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Online, Offline and Beyond: The Social Imaginary in a Scottish Diasporic Online Group

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Abstract
This project uses the method of depth hermeneutics to examine how a group of relatively technologically unsophisticated online discussion participants innovate in the formation of a social imaginary, as defined in Thompson's (1990) explication of the use of media to facilitate social interaction. By deploying a diverse range of technologies with which they are competent, the group avoids the uncertainties of new modalities of social networking such as those represented by Second Life, MySpace and Facebook, while pursuing their goal of discursively negotiating a Scottish cultural identity both online and offline.

Keywords
Scotland, online community, social imaginary, Scottish Diaspora, social networking

Introduction

Computer-mediated communication and the virtual world are features of daily life for so many people, and have been for so long, that the phrase "new media" has lost most of its cachet. Beginning with the first electronic mail experiments in the early 1970s, computer users have been exploring new ways to connect across physical and temporal boundaries. One group which has been active in fostering interconnections between its members is the Scottish culture community that has grown up on the Usenet newsgroup "soc.culture.scottish," often abbreviated by its participants as "SCS."

Usenet predates the Internet and the World Wide Web. Although other computer-related technologies have faded into the dim technological Pleistocene, Usenet continues as a collection of vibrant online discussions in part because Google™ Groups offers simple web-based access to hundreds of Usenet newsgroups. Such newsgroups have no formal process of membership.

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Anyone wishing to participate in any newsgroup may simply access the newsgroup through Google ™ Groups (which requires establishing a free logon and password). Once that is done, users can select newsgroups in which to participate. Some newsgroups are moderated, but even then do not require formal membership; moderation means only that a participant's post will not be allowed onto the newsgroup until it has been approved by the moderator.

Newsgroups are identified within a hierarchical naming topology. "Soc" groups deal with social groupings, "rec" groups with various kinds of recreational activities, "comp" groups deal with a broad range of computer-related issues and so on.

Within the hierarchy, for instance, the group "soc.culture.scottish" denotes a newsgroup where the discussion is concerned with any issue touching on the cultures of Scotland, its histories, its people, their heritages and the ways the idea of Scotland as nation and as cultural identity affects people who somehow identify themselves with Scotland (Cockburn 2006). The newsgroup is not a backwater. It is the site of an ongoing, collaborative, multinational effort to create, define and enact a Scottish community identity—an online social imaginary (Thompson 1990) where a Scottish Diaspora identity is collaboratively constructed and mediated.

Usenet's ease of access and low technological requirements are not unmixed blessings. Alongside the vibrant discussion is a constant stream of crackpots, spammers, scammers and disruptors who post intentionally provocative "flames" in response to participants, advertise pornographic websites, and engage in various forms of hate speech which are often cross-posted to a multitude of newsgroups simultaneously. Participation on many Usenet newsgroups, in a way similar to participation in most physical communities, means learning how to winnow the precious kernels of conversation from the abundant chaff. While some participants engage with disruptive posters (presumably for their own entertainment), the general response to disruptions on unmoderated newsgroups is to ignore them as much as possible.

Some newsgroups, under the editorial control of a moderator, remain relatively free of disruption. The moderator or moderators must approve each post, which tends to make the free interplay of conversation less spontaneous, particularly if the moderator for some reason is not able to read and approve posts in a timely manner. Although moderated groups are quieter, like a gated neighbourhood, the preference of Usenet participants seems to be for unmoderated newsgroups, where the interaction is more freewheeling and "democratic" although the "noise level" is higher.

Conceptual Framework

Many things have changed in the online world in the intervening span from the first email to the present day. Thirty-five years after the first emails, the online role-playing "space" Second Life offers its members the opportunity to create their own avatars, own virtual real estate, undertake virtual intellectual production, and bring their products—both "real" and "virtual"—to market and sell them to customers for real-world dollars. Second Life introduces a communicative nuance lacking on Usenet: a physical presentation, representations of virtual "spaces" in the form of "islands," and a simulacrum of "travel" from one virtual space to another. Nor is Second Life only for the dilettante. American and Canadian universities are experimenting with Second Life as an online course-delivery tool, hundreds of thousands of very real dollars change hands in transactions between members every month, and Reuters has established a correspondent in Second Life to send out regular dispatches for publication in "First Life" newspapers.

It is still too early to take account of the effect of Second Life's interactive spaces on the real-world connections of a broad population spectrum. Like most technologies, the users will conceptualize it according to their own needs and innovate within it according to their ability to overcome perceived deficiencies. Even in the presence of communications technologies that could be judged qualitatively "better" for enabling direct synchronous communication, less sophisticated technologies frequently offer simpler access and other advantages to users (Hays 2005).

A good example is offered by Usenet, essentially a mass-emailing technology that allows users to send messages to a central site from which they are distributed to anyone who has subscribed to that "newsgroup." Even in light of memory-hungry web browsers and graphical user interfaces, Usenet still functions efficiently over dialup networks. Dialup (at speeds below 56Kb/sec) is still a common access technology for Internet and web browsing. In Canada, for instance, the Government of Alberta has supported the development of the Supernet network connecting rural users to high-speed internet, while the government of the neighbouring province of British Columbia has not taken a similar initiative. The author enjoys high-speed access in excess of 1.5 Mb/sec through his university office, yet 40 kilometres (about 25 miles) away his home connects via a 28K dialup line.

