



Virtual Ethnicities

Miranda Mowbray
Internet Systems and Storage Laboratory
HP Laboratories Bristol
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The Internet has created a new phenomenon: rapid multi-person communication within geographically dispersed groups. This has accelerated the possibilities for social identities that are more complex or contingent than traditional geographically-based identities. In this article I discuss the Internet's potential for supporting ethnicities. There are social and institutional barriers to the realization of this potential, and I discuss examples of these. I end with two examples in which the Internet has been successfully used to support ethnicities that may have difficulties offline. The apparently frivolous Internet campaign for citizens to declare their religion as "Jedi" in censuses is a textbook case of the use of jesting liminal status to criticize a social categorization. The other example is clearly serious: the Kurdistan Web, <http://www.humanrights.de/~kurdweb>.

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Miranda Mowbray, HP Labs Bristol

I use the word “ethnicity” in this article to mean a social identity based on a common consciousness of shared origins and traditions (McLean, 1996).

It follows from this definition that for an ethnicity to have a continued existence, there has to be some method of group communication through which this common consciousness is maintained. Face-to-face oral communication is probably the most common and convenient means for transmitting, maintaining and strengthening this consciousness, but this requires the communicators to be physically proximate. Geographically dispersed ethnic groups thus depend on physical travel, cultural artefacts, and communications technologies (such as letter-writing and the telephone) to maintain their ethnic identities. Long-term trends toward greater mobility of individuals and peoples (whether travelling for pleasure or migrating to escape wars or poverty), and toward cheaper, more technologically advanced, and more ubiquitous communications technologies, increase the possibilities for the construction and maintenance of ethnicities that are more complex or contingent than simple geographically-based identities.

The Internet has introduced a new phenomenon: rapid multi-person communication within geographically dispersed groups. Since the maintenance of ethnicities requires group communication rather than simply one-to-one communication between isolated pairs of individuals, or the one-to-many communication afforded by broadcasting media, Internet communications may be particularly well suited to the support of geographically dispersed ethnic groups.

In this article I will discuss both the possibilities of the Internet for supporting ethnicities, and some barriers to this. Since ethnicities are social identities, they require social recognition in order to exist. In the first section below, I will show that there can be problems with social recognition within an online social space. The next section will be concerned with the categorization of ethnicity made by companies offering online services. I will show that these categorizations not only can omit complex or rare ethnic identities, but also some relatively well-recognized ones. In the subsequent section I will discuss whether there is something inherent in Internet technology that discriminates in favour of US/Anglophone/Western identities. The final two sections will show that, despite these barriers, the Internet is being used to support ethnicities that are difficult to realize offline.

Where in Italy do your parents come from?

Here is a dialogue that took place in an Italian-language online social space, Little Italy MOO. (To access Little Italy, telnet to [kame.usr.dsi.unimi.it](telnet://kame.usr.dsi.unimi.it) 4444 and type *connect*

guest.) I have translated it into English and tidied up some of the grammar and punctuation.

Elf Where are you?
Miranda Bristol, in England.
Elf Where in Italy do you live?
Miranda I don't live in Italy, I live in England.
Elf Where do you originally come from in Italy?
Miranda I don't come from Italy. I'm English.
Elf You were born in England?
Miranda Yes.
Elf Where in Italy do your parents come from?
Miranda My parents are English.
Elf Both of them?
Miranda Yes.
Elf But you grew up in Italy.
Miranda No, I grew up in England.
Elf You're pulling my leg.

As well as illustrating the standard point that offline ethnicity can be complex – there may well be readers of this article who would mention different countries in answer to each one of Elf's questions - this dialogue shows that online communication might open up the possibilities for ethnic expression and identity play, by removing some of the information transmitted in offline communication that can lead to (possibly false) assumptions about ethnicity. Elf, who has only met me online, is convinced that I am some sort of Italian, but if he had heard my accent or seen my skin-colour he would be unlikely to think this.

However, it also shows that there are limits to this potential. Elf's belief that his interlocutor is Italian is somewhat inflexible. The ability to claim to be of any ethnicity you please online is not worth much if these claims are not socially accepted.

Several authors have rejoiced in the possibility of online communications for identity play – play that might lead to social and personal insights. "I can be whoever / whatever I want to be. All I have to do is type!" ("Illusion", 2000). This dialogue shows that there are limits also to the adoption of play identities. Elf tries to find confirm the offline identity of his interlocutor, rather allowing the invention of an online play identity. My character on Little Italy MOO is English, but Elf doesn't behave towards me as though I was actually English, any more than I behave towards him as though he were actually an elf. This dialogue shows that both genuine offline ethnicities, and claimed ethnic identities assumed in online play, can be socially rejected within an online social space.

When Elf asks which part of Italy I come from, he may not just be making conversation – he may be trying to identify the regional sub-identity of his supposedly Italian interlocutor. There are strong regional identities within Italy, and a secessionist party is represented in the coalition currently governing the country.

