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“The Facebook is a state of Roma”: Negotiating identities, building communities, and belongingness online among Roma in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This article examines social media as a site for identity negotiation and community building among Roma in the Czech Republic. As Roma are continually denied authority over the construction of their identities, their Czech-ness, claim to physical spaces, and generally made to feel that they do not belong—both in the material and symbolic sense—this article examines how individual activists and community organizers utilize media as a resource to combat spatial alienation. This ethnographic study pays close attention to the cultivation of community through Facebook groups, the utilization of groups and event pages to organize, and the affordances and challenges of moving online efforts offline. At the same time, this article explores tensions and contradictions of these digital spaces that may involve issues like the lack of resources and the fragmentation of community—and of communal space—by such variables as age, language, and technological access and literacy. Ultimately, this article suggests that social media may embody both emotional and material places manifesting as additional/alternative places to negotiate identities and belonging for Roma in the Czech Republic. The findings of this research carry important implications for those with complicated relationships to home(lands), including geographically displaced people.

Keywords

Belonging, Czech Republic, ethnography, home, identity, Roma

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A young Romani activist shares with me about the importance of social media: "And, this is our space, this is our space. The Facebook is a state of Roma. Yeah, it's ours, absolutely." I ask Marek to clarify what he means by state: a mental state of being or a physical state? He responds, "physical . . . like a space, state, yeah. And, this is what I want in the future, our Roma place, state." The longing for place is clear in Marek's voice, an aspirational desire for place shared by many of the people I spoke with during my fieldwork.

Today, there are an estimated 250,000 Roma in the Czech Republic, which translates to roughly 2% of the Czech population[1] (European Commission, 2020). The otherwise deeply homogeneous country has failed to fully acknowledge and support Roma as equal citizens, contributing high levels of unemployment, school segregation, inaccessibility to quality healthcare, and antigypsyism. As Roma are continually denied authority over the construction of their identities, their Czech-ness, claim to physical spaces, and generally made to feel that they do not belong, this article examines how individual activists and community organizers combat spatial alienation and "unbelongingness." In particular, this study sets out to understand how communities utilize social media as a site to negotiate identities, build community, and process feelings of belonging. While research may suggest a duality, media as a key resource for marginalized groups or detrimental to groups, this article engages the tensions within this space to better understand, through an analysis of media engagement among Romani activists and community leaders, its various nuances. This ethnographic project[2] utilizes in-depth interviews with activists and community organizers in the country, observations of public demonstrations, and analysis of online engagements. The article begins with an overview of relevant literature and description of my methodological approach. I then turn to analysis of Facebook groups and event pages that correspond with public demonstrations, arguing that Facebook provides a supplemental place to organize, collaborate, and build community. These online groups become complex communal places wherein identity and belonging are negotiated among the Czech Roma and an additional/alternative interpretation of home is offered.

The Roma, spatial marginalization, and the cautious promise of social media

This article draws from literature on social media identities, digital migration studies, Roma studies, and human geography, paying close attention to the construction of belonging and the notion of being at home. Examining both the material and immaterial manifestations of home, this literature explores how those who are routinely, and at times, violently reminded of their "unbelongingness" experience home in varied ways. This article also explores social media use among marginalized groups to better understand the affordances and limitations of media in providing spaces to experience belonging and community.

The contested nature of "home"

"Roma" is an umbrella term often used to describe a heterogeneous population with diversity along linguistic, religious, social, and cultural ties. Majority groups, especially

throughout the Czech Republic, define Roma by a perceived otherness. This otherness has a particularly ideological and marginalizing element—supporting systems of domination by creating and maintaining a difference between Roma and non-Roma. The modern nation-state maintains its dominant position and belonging both through territorial and spatial control and practices that contribute to symbolic expressions and feelings of unbelongingness experienced by minoritized groups, a point that McGarry (2008) feels is especially salient for the Roma. The reality of Roma in the Czech Republic illustrates how communities are often denied claim to geographic/physical homes, including quite literally through forced evictions and segregation from Czech society through discriminatory housing practices (Amnesty International, 2012; Picker, 2017). These experiences produce feelings of existential anxiety, as individuals and families constantly experience alienation and, at times, displacement.

