

Diaspora, community and communication: Internet use in transnational Haiti

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***Abstract** With its capacity to link many people interactively across great distances, the Internet seems to be the ultimate tool for dispersed ethnic groups wishing to sustain identity in an 'alien' land and work in solidarity with those facing challenges at 'home'. Some theorists speak of the creation of diasporic public spheres arising from creative use of Internet technologies. Nevertheless, scholars working in this area rarely embed their analyses within existing work on the public sphere. In the present study I use insights from public sphere theory to evaluate participants' use of a Haiti Global Village forum. After examining Haiti Global Village, I conclude that such forums offer needed space for civic deliberation and provide a valuable infrastructure for networking. Participants' difficulty in translating these assets into an off-line project, however, highlights the importance of place-based social ties. Consideration of the experience of other Haitian forums reinforces the importance of such ties.*

The June 2000 meeting of the Coalition of Haitians for the Advancement of Haiti (CHAH) convened in a classroom at Our Lady of Peace Church in Tampa, Florida, just after the morning's Sunday Mass. Henri, the group's organizer, asked for a volunteer to open in prayer, and then everyone joined in to sing the Haitian national anthem. On the surface, this meeting is hardly remarkable. Hundreds of diasporic meetings have begun in this same way for decades. What is remarkable is that the discussion that led to the establishment of this group was initiated in a forum at the Haiti Global Village website.

Many scholars argue that as transport and communications have become faster and more affordable, and as sending states have encouraged their expatriates to maintain active ties to home, it has become increasingly common for migrants to sustain dispersed forms of community and identity (Appadurai 1996; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Guarnizo 1998; Levitt 2001; Ong 1999; Smith 1993). This has certainly been true of the Haitian community living abroad. After the fall of the Duvalier regime, former priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide came to power as a popular leader and created the Lavalas political movement. Part of the agenda of this movement was to embrace more firmly the community living abroad. This redefinition occurred most notably with the creation of the 'tenth department' concept. Haiti is divided into nine geographic departments that function as political units. According to Aristide, the diaspora would now be known as Haiti's tenth department. Aristide cemented this

idea by forging relationships with key leaders of diaspora communities living outside Haiti.¹ As members of the diaspora seek out meaningful ways of sustaining their commitments to people in Haiti, many are discovering that the Internet is a valuable tool for helping them sustain identity and work in solidarity with those facing challenges at home. While numbers of those online are difficult to come by, many community leaders and advocacy workers in the diaspora have Internet access and/or belong to a discussion list.²

The Haitian community is one of many whose members are turning to the Internet to maintain social, political and cultural connections to their home countries (Cunningham 2001; Dahan and Shefer 2001; Georgiou 2002; Graham and Khosravi 2002; Mitra 1997). Indeed, some theorists speak of the creation of *diasporic public spheres* arising from the creative use of Internet technologies (Appadurai 1996; Stubbs 1999). In *Modernity at large*, Appadurai (1996: 10) writes the following concerning the relationship between electronic communication and diasporic subjectivity: 'The transformation of everyday subjectivities through electronic mediation and the work of the imagination is not only a cultural fact. It is deeply connected to politics. ... The diasporic public spheres that such encounters create are no longer small, marginal, or exceptional. They are part of the cultural dynamic of urban life in most countries and continents.'

While the idea of a 'diasporic public sphere' is intriguing, it is ambiguously used and ill defined.³ Despite liberal use of the 'public sphere' concept, scholars working in this area rarely engage in a theoretically embedded analysis of the public sphere within the context of dispersed national communities. To understand the nature and significance of such public spaces within diasporic communities, it is necessary to embed our discussion within existing work on the public sphere. Public sphere theory contributes to existing research on transnational community and identity by highlighting the linkages between individual participants, community forums and off-line organizations and institutions. Examining these linkages allows us to understand *how* community agendas are set, *who* participates and how participants use transnational media both to strengthen internal ties among members and to tap into issue or advocacy networks with sympathetic members of global civil society organizations. Toward this end, the following sections situate the Haiti Global Village case within a larger discussion of the public sphere.

Public spheres and national community

Several scholars have examined the significant role reading publics play in shaping national identity and public opinion (Anderson 1983; Eagleton 1984; Habermas 1989). As Internet sites and forums are the most recent means of cultivating public space for reading and criticism, it is useful to frame their analysis with a consideration of how other media have been used for similar purposes. In *Imagined communities*, Benedict Anderson (1983) provides a foundation for theorizing the importance of linguistic community and community media in the formation of national subjectivities. Anderson traces the evolution from the cultural and social domination of elites versed in sacred languages to the relative egalitarianism of popular literacy and

publication in vernacular languages. He argues that this transition played an integral role in facilitating the rise of national consciousness based on linguistic and cultural distinctiveness. Anderson points particularly to the role of vernacular language books and newspapers in helping to cultivate a new sense of national community:

The significance of this mass ceremony [of newspaper reading] ... is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. ... What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?

(Anderson 1983: 35)

What many today take as the mundane routine of reading newspapers represented, in its early stages, a revolution in conceptions of the self and the larger community to which that self was connected. No longer was reality limited to what could be readily experienced, but on a daily basis it was possible to be linked to the realities of many anonymous others with whom one shared linguistic similarity and political membership.

