

*Research*

BORDERS AND BORDER ZONES: DIFFERENCES AND EQUALITIES

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## **THE ELECTRONIC AGORA OF THE BRITISH SOCIETY IN BULGARIA**

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**Abstract.** H. Rheingold (1993) introduces the concept of "electronic agora", claiming that virtual communities act on the square - an open space where it all happens. The theoretical framework of this paper will be set by the theory of Schutz for multiplication of reality and will build on the theory of Muggleton virtual identity. Commonwealth in Bulgaria communicates in a parallel to the real world to the virtual. Through virtual identity can reinvent itself, moving freely between multiple online roles, to be the opposite sex, younger, older, anonymous and thus to avoid the presentation of the true self. What roles occupy the British in Bulgaria in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in cyberspace and how it used? Do they experiment with their identity? Do they develop strong relationships in social groups? Answers to these questions will be looking for in this study.

*Keywords:* cyberspace, electronic agora, migrations, networks, British

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We live in a digital age in a global world where electronic revolution has changed the way of communication by shortening the distances. New fundamental processes related to the form of communication are transformed by face to face into mediated. The social structure that characterizes society in the early twenty-first century, is a social structure constructed around (but not determined by) digital networks of communication. Castells argues that the communication processes are carried out in a new technological context as a result of global digital networks, which is the main system at the beginning of the new century (Castells, 2009, p. 25).

Howard Rheingold (1993) argues that the vision of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network is a version of technological utopianism that could be called the vision of „the electronic agora“. A term of classical Greek extraction, the Athenian agora was not simply an open space but more fundamentally a public space where the ecclesia, the popular assembly of Athenian citizens, could gather to exchange information, engage each other in debate and deliberate issues affecting the polis (Held, 1987, p. 21). According to Rheingold people in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries. To the millions who have been drawn into it, the richness and vitality of computer-linked cultures is attractive, even addictive (Rheingold, 1993). In the present study under virtual agora I will understand the communication of the British society through various online platforms and generally build communications network in cyberspace.

of Sarah Greene<sup>1)</sup>, whereby the boundaries accept both temporal and conceptual form and, if they marked differences, it does not always make it the same way. One of the many possibilities of these days is borders to be thought of as lines that always evokes a sense of both sides. Байман (1999) argues that the boundaries disappear, deleting the differences between here and there, near and far, internal and external, security and insecurity. But Greene<sup>1)</sup> denies the idea that borders are disappearing and believes that it is best if the new measures are perceived as an active entity. Therefore, the analysis of border lines present in the electronic agora of the British society in Bulgaria requires an understanding of the specificity of the forms and processes of social communication, which includes the network society as multimodal platforms and interactive horizontal networks built around the Internet.

The networks are complex structures of communication built around a set of goals; they are programmed and configured independently at the same time. Their goals and operating procedures are programmed in social and organizational networks of social actors. Networks are not specific to the twenty-first century society, they represent basic model of all kinds of life. Fritjof Capra (2002) wrote that "the network is a pattern of life that is common to all life. Wherever we see life, we see networks." The power of networks is their flexibility, adaptability and capacity for self-reconfiguration. The social network is a social structure made up of a range of social actors (individuals or organizations) and a set of relations between these actors. Social networks as a platform for the exchange of multimedia content in real time to an unlimited number of users are worldwide (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Social networks can largely be described as a simple communication model; any Internet user can open an account and become part of the communication process. Social network users update the information on their page using any kind of multimedia content, whether short text notes, video, links to other interesting resources. Periodic update depends on individual social activity of each partici-

pant. An important component of interactive communication process in social networks is the ability to exchange messages with the principle of e-mail - private messaging, forums - the wall in real time - chats, remote organize meetings and events with a large number of participants and create thematic groups and communities united by common interests.

The formation of the British community in Bulgaria is a migration process that became with mass character in the early 21st century; the peak was registered between 2006 and 2008. In the scientific literature the British in Bulgaria are described as lifestyle migrants as lifestyle migration is a recent phenomenon it has not been the subject of much academic research to date. In fact, the migration of relatively affluent people has been largely ignored in the migration studies literature. However, some researchers, notably sociologists, social anthropologists and geographers like Sato Hoey, Fechter, McWatters have begun to explore the trend in different locations and among different social groups around the world, producing a growing body of work (Torkington, 2010). This type of migrants traveling to and from many different places, with apparently disparate motives, showing diverse patterns of mobility, some return each year, while others migrate permanently. Motivation can be very variable in individual migrants, but one unifying factor is their belief that a change of domicile will lead to better and more fulfilling lifestyle. They are people who have made a conscious choice not only about how to live but also about where to live (Hoey, 2005).

