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Bridging the distance: Information technology, social media, and the Maltese diaspora  

Diasporas can be defined as communities who regard of themselves as a national, ethnic, or other form of cultural and political structure of collective membership living outside of their family’s homeland.¹  

Historically, when someone traveled afar, or migrated, there has always been a desire and an attempt at communication, however the means of communication were not so certain. When my grandparents left Malta in 1920, they left behind their family, friends, and the easy means of communication they had with them. To maintain connections, many letters were written by them, as international telephone communications was still in its infancy.  

I recall my mother telling me stories of how she and her family, during World War II, would huddle next to the radio listening for any news and information about the war in Europe, especially Malta. She said her radio at home could receive short wave signals from Europe, mainly England, and they would sometimes hear small pieces of information about Malta. Newspapers during the war were available, and offered additional news, especially maps of the war theater in Europe. During that time, their desire for information from their home country was great, but means of communication was very limited and much slower. Although technology continued to evolve and improve post war, the communication and interconnection between Malta, and its diasporic communities remained much the same for the next 50 years.
The close of the 20th century ushered in a new era of communication. The Internet and the World Wide Web interlinked hypertext documents and permitted users to view and navigate between them. This also allowed for the transfer of information. The creation of e-mail, and the speed and ease in which it handles messages, has transformed traditional written communication to the point that many countries have experienced a drastic reduction in the volume of traditional personal and business mail. The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has allowed users to interact with the previously static websites, which in turn enabled users to also interact with one another. The tools to access this technology has become more affordable, with smaller and faster personal computers. Advancements have also become more innovative with the development of laptop computers, electronic tablets, notebooks and a new device, the smartphone. All of these inventions facilitated the development of programs specifically designed for social networking.

This technology has changed the way we think about a diaspora. The Internet has spurred the development of new tools to leverage its communication pathways. Programs such as Facebook, Google+, Myspace, Yelp, Skype, YouTube, and various other social media programs has had a profound effect on the way diasporic communities communicate and interact with the ‘homeland’ and to each other.

The World Wide Web and Web 2.0 technologies have facilitated the presence of networking and information services to the world. Websites such as the Times of Malta, streaming Maltese TV, and even live cameras around Malta has shrunk the distances for the Maltese diaspora. Electronic social networking has facilitated the formation of communities brought together by common interests. It is only natural that those with familial and cultural bonds would also seek to connect via virtual communities through social media.

**Sharing**

The creation of these virtual communities have not only allowed members to be directly connected to the homeland – Malta, but also share with their friends, and associates the beauty, history, and culture of the Maltese Islands. This exposure has far expanded the reach of the Maltese government to promote tourism, business, and commerce, through the networking of the Maltese virtual diaspora communities around the world.

Creating an online network allows friends and relatives, who have been out of touch to discover one another and communicate. Networking can lead to not only virtual
reunions but actual ones as well as the desire to re-connect and attend cultural events are high. For the Maltese Diaspora, communication through the networks is mainly conducted in English, however networks contain a mix of Maltese and English, while others are exclusively in Maltese. This encourages the Maltese Diaspora to continue to embrace the Maltese culture through its language, and can act as a catalyst for some to re-connect with or learn the Maltese language.

Promoting a sense of community is the purpose behind the social networking sites. These sites allow members and interested visitors to post messages and responses. In addition, photos, videos, events, news, and information of interest are regularly posted to social media sites. The diasporic public sphere is not exclusive to the Diaspora, since information technology and social networking freely allow homeland individuals to participate in this exchange, as well. Postings of news, and expressing views on various subjects encourages engaging dialog and sometimes banter, which is reminiscent of typical family gatherings in Malta. This sphere is neither separate from nor identical to the homeland public sphere, because of its transitional nature. It mingles audiences from both sides, yet some issues are germane to one side and may not have direct relevance to the other.

This virtual arena has transformed once separated and divided groups into a new one: The E-Diaspora.iii The e-diaspora may be virtual communities, or real communities, or even pseudo communities, but they all share a desire for community that followed a migration event which occurred within their family. The e-diaspora have become the content creators of the social networking media, which in turn has become a space where their social relations are shaped, maintained, and strengthened.

**Social Networking Sites**

There are various avenues for communication on the Internet. Dependent on the needs of the users, many networking websites exist to facilitate communication between individuals and groups. We are familiar with the services of Google as a web search engine, however, that is just a part of the services they offer. For networking, Google created platforms such as Google Docs and Google Drive for the sharing of files and other medium. Folders and files can be shared across a wide base of users, which can contain documents, photos, and videos, for both personal and business use. Also, they offer Google+ , a social networking site which allows users to post
information, photos, join interest groups, post status updates, and receive
notifications from individuals and various groups they belong to. iv

Facebook has become the dominant social networking site on the Internet at this
time with over 1.2 billion active members. v Users can be individuals, institutions, or
businesses. They can post status notes and exchange messages, photos, videos, and
receive notifications from other members and groups.

These various social networking sites have exposed to the world to the beauty,
history, and cultural values of Malta. On Facebook alone are the following
networking groups originating in Malta: Heritage Malta, The National Archives of
Malta, National Library of Malta, The National Museum of Archaeology, Armed
Forces of Malta, Department of Information (Malta), Ministry for Tourism Malta,
University of Malta (several departments), Times of Malta, Cisk, and many others.

The Maltese diaspora have also created their own presence on social networking with
groups such as: The Maltese Cross Foundation (Northern California, USA), Maltese
Americans, Proud 2B Maltese Club, and even Maltese Pastizzi- Where to buy them
outside of Malta... and many more. Sites which bring additional attention to Malta
are The Malta Study Center- Hill Museum & Manuscript Library at the University of

All of these sites reinvigorate interest in the Maltese people, its culture, and history.

Business

In business, information technology has created a new form of trade: electronic
commerce. E-commerce has greatly expanded a company’s market reach. vi In
addition, it has allowed an organization to facilitate commerce to those diaspora
desiring and requiring to maintain business and cultural connections. For business,
the benefit of online social networking is leveraging the collective knowledge and
expertise of individuals and organizations, which in turn leads to a smarter and better
informed organization. The availability, low costs, and the much-extended use of the
new means of communication have served to enhance globalization in commerce. vii

The use of information technology has also expanded services in Malta previously
unavailable to the Maltese Diaspora. Banking, real estate, and access to government
services are all available via the World Wide Web. From the Bank of Valletta and
HSBC Bank Malta, to wineries, legal firms, shipping, and many other business in
Malta have a web and social networking presence.
An additional phenomenon has emerged via social networking; that is the wide scale process of obtaining project funding called: Crowdfunding. Rather than solicit venture capital through traditional means, crowdfunding utilizes the global sphere to present projects and solicit funds. Smaller projects, perhaps not eligible for traditional funding, can obtain international exposure which can result in obtaining funding from many smaller sources verses a few larger ones. In this way, the Maltese Diaspora can directly contribute and invest in projects in Malta, adding to an increased sense of contribution.

**Conclusion:**

With the emergence and development of the Internet and Information Technology, social media networks will undoubtedly play an increasing role in the relationship between Malta and its Diasporas abroad. Social networking platforms will serve not only as a tool for communication and community building, but also will provide new opportunities to provide business services and strengthen the cultural relationship between the Diaspora groups and our home country.

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http://www.google.com/docs/about/


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