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The Democratic Interact

Scottish Citizenry in Cyberspace

The great theorist of nationalism, Benedict Anderson, once defined the phenomenon as an 'imagined community' – a sense of togetherness and common culture, somehow shared by people who practically speaking would mostly never meet each other. The community spirit evoked by nationalism is composed of all manner of collective social and cultural institutions – education, language and literature, artistic traditions, festivities and rituals. But in the contemporary age, the main instrument of collective imagining is, of course, electronic media. And if Anderson's analysis of nationalism is right, then no wonder that, in the Scottish context, control of broadcasting, media and telecommunications has proved such a contentious and sensitive issue. Here are the most powerful tools by which we might reinforce the imagined community of the Scottish nation. The very frisson induced by the positing of an "SBC", as opposed to a "BBC" (or as parallel to a "CBC" in Canada) is enough to make obvious the potent link between nation, state and media (or in this case, broadcast television).

Since the steady rise of Scottish nationalism in the Sixties and Seventies, to its current party political zenith in the SNP minority government affected by the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections, key questions have been persistently raised about media and sovereignty. Who controls media in

Scotland? Who does it represent? How reflective of the national society is it? These questions have been raised not just by activists, artists and intellectuals, but by television moguls too. Throughout the Eighties, under the directorship of ex-radical-journalist Gus Macdonald, Scottish Television applied itself to the job of addressing Scotland's democratic deficit under Thatcherism. The forms used were televised fora (*Scottish Assembly*), ground-breaking documentaries (*Scotching the Myth*), cosmopolitan perspectives (*Scottish International*) and serious cultural programming (*Don't Look Down*). Though not well resourced by UK standards, these programmes were nevertheless an explicit response to a perceived and actual crisis of political legitimacy in Scottish society. Interestingly, as a commercial service, STV acted at least as vigorously and innovatively in this kind of programming, if not more, than BBC Scotland over the same period.

We lack a comprehensive history of political, cultural and social television in Scotland. But when it gets written, my guess is that it will show that Scottish nationalism's 'imagined community' has had considerable reinforcement over the last few decades. And this by means of a broadcast media which was officially structured as a UK-governed system of regulation, resourcing and control. The arrival of devolution in 1997 has merely added an extra layer to the reporting and commissioning agenda of editors in Scotland – an agenda that was already well established. What Lindsay Paterson has called the 'autonomy of modern Scotland' – an administrative and institutional self-government, even in the absence of political self-government – has ensured that Scottish media always has a current of Scottish affairs

to report[45].

Advocates of political self-determination in Scotland – from the parliament's founding father Donald Dewar, to the current First Minister Alex Salmond – have always been keen to see a Scottish parliament as a 'process', rather than a finished event. Yet one of the possible directions of that process has to be statehood. What are the media institutions that would be appropriate to an independent Scottish polity? The debate about a 'Scottish Six' or 'Tartan Ten' – that is, a version of the BBC's flagship TV news programmes which could establish its own mix between Scottish, UK and global news agendas, in a similar way to the existing news hours on BBC Radio Scotland – directly addresses that question[46].

But in 2007, these debates have a different overtone. The general tone of discussion about the editorial agenda of a Scottish Six has been politically self-conscious. For what reason, other than a resistance to constitutional radicalism, could there been objections towards a flagship TV news show which filters the world towards the needs of Scottish citizens? Citizens, moreover, whose primary loyalties to the British polity is presumed to be, at the very least, 'in process'?

Thus the debate rages on, surfacing again just after the SNP victory in May 2007. At a subsequent Broadcasting for Scotland conference, STV's managing director Bobby Hain was enthusiastic: 'If we can make a case that translates this idea into a reality at 10:30, we would do it tomorrow. We

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[45] See Lindsay Paterson, *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland*, Edinburgh University Press, 1994.
[46] See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/scotland/3544071.stm.

see the sense in doing it and the merit in it commercially.'[47]

The BBC's head of public policy, Ian Small, saw things differently. The idea of containing Scottish news in an hour made up of a Scots-flavoured national bulletin followed by a local one was 'an old model', said Small. 'The way people consume media is forever changing.' These comments should not be dismissed as simply establishment recalcitrance. In an important sense, Small is right. What is interesting about the 'Scottish Six' debate, from a late-Oughties perspective, is that it presumes an anachronistic model of both media scarcity and audience passivity: the 30 or 60 minute prime-time news slot, with its presumed post-work/pre-prandial family audience, settling down to have their worldviews framed and informed by a state broadcaster. The 'Scottish Six' (or 'Tartan Ten' for that matter) is actually a remarkably constrained moment of media consumption, in these days of flexible working patterns, fragmented families and most importantly a plenitude of digital news sources.

