

DIGITAL DOMAINS: NATION, STATE AND VIRTUAL TERRITORY

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Abstract

This paper has two parts. The first discusses some of the recent developments in telecommunications industries and their sociological significance. Recent claims that the Internet marks an end of Geography are problematised. The argument is advanced that we need an approach which maps social, economic and historical forces to provide a "virtual geography". The second half of the paper situates this general discussion in a specific case study: The formation of a modern Rhodesian national identity. A particular focus of this analysis concerns the impact of Internet based interaction in the formation of national identities and the problematic relationship of these with the state. The persistence and development of Rhodesian nationalism, decades after the ending of the UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence) period, through the medium of the internet, is explored to illustrate the "virtuality" inherent in all national imaginings (Anderson, 1983). The simulated realities of internet based Rhodesiana contain no state elements. By contrast the real Rhodesia can be argued to have consisted almost entirely of a small minority of "whites" whose control over state apparatus was matched with little or no credible claim to nationhood. Only by mapping these processes can any sense be made of the development of "virtual Rhodesia." The paper explores the extent to which processes attributed to new telecommunications industries, such as those of space/time, or nation/state dislocation can be better understood as products of modern industrial societies. Telematics may provide the promise of a greater manipulation of geographical realities, a plasticity of spatial relations and an extension of time. Yet all of these processes occur within specific social and historical boundaries. These boundaries indicate sites where power has been exercised and contested. The internet rather than marking the end of "Geography" contains the potentiality for the invention of new geographies.

Key words: virtual geography, nationalism, cyberdemocracy, Rhodesia, Cyberia.

THE INVENTION OF CYBERIA

The growth of the new telecommunications industry over the last decade has been extraordinary. Perhaps almost equally remarkable have been some of the claims made about the importance and the impact of these developments. It is a commonplace that spatial significances have been eradicated and even that the digital revolution marks an "end of geography".

Nothing more clearly epitomises the claim that the Internet has ended geography than the notion that it constitutes in itself a super-geographical realm. This is the mythical sounding realm of Cyberia. Recent accounts present telecommunication industries as more like a nation

then a tool. Mark Poster writing on Cyberdemocracy comments, "The Internet is more like a social space than a thing so its effects are more like those of Germany than those of hammers."(1997: 216). The argument here is that the failure to realise the importance of the Internet as a "context" reproduces a modernist simplisiticsm in which pre-conceived individuals are instruments of other (grand) narratives which are being read off at a level of theory.

Of course it is important to explore how interactive socialisation occurs within the consumption of any form of media and not treat consumers or users as pre-given. In media studies the problematisation of the "audience" has long had this concern. However what is being argued for here is significantly more than a need to identify the "uses and gratifications" derived by audiences from the Internet. The argument here goes much further. The information revolution provides a technological front end for post-modernity itself. David Holmes argues that in Virtual Reality, "Truth is not determined as the adequacy of knowledge to reality."(1997: 10) The simulated reality of Cyberia is itself a simulation. Whereas modernist science sought to accurately represent reality so it could control it, post-modern science changes reality so that our representations of it seem more real. Holmes claims that "we can bring the real to us in whatever form we so desire and, in doing so, abolish the real"(1997: 11).

The reason for the collapsing of all spaces and temporalities in Cyberian unrealities is the quality of new digital media themselves. Because they allow endless reproduction and consumption in contexts which may bear no relation to their production, Internet communications according to Holmes, become disembodied and come to have "no more significance than a note in a bottle floating between continents" (1997: 37). The meaning of such messages may fortuitously be grasped but will never become a basis for forming community or for the production of social knowledge.

Disembodiment of messages paradoxically is why the Internet is claimed as a liberatory medium undermining or dissolving old social divides.

Participants in virtual communities can thus escape their own embodied identities and accordingly can also escape any social inequalities and attitudes relating to various forms of embodiment. Race, gender of physical disability is indiscernible over the Internet. Any basis for enacting embodiment discrimination is removed, freeing access to participation and granting each participant equal status within the network. (Wilson, 1997:149)

Predictably, however, such utopian promise serves only to disguise dis-empowerment and dis-association. The individual far from becoming an active citizen through being able to play with identity in this way becomes disconnected or abstracted "from physical action and a sense of social and personal responsibility to others" (Wilson, 1997: 153).

