

‘IF YOU’RE NOT IRISH, STOP CALLING YOURSELF IRISH’: SELF-EXPRESSION AND CYBER IRISHNESS IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract / Résumé

The opening years of the twenty-first century can be characterised by the increased overlap between cyberspace and the physical world; virtual reality is more real than it has ever been. The rising popularity of web 2.0 forms of self-expression and user generated content such as *Facebook*, *MySpace* and blogging have resulted in it becoming the largest growth area on the internet.

This essay hopes to explore how the uptake and familiarity with web technology by Irish people has overflowed into their lives and cultural expressions via the use of ‘virtual communities’. As the forums for representing the virtual self continue to evolve and multiply, debates over the multiple meanings of Irishness will thrive as the ‘new Irish’ continue to reinterpret the complexities of their identity using web technology.

Keywords: blogging, cyberspace, cyberculture, identity, Irishness, self-expression, social networks, virtual communities, Web 2.0.

I is the vertical, the virtual reality. I tell it slant.
I am leaning into you to nudge you. I am Immanuel,
and you are Kant¹

The opening years of the twenty-first century can be characterised by the increased overlap between cyberspace and the physical world; virtual reality is more real than it has ever been. As Sherry Turkle observes in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, ‘computers don’t just do things for us, they do things to us, including to our ways of thinking about ourselves and other people’.² The impact of computer technology on our approach to self-analysis and self-representation has infiltrated to the core of national identity, adding a cyber dimension to the central questions of what it means to be Irish. Members of the diaspora have always functioned through a form of ‘virtual Irishness’, an Irishness which restricts access to important files due to historical or geographical distance. The internet shortens these distances with tools to research the records of ancestors, learn the Irish language and explore the landscape through satellite images.³ Irish people are closer than ever before to the functions of the state with Dáil debates online and the Taoiseach’s user-friendly website.⁴ The increased freedom to access information has led to an increased appetite to produce it. As this article will demonstrate, virtual communities such as *Facebook*, *MySpace* and *SecondLife*; and self-publishing forms such as blogging have given rise to many new interpretations of Irish identity.⁵

The *Information Society and Telecommunications Report* (2006) on the use of ICT from the Central Statistics Office Ireland demonstrates the extent to which the internet has become established in Irish households.⁶ The report estimates that 867,500 Irish households (or 59%) have a home computer with the number of homes with internet connections having increased from 655,000 in 2005 to 722,200 in 2006. Young people are often shown to be the most frequent users of the internet with reports such as the SEW 2007 Consumer Survey into *Internet Usage in Ireland* claiming that 71% of males and 76% of females under 25 had access to the internet from a variety of locations.⁷ With the Irish government’s plans to extend broadband to all schools the figures seem set to continue rising. This hypothesis is supported by the data provided by the Statistical Office of the European

¹ Ciaran Carson, *I from Opera Et Cetera*, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, Gallery Books, 1996.

² Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, London, Phoenix, 1996, p. 26.

³ There are a innumerable websites offering these services, the following are representative examples: <http://www.irishorigins.com>, <http://www.gaeltalk.net>, and <http://www.maplandia.com/ireland>

⁴ <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/index.html>, <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/>

⁵ <http://www.facebook.com>, <http://ie.myspace.com>, <http://secondlife.com>, <http://www.irishblogs.ie>

⁶ <http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/industry/2006/ictireland2006.pdf>

⁷ SEW 2007 Consumer Survey by Amarach Consulting, March 2007, <<http://www.amarach.com>>

Communities *Internet—Level of Access, Use and Activities* research in which individual use of the internet across all age groups in Ireland is shown to be at the EU average of 55% just above Spain at 50%, France 47% and Italy 38%. More significantly, the increase of internet use by 16-24 year olds in Ireland is shown to have one of the sharpest increases in recent years rising from 45% in 2003 to 73% by 2006.⁸ Yet it is not the volume of young Irish people accessing the internet which is of interest here, but rather the ways in which they choose to do so, in particular, the ways in which they use the internet to interrogate concepts of Irishness.

