

Introduction: Internet Identities in Europe

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It is over a half century since the notion of European integration was first mooted by French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman. Yet those attending the conference ‘Internet Identity in Europe’, held at the University of Sheffield in September 2004 were in no doubt: despite the flow of ICT-related and other initiatives from EU institutions, there is little evidence of the emergence in the intervening decades of a specifically European identity.¹ This has been underlined in recent days by the French and Dutch publics’ rejection of the proposed European constitution. For the majority of Europe’s citizens, accumulated socio-historical, cultural, political and economic identifications with their nation state or historic region continue to outweigh their identification with Europe.

As Andreas Hepp underlines in his keynote contribution to this volume, this is not to suggest that Europe does not figure among the repertoire of potential identifications for its residents. And that is true not only of the EU’s founder members but also countries such as Spain, Greece, Portugal or Ireland that had been out of phase with the modernisation of these core nations in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. For these so-called peripheral states, entry into Europe represented a leap into modernity, and for those emerging from totalitarian regimes, a leap into democracy. The abstract, amorphous and idealized understanding of Europe that eased these early identifications enabled national politicians to confer their own substance on it, imbuing it rhetorically with whatever qualities and possibilities seemed pragmatically desirable at the time. It also tended to make this optimism unsustainable as citizens adjusted their expectations in the light of experience: the naturalization or gradual erosion of the benefits of new membership, for example, or the impossibility of satisfying the often conflicting hopes invested in Europe in the face of serial compromises on the part of their own national representatives and the perceived intransigence of others’. Being less historically resonant or socio-culturally embedded, less grounded in custom and habit, less pluridimensional than national or regional feeling, European identifications have also proved to be less resilient, less proof against adversity and disaffection. The French ‘Non’, coming as it does from a European ‘core’ member, has been widely interpreted not only as a rejection of the

pragmatism or cynicism of national government but also as an indictment of the failure of EU technocrats to carry the public with them. Citizens' anxieties concerning the socio-political and above all, economic models underpinning EU policies, structures and institutions – anxieties that had previously found almost no formal channels for expression – are now resonating across the European public sphere. Against this background European identity, however conceived, has rarely looked less appealing.

The focus of the Sheffield conference was the Internet's role in European identity construction. In contributions reproduced here, Paul Stubbs and Margaret Andrews both highlight the role of Internet activism in supplementing this perceived democratic deficit which has opened up at a time when Europe's technocrats have been responding to wider socio-political, cultural and economic shifts in which ICT has played a crucial role. By facilitating a broadening of national horizons in response to globalizing economic forces, the Internet in particular has contributed to a certain weakening, but not yet a displacement, of established national identifications – especially clear among younger people, who tend to be more at home in the Web's globalizing social and cultural networks. But as Andrews notes, regional identities, often supported by resources from nation states and the EU, so far appear more able to hold their own. The role of the Internet in these processes and its strategic importance in EU planning and policy-making are set to become still more significant as Europe expands and its formal institutions are extended and consolidated:

[t]here has been a radical change in thinking on the part of governments concerning the role of communications technologies in social and economic development. The EU is now embarked on a drive to become a dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy. ⁱⁱ

Yet, here too, evidence of citizens' engagement with these strategies is at best ambivalent. Surveys in advance of the French and Dutch constitutional referenda suggest that the harmonisation of commercial procedures, in which ICT is playing its part, is widely perceived in those nations as bureaucratic homogenization: that its role in increasing the mobility of goods, services and people figures as a threat to jobs and personal, local and national prosperity, and its association with the knowledge economy as a byword for wasteful bureaucratic initiatives impelled by unaccountable

Eurocrats in remote institutions. At this moment of crisis it seems that the only voices speaking audibly in favour of EU policy are those who formulate it. Some of these policy makers are attuned to the Internet's broader potential, its cultural and culturally-integrative as well as its primarily commercial possibilities. But it is exceptionally difficult to predict what form the materialization of this potential and its impact might be; the Internet is, after all, a communications channel and as such essentially inert until mobilized more or less creatively by its users. The Lund principles, agreed at the Lisbon summit in 2000, do formally register this broader potential.

Europe's cultural and scientific knowledge resources are a unique public asset forming the collective and evolving memory of our diverse societies and providing a solid basis for the development of our digital content industries in a sustainable knowledge society. ⁱⁱⁱ

They render it once again however in terms of essentially commercial formulae. There seems little here to inspire individual or collective identification with the strategy outlined. National representatives charged with imbuing these formulae with qualities that will resonate in their locales certainly have their work cut out.

The gulf between these codified phrases and the everyday on-line interaction of millions of EU citizens hardly needs to be underlined. For those with access to the necessary skills and resources, this interaction opens up new possibilities for making sense of the world and their place in it, even when it is restricted largely to the workplace. If its novelty derives in the great majority of cases from the medium itself, there are instances where existing cultural spaces are being creatively expanded, and some where exhilarating new spaces are being independently created. And these creative opportunities continue to grow, even among members of the European population once largely cut off from them: older people, for example, or low-income and other relatively disadvantaged groups.

