Diaspora, cyberspace and political imagination: the Eritrean diaspora online

VICTORIA BERNAL

Abstract   *In this article I analyse the Eritrean diaspora and its use of cyberspace to theorize the ways transnationalism and new media are associated with the rise of new forms of community, public spheres and sites of cultural production. The struggle for national independence coincided with the rise of the Internet and the Eritrean diaspora has been actively involved in the new state. Eritreans abroad use the Internet as a transnational public sphere where they produce and debate narratives of history, culture, democracy and identity. Through the web the diaspora has mobilized demonstrators, amassed funds for war, debated the formulation of the constitution, and influenced the government of Eritrea. Through their web postings, 'Internet intellectuals' interpret national crises, rearticulate values and construct community. Thus, the Internet is not simply about information but is also an emotion-laden and creative space. More than simply refugees or struggling workers, diasporas online may invent new forms of citizenship, community and political practices.*

> Identity is not a constant and is something that is renegotiated on [a] regular basis, be it at the individual or at the national level. This is especially problematic for those of us living in the diaspora, we deal with so many identities and our existence is literally schizophrenic. We want to remain actively interested in the affairs of the homeland, at the same time we live in countries that [are] careless about our internal struggles and hence our miserable dependence on mediums like Dehai for a sense of belonging and for the illusion of home that it creates. I would even venture to say that the various cyber shoutings and negative exchanges we are accustomed to in Dehai are a necessary and unavoidable aspects of being a part of such a community.
>
> (posting on www.dehai.org, 2 May 1997)

> Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension.
>
> (Clifford 1994: 312)

In this article I analyse the Eritrean diaspora and its use of cyberspace to theorize the ways that geographic mobility and new technologies are giving rise to new collective subjectivities and new public spheres in which struggles over meanings and power are staged and social action is mobilized. An examination of the Eritrean diaspora's

involvement in politics through the website www.dehai.org suggests new answers to questions about the meaning of the Internet for social life and political expression. Eritreans in diaspora use the Internet as a transnational public sphere where they produce and debate narratives of history, culture, democracy and identity. Through the web diaspora Eritreans have mobilized demonstrators, amassed funds for war, debated the formulation of the constitution and influenced the government of Eritrea. Eritrean politics on the Internet are particularly interesting because the country's achievement of independence in 1993 coincides with the development of the Internet and the rapid expansion of globalization. Eritreans' nation-building projects have been pursued in the context of late millennial/twenty-first century conditions and communications. Cyberspace has facilitated the participation of the diaspora in the formation of Eritrea's national institutions and political culture. The reach of the Internet is already vast and its uses in politics are growing, so that in the future Eritreans and others around the world are increasingly likely to communicate with each other and to the powers that be via cyberspace.

The significance of cultural identity in Eritreans' use of digital media reveals the limits of concepts that have been used to represent the social transformations of contemporary life associated with new communications technologies such as the Information Age. The focus on the Internet as a means of circulating 'information' and the positing of a digital divide in terms of 'access' to computers deflect attention from the deeper problem of understanding what makes digital communications meaningful to readers and posters, and treats their content as self-evident when these need to be critically examined and analysed.[1] My research on diaspora and cyberspace seeks to uncover the various ways that migration, transnational connections and new media are transforming the boundaries of belonging and exclusion behind the formation of political identities, the experience of citizenship and the character of the public sphere.

There are four parts to this article. The first examines ideas about the public sphere and considers the implications of new media and of diaspora for the formation and operation of public spheres. The second addresses the ways in which Eritreans were connected through a social and political worldwide web that preceded computer-mediated networks. The third examines how Eritreans used the new possibilities opened up by digital communications to create a new kind of public sphere for political discussion. The fourth considers the relationship of the disapora's activities in cyberspace to issues of media, democracy and the public sphere in Eritrea. I explore how Eritreans in diaspora through their writing in cyberspace and their struggles to locate themselves in the world, in history and in a community of some kind challenge conventional boundaries and official narratives.

In the article I draw on evidence from years of reading and collecting texts from Eritrean cyberspace as well as on interviews and participant observation conducted in Eritrea and the USA. I have conducted research on Eritrea's nationalist struggle and on theorizing the ways in which transnational relations are integral to the construction of nationhood (Bernal 2000, 2004). I have been a participant observer of life in the Eritrean diaspora over the past two decades. I am most familiar with the experiences

of Eritreans in the USA, but I have visited Eritrean homes in Canada, Germany, England, Italy, Sudan and Ethiopia. I have also met Eritreans who live in Saudi Arabia, Sweden and the Netherlands when they were visiting the USA or Eritrea, and I have interviewed Eritreans who resettled in Eritrea after living in the diaspora. As well as interviews with some of Dehai's readers and writers, I also make use of a conference presentation detailing the development of Dehai co-authored by the site's founders and presented by one of them, Ghidewon Asmerom in Asmara, Eritrea (Asmerom et al. 2001). To date I have made three trips to Eritrea, in 1981 under Ethiopian rule, in 1995 two years after independence, and again in 2001 when I gathered data on the newly opened cybercafés, the emergent (and since crushed) independent press, and the government-controlled television station to shed light on the politics of information within Eritrea.

