Mobilising narratives in a transnational space

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New media as a political site for negotiating Malian-diasporic identifications.

Background & research question

The current rise in peoples' mobilities has re-emphasised the socio-political importance of diasporas – as people who have left their place of birth and sustain connections with those staying behind as well as with those who have left to other locations. Diasporic social connections increasingly happen through new media and encourage diverse mobilities of narratives, images, ideas etc.

As Western public and scientific debates often deny these mobilities to African societies, I explore those issues with a focus on Malian-diasporic belongings on the news portal Maliweb and ask:

Which opportunities for political mobilisation emerge from negotiating Malian-diasporic identifications in the transnational space of new media?

Theoretical approaches

Mobilisation:
mediated way in which subjects perform processes of being and becoming mobile within certain structural conditions.

Political mobilisation:
negotiations of these processes that challenge unequal power relations.

Analytical framework:
Yuval-Davis' levels of belonging:

- Intersectional approach to social locations of diasporic agents;
- Their identifications and emotional attachments to groups;
- Ethical and political value systems they use to assess identifications and social locations.

Data collection

With an Online Ethnography approach (see e.g. Kozinets, Markham), I will generate three types of data:

Archived data:
Discursive and non-discursive practices of using Maliweb, profile information

Elicited data:
interviews with users and Maliweb operators, interactive research website

Reflexive data:
research diary on own Maliweb use

Figure: Dimensions of mobility in the belongings of Maliweb-users

1–4 Mobility, connectivity and public space in Mali
5 Dimensions of mobility in the belongings of Maliweb-users

Analysis and interpretation

I will analyse the data with the help of the Discourse-Historical-Approach (Reisigl & Wodak), considering:

- Different context levels
- Contents and topics addressed
- Discursive strategies
- Linguistic means and realisations

Initial observations

First observations of activities on Maliweb show that the levels of belonging constructed among Maliweb-users are interrelated with different dimensions of mobility.

Social location
Maliweb users (re-)produce their social locations in the social media environment. On their Facebook profiles, for instance, they indicate their place of origin, educational status, profession and place of residence. The different places of these give first insights on the motility of the different users as one intersectional aspect. Different levels and styles of (inter-)actions suggest hierarchies in the social locations of the Maliweb community itself.

Identifications
Maliweb users perform their identifications and emotional attachments to different groups: They post profile pictures with colours of the Malian flag or other references such as movie characters. User names display an attachment to Malian or Pan-African affairs (e.g. "the first Malian" or "Paul Kagame"). With their reading, commenting, sharing and travelling between different platforms, Maliweb users moreover engage in certain topics and identify with groups such as Malian citizens, migrants or believers.
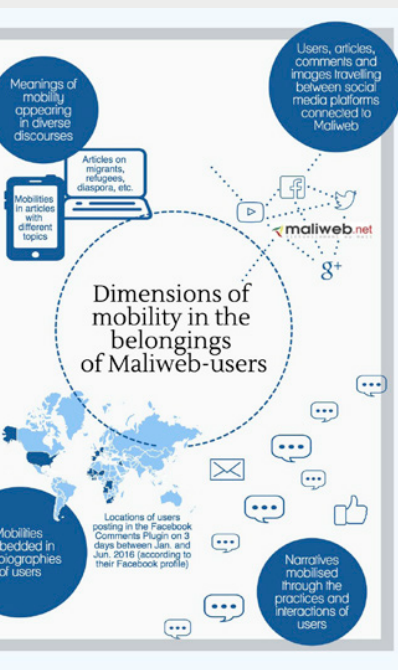
Ethical and political value systems
In their comments, Maliweb users refer to ethical an political values as, for instance, good governance, national unity, self-responsibility – and mobility as a natural human condition. They also critique power inequalities based on neoliberal, post-colonial and patriarchal structures.

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