

# New ethnicities online: reflexive racialisation and the internet

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## Abstract

In this article we analyse the emergence of Internet activity addressing the experiences of young people in two British communities: South Asian and Chinese. We focus on two web sites: [www.barficulture.com](http://www.barficulture.com) and [www.britishbornchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishbornchinese.org.uk), drawing on interviews with site editors, content analysis of the discussion forums, and E-mail exchanges with site users.

Our analysis of these two web sites shows how collective identities still matter, being redefined rather than erased by online interaction. We understand the site content through the notion of *reflexive racialisation*. We use this term to modify the stress given to individualisation in accounts of reflexive modernisation. In addition we question the allocation of racialised meaning from above implied by the concept of racialisation. Internet discussion forums can act as witnesses to social inequalities and through sharing experiences of racism and marginalisation, an oppositional social perspective may develop.

The online exchanges have had offline consequences: social gatherings, charitable donations and campaigns against adverse media representations. These web sites have begun to change the terms of engagement between these ethnic groups and the wider society, and they have considerable potential to develop new forms of social action.

The Internet is becoming ordinary. Half of British households now have access (National Statistics, 2005). Yet the increasingly routine encounter with the Internet has still to be reflected in writings about ethnicity. Until recently the scant literature focused on the digital divide suffered by minority communities (DTI, 2000), or identity tourism by white people masquerading as minority individuals (Nakamura, 2002a). Recent accounts in the United States have highlighted new forms of online cultural practice initiated by minority groups themselves (Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman, 2000; Lee and Wong, 2003). However, there is still no extensive analysis of how ethnic minorities in Britain are starting to shape the Internet, contesting the terms on which their identities are represented in the public domain.

In this article we analyse the emergence of Internet activity addressing the experiences of young people in two British communities: South Asian

and Chinese. We focus on two web sites: [www.barfculture.com](http://www.barfculture.com) and [www.britishbornchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishbornchinese.org.uk). We draw on face to face interviews held with the site editors in summer 2004, content analysis of the discussion forums utilising each site's archive function, and E-mail exchanges during 2003 and 2004 with 20 site users (12 female, 8 male).

Our analysis of these two web sites shows how collective identities still matter, being redefined rather than erased by online interaction. We understand the site content through the notion of *reflexive racialisation*. We use this term to modify the stress given to individualisation in accounts of reflexive modernisation. In addition we question the allocation of racialised meaning from above implied by the concept of racialisation. Internet discussion forums can act as witnesses to social inequalities and through sharing experiences of racism and marginalisation, an oppositional social perspective may develop. Furthermore, the racialised subjectivities shaped by these experiences need not be expressed in essentialist terms. The repertoire of affiliations expands as emerging British-born generations develop new communicative practices to portray their complex senses of belonging and identity.

The online exchange of views about racism and ethnicity has stimulated new forms of participation among British born Asian and Chinese people, groups whose socio-economic progress has yet to be translated into a strong public profile (Song, 2003). We outline how campaigns stimulated by users of these web sites have challenged mainstream institutions and begun to change the terms of engagement between these ethnic groups and wider society. Significant absences remain, particularly with regard to interethnic dialogue via the Internet. Yet whatever their limitations, the web sites created by young British Asian and British Chinese people are emerging institutions with considerable potential to develop new forms of social action.

## **The Internet and new ethnicities**

The Internet is no longer celebrated unequivocally as a space of freedom. More sober empirical research has displaced the obsession evident in the 1990s with virtual communities and identity play:

So long as we focus on the limited areas of the Internet where people engage in fantasy play that is intentionally disconnected from their real world identities, we miss how social and professional identities are continuous across several media, and how people use several media to develop their identities in ways that carry over to other settings (Agre, 2004: 416).

Several recent studies explore how Internet use weaves into everyday social relations by reshaping, rather than supplanting, existing forms of association (Howard and Jones, 2004; Bakardjieva, 2005). The work of Barry Wellman and colleagues suggests that community has been redefined rather than replaced

by the Internet. The medium's ability to connect across space enables the simultaneous, but partial, involvement of users in a wide range of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). For Wellman the immediacy of the Internet facilitates greater 'personalization' – the tailoring of information retrieval and dissemination to highly particular preferences. Rather than expressing core group solidarities, communities become person-to-person interchanges, part of a repertoire of multiple associations, a 'networked individualism' (Wellman, 2001; Wellman *et al.*, 2003).

