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“Bringing Spain back”: The construction of virtual diasporic communities of Spaniards in Mexico

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Abstract

Following the global economic crash of 2008, thousands of Spaniards were forced to leave their country in search of better conditions in other parts of the world. Some set off for European countries like Germany or England, while others crossed the Atlantic into the “New World”. Several migrants, mainly young, arrived in Mexico looking for jobs or better economic conditions. Given these circumstances, social media platforms have attained strategic significance, and not only for Spaniards already living in Mexico who want to stay in contact with their relatives, friends and culture in Spain. These platforms are also an invaluable tool for those thinking of traveling to the Latin American country and who need information related to economic, migratory and security issues. This work focuses on understanding how social media platforms serve both to solve problems of daily life and to encourage cohesion and enable the construction of communities among Spaniards abroad.

Keywords

social media, virtual communities, identity discourse, Spaniard migration in Mexico, digital diaspora

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«Recuperar España»: la construcción de comunidades virtuales de españoles que viven en México

Resumen

Después de la crisis económica global de 2008, miles de españoles se vieron obligados a abandonar su país en busca de mejores condiciones en otras partes del mundo. Algunos se establecieron en países europeos, como Inglaterra o Alemania, mientras que otros cruzaron el Atlántico hacia el «Nuevo Mundo». Algunos inmigrantes, mayoritariamente jóvenes, llegaron a México buscando trabajo o mejores condiciones económicas. En estas circunstancias, las plataformas de redes sociales han tenido una gran importancia estratégica, y no solo para los españoles que ya vivían en México, que querían mantenerse en contacto con sus familiares y amigos, y su cultura en España. Estas plataformas también son una herramienta de gran valor para las personas que piensan viajar al país latinoamericano y necesitan información relacionada con aspectos económicos, migratorios y de seguridad. Este trabajo pretende entender cómo las plataformas de redes sociales sirven tanto para resolver problemas de la vida cotidiana como para fomentar la cohesión y permitir la creación de comunidades entre los españoles que viven en el extranjero.

Palabras clave

redes sociales, comunidades virtuales, discurso identitario, emigración española en México, diáspora digital

Introduction

After the 2008 global economic crisis, most European countries suffered severe public spending cuts, the bankruptcy and closure of several factories and the subsequent loss of numerous jobs. In the case of Spain, the effects of the crisis on the construction industry – one of the most important economic sectors – were particularly harsh, leaving numerous citizens in a very precarious situation. After the national economy crashed, many people, particularly the young and highly skilled, were compelled to migrate and to look for better conditions in other locations. Most of them turned towards Germany or England, countries in which some could get a proper job due to their abilities and academic training as engineers or doctors. However, difficult social and labor conditions forced a significant majority to accept low-income jobs, particularly in the tourism sector.

Meanwhile, many other Spaniards decided to travel to Latin America and to look for better opportunities in a Spanish-speaking country like Mexico. Some of these migrants arrived in the country under very good labor conditions, transferred by transnational companies that wanted to reduce operating costs by reallocating regional offices. Others, however, struggled to find a job with no work permit and with only a few possibilities of remaining in the country. Nevertheless, both kinds of migrants have had to deal with very complex and adverse social and cultural settings in Mexico, such as lower wages and higher crime rates than in Spain. In this context, the use of social media platforms has gained strategic significance not only for those already living in the Latin American country who want to stay in touch with their relatives in Europe, but for the people who remain in Spain and are pondering the option of moving to Mexico and who need information about

the economic, migratory, and safety situation. This paper reviews the recent wave of immigration from Spain to Mexico. More specifically, it analyzes the role social media platforms play, not only as channels that serve to connect Spaniards in Mexico, but also as spaces that encourage the construction of digital diasporic communities in which members share a strong sense of identity with the Spanish culture.

