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Beyond the Digital Diaspora:
From YouTube Networking to the Hmong Music Festival

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Abstract

This article examines attempts by American Hmong to turn the thriving Hmong digital diaspora into a sustainable offline musical community. The Hmong, an ethnic group of five million people spread across five continents, have embraced YouTube as a primary source for Hmong music recordings. Online research on Hmong users with the aid of YouTube Analytics is informed by extensive periods of fieldwork with the Hmong in Vietnam and shorter encounters with Hmong in the US since 2007. The Hmong Music Festival, held in Fresno, California in 2012 and 2013, is used as a case study of attempts by American Hmong to build on the increasingly prominent digital diaspora to form an offline community of shared musical and cultural practices associated with their ethnicity. The cancellation of the festival in 2014 resulted in an online backlash that has challenged the continued existence of this annual event. The research shows that despite the vibrancy of online Hmong musical networks and the potential for developing offline connections, the Hmong digital diaspora are reaching the state of an enhanced imagined community in the cyber world, which may not be able to mobilize into a sustainable offline movement due to irreconcilable local and translocal differences.

Keywords: data mining; digital diaspora; Hmong; minority; YouTube

On 16 May 2014, Tou Lee Chang, president of the events management team AZN LIVE, who are responsible for organizing the Hmong Music Festival (HMF), issued the following press release:

Today, we are announcing that due to a complication with the United States
immigration issue in Thailand, our Headliner, Laib Laus, will no longer be able to headline for the Hmong Music Festival (HMF) scheduled for May 24, 2014. We, like you, expect the greatest possible experience from the Hmong Music Festival for everyone. We have worked extremely hard to put together HMF for this year, but with the sudden change and without adequate time to get a headliner replacement there is a significant impact on the overall HMF experience. Our desires to provide the best possible experience and outcome for our fans, artists, and sponsors have led us to the decision to postpone HMF to May 23, 2015.

Despite their apologies and the offer of ticket refunds, many were disgruntled. Fans from out of state who had planned to attend the event were unable to get refunds on travel expenses, other artists who had been booked to perform were forced to wait another year for the festival and tradespeople who had already purchased their stock were left without customers to provide a return on their investment. The organizers had taken advantage of digital media to create an online frenzy around the festival. But they were ultimately unsuccessful in their attempt to bring the Hmong people together at a music festival on an annual basis. Their failure to harness the potential of this digital diaspora and (re)create a live ethnic community centred around a major cultural event illustrates the challenge for this and other digital diasporas to develop sociocultural unity offline.

Recent research on Hmong music and transnationalism has highlighted the transformative potential of new media technologies on local communities. Ó Briain (2013) outlined the impact of three new technologies—VCD players, mobile phones with MP3 playback facility, and the internet—on the largely marginalized Vietnamese-Hmong population. The technologies are being used by Hmong youths to access transnational media and in particular Hmong language media produced in China, Laos, Thailand and the US. Falk’s (2013) survey of the recent proliferation of YouTube videos featuring the iconic qeej (Hmong mouth organ) also illustrates how a pan-Hmong identity is being constructed online by contributors to the digital diaspora. In Louisa Schein’s reading of videos made by male American Hmong depicting an eroticized, feminized homeland in Southeast Asia, she suggests that “through processes of erotic subjectification, the incitements of homeland videos might foment desires for actual returns in pursuit of erotic encounters” (2012: 228). Yet, despite the potential for transnational movement suggested by these studies of Hmong online and mediated communications, far fewer instances of direct, face-to-face interactions have occurred.

Using a combination of digital ethnography, data mining and periods of fieldwork with the Hmong in the US (Fresno, California) and northern Vietnam, this research seeks to map Hmong activity online and find evidence
to assess the actual potential for these online communities to develop into a sustainable transnational movement offline. The article begins with an overview of the global Hmong population to contextualize the research. In response to Wendy Hsu’s call for more “creative engagement with digital methods in ethnography” (2014),¹ the principal ways that ethnomusicologists have used YouTube data for research are surveyed, and a new methodology for working with this site tailored to the online trends of minority communities is proposed. Finally, the HMF is used as a case study to illustrate the challenges facing American Hmong who wish to move beyond the world of mediated or “virtual” ethnicity to develop offline connections. Although the social networking potential offered by the internet has created an expectation of increased offline connections, in the case of the Hmong, this article argues that we are merely reaching a state of enhanced imagined communities in the cyber world, which may never mobilize into sustainable offline movements due to irreconcilable local and translocal differences.