This initially plausible assessment of the Internet chimes in with broader depictions of contemporary social change. These include the works of Bauman and Beck on the individualised society (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) and Castells on the network society (Castells, 2000 and 2001; Barney, 2004). However, an emphasis on social fluidity and a more individualised selection of affinities can overlook Internet activity addressing the collective experiences of large-scale social categories.

By contrast our research examines the enduring significance of racial and ethnic collective consciousness on the Internet. The two web sites we study address pre-existing, but still emergent, group identities. The take-up of the Internet by new groups of users such as British born Chinese and Asian young people may offer political possibilities precisely through extending rather than erasing the significance of an embodied social identity like ethnicity.

The title of our paper draws on the seminal interventions of Stuart Hall. In the 1980s he used the term 'new ethnicities' to describe the expression of new hybrid identities by the emerging cohorts of second and third generation Black British (Hall, 1988). Hall's work stimulated considerable analytical interest and empirical research (for example Back, 1996). However, his ideas have yet to be applied to the study of Internet activity.

The Internet's ability to reduce the constraint of distance connects dispersed groups who would otherwise have little contact. The British South Asian population has large concentrations outside London and the South East. Britain's Chinese population is the most geographically dispersed sizeable ethnic minority in Britain (Dorling and Thomas, 2004). Young people in both these groups lack a substantial public profile in Britain. They have much to gain from the possibilities the Internet offers for articulating a collective identity.

The usual focus of research into new media use by ethnic minorities has been transnational, locating these technologies in wider debates about globalisation and migration (Adams and Ghose, 2003; Dahan and Shaffer, 2001; Karim, 2003; Parham, 2004; Wong, 2003). Digital media 'change the dynamics of diaspora' by facilitating new forms of connection between here and home (Karim, 2002). They are an integral element of the diasporic habitus, the portable, yet durable, manifestations of difference which define the cultural distinctiveness of transnational migrants (Parker, 2003). Engagement with Internet content has redefined the intangible moods, tones and embodied dispositions constituting the diasporic habitus (Panagakos, 2003).

The literature to date has focused on the diasporic habitus of globally mobile South and East Asian professionals and scholars (Mitra, 2003 and 2005; Yang, 2003). Critics such as Ien Ang (2001) and Aihwa Ong (2003) have interrogated the regression to racial essentialism they see underlying much of the Internet activity stimulated by this migration. Ong's focus is 'the translocal publics constituted by professionals online (. . .) directly engaged in the production of global ethnicities' (Ong, 2003: 92). For Ong this is exemplified by the web site directed at migrant Chinese worldwide: [www.huaren.org](http://www.huaren.org). This site of the World Huaren Federation seeks to address the global Chinese diaspora as a unified collective, bound together by an affinity to mainland China.

However, the Internet is not inherently tied to political projects reaching back 'home' through a closed and exclusive definition of identity. It can support a variety of identity formations. The two web sites we analyse below express the complex mixture of local, national and racialised loyalties felt by many British-born Chinese and South Asians. Growing up negotiating these potentially discrepant affinities can generate an ironic self-recognition as located in both 'East' and 'West' without being confined to either, creating 'a new representational landscape for issues of identity' (Nakamura, 2002b). Twenty years after Stuart Hall's suggestive discussion of 'new ethnicities' (Hall, 1988), the Internet is enabling novel forms of communication within, as well beyond, national boundaries. The rest of the article explores how ethnicities are being expressed and transformed through online practices with a specifically British focus.

### **British Chinese and British Asian Internet sites**

There is no reliable national survey data about patterns of Internet use among Britain's ethnic minorities. Studies of disadvantaged localities (Owen *et al.*, 2003) or particular cities such as London (GLA, 2003) have shown considerable variation between ethnic groups. In this small-scale research Asian and Chinese people are at least as likely to have used the Internet as the majority population, and more likely to have accessed it than Black British people. For Asians and Chinese in Britain, Internet use may be widespread due to high participation in post-school education, youthful age structure (National Statistics, 2004), and the increasing technological proficiency of the East and South Asian nations with which there are ongoing family connections.