In his analysis of the evolution of a public sphere separate from the state, Habermas (1989) also addresses the innovation of using books and newspapers to cultivate mass readership and to shape political subjectivity. Habermas blends historical analysis and social theory in order to trace the rise of what he calls an independent space for the formation of public opinion and will formation. He defines the public sphere as 'the sphere of private people [who] come together as a public ... to engage [in] a debate over the general rules governing [social] relations' (Habermas 1989: 27). The creation of this space for individuals to discuss 'publicly relevant' issues was significant because it occurred during a historical period when influential members of society were rebelling against absolutist rule. By coming together to discuss their ideas about how society should be governed, participants in this new public sphere were creating a place to express their opinions and to consider how they could make these opinions heard within the larger society.

In his analysis, Habermas speaks of a number of cultural innovations that provided the social basis for this emerging public sphere. English coffee houses, French *salons* and German table societies all promoted sociability within the context of intellectual and literary discussion. As the popularity of such spaces grew, weekly newspapers supplemented face-to-face discourse and became the basis upon which individuals formed communities of readers. Habermas writes:

When Addison and Steele published the first issue of the *Tatler* in 1709, the coffee houses were already so numerous and the circles of their frequenters already so wide, that contact among these thousandfold circles could only be maintained through a journal. At the same time the new periodical was so intimately interwoven with the life of the coffee houses that the individual issues were indeed sufficient basis for its reconstruction.

(Habermas 1989: 42)

Habermas argues that, while discussions in coffee houses and table societies often originally centred on literary works, the introduction of such weeklies encouraged discussion of the state of the larger society they all shared. As he put it, ‘the public that read and debated this sort of thing read and debated about itself’ (Habermas 1989: 43).

Both Anderson and Habermas illustrate how new media were used to create a communicative infrastructure for cultivating novel kinds of subjectivity and political discourse. In contemporary times, diasporic websites and forums have become the newest social bases for cultivating national subjectivity and discourse across borders. Immigrants and exiles may be physically displaced from the geographic borders of the nation, but their ability to create independent reading publics provides them with space to analyse critically or express opposition to the policies of their home states. While community newspapers and radio stations within ethnic communities have always facilitated this kind of expression, their use and impact have generally been restricted to local or regional areas.⁴ The use of Internet forums introduces the potential for creating truly transnational public spheres within dispersed national communities.

In their theoretical work on the varied structure and role of different kinds of publics, Emirbayer and Sheller (1999) emphasize that transcending the challenges of time and space has always shaped individuals’ abilities to take part in discussion and to exert influence on public issues:

Modern history has been deeply influenced by the rise of new technologies, sites, and media of communicative interaction. ... [Historians] have shown how literate publics based on technologies that increased time- and space-distanciation between speakers (authors), and audience (readers) were crucial to the development of both the modern individual self and the modern state and economy. ... How and where public communication occurs reveals a history of changing institutional settings that materially shaped the nature of publics and the power of human actors to utilize publicity.

(Emirbayer and Sheller 1999: 159)

Dispersed groups’ use of Internet forums provides qualitatively new arenas for public communication within an international context where transnational alliances are an important means of helping marginal actors strengthen their own networks and gain needed attention from civil society actors during community struggles.⁵

At the heart of this discussion about the use of media to facilitate time- and space-distanciation among a community of authors and readers are the roles of *expression* and *networking* within public spheres. *Expression* is central to the very idea of a public. Participation occurs by expressing one’s ideas, concerns and interests within a community of others who have some aspect of life in common. Such expression, while important in and of itself, does not, however, constitute a public sphere. The *networks* sustained among individuals who participate in these expressive acts largely constitute the publics. Such networks allow participants to leverage their multiple locales, skills and resources for the benefit of individual users and the community as a

whole. Emirbayer and Sheller (1999: 156) emphasize this in their assertion that publics are ‘not simply “spaces” or “worlds” where politics is discussed, as the popular “public sphere” idea suggests, but rather, interstitial *networks* of individuals and groups acting as citizens’. While many ethnic media provide spaces within which to *express* one’s opinions to geographically distant others, it is much more challenging to foster *networks* among these others that one can mobilize around specific issues or projects. The ability to lessen the constraints of time and space through Internet-mediated discussion lays the foundation for members of dispersed national groups to organize both community discussion *and* social practice in a way that includes a wider range of potential members and that opens up the limits of what is imaginable across distance.

In the following sections, insights from theory on the public sphere will be used to analyse the discussion and networking that follow conversation in the Haiti Global Village forum (Fraser 1992; Habermas 1989). The expressive uses of a public sphere suggest that we pay attention to each of the following: (1) speaker access and dominance: *who speaks and who is discouraged from speaking?* (2) control of the agenda: *how much control do participants have over the agenda?* (3) identity and opinion formation: *how does participation shape individuals’ opinions and/or identity?*⁶

Within the Haitian community, which has tended to be polarized by class and political allegiance, the issues above are real concerns. Although the village forums are open to all, participation could be curtailed or discouraged if certain opinions are discredited or if participants are attacked for their views. On the other hand, it is also possible that forum discussion might help participants to cultivate skills for civil and civic dialogue.

