

Interview Report
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This paper looks at whether the Internet will cause cultures around the world to become increasingly similar, or instead encourage greater diversity. I conducted five telephone interviews on these and other effects over the next ten years. The interviewees mostly work within the UK new media industry:

- E-business Manager for a large multinational
- Editor of a weekly Internet news e-zine
- Business Development Manager of a large ISP
- Vice President at a broadband ISP
- Professor in New Media

Each was sent a copy of the questions in advance of the conversations, which all lasted less than thirty minutes.

We covered a wide range of topics and most respondents agreed with one overall theme. The question was whether the increase in the Net's popularity will increase the homogeneity of world culture or create more diversity. Both outcomes seem perfectly plausible. Firstly, the spread of Western (usually American) cultures into other societies is already apparent, largely due to the ability of TV, movies, etc. to spread ideas and images quickly. The Net may simply increase the ease of disseminating these ideas more quickly and thoroughly. On the other hand, the Net is different from traditional mass media. It is more easily personalised and allows individuals to publish their own material. This ability gives people more power to control their 'viewing' and, more importantly, to create their own audiences. These differences from the mass broadcast model have the potential to fragment cultures.

The respondents largely agreed that both trends could become increasingly strong: cultures around the world will become more alike, while the differences *within* each culture will become more distinct. These two contrasting trends of increasing and decreasing homogeneity almost imply each other at a logical level. As a national culture absorbs influences from others around the world it will encompass more diversity, becoming an amalgam of many fragments drawn from diverse sources. However, as more countries undergo this transformation, absorbing more foreign influences, they will become increasingly alike. Eventually all countries will consist of similar mixtures of international influences, creating a more homogenous world culture than we have today.

One interviewee uses Europe as a "test case," stating that on one level it is becoming more like a single country. For example, passports aren't necessary for travel and it seems likely that the Euro will become the standard currency. On a continent-wide level Europe is becoming more homogenous, with poorer countries being brought up to similar standards of living through grants and trade. On a national level however the effect of closer neighbours is increasing differences within nations as attributes of foreign cultures are absorbed. This example does not account for the phenomenon of increasing regional identity, such as that of warring factions in former Yugoslavia or more peacefully in the devolution of Scotland. While an increase in a nation or region's diversity does occur, it may meet with resistance as people stand up for their native culture (another example being France's continual stand against the influence of the English language on their own soil). Extrapolating the European example to a global scale, an expansion of regional friction within nations may be the reaction to absorbing foreign cultures.

Another respondent thinks that while the increasing ease of access to information about other cultures is speeding the homogenisation of the globe, people are associating more with cultures rather than with nations. National identity is becoming less dominant and cultural identity more so, with individuals feeling less connection to the traditional concept of a nation. People don't feel bound by their nation's borders and see themselves as global

citizens, an attitude typified by *Wallpaper** magazine. One interviewee sees geography becoming irrelevant when it comes to people connecting through common interest while another asserts, "There is and will be a decrease in mass media as a unifying force in a society, but it will unify people within a global audience." However, he doesn't expect this unifying power of the media to be as powerful as it once was, with the flexibility of the Internet able to create more targeted and individual media experiences.

Between these two levels of fragmented nations and global homogeneity, language may create another form of association. The arrival of "language networks" whose borders are defined by a shared language was suggested. For example, an English speaker in New Zealand will feel himself part of a network with Britain, Hong Kong, and other English-speaking nations. Trade will create links between networks at an economic level and people will use the official second language of the 21st century, English. The possibility was also raised that English could one day become the first language around the world, depending on whether new generations learn it or not.

Few of the other subjects share such a rigid definition of language networks. One respondent agreed that these networks will arise on the level of the Internet, although right now tools like AltaVista's Babelfish ease the translation of foreign language websites. Back in the real world though, he acknowledges that however strong such virtual networks are, "France is still going to be closer than Australia." Countries that have a strong tradition of a second language will have an advantage, being able to access 'foreign' networks, while others, such as China, could still remain culturally isolated in an era of global connections. Another view was that information can easily be personalised and distributed in many languages, creating language-oriented virtual networks.

From all this an image of a world based on geography becomes increasingly irrelevant. On a personal level, people will associate with those groups which share their interest or culture, groups existing within boundaries defined by language. Traditional national borders become increasingly irrelevant as the rate of information flow amongst cultures rises. There will still be cultural differences among groups, but these groups will be less reliant on geography to define their boundaries.

There is a plausible alternative however, one which other interviewees may have found more likely. Some people have suggested that while the Internet is currently a varied and eclectic place it is destined to become increasingly more like conventional media, dominated by large multinational companies. It will still be technically possible for people to create their own content but the majority of users will only visit the large corporate sites which is little different from the effect of TV. In fact this consolidation is already underway, with Internet statistics firm Media Metrix stating that 20 percent of time spent on the Web is at the top ten sites.

The respondents may agree on this issue because they all, to varying degrees, know each other and are drawn from a similar area of a small industry. If, for example, five TV executives had been questioned we may have drawn very different conclusions. It should not, however, be assumed that the interviewees were all of one mind. Questions not directly relevant to this paper's topic were asked and a surprising amount of disagreement was evident.