Let's return to Benedict Anderson's definition of nationalism for a moment. One way to forge the 'imagined community' is through convincing and compelling spectacles and rituals of national legitimacy – which a thoroughly nationalised Scottish flagship news programme would undoubtedly be. But in the age of Web 2.0, mobile internet and exponentially increasing bandwidth, should we be entirely happy with the *passivity* implied by the debates around a "Scottish Six"? Would it be only a step slightly forwards – though certainly not a step backwards - if progressive aspirations to a re-patriated national media were limited to the

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47 See http://news.scotsman.com/scotland.cfm?id=777172007.

broadcast model? To be blunt: do we want our citizens to be watching spectators of an autonomous Scottish media, or active participants in and through that media? This is to ask questions about our vision of Scottish citizenship, as much as it is of our media.

In his contribution to this book, the political scientist Michael Keating has some stimulating ideas about a new model for Scottish development. Keating notes, with some weariness, that debates about the economics of independence are either an expression of Nationalist optimism - low taxes, meaning vigorous businesses, enabling high spending on public services, hello nirvana - or unionist dystopia (the locusts and plagues of Labour rhetoric in the Scottish election). In between, he contends, there is another model - the possibility of what he calls a "networks and concertation" strategy for Scottish economy and society. Here 'networks' means the strong and open links between firms, governments and universities that can happen in a small nation, meaning that good ideas and best practice get quickly circulated. 'Concertation' refers the kind of agreement about overall development goals between unions, business, civil society, etc, that you see in places like Ireland and Finland, cemented by a "soft" and inclusive patriotism.

Yet this combination of 'concertation and networks' is barely conceivable in a media environment like Scotland's. Do we really think our media is 'fit for purpose' in this regard? Do we think it could enable the kind of national conversation that could formulate achievable national goals, and build a robust and informed consensus, around a vision of Scottish progress?

A media environment where the Scottish press trims its

editorial values because of its permanently compromised financial position and ownership structures? Where the national broadcasters are either inert commercial endeavours (STV) or overly-UK-determined state entities (BBC Scotland)? And where the full empowering possibilities of bandwidth and new media are not (and under our current devolution set-up, cannot) be thought about, and then shaped, in an integrated or visionary way?

Before we can attain the New Scottish Enlightenment so often invoked in the last few years by politicians, moguls and intellectuals alike, we have to try and instantiate a 'culture of seriousness' in this country. That is, spaces and opportunities for proper deliberation and discussion about Scottish futures, where time and resources are made available for citizens to be informed about policy, and given the opportunity to debate and shape them. The explosion of book festivals and public lectures on these islands is a grass-roots sign that there is an appetite for a cultural diet beyond reality TV and formula dramas. There are some – policy models around – Gerry Hassan's work with Demos in Glasgow 2020, a 'project of mass imagination' – which shows how new media, and community outreach, could be combined to generate and sustain this new culture of seriousness.[48]

So yes, the 'imagined community' of Scotland should have the means of collectively representing itself, through the full repatriation of broadcast media, both institutions and regulations. Through this act, we can build an inclusive spectacle of "nationality", in Keating's words, which can transcend and include political "nationalism", and motivate

48 See http://www.glasgow2020.co.uk

a sustainable Scottish progress.[49] But in arguing for our SBC, we should also think about the 'interactive community' of Scotland also: those digital citizens who are already finding their own voice in cyberspace, but who do not have an obvious and amenable set of Scottish media institutions towards which they can direct that voice.