Traditionally, Mexico is a country that sends migrants rather than receives them. Historically, the main target of migratory flows from the country has been the United States of America, where about 33.7 million Hispanics of Mexican origin reside (Gonzalez-Barrera and Lopez, 2013). However, social and political events throughout the past century and the first decades of the present – like war, economic crisis, and social repression from authoritarian governments in other Latin American countries – have forced many people to leave their homes and to seek better conditions in Mexico. Despite internal problems like the illegal drug trade, corruption, and high levels of criminality in some regions, the country is a haven for people who have fled their own country to escape from political repression, an adverse economic situation, and even insecurity (*The Economist*, 2017b). This was the case with Chilean migration during General Pinochet's regime (1973-1990), the El Salvadorian refugees that came to Mexico during the civil war that devastated the Central American country between 1979 and 1992, and the current Venezuelan exodus, in which thousands of people and even entire families have gambled their savings to look for a better life by fleeing from insecurity and scarcity.

Regarding Spanish migration to Mexico, it is possible to establish two main historical streams: during the decades of the 1930s and 1940s, and after the global economic crisis of 2008,

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a phenomenon that has persisted up to today. The first mass exodus was caused by extremely difficult social settings during and after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) that took place between the Republican faction (the Left) and the Nationalist faction (the Right). After the end of the conflict in 1939, with the rise of General Francisco Franco to power, thousands of Spaniards that fought on the Republican side escaped to Latin America, many reaching Mexico through the seaport of Veracruz. According to some studies, about 16,000 Spaniards settled down in Mexico between the 1930s and 1950s (Brugat, 2001). Many of those migrants lived together and founded hospitals, labor unions, and collaborated in the establishment of institutions that have had a profound cultural impact in the country (Soler, 2006; Capella, 2017). These include the *Casa de España en México* (House of Spain in Mexico), which still exists today under the name *El Colegio de México* (School of Mexico), one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the country, and *El Fondo de Cultura Económica* (the Economic Culture Fund), a non-profit publishing company which is actually one of the most important publishers in Latin America (Blanco, 2008). However, after the 1950s, Spanish immigration to Latin America decreased and, mainly for economic reasons, shifted to certain Western European countries with buoyant economies, like Germany (Velasco and Guerra, 2003). After Spain joined the European Union in 1986, the country underwent a period of significant economic development, a rise in education levels, and a significant increase in the percentage of women in the workforce. These conditions encouraged the arrival of migrants, many of them from South America and Africa. By 2007, the year before the 2008 crisis hit, there were about five million foreign-born residents in Spain (González Enríquez, 2007).

The second migratory flow (2008–present) was shaped, not by war, but by an economic crisis. The 2008 mortgage disaster in the USA had not only a local but also a global impact in a matter of months. Only a few countries around the world overcame it to an acceptable level, among them several South American countries that were especially prosperous due to China's high demand on their commodities at the time. In Europe, however, the crisis caused economic decline and high unemployment rates, and in Spain the consequences were catastrophic. After 15 years of constant growth, the country officially entered a recession in 2009 (Day, 2009). The poor economic situation led to a massive loss of jobs in two key sectors of the economy: construction and tourism (Pardo, 2011). The depression was especially harmful for the building sector: in 2007, Spain had been building about 800,000 homes, more than the total production of France and Germany together. As the crisis hit, many people who had invested lost their savings to the construction of homes that nobody wanted (Torrero Mañas, 2010). The decrease in jobs due to the crisis was felt by the tourism sector as well, as more people were reluctant to spend money on vacations and the industry found itself in a serious

predicament. According to some estimations, between 2008 and 2013 nearly four million jobs were lost and the unemployment rate rose to 27.2% (Muñoz Comet, 2014). However, joblessness was especially high among young people, who experienced an unemployment rate of nearly 50%. Many well-educated young Spaniards, often with postgraduate studies, were faced with very adverse conditions in which they were considered lucky if they got a job as a waiter in a restaurant or a maid in a hotel. Spain, a country that had been an important target for migrants in the past, was now unable to provide proper conditions even for its own citizens, who once again needed to look towards the "New World" and turn to *Las Americas*, just as their ancestors had done in the past.

