The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture
The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture
Global Handbooks in Media and Communication Research

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The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture

Edited by

Jessica Retis
Roza Tsagarousianou

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables ix
Notes on Contributors xi
Series Editors’ Preface xix
Acknowledgments xxi

1 Diasporas, Media, and Culture: Exploring Dimensions of Human Mobility and Connectivity in the Era of Global Interdependency 1
Roza Tsagarousianou and Jessica Retis

Part I Roots and Routes: The Nature of “Diaspora(s)”: Their Relation to Nation, Ethnicity, Religion, Societies of Provenance, and Societies of Settlement 21

2 Diasporas: Changing Meanings and Limits of the Concept 23
Robin Cohen

3 Digital Diasporas: Beyond the Buzzword: Toward a Relational Understanding of Mobility and Connectivity 31
Laura Candidatu, Koen Leurs, and Sandra Ponzanesi

4 The Tragedy of the Cultural Commons: Cultural Crossroads and the Paradoxes of Identity 49
Thomas Hylland Eriksen

5 Diaspora and the Plurality of Its Cosmopolitan Imaginaries 63
Myria Georgiou

6 Beyond the Concept of Diaspora?: Reevaluating our Theoretical Toolkit Through the Study of Muslim Transnationalism 77
Roza Tsagarousianou

7 Doing Diasporic Media Research: Methodological Challenges and Innovations 97
Kevin Smets
Contents

Part II  Home and Away: Transnationalism, Localism, and the Construction of Diasporic Identity 113

8 Homogenizing Heterogeneity in Transnational Contexts: Latin American Diasporas and the Media in the Global North 115
Jessica Retis

9 Unraveling Diaspora and Hybridity: Brazil and the Centrality of Geopolitical Context in Analyzing Culture in Global Postcolonial Space 137
Niall Brennan

10 Media, Racism, and Haitian Immigration in Brazil 151
Denise Cogo and Terezinha Silva

11 China’s Vessel on the Voyage of Globalization: The Soft Power Agenda and Diasporic Media Responses 165
Wanning Sun

12 Digital Diaspora: Social Alliances Beyond the Ethnonational Bond 179
Saskia Witteborn

13 Transnational Mediated Commemoration of Migrant Deaths at the Borders of Europe 193
Karina Horsti

Part III  Cultural Politics in the Diaspora: Diasporic Public Spheres/Spaces, Identity Politics, and Diasporic Activism 207

14 The Politics of Diasporic Integration: The Case of Iranians in Britain 209
Annabelle Sreberny and Reza Gholami

15 Scripting Indianness: Remediating Narratives of Diasporic Affiliation and Authenticity 225
Radha S. Hegde

16 Media Representations of Diasporic Cultures and the Impact on Audiences: Polarization, Power, and the Limits of Interculturality 239
Miquel Rodrigo-Alsina, Antonio Pineda, and Leonarda García-Jiménez

17 Toward a Democratization of the Public Space?: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century 255
Alicia Ferrández Ferrer

18 Decolonizing National Public Spheres: Indigenous Migrants as Transnational Counterpublics 269
Antonieta Mercado
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The Power of Communication Networks for the Political Formation of a New Social Actor in Chile: The Case of Migrant Action Movement</td>
<td>Ximena Poo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>283</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part IV  Nation and Diasporas: Diasporas, Nationalism, and the Making of National Cultures</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Making National Cultures: Sindhis in Indonesia’s Media Industries</td>
<td>Thomas Barker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>297</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Reporting Violence and Naming Migrants in Assam: The Coverage of Anti-“Bengali Muslim” Violence in Assam by The Assam Tribune Newspaper</td>
<td>Musab Iqbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>311</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Media and Nationalism Beyond Borders</td>
<td>Janroj Yılmaz Keles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>329</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Online Diasporas: Beyond Long-Distance Nationalisms</td>
<td>Angeliki Monnier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>343</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Somali Development Agents as Development Communicators: Visions and “Religious” Challenges</td>
<td>Michele Gonnelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>359</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>The Mediation of Migration and States of Exception</td>
<td>Miyase Christensen and Christian Christensen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>373</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part V  Gender and Generation: How Do Gender and Generation Intersect with the Diasporic Condition and Impact on Diasporic Cultural Politics?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Intersections and (Dis)Connections: LGBTQ Uses of Digital Media in the Diaspora</td>
<td>Alexander Dhoest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>387</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Sri Lankan Migrant Women Watching Teledramas in Melbourne: A Social Act of Identity</td>
<td>Shashini Ruwanthi Gamage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>401</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Digital Diasporas: Accounting for the Role of Family Talk in Transnational Social Spaces</td>
<td>Gabriel Moreno-Esparza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>415</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Italian Post-war Migration to Britain: Cinema and the Second Generation</td>
<td>Margherita Sprio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>429</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