Moving from ethnicities to racial identities, Lisa Nakamura's study of Asianness in LambdaMOO (Nakamura, 1995) illustrates the social rejection of a minority racial identity within an online social space. She finds that the Asian online characters in LambdaMOO tend to be racially stereotyped characters used by non-Asian LambdaMOOers for exotic identity tourism. The idea of an Asian LambdaMOOer adopting an Asian character, on the other hand, is criticized by a non-Asian LambdaMOOer as "getting in somebody's face with your race". Nakamura does however consider that a more positive use of Asian characters, to enhance expression and insight and to "jam the ideology-machine", is possible, and she calls for player scripts that do this.

Yahoo! doesn't want you to be Irish

The company Yahoo! offers cybercitizens a free web site. Anyone taking up this offer is required to fill in an online form. (To see the form, go to <http://geocities.yahoo.com/home> and click on the links "Sign up for a free web site" and then "Sign up now".) When Yahoo! bought GeoCities, GeoCities members were required to fill in the form before being allowed to edit their own, previously-built, web sites. Obligatory entries in this form include birth date, gender, time zone, and "language and content". If your language is English, the options for "language and content" are

English – United States, English – United Kingdom,
English – Australia, English – Canada, English – Hong Kong, English – India,
English – New Zealand, English – Singapore, English – Other Asia

No other options are possible; in particular there is no possibility of choosing "English – None of the above", and Yahoo! reserves the right to terminate the Yahoo! account of anyone who gives false or incomplete information when filling out the form (Yahoo!, 2002). So if you are an English speaker from the Republic of Ireland, or South Africa, or Uganda, you have a problem.

It does make sense for the cybercitizen to choose one of the languages in the list offered by Yahoo! – if they do not speak any of the languages that Yahoo! is available in then they will not find Yahoo! very useful, and by indicating a language they can ensure that the Yahoo! pages they receive will be in this language. The "content" information, however, does not serve the cybercitizen but Yahoo!. The reason why Yahoo! asks for this information is simple: Yahoo! wants to fit the people who use its web page service into pre-existing marketing categories, so that marketers' content can be more efficiently targeted.

Yahoo! is not the only company that requires people who use its online services to reveal their demographics: this is common practice among companies running commercial virtual communities. In VirComm 2000, the most important international conference for such companies, the conference organisers' introduction to my presentation stated

“Member demographics are one of the most important commodities for virtual communities.”

Rasheed Araeen is quoted in (Sardar & Van Loon, 1999) as saying:

I can say I'm Asian, Indian, Pakistani, British, European, Muslim, Oriental, secular, modernist, postmodernist... Do they define my identity? Can I accept all of them as part of my life, or must I choose one thing or another according to someone else's notion about my identity? I have no problem in saying that I'm all of these things, and perhaps none of these things at the same time.

Systems like Yahoo!'s choose the parameters by which the identity of cybercitizens using the service is described, and also force a cybercitizen to make a unique choice between the different options. If Rasheed Araeen tried to have a Yahoo! web page, he would be forced to choose between *United Kingdom*, *India*, and *Other Asia*. His choice would be constrained according to Yahoo!'s notion (or Yahoo!'s advertisers' notion) about the possibilities for his identity.

Nevertheless, not all online spaces impose this type of constraint. The Internet has been playing a part in the support of some ethnicities that are difficult to sustain offline, whether of minority ethnic groups or of more complex identities that barely exist offline. I will give two examples of this later in this article. Widening the field to social identities in general, there is some evidence that the Internet can facilitate the construction of complex or contingent gender identities. For example, in a study of two online social spaces (Mowbray, 2000, 2001), I found people declaring themselves to have more complex/unusual gender identities online than offline.

On the Net everyone used to be an American

In the early days of the World Wide Web, the *New York Times* reported one Japanese website manager as saying “on the 'net everyone is an American” (McClymer, 2001). David Brake's article “The US Wide Web” (Brake, 1996) discusses how this assumption by US web designers impaired the functionality of some web sites for non-US cybercitizens. Lockard (1996) lamented that because of the dominance of cyber-English, “quasi-anglicized subjects have been compelled to accept quasi-expression as the condition for having even minimal online expression”.

However, the Internet is now much less US-centric and Anglophone in human population, in content, and in technical infrastructure than when Lockard and Brake wrote their articles. According to Brake's article, 84% of Internet users then lived in North America. Now the figure is estimated at 35%, and people whose first language is English are in a minority on the Internet (Global Reach, 2002). These demographic trends look set to continue. Newcomers to the Internet have been producing online content and applications in their own first languages and from their own cultural perspectives, and previously-constructed sites are responding to these demographic changes with support for multiple languages and nationalities - although, as the Yahoo! example shows, they

do not necessarily do this perfectly. Modern browsers have become quite good at supporting the more widely used languages, including some non-alphabetic ones such as Chinese. (The electronic assistance provided by Chinese word-processing systems mean that Chinese need be no slower or clumsier to use online than English.) In the future, translation software and voice-based systems may help to enable Internet use by minority-language speakers, and even by people who cannot read.