The *network* aspects of a public sphere lead us to be concerned about two further questions. The first is the centrality/marginality of participants; which participants are central/marginal to the circulation of network goods (social, informational, material resources)? Second is access to influence; what kinds of access do participants have to influential actors and institutions who can address concerns raised by the group?⁷

These are issues of special interest to members of the Haitian diaspora who are actively involved in working for change in Haiti or on behalf of new immigrants facing the hostile policies of the receiving country. The members of the Haitian community who use the Internet regularly tend to be well educated and often take an active role in their communities as advocates and activists.⁸ For those seeking to build bridges or to recruit others to community projects, discussion lists provide a ready forum for posting enquiries for information or assistance. Other research on Internet-mediated social relationships has shown that such forums often act as social networks that provide their members with social and even, on occasion, material resources (Rheingold 1993; Wellman and Gulia 1999). Paying close attention to the expressive and networking uses of Internet-mediated forums provides a clear framework of analysis for assessing the social and political significance of this relatively new arena of interaction for dispersed national groups.

Methodology

In addition to problems concerning conceptual ambiguity, the tendency of researchers to engage in methodological approaches that are restricted to online observation has hampered previous work on ethnic groups' use of Internet media. This limitation has contributed to an overemphasis on analysis read directly from the screen while obscuring the development of relationships and projects that arise from the interpenetration of online and off-line uses. As a consequence of these limited observations, early work carried out by enthusiasts who believe that Internet use *is* making a substantial difference to the lives of ethnic groups alluded to the social and political implications of these sites without presenting convincing evidence to support their claims.

Critics, on the other hand, often give *too little* credence to the significance of the informational networks that help groups forge community and sustain identity. While it is certainly true that flesh-and-blood individuals rooted in real places sustain them, it is also true that online forums can generate new kinds of relationships and influences, which in turn have off-line effects on the lives of real people and communities.

Ironically, enthusiasts and critics share important limitations in common. First, each uses a short-term approach. Bulletin boards are observed for a few days and then afterwards only randomly (Mitra 1997; Stubbs 1999) or researchers observe activity in chat rooms or on websites for short periods of time (Miller and Slater 2000). This approach results in data that are static snapshots of online interactions. There is no time to see how group uses and interaction change over time.⁹

As a result of these early weaknesses, researchers increasingly cite the need for greater care in how we conceptualize the Internet as a social space (Crang et al. 1999; Graham 1998; Wilson and Peterson 2002). Graham, for instance, cautions against tendencies to conceptualize Internet-mediated space as a world apart from geographic place.¹⁰ He writes: 'Such linkages are so intimate ... that defining space and place separately from technological networks soon becomes as impossible as defining technological networks separately from space and place' (Graham 1998: 181).

The design for the present study acknowledges the need to consider more carefully the interaction between Internet-mediated environments and geographic place. The research presented here is part of a larger study that began as a grounded examination of transnational communication and collaboration within and between Haitian communities in New York, Miami and Haiti. Initial work included monitoring Haitian community radio and newspapers in New York, noting attendance at community meetings and scrutinizing Haitian Internet forums. This work allowed one to compare the different kinds of transnational dialogue facilitated by various combinations of mediated and face-to-face dialogue. In comparison with newspaper, radio and face-to-face meetings, the discussion in the student forum of Haiti Global Village was distinctive because it included participants from multiple locales, was open-ended and inspired the genesis of an innovative cyber- and place-based group. As an organization, the Coalition of Haitians for the Advancement of Haiti lasted for approximately one year and fieldwork was carried out over the last four months of its existence. This work consisted of analysing online dialogue from the Haiti Global Village discussion,

reconstructing the evolution of CHAH from private email exchanges, personal interviews with CHAH founders, and attendance at two Tampa-based meetings during the summer of 2000.

The following section provides background to the social geography of Haiti Global Village. This brief tour of the village will lead us to the student forum where participant discussion led to the idea to form CHAH. The final section briefly considers the experience of Haiti Global Village and CHAH in the light of other groups' online experience in the Haitian community. This concluding discussion emphasizes the importance of examining the public sphere uses of the Internet within a framework that highlights the varied and complex interactions between geographic and cyber-place in diasporic communities.

The social geography of Haiti Global Village

The vast majority of us left [Haiti] because we had to for one reason or another. The vast majority of us would like to come home one day. ... There are thousands of people building the Haitian Internet at this very instant. They are building what will be for us Haitians, above all else: A Bridge Home.

(Henri Deschamps, Founder of Haiti Global Village website)

Deschamps' desire to create 'a bridge home' reflects the desire of many exiles to return one day to the place that – for better or worse – will always be home. The Haitian community has been building these bridges for decades since initial waves of refugees began to flee in the 1960s. Until the mid-1990s, these bridges were built by using radio and newspapers. The 1990s brought access to the Internet for many in the diaspora and increased web content catering to the Haitian community.

Haiti Global Village receives about 500,000 visits a month with roughly 100,000 of these originating from inside Haiti and the rest from outside the country. The principal users, in decreasing order of use, break down as follows: first, the diaspora – namely those who have emigrated or were born abroad; second, Haitian students overseas who grew up in Haiti and are studying outside the country; next, those whom Deschamps calls 'Haiti Alumni' – non-Haitians who have lived or worked in Haiti at some point; and last, those inside Haiti itself. Because of the breakdown in users, the intended Haiti Global Village audience consists of individuals living outside the country.¹¹

Before creating the site, Deschamps and his assistants did extensive research to determine, in his words, what the 'Haitian Internet' should look like. Surprisingly, they determined that the language of the Haitian Internet would be English first, followed by French. Though the Village offers content in French, English and a small amount in Haitian Creole, English is dominant because the design team found that Haitians living abroad in Anglophone countries – most notably the USA – would be the most frequent users.