The Global Hmong Population

Approximately five million people on the planet, spread across at least five continents, identify their ethnicity as Hmong (Table 1). The Hmong most likely originated in the Yunnan basin in China, and the current Hmong population of China is estimated at approximately three million people. During the nineteenth century, mass migrations southward into French Indochina dispersed the Hmong across the borderlands of the soon-to-be-established nation-states of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, thousands of Hmong were among the boat people who fled Southeast Asia as refugees in fear of persecution. Eventually the majority of these asylum seekers settled in the US states of California and Minnesota, with others scattered over the rest of the US and Canada in addition to parts of South America, mainland Europe and Australia (Culas and Michaud 2004).

¹ I am grateful to Justin Schein for drawing my attention to this article.
Table 1. Countries with notable populations of Hmong

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>3,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>1,068,189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>460,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>260,076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>124,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>2,000–3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Guyana</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite their early origins in a localized setting in East Asia, Hmong migrations since then have consistently followed a pattern of geographic dispersal. Shortly before internet access became commonplace, Hmong around the world were only distantly related through shared cultural traits such as language and music. Contact with Hmong in other districts or provinces, let alone countries, would have been extremely rare. The rapid globalization of communications technologies in the late twentieth century enhanced the potential for Hmong translocal and transnational networking. Although these connections are often via third-party media, the Hmong are now becoming increasingly interconnected with others from their ethnic background throughout the world. The internet has had the most transformative impact on this group since the last major migration from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s by permitted Hmong-centred networking. Multiple power centres and peripheries are emerging within this online ethnic network. Certain websites form central nodes in these networks, and most of these are based in the US. The organizers of the HMF have attempted to mobilize these networks and move from online to offline

communication.

Beyond YouTube Hits and User Comments

As we approach the tenth anniversary of the launch of YouTube, the time for a critical assessment of ethnomusicologists’ and other scholars’ use of this site is overdue. YouTube has become a key resource for musicians, fans and music researchers around the world. Despite our tacit acceptance of YouTube as a medium for sharing music videos and a research tool, no notable attempts to critically analyse ethnomusicologists’ methodological approaches to gathering data from this website have been carried out. This section responds to the dearth of critical engagement by surveying appearances of the word YouTube in the main text and footnotes of the two most regularly published journals in the field of ethnomusicology, *Ethnomusicology* and *Ethnomusicology Forum*. The survey evaluates current methodological approaches to online music research with a view to outlining a new approach to the gathering and use of YouTube data.

Between 2007 and 2014 a total of 33 articles referred to YouTube in these journals, 18 in *Ethnomusicology* and 15 in *Ethnomusicology Forum*. Starting with one mention in 2007, a gradual increase in attention paid to the site can be observed. Figure 1 clearly illustrates that the most prominent years for references to YouTube in these journals were 2012 (6 articles), 2013 (8 articles) and 2014 (8 articles). As these figures suggest, YouTube is becoming more prevalent in ethnomusicological studies. A closer examination of the articles that refer to YouTube reveals a set of consistent patterns in our methodologies concerning the site. By critically evaluating these approaches, we might develop more effective methodologies for using this and other websites, therefore enhancing our use of the internet and contributing to more thorough and conclusive research outcomes.