Part VI  New Technologies, New Experiences: Changing Media and Information and Communication Technologies, and Their Impact on Diasporic Cultures 443

30 Between Access and Exclusion: Iranian Diasporic Broadcasting in Open TV Channels in Germany 445
   Christine Horz

31 Low Frequencies in the Diaspora: The Black Subaltern Intellectual and Hip-Hop Cultures 461
   Bryce Henson

32 Facebook for Community, Direct Action, and Archive: Diaspora Responses to the 2014 Floods in the Balkans 475
   Deborah James

33 The Romanian Scientific E-Diaspora: Online Mobilization, Transnational Agency, and Globalization of Domestic Policies 491
   Mihaela Nedelcu

34 Refugees, Information Precarity, and Social Inclusion: The Precarious Communication Practices of Syrians Fleeing War 503
   Melissa Wall, Madeline Otis Campbell, and Dana Janbek

35 Racial and Class Distinctions Online: The Case of the Mexican European Diaspora on Social Networking Sites 515
   Lorena Nessi and Olga Bailey

Part VII  Redefining Social Spaces in the Diaspora: The Transformation of Urban, Physical, and Virtual Spaces 529

36 Physical and Virtual Spaces Among the Palestinian Diaspora in Malmö 531
   Fanny Christou and Spyros Sofos

37 Developing and Defending Mixed Identity: Lessons from the Caribbean Diaspora 547
   Charisse L’Pree Corsbie-Massay and Raven S. Maragh-Lloyd

38 Latino and Asian as Pan-Ethnic Layers of Identity and Media Use Among Second-Generation Immigrants 563
   Joseph Straubhaar, Laura Dixon, Jeremiah Spence, and Viviana Rojas

39 Migration, Transnational Families, and New Communication Technologies 577
   Mirca Madianou

Index 591
List of Figures and Tables

Figures

6.1 Key Focus of Digital Communication and Information Gathering Activity Among European Muslims 89
8.1 Latin American Diasporas in the Global North. Source: Data From IMLA-CELADE, cited in Pellegrino (2003), Martinez et al. (2014), Martinez and Orrego (2016) 120
14.1 “Educated” [tahsil kardeh] was the most common descriptor used by Respondents to the Persian-Language Survey 213
27.1 The Women Are Sorting DVDs of Mega Teledramas for Distribution Among Members of the Diasporic Teledrama Club. The DVD Cupboard is in the Background. (Source: Captured by the author) 405
32.1 Social Media Interactions on the 2014 Floods in the Balkan: How to Help Post 482
32.2 Social Media Interactions on the 2014 Floods in the Balkans: Opening the Discussion 482
32.3 Social Media Interactions on the 2014 Floods in the Balkans: Raising Money for the Victims with a Music and Dance Night 483
32.4 Promoting Fundraising Events 483
32.5 Erich and Local Collaborators 486
32.6 Aid Delivered and Families Supported 486
36.1 Trajectories of Palestinian Diasporization 535
List of Figures and Tables

Tables

3.1  Internet Studies Paradigms as Reflected in Digital Diaspora Scholarship 36

6.1  Key Focus of Digital Communication and Information Gathering Activity Among European Muslims. “Other European Muslims”: Aggregate of “National Muslim” and “European Muslim” Categories 89

23.1  The Comparison of Two Migrant LinkedIn Groups: The Data Analyzed (2012, 2013) 346

23.2  The Comparison of Two Migrant LinkedIn Groups: The Study’s Main Results 347
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Janet Wasko and Karin Gwinn Wilkins
Series Editors
This handbook project would not have come to fruition were it not for the encouragement and faith of the former editor of the Wiley-Blackwell Global Handbooks in Media and Communication Research series, Professor Annabelle Sreberny. She inspired us to embark on this long journey and undertake the daunting task of conceiving and producing this volume. We would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers who provided incisive and constructive comments and helped the book idea take shape, as well as the various colleagues who acted as reviewers of the contributors’ draft chapters. The Handbook of Diasporas, Media and Culture is a much stronger project due to their diligent and often discriminating approach to the material they kindly agreed to review. Janani Govindankutty, our project editor at Wiley-Blackwell, and Kelley Baylis, our designated editorial assistant, guided the project through the final steps of the production process. We are grateful for their assistance throughout this journey.

We would like to extend our thanks to the IAMCR who have embraced and supported the project from the initial proposal stage to the final steps of completion, as well as to our families for their patience and for understanding the demands of undertaking such a project.

