Social Media Affordances and Migrant Political Practices

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Despite the rich empirical findings of recent research on social media and migrant communities, the relationship between social media and political practices is not yet known. Further, research has produced contradictory findings, such as the use of social media for acquisition of liberal values on the one hand and the use of social media for political radicalization on the other. In addressing these issues, the present article has made use of the notion of affordances, imported from perceptual psychology, in order to understand what social media enable and constrain in terms of political practices. Based on empirical material drawn from in-depth interviews with immigrants from Egypt, Libya and Syria living in Athens, participant observation in a community centre and online ethnography, the article suggests that social media are linked to four distinct affordances: i) continuous presence without physical contact, (ii) the possibility for unpredictable encounters, (iii) the rise of new political hubs, and (iv) the formation of new political alliances and solidarities. These four affordances are abstracted from analyzing specific political uses and practices. In our sample the substantive aspects of these affordances were positive, as migrant communities were kept well-informed of political developments not only in their home and host countries but also in other areas of interest; they were able to encounter ideas and narratives that allowed them to understand more in depth the political process; they were able to form new online centres, such as Facebook pages, side-stepping any boundaries imposed by community organizations; and, finally, they formulated new political alliances and solidarities especially with Greek anti-racists and the anti-austerity movement. However, in different contexts, these affordances may lead to different outcomes, showing an altogether ambivalent potential. From this point of view, social media and their affordances cannot guarantee freedom of expression and political participation.

Keywords: Social media; affordances; migrant communities; political practices; politics

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The recent proliferation and global spread of online media has introduced various shifts not only in human practices, such as migration, but also in the ways in which such practices are researched and conceptualized (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010; Reips, 2008). New technologies and network communication constitute a crucial factor that introduces new elements into the flows and patterns of human mobility (Oiarzabal and Reips, 2012). In this article we suggest that, as they become associated with new experiences, such new technologies introduce shifts in socio-political patterns and processes, making concepts such as citizenship and national politics appear somewhat redundant, unable to catch up with accelerated developments in political experiences, practices, loyalties and belongings.

In pursuing these arguments, this article will first discuss the relevant literature, arguing that while research has contributed significantly to mapping migrant and minority[1] political practices in online contexts, we need to develop a broad theoretical template for examining online migrant political practices. Based on Diminescu (2008) it will argue that the idea of migrant experiences as revolving around absence needs to be revised in light of new technologies which allow for constant presence and the building of portable bonds. Rather than prioritizing either the technology or the users in determining migrant political practices, this article makes use of the notion of affordance (Gibson, 1979), which refers to the potential for action enabled and circumscribed by social media as they are apprehended by specific groups or communities. Drawing on original empirical material, based on a series of interviews and participant observation among Egyptian, Libyan and Syrian communities in Athens, this article will suggest four such affordances associated with social media, which can serve as a broader template from which to make analytical sense of the relationship between migrant political experiences and practices and social media. These are: (i) continuous presence without physical contact, (ii) the possibility for unpredictable encounters, (iii) the rise of new political hubs, and (iv) the formation of new political alliances and solidarities.

1.   New/social media and migration

The rise of new/social media has given new impetus to the study of migration and migrant lives. While many immigrant communities were seen as wedded to traditional ways of life, their quick uptake of new technologies is clearly documented (Diminescu, 2008). Relevant studies report on the ways in which migrant

communities have used such new technologies and the implications such use may have (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010; Brinkerhoff, 2010; Trandafoiu, 2013). For the purposes of this article, we could usefully discuss this growing body of research along three dimensions: (i) the macro-sociological dimension, which looks at the broader implications of new technologies for human mobility and flows; (ii) the micro-sociological dimension where the relationship is examined by looking at the ways in which migrants have incorporated new/social media in their lives (e.g. Komito, 2011; Madianou and Miller, 2012); and (iii) the political dimension, which looks at the relationship between social media, migration and the political process.

In terms of the broader implications of the rise in social media use and migration, a recent study by Dekker and Engbersen (2012) reports that social media facilitate migration because of four inter-related factors: firstly, they allow for continuing strong ties with friends and family; secondly, they mobilize weak ties, e.g. acquaintances and friends of friends, who can then help prospective migrants with the process of migration; thirdly, they create latent ties, i.e. relations that exist technically but have not yet been activated; and finally, they constitute a rich information resource, that allows prospective migrants to be knowledgeable in terms of what to expect. Taken together, these factors contribute to the lowering of the threshold for migration (Dekker and Engbersen, 2012).

