

Does Integration Still Take Place 'at the Local Level'?

Challenging a German Integration Paradigm in a Postdigital World

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Abstract *An essential paradigm of the (German) integration discourse is that integration takes place 'at the local level', i.e. in the social sphere, at school, at work, in conversation with neighbours, in sports clubs, and in many other community places and concrete spaces. Ultimately, these are (or have been) the places and spaces where migrants have acquired essential information and could establish contacts with compatriots or with the local domestic society. The Internet seems to challenge the logic of this integration paradigm. Social proximity, contact to the native society as well as to 'established migrants', no longer necessarily has to take place in the material and analogue 'neighbourhood', but – we argue – has been increasingly occurring on the Internet. Thus, the Internet has also become a new lifewide space for learning how to participate in society. Integration continues to take place 'at a local level', but the 'local level' is no longer solely to be understood in a material sense.*

Keywords *Digital Diaspora; Postdigitality; Integration; Participation; Migration*

1. Introduction

While acknowledging that the integration of immigrants – we prefer to speak of *participation*, as we believe that *to take part* is the basic aim of all integration efforts – has been a political challenge for some time, it represents a greater individual challenge for migrants themselves. In view of contemporary thoughts on lifewide learning (Reischmann, 2014), we ask ourselves: How and where may one *learn* integration? The answer should be 'at a local level' – at least if we fol-

low the catchphrase, and the integrational concept it transports, that has dominated the German discourse consistently in the last two decades.

This chapter describes the importance of the locality level in the integration discourse. It critically discusses this guiding principle against the background of growing and ubiquitous digitality and reflects on the role of digital media in digital diasporas, thus also contributing to digital migration studies.

2. Integration Takes Place at a Local Level: The Presentation of a Paradigm

Setting the learning place for integration at a local level does not come as a surprise, since this is where everyday encounters, conversations, and other participatory processes take place. But this concession to the local environment is less self-evident than one may initially assume, at least in the German context.

During the first major influx of non-German workers to the Federal Republic of Germany from 1955 onwards, integration was the task of the Federal Government or occasionally (in educational matters) of the Federal States. Indeed, according to Klaus J. Bade, it remains doubtful if we can really speak at all of “integration” for these first decades, as the German grand seigneur of integration studies describes German integration policy up to the 1990s in terms of being in “deep sleep” (Bade 2007, p. 37).¹ With the increasing awareness that Germany was indeed a country of immigration, those actors who had already made practical efforts regarding the integration of migrants became aware of their factual roles: For the municipalities², especially the big cities (Schammann et al., 2020, p. 6), “there has been de facto no alternative to integration at a local level” (Bommès, 2011, p. 194). These actors of practical integration were indeed on-site ‘at a local level’: mayors, integration officers, advice centres, welfare organizations, schools, neighbours, sports clubs, community interpreters, and migrant organizations (Weiss, 2013, p. 22).

The continued and constantly reiterated postulation that integration takes place ‘at a local level’ has become a repetitively communicated “semantic formula” (Bommès, 2011, p. 194); a “mantra” (Bommès, 2011, p. 215); a “slogan” (Bommès, 2011, p. 197); a “catchphrase” (Williams, 2010, p. 17); or a “motto”

1 All translations by the authors of this chapter.

2 For more on the German system of multilevel governance, see: <https://portal.cor.eur opa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/Germany-Systems-of-multilevel-governance.aspx>.

(Kerpişçi, 2022, p. 58); or perhaps indeed may be seen as a paradigm – an unquestioned tenet that nobody dares to contradict.

