# Space, time, and culture on African/diaspora websites: a tangled web we weave

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The four articles presented in this collection on the topic 'Space, time, and culture on African/diaspora websites' address African/diaspora websites and their networks in divergent ways and focus on a number of broad themes. These are: that the future is located in and shaped by the past; movement and displacement in geographical terms are re-conceptualised through website activities to produce discourses of identity; online and offline interactions are linked and there is fluid passage between the two; while web design programmes define the visual and content-based structure in vertical and horizontal sections, the websites analysed here are individualised by the specific collection of texts and images and the more or less extended presence of sounds and videos; the Internet has enhanced the possibilities for visibility and has opened up a range of new dynamics for creating and reaching out to publics, also for individuals or groups that are not likely to acquire a voice on traditional media platforms.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave

When first we practise to deceive!

Walter Scott, *Marmion* (1808) Canto VI, stanza XVII

'Tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations', wrote Julia Kristeva in 1969 (84). This statement, famous in postmodern studies on intertextuality, can easily be linked to the notion of 'websites'; websites do not stand on their own, but stand connected in a web. 'Web' may suggest a neatly structured pattern, with equal connections in spiral form. Yet, the Web as we encounter it through the Internet is more of a tangled web: its interlinkages are more intensified in some places, there are 'holes' in it, and not all parts are equally accessible to all users. The networked and interlinked nature of websites is also not necessarily rhizomic in nature, it can just as well reflect arborescent hierarchies (Deleuze and Guattari 1980).

Such hierarchies are not only a matter of access; they also exist within the Web itself. Not all websites are equally important numerically: some are pushed to the forefront for economic reasons (such as through advertising), while others form a niche only used by a small group. Some websites are linked to a massive number of other sites through hyperlinks, while others stand nearly isolated, with hardly a network to speak of. There are more or less intensified nodal points in the Web: some sites lead to a 'dead-end', while on others users are led from one site to the other almost automatically. These hierarchies of the Web have hitherto hardly been the subject of research, and especially the 'failed' spaces, as David Kerr calls them in his contribution to this Special Issue, have been left unstudied. It has been shown that as much as 40% of the Internet's materials disappear within one year, another 40% is substantially changed, and hence only 20% shows a

degree of stability after a year (Christensen-Dalsgaard et al. 2003, 2; Sutton 2004, 1). This extreme fluidity renders it extremely hard to take stock: an overview of Internet websites or a categorisation remains a Sisyphean task.

This is further problematised by the question of definition: if we attempt categorisation at all, what criteria will we use? In the case of 'African websites', should we consider only the domains hosted in the continent itself, or include those created by African groups, individuals, and official national sites in the international realm of .com and .net domains as well? In case we opt for the first possibility, we end up with a relatively low figure: only 15% of African websites are hosted on the continent's web servers or providers, as indicated by Calandro, Chavula, and Amreesh (2018, 5) when they write that for Africa: 'The hosting and geolocation analysis indicates that about 85% of the news web-sites are hosted outside the countries in which they belong', citing South Africa as the exception with about 46% of the websites hosted inside the country. Analysis of remote hosted websites reveals that most of them are hosted in Europe and the US.

Lor, Britz, and Watermeyer (2006) propose considering topics/words/languages for delimiting the category: 'South African websites', implying that geography is not a very helpful criterion. If we are to include websites from diasporic communities and individuals, the number of 'African websites' is augmented, but is still limited: in 2010 only some 2,000 sites in the US and another 500 in Europe were estimated to exist (Hassane 2010). Furthermore, we know that websites with Africa-related words and topics can be published by anyone anywhere, opening up further questions of definition (and eventually selection) based on taking into account the explicit (declared) identity of the websites.

This latter remark is also related to a more theoretical problem concerning legal and ethical implications: especially as the internet as a framework for ownership rights and copyrights is still in its infancy, adding to the range of problems linked to the definition of 'African websites'. This not only relates to cultural appropriation, also the issue of re-using materials available on the Internet is at stake. As we will see in the contribution by Brinkman & Luyckfasseel, images in particular are often recycled and put to use in very divergent frameworks. Here we chose not to include websites that focus on African communities/diasporas from an external point of view, i.e. created by researchers or by, for example, local and international tour operators or other entities. Instead we focus on African Internet communities; not necessarily residing on the continent, but still approaching 'Africa' from within.