Research from a micro-sociological point of view tends to support such findings. Madianou and Miller (2012) examined the use of new/social media among Filipino and Trinidadian migrants and found that such migrants have incorporated such media into their everyday routines, often using them to manage complicated emotional relationships, including long-distance parenting. The ability of migrants to perform such roles from a distance makes the decision to migrate easier. While Madianou and Miller focused on the maintenance of family and interpersonal relationships, Komito (2011) has looked at the implications of social media use for processes of integration; his findings include that social media strengthen bonding capital among members of diasporas but may in fact delay or inhibit integration as they are primarily used for interaction with in-group members. In contrast, Trandafoiu (2013) looked at the Romanian diaspora in online environments, holding that new/social media perform an important role in allowing migrants to negotiate the demands of their various identities, ultimately enabling them to come to terms with their transnational existence. Nedelcu (2012) theorizes social media usage as

contributing to the development of a transnational habitus, referring to the ways in which social media enable transnational socializing, the formation of bonds across borders and the development of new cosmopolitan sensibilities.

Politically oriented research on new media and migration has produced mixed results, tracing both negative and positive outcomes. Brinkerhoff (2009) has argued that online participation has led some migrant communities in the US to adopt the liberal values of their host country. Arguing against the view that online media radicalize migrants, Brinkerhoff showed how they mobilize liberal values to justify arguments and support political positions. In contrast, Conversi (2012), looking at both stateless communities and nation-states, argues that they are often involved in "irresponsible radicalization", pursuing politics that may have dangerous repercussions, but which these diaspora members will not have to face as they live elsewhere. Similarly, Bernal (2010) and Chan (2010) analyzed Eritrean and Chinese "long-distance nationalism" in online environments, pointing to the ambivalence of new media use. On the other hand, Trandafoiu's (2013) work on the Romanian online diaspora found that migrants congregating online can pressurize politicians back home, and mobilize in order to support migrant communities. Trandafoiu further reports that while they may occasionally participate in Romanian politics from afar, this occurs in a context where they reflect and engage with political narratives emanating from Romania itself rather than endorsing some narrow nationalistic view. Finally, Nagel and Staeheli (2010) report that online activists among Arab American and British Arab communities seek to connect with other communities in their host countries but also elsewhere on the basis of political affinities; there is a complex geography involved, they argue, which requires a fully transnational geographical lens when considering migrant communities and their political activism in online spaces.

What can we make of such findings in broader theoretical terms? While this research has significantly contributed to our knowledge of how some migrant communities use new media, their findings appear contradictory as we lack a broader template within which to fit them. We have yet to understand migrant online political practices beyond the specific instances, and we have no detailed knowledge of how new media intervene or mediate such practices. A striking finding in Trandfoiu (2013) was the importance of context: Romanian diasporas in North America and those in Europe pursued different kinds of politics: while the former were influenced by the broader American political landscape and were much more anti-communist and

(neo)liberal in their political discussions, the latter mobilized broader frames of justice and equality, reflecting on their experiences. But this suggests that the contribution of new/social media is minimal and that they are mere reflections of the offline context. Trying to make sense of both media and context, Kissau (2012) suggests that migrant political practices may be structured across two axes: the offline-online and the home-host ones. While this is a useful heuristic, continuous mobility, ongoing and unpredictable political developments as well as the dynamism of online cultures, conspire to make the situation more complex and fluid.