In 2007, the German Federal Government ennobled this approach as a “key issue” (Federal Government 2020b, p. 20) giving it in the first edition of the National Integration Plan, the ‘manifesto’ for integration – and now also using the term participation – a prominent place:

Integration takes place at a local level. The immediate living environment has a central function in the integration process. It is the centre of life and a field of contact for immigrants and the local population. For social co-existence and the chances of integration, the local living conditions, the design of the residential environment and the public and private infrastructure offers are therefore important framework conditions. (Federal Government, 2007, p. 19)

Integration takes place at a local level. It is in the municipalities, cities and neighbourhoods where it is decided whether the integration of people with a migration background succeeds. This is where opportunities and problems become visible. The basis for a peaceful and equal coexistence lies in the municipalities. (Federal Government, 2007, p. 22)

Integration is decided at a local level! Encounters between people with and without a migration background take place in neighbourhoods in cities and communities, districts and quarters. It is in the municipalities that it becomes apparent, whether integration succeeds or fails. Successes of integration – but also problems – are most noticeable here. (Federal Government, 2007, p. 24)

While municipalities have benefited politically from their role as integration agents and have gained additional socio-political competencies (Bommes, 2011, pp. 213–215), the nation-state has been losing its importance as a shaper of integration in two respects: On the one hand, competences and prospects for solutions are shifting to the level of the European Union (especially regarding migration issues), on the other hand, the nation-state loses importance towards the local level (especially regarding social welfare interventions) (Bommes, 2011, p. 195). Numerous political (funding) programmes in Ger-

many, over the last decade and a half³, bear witness to this shift away from the nation-state level and towards the local level.

In the *National Integration Action Plan* (Nationaler Aktionsplan Integration) which represents an updated version of the earlier *National Integration Plan*, the catchphrase “integration at a local level” is highlighted within its very own section in the action plan for inclusion, putting this paradigm on the same level as central fields of action for successful participation such as “integration into the labour market”, “integration and education”, “integration in the civic engagement and voluntary work” (Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration, 2020a, p. 16; and Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration, 2020b, p. 10). The local municipality continues to be assigned the key role in integration, as this is seen as where ‘everyday life’ and ‘encounters’ take place (Federal Government, 2020, p. 60).

3. Dimensions for Integration (Participation)

In order to capture integration systematically and semantically, we follow the approach of Friedrich Heckmann (1997, p. 4; 2015, pp. 72–73), according to which integration takes place in four dimensions, thus also defining the position of the agents in the welfare state (Bommers, 2011, p. 205). Heckmann's four dimensions are: (1) the structural, (2) the social, (3) the cultural, and (4) the identificatory. The structural dimension means participation in the labour market, the obtaining of educational qualifications, participation in the housing market and in the healthcare system (e.g. use of preventive medical check-ups). The social dimension includes social interaction, friendship and participation in voluntary sectors: thus, in a broader sense, social and leisure behaviour. According to Heckmann (1997), the cultural dimension

3 Such as the German programmes “Soziale Stadt” (Social City) (Federal Ministry of the Interior BMI); “Beschäftigung, Bildung und Teilhabe vor Ort” (Employment, Education and Participation at a Local Level) (Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs BMVBS); “Migration/Integration und Stadtteiltonpolitik” (Migration/Integration and Urban District Policy) (BMVBS); “Integration durch Sport” (Integration through Sport) (German Olympic Sports Confederation DOSB); “Orte der Integration” (Places of Integration) (Baden-Württemberg-Foundation); and “Integration vor Ort – Stärkung kommunaler Strukturen” (Integration at a Local Level – Strengthening Municipal Structure) (Baden-Württemberg State Ministry, 2022) and many more.

describes processes “related to learning cognitive skills and knowledge of the culture of the immigration country” (p. 4). This is about “functional competence requirements and knowledge bases that are necessary for participation in work and life processes” (Heckmann, 2015, p. 160). It should be noted that cultural integration should reject the idea of an assimilative leading culture (a so-called “Leitkultur”) e.g. the expectation that one should watch popular TV shows, listen to traditional folk music or separate rubbish properly for recycling as a sign of supposed cultural integration. However, learning the dominant language of the society is regarded as an essential requirement for cultural participation, as well as a knowledge of how living together in society is organized, meaning here core institutions, core administrative processes, and core places (Heckmann, 1997, p. 4; Heckmann, 2015, p. 160). Finally, the fourth dimension includes identificatory integration. This concerns the sense of belonging, i.e. whether participation is accompanied by identification. Different hybrid forms of identification are also conceivable here.