Taking the technological limitations of access into account also serves to highlight the

ways in which the message is carried within the technology. In a sense the technology becomes transparent once access has been established. Transfer of information may be at a rate slower than the user would wish, but nonetheless the connection is established and attention turns to matters of content rather than infrastructure. How people construct and express their online community identities is a central question to the present study. Usenet groups are primarily text-based. Observing the communicative interactions of Usenet investigates how a community can be imagined into being from the written word, what differentiates one community from another, and what roles such communities play in the lives of their participants. The main theoretical concept that focuses the study is the "social imaginary" (Thompson 1990).

A social imaginary allows a community, culture or sodality (Appadurai 1996) to call itself into being, collectively make meaning of its existence, and set itself apart from other, perhaps similar groups (Anderson 1991). The concept of the sodality is used intentionally. In formulating the concept, Appadurai (1996) explicitly links sodalities as communities of interest to the use of imagination in the formation of cultural groups (p. 8), which at the same time transcend class boundaries to allow at least some voice to all participants in the discussion (p. 10). The imaginative sodality thus equates strongly with the social imaginary, a social construction that imagines itself into being with reference to mediated images of culture and society.

In a sodality, people who have grouped together around a common interest or concern mutually contribute to the group's understanding of the central point of interest. This like-mindedness, along with calling the sodality itself into being, is the means by which the group also distinguishes itself from other groups through the collective imagination of a history, replete among other things with myths of origin and cultural practices validated by the cachet of long tradition (Hall 1995; Hobsbawm 1983). When this takes place through computer-mediated communication, the online social imaginary thus formed engages in a collaborative process of imagination very similar to that observed in groups meeting physically (face-to-face, "F2F," or in-real-life, "IRL").

Usenet and other computer communication models such as the Internet and the World Wide Web meet the definition of a mass medium—which is created when a sender "employs a technology as a medium to communicate with a large audience" (Baran and Davis 2003: 10). Traditional mass media forms (such as newspapers and broadcasting) are conceptualized as "one-to-many" communication, while Usenet and similar media forms are characterized as

"many-to-many" because not only can one person reach a wide audience, but audience members can also contribute to the overall creation of the message by talking back to the producer and to each other.

The growth of weblogs or "blogs" from a fringe activity to a significant (though journalistically problematic) information source illustrates this evolution. Not only does anyone with the desire to blog have instant access to the "power of the press" but any reader may join in the resulting conversation by posting their comments in response or even linking to their own blog. Concerns raised over the "quality" of the civic debate thus enabled are spurious. It is hard to argue in favour of quality in civic debate when Canada's Parliamentary Question Period donnybrooks are regular features on news broadcasts and America's politicians engage in public mud-slinging. The crucial point is that debate and discussion are enabled across a spectrum of fora.

The method of depth hermeneutics offers some tools for delving into the process of community interaction online. Depth hermeneutics considers three distinct concepts that all support what is named a "social imaginary:" what effect the *technological requirements* of media have on the users, how the *users interact* with each other in the meaning-making process, and finally what the *researcher's reinterpretation* makes out of the roles of the social imaginary and technological media (in this case the Internet) in the construction of identity (Thompson 1990). In the context of this study, understanding how communities create themselves online provides insight into the effects of computer technology and new media on more traditional forms of human interaction.

Because the social imaginary elucidated by Thompson's method of depth hermeneutics is a discursive production, there may be grounds for confusion over the distinction between a depth hermeneutical analysis and a discourse analysis. If a distinction is to be usefully drawn, a further separation must take place to define *which* "discourse analysis" is being opposed to depth hermeneutics. Foucaultian discourse analysis has a number of similarities to the method of depth hermeneutics.

An important difference, however, is that depth hermeneutics also accounts for the limiting or enabling effects of message technology on the discourse—taking a broader view of what is "said" and how factors outside the discourse affect the perception and use of the discourse. Conversely, Foucaultian discourse analysis spends much more energy on an intimate unpacking

of discourse, as much as possible in isolation from external factors—though practitioners acknowledge that no discourse truly exists in isolation (Powers 2001). When the object of analysis is a mediated discourse, the technology and its effects are inseparable from the message, leading to the methodological choice of depth hermeneutics.

The use of media as a forum for cultural definition is not new. "Offline" media traditionally have provided some sense of what a Scottish identity might entail—from books about Scottish heritage, the works of Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott, to productions of the stage and screen ranging from "Brigadoon" to "Braveheart." These are part of the Scottish mediascape, made up of embedded layers of images and concepts in productions put before audiences.

These productions become "strips of reality" (Appadurai 1996) which people use to weave their own concept of what Scotland is and how they imagine themselves in relation to it. Because this is a subjective process, there is not a single unified Scottish identity. Rather, there are multiple identities, each somewhat fragmented and all playing against, with, through and into each other in a constantly shifting dance.