Computers and the internet have been associated with the upgrade of Ireland's economic hardware from the first advertising campaigns of the Industrial Development Authority who boasted of an 'electronic not an industrial revolution'; through to the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger and beyond.⁹ As Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly argue:

Today, the old rural national image is on the wane and the country currently likes to represent itself as a thriving, energetic, cosmopolitan place, a vibrant multicultural hub of postindustrial, information age entrepreneurial activity.¹⁰

The success in Ireland of *Apple's* European Operations Centre in Cork, *Intel's* manufacturing sites in Leixlip, County Kildare and *Dell's* presence in Raheen, Limerick have allowed the industry to become a familiar component of the Irish economy. Irish companies creating tools for business users such as *Nooked* and *Infacta* have contributed to a sector which has one of the highest shares of business sector value globally with ICT accounting for 20% (€53 billion) of total turnover in industry and services. This article hopes to explore how the prevalence of computer technology has overflowed into the lives and cultural expressions of Irish people via the use of 'virtual communities'.

The methodology of such a project is necessarily contentious as it involves taking data from personal profiles which may be misrepresentative of a wider community. The individual commands power at their fingertips to influence how they are viewed by others and to whom they will permit access to their virtual social sphere. Through careful manipulation a member of a prominent virtual community may even wield power over the image of the nation as perceived by millions across the globe; it is this correlation between personal and national online identity which is explored here. The large number of profiles which make up each virtual community make it

⁸ Eurostat: Statistical Office of the European Communities. 'Science and Technology: Internet –Level of Access, Use and Activities'. 8th January 2007.
<<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>>

⁹ For more on this see 'Coming Out of Hibernation? The Myth of Modernization in Irish Culture' in Luke Gibbons, *Transformations on Irish Culture*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1996.

¹⁰ Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 1.

impossible to produce a comprehensive study in an article of this size. However, all of the examples have been selected because they are representative of a larger phenomenon. Additionally, although all of these profiles can be considered 'in the public sphere' because they are available on the internet, there is an implicit understanding that communication is confined within the virtual community. Hence, if direct reference is made to an individual, only the website and available information such as gender, network and time and date reference are provided in order to protect the anonymity of the contributors.

Facebook, launched in February 2004, has over 17 million registered users across 47,000 networks, it is the sixth most trafficked site in the US and rates as the number one-photo sharing site. It describes itself as 'a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them'. Although originally restricted to educational institutions, membership is now open, yet *Facebook's* distinct appeal lies in the links it maintains to real groups aiming to 'reflect your real-life communities'. It is structured through a system of 'networks' to which each member belongs in 'real-life', such as companies, schools, regions, and 'groups' which illustrate the tastes, interests and opinions of the member. At the time of writing, the *Facebook* network for Ireland lists 12,662 members with the maximum number possible (500+) of groups and events listed under the search term 'Irish'. The connection with real places and people provides *Facebook* with a sense of safety and reliability often lacking in other online communities with its aim of 'allowing people to share information online the same way they do in the real world.' Such freedom often results in people expressing opinions they would not perhaps be inclined to do in real life. For example, the 'Britain out of Ireland Group' set up by students who have 'decided the best tactic for the re-unification of Ireland is to invade Britain' in order to 'give them a taste of their own medicine', or the 'Northern Ireland Mafia' who use the tag line 'The British Empire is not dead: we still live in oppressed colonies'. Both of these groups were created by students enrolled at universities in the UK and are classified under the *Facebook* heading 'Just for Fun'. Whilst there are a number of groups which show an intention to explain the historical context of Northern Ireland albeit with an implicit political agenda such as 'Friends of Ulster' or those which celebrate areas of Irish national culture, notably the GAA, there are also a number which thrive on stereotypes and clichés: 'All the Cool Kids Are Irish', 'Being Irish Rocks!', 'Beer me I'm Irish' and so on. In most cases these latter groups are set up by Irish-American students recalling exchange trips to Ireland or attempting to outdo one another in their claims of Irish heritage, regularly through boasts of drinking prowess.

