

The Evolution of Diaspora and Their Interactions with Media

Introduction:

Migration is a phenomenon as old as man – people have travelled and settled across the world for various reasons. Immigrants have been an important part of the fabric of modern society and economy, whether it be through forced migration like that of the Jews, the Africans, and Indian indentured labourers, or through voluntary relocation in search of a better life. Naturally, considering their contributions to society, studying the interactions, behaviours and consumption patterns of immigrants has been an important part of anthropological study since the 20th century.

Through this constant study, the term Diaspora has come to be the term most widely used to refer to immigrant communities of different nations within a host country. Various definitions of this term have been offered by scholars such as William Safran and Robin Cohen, each more complex and evolved than the last. What has not changed, is the importance of studying diasporic audiences and their media consumption patterns – however, both these studies, and the interpretations of diasporic audiences that they offer, are also in a constant state of evolution, like the very definition of Diaspora.

This paper aims at establishing the evolving definitions of Diaspora and then understanding how this evolution has informed the way diasporic audiences are viewed, studied, and interpreted.

The first section of the paper will briefly discuss the various definitions of the term and consider the evolution of Diaspora in a more globalized world – one where the concepts of transnationalism, mobility and connectivity are taken into consideration. The next section will then elaborate on the various interpretations of diasporic audiences based on the evolving

definitions using examples from studies related to Indian (Adrian Athique) and South Korean (Kyong Yoon) diasporic audiences. The last section will conclude the essay.

The Evolving Definitions of Diaspora

According to Robin Cohen (1997), for a long time, the term ‘Diaspora’ had been used to refer to the expulsion of Jews to Babylonia. It was also referential to the movement of the Greeks to capture new territories and their settlement in the places they captured. These relational moments in history have been the defining point for the basis of understanding the term Diaspora.

Whatever be the interpretations of the term, it has always been “associated with experiences of displacement, dispersal and migrancy,” (Tsagarousianou, 2017, p. 2).

Until the 1980s, there was not much discourse regarding Diaspora and diasporic audiences, because immigrants were expected to shed their older identities and cultures and assimilate into those of the host country (Shuval, 2003). Gabriel Sheffer argued that limiting the concept of diaspora to just the Jews was essentially erasure of similar historical communities and proposed three criteria to form a definition: having a collective migrant identity, having an internal organisation separate from the host and the home, and real or symbolic contacts with the home country (Sheffer, 1986, cited in Anteby-Yemini & Berthomière, 2005).

This definition, although expansive, is not quite inclusive of the experiences of different diasporic peoples. William Safran offered a similar definition in 1991, stating that ‘diaspora’ referred to communities that shared characteristics which set them apart from the populations of the host and the home nations. Safran’s characteristics included several other attributes too, such as the common shared beliefs of non-assimilation in host societies,

continued support from the home country and a communal consciousness, hopes of returning to the homeland and an imagined common image of the homeland (Safran, 1991).

However, as Tsagarousianou states, these proposed characteristics, in both cases, are limited and offer an idealistic view of what diaspora should look like – one still deeply attached to their homeland, nothing more than an extension of their home nation (Tsagarousianou, 2017). Cohen suggests that certain additions can be made to Safran's definition to make it broader, less idealistic, and more applicable. These include broadening who is considered diaspora, setting a time period before they can be considered diaspora, recognizing positives of diasporic communities and that diasporic identity is shared with both those in the homeland and those settled in other host countries (Tsagarousianou, 2017).

Cohen also goes on to differentiate between diasporic communities based on the conditions of their migration. These include expulsion/persecution (victim), expansion (colonial/imperial), commercial interests (trade), labour, and culture (Cohen, 1997).

While these definitions offer variable and strong insight into understanding and defining diaspora, they do not take into consideration recent phenomena that have changed the way diasporic communities operate, relate and behave. They lack considerations relating to modern connectivity and transnationalism. The focus is more on the how diasporic communities identify with the home that they have left behind or those with similar lived experiences in different host countries. They emphasize on identifying with the remembered home. What these views fail to consider is that both the home, and the diaspora will have changed; so, while the emphasis on nostalgia for the homeland is important, it cannot be the complete defining trait of a diasporic community. "Diasporic identity can often draw much more on the experience of migrancy and settlement, of 'making' one's home than on a fixation to a 'homeland'," (Tsagarousianou, 2017, p. 7).

Thus, it can be said that the diasporic experience is one of integrating the culture, traditions, and practices of the homeland with those of the host country to create a lived experience unique to a particular community. The Diaspora then become a bridge between the two expectations from migrants: they assimilate with the host culture comfortably while maintaining and practicing aspects of their home culture and traditions.

John Tomlinson (1999, p. 2) defines globalisation as “the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterize modern social life.” One of the main features of an increasingly globalizing world is that global flow of culture is increasingly being spread through networks and relations between nations and people. Arjun Appadurai (1990, p. 296) states that the resulting “fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics,” can be understood by exploring the relationships between the five dimensions of globalized media, developing technologies, global financial capital, ideologies, and diasporic populations.