Cyberia appears to stand for an embodiment of post-modern malaise. As a technology it disembodies and fragments identity and leaves cultural meaning rootless and capable of any kind of assembly or bricolage into new meanings. But does the Internet really do all of this and do it all the time? I use the Internet to check train times but I would soon stop doing so if there was no relationship between the knowledge it gives me and reality. (The alternative possibility that the trains are running at times set by the web page is too silly to bear serious discussion.) In this sense the Internet is very like a hammer. Of course not all Internet usage is so instrumental (although more and more of it is likely to become so), and the point that the Internet serves as "context" for the production of meanings is important. Again however the disembodiment of textually based exchanges as discussed in most of the literature is a

function of the primitive stage of the Internet - as evidenced in examples drawn from the early days of the WELL.

The revolutionary freedom offered by the Internet is in reality a product of the limitations of its origins in text based exchanges. The nature of these limitations is not altogether clear. Some of the most profound and emotionally engaging ideas to be encountered are based in what is after all "just text". We need also to recognise that in "real life" some people are also able to escape the confines of their gender and other social signifiers. It is not clear that there is any quantifiable difference in the extent to which they are able to do so in "virtual" realms even when these are limited to text. If internet communication is made using a Webcam with live pictures are gender, ethnicity and so on all still equally indiscernible? On Home Pages littered with pictures of flags, wives, boyfriends, children, pets and even plants are the meanings necessarily disembodied because they are on the Internet? More problematically if cultural meanings are more embodied on the Internet by means of images, music, video and all the other cultural baggage of the modern World Wide Web, does this mean that a more meaningful basis is created for the production of communities?

Even less post-modern writers suggest the Internet is eroding geography, and clearly this has implications for the formation of communities. According to Mike Holderness "everyone who is on the Internet is in the same place" and as a result,

Communities of communication can therefore be expected to form around common interests and not around common physical location: Ideography replaces geography.(1998: 35-36)

However at one level the displacing of geography in the formation of community is surely a feature of industrial societies. The Internet may mark an even greater displacement but it is not anything new. Neither is it very clear what is meant by geography other than in a common-sense use to designate natural spaces. Geography like history is important because it marks sites (as history marks periods) of social struggle. In geography we can trace the exercise of social power, the operations of class and the other constraints that govern peoples lives.

Actually most Internet usage is probably local, certainly the people I e-mail most frequently are probably people I teach with. We can think of the University as a community of "ideography" as many academics do have interests in common. However, the level of ideas seems to say little about either the conditions of work or of the social processes operating in the geographical and historical production of the University. Constructed spaces are legitimate subjects for geography. If India is suitably studied as a geographical entity then so too are uses made of digital spaces.

The fundamental weakness of the problematic of studying telecommunications as if they are independent of all other social variables was grasped long before the Internet was fashionable object of study. Writing in *New Left Review* in 1984 Fredric Jameson argued against the idea that technology was "in any way "the ultimately determining instance" of either social life or cultural production.

Our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism (Jameson, 1984).

It is not possible to deal with a contentious question of various definitions of postmodernity here. At the very least, however, Jameson's formulation of the problem usefully indicates for example that the real problem of digital reproduction lies in the realm of

copyright and branding. The ability to make digital copies, for example of musical works, that are identical to the original recording means that copies can become indistinguishable from the branded and expensive commercial product. This combined with a global unregulated distribution system poses massive problems for the music industry. Similarly the erosion of traditional points of control in national boundaries poses problems for commerce more than it does for culture.

The problems of identity and culture described as inherent characteristics of the Internet are standard tenants of post-modern theory that have been layered onto the study of new telecommunications industries. Using the Internet to disguise larger social and economic processes (not merely contexts) has become an important part of pop culture. This is how the Utopian and distinctly post-modern magazine *Wired* presents the case for what it calls "The Information Standard":

THE INFORMATION STANDARD

Q: Why is the power of the state in decline?

Money goes where it's wanted and stays where it is well treated, and that's all she wrote.

This annoys governments no end

The Information Standard

Stateless money functions as a plebiscite on your policy. There are 300,000 screens out there, lit up with all the news that traders need to make value judgements on how well you are running your economy.

The Information Standard

The information standard is more draconian than the gold standard, because the government has lost control of the marketplace

Technology has overwhelmed public policy

The Information Standard

Q: As the power of sovereign governments wanes who will be left in charge? Error! Bookmark not defined.

(Wired 6.01, January 1998)

The problem with this is not the nature of information flows, differential access to information, or the effect of information on society. The problem is the erosion of democratic process by market forces with little accountability. Such processes of course are contradictory and may produce many unintended consequences. What they certainly mark is an erosion of our position in society as citizens and the securing merely of our rights as consumers (Elliott, 1986).

The constitution of identities or communities on the Internet must be set in the frame of the problems of their formation in our time not as an independent variable. Recognising the agency of individuals participating in Internet exchanges is important, but this agency is to varying degrees also created and situated outside of the realm of the Internet. This may create problems for the use of the Internet as source for ethnographic research in itself. The same point could be made, for example, about the use of agony columns in Women's magazines as guide to understanding social life. Above all there is nothing new about the Internet to make C. Wright Mills (1959) observation that any sociology worth the name is historical sociology and perhaps one should add "geographical sociology".

