

Of Networks and Nations: placing national identities in Internet social sites

Social networks have rewoven the very fabric of human relationships. They have transformed how we present ourselves, meet new people and stay in contact; how many friends and acquaintances we have and how we exchange words, jokes and ideas with them. When a profile is set up on a social network, the user must consider the sheer scope of people with whom it will connect them, no matter the distance, transport links, or import tariffs. A profile must portray a distinct, individual identity to stand out amid the billions of other digital personalities competing for recognition, bound together by a virtual web of interests, occupations and people. In this great web of abstract societies where nations and nationhood are diffused across interests and occupations, how does national identity manifest itself online, and in what forms do social networking sites encourage this as a globalising characteristic – the exchange and absorption of ideas of national and cultural identity?

National identity and nationalism, argues Benedict Anderson, is a modern phenomenon rooted in the 18th century. The “dawn of the age of nationalism”¹ saw the cultivation of national heritage in the foundation of national monuments, museums and galleries. Yet, he asserts, it was largely consolidated by the tide of print-capitalism that produced tens of thousands of published works in the vernacular. He applies the era’s increase in communication technology to how a sense of nationhood was cemented amongst populations.² This is exemplified in Richard Sher’s *The Enlightenment and the Book*, which follows the journey of Scottish Enlightenment books, including travel journals and history books, across the English speaking Atlantic world. These works, imbued with a strong sense of Scottish identity and national pride, often mutated across borders at the hands of local publishers to adapt to the national sentiments of a non-Scottish readership.³ Even 18th century international print culture encouraged Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ where receivership and interpretation were dependent on the localities that produced them. Being rooted in these localities, newspapers, travel journals and history books contributed a sense of national solidarity to the wider public. In 21st century communication technology, online social networks provide the tools to take this solidarity of nationhood out from its geographical insularity. Cultural or national sentiments expressed in a wider global community are not as nationalistic as their published counterparts because they do not communicate solely with one homogeneous society at one time, but potentially thousands. In contrast, they are beneficial to widening understanding of cultures amongst populations who have less opportunity for interaction. No doubt such interaction already exists, and it has provided a keyhole into what kind of ways ordinary people, given the chance, have adapted their notions of national identity to a cyber environment and also in what ways they are acknowledging and absorbing others.

In 1996 the *Economist* featured an article that predicted the fate of language diversity in the fast-coming age of the World Wide Web. The Internet, it expected, would provide an infinite and fertile

¹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London, 1983) p. 11

² A.D. Smith, ‘Nations and their past’ in *The Warwick Debates: What is a Nation?* (1995), <http://gellnerpage.tripod.com/Warwick0.html>, Accessed: 22/01/11

³ Sher, R.B., *Enlightenment and the Book*, (Chicago, 2006), pp. 21-23

breeding space for minority languages.⁴ The prediction was based on the research of Geoffrey Nunberg, whose cyber exploration had uncovered nuggets of linguistic communities; each conversation encountered, he dressed in perfect national stereotype:

The Italians were talking about elections, as they always do. The French people were exchanging dirty jokes. The Indonesians... were arguing about whether the movie "True Lies" was anti-Islam or merely stupid.

Even in its infancy, the Internet, and its potential to dissolve national boundaries, was being utilised in a way that showed people were given to connect and converse online within their own geographical sphere, perhaps more so than they were to reach across the globe for another national perspective. After all, would an Indonesian care for Italian elections, an Italian share *risqué* French humour; would French secularism relate to Islamic anxieties over a film? Language barriers aside, these were all manifestations of national identity thriving in World Wide chat forums. The question is whether chat room national stereotypes have transferred themselves onto the world of social networking, a cyber revolution not yet mobilised in 1996, and whether they have spread across or moulded online communities.

In 1999 *Wired*, the magazine for technology lovers, wrote ten internet usage principles. Number nine stated:

Go global: ...In these Webbed times, writing from a US centric perspective is hopelessly outdated... Writing with a global perspective means being cosmopolitan: enjoying the best of other cultures and tongues, and resisting the impulse to put foreign ideas and phrases through a bottom-feeder filter.⁵

