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Eritrea on-line:

Diaspora, cyberspace, and the public sphere

ABSTRACT

For Eritreans in diaspora, identities are deterritorialized, one's most pressing communication may be with far-flung strangers in cyberspace, and one's political engagement is centered on a distant homeland. Eritrean experiences, thus, seem to bring together various qualities that scholars have been grappling with in trying to chart the implications of the infotech revolution and life on-line, in seeking to understand processes of transnationalism and globalization, and in charting the elusive construction of community in the postmodern age. Through an analysis of the social history of www.dehai.org, a website developed by Eritreans in diaspora, I explore the ways that new forms of technological and geographical mobility are changing the conditions not just of capitalist production but also of knowledge production and the constitution of publics, public spheres, communities, and nations. [*cyberspace, public sphere, politics, diaspora, community, conflict, Eritrea*]

The public sphere, in other words, traffics in virtual realities.

—John and Jean Comaroff

A 1998 posting on the Internet website www.dehai.org discussed the border war then raging between Eritrea and Ethiopia and expressed a wish to "cut and paste Eritrea" somewhere else, imagining "Eritrean delegates shuttling back and forth from MicroSoft headquarters." "But," the writer continued, "back to reality, we realized Bill Gates may not be able to do it at all." In its wish to resolve a bloody war through computer applications, this message expresses the idea of liberation through technology that the Internet, in particular, has represented for many. At the same time, in its return "to reality," it suggests that the infinite mobility and flexibility that cyberspace appears to offer is merely a fantasy and, therefore, has little bearing on social realities. Yet this posting appeared on an Internet website devoted to Eritrean politics that has captured the energies and attentions of many Eritreans in diaspora for years. Indeed, so strong is Dehai's appeal and so great are its demands on an individual's time in keeping abreast of the latest postings and, perhaps, responding to them, that Eritreans have likened its hold on them to an addiction. Through an analysis of the social history and culture of Dehai, I explore the complex intersections between new possibilities opened up by the Internet and the ways that new forms of technological and geographical mobility are giving rise to new publics and new public spheres that transform the meanings of community, citizenship, and nation.

For Eritreans in diaspora, identities are deterritorialized, one's most pressing communication may be with far-flung strangers in cyberspace, and one's political participation and civic engagement are centered on a distant homeland. Eritrean experiences, thus, seem to bring together various qualities that scholars have been grappling with in trying to chart the implications of the infotech revolution and life on-line, in seeking to understand processes of transnationalism and globalization, and in charting

the instabilities of identities and the elusive construction of community in the postmodern age.

Many discussions of cyberspace focus on the empowering potential of computerized access to information. Nicholas Negroponte celebrated ''the instantaneous and inexpensive transfer of electronic data that move at the speed of light [through which] information can become universally accessible'' (1995:4). And, according to the World Bank, new communications technologies can ''put unequal beings on an equal footing and that makes it the most potent democratizing tool ever devised'' (Wheeler 2001:187). Others focus on the virtual and the freedom to reinvent oneself and to construct entire social worlds free from the limits of embodied reality in everyday life. ''Many computer users seem to experience the movement 'into' cyberspace as an unshackling from real-life constraints'' (Wilbur 2000:48; also see Kevin Robins's [2000] critique). As Pippa Norris summarizes them,

> The more utopian visions of the Internet suggest a future society in which virtually unlimited quantities of information become available, civic society flourishes, government decision making becomes more open and transparent, and nation-state borders are eroded as people build virtual communities for work, learning, and leisure, spanning traditional boundaries of time and place. [2001:232]

The utopian visions associated with new technological advancements are not unlike the promises of national liberation and nation-building projects, which, likewise, always have a utopian dimension entwined in teleological projections of a future social world better than the one people live in now. Eritreans in diaspora coupled the utopian promises of technology and those of nationalism on www.dehai.org, where they could explore their visions and hopes for Eritrea as a nation in the virtual realm of cyberspace. The 1990s were particularly suited to this exploration, as, during that period, everything still seemed possible for Eritrea (at least, in the imaginable future). Those years were understood by Eritreans as a period of transition for a new nation whose political economy and defining institutions were still in process and, therefore, remained open to possibilities. Disappointments could be interpreted as delays rather than as failures or betrayals. I focus here on the period from 1992 to 2000, which I have identified as the first epoch of Eritrean cyberspace, beginning with the creation of Dehai and ending when Eritrean activities in cyberspace fluoresced, producing multiple public spheres.[1]

On www.dehai.org, Eritreans in diaspora constructed ''national'' space within cyberspace, creating a particular kind of transnational public sphere for the circulation of news and views about Eritrean politics. The nature of this public sphere reflects the characteristics of the Internet as a medium and the condition and experience of diaspora. The user-friendly and interactive nature of cyberspace means that users, in some sense, create as well as consume it as a medium (Castells 2001). Dehai is, thus, a cultural product of the Eritrean diaspora as well as a medium used by the diaspora in distinctive ways.

Cyberspace and diaspora are interesting to think about together for several reasons. One conceptual link between diaspora and cyberspace is that of ''displacement.'' Cyberspace involves displacement in that cyberspace is no place or any place; it is an imaginatively constructed space. This is so even though computers and servers are situated in specific locations. People in diaspora have experienced displacement; they cannot fully understand themselves by reference to their present location and context. They feel out of place, and to make sense of who they are, they must construct a social context for themselves that transcends their location. For Eritreans in diaspora it is not so much their geographic distance from Eritrea as the cultural distance between the world they now inhabit and the world they came from that makes displacement not an event but an ongoing process that is expressed through a diasporic identity. And, as a self-conscious diaspora, they see themselves as members of a dispersed community that, in effect, has no location. In both cyberspace and the spaces of diaspora, then, location is ambiguous, and to be made socially meaningful, it must be actively constructed.[2]

A second theme linking cyberspace and diaspora is that of ''community,'' as new forms of social belonging arise out of the dual processes of technological advances in communications and the geographic mobility of populations. Diaspora and dispersal engender networked forms of community, and relations on the Internet, similarly, involve linkages among dispersed users. Diasporas and the Internet are, thus, homologous, and both reflect the changing social formations of postmodernity. Benedict Anderson (1983) drew attention to the way that social imaginaries of nation and community were entwined with the medium of the newspaper in an earlier epoch. My study of Eritrean cyberspace suggests that new media and new conditions of transnational migration and globalization are altering the lived experience of citizenship, community, and nationalism as well as the ways in which these can be collectively imagined.

In this account of Eritreans on the web, I also draw attention to the significance of violence and conflict for understanding community, the public sphere, and cyberspace. Anderson's (1983) conception of nations as imagined communities largely constructs nationalism in terms of a gentle process of belonging and mutual recognition, rather than in terms of the kinds of violent struggles over sovereignty and territory that have characterized Eritrea's formation as a nation. Michael Warner's (2002) influential

work on the nature of publics and public spheres takes for granted the very condition of freedom of expression without fear of violent reprisal on which such a public sphere depends. Discussions of the networked connectivity offered by the Internet, likewise, often ignore the role that social conflict might play on the Internet or that the Internet might play in situations of violence or war (Castells 2001; Escobar 2000; Ess 2001; Wilson and Peterson 2002).

In my analysis of Eritreans in diaspora and cyberspace, conflict emerges as a central dynamic and one that is not only destructive but also productive of identity, community, and the public sphere. Eritrea and its diaspora were formed through violence; community on Dehai is expressed largely through conflict and debate rather than consensus, and Dehai's peak years of activity were those of the 1998–2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, when the website kept readers up to date with the latest developments and analyses and when the diaspora used it effectively to support Eritrea's ability to wage war.