Spaniards, particularly those with double nationality, started traveling to Latin America. Some were attracted by family ties, while others sought better labor conditions in countries like Brazil, Chile or Argentina, which – thanks to the high demand for commodities – enjoyed a thriving economy during the global crisis. By 2013, there were about 2.5 million Spaniards living abroad, of whom 673,662 had been born in Spain and 1,931,248 were Spaniards by naturalization. The Latin American countries with the most migrants were Argentina, with 385,388; Venezuela, with 183,163; Brazil, with 183,422; and Mexico, with 100,728 (Navarrete Moreno et al., 2014). In 2015, it was statistically evident that more people were traveling from Europe to Latin America than the other way around (IOM, 2015). In Mexico, there were about 1,000 work visas granted to Spaniards by migratory authorities in 2002, and from 2008 to 2012, a total of 7,630 were granted (Clemente Trejo, 2012). In 2017, there were 77,041 Spaniards registered at Spanish consulates in the country, according to the Spanish Government (Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social, 2017). Other estimations, however, put the number at around more than 130,000 migrants (INE, 2017). In this case it is important to remark that this number may vary greatly depending on the source, since this type of registration is voluntary and many migrants came as tourists, remaining in the country once the allotted time (180 days) had run out and living "under the radar" of consular or national migratory authorities.

Spaniards left their country due to a very special context shaped by two main issues. The recent terrorist attacks in Europe, especially those in Paris (2015), Brussels (2016), London (2017) and Barcelona (2017), not only created divided opinions regarding migration policies, but also encouraged the rise of extreme right-wing parties seeking more controls, even inside the Schengen Zone, and the end of the European Union. The other issue was citizens' concern about economic recovery throughout the EU. This preoccupation is especially prevalent amongst Spaniards currently living in Mexico because many of them were compelled to leave Europe in search of better conditions. Now they are eager to return and anxiously waiting for the Spanish economy to turn itself

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around, a feat which remains to be seen (OECD, 2017). These concerns are easily detected within virtual migrant communities, as will be observed in the outcome section of the article.

Theoretical framework

One of the most important challenges when studying migration flows is the fact that no integrated theoretical framework exists that encompasses all experiences (Castles, 2010). This, however, need not be seen as a terrible deficiency, but rather an indication that every phenomenon should be explored by considering the context and actors involved in a specific migratory current. Conversely, recent exodus experiences such as that of the Syrians or Africans in Europe have been marked by the eruption of information technologies as a determining constant when dealing with the study of migration. The importance of social media and mobile devices among migrants in all circumstances and latitudes becomes more self-evident each day (McGregor and Siegel, 2013). This prominence could be explained by three different factors. The first factor is the impact of social platforms on encouraging or disheartening migration (ie, the commentaries, data and information regarding safety issues or the labor market shared and consulted via social platforms by migrants that encourage or dissuade future immigrants). Social media and mobile devices make it possible to create virtual spaces in which valuable information can be published that makes it easier for other travelers leaving their homeland and arriving to a new country. The information published can range from where to find a job or what documentation to bring, to how to avoid migration controls, in the case of illegal immigrants. The second factor is social media's ability to help migrants to integrate into their new environment and to stay in contact with those back home. Indeed, the widespread presence and diversification of connectivity around the world – especially in the Middle East, Latin America and Africa – has provided migrants with new possibilities. They now have access to a communication channel that allows them to stay in contact with relatives and friends in a very efficient, adaptable and inexpensive way. Social platforms serve as portals that enable migrants to strengthen their ties to their new environment while simultaneously giving them a way to reinforce their identity and sense of belonging with their culture or country of origin. Finally, the third factor that contributes to social media's prominent role in migration is migrants' involvement in activist movements both locally and abroad. In this context, information technologies allow migrants to have an active role in public affairs, not only to improve their conditions in their new environment, but also to participate in online and street demonstrations for and against social and political matters in their home country.

