



Scots are web-savvy or self-deceptive?

by Paul McCormack

Some might say that Scots invented international networking along with everything else! But despite the recent proliferation of 'Scottishness' on the internet, are we not missing the crucial point? Networking!

Whether it represents an online renaissance or a virtual gathering of the clans, Scottish themed online networking is growing at an astonishing rate. The number of groups displaying the Saltire online has grown considerably in the last five years. From commercial ventures that seek to connect Scots and those of Scottish descent in a shared sense of belonging, to government sponsored organizations that aim to further Scottish business and culture abroad, the explosion in "Scottishness" is a phenomenon that deserves closer examination. Is today's proliferation of Scottish themed networking unique or just a reincarnation of days gone by? Further, is it effective at advancing the Scottish brand on the world stage?

To answer some of these questions, I was privileged to speak with Billy Kay, a renowned Scottish writer and broadcaster. According to Billy, the Scottish Diaspora finding and connecting with each other in distant lands is nothing new. In his book, *The Scottish World* Kay provides many examples of Scots venturing abroad and forming networking organizations. Billy views today's Scottish themed online networking as "a modern way for exiled groups to organize". During our discussion he provided a fascinating overview of a chapter in his book called "A Forgotten Diaspora". In that chapter, Billy details the migration of Scots to Poland in the 17th century and the formation of a self-help society called the "Scottish Brotherhood". The Brotherhood, which eventually had

twelve branches spread throughout the region, settled civil disputes, assessed penalties, allowed Scots to borrow excess funds, and funded local churches and the ministry. Arguably, the Brotherhood provides an early example of a Scottish networking at its finest.

Billy also shared the story of Patrick Gordon, a 17th century Scottish soldier of fortune who traveled extensively throughout the Baltic region. Gordon kept a diary where he noted the following meeting of Scots that took place in Poznan, Poland in 1654:

"During my abode in this place I was kindly entertained by my countrymen, to witt, Robert Ferquhar, James Ferguson, James Lindsay, James White, James Watson and others. I was afterwards by

their recommendation entertained in the suit of a yong nobleman called Oppalinsky, who was according to the custome of the Polonian nobility going to visitt forreigne countreyes. At my departure my kind countrymen furnished me with money and other necessaries very liberally, so that I was better stocked now as I had been since I cam from my parents...."

The Diaspora in the 17th century were "networking" and forming systems of governance long before the advent of technology. Is today's Scottish themed networking unique or a 21st century reincarnation of the "Brotherhood"? Why are Scots and those of Scottish descent seeking out the Saltire online? What discussions take place within these virtual gatherings?

In 2004, having lived in the US for ten years by that point, I founded the *Scottish American Network* group on LinkedIn. It was actually born out of idle curiosity. I was genuinely curious to learn how Scottish expats adapted to life in America. What careers did they choose to pursue? Were they successful? How long did they stay in America? What part of the country did they live? How did they adapt to American life? Today, the group includes approximately 600 members from all walks of life. To encourage connections with Scotland, in the last year, I opened the group to individuals that currently reside in Scotland. The discussions within the group have ranged from business, life in the US, culture, the arts, food, whisky, and of course golf and football



www.scotland.org

*“The Official Gateway to Scotland”
from the Scottish government’*



www.scotlandexchange.org

*“Connecting Conversations”
from the Scottish government*

(we don't call it soccer – ever!). Business and personal connections are routinely made and the members appear to enjoy gathering as a virtual clan to discuss all things Scottish. I would estimate that 25% of the membership is second, third, or fourth generation Scots that are interested in learning more about their heritage. 60% are Scots that reside overseas, with the balance made up of people that live in Scotland and have an interest in America business and culture. The conversations that result offer a nice balance between Scotland's past, its present, and future. I can happily report that Scots in the US as a group are highly successful, well received by Americans and generally very happy in their new found home land.

Like many Scots living in the U.S., hardly a week goes by without an American sharing their connection to Scotland. An astonishing number of people profess to be “Scattish” as their great great grandfather had come over here from over there “some time ago”. To be honest, when I first heard people claim to be Scottish, it annoyed me. Since they were not born in the country, had seldom visited the country – if at all, how could they be Scottish? Now, I recognize that it is in fact a cause for celebration that so many people want to identify with my home. In fact, because Scotland is loved and admired by Americans, moving to this country, although confusing at first, was ultimately very easy and comforting. So many Americans could identify with the country I had left behind. In all honesty, I hadn't left the country behind, it had come with me. I just didn't know it. There is a fun side to the wealth of Scots on this side of the Atlantic. Billy Kay and I joked about the fact that so many people claim to be related to a Jacobite, that if it were true, Culloden would have turned out very differently!