Further conflicts over identities arise when immigrant descendants—frequently identifying themselves as diasporic groups such as the "Scottish Diaspora" —try to reconnect their cultures with "their" homeland. The geographical distance between Scotland and North America influences the ways that people calling themselves Scottish-Americans or Scottish Canadians envision their Scottish identities. Celebrations of Scottish heritage away from Scotland have also introduced new "traditions" into the cultural repertoire, such as the "Kirking of the Tartans" ceremony conducted only at Scottish heritage festivals in the United States (Ray 2001).

As SCS participants communicate, they engage, with varying degrees of intent, in the formation of a cultural identity. Those taking part in the discussion of Scottish culture and heritage who are outside Scotland, in a kind of turn-about, also use the discussion to facilitate the ongoing imagination of their nations as built of immigrant imaginings (Appadurai 1996). As they participate in the collective discussion and negotiation of an online culture—a culture centered on what it means to be "Scottish" created by members from around the world—they are creating a version of Scottish culture that exists primarily as an online construction. The existence of a kind of Scottish cultural identity online serves to directly link the homeland with the diasporic

population, helping members at both "ends" of the discussion to understand the nuances of the homeland and the ways that homeland is perceived among those who "went Away."

Authority on SCS is partially constituted by some connection to Scotland, the closer the better. While most participants at least profess some form of Scottish heritage, participants who live in Scotland at present are evidently assumed to have greater speaking authority with respect to current events in Scottish life. This does not necessarily translate into the formation of an elite composed of Scottish in-residents. In a community defined almost solely by words and participation through regular expression, social capital and speaking authority are earned by one's participation in ways that tend to solidify rather than fragment the group's collective engagement.

To create an identity in this way is a performance, scripted in a way, modified and expanded according to the reaction of the intended audience. Identity is entirely constituted within interactions with others (Hall 1995). These interactions are frequently influenced by the mediascape (Appadurai 1996). For Hall, identity is flexible and multiple, contingent and transitory, always fragmented and always in transformation—much as Appadurai's mediascape is continually shifting. Hall additionally points out that identity has profound political consequences, as support for political positions can shift unpredictably depending upon the importance people place on various contested aspects of their identities.

In terms of cultural identities, the nation as a myth or sign is "a system of cultural representation" (Hall 1995: 612). The *idea* of the nation is the space within which people create the national culture. National culture attempts to create unity, which Hall likewise points out is impossible. What the national idea really constructs is a power differential favouring an elite, within which the differences inherent in cultural identities are reconstituted as contributory streams to the elite national identity. "Modern nations," says Hall, "are all cultural hybrids" (Hall 1995: 617).

In the daily give-and-take that characterizes Usenet discussion groups such as SCS, participants enact a grounded, bottom-up formation of their collective identities, which is different from the traditional top-down formation of identities represented by nationalism. Like the physical nation of Scotland, the newsgroup is a site of multiple cultures in process, because it serves several constituencies with varying degrees of overlap between their objectives. Each of these groups or constituencies contains participants from different geographical areas who

collaborate in the process of identity formation, making the newsgroup a globalized effort to construct hybridized collective identities.

Participants in various threads of discussion may cross from one general group to another in some instances, giving support to this or that perspective as it suits their temperament and adding further to the ferment of hybridity within and among identities in contest. The contestation is the pull between two main effects of globalization on cultural identities, "Tradition" versus "Translation" (Hall 1995). Tradition represents pulling back, insularity, and attempts to retain cultural "purity." Translation represents moving ahead, accepting change, hybridizing, and creating new identities. Translation incorporates the notion of modern diaspora; peoples who have been removed permanently from their origins, who cling to their traditions yet have no hope of return to a homeland (or who have no desire to return). In this situation they are "translated" into a "*culture of hybridity*" (Hall 1995: 629, italics in original).

Usenet seems to make the process of collective identity formation visible in a postmodern way. This culture of hybridity flourishes in the globalized, asynchronous, nearly instantaneous communication online, where hybridized global identities and new cultural forms abound. As an example, one of the critical contestations over identities on SCS is that of "Scottish" identity versus "Scottish diaspora" identities.

The production of a mutually imagined sense of community on Usenet comes about through an enabling technology and through the interpretations that receivers create by taking in the produced symbolic forms (Thompson 1990). Although his conception of how people use mass communication technologies to create and make sense of the world has some strong implications which will be explored later, Thompson makes the point that when mass communication is the object of analysis, "*the object of our analysis is itself a pre-interpreted domain*" (1990: 275, italics in original). In other words, what the researcher is attempting to do is to interpret the ways that people are involved in interpretation of their worlds with reference to the symbolic forms of mass communication they see in front of them.

The contemporary mediascape is characterized by the spread of technologies and images and their inherent political and ideological connotations. Because a broad range of images and possible interpretations characterizes these flows, cultural groups in motion (diasporas) can interweave them to imagine and create their worlds with reference to their past and future. In the case of the contestations over Scottish cultures on Usenet, participants have agency or the ability

to be creative, through mediascapes and across what used to be borders. In forming their identities in this way, people employ agency and imagination to create cultural identities that are disconnected from a particular geographic location, yet which draw cultural input (in the form of mediated images) from all the locations upon which they touch (Gilroy 1992).