However, migrants share more than data, news and commentaries related to "real life"; they also exchange ideas,

feelings, desires and cultural assets from their homeland. In a way, these platforms help migrants to rebuild the world that was left behind (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). This swapping of information linked with a birthplace not only encourages cohesion and mutual understanding, but also and above all reinforces feelings of belonging to a particular place or social group with a common imaginary and identity, configuring digital diasporic communities as a result (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). The term *diaspora* has always been applied by historians, who have used it to label a series of historical events associated with the dispersal of Jews, Greeks and Armenians from their original communities in the Mediterranean. However, it has only been in recent decades that the term has come into widespread use in the social sciences by scholars (Anteby-Yemini and Berthomière, 2005; Bauböck and Faist, 2010). The term has been used traditionally to refer to migrants who belong to an ethnic group and who maintain a strong cultural connection with their birthplace or their family's homeland (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Recently, however, this concept has been broadened and relates more with the idea of identity than the ethnical composition of a community. Therefore, a diaspora according to this definition is a group in which the members have a strong sentiment of belonging to an identity and are willing to protect their culture despite external factors that could threaten it (Cohen and Hear, 2009). In the new millennium, in light of how quickly information technologies spread and their prevalence in the daily life of migrants, the concept of diaspora is an invaluable tool for understanding the dynamics and difficulties that all travelers must face to maintain their culture in an increasingly interconnected and constantly changing world.

The relationship between migration and the internet emerged even before the arrival of big data and massive social media platforms. The internet has provided vital assistance to people who have moved to other territories, countries and even other continents for various reasons. Migrants have adopted and integrated information technologies into their daily life through the use of email, text chats, and digital bulletin boards, among others. Now, thanks to spaces like Facebook (and the use of "closed groups" in particular) and mobile applications like WhatsApp, they have consolidated diasporic communities in which they can continue to connect with the culture of their homeland (Diminescu, 2012). Migrants therefore coordinate and maintain these virtual spaces by assigning organizational roles and establishing rules of conduct among members and even censoring unwanted information and excluding members who do not follow the communal rules. Inside these spaces, they share valuable information for improving their living conditions in their new environment. This includes tips about getting a job, how to regularize their legal status in the country, how to enroll their children in public schools, or how to obtain public health services. Meanwhile, this constant social exchange stimulates their feeling of belonging to a community and culture.

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Methodology and outcomes

This paper focuses on analyzing the digital discourse created by users in online environments (Jones, 2015). The methodology involved gathering, categorizing and exploring information generated and managed by Spaniards in online forums and closed Facebook groups regarding migration, labor, criminality, and Mexican and Spanish social-cultural assets. Based on the results, diverse kinds of users can be detected within these groups: Spaniards living in Mexico, users in Spain who want to come to Mexico, people who lived in Mexico but have returned to Europe, users with both nationalities, and Mexicans with no direct relationship with Spain. Finally, it is important to remember that the discourse generated in online platforms differs from that produced in conventional media like television. This difference mainly results from the fact that digital discourse can embrace all types of media, from audio to text and video. With one single post on Facebook, users can interact with each other, sharing different kinds of information in a way that is almost impossible with any other means of interaction. This paper will take a particularly close look at this feature, particularly when analyzing the diasporic discourse produced collaboratively inside these virtual spaces. In order to accomplish this, users' activity was traced for about eight months in the following social virtual spaces: 1) *Burbuja.info*, an online forum in Spanish with more than 121,967 users; 2) *Spaniards.es*, an online forum where people can exchange experiences about migrating around the world; 3) *Españoles en México* (Spaniards in Mexico), a closed Facebook group with more than 10,000 users; 4) *Verdaderos Españoles en México* (Real Spaniards in Mexico), a closed Facebook group. About 50 posts and user comments were selected for deeper analysis. Finally, data was analyzed and categorized into two main topics: "Labor, migration and safety in Mexico" (21 posts), and "Mexican and Spanish socio-cultural assets" (33 posts).