Haiti Global Village is a sprawling website devoted to the life and needs of the diaspora and the village metaphor is reflected literally in the layout of the site. It was Deschamps' wish that the site have the feel of a city – a place where users could visit,

wander and make a place for themselves. To convey this sense of the city the opening pages of the site are divided into a series of neatly laid out boxes, positioned like spaces on a town grid. Visits begin at the Louverture Village Square, the central site from which it is possible to venture into any number of places representing Haiti's social, cultural and political diversity. To the north of the square is an invitation to sign up for the Haiti Global Village e-Bulletin, which posts news and information about events going on throughout the diaspora. To the west is one of the Village Dialogues – interviews with Haitian community leaders and personalities on issues of concern to the community. The Haiti Global Village poll site to the south is where responses to questions about community issues are compiled and reported.

In addition to these sites, several Village locations entitled *Anba Tonèl* act as miniature public squares where visitors gather to exchange opinions and ideas. The term *anba tonèl* refers to the idea of setting up an informal covering as a sun shelter in rural Haiti. People gather under this *tonèl* to rest and talk. It was discussion in a student-oriented *tonèl* that first gave rise to the idea for CHAH, the group introduced at the beginning of this article.

Anba Tonèl: entering the public square

The full title of the forum considered here is 'Men Anpil (Many Hands)–Haitian Students Overseas'. The phrase 'men anpil' draws on a popular Kreyòl saying: 'Men anpil, chay pa lou' – with many hands, the load is not heavy. The founders describe the forum as an online support network for Haitian students studying at universities abroad. In practice, however, a variety of people use the forum. Many are US-born young people of Haitian descent who want to make connections with others in the Haitian community.

Though the forum is theoretically open to everyone who would like to participate, much of the dialogue takes place in English. The English-language bias was the subject of extended discussion and contention between users located in Europe and the USA. This discussion revealed that many of the posters were American-born and could not read or write French or Kreyòl. Within multilingual national communities, the issue of language bias has clear implications for how accessible such forums will be in the emerging public sphere of the Internet. While steps are being taken to broaden the language base of the Internet, English still dominates much of the content.¹²

In the spring of 1999 a brisk conversation began as participants argued back and forth about the roots of Haiti's problems and the most effective ways of addressing them. As the *Men Anpil* discussion unfolds, participants grapple with how critically and morally to assess the roles of the Haitian state, citizens in Haiti, and the diaspora community in addressing Haiti's problems. This ability to consider carefully such complex issues makes personal expression in Internet-mediated forums an opportunity for civic learning as discussants share their own views, listen to others and try to keep the discussion amicable. Participation also offers users the opportunity to assess themselves and their commitments as they come to terms with how they should respond to Haiti's problems both as individuals and as a community of the diaspora living abroad.

The exchange in the *Men Anpil* forum begins when a student signing in as *Yvette* posts a message called ‘*Sak ap pase?*’ (What’s going on?). She begins by explaining that she posted an earlier message asking people to ‘put their hands together’, to think about what can be done to help Haiti. When she gets no response, she writes in again to say:

Let me tell you something my brothers and sisters, there is a reform right now that is being done. It’s not being done in Haiti only, but in every little street where there is a Haitian. It’s time for us to [stop] waiting for the government to do something about anything, but to start putting our heads together for the well being of our country ... we NEED YOU. I’m going to leave this message and hopefully I will see more people ... who care so much for this country, who are willing to put all our differences aside to say YES I WANT TO BE PART OF IT. ‘It’ is the future of Haiti.

(#6, archive)

Yvette is a college freshman studying in Florida and her writings here, and in other parts of Haiti Global Village, suggest that she is originally from Haiti and is studying in the USA. Her admonition that reform is or should be happening ‘in every little street where there is a Haitian’ communicates her own sense of responsibility for the country’s welfare and acts as a call to others who are ready to adopt this same sense of responsibility. Accordingly, she calls on forum participants to ‘[stop] waiting for the government to do something’ and shifts the locus of responsibility from the state to those ‘who care so much for this country’. Yvette’s decision to write two messages to the forum underlines how important she feels it is for her to be part of a larger conversation and initiative to make things better in the country she left behind.

This time her message does not go unanswered as many people write in over several days to discuss her post. Henri writes that a large part of the problem is that ‘Haitian politicians do not care about the Haitian people’, and he suggests that it should be more difficult for people to run for office. In order to run, he argues, ‘the electoral council should require them to show certain proof of good things they have done for the country’. Thus, Henri takes the conversation from what ‘we’ can do to what must change in the Haitian political system. He ends his post by saying: ‘Whether or not you agree with me, I’d like to read your opinion.’

This open invitation to different views helps to keep the conversation both civil and deliberative. In many other forums, discussions become heated to the point that participants withdraw. This is especially likely to occur in unmoderated forums such as Haiti Global Village. Discussion here, however, stays relatively respectful because the participants themselves set up informal norms that encourage courtesy and tolerance.