To seek greater understanding of why people embrace Scottishness online, I asked members of my group the *Scottish American Network* and *Friends of Scotland* (another LinkedIn discussion group) for their thoughts. The answers they shared provide some interesting clues as to why there is more Scottish online networking taking place,

Ian Ruxton, an expat living in Japan summed up why our culture is so easy to identify with,

“The distinctiveness of the badges or marks of Scottish culture - kilts, tartan, bagpipes etc. is pretty much unique and very easily recognised the world over. Why is it so distinctive? In brief I feel it was an effort by our ancestors to distinguish themselves from the English, borne of the feeling of being “in bed with an elephant” over the centuries!”.

Colin Smith, based in Dundee had observed an awakening of the past as well as an appreciation for the future.

“The great strength of the groups I am on is that they bring together Scots who are still here with descendants of those who have gone, in some cases many generations ago, and this leads to reawakening of ties and an interest, for the emigrant, in modern Scotland as well as in historical Scotland. “Scottish themes” can be anything from business, arts, culture to fitba!”

Susan McIntosh, an attorney based in Colorado connected the clan system and the Scottish impulse to network,

“While it is true that the traditional clan system had in many fundamental ways disintegrated by 1746 it didn't disappear entirely. One continuing manifestation has been this persistent Scottish impulse to network - and to be somewhat clannish about it - that thrives down to this very day.”

In order to gain an even deeper understanding of “Scottishness” on the web, I contacted **Alastair McIntyre**, an expat, and owner of *Electric Scotland* (www.electricscotland.com) a popular destination for visitors with an interest in Scottish history. I asked Alastair what made Electric Scotland unique.

“Simply put it is the massive volume of content we have on Scottish History and the history of Scots at home and abroad. We probably have more information on the Scots Diaspora in history than any other organisation in the world. The main point here is that we're very open with all our information and frequently share individual pages with other web sites as well as many magazines and other newsletters. The key to the site is that we publish new content every day and so there is always something new to read. We explore all aspects of history and so you'll find history of places, agriculture, poetry, sport, industry, literature, Scottish

dancing, and of course a good amount on the Scottish Diaspora, etc.”

We know that the Diaspora are connected online, but what about those the live in Scotland? Are those individuals making an effort to connect with their overseas brethren? It would appear that they are, but the evidence is not conclusive as Alastair is faced with a startling problem.

“One thing I can report is that when I look at my visiting traffic report in the old days only some 4% of my traffic came from the UK. Note here that the Scottish Government has done nothing to persuade Google to make stats available for just Scotland and thus you can only get UK traffic reports. If you spend the time you can extrapolate information by getting a city report but that takes a lot of time. If Google can produce stats for US States then surely they can produce Scotland only Stats but they sure aren't going to listen to me but they just might listen to the Scottish Government if they made a request. Today I get some 28% of my traffic from the UK so that tends to suggest many more Scots are interested in finding out more about Scotland in the world.”

I can't imagine why Google has not produced statistics for Scotland. If a member of the Scottish government is reading this article, don't you think it is time for Scotland to have its own report?

One of the reasons that I created my networking group on Linked was to find out how the Diaspora fared in their adopted American homeland. Given the global reach and appeal of Electric Scotland, I was curious to hear what Alastair had learned about the Scots that he didn't know before.

“I had absolutely no idea of what Scots did after they left Scotland. That has been the single most important thing I have learnt and it's an amazing story and frankly that story is if anything more important than the history of Scotland in my opinion. It's also by discovering that, that I learnt how Scots did work together to build their businesses in other countries.”

However, Alastair view on Scots abroad is not all rosy. He pulled no punches regarding his assessment of Scotland's efforts to capitalize on its global successes.

“Given the tremendous opportunities that the web has given us to communicate I feel there is still a total failure to

communicate by Scots today. Of course every country in the world has this same failure but I feel given the size of Scotland and its generally favourable impression across the world we are simply not good at communicating. I'm pretty disgusted about how poor we are at promoting exports, tourism and inward investment in Scotland. We should be making billions more than we are but a giant failure to communicate is holding us back. We need to somehow break this mold and do much better.”

To underscore his point, Alastair shared a conversation that he had with the CEO and chairman of the Highland Games in Jacksonville.

“Alastair I can't understand why there is no representation from Scotland at our Games. Do you know that you are the only local Scot here? Why aren't your tourism people or business people represented? I'm also pretty passionate about Scotland being of Scots descent and I'd love to hear about Scottish businesses that I could use to purchase products or services for my company or indeed personally but I have no idea where I can go to find them. Could you not do a write up of a Scottish business each week in your newsletter?”

Alastair took the words to heart and made a concerted effort to trigger interest back in Scotland. His efforts resulted in a “wall of silence” that is frustrating to read and no doubt far more frustrating to experience firsthand.