Although the ways in which external threats can serve to unite nations and communities are well recognized, the ways in which communities are themselves united through conflict are less obvious. Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson provide a glimpse of this when they observe in relation to Middle Eastern public spheres that Muslim politics ''is less an expression of a unitary voice . . . than an engagement to argue over correct interpretations'' (2003:6). Pnina Werbner has similarly described the diasporic public sphere of Pakistanis in Britain as ''an arena of argument'' as well as of ''imaginative creativity'' (1998:12). In her study of Sudanese in North America, Rogaia Abusharaf touches on several themes addressed in this article when she notes that ''exile has allowed Sudanese to debate identity, ethnicity, and religion by providing them the freedom of unfiltered communication'' (2002:166). My analysis of Dehai recognizes the role of violence in constructing community and draws attention to the significance of a public sphere in which conflict can be conducted without violence. I suggest that the public sphere can serve many other purposes than simply providing a venue for rational discussion à la Jurgen Habermas (1992). Dehai serves as an arena of nonviolent conflict in a violent world but also as a multiplier of outrage and as a vehicle for mobilizing action in situations of conflict. Brian Axel asserts in his study of Sikhs that ''violence is the thread by which the diaspora is constituted as a community'' (2001:156).

The role of the Internet in facilitating community building is often conceptualized in naive terms, for instance, through the vision of ''the global village'' that constructs cyberspace as borderless connectivity and inclusivity. Such visions fail to apprehend that communities are also constructed out of violent processes of conflict and exclusion. Simplistic notions of connection miss the sense in which Eritreans may have become part of a global

village, but it is, for many intents and purposes, an Eritrean village. Some conceptualizations of transnational migration and the Internet are too dominated by the notion of ''circulation'' and by the equation of movement (virtual or geographic) with freedom, represented by fantasies of limitless speed, unchecked mobility, and wide-open (cyber)spaces. Analysts need to consider who and what is circulating and to recognize that what connects people also fragments them, just as Eritrean cyberspace is distinct from other cyberspaces.

The exploration of community, identity, and political conflict in this analysis of Dehai runs counter to technologically driven modernist visions of electronic enlightenment, empowerment, and connectivity, suggesting something far more ambiguous and complex. Even Manuel Castells's assertion that humanity has entered an information age in which ''power is primarily exercised around the production and diffusion of cultural codes and information content'' (2001:164) seems utopian in light of the 1998–2000 Eritrean–Ethiopian war, the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

My analysis of Dehai and Eritreans in diaspora has developed out of a diverse array of sources, including visits to Eritrea in 1981 (under Ethiopian rule), in winter 1995–96, and again in summer 2001. I have interviewed Eritreans from various walks of life, both in Eritrea and in a number of countries where they live in diaspora. I have been a participant-observer of life in the Eritrean diaspora for some 25 years now. I am most familiar with the experiences of Eritreans in the United States. Eritreans in the United States are responsible for creating and maintaining Dehai, and they also have contributed many postings.

I see the social history of Eritrean cyberspace as one of ordinary people inventing a public sphere that made possible the articulation of ideas and sentiments that could not be expressed elsewhere. Dehai had no counterpart in Eritrea, where expression and media remain tightly controlled by the government. As a long-time ''friend of Eritrea,'' the journalist Dan Connell notes,

> There is no tradition of signed articles outlining positions not yet adopted by the Front, for example, nor is there any outlet for them, no sections set aside for debate in PFDJ [People's Front for Democracy and Justice] publications, no space for op-eds in the newspaper, no panel discussions of contending perspectives broadcast over radio or TV. Positions on controversial issues are thrashed out within the movement, with input from the membership through forums and seminars convened for that purpose. [1997:69]

Outside of Eritrea, members of the diaspora may live in societies that espouse freedom of expression, yet Eritrean

perspectives and concerns are absent from public forums and media outlets. The significance of Dehai postings to Eritreans in diaspora, thus, stems partly from the lack of media outlets (prior to the establishment of Dehai and subsequent rival sites) that catered to their particular interests as readers or that provided outlets for them to publish their opinions, poems, and analyses.

Dehai is significant, moreover, because it overflows its electronic boundaries in a number of important ways. It gave rise to face-to-face encounters among some of its users at yearly Dehai retreats, for example. Even more importantly, Dehai has had material consequences—fund-raising for development, aid, and war and mobilizing political activities and demonstrations. As a transnational public sphere focused on Eritrean affairs, Dehai has linked the diaspora and the nation. Eritreans in diaspora debate national concerns such as the formulation of the constitution, the requirement of national service, and other policies. They believe, moreover, that government officials monitor postings and participate pseudonymously in on-line debates. Critiques on Dehai appear to have influenced policy in Eritrea. By serving as an open public sphere for debate, Dehai has added an unprecedented dimension to Eritrean politics.

To understand how this came about, some contextual background about Eritrea and its diaspora is needed. The Eritrean diaspora is a product of three decades of war for independence from Ethiopia that caused Eritreans to flee their homes (Iyob 1995; Kibreab 1985). The mass mobilization and political education connected with the nationalist struggle permeated Eritreans' lives within Eritrea and beyond it (Pool 2001; Woldemikael 1991). Perhaps, as Achille Mbembe suggests, ''the state of war in contemporary Africa should in fact be conceived of as a general cultural experience that shapes identities, just as the family, the school, and other social institutions do'' (2002: 267). Every family, every home was affected by 30 years of war fought on Eritrean soil, and so ordinary people in that part of the world, even if they wielded little power, came to feel that they had a stake in the political. In 1993, Eritrea was officially recognized as a nation.

The achievement of nationhood did not bring an end to Eritrean diaspora, however, as the majority of Eritreans living abroad did not resettle in Eritrea. Some had no homes or kin left there to return to, and the war left Eritrea with a devastated economy that had little means of absorbing returnees (Woldemikael 1996). The new speeds at which information and resources could be transmitted and transferred facilitated Eritreans' networking across geographic distances and the involvement of Eritreans outside of Eritrea in the life of the new nation. The new technology did not give rise to transnational Eritrean circuits of sociality, information, and resources. Technological developments and the creation of Dehai (and, eventually, other

sites), however, facilitated the diaspora's participation in homeland politics and its self-constitution as a diasporic community. The speed, immediacy, and spontaneity of Internet communications as compared with most other media, moreover, mean that reaction times to events halfway across the world are almost instantaneous, and this serves to heighten the sense of participation and the possibilities of shaping outcomes from a distance.

Ordinary citizens within Eritrea did not have access to the Internet until the year 2000. Eritrean activities in cyberspace have, thus, largely been confined to the diaspora and government elites until recently. The diaspora's engagement with Dehai reached its peak intensity during the 1998–2000 border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, when the website became the source for breaking war news, for fund-raising and organizing support, and for analysis and discussion of the war and the media coverage of the war. The war that ended in December 2000 was a turning point for Eritrea and for Dehai. On the national front, dissent and government repression intensified, and in cyberspace, the common public sphere that Dehai represented fragmented as an array of alternative sites emerged. With these developments began a new era of Eritrean cyberspace.