Such practices have profound consequences for self and community identity—highlighting the importance of home. The notion of home is multi-scalar, meaning that home is "politically, socially, and culturally constituted, but lived and experienced in personal ways" (Blunt and Dowling, 2006: 32). Home helps constitute identity, as a place where an understanding of self develops. But home is complicated; it is not a fixed place where set identities are simply affirmed. Fay (2011: 27) suggests that perhaps feelings of home are experienced within that nuanced in-between space, arguing that "there is no such comfort as a given, original home. What is offered instead is an understanding of home that is not comfortable, yet nonetheless filled with a sense of belonging." This notion of home includes both the material and emotional, as home transcends geographic boundaries and becomes a complex place to create meaning and a sense of belonging to a larger collective. In this way, home is both a feeling and a place. I stress the importance of symbolic home here, as physical homes may not always be experienced. People may not have a fixed place of origin nor may they have the ability or desire to return to a homeland.

Unlike displaced groups that may have a recollection of a physical home they have left (forcefully or through their own volition), the Roma do not have a place recognized as a Roma "homeland." There is a long and contested debate surrounding the origins of Roma people, the most common suggesting Roma come from India. However, Webb (2019: 1200) argues "an Indian homeland is thus too remote and irrelevant to the realities of the present." A return to a homeland or creation of a homeland for Roma—a more nationalistic view held by some and echoed by Marek's remarks at the beginning of this article—may not be possible, but such endeavors exemplify the desires to have a place to honor Roma histories as well as create and maintain Roma identities. These histories are also marked by experiences of discrimination and displacement. Webb (2019) argues collective suffering has replaced notions of homeland—an already contested topic for a dispersed group with diverse experiences—and instead suggests experiences of discrimination and histories of oppression are what connect Romani people. This articulation of Roma identity offers an alternative way to think through how Roma construct their identities, especially in the absence of a home(land). This absence creates feelings of longing in which the aspirational desire to create a "Roma place" is key to becoming—a critical part of negotiating belonging (Racleş, 2018). And, in response to being denied a claim or made to feel as if groups do not belong to a place, the location of alternative sites to

process feelings of belongingness is highlighted. Brah (1996) refers to feeling at home as "achieved by physically or symbolically (re)constituting spaces which provide some kind of ontological security" (Fay, 2011: 37).

The fragmented structure of the Internet is a valuable resource to communities that have a fractured sense of home. This was recognized relatively early in the movement into digital culture. Shohat (1999: 226) suggests that "new media can be an imperfect means by which dislocated people who lost their geographic home retain their home imaginary, while also struggling for a literal and metaphorical place." As Easthope (2004: 135) offers, "while homes may be located it is not the location that is "home.'" Online spaces are imperfect—some of these drawbacks are discussed below—but these mediated places may also provide a way to think through feelings of belonging.

Social media as places for marginalized groups

Exploring the dynamics of alternative mediated spaces that have been used by marginalized groups and may be viewed as analogous to the situation of the Roma in the Czech Republic is particularly useful in this analysis. Social media present a number of opportunities for marginalized groups in locating spaces to meet people with similar interests and share information with one another that helps build community. Furthermore, social media may create a visibility for the disenfranchised that does not exist within dominant media. However, social media also come with their own economic and technological proclivities that complicate their utility for the creation of virtual spaces for groups like the Roma.

Often social media are credited with creating structural changes—for example, removing corrupt governments or changing particular policies. But, as Christensen (2011) notes, the role of social media in dissent is not always clear, or at least complicated (see also Cottle, 2011; Rodríguez et al., 2014; Wojcieszak and Smith, 2014). Social media offer both progressive and regressive affordances, and rather than definitively declare one side of the techno-utopian or techno-dystopian debate, examining the nuance in between and engaging in analysis of the tensions within this space are helpful. For example, social media have played an important role in activist efforts particularly for marginalized groups while also being problematized spaces for organizing and identity—points I will return to.