THE LOST TRIBE OF AFRICA?

Benedict Anderson's definition of nationalism as "imagined community" was intended in part as a corrective to more reductionist accounts which had failed to take sufficient account of the imaginative and creative process involved. There is nothing imaginary about nationalism in the sense of its construction being a falsity. Anderson points out that all communities larger than those of "face to face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (Anderson, 1986: 89). This is a helpful starting point for considering Rhodesian nationalism as it presents an extreme case which at the surface appears to have even more "no there there" than most nationalisms.

From its foundation in the late nineteenth century the Rhodesian state was a problematic construct. The handful of settlers and speculators were part of an outrageous and only quasi legal experiment in venture capital. Although nominally part of the great expanding empire, British influence was initially limited to a charter licensing the mining activities (and these activities alone) of Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company. For the first decades of the extraordinarily brutal regime the government was the private company. Its lasting legacy can be seen in the fact that the police force continued to be called the British South Africa Police until independence in 1980. The legitimisation of a settler presence in the territory, a contravention of the charter, required an extraordinary media campaign and two wars, known by Zimbabweans as the First Chimurenga.

The Rhodesian administration despite its control of state apparatus had little success in extending its hegemony over the massive majority of the population. Not until the internal settlement of 1978 did it manage to co-opt even moderate black support. The bitter and prolonged war of independence, or second Chimurenga, saw large swathes of countryside where effectively the new Zimbabwean state was already in control long before final independence (Frederikse, 1982: 5). At a level of national imagining the fact that old soldiers of the first Chimurenga lived to see the second being fought illustrates the transient nature of Rhodesian nationhood. In addition colonial Rhodesian nationalism presents a by no means monolithic front. Only a few years before Ian Smith's declaration of Independence in 1965 Rhodesians had returned the moderate liberal Garfield Todd to power on a platform that envisaged a gradual transition to majority rule.

It was the UDI experience which formed the focal point for the development of Rhodesian nationalism. Yet this period lasted for only thirteen years. Furthermore the massive emigration of whites during UDI and following independence put paid to the propaganda slogan of "We're here to stay".

This briefly is the setting against which the development of a revived Internet based form of Rhodesian nationalism needs to be considered. This is how one page describes the phenomena:

INTERNET "RESCUES" LOST TRIBE OF RHODESIANS

Rhodesians are nothing if not resourceful. Their country might have been taken from them by politicians, but the spirit still roams the world, looking for a home. Taking advantage of late 20th century technology, they are creating a virtual country on computers around the world.

They've logged in from more than 20 US states, from Canada's Yukon and from Port Elizabeth to Perth.

Rhodesians are everywhere, and they've taken to the Internet with a vengeance. (H.Ref. 1)

How is that decades after the ending of the UDI period groups of people are elaborating a Rhodesian national identity, especially when the life stories of many reveal they were first generation settlers in the first place? Can this extreme case reveal anything about the formation of national identities? Does it provide any insights into how these processes are mediated by modern telecommunications?

The virtual imagining of Rhodesian identity appears to mirror image the reality. The real Rhodesia consisted of minority rule (by about 3% of the population) in which the power of the state was in the hands of a group with little claim to national hegemony. Most definitions of nationhood stress that as a form of community it must contain what Anderson describes as "deep horizontal comradeship" regardless of exploitation and inequality (1986: 89). At least members of nations need to share what Nira Yuval-Davis refers to as "common destiny" (1997: 19). The extent to which this was true for most people in the territory of Rhodesia is highly questionable. The "them and us" complex of nationhood in this instance was an internal division. Rhodesian nationalism was always racist.

The plasticity of time and space offered by new information technologies has created the possibility of a re-creation of Rhodesian nationalism. There is even a site which declares itself as the "Government of Rhodesia in Exile". The opening paragraph of the page describes the current state of Rhodesians: "Homeless, stateless, rudderless, brainless..." and urges a return to the good old days adding, "If it cannot be done peacefully, we will return to the bush and wage a new Chimp-urenga, or Gorilla war." (H.Ref. 2) The intention is joke which is meant to be offensive.

Flouting the conventions of what is perceived as politically correct "pommie" "yankee" or "ozie" society is popular theme. Being a Rhodesian is construed as act of resistance. The "them and us" becomes Rhodesians against the rest of the world. A site by the name of "Rhodesians at War" encourages responses:

I invite you, and anybody you know who was there, to contribute, in an attempt to tell the story of how ordinary Rhodesians soldiered on regardless.