Diaspora, new media, and the public sphere

Bringing the study of migration into dialogue with media studies reveals the ways in which transnational migration, coupled with new technologies of communication, is transforming political participation. Migrants and refugees may be at the forefront of political innovation and social change. While migration and long-distance communications have long histories (Dahan and Sheffer 2001), new media, especially the Internet, are giving rise to novel communicative spaces and practices and creating new discursive communities that, while they may as in the case of Ertireans, build upon existing social networks on the ground, bring them together and extend their membership and significance in novel ways. As Karim (2003: 16) notes, 'Transnational "third spaces" [neither here nor there] are the liminal sites characterized by a significant degree of creativity. This zone of multiple borders is a frontier of modernity, where new ways of addressing the problems of contemporary social relations are sought.'

Scholarship on (im)migration in the US context has developed separately from the growing body of literature that explores the implications of population movements in terms of transnational social and political fields (Appadurai 1996; Basch et al. 1994; Ong 1998; Vertovec 1999). A focus on diaspora brings to the fore forms of identity, community and political allegiances that are not necessarily congruent with place of residence or legal citizenship, and helps to make visible the multiple social worlds people simultaneously inhabit (Clifford 1994). Transnationalism and the Internet have been seen as breaking down boundaries. Perhaps we should look instead at how they allow, not for a borderless world but for a reconfiguration or remapping of boundaries, so that, for example, what might have once been outside the margins (of the nation) is now more effectively included within a larger framework of imagined community.

The political activities of Eritreans on the web suggest new formulations of citizenship and sovereignty and the ways the nation is imagined as community. The Eritrean diaspora could be conceptualized as an offshore citizenry or extension of the nation that, like other offshore phenomena – financial havens and exported jobs –

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serve particular purposes and take on particular characteristics by virtue of their offshore location. This perspective reveals a different dynamic than the notion that residence abroad is temporary or that reabsorption into the borders of the nation is the outcome desired by the Eritrean state or by members of the diaspora. It draws attention to the remappings of political landscapes within and across nations. This analysis further suggests that we reconsider the dynamics of sovereignty–subject/citizen relations. While recent scholarship (Agamben 1988; Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Mbembe 2003) on sovereignty has emphasized domination, Eritreans' participation in the politics of their homeland from the overseas locations where their legal citizenship resides, shows how 'citizens' are not simply subjects or receivers of state power, but are active consumers and producers of state power. This voluntary engagement in relations of sovereignty with the Eritrean state from overseas suggests a dimension of citizenship that might best be understood as 'emotional citizenship'. That is, Eritreans in diaspora in North America and Europe are for the most part legally citizens of the countries where they reside and earn their living, but they are emotionally pushed and pulled into Eritrea's national politics. Their sense of themselves is intertwined with Eritrea's destiny as a nation even if they have no intention of living there. A posting on Dehai from 23 June 1998 states in part:

> What do u mean???, are u sorry for being an Eritrean??? … Well my brother like it or not, you are only Finish in paper … We all have other countries citizenship, (I have Canadian citzeship) … Take my advice, first be proud on who you are, then bless the Finish for awarding you with a peace of paper
> (unconventional grammar and spelling retained from original).

The politics of diaspora and the political uses of the Internet help to reconfigure the body politic and therefore may require us to rethink notions of sovereignty that locate power in biopolitics and government control over life. At the same time, the importance of identity, community and 'emotional citizenship' bring into focus elements often overlooked in discussions of the public sphere as a site of rational discourse or of the Internet as a tool for circulating 'information'. The Eritrean state for its part, has acted to retain the diaspora as an offshore of Eritrea, extending recognition to them through national identity cards, taxing them, and courting their financial and political support in an array of ways. Postings on Dehai provide a window into these emergent political practices and subjectivities.

Much work on 'online communities' (for example, Smith and Kollock 1999) fails to explore the relationships between online activities, virtual community and experiences of belonging, exile and citizenship in the lived world. I ground my cultural analysis of Eritrean cyberspace in the context of the social history of Eritrean nationalism and the diaspora. I focus on www.dehai.org, the first and foremost Eritrean website which established cyberspace as a public sphere for Eritrean politics and fostered the development of Internet intellectuals and a wider public of readers and occasional posters.

Scholarship on the public sphere has tended to focus on the ideals laid out by Habermas – of open access, equal status of participants, and rational analysis of alternatives (Calhoun 1992; Garnham 2002; Habermas 1989). Critics have pointed out that even in Western democracies actually existing public spheres fall short of the ideal in various ways (Fraser 1992). It is interesting to consider, however, how the characteristics of the Internet as a medium and the conditions of diaspora relate to Habermas's ideals. Access to computers and literacy are barriers to using the Internet, though it is important to remember that it does not exist in a vacuum but in a larger field of communication flows via word of mouth, telephone, and other means, so that the reach and influence of the Internet extends to those who may not go online themselves. Nonetheless, content is created by those who have computer access and are literate so some bias is built into Internet communications. Even so, the Internet can be seen as decentralized, participatory, unregulated, and egalitarian in operation compared to mass media such as newspapers, radio, or television where communication is largely one way and consumers have very little opportunity to be producers of content.

As a recent *Los Angeles Times* article noted, the kind of 'viral marketing, which Google used to lure millions to its e-mail service, takes for granted that a retired janitor who blogs from his sofa might have as much marketing power as a full-page ad in *Newsweek*' (Barrie-Anthony 2006: A22). If we substitute 'political impact' for 'marketing power', we can see the potential of the Internet to change politics, particularly through giving voice to the views of people who are not in authoritative positions. The Internet can serve to mask or reduce the effects of status inequalities among participants in the public sphere along the lines advocated by Habermas. As it happens, some of Dehai's most highly regarded and prolific posters work as parking lot attendants and taxi drivers. Their status as media personalities on Dehai is not based on their established social status in the USA or in Eritrea.