Certainly, emerging and social media can be valuable for social justice organizing and offer ways to resist economic oppression. Social and digital media play an integral role in providing minority groups a relatively safe space to access and disseminate information, organize public engagements, create identities, and find communities, which assist in producing feelings of empowerment and belonging (Faris and Rahimi, 2015). For example, Zayani (2015) discusses how blogs became central to forming both political and virtual identities for Tunisians. The Internet also became a valuable resource in forming online campaigns that encourage offline activism in Tunisia, and in the cultivation of "traditional" media forms like radio that may be distributed through digital means.

A key part of emerging media is how they facilitate connections and constitute group-based senses of self for those who have been separated from a safe physical place. From a broader perspective, Bittarello (2009) notes how concepts of the Internet are tied to

spatial metaphors—cyberspace, surfing the net, web*site*—to the point, she argues, that the spatial elements are mythologized and even sacred. We see the uses of social media and the Internet as a digital home often enacted by the geographically displaced. Witteborn (2015) suggests that computers and mobile devices are particularly important for displaced populations to connect with family members and participate socially. Furthermore, Witteborn suggests online spaces are vital in helping produce identities and communities for forced migrants, as they manufacture identities that may not reflect their current life, but their imagined reality. Sreenivasan et al. (2017: 106) discuss similar concepts, suggesting mobile phones allow Sri Lankan refugees to keep an open dialogue and "create a virtual community for the refugees, to some extent replacing the physical community they left behind." These online spaces may also offer participants the ability to narrativize their identity in relation to different local and super-diverse contexts. Focusing on Polish refugees and Facebook postings to other refugees, Baran (2018) argues that such narratives illustrate how those who post on relevant Facebook groups discursively maneuver issues of belongingness, ethnicity, nationalism, and identity. In considering the various affordances of digital technologies, it is critical to investigate the paradoxes as well, acknowledging that such technologies may also exacerbate some situations (Leurs and Smets, 2018).

There are barriers and limits to the emancipatory nature of such technologies and these limitations may vary by both group and geographic context. There exists a complicated nature of media engagement among migratory populations, including access to information and communication technologies as well as the cultural codes and skills required to effectively use social media (Dekker et al., 2018; Leung, 2010). Furthermore, there remain valid concerns of bad actors infiltrating these spaces and governments utilizing social media to serve their own purpose (Morozov, 2012; Tufekci, 2014), including censorship tactics to discourage citizens from political activism (Golkar, 2011; Pearce and Kendzior, 2012). There are also commercial interests that may contradict and challenge activist efforts (Papacharissi, 2002; Youmans and York, 2012). Such work reminds us to avoid technological utopianism, whereby we credit social media with more power to affect change than they actually possess. Many contextual factors in a given situation may influence social change: social media could be one of them, but in conjunction with other socio-cultural, economic, and political factors.

This article, then, sets out to understand how social media can ameliorate Roma expressions of spatial alienation. Can media, especially social media, that integrate into lived spaces and can be with someone constantly through mobile devices offer avenues for discursively constituting belongingness among the Czech Roma? Furthermore, what are the roles that such spaces may play in the development of a Romani identity created by Roma, especially as enacted by activists working on Romani rights?

Methodology

This article is part of a larger ethnographic project where I conducted 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Roma or Roma-allied individuals, accompanied by significant observation and embeddedness in the Czech Republic (including a year of fieldwork). Interviewees are made up of 15 women and 10 men, who were all over the age of 18 years.

The individuals I spoke with occupied various positions within their communities as organizers, activists, artists, journalists, students, and directors of large (trans)national organizations and recruited through snowball sampling. The interviews ranged in time from approximately 40 minutes to 2 hours. In addition, I conducted follow-up interviews with several of these individuals. Interviews with participants and observations of various public gatherings—including two demonstrations discussed later in this article—contribute toward this understanding, where I am able to capture how participants describe their thoughts, motivating factors, and experiences.

Multiple and thorough readings of the interview transcriptions allowed me to induce themes from the data through an open-coding process by clustering keywords and topics (Ryan and Bernard, 2000). The development of themes and subthemes helped manage the interview data and connect to other data, including observations of public demonstrations, and mediated interactions online. This study was designed in accordance with the institutional review board guidelines for the ethical treatment of human subjects and received board approval. To maintain the anonymity of those participating in this research project, I have changed the names of individuals and have not included the Facebook group names.