In this research are used several research methods aimed to collect and analyze relevant data. The research started with Ethnological methods – structured and semi-structured interviews, participant observations, free conversations and observations and media content analysis then analysis of social networks, blogs and online forums in which British citizens are actively involved. The study was conducted for two years from 2011 to 2014 in the regions of Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, Popovo, Targovishte, Shumen, Silistra and

Vidin. There were conducted 34 interviews with British citizens of both sexes, aged between 24 and 73 and belonging to different educational and social status. Among respondents are Britons living in Bulgaria in the last 10-12 years as well as newcomers. The aim of those observations was to monitor online interactions between British citizens from different groups, to register their virtual identity manifestations and to measure how the borders between real and virtual world function.

Attracted by the beautiful scenery and climate, the British established in Bulgaria live in small towns and mainly in villages. Some villages are becoming very popular destinations and there live between 8 and 10 families, but in others it's only one or even left a widower or widow. Social networks are a unique opportunity for them to communicate on a daily basis, creating open or closed thematic groups. In bad weather and inaccessible roads, online communication is the only one, even without opposing the actual daily contact with those living in the same area. Communication network of the British community in Bulgaria is carried out on the border between two worlds virtual and real. What kind of social networks and virtual boundaries are created? Do they construct a real agora? If so - how electronic agora unites and divides the British in Bulgaria? Answers to these questions will be sought to support my working hypothesis, which is - the British in Bulgaria build stronger relationships and create new boundaries with each other in cyberspace. The purpose of this article is to obtain a new qualitative knowledge of ongoing online communication processes among new immigrants in Bulgaria.

Real terms by which the British in Bulgaria face in the process of communicating with each other's are territorial remoteness, but in cyberspace are available multimedia platforms around which they construct new rules and boundaries of communication. In the communication process of the community I observe two types of boundaries, which in this study provisionally are called external and internal. The external is between real and virtual world, it

is very porous and easily overcome, but in the absence of individual technical competence, connection to the global network, technological device, etc. it hardens. In the virtual world, the British generate new internal boundaries, limit access to social membership, which are created by them.

Cyberspace is different from reality; it raises many questions about borders, groups, Diasporas, creating a new culture and a virtual identity. What happens in the virtual world? Who am I? The answer, according to Erikson may be different depending on what I think to myself, what others think of me and what I think others think of me. In the virtual world, however, people can invent their own identities as change the gender, age, occupation, birth place, and all those social markers that help in the formation and maintenance of identity. User of the global media has the opportunity to get away from religious, ethnic, social and sexual prejudice and reveals to him the opportunity to develop a new image of himself, remaining hidden in cybernetic anonymity skillfully plays with its multiple digital identities. Vision of digital identity is one of the foundations in media theory of the Internet, one of the areas in which the vision of network is very similar to dream Arcadia and the ability to be happy and free from the shackles of social norms and personal limitations of physical reality. Physical and social body opens, becomes "body without organs" dissolving the flow of information and communication (Попова, 2008).

How these virtual communication processes and the development of information technology on the ability of the British to control their own lives and provide them the opportunity to know different self-presentation? Manuel Castells (2009) argues that "based on available and accessible to them cultural material, social actors build a new identity, redefining their position in society and thereby aims at the transformation of overall social structure".

The British are coming to Bulgaria with experience in Internet communications. The idea of a change of residence already implies the possibility

or willingness / unwillingness to change identity. Some of the respondents sign up on Facebook under another name and with another profile picture, and offer no real information about their identity. Not all British present themselves in this way. Most of them choose their own photo profile, but not excluding those who place a picture of an animal, a plant or a photo from his youth. On the one hand this is defined as an option among internet users in order to maintain privacy, but on the other hand is known in scientific literature as experimenting with identities. However, the ease of rollover role in role in cyberspace (and sometimes simultaneous presentation of multiple identities), rapid substitution of some other preferences leads to loss of sense of reality (Turkle, 1995, pp. 9-26).