Diminescu (2008) has suggested that rather than thinking of migrants as uprooted and absent, it is more appropriate to think of them as connected, and as bringing their portable networks with them wherever they find themselves. Diminescu's work usefully highlights more global shifts in migration, which show clearly that human mobility is increasing, and that migrants are not settling in any given territory but rather settling in a mobile life. New/social media allow them to be connected to distant others – Diminescu describes migrants as the authors of a culture of bonds which they then carry with them (2008: 567). Migrants can then be seen as characterized by 'multi-belonging (to territories and to networks), hypermobility, flexibility in the labor market, the capacity to turn a relational dexterity into a productive and economically effective skill' (*ibid*.: 569). Finally, given the above, Diminescu criticizes the understanding of migration in terms of binaries, such as presence/absence, central/peripheral, mobile/immobile, home/host countries, arguing that we need a more complex and nuanced understanding which takes into account connectivity and constant movement, and which accepts both ruptures and continuities as part of the same dynamic of migration. Moreover, Diminescu has argued that while these new mobilities are the result of complex political and economic trends, as described by Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity" (2000), new information and communication technologies alter and enrich the possibilities for connection and bond formation among migrants. Diminescu fully understands the ambiguity of such new technologies, which on the one hand allow for this culture of bonds to be authored and maintained, while on the other hand position migrants at the centre of a new surveillance and governance structure, through tracing and recording their actions and movements (c.f. Morozov, 2011).

Building upon previous research findings and following through Diminescu's insights, it seems clear that we need to understand the relationship between migrant

political practices and social media as an ambiguous, dynamic and unpredictable one. At the same time, this should not prevent attempts to formulate a broad theoretical template to apprehend the ways in which this relationship is evolving. Drawing on empirical work in Athens, this article proposes four related but distinct shifts introduced by social media as they are used by migrants holding that these may be abstracted from their particular context of migrant communities in Athens and find wider application. These are considered as the outcome of the specific technological potentialities afforded by social media, their so-called "affordances" (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001), coupled with concrete uses or practices observed among our sample. Affordance is taken to refer to the possibilities for action involved in the particular way in which social media are apprehended by social actors; they are neither wholly determined by the technologies behind them nor by the users, but rather they come into being when specific media potentialities are actualized by specific uses. As Hutchby (2001: 448) put it, affordances are functional and relational; they are functional because they enable and constrain action, and relational in that different groups may perceive and use affordances in different ways. These two dimensions are important in pointing to both the stable elements of social media and the more dynamic ones. Using the specific case of migrants in Greece, we hope to illustrate some of the dynamics involved in the mediation of migrant political practices and experiences by social media.

2.   Exploring online migrant political practices

Based on original empirical data, but also upon other relevant research, this section will argue that social media can be associated with four affordances in the political experiences of migrants. These include: i) continuous presence without physical contact, (ii) the possibility for unpredictable encounters, (iii) the rise of new political hubs, and (iv) the formation of new political alliances and solidarities.

The empirical observations on which this discussion is based are drawn from a year-long study between 2011 and 2012 which included in-depth interviews with 25 migrants from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and specifically from Egypt, Libya and Syria, living in Athens. The empirical material was further drawn from participant observation in a community centre and from online ethnography, through following Facebook pages, blogs and news sites. The respondents were chosen in light of demographic data from migrant organizations,

embassies and Arabic schools, while care was taken to select people from different social environments. Nevertheless, a number of respondents were recruited through friends of people already interviewed and others were contacted randomly through the researchers' networks. Interviews were conducted in both Greek and in English. The sample of this study included both men and women between 17 and 52 years old and the majority (15 of the 25 interviewees) were men; most were first generation immigrants to Greece. Many of them had relatively high levels of education, yet the majority was employed in low-wage menial and semi-menial jobs. Their migratory strategy spanned between a stay of six months and up to 20 years in Greece. In some respects, this group of migrants is different from other migrant groups, especially Pakistani and Afghan migrants, who tend to work in the agricultural and construction sector, mostly in rural areas (Triandafyllidou and Maroufof, 2009). The ease of access to community centres which have computers and Internet subscriptions may be an important factor differentiating our interviewees from migrant groups in rural areas.

2.1 *Continuous presence without propinquity*

The idea of new media creating "communities without propinquity", that is, communities without physical co-presence, has been critically discussed by Calhoun (1998) who argued that the notion of community requires face-to-face interaction. The kinds of communities that are supported by new media are not the same organic communities as found, for instance, in a small coal-mining town, argues Calhoun (*ibid.*: 374). While indeed newly created, mediated community may not have the same degree of coherence or empathy, in the case of our migrants, their social media use allowed them to be continuously present in pre-existing communities and networks, although their face-to-face contact was limited to their occasional visits back home. Through a variety of applications, notably Skype, but also Facebook and to a much smaller degree Twitter, migrants keep in touch with their communities and networks of friends and family. Often, this allows them to keep abreast of political developments and especially be aware of the effects that such developments may have on their families and friends. For instance, Hala, a Syrian migrant, told us how she found out about what was going on in Homs through her Facebook connections. This also allowed her to organize help for Syrian refugees who arrived in Athens. Through Facebook, Hala, in common with other respondents, managed to remain present and relevant in politics in her home country, especially through receiving and