In the formation of various Scottish identities on Usenet, for example, individuals from several national areas discuss, negotiate and perform cultural identities within a mediascape. In this way the identity formations are not only distributed by mass media (in this case, Usenet), but the particular mass medium itself becomes the forum where identities are constructed by participants in ways that may not be possible in other kinds of media. By allowing the audience to create the message as well as receive it, Usenet enables a dynamic conversation with input from every participant. As an alternate channel of interaction that challenges attempts to exercise control over the message and therefore over the culture (Appadurai 1996), Usenet offers each participant the opportunity to imaginatively perform their identities and to collaborate with others in the creation of cultural forms. Undertaking this project creates a "social imaginary" (Thompson 1990).

Method

The method that most effectively illuminates the ways people make use of media images in the imagination of their identities is depth hermeneutics (Thompson 1990). This method asks three questions of the observed discourse, which overlap to some extent:

1. What is the historical and social context for the production of a particular discourse?
2. What is the content of the discourse itself?
3. What synthesis of meaning can be made from the context and structure provided by the study (Thompson 1990)?

These questions or areas of inquiry will be discussed as separate phases of the research.

The social imaginary represents an interpretive framework applied among the participants of a social group. In this sense, the third phase of a depth hermeneutical analysis entails the examination and interpretation of a pre-interpreted domain. Since it is the investigator's opportunity to interpret the discourse in front of them, it is certainly possible that the larger meaning put forward by the investigator may be at odds with the meaning that participants in the discursive social imaginary believe they are making for themselves. In particular, the ways the

discourse is used to uphold relations of power and dominance may make themselves clear to an outside observer, yet be denied or ignored by participants.

These same three questions, in turn, become the research questions framing the present study. The discursive social imaginary can be equated to online community or culture. The next crucial task is to specify or operationalize the identifying characteristics of online community within the framework of this study. There are three characteristics that I argue point to the existence of an online discursive social imaginary: 1) explicit references to online community; 2) explicit references to the linkage of online to offline or "IRL" community; and 3) the use of forms of address or language that limit comprehension of the message to within a social imaginary whose members have certain specialist knowledge.

Communication plays a role in the differentiation, definition and maintenance of boundaries around cultures, which are constituted through the process of social imagination. The social imagination of an online culture is therefore confirmed by observing online discussion that represents defining, redefining, adapting or negotiating iconic cultural artefacts or practices.

Context of the Study

This study proceeds in the following manner: first, it lays out the socio-historical context for the formation of an online discursive social imaginary on soc.culture.scottish (SCS); second, it presents a purposively-selected example of online discussion that illustrates the development of an online community or discursive social imaginary; and finally it explicates the observed interaction to make a critical interpretation of it.

Since SCS is a forum for the discussion of Scottish cultures and heritages, it is important to briefly visit the historical construction of Scottish heritage identity. This discussion is neither intended to be comprehensive nor extensive, but rather to touch upon a particular iconic image and to suggest additional resources to those who may wish to pursue them. Because in North America the iconic Scot is the Highlander—and, in fact, the iconic Highlander has been co-opted as a main image of Scotland by tourism promotion agencies—the Highlander is the beginning point for this discussion.

The historical foundations of the modern conception of the Highland Scot go back to the reign of Queen Victoria (Finlay 1963; Trevor-Roper 1983). Indeed, Finlay refers to "Balmoralism," or the cult of Highland identity named after the estate to which Queen Victoria

retired in summer; a practice carried on by the current Queen and members of her family. The novels of Sir Walter Scott (in particular *Rob Roy* and *The Maid of Perth*), the formation of Highland Societies, and an intricately detailed nomenclature of clan-related accoutrements such as tartans, badges, mottoes, battle cries and slogans all contributed to a craze for things Scottish and a simultaneous identification of anything Scottish as therefore also of the Highlands. Modern North American heritage enthusiasts who place much importance on the invented cultural nomenclature are derisively called "tartaneers" in Scotland (Ray 2001), while "Balmoralism" has been supplanted on SCS with the label "Brigadoonery."

The necessary foundational myth of the Scottish identity (Hall 1995) is supplied in part by the epic Gaelic poems of the Celtic bard Ossian. This poetry was at the time of its "discovery" and publication widely acclaimed by historians and poets, who declared Ossian the "Gaelic Homer" (Campbell 1862; Trevor-Roper 1983). The poems in fact had been forged by James MacPherson of Edinburgh, who published what were purported to be the "original" Gaelic poems of Ossian in 1807 (Trevor-Roper 1983: 26). Though the provenance of the Ossian poems was suspect at the time, Campbell (1862) suggested in a back-handed way that they must be authentic because MacPherson was an execrable poet in English, while Ossian's poetry was subtle and evocative—obviously beyond MacPherson's rather meagre abilities.

