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3 Lonán Ó Briain

4 **Beyond the Digital Diaspora:**
5 **From YouTube Networking to the Hmong Music**
6 **Festival**

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8 **Abstract**

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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.

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

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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:

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Today, we are announcing that due to a complication with the United States

1 immigration issue in Thailand, our Headliner, Laib Laus, will no longer be
2 able to headline for the Hmong Music Festival (HMF) scheduled for May
3 24, 2014. We, like you, expect the greatest possible experience from the
4 Hmong Music Festival for everyone. We have worked extremely hard to
5 put together HMF for this year, but with the sudden change and without
6 adequate time to get a headliner replacement there is a significant impact
7 on the overall HMF experience. Our desires to provide the best possible
8 experience and outcome for our fans, artists, and sponsors have led us to
9 the decision to postpone HMF to May 23, 2015.

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


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

39 Using a combination of digital ethnography, data mining and periods of
40 fieldwork with the Hmong in the US (Fresno, California) and northern
41 Vietnam, this research seeks to map Hmong activity online and find evidence

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

16 The Global Hmong Population

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

1. I am grateful to Justin  Chein for drawing my attention to this article.

1 **Table 1.** Countries with notable populations of Hmong²

Country	Population
China	3,100,000
Vietnam	1,068,189
Laos	460,000
United States	260,076
Thailand	124,000
France	15,000
Myanmar	2,000–3,000
Australia	2,000
French Guyana	1,500
Canada	800
Argentina	600
Germany	92

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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

2. Population figures were taken from Lee and Tapp (2010: 1) and Lemoine (2005) with more recent census data added for Vietnam, http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=515&idmid=5&ItemID=10799 (accessed 5 July 2011) and the US, <http://www.hmongstudies.org/SoutheastAsianAmericans2010Census.html> (accessed 1 February 2012).

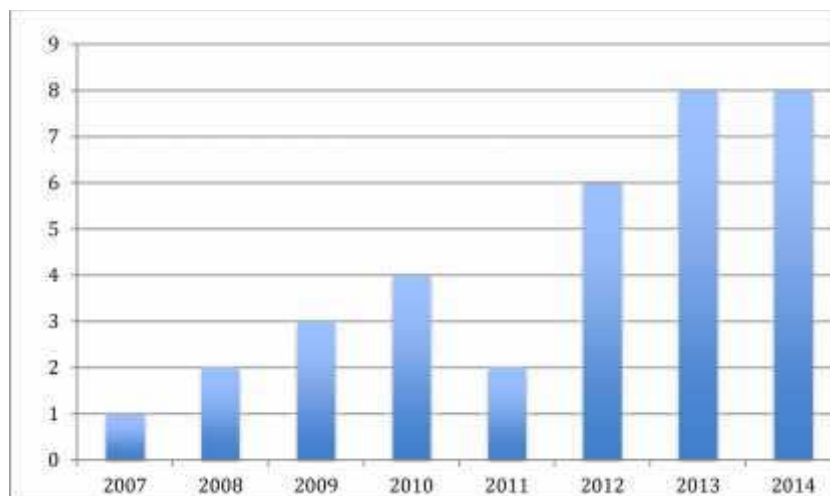
1 communication.

2 Beyond YouTube Hits and User Comments

3 As we approach the tenth anniversary of the launch of YouTube, the time for
4 a critical assessment of ethnomusicologists' and other scholars' use of this site
5 is overdue. YouTube has become a key resource for musicians, fans and
6 music researchers around the world. Despite our tacit acceptance of YouTube
7 as a medium for sharing music videos and a research tool, no notable attempts
8 to critically analyse ethnomusicologists' methodological approaches to
9 gathering data from this website have been carried out. This section responds
10 to the dearth of critical engagement by surveying appearances of the word
11 YouTube in the main text and footnotes of the two most regularly published
12 journals in the field of ethnomusicology, *Ethnomusicology* and
13 *Ethnomusicology Forum*.³ The survey evaluates current methodological
14 approaches to online music research with a view to outlining a new approach
15 to the gathering and use of YouTube data.

16 Between 2007 and 2014 a total of 33 articles referred to YouTube in these
17 journals, 18 in *Ethnomusicology* and 15 in *Ethnomusicology Forum*. Starting
18 with one mention in 2007, a gradual increase in attention paid to the site can
19 be observed. Figure 1 clearly illustrates that the most prominent years for
20 references to YouTube in these journals were 2012 (6 articles), 2013 (8
21 articles) and 2014 (8 articles). As these figures suggest, YouTube is becoming
22 more prevalent in ethnomusicological studies. A closer examination of the
23 articles that refer to YouTube reveals a set of consistent patterns in our
24 methodologies concerning the site. By critically evaluating these approaches,
25 we might develop more effective methodologies for using this and other
26 websites, therefore enhancing our use of the internet and contributing to more
27 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.