Appropriation of such a sensitive stereotype often draws impassioned responses from native Irish students and the establishment of rival groups such as 'If you're not Irish, stop saying you're Irish', from which this paper draws its title. Members of this group from both sides of the Atlantic debate

issues of cultural identity, the Irish language and the diaspora, with young Irish people often attempting to provide a more contemporary perspective, as one user explains: ‘today’s Irish are living in a thriving economy centered on industry and research, we are a highly educated nation who abandoned old, romantic Ireland decades ago and have now moved into the modern world’. The same contributor goes on to acknowledge that:

Perhaps it is our own fault to an extent that these people have us so misunderstood, we did sell that image for years, everyone has a postcard with an old man, a donkey and a stack of hay...but those old men are few and far between these days, most Irish people wear designer clothes, listen to American & British music, eat ethnic foods, etc., much like everyone else in the western world.¹¹

Interestingly, the author of this statement not only divides Ireland into its past and present manifestations, but also distinguishes between generations. For him, the Ireland of the past is a place for ‘old men’ whereas the present is for the young, internationalised consumer culture in which clothes, music and food are prized not for being distinctly Irish, but for being generically acceptable to the ‘western world’. The self-reflection of this statement acknowledges the damage that can be caused through misrepresenting identities and highlights the appeal of sites like *Facebook* which represent the evolution of the ‘postcard’, allowing users to produce more nuanced images of a people or place. Ultimately, the students engaging in these debates are acknowledging that Irish identity is malleable and needs to be constantly reshaped into new forms which best represent contemporary as well as historical experiences.

The website *MySpace* offers a similar philosophy of ‘an online community that lets you meet your friends’ friends’. This is an ironic claim, for in a virtual community you may never have ‘met’ your friends or friends’ friends other than online. Like *Facebook*, *MySpace* has expanded from its original community which was predominantly teen-based, to a site now rivalling Google in the trafficking stakes; it has a specifically Irish version, promoting Irish music and local events. As with *Facebook*, a number of members shape a visual sense of Irish identity through their profiles which are dominated by a highly stylized and often distorted use of symbols; ranging from shamrocks and leprechauns, to IRA slogans and cartoons of masked gunmen. Powerfully emotive language and images often incite fierce online conflicts, proving that some issues are able to divide even virtual communities. One weakness then of *Facebook* and *MySpace* is in their sometimes careless regard for the real people who produce virtual versions of themselves for the sites. They permit a conscience-free freedom of speech as the individual feels uninhibited due to the barrier of the screen which shields them from others. The future significance of these sites and the archives and legacy they will create is perhaps the most interesting

¹¹ *Facebook*, Male, Cork, posted on Jan 12, 2007 at 7:55am.

consideration. The article ‘Getting to Know You’ part of the *Virtual Ireland* collection on *The Irish Times* website quotes Fergus Burns of Irish firm *Nooked* who observes that: ‘a future Taoiseach or president of Ireland is now on *Bebo*’.¹² The potential ramifications of this are immense. It has been reported that prospective employers and university tutors use the sites as a means of establishing the reliability of a candidate or the veracity of an alibi. Could it be then that a ‘future Taoiseach or president of Ireland’ could be prevented from achieving their potential due to the whims and trends of their teenage-self? The content of the profile is inevitably shaped by the limited questions asked by the site and therefore any attempt to express individuality can result in caricature; whether a misdemeanour by the virtual self could ever conversely affect the future of the real self remains to be seen.

The term ‘virtual community’ originally relates to the 1993 book of the same name by Howard Rheingold.¹³ The term is clearly problematic as the constituent members do not come together, or live in proximity as ‘community’ would suggest; they are by definition dispersed and interact through their virtual selves. This is of course the crucial issue in the matter of online ‘social networks’, because, although there are established rules and systems of etiquette, often self-consciously discussed by users, they remain different from the rules which govern real human relationships. There is for example a sense that expressing strong opinions or demonstrating certain forms of behaviour is acceptable online. In a virtual world virtually anything is acceptable. The concept of a virtual community, albeit existing in the imagination rather than cyberspace, is a well rehearsed concept. Benedict Anderson’s influential *Imagined Communities* (1983) shaped contemporary thinking on the concept of the nation. Anderson defines the nation as an ‘imagined political community’ which is ‘imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’.¹⁴ The community of the nation can only exist in an imaginary sense he argues because of its size, ‘even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion’.¹⁵ The concept of the nation then, detracts from individual variation and connects large numbers of people into one overarching group, ‘regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship’.¹⁶ This ‘comradeship’ awards a sense of authority to the individual and the power

¹² ‘Getting to Know You’, *Virtual Ireland, Ireland.com: The Irish Times*, © 2007, Consulted: 4th February 2007.