Kiskeya soon takes up Henri’s invitation to dissent by challenging his focus on politicians and bringing the emphasis back to the role of everyday people. He writes:

In response to the problem with Haitian politicians, I see your point, however, I also disagree with you slightly. ... The problem, as I see it, is that the government no longer encourages political participation from the average

citizen. In a democracy, we elect politicians to represent us, but ultimately, we (the people) hold the reigns [*sic*]. ... Your suggestion ... would not address the main problem affecting Haiti.

Kiskeya is not alone in his thinking, and a number of others write in to support him and to challenge Henri's emphasis on politicians and the state. While Kiskeya, Yvette, and others deplore the corruption of the political system, they see little likelihood that the situation will change and thus direct most of their criticisms at what they perceive to be the lack of community initiative for improving the situation on the ground. As a contributor named Nancy cynically notes: 'By definition, a politician is only concerned with his career and his own personal advancement. ... Personally, I hope those of us who are getting our education in first world countries would get together and do something concrete.'

Henri finally shifts the tone of his contributions in response to Nancy's message. Picking up on her request for members of the diaspora to 'get together and do something concrete', he responds with a note entitled 'Let's get together'. He writes:

More than ever before, Haiti has a prodigious generation living abroad. ... I understand we all love Haiti. But how do we intend to show that love? I believe we must all get together and do something to help Haiti. ... If we are sincere in what we want to do, then everything is possible. Common [*sic*] guys! Let's get together.

(HGV 1999)

At this, a number of people write in to support Henri's call. His message marks the turning point in the discussion as participants begin to think about ways to put their thinking into action.

Assessing expression in the forum

In assessing the expressive qualities of the forum, it is important to emphasize that its relatively civil atmosphere encouraged rather than discouraged participation even though the focus of the conversation was on the fragile political situation in Haiti. The exchanges offer opportunities for civic learning as participants make an effort to allow dissenting views while they discuss the complicated social and political terrain of Haiti's reality. In terms of identity and opinion formation, participants tended to stick to and defend the opinions they had before entering the forum. Despite their differences, however, Henri's willingness to shift his position slightly helped participants to come to the point of considering a way to work together. In the following section we follow forum participants off-line as they consider how to implement the vision of working together to make a difference in Haiti.

Haiti global villagers work towards off-line collaboration

The online record of this discussion ends during the summer of 1999, and since the author did not discover the discussion thread until the spring of 2000, it might have

been assumed that little had happened in the interim. Fortunately, the email addresses of all the contributors are included with their messages and it was therefore possible to contact Henri directly to enquire about the fate of the proposed initiative. He answered promptly, explained that he was still at school in Tampa, Florida, and that a group called CHAH – Coalition of Haitians for the Advancement of Haiti – had formed in response to the Haiti Global Village discussion. CHAH had held its *début* conference in January 2000 and was continuing to meet regularly.

The group's online component was an email discussion list that included members from Florida, New York and Boston and was moderated by Henri himself. The creation of the Tampa-based and online groups illustrates how combinations of geographic and cyber-place are being used to create new kinds of organization and practice. At this point CHAH is neither an 'online community' nor a conventional place-based organization. It is something in-between that evolved *not* from the ground up but from cyber-space down. While scholars who decry overzealous predictions that the Internet is 'revolutionizing' social life are right to be cautious, it is important not to limit prematurely the parameters and expectations of how different groups may use the Internet to organize themselves and their communities. For Henri and others, forums like Haiti Global Village expand the pool of personal and informational resources available for pursuing their work in the community.

Henri invited the author to travel from Miami to Tampa during June 2000 to attend a CHAH meeting scheduled for Sunday after church. During the first of two visits to Tampa, Henri and other CHAH participants offered additional background on the group. Henri explained that he had only recently discovered Haiti Global Village around the time of the discussion in the student forum. He was impressed with the possibilities the site offered for reaching out to other parts of the Haitian community, and he began to participate regularly in a number of forums on the site. He had always been involved in activist community work and decided toward the end of the forum conversation to use the Village as an outlet to extend this work beyond the small Haitian community in Tampa. He received his most supportive response from a forum participant named Alex who wrote in to say:

I agree with you Henri we should unite. We are the future. We need to find a way to motivate all our true Haitian brothers and sisters abroad as well as within our beautiful republic. ... We have well-educated and strong leaders abroad and within the country. We need to motivate our people and get them to start thinking and doing for themselves and not sit on their hands and wait for someone to hand us a silver spoon.

(HGV 1999)

Henri responded quickly: 'We see eye to eye. And I believe there are thousands of other Haitians who have the same spirit. We just need to find them. What do you propose to do in order to find them?' Alex suggested they disseminate a call for interested persons on Haitian radio stations and via the Internet. At this point, exchanges between the two moved off the Haiti Global Village website as they

communicated person-to-person in an effort to define their idea of how to establish a group that would have both an Internet and a geographic presence.¹³

Alex begins their personal exchange by giving Henri a brief description of himself. He explains that he arrived in the USA from Haiti 18 years ago and now resides in New York. He has not been back to Haiti for several years, but the despair that he saw on his last visit left its mark on him. He writes:

I last visited Haiti in '91 and to my disappointment it was not the Haiti I remembered. I had vowed then that something had to be done ... but I'm sad to say I never took the proper measures until now. I have a goal in life and that goal is to go back to Haiti and live peacefully at will.