disseminating information and also in helping people influenced by political developments. Moreover, social media allowed them to form new connections and bonds with their compatriots in Greece, even if they did not manage to socialize often or meet face to face. This enables them to be continuously informed of developments that concern them in Greece, including changes in migration policy and citizenship status, as well as political statements regarding refugees. This finding echoes research by Bernal (2010), Chan (2010) and Conversi (2012), and points to a continuity of Anderson's ideas on long-distance nationalism, which allows people to participate in national politics from afar (Anderson, 1991). However, for Anderson, this long distance nationalism primarily takes the form of remittances, support for specific political figures or parties, nationalist propaganda and so on, and was usually mediated through community leaders and community organizations in the host country (see also Skrbis, 1999). Moreover, this continuous presence does not necessarily result in nationalistic politics; often, it can be broader in scope and traverse various political narratives. For example, in her work on Romanian migrants, Nedelcu used the frame of cosmopolitanism to refer to the gradual development of cosmopolitan sensitivities and 'an awareness that one belongs to a globalized world of networks and complex interdependencies' (Nedelcu, 2012: 1352). Thus, while social media afford the possibility of presence without propinquity, this presence may take different forms, often very distinct from nationalistic frames and from minority politics.

In the case of our respondents, social media add a new and significant component: political participation does not pass through community leaders nor is it vetted by anyone within the community. Whilst still mediated through social media and people's existing networks, political presence and participation are not determined or shaped by migrant community organizations and their leaders. Moreover, as such political presence takes place in and through networks of family, personal friends and acquaintances, it acquires a more personal aspect. Another relevant element in this kind of political presence is the diversification of political viewpoints. While notions of long-distance nationalism, which we may argue belong to the previous media order, were supported through satellite television channels broadcasting in migrant homes, this new form of continuous political presence is mediated through blogs, diasporic online fora, online news sites, YouTube channels and so on, a variety of media which eschew any kind of centralized control and which

for this reason support a variety of political viewpoints. Finally, this allows for continuing engagement rather than sporadic and *ad hoc* contributions to politics. Occasionally, this engagement may take the form of outright activism and street protests, especially when political developments call for something like this, as for instance with the January 2011 uprising in Egypt, the downfall of Gaddafi in Libya and the ongoing civil war in Syria. But for the most part, the kind of political presence without propinquity afforded by social media implies that migrants can be politically aware, informed and engaged at all times.

2.2 *Unpredictable encounters*

Notwithstanding his emphasis on migrant guest workers, Sayad (2004) had already seen that migration engenders unpredictable political encounters, which would never have happened in the space of the nation-state. Migration, he argued, brought together rural, working-class migrants with middle class intellectual political exiles, who would have never had the opportunity to meet and converse in Algeria but they encountered each other in coffee shops and community centres for migrants in France. For Sayad, this signalled the development of national-based politics and for the rise of a widely supported struggle for national independence. Thus, already in the 1960s, the encounters between middle-class exiles and proletarian guest workers from North Africa and Southern Europe in North-West Europe gave rise to a new radicalism and galvanized movements for independence and the restoration of democracy (Sayad, 2004).

It is this aspect of unpredictable encounters that we would like to argue is intensified by social media. Although much has been written about new media as echo chambers and hyper-fragmented public spheres of similar others (Sunstein, 2009) our respondents indicated that, as a combined result of their migration and social media use, they have come across people, ideas and opinions that they would not have otherwise met. Although evidence from network theory suggests an overall effect of homophily (McPherson *et al*., 2001), our respondents made it clear that they use a variety of sites, blogs and news sites, they are in general open to having new Facebook friends, and their "friends" lists included a variety of people. For instance, Osama, who came from Egypt about 6 months before the interview, told us that he reads as many blogs as possible, not only in Arabic but also in English. While he does

not support everything he reads, he likes to come across new ideas and opinions that make him think.