Transnational migration, diaspora and relocation of course raise new questions about class and social status. While Eritreans in the USA and Canada are largely working class and generally hold service-sector jobs such as hotel workers, they have high incomes relative to those in Eritrea (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2005; Woldemikael 1996). Despite their lack of wealth, the diaspora has contributed millions of dollars to Eritrea, not only in the form of remittances to family members, but also through taxes paid to the Eritrean state, donations contributed for various projects and, most significantly, to fund the 1998–2000 border conflict with Ethiopia. Diaspora reconfigures class and status, creating multiple hierarchies and frames of reference. Thus, an Eritrean in the USA could be compared with populations in Eritrea, with Eritreans in the diaspora globally or locally, as well as with various populations in the US context, whether with other immigrants, African-Americans, or to some broader middle class.

By any of these standards, however, it would be difficult to position members of the Eritrean diaspora as social or economic elites. Most came to the USA without higher degrees or capital and have had to work hard to support themselves, often while contributing to the support of relatives elsewhere. The culture of Eritrea's

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nationalist movement, which had a strong role in forming Eritrean political culture abroad (Hepner 2005) as well as at home, was moreover strongly anti-elitist, drawing inspiration from Mao as well as Marx. Even as the ruling party, the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice has embraced capitalist models of development, Eritrean elites like President Isaias himself are by and large party elites who came out of the guerrilla movement, rather than 'traditional' social elites or members of a wealthy class. As a whole, the diaspora has economic clout in relation to Eritrea whose economy has been described as 'remittance-based' (Fessehatzion 2005). But, in a way that curiously parallels the decentralization of the Internet, the economic importance and political significance of Eritreans in diaspora derives from the aggregation of many individuals without raising any one of them to the status of an elite.

Turning to the question of whether the Internet promotes rational analyses of alternatives, the general answer would seem to be that it does not. Compared with centralized media that are regulated and subject to editorial oversight, the Internet has fewer barriers to forms of expression that might be deemed inappropriate elsewhere. However, if we consider public spheres outside Western democracies, the greatest threats to the quality of discourse and debates would not be a fall from rationality, but firstly censorship and various forms of repressive expression and controlling information and, secondly, the threat of punishment or physical violence against those expressing unpopular perspectives or criticizing the powerful. As a communicative space, cyberspace offers considerable freedom from censorship as well as from violence. In fact, I would argue that for Eritreans the possibility of exploring ideas without fear of official reprisal or violence is one of the underlying attractions of Internet communications.

The opportunity for critical expression is also grounded in the experience of diaspora. The Eritrean state has a limited ability to control the access of Eritreans abroad to information or to restrict their political expression. Living outside Eritrea, moreover, has exposed members of the diaspora to alternative politics (for example, Eritreans in North America and Europe have had at least informal ties to progressive organizations of various kinds through their involvement in the liberation struggle), and they have been exposed to media and educational environments where ideals of freedom of expression are promoted. Much scholarship on the public sphere takes for granted the conditions of Western democracy and for that reason perhaps the profound issues of censorship, repression and violence have not been given the attention they merit in theorizing the public sphere.

Considering all of this, then, the Internet offers good possibilities for creating public spheres that achieve some of the values of access, status equality and, if not always rational discourse then perhaps what is even more important, free expression. However, as Spitulnik suggests, rather than simply applying fixed criteria to judge whether certain communicative practices can count as a public sphere or not, a more productive approach may be to explore the 'context-specific emergence and existence of conceptual and institutional structures that do mediate state and society' (Spitulnik 2002: 178). Spitulnik's discussion of what she calls 'small media' in Africa (by which she means alternative media that individuals and small groups can control, including

cassettes and the Internet) views these communicative spaces as 'vital and pervasive undercurrents and reservoirs of political commentary, critique, and potential mobilization' (Spitulnik 2002: 179). Parham's (2004: 208) research on the Haitian diaspora's use of the Internet notes the significance of cyberspace communications for 'civic learning as participants make an effort to allow dissenting views'. The importance of such sites where relative freedom of expression and tolerance of opposing viewpoints are practiced becomes even greater when the larger political context lacks those possibilities, as in the Eritrean case, and where, as a recent essay on Eritreans in Canada puts it, 'war and repression create an afterlife among diaspora populations' (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2005: 85). Dehai has served as a site for debate and, perhaps more importantly, it has offered a comparatively safe space to develop ideas, perspectives and critiques and to experiment with dialogue across social ruptures, such as those between Muslim and Christian Eritreans. The location of critique and alternative perspectives in cyberspace and largely produced by Eritreans in the diaspora are clearly shaped by their location outside the Eritrean state and yet are meaningful through their ongoing link to it.

Diaspora and Eritrea's global village

The Eritrean diaspora has long played a vital role through its economic support for and political activities on behalf of Eritrea. The diaspora actively supported the independence struggle and later, the border war with Ethiopia. Eritreans in the diaspora are connected through longstanding transnational linkages that predate independence and span several decades (Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001; Conrad 2003; Hepner 2003). During the liberation struggle, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) took an active role in organizing the diaspora and fostering its links to Eritrea (Bernal 2004). After independence the EPLF was renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, and is now the ruling party of the Eritrean state. The PFDJ has maintained links with Eritreans in the diaspora who served as important sources of support during the nationalist struggle.

