The Indernet:
From Internet Portal to the Social Web

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ABSTRACT

The social web creates a different technological environment for natio-ethno-cultural community building than internet portals did. Using a long-term ethnography of the virtual space Indernet, the article pursues the question, why after a relaunch of the former internet portal as a blog and a Facebook page it no longer functioned as a space of the second generation. In particular it analyses which demographic and technological factors had an impact on the capacity for community building. The article argues that the individualised usage of social media and the flow of Facebook make it much harder for ethnic entrepreneurs to create a space of natio-ethno-cultural belonging.

KEYWORDS

Blogs, Community, Diaspora, Facebook, Germany, Indians, Internet, Second Generation, Social Media, South Asians

INTRODUCTION

Make your choice and surf to the Indernet, Germany’s first and premier online portal for NRI’s and for those who simply love India!

Thus, the virtual space Indernet (cf. Goel, 2009; Reggi, 2010) described itself (in English) on its Facebook page in the year 2016. Sixteen years after it was founded by Indians of the second generation for others like themselves, it claimed to be a space both for those biographically linked to India (Non-Resident-Indians/ NRI) as well all those interested in India.¹

The emergence of digital media came along with the promise of making geographical distances less important and offering migrants’ new possibilities to create their own publics and facilitate their networking (cf. Karim, 2003a; Mitra, 1997). Thus much research was – and still is - conducted about how migrants use internet technologies (cf. Greschke, 2012; Kuntsman, 2009; Madianou & Miller, 2013; Miller & Slater, 2000). Much of this research deals with South Asian diasporas in the Anglophone world (cf. Gajjala, 2004; Gajjala & Gajjala, 2008a; Lal, 1999; Mallapragada, 2000; Mitra, 1997; Sahoo & de Kruif, 2014; Rai, 1995). Studies from other parts of the South Asian diaspora² are hardly found, which confirms Goggin and McLelland’s (2009) critique of Anglo-centric internet studies (cf. Leung, 2008, p.10). Analysing the German virtual space Indernet accordingly aims at extending the map of South Asia online (cf. Gajjala & Gajjala, 2008b, p.1).

Germany lies on the margins of the South Asian diaspora¹. Due to the small number of migrants from South Asia and because their diversity community structures hardly exist, digital media is even more important for networking both within Germany and transnationally (cf. Oberkircher, 2006, p. 178; Schulze Palstring, 2015, p.167). Since the year 2000, several digital networks have developed,
most of which have been established and used by the highly skilled migrants who have settled in Germany since the year 2000 (cf. Schulze Palstring, 2015).

The aim of this article is to present an archaeological analysis of natio-ethno-cultural community building through the virtual space Indernet. A virtual space is made up of different (temporal) layers, which need to be excavated in order to understand its history. In the case of the Indernet it started in the year 2000 as an internet portal and was relaunched as a blog and a Facebook (fb) page in the year 2011. The Indernet in the year 2016 thus hardly resembles the one of the year 2000, but remains of the earlier versions still can be found. Thus, this article sets out to excavate the different layers of the virtual space, in order to analyse its development.

METHOD

The ethnographic analysis of the Indernet follows Miller & Slater’s (2000) approach of an ethnography of the internet. It shares not only the conviction that an ethnography must be based on long-term observation and interaction, but also Miller & Slater’s understanding that the internet does not exist as a fixed entity, but rather is assembled by its users according to their needs. Thus, internet usage must always be analysed in a particular context and take account of the interwovenness of online and offline (cf. Goel, 2014; Hine, 2015, pp. 55-88). Differing from Miller & Slater (2000), however, this research project does not start from a geographical space, but rather from a virtual space, i.e. the Indernet (cf. Greschke, 2012; Kuntsman, 2009; Shahani, 2008).

A few months after the Indernet was founded in the summer of the year 2000, the observation of the virtual space started with at least one daily visit as a lurker. At the beginning, parts of the website (and of some related sites) were printed on paper and archived. Later archiving was done by saving electronic files. Thus, an attempt was made to deal with what Everett (2009, p. 11) calls the hyper-ephemerality of the cybertext, i.e. the fast changes online and the consequent disappearance of content. These printouts and saved files still serve as an important basis for analysis, since internet archives provide only limited access to earlier versions of the Indernet. In the years 2004 to 2006, the lurking observation was complemented by participation in the forum and chat of the Indernet, by writing articles for the internet portal and attending offline events. Most importantly in this time the interaction with editors and users was intensified through different channels and more than 80 narrative interviews with founders, editors, users and observers were conducted. Most of these took place face-to-face. Only few were conducted via email or personal messages when either there was no possibility of meeting face-to-face or the interviewee chose to stay anonymous. Since 2007 the daily observation has gone back to that of a lurker, supplemented by occasional informal contact and encounters with editors and users of the Indernet. After the field site moved in 2011 to the blog and fb, a Facebook profile was opened and requests for friendship sent to former interview partners. This opened the possibility of observing to some extent the fb usage of (former) Indernet editors and users as well as the possibility to occasionally interact with some of them. The analyses of the fb interactions are based mainly on the documentation of experiences in the research diary (cf. Hine, 2015, pp. 81-85) since there was no possibility of conducting new interviews. In general, the analysis follows the ideas of grounded theory (cf. Cresswell, 1998) and is theoretically informed by critical race theory developed for the German context (cf. Mecheril, 2003). It links the analysis of the in-depth observation in the time from 2004 to 2006 with the long-term observation before and after.

Following the principle of care (Boellstorff et al., 2012, pp. 129-131), this article attempts to implement ethical considerations in its analysis. Acquiring informed consent online faces many challenges (cf. Boellstorff et al., 2012, pp. 131-135). On the one hand, participation in virtual spaces is highly volatile and noncommittal, making it difficult to identify everybody, who should be asked for consent, and making it even more difficult to getting into contact with everybody involved. On the other hand, the openness of ethnographic inquiry makes it impossible to inform those contacted fully about what they are asked to give their consent to. In particular, given the long-term of this