Additionally, the structure of social media networks is one which supports weak links, i.e., not particularly close friends or acquaintances, but who may provide bridges to new and hitherto inaccessible networks (Granovetter, 1973). Although for Manal, an Egyptian living in Greece for three years, the majority of her Facebook friends are from Egypt, she accepts and initiates (Facebook) friendships with others, be they Greek or from other nationalities; they in turn open up new opportunities for communication and expose Manal to new networks and ideas. Moreover, for Basma and Tareq, reading blogs and news sites made them aware of the possibilities of freedom and the liberty to express any opinion. Basma, a Syrian woman who lived in Athens for almost 20 years, mentioned how her ideas about Israel and Lebanon were altered when she came across analyses of the political situation that came from bloggers rather than from formal political and journalistic channels. Tareq, an Egyptian man living in Athens for about 15 years, told us that he likes reading all kinds of different blogs, some in Greek, in order to familiarize himself with different ideas. Thus, unexpected encounters do occur online, through friends of friends, through reading comments or posts on blogs or news sites, and through being directed to a YouTube video or a Twitter account. This way, migrants come across new ideas, concepts and information, which sometimes offer them greater insight, helping them understand something in more depth, or which may offer them a completely new way of seeing things. In short, the encounters afforded by social media cannot be predicted by a person's offline network or by their typical day-to-day physical trajectory through space. The unpredictability of these online encounters and their outcomes can account for apparently contradictory findings such as those by Conversi (2012) on radicalization and Brinkerhoff (2009) on the adoption of liberal values by Iraqi and Afghan migrants to the US.

2.3 *Rise of multiple political hubs*

Based on the previous two affordances, constant presence and unpredictable encounters, social media upset and disturb established political orders, characterized by hierarchical structures and ideological cohesion. One of the main grievances of minority/multicultural politics, especially in countries such as the UK, has been that politics and relevant policies were developed through consultation with unelected and

unaccountable "community leaders" (Vertovec, 1999). At the same time, we know that new media have clearly affected the structure and conduct of activist politics. Bennett (2003) has shown that new media are associated with shifts in political organizing that include weak ideological ties and multiple centres or hubs. Quoting the notion of segmented, polycentric, integrated networks – the so-called "SPIN" model (Gerlach, 2001) – Bennett notes that digital media politics revolve around such networks. In contrast to social movements of previous eras, such as the labour movement, which were hierarchical and had clear ideological lines, in online environments, political movements are composed by many and diverse groups, have multiple leaders or centres of influence, and form a loose network with multiple and redundant links between members (Gerlach, 2001). Moreover, on the Internet political campaigns become permanent, mobilizing lifestyle narratives rather than ideologies, while they can also affect mass media communication and information flows (Bennett, 2003). In some instances, online campaigns may feed into the agenda of mainstream media; an example of this is the controversial Kony2012 campaign, on Joseph Kony, a Ugandan warlord, which began as a YouTube video prepared by a non-profit organization and was subsequently widely reported by the mainstream media (Madianou, 2013).

Thus, as our respondents noted, new and multiple hubs emerge in online contexts, often sidestepping the more traditional community organizations operating offline. Facebook pages and YouTube channels emerge in order to address political issues not addressed either through mainstream politics or through community organizations. Often these initiatives run parallel to community organizations, which operate their own pages through social media; for instance, the page of the Greek-Egyptian Federation or the Muslim Association of Greece. But the operation of several pages on diverse topics shows the creation of multiple hubs, which are no longer controlled by community organizations, although it is also clear that the latter still have a role to play. These new hubs cover a wide range of areas, including reporting and countering everyday racism and difficulties in obtaining papers and permits (e.g. the Facebook page Stamatiste tous Ratsistes/Stop Racism (*sic.*)), organizing in order to ensure basic rights, such as having a mosque in Athens (e.g. the Facebook group First Mosque in Athens), or in support of political struggles at home and elsewhere (e.g. the Facebook page *Allilegii sto Syriako lao* [Solidarity to Syrian People] and the page Ship to Gaza). These initiatives enjoy different levels of support,

ranging from a few hundred to several thousand "likes". Three important things to note here are, firstly, that there is no single ideological line connecting any of these initiatives; secondly, that they are open to all, i.e. not limited to specific communities; and thirdly, taken together, in their entirety, they are not always directed exclusively to either the home or the host country, but traverse territorial lines and mobilize broader frameworks of justification. For example, both First Mosque in Athens and Solidarity to Syrian People refer to specific localities, Athens and Syria, but they allow anyone to participate ("like" or join them) and justify their demands on the basis of frames of justice, fairness and equality. Thus, you do not have to be Muslim, or even live in Greece, to join the First Mosque in Athens group and you do not have to be Syrian to like the Solidarity to Syrian People page.