The originary people (Hall 1995) are supplied by the Picts of the Scottish north, supposedly united with the kingdom of the Scots—named Dalriada—under Cinnaid mac Alpin in 843 (Webster 1997). Commonly accepted history has the Picts intermarrying with and eventually becoming subsumed within the Irish settlers who landed on the west coast of Scotland. The barbarous Highlanders of the hill country, after battling with the Romans, who eventually built Hadrian’s Wall to contain them, and with the Norse rievers who came down from the north and east, represent in the mythology the noble savages who resisted all attempts to subjugate them, including those of Edward II. Scottish nationalist pride turns on the critical distinction that while the Irish were forcibly brought within the United Kingdom, the Scots construct their unification on the premise that they were such a fierce people that the English could not beat them conclusively in battle and were forced to negotiate and conciliate their entrance to the United Kingdom (Webster 1997).

The Norman invasion of England and subsequent change from Anglo-Saxon to Norman rule had its effect on Scotland as well, as Normans intermarried with prominent Celtic families.

The Normans also lent their names to the resultant bloodlines, though the names have in many cases since been Gaelicized and Anglicized (Moncrieffe and Hicks 1962). The crossings of the invaders left their mark in Scotland's major language groups. Gaelic, which is held by some proponents of Scottish independence to be the "original" language of Scotland, is a corruption of the Gaelic spoken in Ireland. (The Scots speak of their dialect as "Gaelic" and that spoken in Ireland as "Irish." The Irish refer to their dialect as "Gaelic" and that spoken in Scotland as "Erse.") Scots outside the Highlands disagree with the notion that Gaelic is their original language.

The islands of the Orkneys and Shetlands have as their regional language a form of Gaelic incorporating a large number of Old Norse loan words—a dialect form which has been endangered for many years and may have finally passed into history. To the east and in the southern part of Scotland in what is conceived as "The Lowlands" the recently officially recognized language of Scots is spoken. Linguistically, Scots bears some similarity to Middle English, the language of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Scots, like Middle English, makes use of Anglicized forms of various Latin, French and German loan words along with modernized versions of Anglo-Saxon loan words from Old English, and retains some nuances of expression that have passed out of usage in Modern English.

The matter of language carries a tremendous freight. While some political groups (such as the Scottish National Party, or SNP) have attempted to make the case for government support for Gaelic education in the schools and for Gaelic as the official language of Scottish jurisprudence and administration, and the UK government in the person of the BBC has provided a Scottish Gaelic broadcasting service, opponents of universal Gaelic-medium education have rallied to the cause of Scots as a third major language in Scotland. Supporters of Scots point to its traditional status as the court language of the Scottish kings and to 1996 Scottish census records showing Scots as the language of choice for between 30 and 90 percent of the population depending on geographical region (Wilson 2002: 9).

Against this historic backdrop, various political machinations and expediencies forced large numbers of Scots to seek their fortunes outside Scotland, in America and Canada and elsewhere in the British colonies (Ray 2001). The Scottish heritage established in the United States bears little actual resemblance to the understanding of many historians of the culture from which it purportedly emerged, and imparts meaning to invented cultural performances that likely

were never practiced in Scotland (Ray 2001). Additionally, some Scottish heritage enthusiasts have appropriated the concept of diaspora to signify the enforced movement of the Scots into the world.

Diaspora has become a common and highly politically contested identifier for displaced populations, combining a longing for an identificatory homeland with a claim to speaking authority and political influence as a separate identity (Appadurai 1996). As such, a legitimately laid claim to diaspora status also constitutes a claim for preferential treatment with respect to those who are not politically-displaced incomers. Immigrants sever their ties to their old homeland and cast their lot in with the new, while diasporic populations always hold out the possibility of return—even when there may in fact no longer be a recognizable homeland to which to return (Appadurai 1996; Hall 1995). Certainly time and the assimilation of Scots in the lands where they have settled has taken away the possibility of return. In fact, evidence to suggest that a great deal of supposed Highland culture never in fact existed (Campbell 1862; Trevor-Roper 1983) lends credence to the view that the "Scottish diaspora" itself was an imaginative creation that has served only to validate self-congratulatory claims to preferential treatment.

Notwithstanding the contestation over the culture and its interpretations, the Highlander as an iconic image has a very high and enduring profile. In the United States and Canada the often-cartoonish image of a kilted Scotsman is frequently meant to convey a sense of good monetary value based on the supposed Scottish thrift to the point of miserliness. The use of the word "Scotch" rather than "Scottish" to denote the culture also connotes the stereotype: someone might refer to the speedometer in their car as "Scotch," meaning it "gives less than the going rate" or indicates a speed slower than the vehicle is traveling. Oddly enough, the Scotsman as Highlander cultural icon originated in a part of Scotland where Gaelic should have been the majority language. "Highlanders" popularly conceptualized away from Scotland typically are depicted either speaking Scots—the language of the Lowlands—or a bastardized interpretation of English pronounced with a generic accent and "rolled R."

