

Virtual Euskadi: Measuring a special population's Web ties.

Foreword to P. J. Oiarzabal, *The Basque diaspora webscape: Identity, nation and homeland, 1990s-2010s*. Reno: Center for Basque Studies.

By Ulf-Dietrich Reips¹

The Basques, this ancient people originally living on the Western shores of Europe, before hunger, civil war, industrialization, and the hopes for a better future drove many of them to the New World, is one of the smallest peoples with one of the largest diasporas. According to some counts, more than three quarters of all Basques live outside of their original homeland.

Pedro J. Oiarzabal has taken on the monumental task of documenting the voices of communities of Basques who have emigrated from their homeland and their descendants, as these voices manifest on Web sites. His book is to be seen as part of a larger effort by him and his colleagues, with works spanning from his books, *La Identidad Vasca en el Mundo* (Oiarzabal and Oiarzabal, 2005), *Gardeners of Identity: Basques in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Oiarzabal, 2009), *Diasporas in the New Media Age* (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010) and *Sailing in New York* (Oiarzabal, San Sebastián and Aguirre, forthcoming), to our recent special issue of the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* on “Migration and the Internet: Social networking and diasporas” (Oiarzabal and Reips, 2012).

The present book moves the focus to the virtual world; it builds and provides essential groundwork for any further studies of the modern Basque diaspora in light of the new era of social media. When, from where, and how the diasporic Basques organized themselves for the first time in their presence on the Internet will be the base for any study that compares the Basque diaspora to other diasporas. It will also inspire researchers to provide similar accounts of other diasporic communities – accounts of diasporas in exploration and transition from pre-Internet times to social media. Future generations will look at the era of the current generation with curiosity, like we look at the generation that first experienced book printing. How did their lives and their communities change with the new medium?

Between Chapter One: “Imagining the Basques” and the concluding seventh chapter Oiarzabal leads us through a colorful landscape of websites and internationally transformed diasporic reflections of community identities – a *webscape*, as he calls it. This webscape almost exclusively consists of sites from the Americas, suggesting that European diasporas more easily connect with and directly engage in the homeland, because of geographic proximity. Almost cursorily, Oiarzabal leads us to important places of discussions (for example of the term “diaspora”), through the blossoming history of imagined online communities (Chapter Four), to shores of online self-representations, colorful forests of pictures from diaspora Websites (e.g. variations of depictions of the Gernica tree), and along streams of identity discourses. The third chapter, “Communication technologies and technological diasporas” is an excellent summary of the Basque diasporas’ history with pre-Internet media. It leads nicely to a later analysis, “Implications for the Basque diaspora: towards social networking” on the effects of new Internet technologies. Oiarzabal’s empirical analyses reveal high intra-

¹ (1) University of Deusto; (2) IKERBASQUE, Basque Foundation for Science

diaspora connectivity, suggesting learning of diasporas from each other – as diasporas. We can expect this interconnectedness to grow in the social media revolution, just as the interconnectedness of diasporas with the homeland. In his captivating style that is both rich in anecdotal evidence and empirical rigor, Oiarzabal analyzes in Chapter Five, “Imagining the Basque Country”, how diasporic Basques and homeland representatives tend to imagine Euskadi. Images are ordered along a dimension past-future and the analysis reveals that only very slowly a primordial sense of Basque identity is left behind in favor of a globalized, mobile, digital identity – there are few traces of the latter, if at all. From my perspective it would be interesting to explore if this finding from the Basque diaspora webscape could be replicated elsewhere, for example in the process of “Basquification” of those who move to the Basque Country, both foreigners and those returning from the diaspora. With Chapter Six, “Online Politics”, the author reveals most interesting facts about the detachment of political views between many diasporas and the homeland. Some of the resulting dynamics (also visible in a wonderfully researched and narrated episode of Basque Children who flew to the UK in 1937) are certainly due to the general situation of diasporas in their host countries, some come from mystification and lack of detailed experience with everyday life in the homeland. For example, many Basque diasporas portray themselves not in a heroic way but rather as victims and diaspora groups also exhibit a great level of criticism of the Basque government.

In all of the coming research that will be built on Oiarzabal’s groundwork, a very carefully researched collection of data from the full or near full population of Basque diaspora websites, and the analysis of this trove of data. The author provides an inspiring outline for future research in the concluding chapter of the book, “Implications for future research: open questions”, in which he highlights the importance of “longitudinal studies, [and] a comparative examination between the Basque diaspora online and other digital diasporas.” Of course, this analysis will further have to be complemented by research with those who are not to get full coverage of Basque diasporas. As Oiarzabal notes (p. 233), “only 0.4% of Basques abroad are members of diaspora institutions.” Future research will try reaching those outside the institutional context, the social media revolution will make this task much easier than it was in the past (Reips, 2008, 2013).