He defines diasporic populations under “ethnoscapes,” as one of the major connecting dots between the remaining four dimensions. The concept of diasporic communities as ethnoscapes can better be understood using transnationalism, which refers to “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement,” (Basch, et al., 1993, 8 cited in Marino, 2015).

Diasporic communities, thus, exist and grow at the centre of the globalising world. They partake and help in the development of all of Appadurai’s dimensions. They enable the flow of global capital by sending money back and forth with contacts in the homeland. They make use of, critique and adapt to developing technologies in order to facilitate their lived experience and connect with their families, with the larger society of their homeland and

explore their cultural identities by engaging with both the media of their homelands and that which is representative of their experience.

The diaspora, then, becomes the figurehead of the concept of transnational social spaces. By using global capital, be it human, social or financial, they enable the emergence of these transnational spaces, “characterized by a high degree of intimacy, emotional depth, and social cohesion,” (Marino, 2015). As compared to narrower previous definitions and understandings of diasporic communities, “this way of thinking about diasporas allows us to think of a multitude of phenomena and processes in a much more holistic and inclusive way, bringing together diverse transnational flows and the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of these,” (Tsagarousianou, 2017, p. 10).

It allows for a more robust understanding of diaspora, their experiences and their intrinsic culture (one that reinvents and combines both the home and the host cultures). Thus, it can be inferred that diaspora does not only refer to a long settled migrant population in a country, traditionally and culturally different from the host, who long for their homeland and nostalgically thing back on their culture.

Diaspora can be understood as ‘human capital’ linking and enabling global connectivity through complex relational networks of transnational social spaces that partake in the globalised movement of capital, media, technology and ideologies.

Interpretations of Diasporic Audiences

In the simplest of terms, diasporic audiences refer to the specific branch of media consumers who are also a part of a diasporic community. However, these audiences find themselves in a complex relationship between their home media and the media of their host country/the Western media. In order to understand this relationship, and thus the changing interpretations of a diasporic audience, it is important to explore what sets diasporic audiences apart.

Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, refers to the Third Space of Enunciation. This is a hybrid space that exists between the traditional and the modern – it is in this ambivalent space, that the subaltern can engage with a modern cultural identity without facing consequences for ‘abandoning’ the traditional cultural identity (Bhabha, 1994). Here, both identities and the ability to experiment with both identities exist at the same time. The diasporic experience enables the community to engage with media, culture, and people within this third space. They are able to explore both the host culture and their home culture in this ambivalent space.

As stated before, diasporic communities engage with technologies and media to substantiate their experience of living away from the homeland. Appadurai (1990) suggests that diasporic communities are essentially small nations of ethnicities deterritorialized from their places of origin. These communities become centres for the hybridisation of culture and the “deterritorialisation creates new markets for film companies, art impresarios and travel agencies, who thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland,” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 302).

Thus, the diasporas become major consumers of cultural and media products. Their unique experience of being connected to both their homelands and their host countries make for interesting interactions with media and cultural products. It can be understood that diasporic audiences “are not necessarily place-determined but rather bound by ties of belonging, by formal and informal social networks within the jumble of local, translocal, and cosmopolitan identities,” (Smets, 2013). This means that diasporic communities become audiences of transnational media through their need to find their communal, familial, and personal experiences reflected within media. This manifests in the form of a hybridised consumption of media belonging to the host and the homelands.

The ambivalent third space where diasporic communities interact and engage with media then allow for two types of interactions to occur with the host media and the home media. Adrian Athique (2011, p. 3) states that “the diasporic media audience can either be considered to be engaged primarily with the maintenance of a global ethnic culture, or beset by the challenges of combining different cultural streams.”

Diasporic audiences, then, are seen as riding the tide of transnational multimedia availability to develop hybridised cultures through their media interactions.

Take the example of Korean-Canadians interacting with the Hallyu wave. In a study conducted in Vancouver by Kyong Yoon for the Academy of Korean Studies and the University of British Columbia, the interactions and involvement of several college aged Korean Canadians with the Hallyu Wave were studied to understand “the diasporic reception of Hallyu” (Yoon, 2020, p. 152).

The Hallyu Wave refers to the increased global popularity of Korean media and culture. The rise of Hallyu has also been attributed to the increased usage of social and digital media by audiences and media organisations alike.

Yoon’s research outlines the way that diasporic audiences, especially younger demographics, interact with media products from the homeland – they are responsible for not only the consumption of transnational media products, but also for their rapid dissemination and the rise in their popularity. “As linguistic and cultural translators, diasporic Korean youth have contributed to the rapid dissemination of Hallyu. They translate Hallyu literally by producing subtitles for a larger audience and re-localize Korean media culturally in a transnational context” (Yoon, 2020, p. 153). The study focussed on 15 second-generation Korean-Canadian youth aged 19 – 32.