4. Participation and Lifewide Learning at a Local Level

The formula “integration takes place at a local level” is often linked to a decentralist concept of political decision-making i.e. shifting decision-making powers to the municipal level. However, the idea of integration taking place at the local site goes beyond the political level and penetrates the civic-societal level. As depicted by McLeod (2023), according to Vygotsky, sociocultural learning occurs through interaction with the sociocultural environment (the civic society). Here at the local place is where problem-solving strategies are conveyed in collaborative and dialogical steps by “more knowledgeable” members of society (McLeod, 2023). These “more knowledgeable” members of society who are helpers or ‘teachers’ during the lifewide learning integration process, can also be called “established migrants” (Lietz, 2014, p. 360) and are often found in “ethnic communities” (Heckmann, 2015, p. 3):

Here, and not at government authorities, they [the new immigrants] receive the main support; here they are provided with most of the necessary knowledge about the host country; it is here that everything takes place which the public often assumes develops in its own. (Weber, 2006, p. 61)

Thus, learning how to participate takes place on a daily, continuous, unplanned, and uncontrolled basis (Reischmann, 2014, p. 287). It wards off deficit orientation and targets the resources of immigrants and their environment (Reischmann, 2014, p. 292). This process is, therefore, fully consistent with what Reischmann (2014) calls lifewide learning and is congruent with the lifewide learning ideas of the “mosaic stone learning-outcomes” formed from different situations, contacts and experiences. Competences are acquired *en passant*, but the lifewide learning process also retains a certain ambivalence: It is not really possible to name exactly when and where a learning stage is mastered (Reischmann, 2014, p. 296).

Indeed, integration has always taken place and still takes place today in the above-mentioned dimensions “at a local level” (Bommes, 2011, p. 215): Where one goes to school and to work; where one finds a home and participates in the healthcare sector (*structural level*); where one makes friendships and where one visits sport clubs (*social level*); where one uses in everyday situations e.g. in the supermarket, in the neighbourhood the dominant language and core knowledge of culture (*cultural level*); and where one finally feels at home, or at least as part of society (*identificatory level*). But society has experienced something of a disruptive change: Does this focus on a close physical localization still apply unconditionally in a digitalized society? Do today’s everyday life and encounters not (also) take place online? What impact does this new reality have on integration practices and paradigms?

5. Digital Migration Studies

The concept of locality as immanent in the integration paradigm – ‘integration takes place at a local level’ – is now tested by digitality. Everyday life and domains that used to be exclusively material now increasingly take place online, sometimes making personal physical contact itself appear obsolete e.g. online shopping, online dating, and online meetings. Of course, these domains are not exclusively virtual in nature; online shopping and online dating are followed by decidedly haptic, material experiences. However, digital technology remains so ubiquitous, of course also – or indeed especially – for migrants (Arnold et al., 2017, p. 7), that everyday practices can no longer be easily divided into either “virtual” or “real” (Frieze, 2020, p. 7). Thus, Cramer (2014, p. 13) uses the term *postdigitality*, a societal development in which digital technology is omnipresent even in the (supposedly) material world. Thus, we live now almost

permanently in a hybrid, postdigital state (Conti et al., forthcoming; Thelwall, 2013, pp. 69f.).

The hope that the Internet would promote the social participation of migrants has also been increasingly associated with digitalization (Hinkelbein, 2014, p. 23). Above all, the migration development to and in Europe from 2015 onwards was very effective in the sense of connecting social participation with the postdigital. For the first time we directly experienced a large number of migrants who could access the Internet via their smartphone throughout every step of their journey: Planning the migration, during the actual journey, during the acculturation process and, not least, while also maintaining contact with their country of origin (Moran, 2022, p. 1). Diminescu (cited in Moran, 2022, p. 2) has written as early as 2008 of "connected migrants", i.e. migrants who appropriated the Internet in the course of their migration (see also: Kok and Rogers, 2017, quoted in Moran, 2022, p. 2). These occurrences, observed by scientists, have given birth to Digital Migration Studies (Moran 2022, p. 1). More precisely, Moran (2022, p. 3) states that digital media have added "a new dimension" to the phenomenon of migration.