(29 July 1999 and 30 July 1999)

Henri responds by also giving a brief introduction of himself and his aspirations:

I am so happy you describe yourself to me. I feel your desire to help Haiti. We are connected. So we will make it happen. ... As for me, I [am] not married yet. I live here almost by myself among total stranger[s]. I came here to study and that is what I am doing right now. ... I'll be 28 years old soon. ... I hope you have a good picture of [me] now.

This exchange, together with the Haiti Global Village experience that led up to it, highlights the unique forms of sociability facilitated by the use of Internet space. The forum itself acted as a kind of public square that gathered participants from across the diaspora for community dialogue and it served as a medium for introducing like-minded people interested in addressing needs in Haiti. Up until this point none of the participants in the village discussion have met each other, but the commitment to Haiti and the desire to address the country's issues are enough for Alex and Henri to set about creating an initiative that will help them to realize their shared goals.

It is one of the strengths of online communities that those with common needs who may be isolated where they live are able to find and support each other (Rheingold 1993; Wellman and Gulia 1999). In this case, the support needed is a space that allows dispersed Haitian users to cultivate a sense of community and national identity while being 'among total strangers'. In addition to sustaining identity, ethnic groups use such sites to maintain their commitment to supporting nationalist or nation-building projects in their home country (Dahan and Shefer 2001; Lal 1999). Commitment to rebuilding the nation is evident in Henri and Alex's exchanges as they begin to discuss what CHAH will look like. As a first step toward creating a group, Henri suggests they come up with a mission statement. Alex agrees and obliges by putting together a draft of the statement, which is excerpted below:

The Coalition of Haitians for Advancement of Haiti is working to unite all Haitians, [people of Haitian descent], and friends of Haiti. ... It is committed to rebuild the image of Haiti. ... In conjunction with associations, groups, clubs, and other organizations that are working to build a better Haiti, CHAH

will promote, assist, provide and support the necessary avenues to maintain a long-term commitment in rebuilding the Haitian society.

The mission statement expresses the common desire in the Haitian community to 'rebuild Haiti'. The beginning of the statement, with its inclusion of all Haitians within and outside Haiti, reinforces the idea that the rebuilding project is everyone's responsibility. The inclusion of 'friends of Haiti' is also notable here. The country is dependent on the contributions of its diaspora and on international aid and organizations, thus it is not surprising that Henri and Alex want to keep the door open to non-Haitians who would be willing to help.

Alex and Henri go back to Haiti Global Village to talk about CHAH and they send out individual messages to people whom they think would be interested in being part of it. As the two gather interested potential members, Henri secures space on Yahoo e-groups to open up a CHAH discussion list, which he moderates. It is also during this time of initial correspondence that Henri organizes the Tampa-based organization also called CHAH. This is meant to be the first place-based group affiliated with CHAH online. The eventual goal was to have CHAH discussion-list members in other locations affiliate their local organizations with the online CHAH network. With this kind of network, online members would be able to share ideas and resources stemming from their local community work.

The Tampa-based incarnation of CHAH contained the most energy for implementing the vision and, after the group held its founding conference, the leadership planned to send out a conference summary to the email list so that those in different parts of the country could begin to see how CHAH could work as a network of locally based groups sharing ideas. This communication failed to occur, however, and the geographic and cyber-space components of CHAH began to diverge. Another blow was dealt when Alex, based in New York, suddenly stopped communicating with Henri and dropped out of the picture entirely.

A core of CHAH members came together for another meeting in Tampa in July. This, however, was destined to be the group's last meeting. It was less well attended than the June meeting and Henri himself was absent. He had gone to Haiti for the summer and no one heard from him while he was gone. Since no one else took the initiative to lead the group, both the online and off-line dimensions of CHAH disintegrated a year after the original Haiti Global Village discussion.