The Context of SCS

A primary intellectual project facing participants to the online discussion on soc.culture.scottish is to come to terms with the effect of traditions whose origins are remote in

several dimensions: time, space, and fact. Paraphrased from the newsgroup's charter, SCS was founded in 1994 to foster discussion of the heritage of Scotland and of members of the Scottish Diaspora, and to serve as a place to discuss current events within Scotland and how those events affect the present-day reality of the nation (Cockburn 2006). One of the founders, Craig Cockburn, maintains an extensive website dedicated to the "FAQ" or "Frequently Asked Questions" relating to SCS, as well as a number of other electronic resources relating to Scotland, available at http://www.siliconglen.com.

A secondary intellectual project intends to discursively imagine and re-imagine tradition and heritage in the light of present-day knowledge, trying to maintain the connection between the past and the present that embodies the progression of a growing culture.

The Content of the Discourse

The content of the discourse observed in this study comprised a purposively-selected thread of discussion on SCS representing efforts to cement an online community on the newsgroup. The thread concerns an IRL ("In Real Life") gathering of newsgroup participants and how some aspects of that gathering have been narrated and enacted online as well as in person. The moment itself was an international collaboration that began with the idea of a "quilt block exchange" wherein each participant sewed together a number of quilt squares, one or two for each attendee, of their favourite pattern and in an agreed standard size. At a physical meeting, each person attending receives one or two quilt squares from each of the other attendees, with the object of each attendee collecting enough squares to sew together an entire quilt as a memento of the meeting and a tangible connection to the people who made each of the squares. Each square is signed by the person who made it, and each is supposed to carry some image, pattern or cloth artefact of significance to or symbolic of the maker. Both male and female participants to SCS took part in the gatherings, dinners and activities that had been planned as part of a week of festivities.

Observing the Social Imaginary

In this case, the presentation and interpretation of observations overlap to some degree. This thread, "SCOOP!! Stirling Phoaties—Early Edition", covered seven days and 31 posts to the newsgroup. Although this thread is relatively short, it still represents the longest of the

discussions of this gathering to take place within SCS. The title refers to the general locale where a majority of the functions were held during that week, Stirling University in Scotland.

The opening post of the thread is simply an announcement, with a URL or clickable Web address, pointing viewers to Poster 1's website for a look at pictures taken just that evening at a gathering in a local pub (evidently "phoaties" in the thread title is an attempt to render "photo" in something resembling Scots). When Poster 2 sought some advice about accessing the pictures (due to problems with their computer), other participants of the newsgroup who could not attend the evening checked in with thanks:

> "What gorgeous, gorgeous people! I am so sad that I could not be there, almost as sad as [one of the attendees] looks in the one pic. Thank you for posting them" (Poster 4, 6/11/04, accessed 3/23/05).

> "I have just arrived home from a day at labour. I was gratified to see some very excellent pics of happy smiling people and not a sign of 'emptiness'" (Poster 5, 6/11/04, accessed 3/23/05).

Poster 6 provides some clues to how SCS participants who were unable to attend the IRL events will use the pictures. Posting pictures of attendees while the event is still playing out is not an activity often encountered either IRL or on SCS. The people at the event know what each other look like, while the rules of SCS forbid the posting of pictures to the newsgroup. Posting a link to another newsgroup or to a website where participants may view pictures is acceptable, however. The fact that people who were in attendance took pictures and made an effort to post them where others could see them while the event was happening, and that participants who were unable to attend publicly narrated their desire to see pictures and the use they intended to make of them, indicates that SCS participants find it easier to converse textually with someone whose physical presentation they can verify—even if only photographically. Poster 6 also encourages the previous poster to attend part of the festivities if at all possible.

> "Yes, they do look like a nice bunch. A big Hello to all of you in the pictures! Now I can put some faces to the words that I see on my computer screen. Great isn't it! Hurry up and get to the meetings [Poster 5] before you miss anymore" (Poster 6, 6/11/04, accessed 3/23/05).

The offering of "a big Hello" to the attendees by Poster 6 could be read in two ways: first that they were aware many attendees were checking their emails from Scotland and reading SCS during the week, or that the message was intended to be read by participants from outside

Scotland when they returned home from abroad. Reading further into the thread shows both readings are correct.

In the sense of the first reading, SCS bridges both geographic and temporal distance in a way that knits IRL and online community together and allows those who are unable to physically attend to participate in events nonetheless, to see the places where the IRL meetings were happening and the attendees, and even to join in the conversations in a limited way by posting their comments to the newsgroup for the attendees to read.

Early plans for the event had included a live webcam broadcast of one IRL meeting in a pub, along with a synchronous chat channel to allow anyone watching to join directly in conversations held around a computer in the pub. Although technical problems stalled plans for the webcam and chat line, it still demonstrates that SCS participants value a diverse range of contributions to the social imaginary. The plan also points toward a commitment to community-building, using all available channels of communication: IRL, Usenet, the Web, photography, email, chat, webcams and so on. In a fashion similar to the making of a quilt from many pieces of fabric, the social imaginary of SCS represented in this discussion is stitched together from a palette of communicative strategies so as to include as many participants as possible in an event that ordinarily would seem to be of an elite nature accessible only to those who could be present in person.