< <http://www.ireland.com/timeseye/virtualireland/articles/article10.html>>

¹³ Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley, 1993.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983, p. 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.7.

of unity to the group, yet it also becomes the source of violence when opposing ‘imagined communities’ conflict, as Anderson laments:

Ultimately it is this fraternity that made it possible, over the past two centuries for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.¹⁷

The individual then is not only strengthened and legitimised by the nation, but also put at risk. Essentially, the concept of a nation permits people to group together to gain authority and power over other groups of people. In order to achieve success the group must attempt to make themselves distinct from other communities by identifying group characteristics and codes to which the majority adhere. Many of the same principles apply to virtual communities; the borders of cyberspace are often as contested as those shown on a map and citizenship is frequently questioned. Similarly, communities in cyberspace and reality are connected by their dependence on the individual. In both, the particular ways in which the individual perceives himself, alone and in relation to others, formulates the structure of a community. As Tim Jordan observes in *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet* (1999):

People build communities in cyberspace by interpreting the bounds of their and their communities’ actions as being based on the primacy of individuals [...] Virtual communities are built from individuals mobilising their powers.¹⁸

On the internet nobody knows you’re Irish, and perhaps more significantly, nobody knows if you’re not. The sentiment of: ‘If you’re not Irish, stop saying you’re Irish’ highlights the problematic nature of Irish identities claimed and denied on the internet. Irishness is as contested a concept in cyberspace as it is in real life (referred to by internet users as RL). The relationship between the individual and the groups he or she represents has always shaped concepts of national identity. Far too often Irish identity is represented via a series of dichotomies: Catholic/Protestant; Nationalist/Unionist; urban/rural and so on. Such a simplistic approach is in itself limiting but continues to promote Irishness as the primary identifier. In practice, Irishness can and does contain a subtle combination of the categories listed above; indeed, it relies upon them all for its existence. Ailbhe Smyth has noted the prevalence of this, observing that ‘however much we may argue about the meaning of Irish national identity, we rarely question its right to be the dominant meaning. Irish first, and all the rest comes after and sometimes not at all’.¹⁹ Further work needs to be done to

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.7.

¹⁸ Tim Jordan, *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 9.

¹⁹ Ailbhe Smyth, Extract from *Critical Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1996 in David Pierce (ed.), *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*, Cork, Cork UP, 2000, p. 1121.

establish whether this remains the case amongst virtual communities. However, it is already possible to observe that Irishness is a highly prized signifier amongst members of virtual communities as it is often emphasized or even exaggerated by those seeking higher status online; sites such as the *Irish Blog Directory* reinforce this with a service that collates ‘blogs of Irish content or Irish interest’ in order to promote them globally :

Our directory is not only for Irish people but for anyone all over the world who may have an Irish flavoured blog. You don’t have to be Irish to blog about Ireland.²⁰

This phenomenon is part of the wider notion that ‘Irishness is in’ as Brendan O’Neill argues in the article ‘Whose Ireland is it anyway?’ (2003): ‘being Irish has become a lifestyle choice, not a national status. Ireland is not so much a state, as a state of mind’.²¹ This is certainly the case for internet users who produce profiles in which conventional and clichéd symbols of Irishness are frequently applied to a contemporary form of self-expression.