A striking fact that can be observed when studying these communities is the evolution of social media platforms used by Spanish migrants. A few years ago, forum platforms were the dominant virtual spaces in which migrants congregated and shared information. However, migrants currently spend more time on Facebook. One reason for this could be the fact that Facebook has become a leading social platform with more than two billion users around the world. For many, joining a closed Facebook group is second nature and much easier to do than on other virtual platforms. Currently one can find any number of Facebook groups created by Spaniards in Mexico. The largest is *Españoles en México* ("Spaniards in Mexico", <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/mexpanol/>>), with more than 10,000 members. The space covers diverse topics, from Spanish culture to migration and labor issues. However, specialist groups also exist that have been created to address a specific need. An example of this is *Artistas Españoles en*

México ("Spanish Artists in Mexico", <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/212570238905720/>>), a group that promotes labor opportunities for Spanish artists living in Mexico. Another is *Españoles en México Trueque y Compra/Venta* ("Spaniards in Mexico Exchange and Buying/Selling", <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/truequemexpanol/about/>>), which promotes items made or sold by Spaniards. In some cases, migrants even exchange houses when departing from Spain or leaving Mexico. In addition, there are other more local groups whose function is to unite Spaniards living in certain cities, such as *Españoles en Guadalajara, Jalisco* ("Spaniards in Guadalajara, Jalisco", <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/562010783817145/>>) or *Españoles en Monterrey* ("Spaniards in Monterrey", <www.facebook.com/groups/espanolesenmonterrey/>). Yet of all of these virtual groups, there is one whose background is particularly noteworthy: *Verdaderos Españoles en México* ("Real Spaniards in Mexico", <www.facebook.com/groups/1572881676371560/>). This group was created by former members of *Españoles en México* who were excluded from or decided to abandon the group due to their far-right ideology. Inside this approximately 600-member group, one can find negative comments about African and Syrian migrants in Spain, the Catalan independence movement, and left-wing political parties like *Podemos* ("We Can") and the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE, "Spanish Socialist Workers' Party"), along with positive commentaries on the Spanish army, the Catholic religion, Francisco Franco's regime, and the right-wing political party *Partido Popular* (PP, "People's Party"). Putting aside questions regarding the foundations that support the group's ideology, the main point of inquiry here is how the current social and political polarization of Spanish society can be observed even in a diasporic community of migrants rooted in another continent. This divergence will be analyzed later in this paper.

a) Labor, migration and safety in Mexico

Traditionally, Mexico City, the capital of the country, has been Spaniards' main migration destination. Following are states near the capital like Puebla and Veracruz and the State of Mexico. However, as other economic regions in the country, such as the Bajío (lowlands), encompassing the states of Aguascalientes, a part of Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Queretaro, have prospered and due to rising insecurity in Veracruz, more and more migrants have moved out of the capital city. In fact, Spaniards living in Mexico today must face a very complex reality. Safety is a huge problem, and it's growing: there is a public war between the Mexican authorities and the drug lords and a private war between kingpins over controlling illegal activities like prostitution, drug trafficking and extortion in various places in Mexico. The Mexican Drug War marked its tenth anniversary in 2016, leaving a trail of more than 150,000 dead and 28,000 missing (Pardo Veiras, 2016). This

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insecurity is especially high in some cities in the northern border of the country like Reynosa, in Tamaulipas, and the southern states of Guerrero and Veracruz (*The Economist*, 2017a). Despite these problems, Spaniards arriving in Mexico also find a more media-savvy and critical Mexican society that is less willing to tolerate cases of corruption and criminality. This society also uses social media as an effective channel for denouncing such things as discrimination against women or the misuse of public goods for private interests, giving greater visibility to traditional problems.