3. This survey covers primary research articles, call and response pieces and keynote addresses. Other materials that make reference to YouTube but are omitted from this overview include editorials in regular editions of the journals and reviews of other material including review essays. The analysis covers all issues between 2007 and 2014 (i.e. *Ethnomusicology* issues 51/1 to 58/3 and *Ethnomusicology Forum* issues 16/1 to 23/3). There were no references to YouTube in 2006.
These articles can be categorized into four distinct levels of engagement with YouTube. At the most basic level, general references are made to the website as a platform for sharing music videos (Bakan et al. 2008; Ivey 2009; Mera and Morcom 2009; Cottrell 2010a; Cottrell 2010b; In-Young Lee 2012; Solis 2012; Dawe 2013; Keegan-Phipps 2013; Mills and Park 2013; Dave 2014). These articles tend not to speculate about cultural change or question the impact of using YouTube to any notable degree. The second level comprises references to specific videos, channels, musicians or musical styles with limited analysis of any actual footage (Miller 2007; Manuel 2008; Wood 2010; Rammarine 2011; Bates 2012; Ciucci 2012; Seeman 2012; Dawe and Eroğlu 2013; Phillips 2013; Risk 2013; Brown 2014; Harris 2014; Schultz 2014; Tatro 2014; Wiens 2014). Here, YouTube videos are used as free and widely accessible pieces of evidence to illustrate points about image, to demonstrate the popularity of a musician via the number of

4. These figures are not a perfect representation of ethnomusicologists’ increased engagement with YouTube because Ethnomusiconeology Forum shifted from two to three issues per calendar year in 2011. However, even if the figures are rebalanced to take the slight increase in the number of articles into account, the graph would still show an almost consistent increase with the exception of 2011.

5. In these articles the website is often identified along with other relatively new media technologies as a medium that is contributing to changes in the cultural landscape of our fieldwork sites. YouTube is referred to by interviewees only and not discussed further by Cottrell (2010b) and Mills and Park (2013).
view counts they have amassed or to highlight an idiosyncratic performance style or presentation format (e.g. Risk’s [2013] discussion of the “chop” technique in North Atlantic fiddling traditions). This is taken a step further at the third level with additional references to the comments section as indicative of widely held beliefs or to highlight controversies concerning a video, a musical style or a musician (Tucker 2009; Stobart 2010; Alajaji 2013).

The fourth level of analysis demonstrates the most comprehensive engagement with YouTube as a data source in articles published in these journals. Articles at this level explore the impact of YouTube videos on processes of musical creativity and the lives of the communities in question (Tan 2009; Harris 2012; Seeger 2013; Jung 2014). YouTube is identified as a key medium for musical transmission in the twenty-first century. These scholars devote extensive space to connecting their video analyses with the daily lives of their interlocutors via interview data and extensive analysis of the comments on particular videos. Each article takes a different approach as demanded by the research contexts and arguments. For instance, Harris (2012) examines YouTube videos and associated comments in her discussion of the Uygher transnational community. In response to interethnic violence in China, the YouTube comments’ section on these videos become a site for the renegotiation of Uygher identity politics. Unusually for this deeper level of analysis, Seeger (2013) omits a discussion of user comments. In an informed armchair approach to fieldwork, YouTube provides a quick, easy and cost-effective means of access to Seeger’s remote field site in the Amazonian basin. At this level, scholars employ the full range of data available to typical YouTube users.

This survey is not intended as a criticism of the aforementioned articles at any of the four levels, or to encourage scholars to consistently aim for fourth-level uses of the website as a data source. Rather, the description of these levels has exposed the range and limitations of current ethnomusicological uses of YouTube data in two of the most regularly published journals in the field. By outlining these varied approaches, possibilities for moving beyond the fourth level of engagement can be achieved.

The Bigger Picture

This section uses data drawn from YouTube Analytics on one video to illustrate the potential for enhancing ethnomusicological research with this

site. Data mining, an analytic process designed to explore web-based data
using sets of variables, can be used to reveal hidden information about
websites including user patterns and audience demographics. Data mining on
YouTube can be easily achieved using embedded functions such as YouTube
Analytics, other analytics-based software or customized web crawlers. Data
mining with these programmes offers the potential for a fifth level of
genagement with YouTube and other websites through the production of
extensive quantitative data on the sites. The resulting information can be
extracted into comma-separated values (CSV) files, which can then be
reconstructed in an Excel document to create graphic illustrations of the
information. One limitation of this feature on YouTube is that the data can
only be drawn by the channel owner—data from HMF videos were not
available for this reason. This research takes another transnationally circulated
Hmong recording as the basis of the analysis, “Kwv Txhiaj by Maiv Thoj
Vaj—Hue Ku, Thailand”. This video has been available online for longer
than any of the HMF videos, and consequently more data are accessible on
user trends. The analysis of this data is used to gain a more accurate
perspective on Hmong users of the internet, and to illustrate the challenge
facing the organizers of the HMF in their attempts to (re)unite the global
Hmong population.