From the perspective of the internet, of course, much of the discussion about an autonomous Scottish national media – either in terms of institutions or regulation – could seem almost entirely moot. Like every other part of the English-speaking developed world, younger Scots in particular are embracing what has been called, variously, the 'social web', or 'web 2.0', or 'participatory media' – in essence, digital platforms, accessible through ever-increasing bandwidth

[49] "This represents a disjunction between elite discourse, mass opinion and working institutions. Scotland has not yet managed to distinguish clearly between nationality, which can be a unifying theme underlying social co-operation, and nationalism, which is divisive within the country and which the parties have chosen to make the main political cleavage. There is nothing, for example, comparable to *catalanismo*, a shared orientation that allows Catalan nationalists and the socialists (although not the conservatives) to share an ideological framework of territorial development and social solidarity, while disagreeing on politics and policy. A similar spirit is visible in Quebec, where partisanship (which can be strong) exists within an overall commitment to the shared frame of reference. It is possible that independence might be the catalyst for the construction of a new development coalition, a change in interest representation and a reform of policy-making capacity, but it will not happen by necessity. There may be strong incentives to adopt pro-growth policies in order to break the fiscal constraints but this does not mean that politicians would respond. After its own independence, Ireland stagnated under the domination of conservative and anti-development forces and did not learn how to break out of this for another sixty years." Michael Keating, Scottish Independence, op cit.

and domestic usage, which encourage a creative and active input from the consumer. (The brand names are now well-known: *MySpace*, *YouTube*, *Bebo*, *Facebook*, *Blogger*. In a sense, we have to think about seriously abandoning the notion of media 'consumer', and moving at least to a more active definition of the media 'user' (or, if we can cope with the neologism, Australia blog expert Axel Bruns' notion of the 'produser'[50]).

For those who have often dreamed of the moment where the citizens would 'seize the means of media production', as it were, it's bliss in this very dawn to be alive. The 'blogosphere' – the name given to the hundreds of millions of actively-maintained online journals (or 'blogs') that have sprung up since the late Nineties – is now a recognised media domain, and one which is affecting the mainstream media (particularly print journalism) in direct ways.

UK papers like the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph* have rushed to boost up their web pages – indeed, to turn them into the kind of regularly updated and fully-responsive multi-media platforms that any blogger would recognise. Their urgency comes from the sheer volume of online traffic, and its commercial consequences: online advertising spend in newspapers is now greater than that in print editions.[51] Yet the intensity of that traffic comes from an increase in the commercial but also the 'social' usage of the internet. That is, net users' motivations for logging on are not just about finding information and services, but also vibrant communities of interest.

Just as exciting are the audio, and audio-visual, ambitions

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[50] See Joanne Jacobs and Axel Bruns, Uses of Blogs, Peter Lang 2006.
[51] http://www.guardian.co.uk/frontpage/story/0,,2044429,00.html.

that these new 'produsers' of media explore. At the moment, the content streams of *MySpace*, *YouTube* and *Google Video* are certainly driven mostly by trivial, gossipy and entertainment-led interests. Yet we cannot underestimate the effects of these digital users uploading audio-visual material from their own devices – not just video cameras in fixed settings, but camera phones on location – onto these platforms. The volume is quite unprecedented, in terms of media participation. As the web's Dan Gilmour has written, 'we the people' are becoming 'we the media'[52], and in that environment, some genuinely engaged content will emerge.

The more sensitive of these platform providers are becoming aware of the civic potentialities of their software. *YouTube* has already set up a channel called *CitizenTube*, which invites activist contributions from around the world. *Bebo,* the teenage networking site, will launch *Bebo Be One* before the end of 2007, giving its users tools to develop their activist and health agendas. Al Gore, most notably, has been ahead of the curve on this, with his Current TV channel. It opened in 2005 with an explicit aim to seek content from users, in an attempt to 'give the media back to the people' in the face of corporate dominance of editorial values in US media.[53] Gore's latest book, *The Assault on Reason*, explicitly cites the internet as a resource for national renewal – a 'networked democracy' which can help citizens recover their passion, energy and voice for political

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52 http://wethemedia.oreilly.com/.