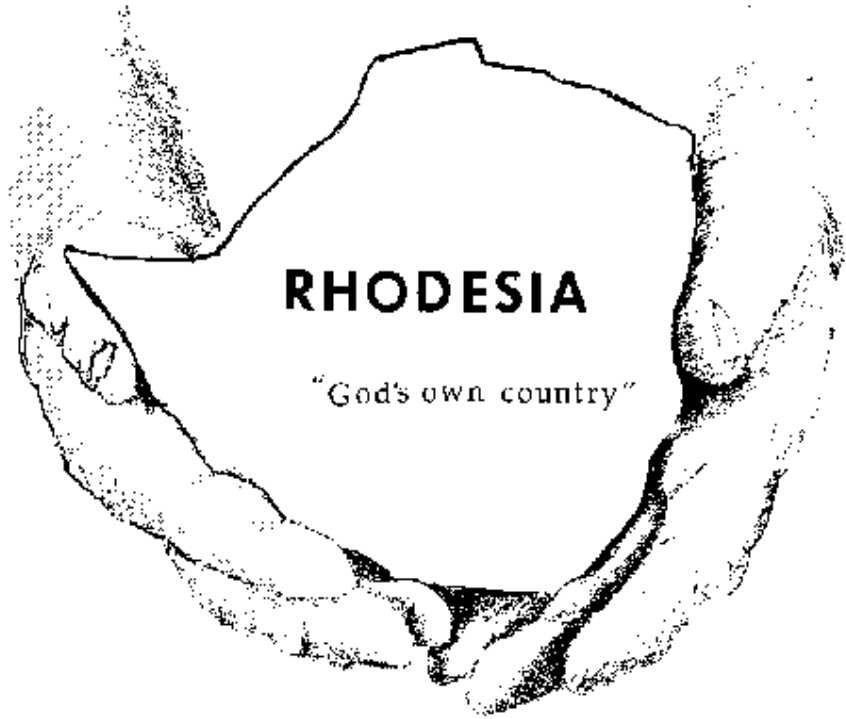
I'd like your family snaps, the backyard braai, the fishing trip to the lake. Anything that says: We're bloody coping despite international attempts to cow us into submission! (H.Ref. 3)

In this instance Tom Nairn's observation that nationalism is a social neurosis the equivalent of infantilism in individuals may seem to have some truth (cited in Anderson, 1986). "We promise to carry the Rhodesian spirit to our graves and we promise to spread the word of our "Faith" to all we come in contact with" writes a correspondent in Australia who bemoans leaving Rhodesia in 1978 at age 16 before he had a chance to fight in the war.

I feel as though we are part of this Rhodesian global community and can help each other in the process, this adds to our purpose of existence and who knows where this might lead: to another Rhodesia where we can all be together again perhaps? (H.Ref. 4)

Sentiments like these are not easily or usefully disassociated with the concept of nationalism despite their problematic formulation. The theme of the lost tribe has a particular significance. A popular Rhodesian myth concerned the building of Great Zimbabwe (an impressive group of ruins from which the modern country takes its name), by either the queen of Sheba or a lost tribe of Israel. Against all historical evidence Rhodesians denied that local

Shona people's ancestors could ever have built such an impressive structure. In some way this established a prior claim to the land and implied that African were just as much interlopers as white settlers. The notion of being specially chosen by God and that Rhodesian independence



marked a resistance to communist, atheistic, immoral and decadent Western social and political developments was a popular theme of Rhodesian propaganda. It too finds expression on the Internet in images of Rhodesia cradled in caring hands with the slogan "God's Own Country" (H.Ref. 5).

CONCLUSION

This brief resume of the considerable and rapidly growing "virtual Rhodesia" requires both historical and geographical mapping for any kind of useful analysis. A plasticity and invention in the uses of the Internet are evident rather than abstraction and disembodiment. These pages contain a rich imagery of photographs, anthems, waving flags, recipes, reminiscences, novels, noticeboards, virtual embassies and more. Unlike the early examples of Internet communications they provide a great deal more than just abstracted text.

It may be that these pages are being produced merely because the medium allows it. Creating a web page is relatively easy and cheap and the presence of such material on the World Wide Web cannot be taken to indicate a significant social movement. In point of fact most of the materials are derived from paper sources initially. The circulation of these paper materials would have been limited previously to specific distribution networks. Now the Internet allows a revolution in dissemination and arguably allows the development of some

kind of new communal identity. The meaning and significance of communities of this sort requires a mapping process. A process that begins with the recognition of the continuing importance of geographical realities in social life, and a recognition that these geographical realities were always virtual.

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