The Electronic agora performs specific functions for the British: (i) *informational* - includes information on key events in the community; (ii) *correlated* - includes an explanation of the meaning, interpretation and evaluation of events and information from the norms established in the host state; (iii) *prioritization* of events and information; (iv) *ensure continuity* and consistency - support the dominant culture and cultural achievements of the host State on par with their own, and support common values; (v) *entertainment* - providing entertainment, various means of recreation and creativity; (vi) *mobilization* - agitate for socially significant goals.

British blogs in Bulgaria are not many, but they are active and have a well-functioning media communication platform in the community. Those features are present in the blog "A Letter from the Back Of Beyond - A Bulgarian Blog" - "Letter from the other side of the afterlife - Bulgarian blog" whose shape resembles a "personal online diary." In the words of the very blogger Chris Bacon (AleksandarStambolijski, Veliko Turnovo), its purpose is to describe "Rural Bulgarian life as seen through the eyes of an Englishman who now lives in a very small Bulgarian village. A blog aimed at three different sets of people. Firstly there are those who might be considering relocating

to Bulgaria, some of the information might be of help. Then there are those who have already made the move. Finally there are the Bulgarians themselves, maybe you are curious to see just how a foreigner views and copes with living in your country. Welcome to the blog." The Blog is created in 2010 and is characterized by thematic diversity, it is often reflecting on all major holidays, changes in seasons and natural disasters, Bulgarian music, information about famous historical figures, tips on buying and repairing properties and significant cultural events calendar of the ancient capital.

Individuals can be connected in network specific types of relationship such as friendship, kinship, ideas, views, traditions, financial relations, links and more. The term social network is used to describe the social structure defined by these interactions. Links through which a social unit connects represent the convergence of various social networking on this unit. This theoretical approach is relational. Axiom of the social network approach to understanding social interaction is that social phenomena must be studied primarily by the properties of relations between and within individual units, rather than the properties of these units. All interviewed Britons have accounts on Facebook, some on Twitter or LinkedIn. Communication is multidirectional as with family and relatives and friends of the sending State and of new friendships in the host State. In some groups, we observe the existence of a routine, such as every Friday and quiz be held every Saturday and Sunday are asked what you cook, what book to read, what type of garden work planned, etc.

In early 2002 the British in Bulgaria, created only two Facebook groups "My Bulgaria" and "British expats in Bulgaria", almost all respondents belong to them. Subsequently, however, is difficult to keep all groups listed. Groups increased significantly and bring people together around specific themes - animals, sales, children, cooking, female gossip, etc. The main reason why the British are so active in the virtual world is that through social

media they disseminate and receive news, ask for help and support when needed, have fun, talk to friends, etc.

British women in Bulgaria are united around a group of "Lala's ... Lady's and Friends Private Sanctuary" a curious fact about this group is that after creating multiple online friendships and time spent in online communication, the idea to hold the ladies' lunch in order "to put the names of persons", i.e. observe first online communication, which is subsequently transformed to face to face communication. At these lunches women from all over Bulgaria meet, sometimes the distance they travel is of the order of 200 -250 km. Veliko Tarnovo, Stara Zagora and Yambol are among the cities which hold similar type of meeting, they are only conditionally called luncheons because they grow in the evening and in the night parties.

Deterritorialization is the process by which loses the natural connection of culture to geographical and social areas, the relationship between identity and place is not compulsory. Exempt cultural characters of certain places and begin to move through time and space in which to interact with other cultural forms. Most of the virtual communities are naturally deterritorialized and connect people who care about the same topics, ideas, projects, goals, initiatives, etc., regardless of geographic or institutional boundaries. You could say that in the new virtual territory, proximity is semantic rather than geographical or institutional. In cyberspace geographical proximity has not disappeared, but is redefined as an important class of semantic proximity, they are also the language being, political and sexual orientation, etc.<sup>2)</sup>

But as a "counter" concept of deterritorialization occurred territorialization, re regionalised to refer to a situation where people are trying to create a new cultural center where they go (Tomlinson, 1999). Facebook arise in groups whose main sign of unity defined village. For example, the British administrators of the Facebook group Pavlikeni added an additional requirement for membership "This is a friendly group for all who live in and around

the wonderful city Pavlikeni." Such selection of participants, focusing on a specific territory is not new to the British; in Scotland there is a group in which members can be only Scottish residents or relatives of those with proven kinship or Scottish roots. Identifying and connecting element in this type of group communication and the particular region and what is happening there. This gives grounds to register the internal border, a new line that divides and unites.