Early claims that Internet technology inherently enforces US or Western cultural values, for example an aversion to government censorship (Gilmore, 1993), now appear less convincing in the light of the use of Internet technology by militant anti-Western organizations and the successful adoption of the Internet in states like Singapore.

In my opinion, the fears that Internet technology has a strong inherent linguistic or cultural bias in favour of US or Western ethnicities may have been exaggerated. However at the moment the Internet has a strong *economic* bias, against the global poor. If very few people in your ethnic group are on the Internet it is not so easy to use the Internet to support your ethnicity. An ethnic group might have very few members with access to the Internet because its members lack the means to pay for Internet access, lack access to training and technical support, or lack a reliable electricity supply. For example, lack of online support for the Ndebele language and culture is probably not the biggest barrier to the use of the Internet by the Ndebele people of Southern Africa.

Despite the reservations and limitations I have described in this article, I am optimistic about the Internet's potential as a tool for supporting ethnicities that face problems offline. I will end with two examples of this, one apparently frivolous and one clearly serious.

May the Force be with you

My apparently frivolous example is that of Jedi Knights. (This is the fictional religion in the film "Star Wars".) Here is an extract from a chain email that was circulated in several countries undergoing a census in 2001:

It has been suggested that anyone who does not have a dominant religion to put "Jedi" as their religion. Send this on to all your friends and tell them to put down "Jedi" on their census form.

The campaign is thought to have started in New Zealand (Brightwell, 2001), but also figured in censuses in Canada ("Zedbadee", 2001), South Africa (Hayes, 2001), Australia, and England and Wales.

Sherry Turkle and others have pointed out the relevance of Victor Turner's theory of liminality to the identity play in some forms of Internet communication (Turkle, 1995). People in liminal states do not fit easily into the identity categories that structure the societies within which they exist. A typical use of liminality is to criticise and destabilize

categorizations through poking fun at them from outside or from in between the categories. This email campaign is a textbook example. It appears just to be a frivolous piece of fun, but hides a serious criticism of the religion question in the census (what about those who have no religion, what about those with religious beliefs who are not members of a dominant organized religion, what about potential misuses of the census data on religion). The campaign was, in part, a disguised protest that the census forms were enforcing preconceptions of acceptable religious identities. This is an example of a wider issue, that government bureaucracy (and the bureaucracy of commercial companies, as the Yahoo! example shows) may enforce standard preconceptions of ethnicities.

The reaction from the Australian and UK authorities showed that the campaign did succeed in provoking those whose job it is to police these categorizations. The Australian media publicized a quotation by the head of the Australian census organization that appeared to threaten fines for anyone declaring themselves to be Jedi (CNN, 2001). As a result of the public reaction to this, the Australian Bureau of Statistics went to the length of issuing a special press release assuring that genuine followers of the Jedi religion would not be fined (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). The UK authorities originally announced that any such entries would not be tallied but would be lumped together with all other miscellaneous answers to the “religion” question (BBC, 2001). They later relented “because a large group of people have entered it on their forms”, and assigned “Jedi Knight” its own code number for tallying census answers (Reuters, 2001).

Unprecedented opportunity for the Kurds

My clearly serious example is the Kurdistan web, <http://www.humanrights.de/~kurdweb>, a web of sites about the Kurdish people and culture. For me this is a clear example of what the Internet can achieve for ethnicities that have difficulties offline. This quotation is taken from one of the front pages of the Kurdistan Web.

The Internet has opened the unprecedented opportunity for the Kurds in various corners of the earth to discuss among themselves and provide to others information on their culture, politics and human heritage. It has also laid for open discussion these hitherto forbidden topics to millions of Kurds living in such restrictive societies as Turkey. It has likewise reinvigorated the voice of smaller Kurdish communities as the Guraní, Kalhurí, Pehlí, Hewramí, Kirmashaní and their rich, millennial literature. (Kurdistan Web, 1995-2001)

The Kurdistan Web is an example of how the Internet can reinforce an ethnic group across international boundaries. Interestingly, it may simultaneously be an example of how the Internet can facilitate the fracturing of an ethnicity into sub-identities: notice how the extract quoted above highlights smaller subgroups within the Kurds. Many other geographically-dispersed stateless groups use the Internet in a similar way to the Kurds (although the Kurdish use of the Internet is particularly well developed), to maintain and strengthen their common consciousness of their shared origins and traditions, and for

practical support within their group. The Kurdistan Web is also directed towards non-Kurdish visitors - one of its purposes is to try to strengthen acceptance of the Kurdish identity by non-Kurds.

These examples show that, despite the difficulties and limitations that do exist, the Internet has potential for constructing and maintaining ethnicities that might face difficulties without it.

Discussion Questions

1. Are there circumstances under which the construction and support of a complex ethnicity is not desirable?
2. Internet communications can help unite ethnic groups that are geographically dispersed, but can also promote the fragmentation of ethnic identities. What factors influence which of these two tendencies will dominate in a given context?
3. Online communication can be especially effective within an organizational structure consisting of a loose affiliation of small closely-knit local groups. Are there ethnic groups whose culture is particularly well suited – or particularly badly suited - to this organizational structure?

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