Most importantly, we would like to thank the authors whose scholarly contributions to this Handbook helped to shape it and also to refocus our own thinking on diasporas and media at a time when migration and forced displacement have been taking center stage in political and public debate. We do hope that this handbook will make a contribution to such debates within the academia but also, hopefully, beyond it.
After a timid debut in the 1980s, over the past three decades, the term “diaspora” has featured prominently in numerous studies and in the broader theoretical debates within different, mainly interdisciplinary, fields such as cultural and media, postcolonial, and area studies. During the same period, similar attempts to introduce the term in the discourses of social science and humanities have been making inroads into older and more established fields such as politics, sociology, international relations, literary criticism, and social anthropology.

It is clear that the popularity of the term has not just been a terminological fad. It was partly the product of a desire, and need, among scholars to explore new dimensions of human mobility and, eventually, as this handbook aims to illustrate, connectivity, that were not adequately addressed through the use of existing conceptual frameworks that had particular histories and connotations. Moreover, it was intended to link phenomena associated to human dispersion with broader theoretical advances associated with the study of globalization, postmodernity and postcolonialism, to name but a few.

“Where once were dispersions,” Khachig Tölölyan observed at the time, reflecting on this trend (1996, p. 3), “there now is diaspora.” Indeed, as James Clifford (1994, p. 306) suggested,
For better or worse, diaspora discourse is being widely appropriated. It is loose in the world, for reasons having to do with decolonization, increased immigration, global communication and transport—a whole range of phenomena that encourage multi-locale attachments, dwelling, and travelling within and across nations.

Returning for a moment to Tölöyan’s remarks, it should be pointed out that the shift from dispersion to diaspora indicates much more than the theoretical convergence we identified. The difference between dispersion and diaspora also lies in the ways in which diasporic phenomena and cultures are seen in the context of an increasingly transnational terrain and, we would argue, brings to the fore the notion of agency. Whereas dispersion refers to the process of populations spreading beyond the bounds of their place of “origin,” diaspora connotes processes of making sense of this dispersion, of creating infrastructures for narration and action in transnational and translocal contexts, or to the meeting of roots and routes as Gilroy (1993) aptly suggests. Diasporic studies have thus tended to look at the processes of the making of a diaspora, the conscious and subconscious ways in which particular transnational communities, networks, and identities are formed and transformed. In other words, social action and cultural change, the way in which migrants construct meaning, develop subjectivities and identities, and embark on action, are central in our understanding of the notion of diasporas.

However, the ascendancy of the term in social science discourse was not welcomed by all concerned as many remained skeptical, finding “diasporas” an unnecessary distraction most likely to bring confusion and undermine existing theoretical advances by its sheer presence in the debate. Characteristically, reflecting this skepticism and, even, hostility, at the opening plenary of the 1999 American Historical Association meeting, Colin A. Palmer claimed that “diaspora is a problem that invites a great deal of methodological fuzziness, ahistorical claims, and even romantic condescension” (in Winkler, 1999). Even more sympathetic commentators such as Alain Medam (1993) and James Clifford (1994), expressed skepticism and dismay at the gratuitous usage of the term often in order to merely, and descriptively, refer to the dispersion of a population from one nation-state to several “host countries,” stressing the need to attempt a more robust theorization.

This rapid expansion of the usage of the term has had significant implications as far as the concept, its meanings, and its theoretical usefulness are concerned. Quite often the term has been used loosely and descriptively, referring uncritically to diverse phenomena associated to human mobility. Equally often, it has been used interchangeably with other categories that have had a presence in social science discourse for much longer such as those of “ethnicity” or “race,” “minority,” or even “migration.” Often criticisms focused on the undiscerning conflation between diasporic phenomena and other forms of mobility such as tourism, retirement migration, and a host of other similar practices. Indeed, “diaspora” would
often be used to refer to phenomena as diverse as medium-term “professional” mobility or to the dispersion of “expatriates” from Western post-industrial societies to other parts of the world—while concerns have also been expressed as to the capacity of the concept to refer to phenomena as diverse as exile and forced displacement on the one hand and the transnational mobility patterns of entrepreneurs in the Asia-Pacific region on the other.

In addition to this terminological laxity, conceptualizations of “diaspora” have been “partial” and, not uncommonly, not integrated within relevant theoretical frameworks that would give the concept depth, theoretical usefulness and enhance its critical utility. It is quite clear that, as “diaspora” has become “one of the buzzwords of the postmodern age” (Cohen, 1999, p.3), in some cases, the usage of the term adds no value to attempts to better understand the complex phenomena it is purported to describe and probe; indeed, on some occasions its uncritical and unreflective application, may be counterproductive. In such instances, “diaspora” becomes more of a catch-all term, referring uncritically to a variety of dissonant contexts of displacement and human mobility, lacking some common denominator and disregarding crucial factors such as the particular social relations and imaginations that underpin such phenomena.