There are three forms of Internet content geared to the specific experiences of young Asians and Chinese in Britain. Firstly, web-based offshoots of other media forms. These include the BBC Asian Network web site, the online counterpart to its radio station for British Asians. ([www.bbc.co.uk/asiannetwork](http://www.bbc.co.uk/asiannetwork)) and the web site for the weekly newspaper Eastern Eye ([www.easterneyeonline.co.uk](http://www.easterneyeonline.co.uk))

Secondly, information portals designed as entry points into ethnic minority markets. For British South Asians among the most prominent are Clickwalla

([www.clickwalla.com](http://www.clickwalla.com)) and Red Hot Curry ([www.redhotcurry.com](http://www.redhotcurry.com)). These commercial sites offer directories and listings for Asian arts events, music, Bollywood films and fashion. They also provide specialist cultural knowledge and niche marketing opportunities to mainstream bodies seeking South Asian customers. For British Chinese, Chinatown Online offers information and educational advice, as well as a listing of Chinese business and community organisations ([www.chinatown-online.co.uk](http://www.chinatown-online.co.uk)).

The third category, and the primary focus of this paper, is not for profit web sites and discussion forums generated from within the East and South Asian populations. For the former, key examples are the bulletin board Dragon Link ([www.dragonlink.co.uk](http://www.dragonlink.co.uk)) and the online commentary site Dim Sum ([www.dimsum.co.uk](http://www.dimsum.co.uk)). For South Asians, there are a variety of sites for particular religious denominations, notably the Islamic Forum ([www.islamicforumeurope.com](http://www.islamicforumeurope.com)) and the Hindu Forum of Britain ([www.hinduforum.org](http://www.hinduforum.org)).

Unlike the web sites directed at the global East and South Asian populations (for example [www.sina.com](http://www.sina.com) for 'the global Chinese community' and [www.nriol.com](http://www.nriol.com) for 'non-resident Indians') these British-based sites have an explicit focus on what makes growing up in Britain a distinctive set of experiences. In this paper we analyse two of the most important interactive British sites: [www.barficulture.com](http://www.barficulture.com) and [www.britishbornchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishbornchinese.org.uk).

**[www.britishbornchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishbornchinese.org.uk)** developed out of the Chinatown online site in summer 2000. It aims to 'provide a forum in which British Born Chinese can share experiences, ideas and thoughts' ([www.britishbornchinese.org.uk/pages/about.html](http://www.britishbornchinese.org.uk/pages/about.html)). It has grown into the main participatory Internet site for British Chinese people with over 7,600 registered members by June 2006.

**[www.barficulture.com](http://www.barficulture.com)** started in August 2001 as an online magazine and community web site primarily for British South Asians. It has over 5,000 members, and the site receives 5.5 million hits per month. The barfiCulture site editor explained why he set up the site:

There's a real problem on the net. There's an opportunity for people to come together and learn about each other, but that's not happening, in fact, they become even more disenfranchised. And going to their own little communities – rather than wanting to know about what other people are thinking, or what's happening out there. So I thought, there needs to be this forum where we can let the Asian community learn more about each other (Sunny Hundal, barfiCulture site editor, interview, May 2004)

These sites emerged as a generation of British educated Chinese and Asian young people came through higher education in unprecedented numbers, seeking outlets for self-expression. Each site attracts a youthful constituency mainly aged 18 to 30. The sites' dominant tone is informal, interspersed with serious meditations on what it means to be Chinese or Asian in contemporary Britain.

Signifiers of ethnicity elicit recognition through the site names themselves – barfi being an Indian sweet – and also the user names chosen by those posting material on the sites. Many of these declare dual affiliations to ethnic background and British city, for example ‘panjabi\_scouser’. Each site has editorial sections inviting site users to submit articles. On barfiCulture in June 2005 these included ‘Desi Wedding’ and ‘Why a Sikh Girl Loves to Go to the Mosque’. The British Born Chinese site also had features with titles reflecting the cultural hybridity of its members: ‘Rice or Chips’ and ‘Banana Splits’.

The heart of each site is the forum, the near real-time discussion boards onto which registered members can post messages at any time, subject to potential moderation and deletion. barfiCulture has eight message forums; including ‘the main forum’ and ‘soul bazaar’. The British Born Chinese discussion board has 23 thematic channels, including ‘ID Parade’ specifically for discussions about identity. As of July 2005, the barfiCulture forums had hosted over two and a half million messages, the British Born Chinese forums over 600,000.