In 1993, when Eritrea became independent, about one in three Eritreans were living outside the country and the majority did not subsequently repatriate to Eritrea. After independence the Eritrean state was quick to enfranchise Eritreans in diaspora and to define citizenship in ways that would include them and their offspring in the Eritrean nation. Although they remained abroad, many diasporic Eritreans remained ardent nationalists and actively sought to participate in Eritrean political life from their diverse locations. Eritreans in the diaspora around the globe (but particularly in North America and Europe) have participated in homeland politics in significant ways. They voted in the national referendum on independence. They have waged international public relations campaigns and staged demonstrations on behalf of their nation. As I write this, Eritreans are demonstrating in Washington DC demanding UN attention to demarcating officially the disputed Ethiopian–Eritrean border.

In considering Eritrean activities in cyberspace, this history of strong transnational networks throughout the diaspora and established relationships linking the diaspora to

nationalist fronts and eventually to the Eritrean state has allowed for translations between online and offline social and political worlds that are not available to all diasporas or migrant populations. In fact, the great degree to which Eritrean transnationalism has been promoted and orchestrated by nationalists and the state is unusual (Conrad 2005; Woldemikael 2005). The Eritrean government has enfranchised Eritreans in the diaspora in concrete ways, including according them a form of dual citizenship through the issue of national identity cards that recognize them as Eritreans even though they hold passports of other countries. Furthermore, Eritrean citizenship is defined through descent from either parent rather than by place of birth, thus extending Eritrean citizenship to children born abroad. This quasi-citizenship status is unusual by international standards (and it is worth remembering that many Eritreans fled the region before the country's independence from Ethiopia and so never had Eritrean citizenship as such). A further unusual feature is the special 2 per cent tax rate levied on the incomes of diasporic Eritreans.

Dislocations, cyberspace and spaces of belonging

The fact that cyberspace has no physical location mirrors the displacement of Eritreans in diaspora, and the networked sociality of cyberspace resonates with their dispersed social networks. In this way, the Internet may be the quintessential diasporic medium because it builds upon, reinforces and extends social networks (however, see Ackah and Newman 2003 for a Ghanaian counter example). Yet I argue that part of what cyberspace offers Eritreans in the diaspora is also a mending of ruptures in the social body and in individual subjectivity, through the ability of the Internet to bridge distance or at least render it invisible, making physical location irrelevant.

The isolation, discrimination and disenfranchisement experienced by Eritreans in countries where they settled have served to further their identification as Eritreans and have provided an impetus to maintain links with fellow Eritreans across vast distances. A posting on Dehai from 4 April 1998 about Eritreans in Germany has this to say: 'The German language became so "unlearnable" and Germans so unapproachable that life was simply passing many Eritreans by. The active social life that Eritreans are used to became so restricted … Eritreans fought back. They sought a way out of this unexpected dilemma by holding onto their identity more than ever.' Thus, the other side of Eritrean political activities in the diaspora is the alienation and invisibility Eritreans often experience in their residential communities and workplaces in the West, where, as suggested by the posting at the beginning of this article, those around them are ignorant and indifferent to the histories and realities that affect them so deeply. The focus of Eritreans' civic engagement and political participation is their 'homeland', and this focus has remained intense despite decades of residence abroad and no plans to resettle in Eritrea.

The freedom of expression found in the USA and Europe has shaped the diaspora's relation to politics in Eritrea. For example, the Eritreans who founded Dehai consciously modelled it on the American ideal of a free and open public sphere

for debate. Paradoxically, however, despite their attraction to the democratic institutions and ideals of the West, Eritreans often are disenfranchised in practice in their new home countries and do not participate fully as citizens in the communities in which they live. Some have had visa and immigration problems that clearly constrained their participation. But even as they have achieved legal citizenship in the USA, for example, Eritreans feel a greater sense of entitlement and a stronger motivation to participate in Eritrean politics than in American politics. If they do engage with the American political system, it tends to be on behalf of Eritrea. On a pragmatic level the likelihood that Eritreans could have an impact on US politics and policies is slight compared with the influence the diaspora can wield in Eritrean politics and their sense that Eritrea's leaders are listening.

Eritreans in the USA were quick to recognize the advantages of computer-mediated networking and established the first such Eritrean network in 1992, which they called Dehai (a transliterated Trigrinya word that means both 'voice' and 'news'). Dehai's subtitle, 'Eritrea Online', suggests that it is meant to be a kind of virtual Eritrea and to serve as a 'national' space within cyberspace. Dehai's Charter states: 'The purpose of this Charter is to promote freedom of expression, and to facilitate an open environment in which members may express a diversity of opinion that is to be both welcomed and respected. All subscribers are duty bound to abide by and preserve the spirit of the Charter' (Dehai 1999). What Gonzalez-Quijano (2003: 67) has described as 'a lack of firm national boundaries on the Internet' allows participation online to stand in for participation in Eritrean politics. The ambiguity of boundaries in cyberspace is also congruent with the transnational reach of Eritrean nationalism, which flows not only from the diaspora towards Eritrea but from the Eritrean leadership in Eritrea out to the diaspora.