The agenda of any attempt to theorize “diaspora” and, by extension to talk about diasporic cultures, therefore is a complex and extensive one. In order to avoid the pitfalls identified above, one needs to pose questions as to the particular meanings, if any, that “diaspora” assumes in the particular political and theoretical constellations it has been part of during its rapid ascendance to the universe of social science and humanities discourse. One needs to explore the multiple ways in which the debate on diasporas and the very concept of “diaspora” converge with the broader contemporary to it debates of globalization and late modernity. Such an examination involves a search for the intersections between a “theory of globalization” or of “transnationalism” and the study of diasporic cultures. It requires thinking in terms of transnational and global flows and situating “diasporic cultures” in their midst, understanding them in terms of their relation to the complex ethnoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, and ideoscapes that make up the global terrain and the networks that populate these. The intersection of the complex connectivity that underpins the transnational field and of the processes of cultural reinvention and reconstruction that the diasporic condition sets in motion effectively renders media technologies and diasporic media crucial factors in the reproduction and transformation of diasporic identities, and of diasporas in general. In other words, the global flows making up the complex array of institutions and practices that, following Appadurai (1996) we can call diasporic ethnoscapes, ideoscapes, financescapes, and technoscapes, are translated into diasporic imaginaries, partly through their representation and narrativization that is achieved within the context of the relevant mediascapes. Focusing on the cultural implications of the global flows of information and capital, Appadurai suggests that it is through the complex landscapes these constitute, that community may be
imagined and realized (Anderson, 1983). In an increasingly globalized world, the mediascapes that enable interaction across distance are crucial in shaping transnational, national and local politics, cultures, and identities. Contemporary ethnoscapes reconfigure beyond recognition traditional ethnic and local notions of community as the notions of culture and community have shifted from the more static geography of the locality to the fluid topography of the transnational landscapes Appadurai identifies. He points to the struggle by Sikh immigrants in the West to further the cause of an independent homeland (Khalistan) within India, although the population involved in this struggle and the underlying imagination of Khalistan is only connected via the mediascape of a set of internet technologies: these landscapes thus, are the building blocks of what, extending Benedict Anderson, could be seen as imagined worlds, that is, the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe (Appadurai, 1996). Community is therefore “imagined,” mediated through the imageries of the mediascape, ideologies of the ideoscape, and ever-shifting demographics of ethnicity (ethnoscape) and information.

Such rethinking poses questions, not only of the impact of mobility, but more crucially, of connectivity, of the ways in which dispersed populations, develop networks and the crucial connections that turn them from merely that—dispersed populations—into transnational actors in an increasingly globalized world. In this respect, developments in the fields of media and cultural studies have played a significant role in understanding diasporas both conceptually and empirically. Research has brought to the foreground the interconnections between locations (past and present), and between spaces—physical and virtual (cf. Aksoy & Robin, 2000; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Diminescu, 2008; Georgiou, 2006; Gillespie, 1995; Nedelcu, 2012; Retis, 2006; Siapera, 2010). Within such a conceptual and methodological context, diasporic media and cultural studies have largely challenged the occasionally excessive emphasis on the notion of a homeland left behind, lost and/or lamented and they have focused on mediated interactions, on flows of ideas, information, resources. They have more broadly questioned the conventional state-centered logic that stresses the importance of not only homelands but also countries of settlement. As Beck argues, mediated mobility has transformed “the experiential spaces of the nation-state from within” (Beck, 2006, p. 101) and has therefore prompted the study of alternative experiential spaces that surpass the geopolitical restrictions associated with the nation-state. They have set the concept against, and within, the imagination and practices that, over the past couple of centuries, have given rise and sustained the resilient geopolitical entity of the nation-state. Recognizing that diaspora (and diasporic cultures) straddle uncomfortably the divide between the national and the postnational, remaining fluent in the idiom derived from the territorially bounded universe of the former while embracing the fluid and deterritorialized terrain of the latter, they have prompted a rethink of the concepts of the nation, national culture and national identity, which diasporas are often claimed to be offshoots of. They have simultaneously
explored the processes that the emergence and reproduction of diasporic cultures entail and which transcend these very concepts: the deterritorialization and transnationalization of social imagination and identification, of the social practices and relations that are set in motion in these new contexts of social action.