Both sites highlight the distinctive experiences of living in Britain, rather than connecting with the Chinese or Asian diasporas as a whole:

We’re the second generation and we’re grown up now. And now the Asian culture has really taken a hold in the UK (. . .) as British Asian culture has become more developed, people can hold onto that. (Sunny Hundal, barfiCulture editor, interview May 2004)

The national specificity of the British Chinese forum became evident in February 2004 when an American web site, the Chinese Nationalist Alliance, posted messages asking people to join their web site ([www.theasf.net/forums](http://www.theasf.net/forums)). The rallying call to ‘all Chinese nationalists’ was received angrily:

Jeez, these CNA guys are nuts! It’s almost like a Chinese National Socialist party! – it isn’t is it? – it’s just things like intolerance to homosexuals, the purity of Chinese culture and keeping outside influences away, it all sounds so much like a Chinese version of the ‘Aryan Race’ concept! (posted by ‘Percy’, British Born Chinese site, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2004)

This sense of the British Born Chinese site as a uniquely British discursive space to debate experiences is the major attraction to users:

I think it offered the opportunity to discuss things from a British Born Chinese point of view that you can’t get with discussing them with just Chinese or English people. It was great – the ability to talk to lots of people at the same time about things that were close to your heart (Paul, former British Born Chinese site volunteer, interview May 2004)

The discussions are inflected with feeling for places of family origin, but not as the prevailing ethos of the site. Any discernible diasporic sensibility is a loose, but at times deeply resonant, affiliation to East or South Asia. For example on the British Born Chinese site in 2003, news of the deaths of Hong Kong Chinese stars Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui elicited heartfelt childhood memories of listening to Cantonese pop music and watching Hong Kong films.

While interest in both British Asian and South Asian popular culture is prominent on the barfiCulture site, in comparison with the British Born Chinese site, religion plays a much larger part in the content of barfiCulture, with Sikh, Hindu and Muslim faiths in recurrent and occasionally tense dialogue. Over the years, both sites have generated significant offline meetings. The British Born Chinese site advertises a monthly meeting in London at which two hundred attend. Get-togethers of British Born Chinese people in cities all over Britain, and in Hong Kong, are set up through the site. Similarly, monthly gatherings at restaurants and clubs have emerged from the barfiCulture site. The online and offline interactions of these two forums provide a rich source of debate about the nature of ethnicity in contemporary Britain.

## **Reflexive racialisation and contested identities**

In stark contrast to mainstream media, the content of these web sites' forums is self-generated and self-policed. Discussions move within boundaries that are constantly challenged and redrawn through the very discursive forms employed. Issues central to the definition of ethnic identity: authenticity, belonging and interethnic relationships are recurrently explored in lively exchanges. Although each of the sites welcomes contributions from people who are not Chinese or South Asian, there are regular debates about how inclusive or exclusive the sites and their users should be. The barfiCulture site editor has a strong policy on deleting messages he feels are extreme or inflammatory, particularly in relation to other religious groups:

I was very strict with the content . . . a lot of web sites they have this freedom of speech, but what that means in practice is that you have a core bunch of people who are very dogmatic, let's say about religion. What that means is that people who are moderate or people who just want to have a sensible discussion will get totally driven out. (Sunny Hundal, barfiCulture editor, interview May 2004)

This strong moderation policy encourages debates about how different Asian faith groups should define their identities. For example in January 2004 the barfiCulture main forum saw a discussion on 'wot 2004 means 4 sikhs'. This call for an anniversary commemoration of the 1984 attack on the Golden Temple stimulated a debate about the appropriate temporal framing of Sikh identity. A message arguing that 'Being a Sikh should be about what we are like now,

not always what Sikhs were like in the past' (posted by 'delighted', barfiCulture forum, 12th January 2004) met with the following reply:

guys to look fwd u 1<sup>st</sup> hav 2 look behind u. we can not hide away from the facts or truths bout our past and if our own ppl don't want 2 no bout who we r, where r we from, where we r going then who will?? (posted by 'taran', barfiCulture forum, 12th January 2004, *spelling as in the original*).

Questions of communal self-definition are regularly debated, for example the barfiCulture forum has included threads on 'Are Ishmailis Muslims?'; 'There are many kinds of Sikhs'; 'Most of us call ourselves British Asians'.