German governmental policies have also taken this into account: The informational behaviour of immigrants is described as "decentralized in self-organized networks and in digital and social media" (Federal Government, 2020b, p. 27). The updated version of the National Action Plan on Integration (Federal Government, 2020a, p. 33) recognizes that digitalization plays an important role in integration and that corresponding integration offers are being established and promoted; this also includes the development of digital tools for counselling in youth migration services, qualification of employees, online counselling centres and online information portals (Federal Government, 2020a, pp. 33, 36–37). In addition, the reach of social media and the merging of traditional and social media are considered, for example in the fields of education, language acquisition and voluntary work (Federal Government, 2020b, pp. 29f.).

In academic empiricism, Digital Migration Studies – although not always under this term – have exerted their influence on various (sub-)disciplines for the past decade and a half. The trend of producing further knowledge and insights is increasing due to the growing importance of the Internet and an ongoing intertwining of the online and offline spheres. Examples of some articles which reveal the specifics of how postdigital developments have influenced integration affairs are represented and discussed in the following paragraphs.

Discourses of Digital Migration Studies

Indeed, it is clear from a perusal of some of the literature from the area of Digital Migration Studies that many aspects of the integration/participation discourse require re-thinking. Referring to numerous empirical studies, Moran (2022) argues that migrants use digital technologies to access important information concerning citizenship, employment, education, language training, housing, banking, and healthcare upon arrival. Language acquisition is often mentioned at the forefront:

In multiple studies participants divulged that they used digital media to learn the language of their host country, helping them to integrate more successfully. Platforms and tools such as YouTube and Google Translate provide recently arrived migrants with easily accessible and cost-effective private language tuition. (Moran, 2022, p. 9)

Arnold et al. (2017) contribute to understanding the prominent role that smartphones play for migrants during and after the migration process in Germany. The smartphone is captured as a local object that simultaneously expresses and shapes global relations and transnational migration movements, to and within Europe. Following arrival in the destination country, smartphones enable navigation in the new context, as well as various forms of participation (Arnold et al., 2017, p. 6). Smartphones facilitate migrants' self-organization, autonomy and participation in various ways: searching for information regarding travel and arrival countries, keeping in touch with friends, family and other migrants, taking online language courses, making use of translator apps, and dealing with the challenges of daily life. According to Arnold et al. (2017), the smartphone becomes an instrument of integration into the new host society (p. 5).

Ponzanesi (2021) and Alinejad and Ponzanesi (2021) examine the structural participation of Somali migrant women living in different European cities (London, Amsterdam, Rome) and how they use digital media in their everyday lives. The focus is on the intersection of Internet usage with gender dynamics in relation to questions of origin, religion and education (Ponzanesi, 2021, p. 8). The results show, on the one hand, that local communities are in a way social hubs that create new communication spaces and practices and, on the other hand, that everyday media life in the context of international mobility across continental borders is often shaped by postcolonial confrontation (see:

Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021). Furthermore, the use of digital media seems to primarily reflect considerations of social positioning within local spaces and transnational networks that potentially support social participation, e.g. through access to education and resources for their children, and through social support from other migrant women in similar situations (see: Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021, p. 30). Ponzanesi (2021, p. 8) concludes that the Internet affects the sense of belonging and the way social groupings are formed as well as opening additional options, especially for women and in environments outside of their home country (see: Ponzanesi, 2021, p. 8).