This video was recorded by Justin Schell and posted to his personal
YouTube channel on 11 January 2012. A Christian song in the kwv txhiaj
style (see Ó Briain 2012), this recording was made by Schell while on a
fieldtrip to Thailand to gather data for his PhD dissertation (2013) and record
footage for his documentary film, We Rock Long Distance (forthcoming).
Schell created the CSV files from the video between May
and June 2014. By this stage, the video had been viewed almost 20,000 times
in a total of 52 countries. All 18 comments on the video were posted within a
year of the video being circulated on social media, prior to the creation of the
CSV files. However, excessive attention to these comments would provide a
misrepresentation of the views of the audience due to their limited number.
Instead, the information from the CSV files is reconstructed here into pie

7. The Digital Humanities centres of most reputable universities can advise on these
and other suitable data mining software. Data mining technologies raise new ethical issues
concerning the exploitation of users’ private online data. One issue is that the need to
consider concealing user identities is exacerbated. In certain cases, the research should not
be carried out at all. With YouTube Analytics, however, individual users’ identities are not
disclosed, and the potential for impacting the Hmong through the use of this data is
negligible.

charts to provide an illustration of the subdivision of users by country and their viewing trends. Only the top ten countries are included for the purposes of this exercise.

Hmong is a minority language that is taught at few schools outside of Hmong-populated areas. Very few non-Hmong or non-Hmong-affiliated people learn this language because most Hmong are also fluent in the national languages of the countries in which they reside. Hypotheses concerning this ethnic group are possible because the video can only be found using Hmong-specific terminology, unless the viewer reaches the video via an embedded link—Figure 4 demonstrates that viewers from embedded links comprise a small minority of the viewers. Consequently, data from videos such as “Kwv Txhiaj by Maiv Thoj Vaj—Hue Ku, Thailand” can be compared with population statistics and combined with qualitative data from ethnographic fieldwork to reach evidence-based conclusions about the global Hmong population.

![Figure 2. Total number of view counts by country](image)

By far the largest number of individual views is located in the US. Schell’s research and production is centred on US-based musicians. In particular, his documentary features the Minnesota-based Hmong rapper, Tou SaiKo Lee, whose followers are mostly based in the US. More generally, however, North America has the highest rate of internet penetration, where 87.7 per cent of the population has regular access to the internet. This contrasts with only 34.7 per...
cent for the Asian continent. Despite the vastly greater Hmong population in Asia, then, the large number of American viewers of Hmong videos on YouTube should be expected.

American Hmong might be surprised to note that the country with the second highest number of views is Vietnam. When referring to their imagined homeland, Hmong in the US often cite Laos, Thailand or China. For obvious historical and political reasons—the emigration of the Hmong from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s was largely due to their opposition to the Communist-led forces of North Vietnam—many second- and third-generation American Hmong are not even aware that Vietnam has the second highest Hmong population in the world. Vietnam is closely followed by Thailand, France, Laos and Australia respectively, all countries with sizeable Hmong populations (see Figure 2). Another curiosity with the data on Figure 2 is the appearance of South Korea and Malaysia, countries that are not commonly associated with the Hmong. This may suggest that more Hmong are travelling to or living in these countries than previously thought.