The 'Shia Muslims in England' thread started in January 2004 on the barfiCulture site demonstrates how the combination of textual and visual representations can dramatise loyalties to both religious faith and locality. A user posted a series of digital photographs of British Muslim enactments of the Shia ritual of matam – self-punishment in memory of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. These striking visual images drew 250 responses over the next four months. Many traced some of those pictured to Birmingham, Manchester and Bradford and responded quite emotionally: 'dunno why, but some of those pictures gave me a great feeling' (posted by 'delighted', barfiCulture forum, 19th January 2004). Respondents explained how such seemingly extreme acts express deep religious faith: 'so when they do the stuff in the pics up top it's a way of trying to console the deep pain for the loss of the ppl who gave their lives in a very tragic way' (posted by 'sarin', barfiCulture forum, 9th April 2004). This precipitated a wider debate about the doctrinal differences between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

Lengthy discussions of ethnicity, identity and future prospects in Britain characterise a significant proportion of the forum content on the two sites. In July 2004 a thread on the British Born Chinese site asked 'How far can BBCs (British Born Chinese) go?'

Will we see BBCs becoming the leaders of the future? Do BBCs have that ambition? Many of our Indian subcontinent counterparts are becoming more visible – are BBCs destined to remain invisible? (posted by 'flickserve', British Born Chinese forum, 10th July 2004).

Responses highlighted both the structural obstacles to progress and the importance of individual effort:

Passiveness and BBCs go hand in hand. It takes ambition and aggression to push and excel yourself to the top. Many BBCs don't carry that. Coupled with issues with regard to the Chinese as a race and where they belong in the media and general perceptions, BBCs never feel inspired to do more than they need to. They think they will be fighting an impossible battle. (posted by 'kww0ng', British Born Chinese forum, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2004)



I don't think BBCs will become leaders of the future. Racism is always to stand in the way and white people are never going to allow us to become leaders (posted by 'Dolly', British Born Chinese forum, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2004)

These interchanges are examples of *reflexive racialisation*. We use this term to highlight the Internet's ability as an instantly accessible, interactive and archivable medium to host a self-authored commentary on the issues faced by racialised minorities in a multicultural context.

Recent social thought regards heightened reflexivity as a defining feature of contemporary social change (Giddens, 1991). The intense self-definition and self-monitoring of conduct generates an awareness of historical contingency and the questioning of orthodoxies. Traditions are interrogated, rather than accepted, and inherited identities continually revised. The Internet accentuates this reflexive turn by offering 'an excellent example of the double character of sovereignty and dependency which characterizes the reflexive subject' (Beck, Bonss and Lau, 2003: 25). Through the Internet the individual is both initiator and outcome of the networks providing life with biographical meaning:

(...) subjectivity is now a product of self-selected networks, which are developed through self-organization into spheres that enable self-expression, and reinforce it through public recognition. Both the self and the public develop in tandem (Beck, Bonss and Lau, 2003: 26)

However, the reflexive modernization thesis, like Wellman's notion of networked individualism and Castells's polarity of the self and the Net, can give insufficient weight to the enduring force of collective identities such as race and ethnicity. For instance Scott Lash describes ethnic groups as one of the 'classic institutions' in retreat before the reflexivity of the 'second modernity' (Lash, 2003: 52). The arguments of Lash and Beck imply that individuals are left to bear the burden of social change by devising personal biographical responses to structurally induced dilemmas. In fact social identities that mediate between the self and the Net, the individual and the public, can be disseminated and recognised through the sharing of personal experiences in these forum discussions.

For example a thread on the British Born Chinese site started by a young man experiencing verbal abuse whilst working in a Chinese catering business elicited many sympathetic responses:

When we first moved to the takeaway that we have now, we used to get a lot of trouble. They used to hang around outside our shop window, sometimes opening the door to shout abuse at us or to throw a snowball or firework into the shop. When they came in to buy something, they would take the mickey and say things like 'fried lice' instead of 'fried rice' (...) When I get someone like that, I just ignore them or give as good as I get, even though

my parents say I should just learn to tolerate them and not offend the customers. But I'm too proud of being Chinese just to give in and take it (posted by 'Shu dai xiong', British Born Chinese forum, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2004)