In another article, I have explored the emergence of the Eritrean diaspora and its relation to Eritrean nationhood (Bernal 2004; also see Hepner 2003). Here, I construct a social history of Dehai and its development as a public sphere by and for diasporic Eritreans during the 1990s. The 1990s are particularly significant because during that decade Eritrea gained official recognition as a nation, and, at the same time, on the global scene, the Internet emerged, and Eritreans in diaspora began to use it in creative ways. Dehai began in 1992 as a computer-mediated Eritrean network that actually predated the Internet. It continued to evolve as new information technologies developed. Once the Internet took off, www.dehai.org's preeminence as the Eritrean Internet link went largely unchallenged until the turn of the millennium. The sites that subsequently developed cannot be understood without reference to Dehai's role in establishing cyberspace as a significant sphere of Eritrean activity and in defining Eritrean on-line culture and practices.[3] The postwar efflorescence of websites since the year 2000 and recent developments in Eritrean cyberspace are outside the scope of this article, however.[4]

Here, I seek to uncover why Eritreans in diaspora have found reading and writing on Dehai so rewarding. I use an exploration of the meaning of Dehai as an entry point for thinking about transformations of community, citizenship, and the public sphere in relation to new media and transnational migration, which separately and together are making possible and, perhaps, compelling new social and political relations. Through an analysis of the organization of Dehai, the content of individual postings, posting genres, and broader patterns of postings, I reveal not only

the overt purposes served by Eritrean practices in cyberspace, such as circulating information, but also the means and forms through which reading and writing on Dehai constitute a public sphere in which citizenship, identity, and political expression can be contested and performed. I show how these cyberspatial activities extend beyond the realm of the virtual, linking words and deeds, blurring the boundaries between the diaspora and the nation, and exerting influence on world events.

The sources I draw on include Dehai postings, fieldwork in Eritrea, discussions with Eritreans in diaspora, a presentation by one of Dehai's founders, Ghidewon Asmerom (Asmerom et al. 2001), and interviews I conducted in the United States with readers of and contributors to Dehai, including one of the most prolific writers to emerge on the website (whom I call by the pseudonym Yakob).[5] Yakob is an Eritrean in his thirties. He is college educated and works as a taxi driver. He married an Eritrean woman in diaspora. As one of Dehai's major posters, Yakob is, by definition, not a typical Dehaier. He is one of the 15–20 people who have emerged as Dehai's media personalities and who have shaped the character of Dehai through their consistent contributions of significant and entertaining postings over the years and their courage and commitment to putting their views on the line and exposing themselves to critique. As a former student as well as in his current occupation in the service sector and his strained economic circumstances, Yakob has much in common with many Eritreans in diaspora.

The making of a diasporic public sphere

The public sphere is where people, through their communications, become citizens.

—Howard Rheingold

Dehai was initiated in 1992 by Eritreans in the Washington, D.C., area (jokingly referred to as ''the capital of Eritrea'' by Eritreans in the United States because of the concentration of Eritreans settled there). Messages are written in English with occasional transliterations of Tigrinya (the dominant language in Eritrea). *Dehai* itself is a transliteration of the Tigrinya word that literally means ''voice'' but that is also used to mean ''news.'' Dehai has two main components; one is a newslist to which people can post published news or links to published news related to Eritrea. The other component, which is the focus of this article, is a discussion list or message board devoted to Eritrea-related issues. Both of these components are archived on Dehai. The Dehai charter, first posted on the website in 1995, defines the purpose of the site as follows: ''The main objective is to provide a forum for interested Eritreans and non-Eritreans to engage in solving Eritrea's problems by sharing information, discussing issues, publicizing and participating in

existing projects and proposing ideas for future projects'' (Dehai 1999).[6]

Dehai built on an existing community that was a series of interlinked networks, a nontechnological worldwide web of Eritrean social circles and connections. According to its founders (Asmerom et al. 2001), Dehai began on November 9, 1992. As Ghidewon Asmerom recalls, ''At that time only hi-tech industry people were talking about the Internet. But there was a list, socioculturalafrica. It was a thing where you post your message and debate. A lot of Ethiopians were posting messages against Eritrean independence. I posted replies and so did some other Eritreans.''

Ghidewon was working with computers at AT and T in Virginia, and he knew two Eritrean students who were studying computer science at the University of Maryland. As Ghidewon tells it, the three of them were so frustrated with the socioculturalafrica list that they said, ''Forget those people. We shouldn't be discussing Eritrean independence with them.'' And they determined to create their own list, an Eritrean list. Ghidewon explained,

> We wanted to make it a free and independent forum to discuss issues and we made it a closed list at that time because we didn't want to discuss with Ethiopians. But, even in the U.S., the people who had access to computers were very limited, so it was biased to techies, university Eritreans, and people in the IT industry. We set a board [of administrators] and developed guidelines. We invited social scientists, professors, and so on. Some [Eritreans] were reluctant to join, however, and one said, ''You are creating a monster,'' because Dehai is a free forum and traditionally we don't have free forums. So they said, ''It will be taken over by opposition.'' But, we wanted to prove them wrong and show that all kinds of views can be explored and discussed.

''Opposition'' here refers to critics of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The EPLF was the leading independence movement and the one that ultimately achieved victory over Ethiopian forces and whose leader, Isaias Afewerki, became the president of Eritrea. After independence, the EPLF morphed into the PFDJ, the de facto ruling party of Eritrea's one-party state. In the early 1990s, when Dehai was conceived, Eritrea was not yet formally independent, and the only organized opposition to the EPLF consisted of the supporters of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), who had been defeated in a civil war with the EPLF and who also are part of the Eritrean diaspora.

The choice of English to discuss and debate Eritrean issues largely among Eritreans can be seen to signal a rupture with norms of public discourse within Eritrea and to highlight the novel possibilities of communication in this new medium. Ghidewon said, ''At the beginning we said the language would be English, a closed list, interactive, the most noisy list, controversial.'' English has generally

dominated computing and the Internet (Keniston 2001), but language is a particularly controversial issue in Eritrea: Although the population is nearly evenly divided between Muslims and Christians, the most widespread language, Tigrinya, is the language of the highland Christian population. The choice of English, therefore, may have been partly motivated by an effort to avoid any language choice that would be perceived as tainted by sectarianism.[7]

Several points emerge from the founders' account of Dehai's inception. One is that Dehai is a direct outgrowth of Eritrea's nationalist struggle. The Eritreans who created it were seeking an independent public forum for discussion and debate about Eritrea in which they would be free to explore their own ideas on their own terms, separate from Ethiopians. In the wider Eritrean context, within which the EPLF had developed its own various media outlets (pamphlets, newsletters, and magazines) during the nationalist struggle and had organizational bases throughout the diaspora, Dehai stands out as a public sphere that was self-organized by ordinary Eritreans, rather than under the auspices of the EPLF, PFDJ, or any other organization. Furthermore, as Ghidewon's words attest, the creators of Dehai wanted to bring into being something that had never existed before in the context of Eritrean history; they intended Dehai to be a new kind of public sphere that would foster free and open debate. One of the website's great strengths, according to Ghidewon, is that ''Dehai has the ability to discuss taboos.'' The desires of Eritreans in diaspora for freedom of expression were shaped by their experiences in Western democracies and were also tied to the hopes they had for a liberated and democratic Eritrea. As Ghidewon commented pointedly at his presentation in Eritrea in 2001, when liberation had been achieved but democracy still remained a hope, ''That's what democracy is. It is not 'shut up. I will talk. You listen.' '' In this sense, then, Eritreans in diaspora were modeling, on Dehai, the kind of public discussion they wanted to see take place in Eritrea's public sphere.

As a website, Dehai can be accessed by anyone; however, only members can submit postings and gain access to Dehai archives. In 2001, Dehai had over 2,000 members. (By comparison, another African website, Burundinet, had only 200 members [Kadende-Kaiser 2000].) Although most of the messages appear to be from U.S. addresses, messages also are posted from Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Italy, and Germany. According to its founders and site managers, Dehai's ''membership is diverse in age, profession, and viewpoint'' (Asmerom et al. 2001). Moreover, Ghidewon asserted, ''Dehai is an antielitist list. A high-school student who doesn't know much English can write and no one would dare ridicule.'' Clearly, participation that requires expression in English and the use of a computer is exclusive in practice if not in ideals. Interesting ideas and controversies that surface on Dehai, however, are spread by telephone and word of mouth and are discussed in face-to-face meetings off-line, and in these ways Dehai has served a larger public beyond its members and its wider circle of readers.