Although not explicitly referring to diasporas and the diasporic experience, media studies pointed out the importance of media technologies in facilitating the compression of time and space, and thus bringing about new possibilities of being; in particular, “new possibilities of being in two places at once” (Scannel, 1996, p. 91)—referring to the place where audiences receive the broadcast content and the place where an event actually takes place. Indeed, broadcasting permits the live witnessing of remote happenings that might bring these as close—experientially—as those in someone’s immediate physical surroundings. Meyrowitz (1985), focusing on the emergence of electronic media and their time–space distanciation effects, reaches a similar conclusion as he argues that the utilization of these new media produces a reconfiguration of our understanding of place that he describes as a novel condition of having no-sense-of-place. In this sense, subsequent work on diasporic media has pointed out that physical remoteness characteristic of the diasporic experience no longer prevents individuals in remote locations to coexist and interact in ways that we can effectively describe as co-presence. Diasporic media do not merely enable their audiences to “be in two places at once” but effectively give them the opportunity of producing new spaces where multiple remote localities and the experiences generated and shared by their inhabitants come together and become synchronized and related to each-other. This is not merely a rhetorical distinction but an important dimension in the processes of making sense of the encounters that take place during the consumption of diasporic media content.

Thus, the much-needed emphasis on transnational communication and networking prompted us to rethink spatiality, not only in terms of conventional geographies but also in terms of digital spaces, of networks and flows (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1990), not only of boundaries but also of crossings. Such studies, have shed light on the impact diasporic media have on the reconfiguration of time and space in profound ways: the utilization of space- and time-distanciating technologies by populations dispersed across borders has potentially significant implications in how different members and components of diasporas experience events and engage in interaction, affecting in turn the ways in which diasporas are imagining themselves and situate themselves in space. They have addressed the complex ways in which diasporic communities seem to be simultaneously uprooted and connected, experiencing loss and engaging in creating new spaces where they feel at home (Tsagarouianou, 2001, 2007). As researchers in the fields of media and cultural studies have shown, diasporas are not looking toward one direction (usually back home, as earlier studies indicated). Instead they inhabit complex fields where information, ideas, cultural and political imaginaries emanate from diverse nodes and are multidirectional. These complexities have been addressed in the
analysis of the consolidation of Latin American diasporas in North America, Europe, and Asia in the last decades. Accustomed to processes of hybridization within the region, Latin Americans have consolidated diasporic communities, built in imaginary rather than physical space where cultural and media consumption become central (Retis, 2006, 2014; Retis & Sierra, 2011).

Cunningham and Sinclair (2000) suggest that the flow of media and cultural products does not only occur from the center to the periphery; in addition to the information and cultural flows that emanate from the North and spread to the South, usually associated with phenomena such as cultural or media imperialism, an array of significant information flows from South to North is emerging, and is increasingly defining new world regions. Indeed, Sinclair, Jacka, and Cunningham (1996) argue that the emergence of diasporic media not only is breaking down the traditional geocultural imagination of the world along the lines of the center–periphery distinction itself, but is beginning to define what they call geolinguistic regions, that is, regions across which linguistic and cultural similarities are at least as important as geographical proximity has been in forming world regions in the past. The media space of a diaspora largely tends to be of this kind, to the extent that it is spread throughout several of the national markets that have been the territorial unit for international media distribution in the past.

This diasporic ethnoscape, although truly global, nevertheless comprises ethnospecific media flows that connect communities in dozens of countries while also embracing their situatedness in a given one. (Sinclair & Cunningham, 2000, pp. 27–28). It should therefore be stressed that this complex “geography of flows” cannot and should not be decoupled from the conventional geographies of the nation-state. To a certain extent, grounded in and circumscribed by the constraints of the latter (Bauman, 1998), diasporas are located in a highly complex and challenging social field characterized by tension between the nation and the transnational.

Within this context, the ever-increasing use of transnational communication technologies has become central in supporting, organizing, and disseminating shared narratives, memories, and experience as well as diversity within diasporas, in their cognitive and affective mapping (Tsagarousianou, 2001, 2007), in supporting diasporas’ sense of ontological security (Georgiou, 2013, p. 307), in grounding them in translocal spaces. The comparative study of multidimensional processes of production, distribution, and consumption allow us to achieve a greater understanding of media practices in diasporic transnationalism contexts (Retis, 2017, p. 32).

The literature on diaspora use of media, old and new alike, has shed light on the production of “culturally relevant and locally vital information to immigrants in the host society” (Yin, 2013, p. 3); on opening spaces “for a self-reflective discourse among migrants” (Bozdag, Hepp, & Suna, 2012); “processes of reinforcing identities and sense of belonging” (Georgiou, 2006; Tsagarousianou, 2004); of “(re-