53 For Bebo Be One, see http://www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?
    MID=367137231&MemberId=3400373057.
  For Citizen Tube, see http://www.youtube.com/profile?
    user=citizentube; for Current TV, see
    http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=citizentube.

change.[54]

The rise of podcasting – the availability of mostly audio speech material, easily synchronisable with media devices like the ipod – is a less spectacular, but potentially more profound development, in terms of civic activism. A subscriber to the iTunes podcast page has hundreds of podcasts available to download, many from institutions and movements which find themselves on the same playing field as large organisations like *Newsweek* or the BBC. And beyond the enclave of iTunes, the possibility for podcasts to run discussions or interviews way beyond the constrictions of most broadcast radio – in terms of time, focus on subject, level of discourse, etc – is being taken up by hundreds of thousands of 'produsers' on line. They now have the opportunity for their communities of interest to become a part of the 'audio menu' of MP3 device users.[55]

This new media landscape, with many other developments undoubtedly on the way, is already having profound effects on more established broadcast institutions. The current director of the BBC, Mark Thompson, has been acutely aware of how the Corporation must change in the face of these users and produsers.[56] For as long as it remains part of the corporation, BBC Scotland will shape itself in Thompson's image of 'Martini media' – available anyplace, anytime, anywhere.

In terms of our argument – which is to explore the justifications for a repatriation of powers over media and broad-

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54 Excerpt from 'The Assault on Reason'   http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1622015,00.html.

55 Come one, come all: the rise of podcasting, NPR, May 23rd 2005, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4661213.

56 http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1761065,00.html.

casting to the Scottish Parliament – the rise of Web 2.0 and participatory media poses some thorny questions. Firstly, what powers would a Scottish media regulator have over Web 2.0? Much of the vigour of the social web is being expressed through platforms that are (with significant exceptions) freely and equally available throughout the European Union, though originated, located and resourced most often in the US. The truism that the Internet 'knows no national boundaries' has begun to unravel recently, with the spectacle of search engines like Google and Yahoo amending their search parameters to satisfy the jurisdictions of national governments – like China around issues of political dissent, or Germany in terms of 'holocaust denial'[57].

There is no doubt that a repatriated Scottish media regulator – particularly under nation-state conditions - would have the power, if it so chose, to compel digital enterprises operating in the Scottish jurisdiction to amend their services, as a condition of operating in this territory. But the case against ever exercising this is towering. Lawrence Lessig, the noted American cyber-lawyer, has written extensively that 'code is law', and vice versa: libertarian dreams of the internet are coming up against some thorny realities of governance and legislature throughout the world.[58] Yet the global furore caused by national meddling in the codes of search engines is surely sufficient to ensure that a Scottish regulator – a McOfcom – would never do so.

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[57] On German censorship of Google, see http://blog.outer-court.com/archive/2006-06-14-n72.html. On Google in China, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4645596.stm. And on the general rise of net censorship, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6665945.stm.
[58] See http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/reviews/article2339518.ece

So if negative powers over digital regulation would not be used under Scottish media autonomy, positive powers would seem to be limited - other than what an 'SBC' might do to continue the 'digital user revolution' instigated by the BBC. But is there anything distinctive that an SBC could do in relation to Web 2.0?

Scottish society would undoubtedly benefit by adopting the 'creative archive' approach, recently abandoned by the BBC, for the Scottish televisual archive. The creative archive (a open digital resource of the BBC's programmes, accessible from any broadband-linked device or terminal) was proposed in 2004, under the director generaliship of Greg Dyke. Now watered down into an 'on-demand' seven day service, the 'creative archive' concept could be retained for a future SBC (assuming, a retention of BBC Scotland's archive, of course). Easy and ubiquitous access to a 'television history' of modern Scotland would be of enormous educational and cultural importance. The health of any national identity rests on its ability to reflect on its past, in ways both critical and celebratory, in order to inform the present and shape the future.