Dehai's charter states that Dehai's ''mission'' is to serve ''as a free, unmoderated, and open communication medium among Eritreans and non-Eritrean friends of Eritrea for the purpose of discussing and exchanging information on Eritrean society, history, politics, economy, technology, culture, languages and current affairs'' (Dehai 1999). The core values enshrined in Dehai's charter and emphasized by the founders are civility in the exchange of viewpoints and freedom of expression. Under the heading ''Code of Conduct,'' the Dehai Charter states, ''Subscribers of Dehai SHALL NOT post articles that degrade or insult any subscriber, or group of subscribers' beliefs, creed, race, religion, gender, age, or national origin'' (Dehai 1999). The charter also includes a list of eight ''Posting Guidelines.'' Several of the guidelines are specifically aimed at setting out social norms for appropriate communication on Dehai. The perceived need to do this on the part of Dehai's administrators may relate to the novelty of this type of open public forum as well as to the newness of Internet communication, in which anonymity and distance separate interlocutors. Guideline 5 states that ''postings should primarily address issues and not only critique or embarrass a subscriber or group of subscribers.'' Guideline 7 states,

> Subscribers should grant the benefit of doubt when attempting to figure out motivations—if any—behind postings. Before ex-pressing criticisms, subscribers are encouraged to explore privately e-mailed, diplomatic requests for clarifications. Such an approach should preempt misunderstandings, stop communication barriers from building up and provide respondents with an opportunity to explain their postings. [Dehai 1999][8]

From its inception, Dehai has had monitors to ensure that civility is maintained. Beyond that, according to Ghidewon, content is not censored: ''Extreme *shaebia* [government] supporters will claim that we are antishaebia, and the critics say that Dehai is shaebia. But, basically, if the person has the guts, they are free.''[9] In the history of Dehai, only one or two members have been expelled as repeat offenders. Ghidewon emphasized that ''Dehai is not an organization or an association. It is a mailing list. We are only the administrators. Dehai doesn't represent our views.'' He added that ''in Dehai, if a person is a newbie, he or she can post a message and, without any interface, that message is distributed to Dehai members.'' As is the norm with discussion sites, readers greatly outnumber posters on Dehai. Ghidewon reports that from its inception in 1992, Dehai has averaged 37 postings per day

(Asmerom et al. 2001). Clearly, with the growing availability of computers and the rise of the Internet, this daily average hides the rising number of messages as Dehai became more accessible. Yakob estimates that about 50 new messages were posted every day on Dehai throughout the late 1990s, and even a devoted Dehaier such as he could not read them all. That rate would yield an average of 1,500 postings in a month, and postings that go on for several pages of single-spaced text are not at all unusual.

Those who started Dehai conceptualized it as a special forum allowing Eritreans freedom of expression, and they established norms of tolerance and civility in the posting guidelines. Whereas a small group created the computer-mediated forum, the actual content of Dehai is collectively contributed by many participants through their individual postings. Dehai's success in attracting and retaining a large community of readers and writers over the course of a decade is extraordinary and could not have been engineered by even the most savvy computer programmer. As many web designers have learned and as anyone who has joined an e-mail discussion list also knows, ''If you build it, they will come'' does not apply to cyberspace. This makes it all the more noteworthy that a marginal, displaced, ragtag population of refugees and immigrants from one of the least technologically advanced and least democratic regions of the world succeeded in creating in cyberspace such a dynamic, vital public sphere. Technology and computer know-how were required to make Dehai possible, but its success must be explained in social terms. It is also worth noting that Dehai has no commercial content. The people who created and administer Dehai are volunteers as are the writers who contribute postings. Dehai has been maintained and developed by its founders and administrators and by its posters, many of whom have volunteered large amounts of their time to Dehai year after year.

Even simply keeping current by reading postings on Dehai is time-consuming. Yakob, who first became involved in Dehai in 1995, explained that, like many Eritreans, he did not have a personal computer in his home. Therefore, to read and write on Dehai, he had to go to public places, mainly libraries, where he could go on-line for free. But this, as he pointed out, added to the time commitment involved. Significantly, although the founders and some of the earliest participants in Dehai were self-described ''techies'' employed or studying in computer-related fields, Yakob had no other involvement in computing or the World Wide Web except through Dehai. Yakob explained,

> I didn't do anything else on the Internet. I just went to Dehai. It is a big commitment of time. In fact, even when I heard about Asmarino.com and the other sites [that Eritreans developed later], I resisted for a long time, because I can't do more than Dehai. I was totally

engaged with Dehai. From 1995 to 2000 I read Dehai every day, and I posted something two or three times a week.

The character and content of Dehai postings are diverse, ranging from simple and sincere statements of opinion about a current event or policy issue in Eritrea to poetry, complex political and historical analyses, debates with other posters, witty repartee, parody, and satire. Postings also announce Eritrea-related activities in diaspora and reminders about Eritrean holidays, historical anniversaries, and milestones. Another common genre of Dehai postings is the media critique—postings that seek to set the record straight, most often taking issue with something reported in Western mass media regarding Eritrea. In relation to the Western press and to official Eritrean views and government-controlled media, Dehai is an alternative public sphere.

Media critiques and postings concerned with Eritrea's public image point to the diaspora's self-conscious and sophisticated approach to the Internet and other media. In the same way that a play within a play draws attention to the artifice involved in what is being presented, Eritreans' posting of media critiques within the medium of cyberspace draws attention to the politics of knowledge production and reveals the Internet as much more than a means of gaining access to or circulating ''information.'' Eritreans in diaspora use the cyberspatial public sphere to create information as they produce and debate narratives about nationhood, citizenship, democracy, and relations of power and authority.

Cyberspace, conflict, and community

Community

Dehai is a product of Eritrean social relationships and a vehicle for reinventing community under changing conditions. The website's subtitle, ''Eritrea Online,'' suggests that Dehai is meant to be a kind of virtual Eritrea. For Eritreans in diaspora unable to access actual Eritrea, Dehai has served in part as a surrogate homeland. As a message posted on April 4, 1998, describing Eritreans in Germany, explains, ''Soon after Eritreans settled down in their new society isolation dawned in their homes.'' Dehai provides a sense of connection to fellow Eritreans and to Eritrean national concerns as well as to Eritreanness more broadly. Another Dehaier explained the lure of Dehai this way: ''As a friend once said, Dehai is a second home. Living in the industrialized world where life moves in the fast lane, there is little room for socialization and personalized contact, like a relaxed evening in a friend's house or in a local bar or tea room or in the shop of a friend, like people do in places like Eritrea. Dehai gives us that atmosphere'' (Rude 1996:22).

Yet Dehai does more than that. Through the web, Eritreans in diaspora participate in conversations and debates with interlocutors outside their own social networks, which, within Eritrea, would have been largely shaped by region, ethnicity, and religion. Moreover, people within Eritrea have little sense that tea-shop chats have the ear of government leaders and might actually lead to something as concrete as policy changes. Dehai has undoubtedly attracted Eritreans because of shared understandings, experiences, and the feeling of familiarity that can connect strangers to each other and make people feel at home. But, to the extent that Dehai realizes certain promises of citizenship and offers an open public sphere, it must not be seen simply as reproducing something Eritrean but, rather, as bringing into being something new—a new public and a new public sphere.