In their contributions to this volume, Julia Davies provides a vivid example of one instance of this, while Sita Popat describes an EU-funded dance project designed to promote cross-national collaborations. But at a time when astrophysicists are exploiting the potential of isolated technological energies by harnessing idling Internet-connected computers for their complex calculations there are no analogous

initiatives in prospect, metaphorical or otherwise, to harness these fragmented cultural energies for some larger European purpose.^{iv}

For the reasons outlined above, even if activists in Croatian towns or Catalan cities or German-based Turkish guest-workers now have the means to make contact with collaborators beyond their locale, it is difficult to see why they should restrict their virtual mobility and identifications to a European frame – even were it always technologically possible to do so. This raises a question at the very heart of the EU identity crisis which, as David Stone points out in his essay, turns on notions of being and belonging: if, as proposed five years ago in the Lund principles, national cultural heritage is to be made accessible by digital means, which identities will it put into the foreground?

There are also the thorny technico-legal issues that surround the practical operation of Internet identities: questions of intellectual property rights, authenticity, and (since, as Andrew Prescott's essay here highlights, obsolescence is an economic drain on public bodies) the formulation of standards and practices. Who or what will be the key drivers in these processes and decisions at a European level: business interests, politicians, civil society? And who would benefit if EU institutional initiatives were, over time, to generate a recognizably European Internet identity, particularly as individual users routinely articulate the Internet's value for them in terms of individual difference, or communities of difference?

Participants at the Sheffield conference were asked to consider these and other questions arising from the notion of Internet identities in Europe. As noted, of the seven contributions to the volume, none found compelling evidence for the emergence of Internet-based forms of European identity, though all address questions of Internet-based identity in a European context. In his essay 'Me, Myself and I(T). Considering Identity in the Age of Technology', David Stone provides an initial orientation for the conference theme by placing the questions it raises in a broad philosophical context. How might the Internet be said to be promoting or inhibiting the development of modern European identity? What factors facilitate the coexistence of multiple identities? What is the link between knowledge, action and power? What does technology contribute to our being?

Invoking Heidegger's definition of our limitations as spatially and temporal finite beings, Stone suggests that our knowledge and access to technology are limited because they can never be anything more than partial. He refers the contribution of

the Internet to our identity as beings, to the wider technological revolution that ended the era of metaphysical knowledge. The inadequacy of the technological version of the truth lies in the fact that we become mesmerized by process at the expense of content. It is here, he argues, that the specific danger of the Internet's limitations lie, a danger linked as much to our modern subjectivity as to the power of modern technology to ease our ability to communicate identities. The task of introducing ourselves as individuals or group members to other Internet users gives us opportunities to define our identity according to new codes of behaviour. We join on-line groups by means of self-identification or self-definition, as there is no one to introduce us into a cyberspace chat-room as we are introduced in off-line social situations. To this extent, our identity tends to be defined without physical qualification when we join a chat-room, while our membership of cybernetic communities in real life is structured by technological possibilities, our personal tastes and computing skills.

In his keynote essay 'New media connectivity: a new world of mobility. The Internet, identity and deterritorialization in Europe', Andreas Hepp focuses on what he sees as a defining aspect of these technological possibilities. At the heart of European practices and debates around Internet and identity, he argues, is the relation of media connectivity to deterritorializing cultural change. Connectedness or connectivity as such is not a new phenomenon; but while the pilgrimages that brought medieval travellers, for example, into contact with other cultures were anchored in physical relations, newer forms of connectivity tend to be increasingly mediated. By enabling connections to be made readily beyond national borders, Internet and other communications media are encouraging the emergence of more mobile identities. To this extent, Hepp argues, digital media such as the Internet are inextricable from a wider process of media globalization. He grounds his examination of this process in a historicized analysis of media connectivity linked to the rise of deterritorialized identities. Drawing examples from German-Turkish Internet portal 'Vaybee', however, and 'Attac', an Internet portal for the critical globalization movement within Europe, he underlines the persistence of territorially-bounded components within mobile, deterritorialized phenomena. He concludes that Europe is serving as a context for the constitution not of a new European identity or identities, but of more mobile deterritorial identities that, for the moment at least, retain marked territorial components.

The five remaining essays in the volume explore specific instances of Internet community building in Europe, its strengths and limitations: in three of them, these instances are primarily cultural and educational; in the other two they are examples of cultural politics. Dance specialist Sita Popat opens this half of the volume with a rare example of an attempt to use Internet communications to forge an explicitly cross-national identity. ‘The on-line devising process: creating theatre through Internet collaboration’ is an account of a ‘Eurodans Project’ mounted in 2002 and involving 26 student dancers from seven European countries. The record of her experience demonstrates that the Internet offers creative possibilities for facilitating dance collaborations, as well as technological innovations to reduce the distance between artists and to aid teaching and learning. Alongside the advantages of synchronous communication, however, Popat registers significant challenges: among them, the expense of the project and the need to find ways of compensating for the lack of opportunities for studio-based improvisation. But by seeking creative responses to these and other challenges, she suggests, they were able to use Internet technologies to find new ways of expressing the identities of individual groups, of groups of dancers from specific countries, and of the dance group project as a whole.