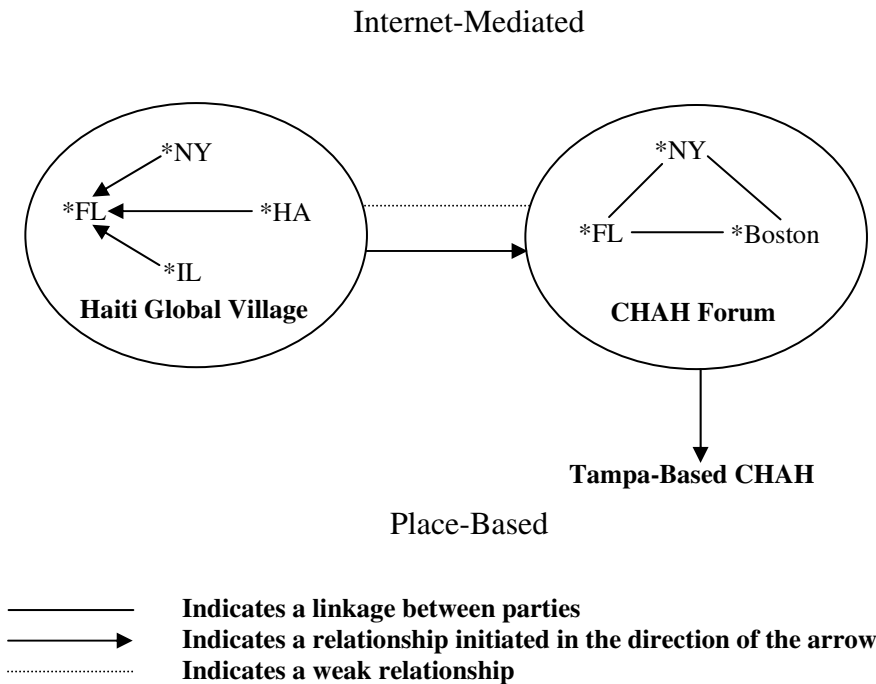
Assessing the network uses of the forum

The social ties that grew out of Haiti Global Village are represented in Figure 1. The diagram shows the social relationships and outcomes that emerged from discussion and interaction in the two online spaces. This diagramming of relationships allows us to see where relationships are being built and how – if at all – they are connected to off-line initiatives.

In this case, the only initiative is the Tampa-based incarnation of CHAH. The direction of the arrows in the Haiti Global Village circle signify that individuals in New York, Haiti and Illinois were drawn by or responded to the invitation Henri

made in Florida. The fact that the locations are linked only to Florida and not to each other shows the limits to the social relationships generated within the forum. People were interested in the call to ‘do something concrete’, but this did not result in a general discussion among *all* the participants with each other in an effort to work together to implement this vision. It was Henri’s activism that generated the vision, and he used the forum as a launching pad to create CHAH.

Figure 1: Social ties emerging from Haiti Global Village



At this point, the CHAH forum became an entity of its own that was separate from Haiti Global Village. The two were still connected, however, since Henri and Alex continued to post messages about CHAH to various Village forums. The leanness of ties within the CHAH forum further illustrates the limitations of the project. The lines without arrows show that everyone is linked together within the same discussion, while the lack of arrows indicates that no one initiated contact with another member in order to work together or to sustain an extended writing relationship. While participants in Haiti and Illinois originally expressed interest in being part of a new effort, those on the CHAH forum were mainly from Florida, with one or two from New York and at least one from Boston. Thus, while the CHAH forum provided a new framework for discussion and organizing and briefly helped to sustain a hybrid organization linking members online and off-line, the effort fell far short of the original vision. The experience of CHAH offers insights for examining the strengths and

weaknesses of using the Internet to create a diasporic public space and these are considered in the concluding section.

Conclusion: diaspora, community and communication

The examination of Haiti Global Village and CHAH offers some observations for considering possibilities and limits for diasporic groups using the Internet. In terms of expression, deliberative forums should ideally offer space for dispersed national groups to exercise civic skills by engaging in analysis of community issues. One of the first concerns in examining the expressive qualities of a public sphere is access. Haiti Global Village forums were technically open to all who have access to the Internet. At the same time, however, while group members did not have an explicit discussion about which language to use for their conversation, those wishing to participate in the student forum would have been excluded if they were unable to read and write English. While the introduction to each forum encourages participants to use the language in which they are most comfortable, in practice English speakers dominate many of the forums. The issue of language bias will likely be an issue of concern within other multilingual diasporic communities who use the Internet as a space for community dialogue.

Findings are more optimistic concerning participant control of the agenda and opinion formation. Because the forum was web-based and unmoderated, participants were able to exercise a high degree of control over the direction of the conversation. This kind of control is often limited or at least directed within moderated email lists where everyone's contributions are subject to the scrutiny and decision-making power of one person. Finally, participants in the Haiti Global Village forum kept their dialogue civil and encouraged differing opinions. The dynamic within such forums may vary considerably, however, depending on the particular combination of personalities on the forum. Overall, the student forum observed here offered a space that allowed users to reflect on their identity as Haitians in diaspora and to consider the nature of their relationship to Haiti as a diaspora community. These uses illustrate the expressive value of Internet forums within a dispersed national community.¹⁴

In contrast to the expressive uses of the forum, participants' attempts to use the Haiti Global Village discussion as a springboard for networking met with several challenges. A major obstacle was the division between those who were central to the development of the group online and those who were on the organizational margins off-line. The conceptualization of CHAH occurred online and grew primarily out of communications between Henri and Alex. It was only after they had sketched out the mission of the group online that they sought to incorporate those on the ground. As a result, the Tampa-based group that Henri organized developed separately from the CHAH e-group that existed online. This disjuncture contributed to a growing division between the two incarnations of the group. This division also contributed significantly to the difficulty of cultivating social ties and influence off-line. With no pre-existing off-line relationships, it was very difficult to keep in touch with those from other parts of the country who initially expressed interest in being part of a national network but who failed to return email messages. CHAH's experience thus highlights the limits of

cultivating networking within an online public space that is only weakly rooted in grounded relationships.

There are, however, many ways to configure Internet-mediated relationships within a diasporic public sphere. While CHAH lasted for only one year, other forums available on the web continue to play an important role in transforming the character of dialogue and social organization within the extended Haitian community. An online group of Haitian writers and linguists have used their group, REKA (Haitian Creolists Internet Network) to write letters to Haitian officials objecting to the state's lax policies regarding the official development of Kreyòl language policy and resources. At the time of this writing, REKA has been online for four years and has recently begun to publish an email-distributed Kreyòl language journal. The group's longevity and successful initiatives are due in part to the fact that several of the founding members of the forum belong to a place-based group organized in chapters across the USA and Canada. These members sought to extend their ability to communicate with each other by developing the online forum.