Of course, even if Dehai is completely open in principle, in actual practice limits exist in terms of who uses Dehai. For instance, Dehai is largely a male endeavor. But, if the public sphere that Dehai represents is largely populated by male citizens, that is perhaps not so much a reflection of anything unique to Dehai or to Eritrean culture as it is representative of worldwide patterns of universal citizenship that assume a male subject and women's exclusion from the public sphere (Fraser 1992; Pateman 1988). In that sense, the drama of men arguing with other men over the question of women's rights in Eritrea is no more shocking than the nearly all-male legislature in the United States debating women's abortion rights. Eritrean men, moreover, have significantly outnumbered women in the North American and European diaspora, and the men have had more access to education, to the English language, and to computers. To depict Dehai as dominated by elites, however, would be inaccurate. Some of Dehai's most prominent posters work as parking lot attendants, night guards, and taxi drivers and are not part of any elite based in Eritrea or in the diaspora. Through their writing on Dehai, some individuals, such as Yakob, have achieved celebrity, but they had no particular economic or social standing in Eritrean circles prior to their emergence as Internet intellectuals. In fact, as I have explored in more detail elsewhere (Bernal 2005), Dehai produced them, not the other way around. As Alireza Doostdar notes in relation to Iranian blogging, "Just as the Internet provides intellectuals with a much-less-restricted environment for publication and cultural-political actions, it also opens up possibilities for publication for nonintellectuals who have been excluded from this domain thus far. The absence of any kind of control means just about anything can (and does) get published" (2004:658).

On Dehai, shared memories, histories, understandings, and culture can form the taken-for-granted context within which communication takes place. As Rose M. Kadende-Kaiser notes for Burundinet, most messages "assume previous knowledge of Burundi: its culture, politics, social history, geography, and political leaders" (2000:133). Not only is knowledge of Eritrean history and culture a prerequisite for fully understanding Dehai postings but many of the most entertaining messages involve witty retorts or parodies of views expressed on Dehai and, so, also require a knowledge of Dehai itself. The acceptable boundaries of reasonable debate and the intolerance expressed in some postings on Dehai are themselves the subjects of Dehai postings, so a self-critical, reflexive mode is built into Dehai communications.

A common feature of Dehai postings is that they are addressed to Dehaiers as a community and sometimes directly to the authors of specific postings. In these ways, individual postings invoke the larger context of Dehai, as they respond to the general tenor of sentiments that have been previously expressed regarding a particular topic or take issue with a specific statement previously posted by a particular author. In this sense, Dehai is a community constituted in part through a shared discursive history (a history that is, moreover, archived and accessible to members). This discursive history to which posters can refer becomes part of the collective memory of Dehai readers that can be invoked in meaningful ways. Dehai is, thus, not only interactive, in that readers can also be writers, but also self-reflexive, in that postings reflect on other postings and on the larger context of Dehai postings. The messages themselves construct a context in which the continued communications on Dehai take place, by weaving elements of previous postings into current postings.

This discursive history even gives rise to nostalgia, as indicated in the following posting from Monday May 12, 1997, which laments "the trend dehai is going. Bizey-QeleAlem [frankly], it's regressing. I had no choice but to revisit the old archive and here is what I thought deserved a second chance of reading." The poster has selected a poem, by a woman he says is a student at Stanford University, that includes the lines

Look at me. . .

Stare into my eyes. . .

See my anger and misery. . .

A second class citizen in my own country. . .

Invisible in higher industry and political society. . .

Look at me. . .

I am standing, demanding, and screaming. . .

Do not fear my power, strength or militancy. . .

I am an Eritrean woman with independent dreams...

That is the new me...[10]

This poem is interesting in its own right for the way it reflects the multiple positioning of self that runs through many Dehai postings. The author is an Eritrean student at Stanford, but within the poem, she expresses herself as if she were located within Eritrea, ''a second class citizen in my own country.'' I return to this theme in the next section.

A message posted on October 24, 1997, opens with a transliterated Tigrinya greeting, ''Selamat Eritrawian B'habera kemey a'Lo Sdetawi Nabra!'' which translates roughly as, ''Hello, Eritreans together, How is the diasporic life?'' It then states, ''I would like to greet everybody politely and sincerely. I am sielent reader and observer of Dehai. I appreciate Dehai Administrators and all fellow Eritreans who contributed a positive, constractive, critical and somehow objective Ideas to the nation building of Eritrea.'' The message then goes on to praise by name some of Dehai's main posters and to mildly critique some of them, as well, stressing overall the need for unity in nation-building despite diversity. The message ends with, ''Dehai is not a medium of false rumours and cheap propagandas. It is a constructive, communicative, progressive, critical and a SCHOOL to wide the Mind to learn new things which improve our knowlage in order to contribute to NATION BUILDING.''

Likening Dehai to a school might suggest the transmission of received knowledge, but the writer's adjectives, *constructive, communicative, progressive*, and *critical*, make clear that Dehai is a site at which received knowledge is questioned and alternative knowledges are produced. Its educational component might also be understood as the opportunity it offers for Eritreans to practice a kind of participatory citizenship that has eluded them within Eritrea as well as in the lands where they have made their new homes.

A (three-page, single-spaced) posting from January 27, 1998, explicitly deals with silence versus speaking out on Dehai (''voice'') and with the significance of www.dehai.org. The writer starts by explaining that his most recent posting had prompted private e-mail discussions but that, now, he was bringing the conversation back to Dehai. He suggests that quiet readers of Dehai (those who do not write) may be quiet for distinct reasons: ''I question whether I am qualified enough, whether I have contributed enough, to have the privilege of speaking out. . . . I suspect there are also many people like me in dehai and in the general public. . . . We are silent because of too much 'frHi' [fear] lest we seem to disrespect the 'Hdri' [legacy] of our martyrs by our dfret [audacity] to criticize.''[11] The message then goes on to say that silence is not what the martyrs

fought for, and, in a paragraph written in capital letters and sprinkled with exclamation points, the writer asserts, ''OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS BACK HOME ARE WAITING TO HEAR OUR DEHAI!'' (a pun, as ''to hear someone's Dehai'' is an expression meaning to hear from someone). The poster continues, stating that just when he feels trapped in silence, he hears voices in the distance, and, as they get nearer, he hears

> their songs, their cries, their hopes. They are voices like mine. They are voices in dehai. . . . In our excitement at having found each other, we raise a lot of noise, we shout at each other. . . . The noise gets so loud that our declaration of love [for Ertirea] sounds too possessive, too exclusive, and we start to argue, to justify, to testify, to rectify, to quantify, and before we know it we are hurling insults at each other.

The author moves to a positive note toward the end of the posting, saying to the unnamed Dehaiers who had written private e-mails to him, ''Your taking the time to let me know your true feelings and appreciation means a lot to me—actually it's the high point of being a dehaier.'' Dehai, then, is much more than a surrogate Eritrea, an Eritrea Online. Dehai serves as a form of community in its own right, to which, in some contexts, the actual Eritrea is auxiliary, and not the other way around. In an illustration of this, one of Dehai's founders, who had resettled in Eritrea, used to return to the United States to attend Dehai retreats.