The construction and representation of Irish identity through cultural and literary forms has long occupied scholars. Whilst the academy has depended upon observing society’s steady evolution, young people have frequently reinterpreted and remodelled the identity passed on to them to seemingly instant effect. This is in part the inevitable impact of each generation reacting to new stimuli; but also displays a response to the new means of self-expression which emerge through developments in art and technology. Luke Gibbons makes a crucial point when he proposes that identity ‘does not just involve consciousness, or even self-consciousness, but also the realm of representation, i.e. the capacity to be realised in material form’.²² Whilst identity is by its very nature ephemeral, attempts to define it are always manifest in physical forms: mass protest, official documentation, and autobiographical writing. The so-called ‘web 2.0 generation’ continues to engage with the various contentions of Irish identity, but increasingly, uses the internet to do so. The term ‘web 2.0 generation’ relates to the users of the second generation of web-based services characterised by collaboration and contribution identified by Tim O’Reilly.²³ The web 2.0 generation actively engages with the internet as content producers, rather than viewing it as a source from which information is gained or received. The results are interesting not only due to

²⁰ www.irishblogdirectory.com Consulted: 1st June 2007

²¹ Brendan O’Neill, ‘Whose Ireland is it anyway?’ 14th March 2003, p. 2, www.spiked-online.com, consulted 22nd August 2006.

²² Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, Cork, Cork UP, 1996, p. 10.

²³ Tim O’Reilly, ‘What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software’. 30th September 2005, Consulted: 5th March 2007 <<http://www.oreillynet.com>>

the ways individuals interpret and construct their own sense of self, but also because of the reactions and responses elicited by other contributors. New identities demand new formats of representation and the internet has come to provide a variety of possibilities. Its relevance in Ireland is demonstrated by the organisation *Web 2.0 Ireland*, 'a resource of, by and for the web 2.0 community in Ireland' which has a website supported by *Enterprise Ireland* whose core mission is 'to accelerate the development of world-class Irish companies to achieve strong positions in global markets resulting in increased national and regional prosperity.'²⁴ Whilst these tools have clear potential for industry, their current manifestations are, as I have demonstrated, principally concerned with individual identity and personality.

Unlike the traditional forms of printed memoir and autobiography which demand a lengthy period of self-reflection before the self is represented in all its retrospective glory; virtual profiles provide instant access to the author's self-image. Similarly of course, they lack professional editors, publishers, critics and indeed paying readers, which inevitably affects the credibility and quality of the texts. Some are updated on a daily basis, charting the fluidity of identity and so often more can be learnt from the information a person removes than from any new information they add. The level of self-absorption and commitment to projecting a public persona that this requires, contributes to the phenomenon of a virtual world populated predominantly by young people. As Fintan O'Toole identifies in *The Irish Times* online article 'Fast, Faster, Fastest', 'European 16 to 24-year-olds are now spending an average of 13 hours a week online, companies are increasingly seeing the web as the best way to target the young'.²⁵ As O'Toole goes on to observe, these young people are not simply consuming the internet, but rather, producing it via 'platforms that harness the collective intelligence of their users'.²⁶

The dominance of the young and the lack of parental and state control have caused cyberculture to be viewed with suspicion as an uncharted, subversive place. In his repudiation of the Telecommunications Reform Act in the US, J.P. Barlow highlights the fear of the unknown sometimes betrayed by the legislators and commentators who lack familiarity with some of the concepts of cyberculture, proclaiming: 'you are terrified of your own children, since they are natives in a world where you will always be immigrants'.²⁷ The fact that many of the most popular virtual communities are inhabited almost exclusively by young people can produce a *Lord of the Flies* effect. In an interview on RTE news on the 10th January 2006, Clive

²⁴ www.web2Ireland.org, www.enterprise-ireland.com.

²⁵ Fintan O'Toole, 'Fast, Faster, Fastest' *Virtual Ireland, Ireland.com: The Irish Times* ©2007, Consulted: 21st February 2007

<<http://www.ireland.com/timeseye/virtualireland/articles/article1.html>>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ John Perry Barlow, 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace', in Neil Spiller (ed.), *Cyber-Reader*, London, Phaidon, 2002, p. 273.