A McOfcom could also use other parts of the transmission spectrum – our proliferation of satellite and digital TV channels – to answer long-specified deficits in Scottish cultural, educational and community life. A Scottish 'arts' digital channel, with a mix of commissioned and archive material, would certainly be an answer to the extraordinary flowering of cultural innovation that has been the handmaiden of political change in Scotland over the last 30 years. A Scottish 'enterprise ' channel would give voice to the distinct drivers of Scottish development – in law, education, finance, lifelong-learning, science and technology. And a Scottish 'communities' channel would aim to give

voice to the diversity of Scotland's lifestyles, places and ethos, empowering local citizens as much as possible to articulate their aspirations and protestations.

Yet the answer to the obvious question, in the face of this multitude of channels and platforms – 'how could we afford all this?' – can be partly derived from the success of the social web. Net telecasting through *YouTube* and *GoogleVideo* has, for some, degraded broadcast TV standards – low investment and expertise in these clips means low quality. But for others, the energy displayed by non-experts and new participants in mediating themselves is something to be channelled and developed, not denigrated.

Could we ally the power of Web 2.0 participation and "prod-usage" with the creation of specific Scottish digital channels, designed to develop the nation? The spectacle of new television channels could reinforce the 'imagined community' of Scotland – collectively enriching our self-understanding and sense of recent history. This need not be a completely 'top-down' imposition of programming, coming from the editorial policies of existing (or repatriated) institutions like an SBC. The educational ambition of the Reithian legacy – that it is the responsibility of public service broadcasting to bring things to its audience that they didn't know they would like, until they saw them – is still worth preserving in a New Scotland.

But in an environment of digital plenitude, we don't need to be trapped in an either-or framework – that is, *either* a more intensely 'Scottish' version of national broadcast programming, *or* a diverse new ecology of Web 2.0 participatory media. We can, and should, have a exciting relationship between both these realms. How can the 'imagined community' of broadcast television best interrelate with the

'interactive community' of the social web? (Indeed, Al Gore's Current TV provides an excellent initial model for this kind of service. Subscribers upload material which is then voted on by the Current TV community, nudging it closer or further away from transmission on the actual satellite channel.)

In the Scottish context this raises a profounder question. What kind of Scotland will come through our media, what kind of understanding will Scots have of themselves, if we give as much weight to 'interactive' processes as 'imagined' processes? Is there the opportunity to actually *revitalise democracy itself* in Scotland through an active embrace of Web 2.0-style technologies and practices? Can we build that 'networked democracy' that Al Gore looks towards, giving a boost to our spirit of citizenship? After the debacle of the voting process in the May 2007 elections for the Scottish Parliament, we may need to think about long-term measures that can give the Scottish people a direct sense that their voices matter, and will be heard.

The creation of these three Scottish digital channels would have to be accompanied by a strong investment in a robust upload platform on the internet, which would be able to receive and filter audio-visual material from the populace. (And we *will* need to build it, rather than just presume that we can piggy back on existing platforms like *YouTube* or *MySpace*.) This would not just be relevant for the 'communities' channel – an expected repository for 'people's' media - but for the 'arts' and 'enterprise' channels also.

Yet if we bend a repatriated media policy in Scotland towards valuing active participation as much as passive watching, then we should not presume, as the Hollywood movie *Fields of Dreams* had it, that 'if we build it, they will

come'. A mere encouragement to participation would almost certainly not be sufficient to ensure take-up and involvement. (Again, our recent experience with Vote Scotland's campaign to educate our voters in the ways of proportional voting systems should be properly cautionary). Two other enabling conditions would be required, both of which entirely within the regulatory remit of a Scottish government. One would be a strong minimum standard requirement for broadband speed and availability. According to the OECD, the small nations of Europe – Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Norway – are in the lead in terms of subscribers per head; yet none of them match South Korea's march to fibre-cable broadband network, which measures download and upload speeds in Gigabits rather than Megabits.[59] A straightforward argument for Scottish macro-economic autonomy is to create incentives for the fibre-optic cabling of the nation.