In the words of its founders, 'Dehai's objective was to solve Eritrea's problems by sharing information and proposing ideas, and to foster a speedy flow of ideas to and from Eritrea' (Asmerom et al. 2001). One might have expected that Eritrea's independence would have led most of the diaspora to return 'home' as their goal of nationhood had been realized. Yet, the majority of Eritreans did not resettle in their homeland when the war of independence ended. They continued to invest time, emotional energy and financial resources in the cause of Eritrean nationalism from the countries in which they lived. New threats, external (first from Sudan, then Yemen, then from Ethiopia) and internal (divisions between Christians and Muslims) loomed over Eritrea after independence. And with the goal of national independence achieved, new political desires blossomed. To realize the promises of Eritrean nationalism, development and democracy had to be pursued with the same zeal as independence. In this receding horizon of political desires where objects remain out of reach, cyberspace could serve as a repository for the yearnings and visions of Eritreans in diaspora for the best of all possible Eritreas even as it served as a means of connection to other Eritreans and even to their own 'Eritreaness'. Dehai was established on the eve of Eritrea's independence and built on the solidarity of the diaspora in the nationalist struggle, carrying it forward into the projects of nation-building and democracy.

Through the 1990s Dehai remained the predominant Internet link for Eritreans around the world. In its early forms it worked largely like a subscription list that members joined in order to receive or submit messages. Once it became a website, Dehai could be accessed and read by anyone, but only members could submit postings or access its archives. Messages are written in English with occasional transliterations of Tigrinya (the dominant language in Eritrea). Dehai has two main components. One is a newslist where people can post published news articles or links related to Eritrea. The other is a discussion list or message board devoted to Eritrea-related issues. Both of these are archived. Postings are generally addressed to 'Dehaiers' as a community, though messages also are frequently addressed directly to the author of a prior posting that the present writer wishes to agree with or debate. It has no commercial content or links. Dehai is a labour of love and obsession that was created, and has been maintained and developed by its core founders and by its posters who have given large amounts of their time to the site. The social history of Eritrean cyberspace therefore consists of ordinary people inventing a public sphere that made possible the articulation of ideas and sentiments that could not be expressed elsewhere (certainly not within Eritrea where expression and media are tightly controlled by government), and widened participation in debates by linking interlocutors who were unknown to one another and geographically dispersed. Eritreans who work as taxi drivers and parking lot attendants have become poets and pundits online.

Although Dehai was created by and for diasporic Eritreans in the early 1990s most Eritreans within the country did not have access to the Internet until 2000, with the important exception of government officials. Thus, Eritrean activities in cyberspace were largely confined to the diaspora in the early years, and content production has largely continued to be so after 2000.[2] Despite this, through Dehai (as well as through other means), Eritreans in diaspora see themselves not simply as commentators on Eritrean national life but as active participants. About 40 to 50 new postings appeared on Dehai each day through the 1990s, and there were over 2000 members by 2001 (Asmerom et al. 2001). Since membership is only required for posting, not for reading, the number of readers is clearly much larger. The time involved in keeping up with postings is itself a subject of online discussion. A posting on 18 November 1996 says discussions on Dehai are 'wonderful but unlike Soap Operas on TV, where you can jump in after 2–3 weeks and not miss a beat … you gotta keep up with the dreams on Dehai!!' Dehai is noteworthy, not only because of its popularity and longevity among Eritreans in the diaspora, but for the way it has served as a cultural outlet for intellectual and creative talents. It has stimulated the production of a wealth of diverse texts and made possible their publication and dissemination; it brought into being a new community of Eritrean writers, pundits and dissidents. In this regard it is useful to consider how civil society and the public sphere are sites of popular expression and cultural production. Breslow's discussion of a cultural studies approach to popular culture captures something of the deeper meaning of involvement in Dehai that is lost if it is understood simply in the instrumental political terms of rallying support for Eritrea or expressing dissent. Its creativity links it to the realm of popular culture:

where popular traditions, local sayings, and cultural identities, practices and representations come into conflict with an impersonal, bureaucratically central- ized and industrially commodified apparatus of cultural production. Structures of representation mediate the subjective and the social. They empower individual subjects making the world sensible. At the same time these structures allow for the commonality of meaning, and the profundity of cultural solidarity amongst a culture's subjects.

(Breslow 1997: 246–7)[3]

The user-friendly and interactive nature of cyberspace means that users in some sense create it as well as consume it as a medium. Dehai is thus a cultural product of the Eritrean diaspora as well as a technology used by the diaspora for particular purposes. Through Dehai Eritreans use cyberspace as a site of cultural production as well as a forum for political expression.

Dehai postings also announce Eritrea-related activities in the diaspora and offer reminders about national holidays, historical anniversaries and milestones. Media critiques are another common genre of postings. Generally, these seek to set the record straight, most often taking issue with something reported in Western mass media outlets regarding Eritrea. At his presentation in Eritrea in 2001 Ghidewon remarked that, 'Dehai has the ability to discuss tabus and it serves as a watchdog to Western media. You will be surprised, even a single comma might offend Eritreans' (Asmerom et al. 2001). A consistent source of irritation after independence was the media's use of outdated maps that failed to show Eritrea as distinct from Ethiopia.