These findings echo Trandafoiu's (2013) analysis of Romanian online diasporas, who used many sites and formed leaderless communities, although they had clear rules and norms about how to participate in such online environments. Similarly, Nagel and Staeheli's (2010) analysis on the mixed geography of online Arab activists implies the concurrent existence of multiple hubs, overlapping but also distinct political causes, across many different locations. While the state still looks at community organizations and their leaders, individual migrants are politically active in diverse ways and connect through social media. This, in turn, leads to the fourth element of the articulation of migrant political experiences with social media, namely the creation of new political alliances.

2.4 *New political alliances and solidarities*

The possibility of political presence without propinquity, the unpredictable political encounters, as well as the rise of new political hubs support the creation of new political alliances and solidarities. This was already a new development characterizing not only new media politics but also the post-ideological political landscape that emerged in the 1990s (e.g. Bell, 2000). Empirical studies of new forms of movements and activism supported by the new media show that they function as very broad umbrellas often housing very diverse and even contradictory elements. For instance, Gillan and Pickerill (2008) found that the anti-war movement in the UK included some 'bizarre coalitions' (*ibid.*: 22), which moreover differed from those in the US and in Australia: Muslim organizations were found alongside gay rights groups, Marxist-based political associations and environmental activists united only in their

activism against the war. As Tarrow put it, 'all shifting and reticular movements reduce ideological cohesion, but the Internet may be extreme in its centrifugal effects' (2005: 138).

Similarly, our respondents reported the formation of new strategic alliances and solidarities which traversed ethnic, national/territorial,[2] religious and political lines. Typically migrants, especially those who have arrived recently, tend to use social media in their own language and are not so aware of local politics. This was clearly the case with Hassan and Imaad, two Egyptian men, who were living in Athens for three months when we spoke to them in December 2011 at a community centre in central Athens. Both had good English, but no Greek, and knew only very little about Greece and its politics. When we pointed out to them that Greece is in the middle of a serious crisis,[3] they agreed and amplified the argument, insisting that there is crisis everywhere, referring to their own countries but also elsewhere in Europe, and saying that "we must all stand together". This was a clear declaration of solidarity and, as we discovered later, this was expressed equally clearly not only in other interviews but also in the development of various solidarity networks for support that operate both offline and online. In our informal discussions at the community centre, we found that this solidarity was extended to all those considered disadvantaged, both in economic and in political terms, i.e. to both those who are poor and those who are politically oppressed. It therefore included not only poor people across the world, but also those living under oppressive regimes, with explicit references to Syria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Palestine. The common enemy was not clearly articulated but assumed to be corrupt politicians and their allies.

One of the more poignant examples of this solidarity comes from Hala, a Syrian woman who is originally from Syria but has lived in Athens for over 20 years.[4] Hala is actively involved in supporting the Syrian opposition to President Assad, and helps run two Facebook pages and a website. Hala was preparing a fundraiser in support of Syrian refugees and posted a request for help on her page. The request was vague but it included the address where the fundraiser would take place. When the time came, Hala was astonished to find help in the form of food, clothes, money, as well as volunteers who had arrived to offer help; these were a mixed group of Greeks and non-Greeks. Hala was touched by this, and pointed out that something like this would not have been possible were it not for social media. This example clearly shows the active solidarities that emerge through social media.

Another form of connection and solidarity concerns the struggles against the austerity policies of the Greek government. Migrants have been hit very hard by the crisis in Greece, with rising unemployment and incidents of violence against migrant communities (PICUM, 2013). Those with whom we spoke were very vocal in their criticism of current policies and austerity politics, of the way in which the state and its apparatus, including the police and the courts, have turned against migrants, with operations such as Xenios Zeus having the objective of "dealing with illegal immigration".[5] Immigrants have therefore sided with Greeks in protesting against austerity measures, using social media to organize and coordinate protests. Tareq told us that he and several of his friends and colleagues have marched alongside many others, Greeks and immigrants, outside the Parliament at Syntagma Square, and that such protests were coordinated through social media, through *ad hoc* Facebook pages and Twitter accounts.