Another long-lasting group is an email list called the Corbett List. The list has been in operation for eight years and includes some of the most influential community leaders from across the diaspora. Corbett List social ties extend off-line as well and human rights advocates use it to circulate petitions and to rally support for improved conditions in Haiti. Knowledge of the list spreads through pre-existing social ties among advocacy workers, academics and missionaries and these networks encourage a kind of stability and vitality lacking in the CHAH experiment.

These sites, together with dozens of others, provide an increasing number of spaces for the Haitian diaspora to connect with friends and family, find news and information, discuss community affairs and work in solidarity on a variety of issues. We are still, however, in the beginning stages of understanding what combinations of geographic and Internet-based organization best facilitate community expression and networking in diasporic communities. The diverse forms of organization in diasporic websites and discussion lists provide the material for much-needed comparative research in this area.¹⁵ The challenge for future researchers is carefully to compare and contrast how various ways of linking geographic place and cyberspace within dispersed national groups shape the ability of participants to sustain expression and networking across distance within their communities.

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Notes

1. Glick Schiller and Fouron (1998: 135–6) is the source of much of this summary.
2. The estimated presence of many community leaders is based on the author's work involving other Haitian Internet groups where in one forum 46 per cent of respondents reported that they work for or with advocacy organizations. The author also helped to compile a directory of Haitian community organizations where 30 of 40 groups included had an email address and/or website. Henri Deschamps, founder of Haiti Global Village, estimates 400,000 online in the diaspora and at least 100,000 in Haiti. These numbers, however, are based on the average *number of hits* on his site per month and it is difficult to know how many individuals are responsible for these hits since one person may make multiple visits. In contrast, the *CIA world factbook* reports only 30,000 online in Haiti – lower than Deschamps' estimate, and there are no other known estimates of the diaspora as a whole.
3. In *Modernity at large* the 'diasporic public sphere' is a central organizing concept but it is in no way linked to the large body of work on the public sphere. Instead, Appadurai uses it as a metaphor to link together ethnic media that primarily include television, video cassettes and film. In his work on the Croatian diaspora's use of the Internet, Stubbs (1999) refers directly to Appadurai in his own argument that Croatians use the Internet to create a diasporic public sphere. Here again there is no reference to public sphere theory or to how such a sphere would be significant for dispersed national groups.
4. There are some rare exceptions. For example, satellite radio stations located in Haiti have, on occasion, offered simulcast broadcasts that have allowed residents in Haiti, Miami, Boston, Canada and other locations to listen and call in at the same time. In addition, see Rhodes (1993) for more on Haitian newspapers and Eugene (1998) for more on radio.
5. This has occurred, most notably, in the case of mobilization by indigenous communities in Chiapas, Mexico during their transnational mobilization against the NAFTA. In his work, Nan Lin (2001, see chapter 12) also offers a compelling account of how Chinese-based Falun Gong members have used the Internet to mobilize against the will of the Chinese state.
6. These criteria follow critical insights from Fraser (1992) and Benhabib (1992) in their analyses of the public sphere.
7. These criteria are derived from discussion of the network function of publics in Emirbayer and Sheller (1999).
8. As many critics note, the Internet is still class-biased to a significant degree. The existence of class bias does not, however, invalidate the significance of these forums. Those who *do* use them are often community leaders who use the forums to shore up their personal and organizational networks so that they can work more effectively on behalf of their communities. This pertains particularly to those who work with non-governmental advocacy organizations. These judgments are based on other research in the Haitian community, see note 2 above.
9. The data for Mitra's study, for instance, were 1287 postings generated on 25 March 1995 on the soc.culture.Indian group combined with random observations of the newsgroups to see which issues consistently emerged during discussion (Mitra 1997: 61). Similarly, in his study of the soc.culture.Croatia newsgroup, Stubbs (1999: 10) examined 554 messages posted over just ten days in 1998 from 24 September to 5 October.
10. Geographers have a unique insight into these debates, and Graham's article offers a particularly useful approach to a more geographically informed discussion of the Internet and social life.
11. The information here is based on an interview with Deschamps.

12. An online group called REKA (Haitian Creolists Internet Network) is working to do precisely this by using the Internet to create a Kreyòl language reading public. They operated a Kreyòl language discussion list from 1998 to 2001 and began publishing an online Kreyòl language journal at the beginning of 2002. Since there are relatively few places outside Haiti where one can read or write Kreyòl, these cultural workers have found the Internet an invaluable tool for sustaining and developing Kreyòl language material.
13. Fortunately Henri had saved the record of his private email correspondence with Alex and agreed to share this with the author in order to facilitate a reconstruction of their working relationship and initial ideas for developing CHAH.
14. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that such forums may also become combative or be put to destructive use. The latter might occur, for example among nationalist groups who use the Internet to spread exclusionary discourses about national minorities or to plot destructive actions (see Castells 1997; Lal 1999).
15. See Parham (2003) for this kind of comparative approach, where Haiti Global Village-CHAH is compared with REKA and the Corbett List.

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