In his essay on ‘Welsh Internet identities’, Andrew Prescott looks at the role of the Internet in the development of one form of identity in a scholarly research context. In a profusely illustrated account of the founding and development of the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth (NLWA), he underscores the importance of such institutions in the construction and international legitimation of national cultural identity. He notes that universalist principles were as compelling as nationalist motives in the minds of the library pioneers, however, and found outward expression and authority in the library catalogue. Given the cost and complexity of compiling such catalogues it is no surprise to learn that libraries were at the forefront of Internet use from its inception. Prescott provides a useful history of the Internet’s rapid technical evolution and notes its early adoption by librarians at the NLWA, who quickly recognized the potential of the new technology for overcoming the Library’s relative geographical isolation. At the same time, he notes the adoption by other key actors in identity creation of library Internet traditions, among them the Council of European National Librarians. By acting as a gateway to Europe’s national libraries, this body has helped to enhance the accessibility of information on the NLWA and its holdings. Comparing these processes with other national developments in library

communication through the Internet, Prescott concludes that this medium, rather than easing the emergence of transnational identifications, has actively reinforced the importance of these libraries as symbols of the nation.

Popat and Prescott explore the Internet as a medium for semi-formal learning and teaching or an institutional facilitator of scholarly research, before considering how these intersect with its role in the formation of identities. Julia Davies turns our attention to the informal educational potential of the Internet, and, specifically, its ability to generate communities among young people whose repertoire of possible identifications would otherwise be severely limited by reduced off-line interaction with peers. In “‘Hello who ru?! **big welcome hugs** I’m a newbie” Teenage identities and connections on line’, she provides a vivid insight into two teenage on-line communities and their roles in apprentice learning. The two communities in question are ‘The Magic Web’, for young women who self-identify as teenaged witches, and the AYME message board, for young people with ME. Approaching both as ‘communities of practice’ enables Davies to explore how participants learn from other group members as they establish a shared history, experiment with identities and voices, and develop negotiation and other skills of value in off-line as well as on-line worlds.

In her analysis of Internet use by Castilian and Catalan feminist groups, Margaret Andrews extends the focus from communities of practice to communities of praxis. Like Paul Stubbs in the volume’s concluding essay, she is particularly concerned with the production and off-line implications of forms of on-line activism. ‘The persistence of ethics and the search for solidarity: feminist Internet spaces in Spain’ explores the ethical potential of digitally-mediated activism. She rejects polarized accounts of the Internet as either a uniformly utopic or dystopic space, drawing on Castilian and Catalan examples to illustrate that it is, rather, a socially constructed space in which practices are inflected by the constraints and possibilities that operate in users’ pre-existing, non-virtual, interactions. In an interesting aside on the essay by Davies, who describes users with limited opportunities to engage with peers off-line learning and honing core skills on-line, Andrews argues that on-line activism supports feminist ethical self-identifications most effectively when it reinforces off-line activism – specifically when it is accompanied by, and used to amplify, pressure for off-line social change. Similarly, the factors inhibiting these identifications, such as language barriers or limited Internet access among more disadvantaged groups, derive as much

from the wider power relations in which their activities are embedded as from the character of the technology itself. Partly because pre-existing non-virtual praxis tends to be more thoroughly embedded in local and global networks, she sees more evidence of contingent forms of identity than of an emergent, overarching, European identity.

In 'The ZaMir (for peace) Network: from transnational social movement to Croatian NGO' Paul Stubbs recontextualizes some of the questions around virtual solidarity that are explored by Andrews and Hepp. The fact that he has himself participated in the processes described gives his analysis special resonance. The impact of the recent wars in the east of the European continent on Europe's wider political community has yet to be measured, Stubbs observes. In war-torn Croatia, however, issues are being raised that have particular significance for sociological scholarship on community studies, especially work addressing the creation and growth of networks. Particularly significant here is his critique of cyber-activism, which questions the validity of the concept and its relation to previous studies of activist networks. ZaMir, he notes, was a pacifist movement created in the cyberspace age and intent on rebuilding connections between individuals and communities, and it is no accident that lively debates among activists hailing from many human-rights and women's groups were conducted over the Web. Stubbs examines how this political movement functioned through the Internet and traces its activists' transformation from techno-hippies to technocrats as the amateur political group became professionalized and absorbed into an institutional role.

ⁱ The editors, as organizers of the Conference, gratefully acknowledge the generous financial assistance of the British Academy

ⁱⁱ See Information Society, Directorate-General, section 6, 'Regulatory Framework', eEurope 2005 in *Towards an Information Society for All*, p. 21.

ⁱⁱⁱ See 'The Lund Principles: Conclusions of Experts Meeting', Lund, Sweden, 4 April 2001, *European Content in Global Networks. Coordination Mechanisms for Digitisation Programmes*, p. 1.

^{iv} See [Hhttp://setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu/H](http://setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu/H) (accessed 1 June 2005).