In this context, Spaniards have access to diverse sources of information about crime and safety issues in Mexico, from big media corporations to private users, thanks to the internet, which can help them to avoid falling victim to misfortune. This access to information is well illustrated in the following commentaries from a post regarding virtual kidnapping,¹ a scary extortion trick usually committed over the phone. User A posts:

They [the criminals] think that if you're a Spaniard you must have a lot of money, and, if not, your family lives in Spain [so they can pay]. My husband [a Spaniard] has been in Mexico for two years, and when somebody asks him "Where are you from?", he says "I'm Mexican", because the insecurity is high. (From the Facebook group *Españoles en México*)

In many posts related to safety, it's possible to find two stances: (1) emphasizing the problem, or (2) denying or diminishing the perils. The following comments demonstrate these contradictory views:

In all rankings that you could mention about insecurity, Mexico is a dangerous country. (User NG, *Españoles en México*)

I've been travelling across the country and I've never seen a critical or dangerous situation... I don't think we should exaggerate the situation and say that being in Mexico is like being in a "(Vietnam) War movie". (User MN, *burbuja.info*)

These opposing viewpoints can be explained partly because safety may vary drastically even within the same city, where one can find safe neighborhoods and others with problems with crime. However, there are other variables to consider, such as the fact that Spain has much lower crime rates than Mexico, and, of course, the issue regarding how the media portrays crime-related news from the country. This last point is expressed clearly in the following testimony:

Mexico is a more dangerous country than Spain or any other European country, but this doesn't mean that you can't go out to buy groceries or to take your children to the park. The media shares the news, but it also exaggerates the situations. (User A, *burbuja.info*)

Another important issue that every migrant in Mexico must face – not only migrants from Spain – is the fact that new modifications were added to migration laws in 2012 due to the recent increase in foreign workers in the country. Today, the regulations for granting legal work permits are some of the most complex and difficult to fulfill in the region. Those willing to stay and work legally in the country must meet several requirements: fees, the sponsorship of a company registered in a special database, the need to leave the country and to apply from outside of Mexico in a Mexican consulate, and so on. The concern and worries about new migration rules are present in these virtual communities, where it is easy to find posts with hundreds of comments about economic and labor conditions in Mexico and the possibilities of getting a permit to work legally. The following example provides a good illustration: when User LI complained about how hard it is to find a good job as an elementary school teacher with a proper salary in Mexico City, User SG replied:

This is Mexico, where you have to get used to everything: the society, culture, food, wages and the people's slang. Don't expect to find gold where there isn't any. (*Españoles en México*)

Another example from the same group involves a Spaniard working in Germany who published a post regarding his intentions to migrate to Mexico:

After a lot of deliberation, I have decided to go to Mexico because my partner is there. I came without a plan, and I've been trying to look for something from a distance but all the companies need to see me in their offices for an interview. (User PM, *Españoles en México*)

Other migrants in the group quickly warned him about the difficulties of getting a proper job (since getting a work permit is very difficult) and told him the salaries and working conditions are worse than in Germany:

Man, it's better to stay in Germany, the quality of living is so low in Mexico because of insecurity and a bad social life. Jobs... No way, there aren't even enough for Mexicans. I'm not a pessimist, but I'm telling you the truth. Germany cannot be compared to Mexico. (User MA, *Españoles en México*)

However, Spanish migrants, particularly young ones, still depart for Mexico despite these inconveniences. This is mainly because the country still offers opportunities to young people who are tired of looking for a job that matches their academic training in Spain or simply because they just want to start a new life in a "New World":