A majority of the participants felt disconnected from both, their heritage and the host culture – they constantly engaged in “the process of negotiating between being Korean in the home and Canadian outside” (Yoon, 2020, p. 162). Although they grew up being exposed to Korean media through their families, their exposure to Korean popular culture, by personal choice, was driven by the rise of digital media. It allowed the participants to customise their experience and feel connected with the current population of their homelands (Yoon, 2020, p. 165). The participants also played a role in popularising Korean pop-culture within other communities – in order to keep up with their Korean friends, other non-Koreans began engaging with Korean media.

The participants were consuming Korean media in the form of K-pop, K-Dramas, Variety shows and even YouTube channels. Here, digital media helped them keep in touch with their Korean roots in the present – unlike first generation migrants, they were not connecting with an imagined community, rather they were connecting with their peers in the homeland and interacting with their media in the present time, much like they would if they were still situated in the homeland.

“The Internet is used to create transnational imagined audiences formed by dispersed people,” (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2010) - it allows media producers in countries to specifically target and engage diasporic audiences outside the country. K-pop management companies, for example, have used YouTube, Instagram, and other social media platforms to engage diasporic audiences and through them, pop cosmopolitans. This allows transnational audiences from diasporic communities to interact with media in two ways, as consumers and disseminators.

Diasporic audiences interact with media and mediatised situations within the third space to situate their experiences of hybridised cultural and national identities to fit within

their multifaceted realities. Through interacting with their home media and their host media, they are able to maintain a balance between what they are perceived as by both their host and home cultures. These interactions also enable diasporic audiences to positively identify with both their ethnic and state identities, “expressing cultural identities that are communal and individual but also both local and global” (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2010).

Diasporic interactions with their heritage culture have also proliferated the understanding of how scholars and officials anticipate the needs of diasporic audiences and what they believe ideal diasporic audiences of their ethnicity should behave like. This is illustrated by the example of Indian diasporic audiences, Bollywood and how their interactions have shaped the global view of India diaspora. In his paper, ‘Diasporic Audiences and Non-Resident Media: The Case of Indian Films’, Adrian Athique (2011, p. 4) argues that the growth in popularity of Indian films has been largely in part due to the “computer literate” Indian diasporic community across the world.

Bollywood films, since the 1990s, have increasingly featured Non-Resident Indians (NRI) as protagonists of “Indian” stories. Athique notes that there has been a positive shift in the way that the country views NRIs, from someone ‘corrupted’ by the west to someone who “brings capital, cosmopolitanism and consumerism to India in exchange for cultural nurturing and validation” (Athique, 2011, p. 6).

Thus, Bollywood films promote the idea of the “cosmopolitan patriot” (Athique, 2011, p. 6) who constitutes a diaspora elsewhere, but maintains their Indian connections and fulfils their duty towards the nation by building the image of a ‘model minority’ elsewhere. Unlike in the case of Korean Canadians and the Korean media, Bollywood creates specificities to entice and attract specific diasporic audiences to consume the offered media. Here, the diasporic audience sees a partial, if not a complete reflection of their specific

experiences mirrored in the media produced 'back home.' Like in the case of Korean media, it is an attempt to capitalise on diasporic audiences by providing them the opportunity to interact more with the home media.

“This model of media consumption is characterized by a direct, decentralized, and alternative type of communication, where diasporas can claim their space and celebrate their identity in the national context where they now live, as well as in relation to their homeland” (Marino, 2015).

Diasporic audiences and their interactions with media, therefore, are characterised by how their relations with their home and host countries are viewed. Evolved definitions of diaspora allow for these relations to be situated within the context of each community, their ties to their heritage and how they view themselves. These evolved terms, in pushing the understanding of diasporic communities from based on just spatial, temporal, and nostalgic terms to ambivalent, hybridised, deterritorialized nations that push the concept of transnational existence, allow for evolved understandings of traditional identities and the idea of belonging.

Conclusion

Thus, it is only possible to understand diasporic audiences, their interactions with media and the resulting hybridisations in culture, both local and global, through evolved definitions of the term diaspora. The evolving understanding helps scholars approach the concept of diasporic audiences as a hybridity that has evolved through increased transnational trade and interaction. It enables them to understand the unique manner in which diaspora interact with media and used mediatised spaces and situations to realise their differential cultural identities.

Diasporic audiences interact differently with different forms of media to forge new ideals of what connectivity, transnationality and cultural proximity mean to them. Some view

their interactions with home media as way to connect with their ethnic peers located both in the homeland and within their own communities. Others view these interactions as a manner to keep in touch with their heritage – in this case, the nostalgic aspect is less emphasised upon. These interactions are more about bridging the diasporic present (reality) with the present (reality) of the homeland to forge a hybridised cosmopolitan identity.

Some audience interactions with home media are also about finding their identities and expectations within the home media and viewing their experiences reflected back within their home culture.

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