A second condition would be a far more comprehensive campaign of media literacy and articulacy than we have yet seen in Scottish life. According to a recent 2006 Ofcom report on media literacy in the nations and regions[60], Scotland broadly matches other regions of the UK in terms of take-up and usage of media services, except in a few significant and worrying areas. We watch more television than anyone else in the UK; we 'distrust' our broadsheet newspapers more than anywhere else except Northern Ireland; we are less interested than anyone in finding out how our

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59 See
http://www.oecd.org/document/7/0,2340,en_2649_201185_38446855_1_1_1_1,00.html
60 See http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/nations_regions/

media works; and we want to be protected from 'offensive' content in media more than anyone else.

This would seem like unpropitous ground for a new participative media structure in Scotland – other than the fact, also in the Ofcom report, that we say that we download music, video and text more than any other region/nation in Britain. So the appetite for new media would seem to be there - but there would also seem to be a deficit in Scots' attitudes towards active participation in media, rather than just consumption of it. This is where a scaling-up to a national level of media literacy programmes like Scottish Enterprise Glasgow's Real Learning Centres, and its learning lab Urban Learning Space, would be useful.[61]

But it should be raised to the next level - not just of internet use, but internet *prod-use*: the essential skills required to create audio-visual material, podcasts, effective blogging and website coding and management. Indeed, if we can say that citizenship flourishes under conditions where educational and self-expressive levels are high, then in the early 21st century we need to add media (and new media) skills to traditional literary and numeracy skills. Scotland actually has a burgeoning culture of educational innovation through new media, with centres of excellence in Glasgow (Learning Teaching Scotland) and Dundee (University of Abertay). We have much research and practice to draw on, in devising an adult-learning programme to engender 'mass multimedia literacy'. And as the Canadian academic Henry Milner says, 'civic literacy' – not just the ability to understand how one can shape one's democracy, but hav-

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[61] See http://www.intoreal.com, and http://www.urbanlearnngspace.com

ing a quality of media to inform and bolster that ability – is a crucial factor in accelerating the development of any society. Looking at the permanently superior quality-of-life ratings of the Scandinavian societies, Milner quotes the late Swedish prime minister Olof Palme, who once said that he preferred to think of Sweden not as a social democracy but as a "study-circle democracy"[62].

That might be a little too close, in some eyes, to the Knoxian/Presbyterian notion of one nation quietly united under the study of the Good Book (or good books) for comfort. But the new media equivalent of that 'reflective form of democracy' invoked by Alex Salmond in his First Ministerial acceptance speech, doesn't have to eschew fun, or simulation or speculation. For example, take Ofcom's suggested new policy of Public Service Publishing, where public funds could be made available to a web, games or internet service that was demonstrably acting in the public interest. This could happily be integrated into a new Scottish media-regulation environment, in which participation in new media was already a heavily promoted public good.[63] (In any healthy policy process in Scotland, we should be willing to steal good ideas from anywhere – even Westminster and Whitehall - if they're worthwhile.)

The Scottish games and new media sector, already in some sectors at a world-class technical standard, could also benefit from this kind of public support. Much of the complaint

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62 Henry Milner, 'True North strong and third', Toronto Globe and Mail, Wednesday, August 7, 2002.
63 See http://www.openrightsgroup.org/orgwiki/index.php/ Ofcom_PSP_Consultation_March_2007, and http://www.openmedianetwork.org.uk/contentandvision/ openmediacontent.pdf.

about 'trash' games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Bully* – devised in Scotland - ignores the tough market and demographic realities that many of these games makers have to negotiate. A publicly-enabled distance from the games marketplace will allow Scottish games makers the space to find more educational, subtle and socially progressive content for their simulations and virtual worlds.[64]

The gap between fast-evolving digital cultures, and slow-moving, inherited structures of government, is exactly the kind of gap that independence-minded policy makers should be trying to fill. We need to conceive of a Scotland in which every locality - our schools, hospitals, workplaces, marketplaces, artistic companies, activists, community halls, students' digs and home offices - is encouraged to generate media; to tell digital stories about their experience, interests and agendas; seeking out fellow Scots, and those beyond the country, to collaborate in projects formulated and informed by our use of networks. A "Scotland 2.0", as it were.

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[64] For example see Learning and Teaching Scotland's Consolarium, http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/ictineducation/connected/articles/16/ embracinggamingculture/index.asp.