SCS often seems to carry a "family" flavour, reflecting a group belief that matters of heritage and tradition are linked to family and community as the vehicles for passing them on to succeeding generations. The family feeling seems a little strained however when Poster 7 replies to encouragement to attend the IRL, "They seem to have done quite well without me" (Poster 7, 6/11/04, accessed 3/24/05). Poster 8's response and Poster 9's rejoinder attempt to get at reasons for not wanting to attend the gathering, first by offering an apology of sorts for other remarks in another thread:

> "Unfortunately, [Poster 7], because of a post of mine, you weren't there but you were missed. Next time definitely, eh? It was a wonderful gathering of lovely people" (Poster 8, 6/12/04, accessed 3/24/05).

The ninth post seems to show that the poster self-identifies as a black sheep on SCS, a member of the group but possibly one whose presence is not wanted by other members:

> "To be honest, there were good personal reasons for not being there. I alluded to that on this newsgroup long before your post appeared. It's just that these reasons are private. :-)

> You may be a little surprised that what you see of my life here is minimal and often coloured for effect. So, don't feel too bad about it. I have never believed that anything that anyone ever writes here has greater longevity than one week" (Poster 9, 6/12/04, accessed 3/24/05).

Poster 9 seems to be saying that they don't really consider themselves part of the community, perhaps somewhat in the manner of the "not-a-citizen" (Fuglsang 2001): a representative of the outer borderline of group membership, separate yet necessary as a foil for the "citizen." If that is the case in this instance, the project appears to fall short of success, as a prominent and well-respected participant brushes aside their objections:

> "The only sign of 'emptiness' was your absence! Whaur wir yi? Yi auld reprobate!" (Poster 10, 6/14/04, accessed 3/24/05).

Poster 10 is a Scottish-Canadian woman who journeyed to Scotland for the IRL events. Her use of the Scots language to address the reluctant participant sends a message to him that she is putting the conversation on the footing of a family matter. Scots language use is a "family" marker: "wir anes speikin wir ane leid" (us, speaking our own language). Scots (and Gaelic as well, but for a different segment of the SCS population) is not generally spoken with people who are not considered part of the family or close acquaintances (Wilson 2002: 4), therefore despite his own effort to alienate himself, the participant will not be allowed to forget that he's considered part of the group even if some members don't agree with his opinions.

Grudgingly, and after the fact of the IRL gatherings nearby, the poster acknowledges with a conditional form of acceptance that ends this subthread of the overall discussion:

> "Maybe next time. Pleased you all enjoyed yourselves" (Poster 11, 6/15/04, accessed 3/24/05).

While the subthread above was playing itself out over the course of a few days, the main thread of the discussion continued, with more people who had attended posting links to websites with their pictures. While most of the photographers present apparently used digital cameras, two or three used film cameras and used the thread to post apologies for not having their pictures up the day after the last big party. Nonetheless they eventually got them developed, scanned and posted. Most of the responses continue to be of the "putting faces with names" variety, until one of the photographers posts:

> "New shots of the party have now been added to the above page. I also have some recent black and white images at [URL]" (Poster 16, 6/13/04, accessed 3/24/05).

What the poster is referencing are images of scenic parts of Scotland. Not only are newsgroup participants invited to take a limited part in the IRL parties by reading the newsgroup and viewing pictures taken during events, in these images they are also given a tour of sorts of Scotland. Not the same as being present perhaps, yet providing some images straight from the "homeland" that some of the members of the Scottish Diaspora may never have seen, and that they can use as "strips of reality" (Appadurai, 1996) in the imaginative creation of their identities. At the same time, the images bring back some memories of home to an SCS participant from Scotland whose email address now suggests they live outside the country:

> "Thanks for the picture of Dunure Castle, and the view to Ailsa Craig. Dunure has always been one of my favourite Places" (Poster 18, 6/18/04, accessed 3/24/05).

Sharing a pleasant nostalgic memory of Scotland with members of the newsgroup tends to make viewing of the pictures more meaningful for other posters. Someone known only by their words has opened up a glimpse into something meaningful to them. The nostalgic poster's identity performance has more depth, the stimulus for the nostalgia may be viewed with new appreciation by their acquaintances who make a connection between the place and the poster, and the explicit linking of place to identity and thence to the newsgroup by the narration of that link may cause other participants to share their own nostalgic linkages with an idealized "home."

One of the distinguishing characteristics between IRL and life on the newsgroup is that on the newsgroup a newcomer can literally appear in the middle of a conversation without apparently getting a sense of what the other conversants were discussing. Face to face a newcomer may interrupt, but generally they can be observed listening or approaching and can be given non-verbal clues as to whether they will be allowed to enter the conversation. The newcomer in this instance may have been attracted by the subject line, which could indicate that links to photographs are contained in the thread. Certainly after viewing them the newcomer does not seem to have realized what was going on, despite picture captions on the websites and posts to SCS in this thread and others related:

> "Nice pics. I take it they were all on a Saga tour of Scotland or some such" (Poster 28, 6/12/04, accessed 3/24/05).