Not surprisingly, given self-selection, historical development, and funding opportunities for the Basque diaspora institutions, the author finds that “the Basque diaspora has internalized the nationalist interpretation of Basque ethnicity.” Interestingly and in stark contrast to a nationalist interpretation, the author also finds, for example, that “Although the Basque language is highly regarded by diaspora institutions as one of the most powerful Basque identity markers, its actual use on websites is residual, limited to a few sentences, words, and introductory epigraphs.” A wonderfully funny episode is the issue of *subdivision ad infinitum* in identity management. At the core of current unrest and the nationalism and separatism debates, the question of the appropriate level of social identity asks from the point of view of a Basque individual whether he or she is part of a unit at a certain level *exclusively* - without acceptance of the next higher level (Spain/France) as a valid concurrent unit of identification. (Even higher levels, like Europe or the United Nations seem not to be in question). Simultaneously, that same view is not granted to others who identify similarly with a lower level unit. Oiarzabal writes: “Only 4% of total websites refer to the Basque Country as the political-territorial administration of the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) of Spain, while the two

Navarrese websites refer exclusively to Nafarroa.... The BAC official coat of arms refer to three Basque provinces—Araba, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa—the fourth space is blank, but its red color symbolizes the Navarrese coat of arms and the wish to incorporate Nafarroa into the BAC. Significantly, the BAC parliament has 100 seats, but only seventy-five are used. The remaining twenty-five await the Navarrese members. ... Some emigrants from Nafarroa and their descents belong to Basque diaspora clubs, while others participate in Navarrese institutions abroad that identify with a Navarrese identity over a Basque identity. ... The diaspora politics promoted by the different political administrations of Nafarroa has stressed a clear-cut sense of Navarrese identity in opposition to a Basque identity as a reflection of their anti-Basque nationalist orientation back home, and, for instance, Basque language is clearly absent in their websites. The Navarrese websites identify exclusively with the Navarrese coat of arms and the Navarrese government.” Similar views are shared in Catalunya, in their relationship with Spain and the Valencianos – it remains to be seen in comparative future research whether this is reflected in their diaspora webscape.

Virtual Euskadi – the Basque country as a land on the Internet, what a great opening of a title! It raises connotations to the idea of an ideal state, of an utopian country, of an imagined past, of mythical stories in light of dare facts, and of escapism (webscape escapism) from the realities of life. This is precisely what drove most diasporic Basques or their ancestors away from the homeland to seek a new beginning, so by definition Virtual Euskadi is a better place and thus may contain helpful advice for the homeland and those who remain there. It also contains projections of identity, and of course it contains much practical stuff for the dispersed local communities. The newly elected president of the Basque country, the *Lehendakari*, recently wrote a letter to the Basque diaspora, saying that his government's first priority will be "to internationalize the Basque Country" (Urkullu Renteria, 2013). He and his government may find very helpful ideas in Oiarzabal's book, if he reads and listens to the voices from afar.

Congratulations on a very exciting book, I wish it will find many readers to share the pleasure of discovering the Web of Virtual Euskadi!

Ulf-Dietrich Reips, Getxo (Basque Country), March 2013

References

Alonso, A. and Oiarzabal, P.J. (2010). *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics and Community*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.

Oiarzabal, A. M. and Oiarzabal, P. J. (2005). *La Identidad Vasca en el Mundo: Narrativas sobre Identidad más allá de Fronteras*. Bilbao: Erroteta.

Oiarzabal, P. J. (2009). *Gardeners of Identity: Basques in the San Francisco Bay Area*. Basque Diaspora and Migration Studies Series. Vol. 4. Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno. Second Edition.

Oiarzabal, P.J., San Sebastián, K., and Aguirre A. M. *Sailing in New York: The Social Origins of the Basque Club of New York, 1905-1955*. Forthcoming.

Oiarzabal, P. J., and Reips, U.-D. (Eds.). (2012). Migration and the Internet: Social networking and diasporas [special issue]. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(9).

Reips, U.-D. (2008). How Internet-mediated research changes science. In A. Barak (Ed.), *Psychological aspects of cyberspace: Theory, research, applications* (pp. 268-294). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reips, U.-D. (2013). La investigación científica con la ayuda de la Internet. Special issue "20 años de internet público | 20 years old public internet". *Infoamérica-ICR: Iberoamerican Communication Review*. Invited manuscript, forthcoming.

Urkullu Renteria, I. (2013, February 1). *Letter to the Basque community abroad*. Retrieved March 6, 2013, from http://www.blogseitb.us/basque_boise/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/lehendakariaren_gutuna_en1.jpg