On Dehai, Eritreans in the diaspora also grapple explicitly with the politics of knowledge production as they critique other postings, Western media and official Eritrean sources. The character, content and tone of postings are diverse, including straightforward statements of opinion about current events or policy issues in Eritrea, poetry and complex political analyses among other genres. Spirited debate among posters is the essence of Dehai and this is made entertaining through the liberal use of parody, hyperbole, irony and satire. Through such literary techniques it seems to me that Eritreans can articulate the tragedies of their history and experience without repeating the experience of trauma.

The sensibilities of farce and the absurd coexist on Dehai along with sincere patriotism and utopian yearnings for Eritrea's bright future. A few examples illustrate this observation. At one point, the Eritrean government was touting Singapore as a model to be emulated. A posting on 22 April 1997 states:[4]

The draft of the Eritrean constitution emphasised the importance of family. Family is recognized as the corner stone of the society, but the idea to build a kind of super-family nation doesn't fit Eritrea. Because paternalism often spawns authoritarianism in practice. So, in my view Eritrea needs a kind of government which believe in transparency, commitment, and accountability not Singaporean's type of paternalistic character.

A reply the next day states: 'I hope that the reason the President and other top government officials are visiting Asian countries, and particularly Singapore, is to learn and if possible to emulate not copy, as Isayas[5] said, the economic success stories, and not their form of governments.'

A four-paged single-spaced posting from 2 May 1997 is part of a debate about secularism and whether Arabic should become an official language of Ertirea. The writer takes issue with a previous poster, whom I will call Ibrahim, and states, 'As has been evident in recent postings, some are trying to dilute Eritrean national identity by advocating a foreign language like Arabic to become an official language in our country. They wish to convinse us that Arabic is as Eritrean as Tigrinna, Tigre, Saho, Kunama, Afar, Bilen, etc.' For example, Ibrahim writes: 'Arabic is part and parcel of the Eritrean cultural heritage.' Brother Ibrahim, I hate to disappoint you but your claims don't even make good fiction.

A posting from 5 May 1998 says: 'In the spirit of Dehai satirico-humorists, … follows a vocabulary for Dehaiers-in-need' and defines Dehaiers as 'a group of well-meaning Eritreans and others who discuss Eritrea and stuff. Some are more well-meaning than others'. The posting also defines 'Dehai-silentists: If they weren't silent, we would never have found out that they were there. They really know how to be silent in a meaningful kind of way,' and 'Dehai-elders: Prominent members whose wisdomwords never "reach the ground". They are always right. They are even right when they are wrong.' A posting on 15 June 2000 calling for Eritreans to demonstrate at the UN to bring international attention to Eritrea's side of the border war with Ethiopia, includes a list of four excuses for not attending and a response to each of them, ending with:

> EXCUSE 4: 'My spouse or one of my siblings will be there to represent my family.'
>
> RESPONSE: We are more likely to attract media attention when we team up into a bigger crowd. An Eritrean novelist, Yoebio Omar, once said, 'Kulu Seb Imni Inte zicheerih'Si Imba MisSerHe Neru [If all of us could deposit a pebble, we would build up a mountain].'

A posting from 3 February 2003 asserts, tongue in cheek: 'I would like to propose that the birthday of Isayas Afeworki be a national holiday. Furthermore I would like to propose that we build a statue of him. I would also like to propose that National Assembly proclaim PIA to be President for life. (That shouldn't be hard to do at all.)'

Much of the communication takes the form of impassioned debates over Eritrean history, culture and politics. Through Dehai the social traumas of war, displacement and diaspora are converted into social dramas as Dehaiers debate the history and future of Eritrea against their shared background of loss. Perhaps it is those things that are not explicitly stated, all that can go unsaid, that give Dehai its deepest meaning. The Eritrean diaspora is still largely first generation and they have a shared history, through either direct personal experience or extensive knowledge, of life under

Ethiopian rule, the guerrilla war for independence, refugee camps in Sudan, the separation from and premature death of family members among other things. These experiences of political turmoil and violence don't need to be articulated or explained on Dehai, they are the understood historical context of contemporary Eritrean concerns.

Humour, wit, and debating contests among Dehai's media personalities offer not only information but also interpretation and entertainment. For Dehai's posters, participating in discussions about Eritrean politics is a vehicle for the expression of self, allowing posters to display their knowledge of Eritrean history and folklore as well as their skills as writers and debaters. For readers, Dehai is like a mirror that reflects, reinforces and validates Eritrean experience and identity.

Digital democracy? Politics on and offline

The significance of the participation of Eritrea's diaspora in homeland politics and their creation of a cyberspatial public sphere for democratic processes and media in Eritrea is complex and unclear. The public sphere within Eritrea must be understood in relation to the history of nationalist struggle. The fight for independence was a mass movement, but it was also a war fought by a guerrilla army whose leaders became the leaders of the nation. The EPLF was internally brutal in its demands for loyalty and sacrifice to the cause. The politics of conformity and self-censorship were well established within the nationalist movement and this political culture did not disappear with the achievement of independence and Isaias Afewerki's ascent from guerrilla leader to president (Iyob 1997). Where home-grown dissent is silenced, what Eritreans write in cyberspace has added significance. The Internet, coupled with residence in the diaspora, offers a relatively safe and unregulated domain for political expression. Some Eritreans in Ertirea explicitly look to the diaspora to express the criticisms of government policies that they themselves cannot (Conrad 2005).