One of the Scottish posters attempts to set the newcomer right, but seems unsure whether they are communicating with a somewhat-regular participant or a casual reader who happened to stumble onto the thread:

> "Nae ye canna tak it wir aa aon ony kin o tour. Some o iz cam frae Scotland ye ken. ['Don't assume we're all on any kind of tour. Some of us live in Scotland, you know.'] Personally I come from Kelty in Fife and the gracious lady I drove to the meeting came from Dysart in Fife" (Poster 29, 6/12/04, accessed 3/24/05).

The next two posters, the first from the UK and the next from the US by their email addresses, treat Poster 28 as what they apparently are: someone who essentially stumbled into the middle of the thread and didn't take time to read the posts to figure out what was happening. Neither one of them seems inclined to devote much time to the matter, which appears to be a common response to newcomers in most newsgroups:

> "Wisdom comes with maturity... So hang in there, Sunshine..." (Poster 30, 6/12/04, accessed 3/24/05).

> "I don't think I can stand that much maturity" (Poster 31, 6/12/04, accessed 3/24/05).

This short subthread ends up at the bottom of the Google™ newsreader display of this thread. The relative length of the subthread, along with the short answers (to the point of curtness) and the sarcastic tone of the responses themselves indicate that those who had been participating since the beginning of the thread considered Poster 28 to be an unwanted interruption who could be quickly dismissed. Although the poster indicates they have viewed the pictures, they apparently lack the context shared by the other participants in this case. The possibly more regular contributors to SCS evaluate the interrupter as unworthy of much comment, as illustrated by the relative position of this subthread on the Google™ presentation of this discussion.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study finds that a group of like-minded people (a sodality) gathers together in a Usenet discussion group in a manner similar to how they might gather together in a physical group. They feel a connection to and derive psychological benefit from their participation in a "virtual community," and are often observed to narrate those observations in the course of their online interactions. Participants to the newsgroup examined in this study generally do not seem to separate one form of community from another; they readily cross back and forth between the online and offline communities they feel they inhabit, and also undertake specific activities designed to forge linkages or synergies between them in the creation of a social imaginary.

By deploying a suite of relatively simple communications technologies, participants to

SCS enable many of the same communicative acts made possible by more modern strategies such as Second Life and various social networking websites. They do so, however, with technologies that do not depend on broad-band access or on memberships in online associations that may place their private identities or information in jeopardy. The written word is important, and so participants stick with a technology that supports their preference.

SCS participants also appear to place considerable importance on the specific cultural frameworks that help them to collectively make meaning of events affecting the community. The culture of each newsgroup is thus a creation of the social imaginary as it finds expression through the discursive activities of participants. Additionally, as such discursive activities reflect the relative importance of a range of social values held by group members, ultimately the social imaginary and the identities negotiated and performed within a particular online community will differ from those observed in other technologically-dependent sodalities that may have developed in broadly similar ways under the same technological constraints.

If many of the community-building activities of a newsgroup take place offline as well as online (as they appear to do), then I argue that online interaction cannot supplant face-to-face interaction entirely. Just as offline life is marked by both face to face and mediated interaction through several channels—telephone, broadcast media, print, as well as fax and postal mail—so online interaction to support the imagination of community or cultural identities is also enhanced by offline activities.

IRL is not a one-dimensional experience; neither is online community. SCS allows direct contact between participants and others similarly interested in the central topic of the discussion (all matters relating to Scotland) *and* in the collective formation of a social imaginary. Rather than supplanting community with time spent alone, such interactions allow for a more nuanced and imaginative performance of community, which is not strictly bounded by synchronous time or coincident place.

Notwithstanding, a "Law of Conservation of Community" could be said to operate in the ways people prioritize social activities according to the time they have available for them and to the perceived benefits of one sort of activity over another. Online activities may adversely affect the amount of time people will devote to IRL time- and place-bounded community activities, but at the same time people are able to gather together in community groups online that apparently give them a more complete and fulfilling experience of community than they can find in their

physical locale alone.

Separating the "needs of the spirit" from the "needs of the flesh"; enabling people to pursue and discuss their interests with asynchronous and geographically separated interlocutors apart from the physical demands of their employment or living circumstances allows place to be separated from the desire for interaction with like-minded others. Paradoxically, this may enhance the experience of community by allowing various concerns about belonging, common interest, and physical location to be addressed technologically rather than subsumed into a "one-size-fits-all" approach that in reality fits no one very well.

In the context of maintaining and negotiating Celtic identities, this study finds that computer mediated communication can serve to link those who profess a Scottish heritage or other sort of connection with Scotland more closely to persons actually in Scotland. Some of the principal advantages of this linking are much closer connections in time than heretofore possible, and a bidirectional exchange of cultural discourse: those in the Diaspora are able to see how their cultural imaginings affect the present culture in the "homeland," while those in the "homeland" acquire a deeper understanding of the ways their cultures are interpreted and integrated into social imaginaries in other places. Beyond this, fertile ground for additional research may be found in exploring how communications technologies that transmit more "channels" of interaction (video and audio as well as text) might allow for an increasingly nuanced performance of this sort of mediated social imaginary or "virtual community."

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