Byrne of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals described the case of teenage girls being expelled from Alexandra College in Dublin for writing disparaging comments about other pupils on online message boards as a ‘manifestation of bullying in twenty-first century Ireland’.²⁸ Free from the sanctions of their elders, users arguably feel freer to express their individuality than in real-life under the watchful eye of parents and teachers, with discussions occasionally becoming aggressive, graphic or extremely intense, for example the *MySpace* profile accredited to a ‘22 year old Male from Ireland’ under the name ‘Irish Republican Army’ which contains provocative Republican slogans, murals and songs and displays messages of support and incitement to violence.²⁹

The internet is often perceived as a dangerous and unpredictable sea of information on which young people surf through waves of moral peril and opportunities for empowerment and development are frequently overlooked as a consequence. Research by the National Youth Council for Ireland concludes that Ireland has the 5th highest rate of youth suicide in the EU for 14 – 24 year olds and that 90% of such cases are connected to mental health problems and substance misuse. One of the attempts to counteract this is the website *SpunOut.ie* which ‘aims to guide young people through life with quality information, support and inspiration as well as providing a platform for young people to express their opinions, realise that they are not alone and get heard’.³⁰ *SpunOut.ie* uses a number of innovative techniques to encourage young people to access help and promote the site to their peers such as asking them to add it to their list of ‘top friends’ on *Bebo*, read the Blog and contribute to the web forums. Websites like this recognize the opportunity for creativity and self-expression as well as the potential benefits to well-being offered by these new technologies. As John Collins in *The Irish Times* has observed, internet users can now ‘take much more control of the web experience’, noting that, through websites like *Bebo* and *MySpace*, teenagers are keeping online journals, building networks of friends and discovering new music, films and interests based on the recommendations of those they trust. Free and low-cost blogging tools such as *Blogger*, *Irish.Typepad.com* and *LiveJournal* mean that anyone who can use a word processor can become a self-publisher’.³¹ As testified by the *Irish Blog Awards* which took place on 3rd March 2007, web logging has become a fully evolved form amongst Irish web writers, and has overlapped into a community who meet annually to celebrate their achievements.³² Bernard Goldbach also writes in praise of blogging and other technology

²⁸ <http://www.rte.ie/tv/theafternoonshow/1106182.html>. Consulted: 5th May 2007

²⁹ <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=42619303>. Consulted 5th May 2007.

³⁰ <http://www.youth.ie/issues>, <http://www.spunout.ie/> Consulted 5th May 2007.

³¹ John Collins, ‘Power to the People’, *Virtual Ireland, Ireland.com: The Irish Times*, © 2007 Consulted 4th February 2007

<<http://www.ireland.com/timeseye/virtualireland/articles/article9.html>>

³² <http://www.awards.ie/blogawards/> Consulted 5th March 2007.

which allows people to achieve and experience more noting that ‘in Ireland, a vibrant blogging community now shares stories about local events, national news and international developments’. His stance also allows for an application in the real-world as he mentions the fact that ‘several articulate Irish politicians have used their blogs to focus public opinion on issues such as road safety [...] and value for money’.³³ By way of contrast in the same article Michael Foley argues for keeping user-generated content subservient:

Take blogs. So what if people want to publish their thoughts so strangers can read them? In most cases there is nothing wrong with it. But journalism it is not [...] The online world is full of unverified information, inaccurate information, made-up stories posing as fact.³⁴

The unlegislated freedom and ability to make the private self publicly available is arguably the attraction for bloggers who have gained access to a form of self-expression previously reserved for a privileged few opinion columnists. They have in a sense created a new genre, diaries published at the point of production.³⁵

Whilst blogs focus on the inner thoughts and opinions of an individual in carefully stylized prose, ‘social networks’ allow the user to develop a more tangible presence with instant access to photos, likes, dislikes, religious and political views; allowing the reader to acquire an instant snapshot of the author’s sense of identity. The concept of profiles is particularly important, because it functions on the premise that there are certain knowable elements which combine to produce an identity. This may point to the creators responding to some prior knowledge of the self as a fragmented construct, or more realistically that we represent ourselves to others through a combination of verifiable facts and subjective opinions. The profiles depend upon the public presentation of the private self; opinions and preferences are considered to be significant enough to define a person, explaining and justifying their identity. The phenomenon of constructing an online profile in this manner and the act of thinking about one’s identity and how to represent it for others deserves more critical attention. These forums require a new comprehension of the self-profile, created not for a distinct purpose or end product such as a Curriculum Vitae or an online dating agency profile, but rather, to make the private self