The findings explore the complexity of Romani identity and belonging through interviews and observations, focusing on three specific and overlapping themes: the cultivation of community through Facebook groups, the utilization of Facebook groups and event pages to organize, and the affordances and challenges of moving online efforts offline. This study does not attempt to draw a linear relationship between social media engagement among Roma and structural changes in Czech society. Rather, this study examines how Roma activists and groups use what social media may offer in their particular circumstances and for what reasons.

Homepages and home: locating places of belonging online

Jiří, a young Romani man from the Czech Republic, tells me, "I care about my home—Czech Republic is my home, but I am not Czech." He says that he has never fully self-identified *as* Czech due to countless experiences that suggested he did not belong. Jiří recounts a story from kindergarten, where one of his friends said that he could not play with him anymore because "you are Gypsy, little Gypsy and [I] can't play with you." Jiří says that he was constantly confronted by the question, "Who am I?" This complicated question of identity and belonging is one that many Roma in the Czech Republic experience.

Like Jiří and Marek, several of the interviewees discuss a complicated relationship with their Czech Roma identity and attachments to the country. Stefana, a young Romani woman working for a Czech non-governmental organization (NGO), spoke of the students with whom she works:

> They are ashamed, so the students don't say that "I am Roma." And, they pretend that I'm Italian or something. Which is crazy, they say like I'm not Roma and many of them don't share this identity. They are not proud because society tells us that it is not good to be Roma.

Stefana's comment articulates how Roma in the Czech Republic may not publicly identify[3] with this part of their identity for fear of bullying or further social exclusion, which complicates feelings of belongingness. The people I spoke with discuss how Roma in the Czech Republic occupy a liminal space—not fully feeling Roma and not fully feeling Czech, but somewhere in between. In response to the question of "where are you from?" one activist said he responds by saying that he is from the Czech Republic. He then says, "Plzen" (an Eastern city in the Czech Republic) when asked once more. When pressed by the same question, implying, "where are you *really* from?" He says with a laugh, "Okay, India! If you need this 10th Century [history lesson] we went from India to Europe." This account illustrates how Roma, who have lived in Europe for generations continue to experience feelings of not *really* belonging.

Community building through Facebook groups

There are a number of Roma-related Facebook pages in the country and beyond (as these online spaces typically transcend national borders), both open and closed, that range in focus including youth empowerment, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning), advocacy groups, and scholarly communities. Certainly, Facebook is a complex space with clear drawbacks for political activity (Youmans and York, 2012) and manipulation by right-wing extremists or those in service of such political forces (Fuchs, 2016; Kreiss and McGregor, 2018). However, Facebook allows people to connect with one another to share experiences, an important aspect in building a sense of community and belonging (see again Faris and Rahimi, 2015; Zayani, 2015). In addition to providing communities with a place to bond, activists speak of the ways in which Facebook has also been instrumental toward creating campaigns to combat antigypsyism (although, as discussed later, fissures in the activist community are also evident about the use of Facebook). Different modalities of affect that Facebook allows—that include the sharing of trauma and prejudice, but also more positive, humorous, and upbeat posts—are important to such efforts.

Danika, a young Romani activist who works as a public relations specialist in a socially excluded community, created a Facebook group to share her personal stories and experiences with discrimination in the Czech Republic. The group includes almost 500 members, as of June 2020. Danika—who remains the sole administrator of the Facebook group—created the page to start a conversation and provide her community with a space to talk through issues. On the page, where most posts are written in Czech and English comes up when users share content that originates from international news agencies, group members share various types of information with a specific focus on discrimination. Many contributors to the page post educational content as well, including videos and links to sources about the Holocaust, focusing on the Roma genocide. Discussions related to the genocide serve as educational both in documenting the past and in contextualizing ongoing experiences with antigypsyism.

Discussing some of the ways people connect with one another on the Facebook page, Danika says, "Well, statements, negative statements, made by politicians. This connects them." In this way, there is a connection through exclusion, where group members collectively combat harmful messages. Such statements are not rare in the Czech Republic.