The rule perfectly translates to social networks, and today there are a plethora of sites inviting new members to enjoy the very best (and most obscure) of global perspectives on common interests, from knitting and crochet (ravelry.com) to kinks and fetishes (fetlife.com). However, many more are designed to unite people according to common ethnicity (blackplanet.com for the African-American online community), class (asmallworld.net, a "private online community"), religion (xt3.com, "the fastest growing Catholic social network") and sexuality (outeverywhere.com, "bringing gay people together since 1995"). Briefly exploring a handful of networks constructed under these non-nationalistic communities, I quickly found some interesting self-assertions of nationality arise from the general hub of international melting pots. The network ArtDeviant, dedicated to connecting artists the world over, revealed amateur poets, writers, and photographers profiling themselves against the international community by emphasising the importance of their own small corner of Planet Earth and their connection to it. Embi of the Isle of Man wrote:

Stand up for Mann,

Even when others think I'm English,

Especially then.⁶

⁴ 'Language and Electronics: the coming global tongue', *The Economist* (December, 1996), p. 37

⁵ D. Crystal, *Linguistic Identity on the Internet*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 21

She follows with a call for Manx, Scottish or Irish Gaelic speakers with whom she can connect, an attitude reflecting Nunberg's theory; internet users are likely to open up the Web as a gate into their own national, or even regional, back garden, rather than to connect with exotic peoples of afar.⁷ Yet, Embi is seeking international recognition of her little-recognised nationality; ArtDeviant offers her the opportunity to outline Manx as a different cultural sphere from English in the global community, not to be hemmed in by the preconceptions of mainland Britain. Manx identity can be received, acknowledged and appreciated by English speakers from Barbados to Brunei, far beyond the reaches of what any printing press could have allowed. Social networking sites based on cross-boundary interests provide even the least-known communities and regional identities with a launch pad from which to assert their status in international discussions.

This idea, that social networks give a voice to lost or unrecognised national, cultural or regional identities, should be taken further. These sorts of communities should be encouraged to mobilise themselves in the Digital Revolution and provided with the means to do so. In some cases, the effort is already being made to involve small indigenous communities in the digital world. Colombian association Colnado runs projects to provide networks for Colombian citizens and organisations in order to exchange information and experiences on local, national and international levels. One of its current projects is working alongside a programme named '*En Mi Idioma*' [In My Language], which works to provide information technology to indigenous American communities from Canada to Peru in the hope that, given the tools, languages on the brink of extinction may be revived through increased ability to openly publish and work in a public domain. The project, so far, has found success with the Inuit community in Canada and has extended itself to Latin America, for which the website provides links to lessons and publications in Misak and Nasa Yuwe, both languages of indigenous Colombian communities. It lends itself as an example of Nunberg's linguistic back garden prediction: yes, communities in 2011 still enjoy the internet as a virtual mirror in which to connect with their own society, region or nationality. But these back gardens need not be as exclusive as he predicted. The difference with social networks such as *En Mi Idioma* is that they are set up by the international community; this project is largely supported by the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya. As an institution of an autonomous community in Spain, it is given to empathise with and support others overseas, so that they too might promote their identities for international recognition.

The project demonstrates the ability of the social networks to function beyond the linguistically English-dominant giants like Facebook and Myspace, as do many others dedicated to uniting members of linguistic and ethnic communities. Vkontakte.org brings together Russian speakers and citizens of Soviet republics; qqzone.qq.com is Facebook for China and South Korea, and biip.no is the national option for Norwegians. But clearly a language barrier continues to exist, so that sentiments of national identity might flourish in insular linguistic and regional environments, as they did in 18th century print culture. However, in the virtual world there exist few cultural and diplomatic barriers to impede a fairer exchange of ideas of nationality, and what they mean to the individual. With information technology

⁶ Embi, *Identity*, <http://browse.deviantart.com/?qh=§ion=&q=national+identity#/doitaj>, Accessed: 20/01/2011

⁷ Language and Electronics: the coming global tongue', *The Economist*, 21 December, 1996, p. 37

on the increase, including development of sophisticated machine translators, the linguistic barriers to social networking (and indeed all information technology) will gradually crumble.⁸ Projects like *En Mi Idioma* can be nurtured so that they become common practice for indigenous and small communities in all developing countries. National or regional identities manifested in multi-lingual environments that are accessible to a wider demographic could become something to fuse international social relations together. Larger populations of dominant communities can gain more awareness of previously marginal (and even endangered) national identities through social networking sites, with the result of more widespread tolerance of national differences in a globalised world. Social networks have already rewoven our personal relationships; now they need to work on knitting together the linguistically and nationally homogeneous patches of today's World Wide Web.

Words: 1,606

⁸ 'The Many Voices of the Web', *The Economist*, (March, 2010), <http://www.economist.com/node/15582327> Accessed: 23/01/2011