The experience of diaspora, like the virtual world of cyberspace, foregrounds the issue of what counts as real life. Clearly, the simple binary opposition of real versus virtual is misleading. Tessa Adams captures something of the problem when she writes, ''I see contemporary registers of identity as now paradoxically contrasted between that which is legitimately virtual: computer screen life becoming lived experience, and that which is traditionally lived experience increasingly becoming provisional, as if virtual'' (2000:47). The ruptures, connections, and intersections of different social worlds are central to postmodern existence, as is the simultaneity of an individual's multiple locations in conceptual and material worlds (Boys 2000; Harvey 1989). For Eritreans in diaspora who connect to Dehai, these multiple locations might be conceptualized as three intersecting planes of experience: real life (back home in Eritrea), diasporic life (in a foreign land), and virtual life (on Dehai). But I can best conceptualize the lifeworlds of Eritreans in diaspora as a ''kaleidoscopic existence.'' The metaphor of the kaleidoscope, which holds disparate fragments (that are incommensurable and cannot be resolved or dissolved even into a hybrid) simultaneously in the same frame of reference and makes out of them a whole or a pattern, seems to speak to the cultural world of the diasporic subject, who must construct meaning and

coherence through sheer imaginative agency. On Dehai, Eritreans in diaspora use cyberspace as a space in which meanings can be projected, interpreted, reinterpreted, shared, and understood by others, so that the meaning of Eritreanness globally is constructed through collective efforts and the experience of community is reinvented under new conditions.

Conflict

Identities are constructed not simply out of sameness or consensus, however, but through conflict. As Madhavi Mallapragada writes in her study of cyberspace and the Indian diaspora, culture "is the site of constant struggle" (2000:184). Although Dehai fosters community by constructing a cyberspatial public sphere in which Eritreans can gather, it does so, paradoxically, by bringing Eritreans together in an arena of conflict. Kadende-Kaiser notes that "Burundinet brings together many different subgroupings with competing assumptions and beliefs about the crisis in Burundi. This does not mean that these groups do not have anything in common or do not have any shared perspectives" (2000:128). She draws attention to the ways that communication in such fora is a creative process in which meanings are constructed and contested through successive postings, so that "as messages are reflected upon or commented on, different versions of a particular story or set of facts emerge" (Kadende-Kaiser 2000:142). On Dehai, information is not merely circulated or transmitted, it is (inter)actively constructed through Ertireans' collective engagement in discussion. In a fundamental sense, Dehai thrives on debate, and debate thrives on Dehai. (This is not to say, however, that all sides are equally represented or even represented at all.) Nonetheless, community on Dehai seems to be constituted more through conflict than through consensus.

The overriding uniting factor across Dehai is an identity as Eritrean and an attachment to Eritrea, yet the understandings of what being an Eritrean means and the visions of Eritrea's past, present, and future often differ. The very fact that these questions remain unresolved (because Eritrea's future continues to unfold in surprising ways and because, as a new state, Eritrea's institutional forms and even its territorial borders are not clearly defined) and that no definitive answers can be agreed on keeps drawing people to Dehai. Dehai is a public sphere in which Eritrean identity can be enacted, constructed, and performed. Yet what has made Dehai so compelling to Eritreans in diaspora are the unresolved questions of Eritrean identity, citizenship, and nationhood.

Some of the diaspora's passion for Eritrean politics arises out of the unfinished project of nation-building even after Eritrean independence and the insecurity of Eritrea's existence as a nation, given "the potential for rival forms of political legitimacy competing violently for dominance" in

the Horn of Africa (Lyons 1996:89). This potential was most clearly realized in the 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia but did not end with the end of that war. Threats to Eritrea's unity and survival, moreover, are perceived to lie both externally in Eritrea's regional neighbors and internally in the division between Christians and Muslims that has long been a source of political tensions. Furthermore, as one observer has commented, "The Eritrean boundaries of identity and borders of territory are still in the making, and what they will eventually embrace and contain remains to be seen" (Tronvoll 1999:1037).

Fundamentally, Dehai is organized around the existential question, what does it mean to be Eritrean? This question resonates at every level, from the meaning of individual identity to the nature of community and to the pitfalls and potentials of Eritrea as a nation. The subtext of the question is the issue of power and who has the right to define Eritrea and its people. Dehai, therefore, serves not simply as an outlet for the expression of identity and culture, or even simply as a vehicle for nationalism and nationalist activities, but, rather, as a public sphere in which identity, community, and citizenship are constructed collectively through processes of contestation and debate.

Displacement and cyberspatiality

If, as Anderson has suggested, nations are imagined communities, then one should not see the imaginings of diasporic Eritreans simply as a feature of diaspora, reflecting the nostalgia of people far from home. One should understand them as part of the construction of Eritrean nationhood. The homeland may have created the diaspora, but the diaspora is also "something that creates homeland" (Axel 2002:426). Eritreans in diaspora and other diasporas have been significant participants in nationalist projects. Certainly, Eritreans in diaspora, as they express themselves on Dehai, locate themselves within the broader context of Eritrean nationhood, rather than outside of it. This could seem paradoxical or self-deluding because Dehai was created by and for diasporic Eritreans and because, as already noted, ordinary Eritreans within Eritrea did not even have access to the Internet until 2000. But Dehai has had an impact on policy and politics in Eritrea.

Through their discussions on Dehai, Eritreans in diaspora have not only been able to keep in touch with one another and keep up to date on Eritrean affairs but they have also created a transnational Eritrean public sphere that extends beyond cyberspace. The relation of this diasporic, virtual public sphere to the public sphere on the ground and to public discourse more generally within Eritrea is ambiguous, complex, and evolving. Rumors and suspicions are expressed by Eritreans in diaspora about the use of pseudonyms in Internet messages to conceal

identity. Some wonder what clandestine role the government of Eritrea plays in Internet political discussions.[12] One rumor had it that, under assumed names, President Isaias Afewerki himself and his critics within the Eritrean government were using the Internet to debate freely with one another. The truth of such rumors may never be known. But what they indicate is that Eritreans understand their on-line activities as politically significant and that Eritreans recognize both the oppressive and the subversive potentials of a transnational, cyberspatial public sphere whose participants cannot easily be located or identified unless they so choose.

One observer of Eritrea has pointed out that, during the development of Eritrea's constitution, which entailed a three-year process of public education and debate within Eritrea and the diaspora, "since some members of the constitutional commission actively present[ed] their views on Dehai, while others silently 'lurk[ed]', the virtual debate and the real one overlap[ped]" (Rude 1996:19). John Rude writes that "the 'citizens' of Dehai face[d] the drafting of their nation's constitution with the utmost gravity" (1996:19). Writing before the outbreak of the 1998–2000 war, Rude identified the three main foci of Dehai debates as the role of religion in Eritrean national life, women's rights, and the significance to be accorded to customary laws and traditions in the construction of the nation. My own review of the major themes being discussed on Dehai in May 1997, exactly one year before the outbreak of war, indicates that the primary focus of debates was the policy on national service in Eritrea called SAWA, which requires all young adults to spend a year away from home receiving military training and performing service to the nation—such as reforestation, teaching in local schools, and building roads. One of the most hotly debated issues regarding national service was whether or not Muslim women should be exempted for religious reasons. This single issue, thus, served as a means for debating the nature of Eritrean citizenship, women's rights, and the role of religion in national life.

Through Dehai (as well as through other means), Eritreans in diaspora see themselves not simply as observers or commentators on Eritrean national life but as active participants. The borderlessness of the cyberspatial public sphere, the anonymity of readers and their unknown locations, and the possible pseudonymity of writers and their sometimes undisclosed locations all contribute to a sense of access to Eritrea itself. As the frequent poster to Dehai whom I call Yakob explained,

> The government never directly addresses it [political criticism on Dehai], but it has an impact on Eritrea. Sometimes after you critique you see the policy change. People feel that they can influence the government. I hoped that a bigger picture would emerge,

like a conference or a think tank before policy could be made without your notice on a whim. Eritreans would be more than glad to volunteer their time as a sounding board.