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3 **Figure 1.** Combined number of articles that refer to YouTube in the journals *Ethnomusicology* and *Ethnomusicology Forum* by calendar year⁴

4 These articles can be categorized into four distinct levels of engagement
5 with YouTube. At the most basic level, general references are made to the
6 website as a platform for sharing music videos (Bakan *et al.* 2008; Ivey 2009;
7 Mera and Morcom 2009; Cottrell 2010a; Cottrell 2010b; In-Young Lee 2012;
8 Solis 2012; Dawe 2013; Keegan-Phipps 2013; [REDACTED]; Mills and Park
9 2013; [REDACTED]; Dave 2014).⁵ These articles tend not to speculate about
10 cultural change or question the impact of using YouTube to any notable
11 degree. The second level comprises references to specific videos, channels,
12 musicians or musical styles with limited analysis of any actual footage (Miller
13 2007; Manuel 2008; Wood 2010; Ramnarine 2011; Bates 2012; Ciucci 2012;
14 Seeman 2012; Dawe and Eroğlu 2013; Phillips 2013; Risk 2013; Brown 2014;
15 Harris 2014; Schultz 2014; Tatro 2014; Wiens 2014). Here, YouTube videos
16 are used as free and widely accessible pieces of evidence to illustrate points
17 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 *Ethnomusicology 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).

1 view counts they have amassed or to highlight an idiosyncratic performance
2 style or presentation format (e.g. Risk's [2013] discussion of the "chop"
3 technique in North Atlantic fiddling traditions). This is taken a step further at
4 the third level with additional references to the comments section as indicative
5 of widely held beliefs or to highlight controversies concerning a video, a
6 musical style or a musician (Tucker 2009 [REDACTED]; Stobart 2010;
7 Alajaji 2013).⁶

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

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

34 The Bigger Picture

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

6. References to YouTube appear as footnotes only in the following articles: Miller (2007), Manuel (2008), Bates (2012), In-Young Lee (2012), Phillips (2013), Tatro (2014).

1 site. Data mining, an analytic process designed to explore web-based data
2 using sets of variables, can be used to reveal hidden information about
3 websites including user patterns and audience demographics. Data mining on
4 YouTube can be easily achieved using embedded functions such as YouTube
5 Analytics, other analytics-based software or customized web crawlers.⁷ Data
6 mining with these programmes offers the potential for a fifth level of
7 engagement with YouTube and other websites through the production of
8 extensive quantitative data on the sites. The resulting information can be
9 extracted into comma-separated values (CSV) files, which can then be
10 reconstructed in an Excel document to create graphic illustrations of the
11 information. One limitation of this feature on YouTube is that the data can
12 only be drawn by the channel owner—data from HMF videos were not
13 available for this reason. This research takes another transnationally circulated
14 Hmong recording as the basis of the analysis, “Kwv Txhiaj by Maiv Thoj
15 Vaj—Hue Ku, Thailand”.⁸ This video has been available online for longer
16 than any of the HMF videos, and consequently more data are accessible on
17 user trends. The analysis of this data is used to gain a more accurate
18 perspective on Hmong users of the internet, and to illustrate the challenge
19 facing the organizers of the HMF in their attempts to (re)unite the global
20 Hmong population.

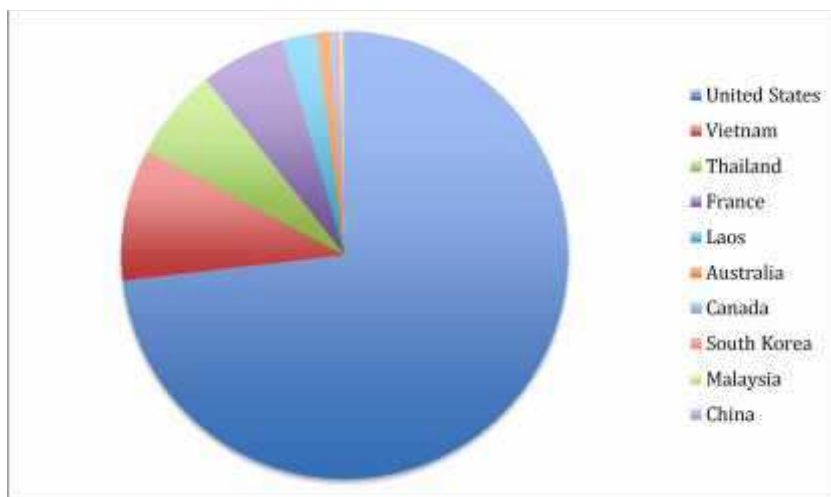
21 This video was recorded by Justin Schell and posted to his personal
22 YouTube channel on 11 January 2012. A Christian song in the *kwv txhiaj*
23 style (see Ó Briain 2012), this recording was made by Schell while on a
24 fieldtrip to Thailand to gather data for his PhD dissertation (2013) and record
25 footage for his documentary film, *We Rock Long Distance* (forthcoming [redacted]
26 [redacted]). Schell created the CSV files from the video between May
27 and June 2014. By this stage, the video had been viewed almost 20,000 times
28 in a total of 52 countries. All 18 comments on the video were posted within a
29 year of the video being circulated on social media, prior to the creation of the
30 CSV files. However, excessive attention to these comments would provide a
31 misrepresentation of the views of the audience due to their limited number.
32 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.