For example, in 2018 there were several public events in response to the dangerous rhetoric of politician Tomio Okamura, a far-right leader who has openly denied the genocide of Czech Roma during the Holocaust, suggesting, for example, that the Roma were able to freely leave a concentration camp in Lety, Czech Republic (Prague Daily Monitor, 2018). Such messages from political figures flow with, and likely accentuate, anti-Roma sentiment in the Czech Republic (Bikár, 2018). However, Okamura's comments have galvanized communities both online and offline (the offline aspect is discussed later), as have other examples of anti-Roma discourse. Danika says that discussions on the Facebook page focus on social and political events and mentions, "then there are under some status, negative comments from majority [non-Roma] that mobilizes this community to react," meaning people come together to respond to negative comments on the page. For example, recent debates around social reforms have extended to these online pages, where people defend their positions online. Danika shares, "when there is a comment from someone from the community that is negative, well they reply . . . more people at once, defending themselves." Drawing from Webb's (2019: 1209) argument that the "condition of victimhood and collective suffering" are foundational aspects of Romani identity, combatting discriminatory messages on Facebook demonstrates how communities defend their identities.

In listening to the way Danika describes the Facebook group, it becomes clear that this site is more than just a venue to share memes or post about upcoming events. This online space transforms into a meaningful place to discuss politics and share personal experiences with discrimination so as to build connections and alliances through shared experiences, in other words to process feelings related to their marginalization. In the case of the Roma, this marginalization is rooted in the hostility of their national location toward them: their own politicians attack the legitimacy of their citizenship and their hardship. Interrogating such criticisms in their geographic community, at times, is met with hostility and/or violence. Thus, shared interrogations online solidify the Facebook page as a Roma community.

Although certainly this is a political space by its sheer existence and the serious nature of items shared and discussed on the page, there are also lighthearted posts, including memes poking fun of political figures like Okamura. Indeed, humor functions to work through serious issues while allowing members to express themselves in different ways (Huntington, 2015). And there are also positive posts. The uplifting tone, for example, when members post about successes, such as students excelling at school despite inequities in the educational system are important characteristics of this space, as it may serve to uplift members, who may often engage with demoralizing stories online. A recent post documenting the journey of a Roma youth choir in collaborating with the Czech Philharmonic on the page exemplifies this point. In this way, the online space grows into a place to engage in public discussions, celebrations, and create places of reflection, identification, and community.

Inclusion, affect, and organizing

Discussions with activists also illustrate how Facebook still may be used as a tool to challenge the structures that have excluded Roma from various aspects of Czech society

by creating a communal environment where different levels of common experience may be shared and that can be inclusive, including a significant range of age, education level, and economic class of users.

Danika discusses her surprise with how Facebook has spread throughout generations, including the elderly. In U.S. contexts, the elderly, often isolated from key elements of society, can use Facebook as a way to create social bonds (Jung and Sundar, 2016). Danika shares how some users write poorly, “older person with no education at all,” but that they are determined to be a part of the conversation online, where people of different educational backgrounds and ages use the site. Petr, a community leader from a Czech city with a large Roma population, echoes this point while discussing how to engage with communities for Roma-related initiatives, where he believes specific “classes” of Roma use “Facebook a lot.” Petr describes that even those who may have difficulty engaging in online discussions due to literacy issues find ways to connect with others on Facebook. Providing an example, Petr says, “We have experience with the old people—old grandmothers have Facebook and just know what buttons to press and that’s it.” He goes on to say that if you ask an older person (the grandmother in this case) to complete other functions, such as uploading photos, she will not be able to, but that she will ask a family member—a fascinating incidental promoting intergenerational dialogue. Petr suggests that posts by older users may not be intelligible, “the writing is horrible, you know? You can’t even . . . recognize what she wrote, but she’s writing, reading, watching the videos.” In this way, these online spaces fulfill a desire to establish and maintain connections with others, regardless of barriers related to age and literacy.

It is not critical that elderly or less literate users understand how to maximize Facebook’s use or to be skilled posters, but rather the very basic skills and access that allow integrative participation is key. In a society that has purposely and at times violently denied Roma the right to participate, to create their own identities, and to be heard, the online place becomes a site for collaboration, activism, and ultimately, a place of resistance. Physical spaces may create barriers—inaccessible for those with limited mobility, little choice for centralized gathering places, incompatible personal schedules—that this Facebook space overcomes. For these reasons, community leaders and activists are employing different methods to reach more people online and develop spaces that encourage collective engagement.