³³ Bernard Goldbach, ‘Blogging: A Great Leap Forward’, *Virtual Ireland, Ireland.com: The Irish Times*, © 2007, Consulted: 18th February 2007
<<http://www.ireland.com/timeseye/virtualireland/articles/article7a.html>>

³⁴ Michael Foley, ‘Blogging: A Great Leap Forward’, *Virtual Ireland, Ireland.com: The Irish Times*, © 2007, Consulted 18th February 2007
<<http://www.ireland.com/timeseye/virtualireland/articles/article7a.html>>

³⁵ A good example can be found at the Irish Podcasts site which began in August 2005 <http://podcasting.ie/podcast/>. A large proportion of the site’s content is produced by third level college students engaged in a multimedia degree programme in Clonmel, County Tipperary.

public, in order to create and maintain relationships both real and virtual; inserting a carefully constructed alter-ego into the parallel universe of a virtual community.

Some virtual communities have evolved these concepts, adding elements of fantasy and anonymity to the world of the virtual self. In *SecondLife* (SL) avatars are created, allowing the user to choose their name, appearance, gender and sometimes even species to explore a virtual world, meeting others, building houses, careers, relationships; and an entire virtual life. New citizens of this virtual world are warned against 'Disturbing the Peace' and reminded that 'every resident has a right to live their *SecondLife*.' In this case the user is not represented by two-dimensional information of collated words and photos, but by a visible other self which occupies the dimension of cyberspace. The avatar inhabits this world in a very physical sense, wearing clothes, eating and drinking; whilst transcending some of the inconveniences of a physical body, for example being able to breathe underwater or walk through walls. A virtual Dublin exists within this world which includes the GPO, Trinity College and Temple Bar; the virtual U2 even promoted their (real) album in *Habbo Hotel*, an alternative version. The *SL* description of virtual Dublin claims that it 'has been praised by real Dubliners for its realism and accuracy'; apparently 'it's just like being there!' Of course, it's not like being there at all. Being in the real Dublin rarely involves coming across an angel on Grafton Street or jumping into the air and flying over the Liffey. *SL* Dublin is however advertised as a cyberspace destination with much the same language used by the tourist board, interestingly focusing on the traditional image of hospitable, friendly Ireland:

Dublin in SL is known for its warmth and sense of community. Drop by The Blarney Stone for a pint and chat with the regulars. Catch a live show, or go shopping at one of our many stores and boutiques.

Fáilte! Welcome to Dublin in SL, Gathering Place for the World!³⁶

The language has distinctive similarities with the latest campaign to encourage tourists to 'Discover Ireland'.³⁷ On the *Tourism Ireland* website members can login to access the 'My Ireland' section to make their own 'personal travel brochure', or rather, select the elements which suit their interests in order to produce a version of Ireland which meets their needs and expectations. In other words, the website allows tourists to construct a virtual Ireland from the comfort of home, before, or perhaps instead of, visiting the actual place.

The rising popularity of these forms of self-expression and user generated content have resulted in it becoming the largest growth area on the internet. In part of course, merely to the increased availability, but also due to the significant attraction of this form of internet use for people who

³⁶ www.dublinsl.com

³⁷ <http://www.discoverireland.com/gb/> and <http://www.tourismireland.com/>.

may feel isolated from a real sense of community or human contact. Virtual identities depend on simplification, assuming that the self can be ‘known’ through a list of key words; an idea which in many ways mirrors the means by which Irish identity has for so long been shaped; paradoxically open to an ever-increasing combination of elements, but all on a strictly ‘either/or’ basis. Virtual communities provide alternatives through which people seek meaning and purpose in the form of a clearly defined and publicly available self. The continuing increase in academic interest and public involvement with virtual communities suggests that they will continue to grow to match demand. Neil Spiller notes that the ‘huge growth of access to cyberspace has rearticulated nearly every aspect of our lives, affecting the way we see the world, the way the world sees us and the way we see ourselves’.³⁸