Yakob, thus, sees Dehai as extending the limits of democracy in Eritrea, and he wishes that the government would formalize the informal influence of Dehai through creating some institutional role for the kinds of critique and debate that take place through Dehai.

Recall the Dehai posting about cutting and pasting Eritrea with which I began this article and the question it raised about the significance of the virtual. Eritreans' answer to that question is that their words on-line do have an effect on the world. Dehaiers sense that postings are read by those in power and are taken seriously. This connection to policy making and to the world beyond cyberspace adds deeper significance to participation in Dehai. The deterritorialized location of cyberspace connects members of the diaspora to Eritrea in a way that elides their displacement (without actually resolving it). Even Dehai's subtitle, Eritrea Online, can be understood in two senses. One sense is that of a surrogate, virtual version of Eritrea that exists on-line, and the other sense is that of accessing Eritrea itself through going on-line.

The link between the virtual diasporic public sphere and life on the ground in Eritrea was brought to the fore dramatically when the war broke out with Ethiopia in May 1998. Immediately, Dehai was largely given over to various war-related communications. The next section focuses on Dehai's wartime content and the diaspora's engagement in the war effort, revealing the instrumental dimension of the cyberspatial public sphere as a means for mobilizing and coordinating actions and resources across vast distances to effect real-world outcomes.

The war on the web

The outbreak of war with Ethiopia in spring 1998 appeared to threaten the very survival of Eritrea as a nation and was regarded by Eritreans in diaspora as a crisis that motivated them to go beyond discussion and take action. Dehai took on new importance as a source of breaking war news and as a vehicle for various sorts of organizing around Eritrea's war effort. Although community had been constructed on Dehai through conflict and debate, the violence directed at Eritrea brought Dehaiers together for the common purpose of ensuring the nation's survival.

The war with Ethiopia moved Eritreans in diaspora to mobilize resources, to wage public-relations campaigns, and to keep abreast of unfolding events in Eritrea. Dehai was central to all of these efforts. Ethiopia and Eritrea both waged public-relations campaigns in the international media, which served as a second battlefront as each

country accused the other of being the aggressor and of lying to the media about victories and losses. One of the noteworthy aspects of Dehai postings during the war was the vehemence and hatred expressed by Dehaiers toward Ethiopia and the passion with which posters supported Eritrea's war effort in their outpourings of emotion, their calls to action, and their mobilization of financial resources.

Ghidewon observed that from 1998 to 2000 most of Dehai's bandwidth was taken up by war-related postings. He stated that ''our main aim was to saturate the web with Eritrean information because the lie machine in Addis was operating nonstop, so we thought it was our national duty.'' Ghidewon's clear positioning of himself and other Eritreans in diaspora as part of the Eritrean nation with obligations of national duty is noteworthy. Dehai's home page was redesigned to give prominence to the border conflict and included a link entitled ''Ethiopian lies'' that focused on Ethiopia's representations in the media.

Postings on Dehai both chronicled and promoted the outpouring of nationalist sentiment and money from Eritreans around the globe. One posting reported that in June 1998, for example, Eritreans met in Copenhagen and pledged $1,000 per household. A June 10 posting from Eritreans in Norway stated that they had agreed that ''every working Eritrean over 18 should contribute 1000.00 US$,'' adding that, ''Of course they where people who said they will give more.'' A June 12, 1998, posting detailed the various activities at a gathering of Eritreans at their community center in Sommerville, Massachusetts, to celebrate ''Martyr's Day,'' reporting that ''our children, through their own initiatives, by holding bake sales and lottery on gifts (courtesy to Eritrean business establishments), were able to raise $1041.00 for the Eritrean National Martyrs Park.'' The posting noted also that pledges for the defense of Eritrea were still being solicited. Showing a knowledge of U.S. democracy, the Sommerville gathering also collected the names of all Eritreans who had been arrested in Ethiopia and drafted some 120 letters to be faxed to U.S. senators from Massachusetts and Rhode Island on behalf of relatives of the detainees.

In Riyadh, Eritreans pledged one month's salary each; in Edmonton, Canada, they donated $26,000 on the spot at a single meeting. Dehai postings reported the results of fund-raising efforts and urged others to follow suit. Writers signed off with exhortations to ''remember our martyrs'' and exclamations of ''Victory to the Eritrean People'' and the more chilling ''Death to the Ethiopian Oppressors!'' In Eritrea, the government set up a national defense bank account to receive funds. The information and account number were posted on Dehai, and money flowed to Eritrea for the war effort. The governor of the Bank of Eritrea, Tekie Beyene, described the contributions from the diaspora as ''beyond anybody's imagination'' (Voice of America 1998). By June 25, 1998, only one month after the start of the war, a Dehai posting proclaimed, ''To all eritrean heroes abroad:-read this and rejoice! This remittance is a torrential blow to the ultra-nationalists of ethiopia.''

Even as the war brought Dehaiers together in their focus on Eritrea's survival as a nation, there was still room to critique the government's actions and Dehai itself. Thus, the overblown patriotism of some posters was parodied in an October 26, 1998, message whose subject heading read ''Classified Ad: Cyberspace Border Patrol Needed.'' The message went on to list the qualifications sought, including ''1. Support anything the prevailing government of Eritrea does at all times'' and ''2. Never miss Awet Nhaffash [victory to the masses—an EPLF slogan] along your signature line when you communicate in writing.''

In June 2000, Eritreans organized a demonstration in front of UN headquarters in New York to protest what they saw as the failure of the United Nations to respond to Ethiopia's attack on Eritrea. The call to participate was posted on Dehai (on June 14). Clearly, telephone, fax, and word of mouth also spread the call to demonstrate, but the speed and reach of Dehai played a role in publicizing the event.

The continual breaking news of the war kept readers constantly coming back to Dehai for further information and analysis. On Dehai, the diaspora's felt need to come to Eritrea's aid could be expressed and, more importantly, acted on collectively through publicizing fund-raising efforts and coordinating activities such as the demonstration at the United Nations. The vehemence with which Dehaiers supported the war in words and deeds expressed the economic might of those in the diaspora and the intensity of their engagement with their homeland. The violent threat to Eritrea's survival shifted the emphasis of Dehai away from its role as a space of social imaginary regarding Eritrea and solidified its instrumentality as a tool to affect the real world. Here the coupling of new digital communications and a transnational population combined to help a small, poor nation wage war on the ground.

Conclusion

Despite the grandiose promises sometimes made about the Internet as a democratic tool offering citizens access to information and participation in deliberation and decision making, the results of mainstream Western experiments with using websites as a public sphere have been mixed at best (Harvey and Porter 2000). As Stephen Lax notes, such sites generally stimulate ''a flurry of electronic activity for a while before falling out of favour with participants'' (2000:165). And, even those hailed as successes, such as Amsterdam's ''digital city,'' have been short-lived (Castells 2001). While Eritreans in diaspora were pouring their passions into Dehai throughout the 1990s, Americans were apparently using the web for the relatively solitary apolitical

pastimes of shopping, gambling, and viewing pornography. In recent years, mainstream political campaigns in the United States as well as more broad-based groups such as MoveOn.org have used the Internet effectively for political purposes, but they have tended to use cyberspace in ways analogous to broadcasting, to send their messages out to the masses rather than as a public sphere that fosters debate. Amnesty International has embraced digital activism around human rights in ways that make use of the interactive possibilities of the Internet, but "click here to stamp out torture" seems to reduce civic engagement to an absurdity (McLagan 2003).