Figure 3. Average percentage of the entire video viewed by country

The average percentage of the video that users watched in each country provides another piece of information on viewer trends (Figure 3), which leads to another set of hypotheses on the global Hmong population. Users in

China viewed an average of 40 per cent of the video. China has the largest Hmong population of any country, and most there continue to speak the Hmong language on a daily basis. In fact, a far greater proportion of Hmong in Asia speak a dialect of the Hmong language on a daily basis than Hmong in the diaspora. Therefore, longer view durations might be expected in Asian countries because the attention in this video, and in *kwv txhiaj* performances in general, is normally on language use and wordplay. But the low number of Vietnamese viewers, where all Hmong I encountered during over 15 months of fieldwork were fluent in the Hmong language, raise doubts about this hypothesis.

Viewers in Vietnam watched an average of only 13 per cent of the video. One not entirely satisfactory explanation could be the intermittent internet connections in rural areas where most Vietnamese Hmong reside. Viewers might have been forced to refresh the website as the connection timed out. A more plausible explanation concerns religious affiliation and its impact on musical preference. Over half of the Vietnamese Hmong population have been converted to various forms of Christianity over the past three decades, and audio recordings have been cited as a key tool in this proselytization and conversion of this community (Ngô 2009). The Vietnamese Hmong who remain animist are highly critical of Christian-themed Hmong language media, as became evident during my fieldwork on Hmong popular music consumption trends in Lao Cai province (Ó Briain 2013). The title of Schell’s YouTube video does not indicate that the *kwv txhiaj* is on a religious subject. Consequently, animist viewers seeking to watch secular *kwv txhiaj* will likely have been disappointed with the religious content.

The relatively long viewing times in Australia, France and the US is also unexpected considering the low levels of Hmong language proficiency in these Hmong communities. Hmong in these countries could be engaging in a practice of nostalgic viewing whereby the video is representative of life in an imagined homeland for diasporic Hmong viewers (see Schein 2012). Language is less important than the overall presentation, the idyllic rural setting and the feminine, Asian-based Hmong. Alternatively, these viewers might be from Schell’s or Tou SaiKo Lee’s own fanbases. They could be more interested in the perceived origins of their musical icon or the background to the documentary.
By looking at the number and subdivision of embedded view counts (Figure 4), the impact of these fanbases can be approximated. Of all 25 websites where the video was embedded, the combined total of individual views was only 306. The video was embedded in the Facebook page for *We Rock Long Distance* in February 2012, which counted for 67 of the views. Werocklongdistance.com, the official documentary website, had 43 views, and hwrc.org (Hmong World Christian Resource Center) amassed 36 views. 612to651.com is Schell’s personal website which he uses to promote the film, and the remainder are search engines or Hmong-specific sites (tojsiab.com).

The relatively low proportion of views on these embedded sites (just over 1.5 per cent of the total number of YouTube views) suggests that the majority of viewers on YouTube were not drawn to the video via the documentary.

This use of YouTube Analytics to examine user trends concerning just one video has enabled us to gain a more comprehensive picture of the global Hmong population and their online activities—non-Hmong viewers can be largely discounted from the view counts due to the language and specificity of the search terms required to find the video online. The data shows that even though the video was shot in Thailand and is entirely in Hmong, three quarters of viewers are based in the US. As Schein has shown (2012), Hmong in the US are fascinated by portrayals of the Hmong “homeland” in Asia. From an American Hmong perspective, the cultures of Asian Hmong are perceived as being imbued with a greater degree of cultural capital. Their attribution of value to Asia Hmong performers by virtue of their location devalues the
cultural activities of American Hmong. This inequality is reflected in the
programming of and online responses to the 2014 HMF.

From Online to Offline

The HMF was established by Tou Lee Chang and Xeng Xai Xiong in 2012 as
an alternative Hmong festival to the Hmong New Year celebration in Fresno,
California. Both events were held at the Big Fresno Fairground. The New
Year event in 2014 was held over seven days and attracted tens of thousands
of revellers. The festivities opened with a traditional call for ancestral
blessings, and other traditions associated with the Hmong, such as the pov pob
courting ritual and qeej (mouth organ) performances, were featured
prominently. This emphasis on cultural practices historically associated with
the Hmong, particularly in Asia, left younger, second-generation American
Hmong with fewer events catering to their age cohort. The HMF responded to
this gap by creating a separate time and space for younger Hmong to come
together in celebration of new popular music in the Hmong language or
performed by Hmong in English:

In 2012, HMF has created a pop culture identity for the Hmong, which has
shaken up the Hmong music industry to thrive again. With HMF being the
platform, new and established artists can build stars status [sic] in the
Hmong community and beyond. HMF also provides a festival experience
like no other events—a unique, memorable and entertaining time.10

The ultimate goal as articulated in this mission statement is to enable the
Hmong music industry to “thrive again”. The claim to create a new pop
culture identity does not accord with the pre-existing and vibrant Hmong
popular music communities online. In bringing these fans together at the first
major music festival specifically for Hmong youths, however, the organizers
suggest that the “virtual” foundations of the current industry are not
satisfactory. This festival was established to shift a digital diaspora principally
bound by musical activities online to one in which offline connections become
a priority.

As with the majority of the festival attendees, the American Hmong
organizers of the HMF were born to immigrant parents as second-generation
Hmong. For their parents, the Hmong homeland was always located
elsewhere, in Southeast Asia or China, and stories or reconstructions of an
imaginary homeland in Asia are pervasive in media produced by this
generation (see Schein 2012). Second-generation Hmong are less ambiguous

about the perceived location of their identities. Yet, despite not experiencing a process of forced transnational relocation, their ethnic identity has had to be resituated in the US. This differentiation from their parents has been facilitated by their fluency in online media; YouTube has replaced the family home and the Hmong community centre as the first point of contact for meeting other Hmong youths. At a meeting of the Hmong Student Association at California State University, Fresno, a group of these youths decided to organize a music festival for their age cohort. The result was the 2012 HMF, which enabled Fresno-based Hmong youths to conceptually and physically re-centre their homeland in the location of their birth.

Despite the initial success of the event, this process of re-territorialization (Kang 2009) has been contested due to divergent interests. The selection of appropriate performing artists serves as an appropriate example. Personal relations manager for the HMF, Samantha Yang, explained how the organizers have attempted to branch out to the transnational community to enhance the reputation of the festival:

> It is our hope to bring more international Hmong stars to the music festival because, I think, when I think about Hmong music it’s beyond the United States … The online competition that we had, we actually had three participants from three different countries … Canada, France and Australia. (t/v 31 July 2014)

The HMF organizers want to include local, national and international Hmong performers, and many festival-goers are also attracted to the perceived cultural authenticity associated with Hmong acts from Asia. But local sponsors of the event preference the inclusion of local artists to encourage more diverse attendance at the event by Fresno residents. As the organizers, festival-goers and sponsors have been attempting to resolve these differences, the online community has heatedly debated the cancellation of the 2014 HMF.

To appease disappointed fans, AZN LIVE, in collaboration with Laib Laus, produced a 27-minute video to explain the reasons for the cancellation and provide an apology. Days before the festival was due to be held in Fresno, California, the video was broadcast on the Hmong TV Network, a Fresno-based station available throughout the US on satellite TV, and posted to the YouTube channel with links to the video on Twitter, Facebook and the HMF website (www.hmffresno.com). The other scheduled performing artists and events at the festival, including the dance show, art exhibition and fashion show, were transferred to the new date in 2015. The HMF team assured fans that they would “take this time to find a headliner replacement and restructure the event to further develop the quality and provide a more enhanced experience for each attendant at HMF”.

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The cancellation of the 2014 HMF caused outrage on online message boards. One of the first to contribute to the opprobrium was blogger woofwoof on 21 May 2014:

A week before the event, they postponed the event just bc of Laib Laus, just bc of one band. WTF? The way I look at is, they couldn’t put this thing together on time and needed a reason to cancel and since Laib Laus couldn’t make it, they use Laib Laus as an excuse to postpone. However what HMF failed to realize is that now they screw up all the outta state people.¹¹

Others speculated about the true reasons for the withdrawal of the headline act. One prominent social media blogger, Zaub Qaub, claimed the issue concerned the sexuality of lead singer, Xyooj Vaj: “According to records, he’s listed as a male. But upon an initial physical examination, this was indeed somewhat of an issue.”¹² Even posters on the and Laib Laus apology video were unsympathetic: “Guys just move on without him … keep the show going and support your artist in USA it’s better … support your artist in USA.”¹³ The wave of online speculation that followed the postponement of the event effectively created a new pop culture identity for the Hmong, but hardly the one intended. Rather than creating a flourishing offline community of Hmong pop fans, as initially hoped, the HMF has so far mobilized online fans who are motivated by their shared vitriol at the event organizers.