Ironically, the World Wide Web, a forum which is by definition ‘global’, appears to frequently lead people into ‘local’ frameworks, as users seem inclined to form the most virtual links with those they actually could or do have real access to, rather than using the full potential of the resource to make contact with those whom they are unlikely or unable to meet. *Facebook* in particular creates virtual communities of students who may well be using the interface to communicate with others on the same campus or within the same university library. As Fintan O’Toole notes, the internet has changed our ‘perception of space and time’.³⁹ With sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace* we are able to constantly monitor people through a News Feed, bringing the 24 hour news age to act upon friendships, changes in ‘relationship status’ can inform us if a couple have parted and conversations can be ‘overheard’ by reading through an exchange of messages posted to the ‘walls’ of fellow community members. Virtual communities are by necessity voyeuristic, facilitating a process of mutual observation more often than actual interaction. Sherry Turkle’s influential research on cyberculture continues to be valuable in assessing how and why people are drawn to representing themselves online:

In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along.⁴⁰

The ambiguity of the term ‘virtual’ is apt in the discussion of identity. In relation to technology it is taken to mean those elements which are created by the computer; alternative, but crucially ‘fake’ versions of people, places and objects, often with advanced capabilities and features impossible

³⁸ Neil Spiller (ed.), *Cyber-Reader: Critical Writings for the Digital Era*, London, Phaidon, 2002, p. 6.

³⁹ Fintan O’Toole, ‘Fast, Faster, Fastest’ *Virtual Ireland, Ireland.com: The Irish Times*, © 2007, Consulted: 21st February 2007
<<http://www.ireland.com/timeseye/virtualireland/articles/article1.html>>

⁴⁰ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, London, Phoenix, 1996, p. 10.

in reality. The virtual world then, has the potential to be both lesser and greater than reality. The virtual world contains reduced risks, it may lack the benefits of human contact, but a virtual punch cannot leave a bruise either. The attraction of virtual worlds is not as an alternative reality which simply replicates our world into a screen-sized version, but rather their ability to push boundaries, or in the case of *SecondLife*, simply fly over them. Similarly, the relative safety of virtual communities allows users to take risks with their identities and how they choose to represent themselves as artists and writers have always done. Both experiments with cyber identity and printed autobiography acknowledge the necessary disparity between intention and capability. As Laura Marcus notes:

Very few critics would demand that autobiographical truth should be literally verifiable – this would, after all, undermine the idea that the truth of the self is more complex than ‘fact’. Thus, it is claimed, the ‘intention’ to tell the truth, as far as possible, is a sufficient guarantee of autobiographical veracity and sincerity.⁴¹

Experiments with representing the self have an established role within Irish literature and socio-cultural history. John Waters refers to Patrick Pearse’s understanding ‘that self-assertion is the mirror image of self-hatred’, claiming that ‘to be denied one’s identity for a long period creates, within the very soul of a people, a profound double-bind which causes them to desire to broadcast their nature and identity to the whole world while having not the faintest idea of who they are.’⁴² The complexities and contradictions of Irish identity remain apparent in the examples of cyber Irishness discussed above and so it could be argued that the paradox observed by Waters persists. Irishness continues to be proudly and vociferously proclaimed in the new forums of virtual communities, (just as it has always been in other forms of autobiographical representation), without moving towards a singular and limiting definition. Ailbhe Smyth observes that ‘identity has a double mission: it is about both reinforcing difference and enforcing sameness: we are unique and unified in our uniqueness’.⁴³ In virtual communities, cyber Irishness performs the same function; providing the virtual identity with a sense of ‘uniqueness’, whilst simultaneously claiming a connection to a vast number of others online, and in the real world. As the forums for representing the virtual self continue to evolve and multiply, debates over the multiple meanings of Irishness will thrive as the ‘new Irish’ provide new slants to the *I* that is the Irish self.

⁴¹ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1994, p. 3.

⁴² John Waters, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Ireland*, London, Duckworth & Co., 1997, p. 107.

⁴³ Ailbhe Smyth, Extract from *Critical Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1996 in David Pierce (ed.), *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*, Cork, Cork UP, 2000, p. 1124.