8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOvtC0pJ_44 (accessed 6 January 2015).

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

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

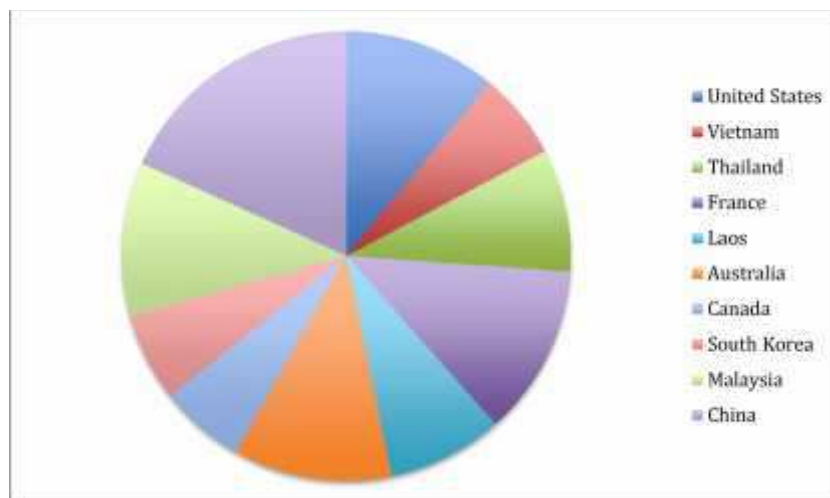


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 17 **Figure 2.** Total number of view counts by country

18 By far the largest number of individual views is located in the US. Schell’s
 19 research and production is centred on US-based musicians. In particular, his
 20 documentary features the Minnesota-based Hmong rapper, Tou SaiKo Lee,
 21 whose followers are mostly based in the US. More generally, however, North
 22 America has the highest rate of internet penetration, where 87.7 per cent of the
 23 population has regular access to the internet. This contrasts with only 34.7 per

1 cent for the Asian continent.⁹ Despite the vastly greater Hmong population in
 2 Asia, then, the large number of American viewers of Hmong videos on
 3 YouTube should be expected.

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



18
 19 **Figure 3.** Average percentage of the entire video viewed by country

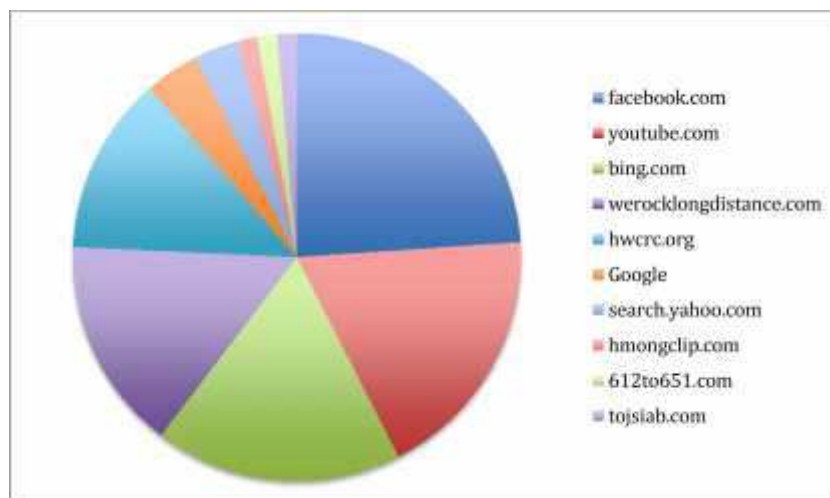
20 The average percentage of the video that users watched in each country
 21 provides another piece of information on viewer trends (Figure 3), which
 22 leads to another set of hypotheses on the global Hmong population. Users in

9. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (accessed 6 January 2015).