As well as practical advice about the installation of CCTV cameras, responses drew on their own frustration with the generally inadequate reaction of the police to such incidents, and the sense of vulnerability working late at night in white neighbourhoods:

When it was snowing about fifteen 16–19 year olds started throwing snowballs real hard at my parents from point blank range. My parents couldn't do anything about it as they were in a big group. When I realised what was happening I called the police straight away, but they never turned up. I was crying 'coz of what happened. This is purely just because we're Chinese, if we were an English family running a chip shop business, none of this would happen (posted by 'HaZZA', British Born Chinese forum, 5th July 2004)

This is one illustration of how the discussion threads are more than fragments from individual lives. Another came in spring 2005 when site users responded to the death of Mr Huang Chen in Wigan, attacked by local youths outside his takeaway business. As one message stated, 'The fact is that these kind of incidents strike a chord with the vast majority of British born Chinese, since most of us grew up with takeaways and more often than not some form of racial abuse' (posted by 'eskargot', British born Chinese forum, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2005). Taken together the messages constitute a collective witness to the experience of growing up as Chinese in Britain (see Parker, 1995; Song, 1999). Underlying the sentiments expressed are broader estimations of social status, prospects for social justice and the necessity of struggle in the face of continued inequalities. When questioned by E-mail about their participation, site users eloquently summarised what the site has meant to them:

I think web sites like this will make British Born Chinese more confident. It gives them a 'unity' with others where they know they are not alone and that they can receive support and advice from people who can sympathise with their special circumstance ('Lam', site user, response to E-mail questioning)

Our use of the term reflexive racialisation to describe the intersubjectivity of these exchanges does not imply an endorsement of implacable racial identities. The reflexivity evident in many of the site discussion threads is best termed racialised, because so many of the issues reported are overdetermined by racism in social settings away from the Internet. We deploy the qualifier of reflexivity to indicate the ongoing tensions between fixed and fluid understandings of identity which these forums express to the full. The extent to which identities are racialised as a set of inescapable destinies or seen as

having to change in response to living as minorities in Britain is one of the defining features of these online interactions.

On the barfiCulture site the case of a young British Muslim woman drew out diverging views on the cultural rights and obligations associated with multiculturalism. In June 2004 Shabina Begum, aged 15, lost her High Court appeal against a school in Luton which had prevented her from wearing a more modest form of dress than allowed for in the school rules. Prior to September 2002 she had conformed to the school's prescribed option (for its mainly Muslim intake) of wearing a long tunic and trousers, the *shalwar kameez*. However, when on the grounds of wanting to express a deeper affiliation to Islam she wished to wear the *jilbab*, a garment covering the whole body, she was prohibited and did not attend school thereafter. The High Court accepted the school's view that it had already provided for Muslim pupils by allowing the *shalwar kameez*, and did not want a further variation of its uniform to become a symbol of being 'more Muslim' (*Independent* 16<sup>th</sup> June 2004).

Although the majority of barfiCulture forum respondents endorsed the High Court's judgement (subsequently overturned by the Court of Appeal), the contending positions were debated at length. Some felt a degree of conformity was necessary:

I think there is a legitimate right for a society to ask that in the public arena members of the society agree to certain standards of behaviour, in principle (posted by 'delighted', barfiCulture forum, June 20th 2004)

Whereas others sided with Shabina Begum:

We should be free to live different ways of life. That's the underlying principle for me (. . .) I'm not a hard-core believer in integration or segregation. Respect means giving each other space and also being humble enough to talk to each other as equals. And that goes against the idea of imposing rules from a dominant culture and excluding others. It means finding a way that people can live their lives without making things hard on others – in both directions (posted by 'jalebijar', barfiCulture forum, June 20th 2004)

Debates like these reflect and nurture a growing reflexivity about race and ethnicity amongst young British Chinese and British Asian people. On display are opinions and experiences hitherto largely absent from the public domain. Vivid recollections of crucial biographical moments evoke advice and opinion on matters such as how to cope with racism at school and work, the details of religious practice, the prospects for social mobility in British society. These open forums can encourage particularly intense self-disclosure, fostered by the sense of intimacy from a distance distinctive to electronic communication. For example, the British Born Chinese site forum 'The Shoulder' regularly deals

with very personal dilemmas such as having non-Chinese partners, the consequences of parents selling the family catering business, and the prospects of working in East Asia. Yet these biographical instances are built into wider collective narratives and arguments about belonging in British society.