Such spaces may be cultivated online but also be moved offline, as especially emphasized by Petr. After living abroad for a number of years, Petr returned to the Czech Republic and grew frustrated by ineffective efforts of local Roma representatives. He works with a small team on different issues and focuses primarily on providing quality education for Roma children by challenging school segregation. In organizing around this issue, Petr found that Facebook could be used not just for online community building, but also for offline organizing, a potential affordance noted by other scholars studying social justice efforts in other contexts (Harlow, 2012). In late 2017, Petr and his colleagues organized a public gathering of over 2000 people to call for equal access to quality education. The event, Petr explains, coincides with the 10th anniversary of the *D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic* decision. This case involves the misdiagnosis of 18 Roma students from 1996 to 1999—a legal ruling stating that the individuals were denied the right to education (ERRC, 2015). According to Petr, the information that

people often receive about the ruling is from the press and incomplete. This event, which brought together performers and speakers, is important in helping educate community members about ongoing exclusionary practices within the educational system and demand access to quality education. The public gathering exceeded their expectations and one explanation given by Petr for this was the role of social media. Petr explains how social media was used for this campaign, sharing that the organization he leads purchased a webpage, but that the URL was long and complicated, so they decided to utilize Facebook to inform and engage people. Through Facebook, he was able to enlist the help of local popular figures to attract interest from viewers. Petr says that people are interested in interacting with entertaining content online, specifically videos, some of which he has created himself. He notes how Facebook's ability to incorporate upbeat messages and positive affect can be useful for mobilization (a conclusion also supported by Gerbaudo, 2016). In response to a comment that came up among several activists about Facebook mostly being used "for fun," Petr explains that Facebook content needs to go to the extreme to attract attention, continuing, "so, it's not true that the Facebook is useless for mobilizing or for all these activities. It is actually [useful], we can use the Facebook, but the way we have to work with the Facebook is specific." Petr discusses how he enlists the help of the "best known artist to transmit the information." He goes on to say,

> When we posted the videos, it was not the best resolution video, it was made from the phone, the resolution was not very good. It was not the best cameraman, so it was shaky, you know, but it was real people.

Petr finds that the best way to connect with communities is to know their interests and to provide entertaining content ("fun," "laughing," "friendly") that can also be educational. Production values are seen as less important: in fact, low production values ("shaky") may be a way to build credibility by enhancing the authentic and grounded message of the video (from "real people"). Petr refers to the "good strategy" of social media campaigns and on-the-ground networking efforts that brought people from all over the country to commemorate the anniversary of this ruling and to continue fighting for a more just educational system.

A tale of two cities and their public demonstrations: social media, participation, and generational tensions

The online Facebook group developed by Danika and the campaigns created by people like Petr demonstrate the different ways that Romani activists utilize Facebook and how these online groups and pages provide a relatively safe and inclusive place to cultivate shared identities and causes. But the use of social media by activists also varies. This is illustrated through an observation of two demonstrations and their accompanying organizing practices online. These demonstrations, which took place in the city of Prague on 17 March 2018 and Brno on 15 February 2018, reveal some of the affordances and challenges of moving online efforts offline.

The two demonstrations were organized in response to remarks made by the Czech politician Tomio Okamura about Roma during the Holocaust with a similar goal of calling attention to the ongoing discrimination that Roma experience in the Czech Republic. The event in Brno, organized by a group of young activist-intellectuals (as they are referred to by a number of activists within the country), focuses specifically on commemorating Roma victims of the Holocaust, whereas the event in Prague has a broader focus, a protest against racism and violence organized by a number of groups. Discussions on the Facebook page dedicated to the demonstration in Brno primarily feature social media users posting about the status of their attendance. Organizers quickly respond to questions about who is organizing the event and the nature of the demonstration, where responses detail the identities of the individuals organizing the event and the speakers, who include non-Roma, such as the mayor of Brno. Organizers also reinforce the idea that this is a "peaceful" demonstration and urge demonstrators to bring candles instead of signs. The demonstration in Prague follows a similar format in disseminating information and organizing the event via Facebook. In response to questions about the scheduling of events during the demonstration, a photograph of a printed document program is posted. While there are a few people who often post and respond to inquiries, there are more people and/or organizations posting on the event page for the demonstration in Prague. Following along the event page, it is difficult to pinpoint the primary organizer(s) and details of the demonstration are scattered around the event's page. Adding to some of the confusion was a location change 3 days before the demonstration in Prague.