Methodologically speaking, 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000) (or – no shortage of neologisms – 'netnography': Kozinets 2015, 'cyberethnography': Domínguez et al. 2007, and 'webnography': Puri 2007) poses new challenges and requires an approach that combines insights from discourse and narrative analysis with ethnographic methods. As Garcia et al. (2009, 78) write: 'Thus ethnographers must learn how to translate observational, interviewing, ethical, and rapport-building skills to a largely text-based and visual virtual research environment.' The Internet is characterised by the fluidity, complexity and density of its connections, rendering it difficult to analyse the patterns in its form and content, while at the same time the notions of culture and

community are redefined through the Web. The Web is both a cultural artefact in itself and a platform where newly formed communities make their concerns and aspirations visible (Hine 2000), directly related to offline concerns and activities.

The four articles presented here address African/diaspora websites and their networks in divergent ways, yet all focus on a number of broad themes that can be summarised as follows.

## 1. Time – the future is in the past

Although the articles treat this topic very differently, in all cases history plays a vital role in mapping the future. This is most overt in the contribution of Inge Brinkman and Margot Luyckfasseel. Their article analyses the strategic uses of 'Kongo history', whereby not only historical facts are used to underpin the arguments, but the very notion of 'history' itself becomes 'a stylistic device to underline the importance and urgency of the message on the site' (p. 20), even functioning as 'history-for-salvation'. This indicates that the academic understanding of history is used in alternative, subverted ways, but it still remains authoritative, functioning to establish the discursive framework of the Kongo-related religious websites and, in this sense, still 'hegemonic'.

This employment of history for the future is also to be found in David Kerr's article: the website he discusses reflects the aspirations of artist/musician KBC (Kibacha Singo) to produce an 'authentic' Tanzanian/East African form of hip hop through the use of older recordings of East African music of the 1960s and 1970s (not easily available in Tanzania) which are presented and commented on his Bongo Boom Bap Blog for simulating contemporary creation: 'The past acts not only as an invocation but as a source for the generation of a new genre; the past is part of creating the future' (Kerr p. 34).

Daniella Merolla's article on Amazigh/Berber websites points out that the historical past is activated through visual, literary and musical productions to evoke contemporary identity construction, as indicated in the online presentation of the project 'New World Embassy: Azawad': 'It is art that carries the history of a people'. Moreover, ancient (pre-Islamic and pre-Arabization) history of North Africa is strategically used on Amazigh websites to assert Berber 'autochthony', which allows for the promotion of their autonomy from present processes of minorisation.

Victoria Bernal's article primarily focuses on the analysis of 'space' (see below), yet her analysis of the 'extra territory' of Eritrea, whereby the Internet is part of the national space although it is not situated within the geographical borders, is causally related to the history of multiple occupations and periods of military rule. The websites' makers and users are 'survivors of its turbulent past, and dreamers of its possible futures' (p. 63).

## 2. Space – location and identity through the virtual

The articles presented in this volume indicate that movement and displacement in geographical terms are re-conceptualised through website activities to produce discourses of identity and, as indicated by Daniel Miller (2012, 155–156), to construct digital places 'in which people in some sense actually live'. Diaspora communities and individuals use the internet to connect to

homelands and to address new audiences, while their community websites create the feeling of being 'at home' for all, diasporic as well as 'located', users.

In this collection, the four articles reflect on the contact between diasporas and people living on the African continent. David Kerr points to Tanzanian rapper KBC's wish to create a new musical genre in Tanzania itself. Merolla's article shows how transnational and in principle de-territorialised websites at the same time reinforce local, ethnic identities, a theme that is also prominent in the 'Kongo history' analysis. Noting that the 'ambiguity of location produced by the internet makes it hard to know for sure where someone is posting from', Bernal (p. 71) develops the concept 'extra territory' to describe space that is constructed as national space and as part of the nation, but yet lies outside the control of state authorities.