The cultural participation of migrants is shown in an empirical analysis by Nedelcu (2020), which was conducted over a period of fifteen years with Romanian migrants in Canada and Switzerland. According to her, information and communication technologies facilitate the co-presence of mobile actors in different places, enable new forms of intergenerational solidarity in transnational families and promote networked forms of mobilization and cohesion at a distance. The case study shows that in the migration context, the Internet becomes a tool of social innovation that challenges traditional notions of borders, space, time and mobility. Everyday socializing practices create meaningful relationships, even if the exchange of content is not particularly significant. Nevertheless, this creates a feeling of permanent belonging and reduces geographical and emotional discontinuities (Nedelcu, 2020, p. 346).

Atay and D'Silva (2019) highlight how social media have made it possible to stay in touch with friends and families "at local levels" from two points of view: In the diaspora but also in the home country (e.g. by maintaining close and even live contact on a regular basis). Prieto Peral's study (2018) is connected to this argumentation. She examines how members of the higher-educated Spanish middle class, who emigrated following the 2008 crisis, network on social media in the diaspora community, with members of the host society and with people living in the home country. She examines how groups are formed and how people talk about themselves, the destination country and their country of origin. The study shows that social media is a space which allows for the linguistic interpretation and understanding of biographies (Prieto Peral, 2018, pp. 211–212). Besides, the connection to the country of origin is intensified by social media, especially by the maintenance of contact with one's family. This sheds light on the possibilities but also the obstacles to identificatory participation (with the host society), as some migrants embrace the challenges of their new environments while others locate their cultural identity in the exclusion of being a migrant (Prieto Peral, 2018, pp. 209–210).

Furthermore, Costa and Alinejad (2020) examine the ways in which identificatory participation takes shape through the use of social media. Two generations of Kurdish migrants living in Milan are portrayed, and the use of social media is presented and compared. The research shows that home has become a mediated experience that takes shape through everyday social media practices (Costa and Alinejad, 2020, p. 1). Above all, social media forms a kind of new home for Kurdish migrants, in which ethnic and political identities are shaped and formed. The authors argue that home is a “digitally mediated experience” (Costa and Alinejad, 2020, p. 1), and therefore takes place onsite, on the Internet.

6. Discussion: The Role of Digitalization for the Dimensions of Integration...

...on a Structural, Social and Cultural Level

Systematically, structural, social and cultural integration is the same in both the country of origin and the host society: It consists of participation in work, school, housing, health etc. (*structural dimension*); family, friendship, leisure time etc. (*social dimension*); and language and cultural knowledge (*cultural dimension*). As the previous chapter has shown, in all of these dimensions, the Internet harbours a deep potential for the improvement of participation indicators for migrants, finally potentially levelling them to the overall social average. More and more often, the Internet even seems to be the tool of choice in fostering participation. This applies in particular to those areas in which the participation of migrants has been hindered due to a lack of system knowledge, a lack of networks and a lack of language skills. Via digital media, barriers can be broken down and the unfamiliarity of the new social, political, cultural, linguistic and economic reality can be better compensated.

The Internet is a platform for the exchange of information and ultimately the learning space for the acquisition of key competences for participation in a structural, social and cultural dimension. Established migrants play an important role here in providing core knowledge, also in a virtual environment. As seen in the prior sections and subsections, establishing networks would appear to be a central motivation for the use of social media: “Anyone who is part of this network has more opportunities to obtain information, to get in touch with other members of society and to join forces with them” (Kissau, 2008, p. 199).

Their reference systems consist of established migrants who have already had similar experiences. These are mostly found within the diasporic community. In the past, they were mainly found in migrant organizations, but also simply in the neighbourhood; today they can in addition be found (self-organized and not necessarily institutionally connected) on the Internet.

... on an Identificatory Level

Identificatory integration seems to be the least investigated, as – in contrast to the others – it is difficult or, perhaps, impossible to measure identificatory indicators, in contrast to, for example, the employment rate (*structural integration indicator*), the engagement rate (*social integration indicator*) or language proficiency (*cultural integration indicator*). The Internet, especially in its function as an exchange platform, e.g. via social media, can potentially help to accumulate social capital.

