with the potentially significant role of media in the ways in which communities, networks and self-perceived collective identities are challenged and unmade (Anthias, 1998). If diasporas really are the 'exemplary communities of the transnational moment', then the role of media, communication and imagination in the formation of these communities needs to be critically interrogated as much as ethnicity and homeland have been in the past (Tölölyan, 1991: 5).

The relationship of media to diaspora must be comparatively and critically interrogated within the context of an appreciation of those moments of media engagement that do not conform to a diasporic, transnational framework and self-identification (Aksoy and Robins, 2003). This entails investigating when and how certain forms of media production and consumption are intertwined with diasporic relationships, self-understandings and experiences, as opposed to the multitude of other possibilities (Aksoy and Robins, 2000). It involves an analysis of moments when migrants consume and produce media in ways that challenge diasporic community and instead articulate distinct, locally based groups based upon experiences of gender, religion, class, politics, ideology and migration. It also involves interrogating the extent to which instances of transnational media use and production recur in systematic ways that lead to sustained diasporic media structures, rather than discrete moments of mediated connection that exist among a range of more locally or regionally embedded experiences (Tsagarousianou, 2007).

The danger of not critically engaging with the relationship between media and diaspora at a conceptual and theoretical level is that media and communications replace ethnicity as shorthand ways of explaining the existence of diasporic communities, with little in the way of analysis and interrogation as to the actual role of media texts beyond a diasporic framework. Additionally, studies of the media use and production of diasporas become focused on a narrow range of media texts, industries and practices, with little analysis of the wider media environment in which migrants live (Gillespie, 2007). The diasporic community thus becomes reified as the dominant factor in the lives of migrant groups around the world who maintain some form of transnational connections with their co-migrants in other countries. That these transnational connections co-exist with intensely localised concerns, and that these migrants potentially identify themselves in multiple ways, shifting in and out of a diasporic frame of experience, is overlooked unless the full range of possibilities is examined when it comes to the consumption and production of symbolic material.

Conclusion

In this article, I have dealt specifically with the relationship between media and conceptualisations of diaspora precisely because the shift from categorical definitions based on ethnicity and homeland to more open cultural conceptualisations places media in a central position in understandings of diaspora. In turn, this situation raises important questions that are yet to be addressed in any systematic way. Conceptualisations of diaspora as a form of self-imagined community need to pay more attention to the engines of that self-understanding and the diversity of roles media can play among both localised and transnational 'communities'. Additionally, diaspora media studies can contribute further to discussions of diaspora by incorporating a broader range of media into their analyses. In order to avoid the automatic reduction of diverse possibilities of migrant media use into the framework of diaspora, it is important that the full range of alternative potentials be examined.

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