“I got back to Scotland I contacted some 200 individual Scottish companies that were either already exporting or who could clearly do so. Not one was willing to provide any information. And of course going to *Scottish Enterprise*, *Scottish Development International*, *Scottish Chamber of Commerce* and many other organisation got me nowhere. I asked *Visit Scotland* if they could provide any tourism articles and to date I have received nothing from them. Why are they not doing anything with the some 300 Highland Games held in North America where you can get between 15,000 and 250,000 or so visitors to these events?”

Given Alastair's comments and experiences to date, I was curious what he envisioned the future of Scottish online networking may look like. He provided candid feedback which I believe is exceptionally accurate.

“There is of course tremendous



www.electricscotland.com

Alastair McIntyre's magnum opus



www.kiltr.com

*“The professional social network for
everyone with a Scottish connection”*



MADE IN SCOTLAND FROM ELECTRONS

JOIN IN, MAKE CONNECTIONS AND DISCOVER WHO YOU ARE...



Scottish people have always looked overseas for prosperity. That's why there are roughly seven times as many people of Scottish descent living outside Scotland (the Scottish diaspora) as there are living in Scotland.

And more people still who just share an affection for, or a connection to, Scotland. Now we have the technology to bring them all together, to harness their energy and their skills for creating opportunities.



GlobalScot's face to face networking events are far more effective than its online presence.

scope for networking but in my opinion that can only be achieved by working together and I see no sign of that happening. The Scottish government and agencies such as Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Development International, Visit Scotland, Scottish Chamber of Commerce, Scottish Councils, etc. simply won't work with other web sites. Likewise individual web sites of Scottish businesses also won't co-operate as they see their own web site as being the only way they will communicate online. That in my opinion is a massive fault and is why we're seeing no real progress being made. That's not to say this is a Scottish problem as every country in the world is the same including the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and others."

Alastair frequently referenced the Scottish government's ineffectiveness online and on the world stage. Almost everyone I interviewed with while preparing this article agreed that it was necessary for the Scottish government to have an online presence. However, as Alastair notes, the Scottish government's efforts often appear ineffective at best. Not surprisingly, there are a number of Scottish government sponsored sites online. However, from my experience, and the experience of others, rarely does the "right hand know what the left hand is doing".

GlobalScot, an organization which is funded by the Scottish Executive, is one of the more well know Diaspora networks. It is comprised of executives from around the world and Scottish companies

with international aspirations. GlobalScot has a dedicated site as well as a group on LinkedIn. I have been a member of GlobalScot since 2004 and attended the inaugural conference in Edinburgh as well as several other gatherings in the States. I must admit that GlobalScot's face to face networking events are far more effective than its online presence. GlobalScot's online presence is a valiant effort that in my opinion has yet to find its feet. Scottish Development International has a dedicated site and there is also www.scotland.org that offers a broad view of Scotland from a historical and cultural perspective. There are many additional Scottish government agencies as well as local governments that have an online portal. The question remains as to whether or not the government and the country as a whole benefits from the government's online efforts. Measuring the overall effectiveness of any virtual or traditional networking organization is notoriously difficult to do. However, ensuring that all of Scottish government's online portals and at networking groups are aligned and support each other will be a difficult task.

Ultimately, for Scots abroad online networking provides a little piece of home online. I have often heard from Scottish expats that each time they go "home" the country looks less and less familiar. Plus, let's not forget our "American" accents. From time to time I've be asked by Scots at home if I am from Canada! Talk about taking the wind out of my sails! I believe that Scottish online communities provide an outlet for expat Scots to reconnect with a country that no longer exists. Often our conversations revolve around cultural references from Scotland in 1990's. The country may have moved on since then, but we are stuck recalling the same TV shows and football games from our previous life. Keeping the Scottish sense of humor alive having left the country nearly 18 years ago is also challenge. Gathering to watch a Billy Connolly DVD, or sharing jokes that most Americans scratch their head at is certainly good for the soul. Thankfully, in today's modern age, we no longer rely upon the kindness of others for basic necessities. However, the need to associate with "guid" people has not changed.

From all accounts, we have a very long way to go before we capitalize on

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the explosion in Scottishness online. Crucial to the success of our efforts is full engagement and cooperation of the Scottish government, private entities, the Diaspora in general and those that remain in Scotland. In short, online networking around the Scottish brand can do so much more than it is accomplishing today. As technology creates more connections between people, so too does it allow the Diaspora to reconnect with their country, former countrymen and women as well as themselves. In the words of George Santayana,

"Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

In Scotland's case, may be our approach to online networking should allow history to repeat itself. May be we still have a lot to learn from the Diaspora in 17th century Poland. They understood the importance of maintaining and fostering a sense of Scottishness abroad, shouldn't we take the time to do so as well?

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