Although both demonstrations in Brno and Prague focus on calling attention to the experiences of Roma—including commemoration of the past—the two demonstrations differ in their online organization and execution. Organizers for the demonstration in Brno discuss how turnout is lower than what they had hoped for but attribute it mostly to the short notice (the first discussion post on the page was written on 9 February and the event took place on 15 February). One organizer, in a sense, already anticipated a low turnout among Roma, commenting on his past experiences organizing events. The trope of Roma apathy is highlighted on Facebook posts, too. One Facebook user comments on the event's page leading up to the demonstration skeptical of the number of Roma who will attend the demonstration but suggests that Roma should not "sit at home" and "show them that we are not afraid." However, participation in public demonstrations is complex, as one activist notes,

> How can I take them together and make them feel that there is something possible? [That] we can change something . . . because Roma don't feel that the change is possible because every day they are facing against racism, discrimination, and the borders to access a normal life.

He goes on to explain how people do not feel safe in such spaces and that they are "afraid that neo-Nazis will come and beat us." Physical threats are a real concern for Roma and rightfully so. One look at the daily news or discussions on online boards document the frequent attacks on Roma. Taken together, these concerns shape participation in public demonstrations.

What becomes clear through the analysis of these demonstrations are the factors that divide activist groups. The Roma activist community in the Czech Republic is small and

connected, yet the generational differences between the “young activist-intellectuals” and the “elders” contribute to some different and, at times, competing visions for Roma activism. The absence of the younger activists was felt at the demonstration in Prague, an observation that was also made by activists. Gabra notes after the demonstration in Prague,

> This was organized by more or less traditional Romani men from the older generation who consider themselves the spokespeople for their communities. They run the gamut on the political spectrum, but it is safe to say that they probably think it’s normal for the presence to be all male. They also have zero expectations of their messages having any weight.

Here, a group of speakers primarily express grievances. While this type of space is needed, many suggest that this method of demonstrating is ineffective and typical for this group. Ivana, who also attended the demonstration in Prague, expresses her disappointment with the low turnout of protestors in an email correspondence following the demonstration—writing that this would be the last Roma-organized demonstration she will attend. She says, “It was the same as usual, Roma are not able to come together to protest. I was taking part in several events like this and it is always the same.” Ivana points to the low turnout and how men who are considered “elders” dominated discussion. When I ask why this would be the last Roma-organized demonstration she attends, Ivana responds,

> In case the event is organized by the “old school” Roma leaders, it is always like it was on Saturday: a lot of debatable and contradictory statements. I think it is due to more reasons: 1) they have problems to express themselves in Czech language which is not their mother tongue 2) they are still in the position of “we are discriminated against and you, Gadze [non-Roma], are the worst”—they still did not understand that this rhetoric is old fashioned and not accepted. They are still not able to formulate their civic rights are violated 3) although they complain on discrimination they also discriminate and are not sensible to the matter of participation of all groups, not only men 4) many of them are kind of they are egoists and like to speak in public, they are building their cult—this is really strange, as they are, at the same time, committed to helping the Roma.

She clarifies, “I will attend future events only in case younger Roma leaders will organize it, or events organized by non-Roma.” The generational gap is clear. There are significant challenges for the elders within the community, as noted by Ivana’s comments. The mindset among the older generation of activists is seen, at times, as incompatible with that of the younger generation. The Romani activist-intellectuals of the current generation speak Czech and are able to voice concerns in a way that is understood by the majority, helping create a larger network of allies. Furthermore, these young activist-intellectuals have a sophisticated understanding of newer resources and technologies.

This use of technology is also, in fact, criticized by elders in the community, further illustrating some of the generational tensions. One demonstrator attending the event in Prague wrote an opinion piece on Romea.cz following the demonstration: “The gadge turned out in person for the Prague demonstration, Romani people only express their

criticism on Facebook." The piece comments on several points, primarily expressing frustration with the low turnout of Roma to the demonstration, and suggests that Roma are not politically involved in changing their realities. The author writes,

> How can you expect anything to change if you cannot manage to participate? I see all these posts on Facebook about all the parties you manage to go to. That's fine, go have a good time, but take an interest in other things too. What kind of a life do you want for your children here?