Taking into account the position of Pierre Levy<sup>2)</sup>, I will introduce assertions and Brinyolfsen that explores electronic communities on the Internet are a global village. He argues that increased connectivity offers potential to create different communities by enabling individuals to come together and create social and geographical boundaries. "Just as the separation in physical space can be formed geographic groups, we find that the separation in the virtual space can be arranged by special interest groups" (Watkins, 2010). From the strong link with the territory and birthplace in de-territorialization of postmodernity, come to re-territorialization that analyzes the virtual.

Interestingly crossing the border from virtual to reality can be observed in the organization of the Olympic Games "It`s a knock out ", held in July 2012 for charity. Infrastructure preparation is done almost entirely online by forming teams, fundraising, information media, and so on until the very course of the games, which is live coverage of online radio Global Trust. Based in Vratsa modern equipped studio, the radio has more than 2.5 million online listeners around the world and every day broadcast program "Breakfast with Bobby" - "a delicious mix of Bulgarian and world news, seasoned with a little gossip and a lot of music" - that presents the work of a longtime British journalist. Several programs are dedicated to particular games and precede them, the goal is to give substantial publicity of the event and to collect additional funds from donors, and many countries support the campaign by sending small amounts. In preparation for the links that are built in the community

are very emotional and form dynamic virtual environment managed by socially significant figures. Of course along with ongoing training on the Internet have been conducted and concomitant meetings and phone calls, but their share is quite small.

Just a few days after the big event, reflected on a national scale, which were collected donations to support emergency relief in Veliko Tarnovo region, came a great rift in the relations of the British in a virtual community. As a result of internal legal limit set by administrators not to advertise in any form in the group "British expats in Bulgaria", posting a poster for another charity event has been removed. Some participants felt affected by too selective approach ads and leave the group, campaigning and more. The new group and the old renamed "The Very friendly group for expats and Bulgarians". The act of the administrator, of course, is just a cause for disunity occurred; the reasons are rooted in the struggle for leadership, claims of competence, disagreements about the beneficiaries and others. Beyond the real, in the virtual world are united by the British ease of connection and multiple channels of communication, but at the same time are separated by new internal boundaries of administrative access social networks. Other public events are organized and promoted in cyberspace, but the Olympics are the biggest. It is possible that the accumulation of a large amount of people also played the role of a catalyst contributed to the scandalous turn of events.

Friendships are rare due to the physical neighborhood in the same village, but raise new in the virtual world. The reason for this is that the British cannot choose who will be their neighbor, but they can choose in which Facebook group to participate in any blog to write or read. In the electronic agora build new relationships and friendships that are the result of free choice, not a territorial or geographical proximity.

Virtual communities are seen as spaces where individuals freely invent themselves, exceeding the specified limits of the social environment. On the

basis of the case presented by the Olympic Games of the British society, we can draw the following conclusions, which confirmed the working hypothesis. Online communication networks are exempt from geographical, in some aspects, and political and national boundaries, but create another type of boundaries, thought of as invisible lines that Sarah Green theorized. Invisible lines as Green<sup>1)</sup> evokes feelings of both sides became visible in the external and internal borders of the communication level for Britons surveyed. The outer border is completely porous, and anyone who wants to be involved in the virtual world can do it as long as he has internet access and technological device. The rules of the internal borders of inclusion and exclusion are determined mostly by the administrator. While discussions are mainly free theme, anyone can join, but the active participation requires thorough knowledge of subject matter and experiences about what kind of posts, topics and behavior will be considered meaningful and worthy of consideration by other users. When many consumers know besides online and in person, supporting circles become stronger, and the process of resisting boundaries more stable.

#### NOTES

1. [http://www.eastbordnet.org/working\\_papers/open/documents/Green\\_Lines\\_Traces\\_and\\_Tidemarks\\_090414.pdf](http://www.eastbordnet.org/working_papers/open/documents/Green_Lines_Traces_and_Tidemarks_090414.pdf)
2. <http://www.slovo.bg/old/litvestnik/208/1v0208005.htm>

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