For 2015, the challenge for the HMF organizers, aside from appeasing disenchanted ticket purchasers from the 2014 event, is to reconcile local (Fresno) and translocal (transnational or online Hmong) differences. The majority of their audience comes from a geographically dispersed ethnic group that is connected via online social networks, while their employees, retailers, sponsors and family support are mostly located in the vicinity of Fresno. These dissonances between online and offline are complicated by the large proportion of Fresno-based Hmong who attend the festival, and the persistent subdivision of the Hmong by their place of origin—for example, HMF advertisements distinguish between Hmong in terms of location when referring to performing artists (e.g. Laotian Hmong, Fresno Hmong, Canadian Hmong).

Locality is a predominant theme. Kruse has emphasized the continued, and

perhaps increasing, relevance of local identity in the internet age:

Even as we acknowledge the importance of new technologies in the creation, diffusion, and consumption of music, historically technological advances in these functions have not necessarily served to lessen the importance of locality and local identity—in fact, sometimes such dissemination has the opposite effect. (2010: 637)

Anderson’s imagined communities have been reinvigorated by the internet as ethnic, musical and other identities are embraced by minorities around the online world. Ethnomusicologists have speculated to the degree that renewed online links might lead to the empowerment of these people. But despite the web of social networks, musical communities and digital diasporas that continues to flourish online, the individuals contributing to its maintenance are divorced by locality. The case of the HMF exposes an oversight in the conception of online musicking by minority groups: thriving online musical communities do not naturally equate to or evolve into successful offline communities.

Conclusion

In the early years of the internet, this technology was heralded as “a neutral instrument of community, connecting pre-established ethnic identities” (Poster 1998: 206). The potential for minorities like the Hmong to (re)connect online was pervasive. Since then, challenges to internet neutrality have threatened the online freedom and flexibility of these communities, and the need for grassroots networking offline has intensified. Chang and Xiong responded by attempting to unite the Hmong in a popular music festival in Fresno, California. Yet the ease of online communication betrayed the difficulty of transitioning from a vibrant online musical network to a staged offline event. Visa issues or otherwise, the cancellation of the 2014 HMF suggests that the challenges of hosting an international festival on an annual basis with meagre funding in a relatively remote city in the US have not been lessened sufficiently by technology. In contrast, networking online (and the communities that have grown out of these networks) continues to act as a key resource for nurturing the concept of a shared transnational ethnic identity, a hyper-imagined community in the digital age. The Hmong digital diaspora is bound by cultural practices that are consistently shared and compared in cyberspace and contested at the local level.

This article has illustrated the potential of using data from YouTube Analytics to map digital diasporas, particularly minority communities who navigate the internet using minority language terminology. The vast majority
of online users searching for Hmong language terms such as kwv txhiaj can be assumed to be members of the Hmong ethnic group due to this being a minority language. Data from just one video has complemented decades of ethnographic research to reveal online patterns and create a more wholesome picture of the Hmong digital diaspora, including the revelation that significant numbers are accessing Hmong language media in Malaysia and South Korea.

In moving beyond view counts and user comments, the combination of new quantitative data alongside the wealth of qualitative data has permitted a remapping of the global Hmong population. The data show that California and Minnesota have emerged as disproportionately powerful centres in the global Hmong music industries despite their comparatively small Hmong populations. But the choice of Laib Laus as a headline act for the 2014 HMF and the cancellation of the event due to their unavailability reinforces the focus on an Asian “homeland” of first-generation Hmong. They devalued the local in favour of the translocal. Now, the future of the HMF depends on how the organizers can reframe the event as a local festival for a global population.

Acknowledgements

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