As scholars think about cyberspace and the politics of the public sphere, it is not simply cyberspace that needs to be theorized in new ways but the public sphere. A dynamic public sphere is not simply created through open access to information or even participation in deliberation. We mistake the significance of the Internet when we equate it with access to "information," and we make a similar mistake when we evaluate the public sphere in terms of openness of access, as if information and communication were neutral goods that exist already and simply increasing their availability is a satisfactory goal in itself. This ignores the way knowledge and information are constructed and draw their meaning from context, and it ignores the questions of the purposes and consequences of communication and of who is communicating what to whom. Such assumptions depoliticize not only knowledge and information but also the conceptualization of what the Internet and the public sphere can offer. As Eickelman notes, "The 'migration' of messages, media, writers, and styles of discourse is part of an increasing fragmentation of authority" (2003:41). Circulation can be disruptive.

What is powerful about the access opened up by cyberspace and by public spheres is the ways they allow diverse actors to call into question the terms of knowledge production, relations of authority, and the politics of representation and the ways they give rise to alternative knowledges and counterpublics. This opening up is inherently political and involves conflict. Such an understanding helps explain why some experiments to create public space in cyberspace have failed, because a public sphere (and by extension citizenship and democracy) cannot be reduced to access to information or, in common neoliberal parlance, "transparency." Dehai was compelling in part because something was at stake (the shape and future of Eritrean society) and because Dehaiers and their larger public believed that the political views expressed on Dehai could affect the real world. As Julia Paley (2004) has suggested along related lines, democracy requires more than a chance for the public to participate in discussion and deliberation; the opinions formed in the public sphere must be linked to government decision making.

Whereas some scholars have focused on the pragmatic uses of the Internet for participatory democracy, other scholars have seen on-line activities and relationships as significant because they offer alternative realities (see Balsamo's [2000] critique). Both of these dimensions of cyberspace are elements of Dehai. Dehai has made possible new forms of civic engagement and political discussion. In fact, Eritreans in diaspora have created in cyberspace a public sphere of citizenship and belonging more successful in achieving democratic form than any within Eritrea. At the same time, Dehai has connected Eritreans in diaspora to a world focused on Eritrea and to a community that is clearly distinct from that of their daily lives, within neighborhoods, workplaces, and mediascapes that reflect little or no Eritrean presence or public expression.

Dehai, like cyberspace (and like many objects of study—globalization, nationalism, and citizenship, to name a few) is not one thing; it is many things, and in seeking to understand it one has to avoid simple answers. Since 1992, Dehai has served as an arena of experimentation, a site for the production of alternative knowledges and for the creation of cultural products—poems and essays—and for political innovation at the margins. In this article, I have struggled to explain Dehai definitively, but perhaps it is precisely the impossibility of doing so that captures the true power and dynamics of Dehai. The expansion and contraction of what Dehai and what Eritrea include at any given time, the ambiguity of borders between the nation and the diaspora and between the virtual and the real, the impossibility of knowing the extent to which the virtual public sphere influences politics within Eritrea, the uncertain identities and locations of posters, and the unknown number of silent readers make Dehai an open and ambiguous space in which political experimentation can take place.

Eritreans in diaspora may be marginalized in the locations where they live and in relation to their original homeland, but the margin can also be a creative space. Eritreans on Dehai are writing in the margins and experimenting with political freedoms and a new kind of transnational political community in ways that might suggest new forms of citizenship, democracy, and the public sphere emerging out of the new technologies and the heightened mobility of the 21st century. Dehai is one expression of the struggles of ordinary people to participate in national debates, narrate history, define legitimacy, and articulate a moral order. It sheds light on the emergence of counterpublics and spaces of dissent in which unofficial views are voiced and alternative knowledges are produced. These spaces of creativity at the margins are perhaps all the more important today, given the pervasive reach of global capital, media conglomerates, and regulatory authorities of various kinds.

In this regard, contrasting Dehai with Anderson's (1983) attention to the role of the newspaper in constructing

nations as imagined communities is instructive. The newspaper is centrally controlled and disseminated, and it largely lacks interactive possibilities, whereas Eritreans on the Internet are not simply imagining a national community but are constructing it collectively through their exchanges, giving rise to new publics and counterpublics and reimagining citizenship and community. But the difference is not simply that, in contrast to mass media, the decentralized, networked medium of the Internet allows diverse and dispersed individuals to express and exchange views (Armbrust 2000; Becker and Wehner 2001). What is also important are the ways that diasporas elide the local and the global as they operate in and across social fields and political boundaries, inventing new forms of community and political practices and, in their own way, changing the world. These processes, exemplified in Eritrean cyberspatial practices, go to the heart of the conditions of postmodernity, revealing how new spatialities and temporalities have transformed not just the conditions of capitalist production but those of knowledge production and the constitution of publics and public spheres, communities, and nations.

Notes

1. I plan to analyze these developments in a subsequent project.

2. This is not to say that whether an Eritrean in diaspora lives in the United States, Germany, Canada, or the Middle East makes no difference. Differences in social welfare systems, immigration laws and attitudes, understandings of ''race'' and religion, and other factors certainly affect daily life and the experience and intensity of displacement. Nonetheless, the notion of ''diaspora'' suggests an individual identity or a social world that is distinct from location and even from nationality as defined by legal citizenship, for that matter.

3. Later rival websites are generally modeled on Dehai, are offshoots of Dehai, or are reactions against Dehai. Since the late 1990s, Eritreans have developed several popular websites, such as www.asmarino.com, www.meskerem.com, www.hafash.com, and www.awate.com, among others. The significance of cyberspace for diasporic Eritreans has been recognized by the Eritrean government and the PFDJ, which established its own website, www.shaebia.com, in 2000 both as a means of disseminating information to the diaspora and as a mechanism of spin control to compete with the views expressed on the nongovernment sites.

4. The second epoch of the Eritrean Internet is defined by the fluorescence of a diversity of Eritrean websites at the turn of the millennium and the resulting decentralization and multisited character of Eritrean web life. Several successful competitors to Dehai were launched, most notably www.asmarino.com, which appears to have overtaken Dehai in popularity. This second epoch is also characterized by the ability of Eritreans within Eritrea to go on-line at Internet cafes. The content of Eritrean cyberspace, however, remains generated largely by the diaspora.

5. In pursuing research on Eritrean cyberspace, I faced numerous challenges as an ethnographer. Little data or research is available on the Eritrean diaspora, and decades of nationalist mobilization and war have thoroughly politicized knowledge about Eritrea. Moreover, as objects of study, the Internet and diasporas raise complex methodological issues. They can, for example, simultaneously be vast and elusive so that what one can examine is always only partial and is part of a whole that is so dispersed and amorphous as to be almost nonexistent as an entirety. One must bring the object of study into view through a sum of its parts and through seeking to understand the connections among them.

6. At that time, Dehai was hosted on the server of Stanford University at the following address: http://diglib.stanford.edu/dehai.

7. Also, because Tigrinya is written in a distinct script (shared with Amharic) that was not then available on-line, postings would have involved transliteration into the Roman alphabet. *Dehai* itself is a transliteration, and many postings include transliterated words or phrases.

8. To retain the character of Dehai communications, unconventional spelling and grammar have been reproduced without editing.

9. *Shaebia*, which literally means ''of the masses'' or ''people's,'' is the Arabic shorthand term for the EPLF. Since independence, *shaebia* has been used by Eritreans and the PFDJ itself to refer to the PFDJ; *shaebia* is, therefore, synonymous with *government* in this context.

10. The ellipsis points in this poem do not denote deletions; they are the poet's insertions.

11. *Martyr* is the term used by the EPLF to refer to Eritrean fighters who died in the struggle for independence.

12. See Fandy 1999 for a discussion of these issues in relation to Saudi cyberspace.

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