However, a distinction should be made between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital. Bonding social capital strengthens connections within an already existing group, which often tends to be homogenous, while bridging social capital creates new connections to people outside the established in-group (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Following the aforementioned state of knowledge, we may definitely notice that – for migrants – digital media play a role primarily for the acquisition of the former type of capital – bonding – and only secondarily for the latter – bridging. On an identificatory level, the Internet is not necessarily used for networking with the host society, but rather offers unprecedented opportunities to maintain connections with the networks of the country of origin and the diaspora community, especially family and friends.

Even if the Internet offers a wide range of communication possibilities, migrants primarily use the Internet to communicate with people of the same origin (*bonding*). As early as 1995, Poster (in Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 984) stated: “Oppressed, minority or endangered groups, often organized in diasporas, use the Internet to keep up with their homeland and native culture, thus strengthening their ethnic ties and lessening their isolation.” In this way, the Internet, although a modern technology, can even contribute to preserving older traditions from the material world. But also a transformation of diaspora communities may be observed as taking place; they are transformed into *digital diasporas* (Candidatu et al. 2019, p. 34). Some of these networks are even based solely on online contacts. Thus, acquaintances which are made within the online network may be, but do not have to be, transferred to the material world. This di-

versity of potential for the digital diaspora gives them greater opportunities in terms of stability and social importance (see: Düvel, 2016, p. 9) and, thanks to the possibilities of modern digital technologies, migrants may live at a local level in ‘two worlds’ simultaneously: in their country of origin and in the host society.

7. Conclusion

The paradigm of ‘integration at a local level’ is directly based on a notion that embeds integration in a material, physical locality. Even though the recognition of the importance of the physical locality as a lifewide learning space (schools, neighbours, sports clubs etc.) for integration still obviously has its importance, a new layer has to be applied, drawn from an increasingly postdigital world: In the view of media digitization, social practices have been changing rapidly and challenge traditional ways of thinking, also in terms of integration practice. Castells (1996, quoted in Haslett, 2019, p. 22) has even argued that digital communication has changed “the fabric of social order.”

In the lives of migrants, there are many situations where the Internet becomes the main and sometimes the only tool for dealing with problems arising from the relationship with reality that surrounds them – uncertain, frightening, strange, and sometimes incomprehensible. The overview of some empirical findings of Digital Migration Studies shows that nowadays modern (smart) communication technologies have reached a new, transnational dimension. Thanks to the possibilities of using Internet technologies, migrants can make experiences, stay updated and feel at home ‘at a local level’ in a triple hybrid sense: in the new host society, in their country of origin, and in the diaspora community of the host society. They can maintain real-time-relationships with their families and take part in social, cultural, and political life in two (or more) countries simultaneously. For migrants, the Internet is a factor of importance in constantly (re-)constructing their identity. In addition to the possibilities offered by the Internet for the structural, social, and cultural dimension, for the identificatory dimension it facilitates vast possibilities for migrants to stay in touch with their country of origin and makes it easier to connect to migrants in the same region (digital diaspora). Accordingly, the Internet may have different effects on the process of migrants’ identificatory integration. Here is a key and also a desideratum to expand knowledge regarding the provision of offers or opportunities to develop hybrid forms of identification, that – using

the potentials of the Internet – develop identities which are based on two (or more) cultures.

The paradigm 'integration takes place at a local level' would therefore benefit from an extension of the local-level concept. Today, more than ever, the idea of being 'at a local level' also embraces the Internet, embedded as it generally is with our daily routines. In other words, following the social geographer John Urry (2000) who stated at the turn of the millennium that online people "still meet face-to-face, but under new conditions of both 'meet' and 'face'" (p. 74), we accordingly suggest that integration continues to take place 'at a local level', but with a new connotation of what 'a local level' can mean in a postdigital world.

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