1. All the translations in this article are the author's.

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I have never traveled to Mexico, but I have an opportunity to live there... I have mixed feelings... It's paradise (Cancun), but safety worries me a lot. (User GD, *Españoles en México*)

b) Mexican and Spanish socio-cultural assets

Mexico, as a former Spanish colony with about two centuries of independence, shares important cultural, religious and linguistic assets with Spain. The countries share a common language and faith, as the Catholic religion is the majority faith in both. They have certain social practices in common, such as bull fighting, which takes place in several cities in both countries. These cultural affinities provide Spanish migrants with a sense of familiarity when arriving to Mexico. However, this does not mean that diasporic virtual communities are always peaceful places. On the contrary, there are some topics that cause conflict between Spaniards, Mexicans and people with a double nationality, like when someone suddenly posts about the Spanish Empire in Mexico. No matter how many centuries have passed since the Spanish rule in Mexico, this remains a controversial topic. Some users occasionally share information about the positive things that the empire left in Latin America; others, however, reply to them with information about the genocide of natives and the robbing of wealth. Sometimes, even small actions like writing the word *México* with a “j” (*Méjico*) – an old-fashioned form that is still in use in Spain but that is no longer in practice in Mexico – could start an aggressive thread. In this case, some Mexicans may assume that the user who wrote *Méjico* is consciously or unconsciously affirming that the country remains under the control of the Spanish Crown. Although these discussions are more frequent in the Facebook group *Verdaderos Españoles en México*, where it is possible to find a lot of information regarding controversial topics like the Spanish Empire, Islam in Spain, and the current separatist conflict in Catalonia, they can also be found in other groups as well. Here is a typical discussion about the subject:

You can't cover the sun with a finger... When the Spaniards came to the New World, there were about 220 native groups in New Spain. Two hundred years later, after the Mexican independence, just around 60 native groups were left. (User C, Mexican, *Verdaderos Españoles en México*)

You just want to maintain the idea that the Spanish Empire was cruel and evil. (User CA, Spaniard, *Verdaderos Españoles en México*)

Despite certain cultural discrepancies, it is not uncommon to find several bi-national marriages that socialize within the groups. Additionally, there is a constant flow of bi-national couples that have migrated to Mexico from Spain for economic reasons, and others that have returned to Spain because the Latin American country does not meet their expectations. It is in this transnational

dynamic that some problems could erupt, such as in the case of a divorce with shared custody of the children in which the parents decide to live on different continents.

Regardless of the distance, migrants have not forgotten their homeland, even those who have lived in the country for years. On the contrary, information about Spain's economic and political situation flows regularly inside these communities. Scattered amongst posts on the most important and even controversial topics are cases of corruption that have involved high-profile politicians from left- and right-wing political parties, the Catalanian independence movement, the current migration crisis of Syrians in Europe, the Sub-Saharan migration problem in Ceuta (a Spanish territory in Africa adjacent to Morocco), and the radical Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe. A radical view of these topics can be observed in the Facebook group *Verdaderos Españoles en México*, which as a group takes a very conservative stance when it comes to the role of traditional institutions like the Catholic Church and the Spanish army, not to mention powerful traditional elements of identity like the national flag and anthem, which tend to cause conflict in some regions like Catalonia. Many of its users publish commentaries condemning the public aid and benefits that migrants receive in Spain. Here is a typical example:

Europeans should repopulate Europe by having children amongst themselves or encouraging migration from Christian countries, like from Latin America. If not, Christianity will disappear in Europe because of immigration. (User JP, *Verdaderos Españoles en México*)

These extremist views contrast with the more temperate atmosphere of other Facebook groups. Yet that does not mean that at times discussion around these controversial topics does not cause ruptures even within the moderate groups. These are not just banal incidents between a few select Spanish migrants who use Facebook in Mexico; they are examples that illustrate and represent the current political polarization of Spanish society. The online testimony of these migrants gives us just a small glimpse of the situation and is proof that there are many pending problems and conflicting visions that the whole of Spanish society will have to face in the coming years. However, there is still a space for dialogue inside these virtual communities, as User LO expresses:

These expressions like “Anti-Spain” are reminiscent of the past. Franco (Francisco Franco) said the same thing: “Those who are against me are against Spain and the Spaniards”. From kindergarten you understand that to love your country is one thing and to love your government is another. (*Verdaderos Españoles en México*)

Despite the conflicts, these communities of Spaniards abroad have flourished and endured not only because of solidarity

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and harmony but also because of a feeling of belonging to a particular community that preserves strong cultural ties with the homeland. The solidarity felt may not be enough to prevent the occasional inner struggle from arising within the spaces, but it encourages members to stay in spite of political differences. Furthermore, conflicts do not always have a pernicious effect on the communities. Conflict is also a form of socialization (Simmel, 2010), and private disagreements allow members to expose debatable points, to argue, and to negotiate solutions that reinforce social cohesion inside the virtual communities.

Above all, these social spaces demonstrate that there are many elements that serve to unite Spaniards living in Mexico, and one of these is food. In all of the social groups there was no lack of information on how to get ingredients or where to eat traditional dishes. There were even posts in which Spaniards discussed how some local restaurants did not prepare traditional dishes correctly by adding foreign ingredients to the food. This was particularly prevalent when it came to *paella*, one of Spain's most representative dishes. In one post, a user complained about how Mexicans add sausages to the dish: "Paella without saffron? Paella with sausage?" (User MG, *Españoles en México*). At the end of the thread, what most users concluded was that the dish was in fact not *paella*, but "rice with things". Although it is no easy feat, Spaniards try, at least momentarily and with the support of these virtual spaces, to bring back cultural elements like food, music, and regional traditional festivities that were left behind in their homeland. They organize *quedadas* (meetings) to enjoy Spanish traditional food and beverages and to talk about the difficulties of living in Mexico and their expectations for the future of Spain. Some migrants create and share vivid experiences of their life in the country through blogs or make podcasts to spread the Spanish culture, like the case of the radio program *Españoleando* promoted by a recently created association called *La Casa de España en México A.C.* (<<http://casadeespana.mx>>). However, what is most significant is how – thanks to these virtual spaces – Spaniards abroad can build and experience a feeling of belonging to a community whose members share a symbolic unity despite the distance and the contexts on both continents (Anderson, 2006).

Conclusion

These Spanish diasporic communities illustrate how connections of solidarity are formed amongst Spaniards living in Mexico as well as those who are in the process of moving to the "new continent" in search of better labor conditions. These connections provide members with crucial information regarding social and economic situations on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Thanks to these spaces, many migrants with higher qualifications and university studies have finally found a job in an occupation related to their

academic studies, a nearly impossible task for many in Spain. These communities also highlight the fact that, when dealing with the realities of criminality and economic concerns, important discrepancies exist, not only between new migrants (who get most of their information from newspapers and television) and Spaniards who have lived in the country for a very long time, but also among long-term residents living in various Mexican states. These details invite us to consider how complex providing a complete picture of a country with as many social and economic disparities as Mexico truly is, even for people who have been living in the country for decades.

In the end, however, what is significant about these spaces is how Spanish migrants struggle to preserve their ties to their homeland, even in times of serious social and political unrest. Thanks to virtual spaces like Facebook, they can, at least virtually, stay in contact with their culture and traditions by reinforcing the construction of virtual diasporic communities and attempt to preserve significant elements of the Spanish culture, like food, protecting them from foreign influences. Finally, what transforms a virtual community of migrants into a real diasporic community is not the quantity of users or the information shared there, or even the expressed desires to go back to Spain to be with relatives, but rather the determination to gradually and virtually bring back the Spain that was left behind through multimedia elements like videos, photographs, and commentaries. It is through these actions that groups of isolated Spaniards become a community (Anderson, 2006). In these communities, members stop thinking about an "I" and begin thinking about a "we" (Georgiou, 2013). This too represents a certain form of resistance and endurance against the adverse conditions that have led them far away from home.

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