In addition, migrants are also strategically forming alliances through social media in order to counteract some of the most pernicious effects of the crisis, especially racism, unemployment and access to medical services. These alliances mainly take the form of systematically "liking" pages of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Médecins Sans Frontiers or the Hellenic League for Human Rights, and of friending or following people who may be in a position to help. Migrants, especially more established ones, act as bridges for such alliances connecting NGOs and antiracist groups with other migrants and refugees, enabling them to have access to information and practical help in a context where the official Greek state is openly hostile to migrants and refugees. Solidarity is built and sustained through such alliances, and while these are the result of political, economic and cultural developments, they are nourished and mobilized through social media links and connections.

Combining all these elements, social media – themselves part of a broader nexus of technological, political, cultural and economic developments – enable and sustain multiple forms of political participation and political orientations among migrants. Migrants are clearly still concerned with politics back home, especially given recent developments in the whole of the MENA region, as well as with influencing and shaping migration policies in the host country. However, they are equally aware of, and concerned with, global developments, both political and economic, and they employ narratives based on notions of justice and equality in

accounting for and explaining their politics. For instance, in a discussion with Basma, a common theme was that of injustice emerging in different contexts, e.g. in Syria, in Palestine, in Egypt and Greece, and the need to address this. She spoke with great eloquence and conviction, pointing that she is trying to do her bit to fight injustice through participating in various networks with an offline and an online presence. "Is it fair?" and "is this democratic?" were two expressions that came up often in our discussions, and demonstrated a concern for fairness, justice and equality. Encountering instances of injustice, our respondents would be mobilized to comment, to share, and to post links supporting their position. Facebook pages and blogs belonging to migrants document such instances and call for redress and more broadly for a fairer society; for instance, on the Facebook page 'Stop Racisme', the 'About' section explicitly referred to a better society. Moreover, most of our interviewees discussed the Arab Spring uprisings in terms of freedom and the quest of people not only for justice but also for the freedom and liberty to express themselves, and to do what they want without any fear. The opportunity to read and contribute to blogs was cited by many as an example of a newly-found freedom.

In some ways, the ability to form new alliances and solidarities is the combined outcome of the previous three affordances. These show the development and spread of a more fundamental political orientation towards justice and equality, which is clearly supported through social media and the connection to many like-minded people. Rather than compensating for the contradictions of migration through nurturing dreams of return, migrants in fact identify them and flag their political relevance. They actively point to contradictions between rhetorics of democracy and inclusion and actual state practices, and between developing and developed countries.[6] Notwithstanding the psychological implications and trauma of experiencing racism, the importance of politically channelling such feelings through documenting and discussing instances of racism and injustice in social media and through creating alliances and solidarities seem to have given rise to a political identity which exists beyond ethnic and national identities and which revolves around understandings of justice and equality for all.

It should be noted here that these particular alliances and solidarities are those expressed and experienced by our limited sample, and may not necessarily be generally true of other groups. While there is no way of predicting the direction and substance of these new alliances and solidarities, the point here is that new/social

media enable the formation of such alliances beyond the experiences and encounters in migrants' immediate physical surroundings. The ambivalence of this attribute is clearly illustrated in the work of Conversi (2012) on new media and radicalization. Similarly, Al-Lami, Hoskins and O' Loughlin (2012) note how social media contents are remediated, i.e. shared and explained and commented upon, by different groups leading to very ambiguous political outcomes.

Conclusion

The current historical juncture is one which prioritizes communication and connection (Castells, 2009). At the same time, human mobility has intensified and diversified; this intensely mobile world is also densely linked and connected through communication and technology networks. While an increasing number of studies are contributing to our understanding of the emerging connections and dynamics, as well as their political significance, we also need to identify the specific contribution of social media. Focusing on the various political connections established and maintained by migrants through social media the present article identified four related but distinct patterns, which emerge as the outcome of social media affordances, pointing to the ways in which social media circumscribe and enable political practices. These include: (i) the development of political presence without propinquity or physical co-presence; (ii) the possibility of unpredictable political encounters and fusions of ideas and narratives; (iii) the multiplication of hubs that run parallel to, but which also undermine, the classic model of centralized community organizations; and (iv) the emergence of new alliances and solidarities. In the specific group of people we interviewed, these affordances were linked to the development of a political identity that had more to do with fundamental political concepts of equality and justice than with nationality and ethnic belonging. However, this is not always or necessarily the case, as these affordances are ambiguous and may lead to politically equivocal practices.