## 3. Online/Offline – towards a contextual netnography

Methodologically speaking, all the articles in this set show the articulation of the online-offline interactions and the fluid passage between the two, as has also been suggested in previous studies (Miller and Slater 2000; Androutsopolous 2008; Costello, McDermott, and Wallace 2017). The study of Internet communities and websites in their online functioning per se remains a fruitful approach (Hine 2000), especially as some users' communities may be disembodied and isolated from their direct surroundings as they are engaged in their computer or mobile activities, which forms the 'paradox of connectivity' (Wilson 2000, 646).

Here, however, we note the opposite: African/diaspora websites are informed by offline activities, put in virtual circulation all kinds of offline materials, and may at the same time be used as connective nodes for offline activities, directly relating users to their surroundings. The implication is that the researchers have all made use of netnographic approaches to study the form, styles, visual and textual discourses employed on the websites, while at the same time broadening the analysis through offline data on the social, cultural and artistic contexts, and/or offline fieldwork (Bernal/Kerr) to map the interlinkages and online-offline interconnectedness.

## 4. Form – image, sound and discourse

If web design programmes define the visual and content-based structure in vertical and horizontal sections, the websites are individualised by the specific collection of texts and images and the more or less extended presence of sounds and videos. In the case of the Kongo religious website, Brinkman & Luyckfasseel (p. 13) note that 'proof' of the website's veracity is often sought through visual elements, such as a the visualisation of the idea that the Bible is a 'gun that kills the black soul' which is illustrated 'by an image of a gun that has the back of the Bible as its barrel'. Moreover, Kongo-related websites use discursive and formal characteristics to underline the importance and urgency of their message.

In Kerr's analysis (p. 34), the Bongo Boom Bap blog 'acts as a site of curation, in which cultural artefacts [sources of video and audio] are re-framed as part of a cultural whole' through comments and the apposition of the various parts. In this new frame, the selective choice of Tanzanian and

East African hip hop sources contributes to articulate a vision of 'what constitutes "authentic", "original" and "organic" hip hop'.

Amazigh/Berber websites and blogs are similarly a platform for interaction and dialogue for (oral as well as written) literary, musical, and visual genres which, in Merolla's analysis (p. 45), 'become a means to identify oneself with the local and global Berber community.' Amazigh websites and blogs thus contribute to enlarging the 'Berber literary space', a notion preferred to the more common 'literary field' (Bourdieu 1996) as it is 'a floating continuum, devoid of … common and shared institutions' which contributes to create identity through 'the intertextual criss-crossing of oral, written, and visual expressions' in both local and international languages (p. 46).

**5. Visibility – old hierarchies and new possibilities?**

The Internet has enhanced the possibilities for visibility and has opened up a range of new dynamics for creating and reaching out to publics, also for individuals or groups that are not likely to acquire a voice on the traditional media platforms. This is not to say that the Internet is equal: we started this introduction with pointing to the hierarchies on the net. As David Kerr (p. 38) concludes: 'To convene digital publics in online space requires considerable social, cultural and financial capital.'

We already indicated that many sites remain passive or are abandoned after some time. Yet, it is important to pay attention to these undercurrents of the Internet, even to the failures. Precisely these discarded and deserted websites may reveal a lot about the aspirations and dreams of people with fewer means to realise these, and the proposed alternatives to mainstream or authorised thinking. Such undercurrents on the Internet may be bursting with creativity, inspiring new and positive cultural dynamics and offering people means to increase their sense of worthiness. Yet they may also reveal the darker sides of the Internet, and, being based on notions of exclusion, instigate people to hatred and violence.

The websites analysed here are examples of such undercurrents, all supported by groups who do not belong to the most powerful strata of the society or societies of which they form a part. They confirm the online/offline and diaspora/'homeland' interconnectedness, and make claims to being heard and seen in these various contexts, by playing with notions of time, space, and culture.

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