This position, though, fails to discuss some of the reasons why Roma may not participate in public gatherings, particularly the threats of physical danger.

In contrast, the demonstration in Brno departed from the structure of centering the voices and experiences of the elders. This is demonstrated by the diversity in speakers both in gender and age. In comparing observations of the two public gatherings, there are stark differences that are realized both online and offline. Facebook, as many of the activists note, aids in informing a larger number of people of their organization as well as in expressing support, concern, and frustrations about their experiences. However, these demonstrations also show how Facebook engagement is complicated, as different organizational modalities intersect with the affordances of social media to create sometimes different results. As the two examples illustrate, it may also still be early in the life of social media symbiosis with the organization of public demonstrations, especially in a population as diffuse as the Roma.

As Ivana suggests, "I know that Facebook was used to unite people, for different initiatives in the past, so I know." However, she goes on to say that Facebook would be a useful resource if used "correctly," further demonstrating the disconnections among activist groups. While there may not be a proven way to use social media for different efforts, there are activists in the country reaching various levels of success by employing different strategies to engage people and communities in campaigns, as the case with Petr, who looked to create and maintain community through different affective modalities on Facebook, including humor.

Conclusion

This article explores how Roma in the Czech Republic may utilize social media to negotiate their identities and pays close attention to the development of communities in online places. Findings demonstrate some of the ways in which individual activists and community organizers utilize media as a resource to combat spatial alienation by creating communal places to support one another, as Danika notes about the online group and highlighted by the engagement of users from various age groups and levels of literacy. Facebook event pages and groups provide a supplemental space for people to organize, learn, collaborate, and build community, as mediated interactions coexist alongside public practices, as discussed by Petr in organizing a call for equal access to quality education. In this way, the very nature of this online space—the multimodality of features and uses—compliments the negotiation of shared identities and belonging for those experiencing a fractured sense of home.

This analysis also highlights the importance of examining the drawbacks, challenges, and tensions within these online spaces, specifically among activist groups. Like home, these online places are full of tension and contradiction, of belonging and unbelonging, where the views of elders clash with younger generations, and collective identity is negotiated. Online spaces are not the only sites in which people may experience belonging, but as Czech society continues to exclude Roma, this article examines how Roma may locate online places to work through feelings of spatial alienation. What is offered is an additional and/or alternative iteration of home—a critical place to negotiate individual and collective identities.

As Livingstone (1999: 92) suggests, "home has become, and can be sustained as, something virtual, as without location. A place without space, to compensate, maybe, for when we live in spaces that are not places. When we cannot *go* home." This article supports claims that home can be experienced within online places and extends discussion in this area by examining the negotiation of self and community among the Czech Roma, arguing that online communal places are multi-scalar and serve as both resource and process. This contributes to cultural survival and efforts to combat injustice on and offline and carries important implications not only for Roma beyond the Czech Republic, but also for those who experience the loss of home or live in places that are hostile toward them. There are similarities in how Roma utilize this online space to other minoritized groups, for example, creating a place to cultivate shared identities and causes (Georgiou, 2006; Grant, 2017). Furthermore, the article contributes to the development of research related to social media use among Roma—an emerging area of research (Hajská, 2019). Through analysis of how Roma in the Czech Republic negotiate identities and expressions of spatial alienation online, the findings of this research provide ways to think through how social media may contribute to creating a sense of belonging among diverse and diffusely situated communities.

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Notes

1. It is important to note that estimates of the number of people who identify as Roma may be larger, as it remains difficult to accurately capture demographic information.
2. This article is part of a larger ethnographic analysis examining media engagement among Roma in the Czech Republic, including fieldwork spanning from Spring 2016 to Summer 2018.
3. The practice of "passing"—wherein people conceal or deny their heritage is an attempt to combat deeply rooted racism (Derrington, 2007). Pantea (2014: 612) refers to passing as a "necessity of survival in racist situations."

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