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

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

26 The relatively long viewing times in Australia, France and the US is also
27 unexpected considering the low levels of Hmong language proficiency in
28 these Hmong communities. Hmong in these countries could be engaging in a
29 practice of nostalgic viewing whereby the video is representative of life in an
30 imagined homeland for diasporic Hmong viewers (see Schein 2012).
31 Language is less important than the overall presentation, the idyllic rural
32 setting and the feminine, Asian-based Hmong. Alternatively, these viewers
33 might be from Schell's or Tou SaiKo Lee's own fanbases. They could be
34 more interested in the perceived origins of their musical icon or the
35 background to the documentary.



1
2 **Figure 4.** Embedded view counts by website

3 By looking at the number and subdivision of embedded view counts
4 (Figure 4), the impact of these fanbases can be approximated. Of all 25
5 websites where the video was embedded, the combined total of individual
6 views was only 306. The video was embedded in the Facebook page for *We*
7 *Rock Long Distance* in February 2012, which counted for 67 of the views.
8 Werocklongdistance.com, the official documentary website, had 43 views,
9 and hwcrc.org (Hmong World Christian Resource Center) amassed 36 views.
10 612to651.com is Schell's personal website which he uses to promote the film,
11 and the remainder are search engines or Hmong-specific sites (tojsiab.com).
12 The relatively low proportion of views on these embedded sites (just over 1.5
13 per cent of the total number of YouTube views) suggests that the majority of
14 viewers on YouTube were not drawn to the video via the documentary.

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

1 cultural activities of American Hmong. This inequality is reflected in the
2 programming of and online responses to the 2014 HMF.

3 From Online to Offline

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

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

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

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

10. <http://www.hmffresno.com/info> (accessed 5 January 2015).

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

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

17 It is our hope to bring more international Hmong stars to the music festival
18 because, I think, when I think about Hmong music it's beyond the United
19 States ... The online competition that we had, we actually had three
20 participants from three different countries ... Canada, France and Australia.
21 (i/v. ██████████ 31 July 2014)

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

29 To appease disappointed fans, AZN LIVE, in collaboration with Laib
30 Laus, produced a 27-minute video to explain the reasons for the cancellation
31 and provide an apology. Days before the festival was due to be held in Fresno,
32 California, the video was broadcast on the Hmong TV Network, a Fresno-
33 based station available throughout the US on satellite TV, and posted to the
34 ██████████ YouTube channel with links to the video on
35 Twitter, Facebook and the HMF website (www.hmffresno.com). The other
36 scheduled performing artists and events at the festival, including the dance
37 show, art exhibition and fashion show, were transferred to the new date in
38 2015. The HMF team assured fans that they would “take this time to find a
39 headliner replacement and restructure the event to further develop the quality
40 and provide a more enhanced experience for each attendant at HMF”.

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

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

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

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

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

11. <http://www.pebhmong.com/forum/index.php?topic=353541.0> (accessed 5 January 2015).

12. <http://www.zaubqaub.com/2014/05/hmong-music-festival-postponed/> (accessed 5 January 2015).

13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMrip6tBZjo> (accessed 15 January 2015).

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

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

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

17 Conclusion

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

36 This article has illustrated the potential of using data from YouTube
37 Analytics to map digital diasporas, particularly minority communities who
38 navigate the internet using minority language terminology. The vast majority

1 of online users searching for Hmong language terms such as *kvv txhiaj* can be
 2 assumed to be members of the Hmong ethnic group due to this being a
 3 minority language. Data from just one video has complemented decades of
 4 ethnographic research to reveal online patterns and create a more wholesome
 5 picture of the Hmong digital diaspora, including the revelation that significant
 6 numbers are accessing Hmong language media in Malaysia and South Korea.
 7 In moving beyond view counts and user comments, the combination of new
 8 quantitative data alongside the wealth of qualitative data has permitted a
 9 remapping of the global Hmong population. The data show that California and
 10 Minnesota have emerged as disproportionately powerful centres in the global
 11 Hmong music industries despite their comparatively small Hmong
 12 populations. But the choice of Laib Laus as a headline act for the 2014 HMF
 13 and the cancellation of the event due to their unavailability reinforces the
 14 focus on an Asian “homeland” of first-generation Hmong. They devalued the
 15 local in favour of the translocal. Now, the future of the HMF depends on how
 16 the organizers can reframe the event as a local festival for a global population.

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