Dehai readers and writers to whom I have spoken believe that Dehai has, moreover, influenced political policies within Eritrea. One of the most active and prolific writers to emerge from Dehai, whom I refer to as 'Yakob' (I have substituted pseudonyms for all personal names in Dehai postings), for example, says that although the government does not officially respond to statements on Dehai, sometimes after a criticism is posted, the policy is changed. Government leaders are also believed to participate in Internet debates under assumed names. Moreover, since readers cannot always tell if a poster is using their real name or a pseudonym, some readers suspect that members of government pose as ordinary posters to push online debates in pro-government directions. There is no reason to doubt that online discussions are monitored by the Eritrean government because the government goes to great lengths to retain the diaspora's support, for example, sending party officials and important office-holders to the USA and other places to brief Eritreans abroad on key issues. In this sense, the public sphere of Eritrea and that of the diaspora on- and offline are not entirely distinct, but overlap and intersect in ways that cannot fully be traced or delineated. The fact that the locations and identities of Internet posters,

along with their motives, may be obscured contributes to this (Castells 2001; Fandy 1999).

What is clear is that the public sphere of Dehai made possible certain kinds of discussion and critique that could not be expressed elsewhere, and has widened the participation in debates by linking interlocutors who were otherwise unknown to one another, geographically dispersed and from different regional, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Dehai also brought into being new public intellectuals and allowed them to develop their talents in the forum it offered.

The extent of the diaspora's influence on homeland politics is hard to know. The significance of what Eritreans write in cyberspace must be understood in relation to the strong transnational linkages among Eritreans in diaspora, their links to the EPLF and later to the PFDJ, and in relation to the amount of resources that the diaspora has continued to send to Eritrea. The financial support given by Eritreans in the diaspora ensures that their views will not be totally ignored by the government.

In Eritrea in 2001, one of Dehai's founders and continuing managers, Ghidewon, expressed the website's goals for the future in this way: 'We should be able to open a window on Eritrea so the world can see Eritrea for what it is with information written by Eritreans. We should strengthen Eritreans in diaspora and the links between the two [Eritreans at home and those abroad].' In thinking about some of the limitations of the site, Ghidewon offered the following analysis:

> The drawbacks of Dehai is that there are too many silent members, the discussions are not always focussed. … We major in minors and minor in majors. Politics dominates, so we don't discuss technology and culture. Discussion is usually dominated by science and industry rather than social science. There is a language issue. Some people are intimidated by English. Another pitfall is there is too much focus on time-sensitive issues, instead of on information that lasts a long time, and there is an obsession with politics.

Ghidewon also mentioned the lack of participation from Eritrea, for which he said there is 'no excuse' since 'we know we have many readers in Eritrea'. However, during most of Dehai's development, Eritreans aside from government officials lacked access to the Internet, so from inception to its heyday during the 1998–2000 border war it was *de facto* a diasporic cyberspace, but one with an important link to Eritrea's leadership.

In 2000 ordinary members of the public in Eritrea gained the ability to go online in cybercafés, offices and other venues and since then several factors have reduced Dehai's centrality. The end of the border war and the shift of the diaspora out of crisis mode to more routine political issues and debates probably led to decreased activity as people's attentions drifted. That may not be as significant as the rapid rise of a handful of other Eritrean websites competing for the same readers and writers as Dehai. Political rifts emerged within the country's ruling circles. The border war and the government's handling of it strained people's loyalties and willingness to censor their criticisms. The government's response to criticism was to crack down on any

suspected critics. Overall, a new political era dawned within Eritrea and in the diaspora. The diaspora was able to express itself and make the cracks in the façade of Eritrean unity more visible in the fragmentation of the online public sphere. In Eritrean cyberspace the number and diversity of websites has grown, with some reflecting distinctive ethnic/religious points of view on Eritrean politics.

Once Eritreans within Eritrea gained access to Dehai and other websites from cybercafés, the government and local media faced new pressures if they wished to retain any credibility, since alternative sources of information and analysis became available. In Eritrea, in 2001, I observed the effect of Eritrean cyberspace in putting pressure on the government to loosen its control over the country's media. The government allowed independent newspapers to operate, and some were openly critical, but this was short-lived. In autumn 2001 the government cracked down on independent media and put a number of journalists in prison. The diaspora, who are beyond the direct control of the government, can play an important part, disseminating information and alternative analyses to Eritreans in Eritrea, and offering to the Eritrean government a window on dissent.

Conclusion

Dehai expresses the yearnings for expression that grow out of conditions of repression and lack of free speech within Eritrea and also out of the invisibility and isolation of Eritreans in the West. Through Dehai Eritreans could express their very human desires to make meaning of individual loss and suffering through social engagement, and to work through social traumas like the catastrophe of war by reinterpreting them. They could feel they were working towards a better future as part of a community. My analysis of the content and organization of Dehai suggests that while on the surface it is about open access to information and the exchange of ideas, at a deeper level, reading and writing on Dehai does something much more profound in creating community among the displaced, constructing a shared national and virtual history, and serving as an arena for civic engagement and dissent as well as for entertainment and status production.