It therefore seems that presence rather than absence and connection characterize migrant political practices on social media. Traversing and undermining ethnic models of political belonging, this constant political presence and related practices appear to support new and more elemental political identities. At the same time, they raise a set of critical issues which must also be studied and taken into account.

Firstly, while we found that social media amplify and diversify migrant political presence it is not clear who has benefitted from this and under what circumstances. Are all migrants equally engaged politically? Are some absent from online political spaces, and if so why? While all of our interviewees reported some political activity, and the community centre we visited had several computers to be used by visitors, it is far from certain that other categories of migrants, especially those in rural areas, enjoy the same degree of Internet access or possess the same degree of digital literacy. Future studies may attempt to find the new political divides and the extent of continuities and differences with known cleavages and inequalities.

Secondly, while social media create multiple hubs, they may also undermine communities by fragmenting and separating them. Although this may help evade traditional community controls, are these new hubs more democratic? To what extent can they give voice to all parts of the community? As mentioned earlier, migrants in rural areas, especially those involved in agricultural work, may not have access to new media or the digital literacy necessary to use them; do their positions and experiences find an outlet in social media?

Finally, we have documented the development of compound political orientation, as well as traces of a shift from nationalist narratives towards more global demands for justice and equal distribution of wealth. On the other hand, as already noted, the extent to which this may be used as a generalization is an open empirical question: these affordances cannot on their own lead to more egalitarian or participatory politics. A case in point concerns the recent rise to prominence of the racist party Golden Dawn; its extreme nationalistic and racist politics and discourses have inevitably found outlets in online spaces, with instances of online racism as well as racist groups organizing on social media (Siapera, 2013). Any political gains for migrant and minority communities must therefore be balanced with a consideration of the gains for xenophobic and racist political groups.

Notes

1   In the context of this article, migrant communities also refer to minority communities. The term migrant is used primarily because most of the communities and people studied were very mobile, moving from one country to the next, rather than forming part of an established and relatively settled minority. Nevertheless, the arguments and findings of this study may be also applicable to settled minority communities.

2   This is not to imply that geography and locality are no longer important. Rather, individual persons/members of migrant communities use new/social media to participate in political projects in their homeland and their host country, as well as elsewhere, in other locations that may be of interest: an example of this is the case of Palestine which mobilizes members of the Egyptian, Libyan and Syrian communities as well as Greeks.

3   At the time of writing, in early 2014, the crisis in Greece showed no signs of abating: according to Eurostat, in December 2013 the unemployment rate was 27.8%, the highest in the European Union, while the economy had contracted for a fifth consecutive year by 4.2% (source, EU, 2013 http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/eu/forecasts/2013_spring/el_en.pdf).

4   Hala's activism and vocal support for immigrants and their rights made her a target for Golden Dawn, the overtly racist party that gained a surprise 6.9% in the parliamentary elections of 2012. After months of harassment, Hala and her family left Greece for Sweden in early 2013.

5   The phrase is used on the Greek police website. The controversial three-pronged operation Xenios Zeus has three "pillars": (i) pushing back potential immigrants in the Greek borders in Thrace; (ii) repatriation of illegal immigrants; (iii) removal of illegal immigrants from the centre of Athens (source: http://www.astynomia.gr/index.php?option=ozo_content&lang='..'&perform=view&id=18 424&Itemid=950&lang=). In practice this allows the police to stop, search and detain immigrants until and unless they produce valid documents.

6   A new spatial contradiction that is perhaps emerging in Greece in the aftermath of the Dublin II Agreement – which stipulates that asylum seekers/refugees' applications should be dealt with at their port of entry to the EU – is that migrants find themselves trapped in crisis-ridden Greece and harbour hopes of moving on to other European countries. A number of our interviewees have relatives or friends living in the UK, Germany or Sweden and used them for comparison. It is also interesting to note that in a relevant discussion they found it hard to believe that racism exists in countries such as the UK.

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