Much scholarship on the Internet both emphasizes connectivity and assumes a Western individual cybersubjectivity. Eritreans' use of cyberspace draws attention to the social ruptures projected into and acted upon in cyberspace as well as to the continued significance of collective identities despite globalizing processes, geographic and technological mobility, dispersal and displacement. I contend that the Internet is the quintessential diasporic medium, ideally suited to allowing migrants in diverse locations to connect, share information and analyses, and coordinate their activities. The involvement of the Eritrean diaspora in transnational fields of political mobilization and in Eritrean national debates reveal the complexities of transnational migration and the interconnections between democracy in the West and processes of peacemaking and democratization elsewhere. Cyberspace is a medium that helps diasporas overcome distances that separate members from one another and that separate the diaspora from its homeland. Particularly where strict regulation,

censorship and self-censorship are characteristic of homeland-based media, cyberspace gives a range and depth to the perspectives expressed around public issues that may not be possible in public spheres in the home country (Eickelman 2003).

This analysis of the Eritrean diaspora's use of cyberspace as a vehicle for participating in homeland politics speaks to some key debates on cyberspace and life in the digital age. According to the World Bank, new communications technologies can 'put unequal beings on an equal footing and that makes it the most potent democratizing tool ever devised' (in Wheeler 2001: 187). The example of Dehai suggests a much more complex role for cyberspace in people's lives and a less straightforward relationship between 'information' and democracy. As Armbrust (2003: 102) has observed, 'media do more than record or promote. They are especially significant sites of social experimentation because they are at once removed and engaged'. One could say the same for the Eritrean diaspora, which is itself both removed from and engaged in Eritrean politics, so that the space of diaspora becomes a creative one.

Becker and Wehner (2001) point out that the very freedom of the Internet can, however, also be a limitation. In contrast to mass media, which standardizes information and the rules of conduct and rhetoric that are broadcast, the Internet is so unstandardized and diverse that it promotes social fragmentation and partial public spheres. They argue that the Internet underlines social differentiation by supporting the dissemination of 'plural and incommensurable discourses'. This could be true of Dehai as a public sphere in relation to larger public spheres such as those of Western mass media or Eritrea's government-controlled media. Moreover, the ultimate frag-metation of Eritrean cyberspace into multiple sites/spheres may also reflect the centrifugal force towards plurality that Becker and Wehner argue is related to the character of the Internet as a medium. On the other hand, the decentralizing aspect of the Internet makes it all the more noteworthy that Dehai successfully held Eritreans together for years as participants in a common public sphere despite, or perhaps because of, political conflict on- and offline.

I see Eritrean cyberspace as reflecting the struggles of ordinary people to partici-pate in national debates, narrate history, define legitimacy and articulate a moral order. Eritrean websites have fostered the emergence of counter-publics and spaces of dissent where unofficial views are voiced and alternative knowledges are produced. These spaces of creativity at the margins are perhaps all the more important given the pervasive reach of global capital, media conglomerates and regulatory authorities of various kinds.

This analysis draws attention to ways in which diasporas bridge the local and the global as they operate in and across social fields, inventing new forms of citizenship, community and political practices, creating new social geographies and, in their own way, changing the world. Studies of migrants that see them simply as ethnics, refu-gees or struggling workers miss these processes. The transnational migrant, moreover, is a key figure of global modernity, one that reveals the failures of postcolonial societies to provide stability and welfare and the failure of Western democracies to enfranchise populations marked as racially or culturally different. The diasporic

individual who is never completely grounded or at home, who lives in ambivalence and instability, therefore speaks to the precariousness of the social arrangements upon which we all depend, and to the ways community and social justice must constantly be produced from the ground up and reinvented under changing conditions.

Victoria Bernal
Department of Anthropology
University of California
4229 Social Science Plaza B
Irvine
CA 92697-5100
USA

Notes

1. The concept of the digital divide has implicated the Internet in new forms of inequality, and to some extent we must also consider the ways in which cyberspace is a privileged and exclusionary space. This is particularly true for the less educated and for women. In the case of Dehai, this question can be connected to the question of how ideas about African elites may or may not apply to Eritreans in diaspora. I lean toward seeing Eritreans in cyberspace as an avant-garde that may suggest the ways that African intellectuals, cultural critics and dissidents might use cyberspace as a forum for expression.

2. Once the Internet took off, www.dehai.org was for a long time the pre-eminent Eritrean website after which later websites are modelled. Since the end of the 1990s, Eritreans have developed a number of other websites such as www.asmarino.com, www.meskerem.com, www.hafash.com, and www.awate.com, among others. The significance of cyberspace for diasporic Eritreans was recognized by the government when it established its own website, www.shaebia.com in 2000, both as a means of disseminating information to the diaspora and as a mechanism of spin control to compete with the views expressed on the non-government sites.

3. Breslow (1997: 255), however, sees the Internet's decentralizing tendencies as working against the forms of solidarity associated with popular culture and civil society.

4. Many Dehai postings are long and, in the interest of space, I can just excerpt a few lines from them. Unconventional spellings, usage and grammatical practices are part of the character of Dehai and I have chosen to reproduce them unedited and without introducing '*sic*' notations, which clutter up the texts, interrupt the flow and would seem to insult the writers by pointing out their unstandardized English as an 'error', which is inappropriate in this context.

5. It is common for Eritreans to be known by their first names, since their second name is the first name of their father, not a surname as such. Calling the President by his first name is not a sign of disrespect, but it does suggest familiarity. The more correct, formal reference would be 'President Isayas'. The fact that some Eritreans feel comfortable speaking of Eritrea's president as simply Isayas says something about their sense of connection to Eritrean politics and their sense of entitlement, ownership and membership in the political community of Eritrea.

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