In the sociological literature, the concept of racialisation implies the allocation of racial significance to social events and groups largely from above (Miles and Brown, 2003; Murji and Solomos, 2005). Sites like *barfiCulture* and *British Born Chinese* contest the terms on which racialised minorities are represented, a reflexive racialisation from below:

As they argue, write, read, send E-mails and interact with one another on and offline, the creators of thousands of interwoven online texts over the years have been articulating 'race' and 'culture' on their own terms (Franklin, 2003: 465).

The dilemmas of how to live as British Chinese and British Asian are laid bare, offering a continually refreshed public platform distinctive to these emerging British-educated generations. In addition, both sites have stimulated novel forms of social mobilisation, creating a new self-confidence to mount campaigns against other media and institutions where the terms of representation work against young Chinese and Asian people.

## **Social mobilisation**

Aside from the inherent interest of the forum content, the online interactions have offline consequences. The discursive ambience of reflexive racialisation has encouraged interventions in wider social and political processes (McAughey and Ayers, 2003; van de Donk *et al.*, 2004).

The *barfiCulture* site is a point of contact between the Asian music industry in Britain and its listeners. Asian music producers both read and contribute to the site. Messages on the discussion boards have called for a reduction in derivative MC-style rapping, and a return to the initial impetus of Bhangra. The *barfiCulture* site editor also runs *Asians in Media*, a web site highlighting the progress of British Asians in the media industry ([www.asiansinmedia.org/news](http://www.asiansinmedia.org/news)).

The British born Chinese site – together with other sites such as [www.dimsum.co.uk](http://www.dimsum.co.uk) – has emboldened members to take part in campaigns against adverse media representations of Chinese culture and people. In April 2001 several thousand Chinese people demonstrated in London against the scapegoating of Chinese food during the foot and mouth health scare. The protest culminated in a meeting with, and apology from, a government minister absolving Chinese restaurant food from any blame for the outbreak (Parker, 2003).

In 2002 the British Born Chinese site became involved in a series of formal complaints against a national newspaper. The journalist Charles Champion published a vitriolic attack on Chinese food in the *Daily Mail* newspaper of 7th August 2002. Called 'Chop Phooley', the piece asserted 'the unpalatable truths about Chinese dishes that are now Britain's favourite food'. Letters of complaint as well as a rebuttal web site – [www.whycharlescampioniswrong.co.uk](http://www.whycharlescampioniswrong.co.uk) – won a partial retraction in the *Daily Mail* of 20<sup>th</sup> December 2002.

The British born Chinese site's content has itself become a political issue. In April 2003 at the height of the SARS crisis in East Asia, the British Born Chinese discussion board received two posts from users alleging that a Chinese restaurant in Birmingham and a Chinese grocery store in London were infected with the SARS virus. Within days, these were picked up by Chinese businesses and the web site was blamed for spreading rumours contributing to a sharp downturn in trade in Britain's Chinatowns, prompting an intervention by the Metropolitan Police. Threats of legal action against the site's owners for hosting these messages revealed a distrust of new media on the part of the older generations. The incident prompted an extensive debate about the role of the site.

Competing views about the responsibilities of site owners and users, the limits of free speech, and who had legal liability for messages posted highlighted the public nature of a discussion board hitherto associated with intimate, spontaneous communication. In response, the site clarified its purposes, emerging with a heightened sense of how important it has become for many Chinese people in Britain. The site editor refused to disclose the identities of the original message posters to the police and no charges were pressed. Reflecting on the experience later, the site editor Steve Lau recalled:

I then sent out an email to all the members saying we were offline, saying this is the reason why. These are the implications to us. Please can you be careful about what you post, how you phrase things (. . .) It was in spite of what the police were saying to us, not because of it. That was our responsibility, as a responsible website to the community. The last people we want to injure are the Chinese community (Steve Lau, British Born Chinese site editor, interview, September 2004).

The E-mail sent during the SARS affair provides a useful statement of the forum's guiding principles. It illustrates the part played by the web site in promoting a heightened collective self-awareness amongst the British Born Chinese:

The British Born Chinese website believes:

1. We all have a responsibility to promote social cohesion and to fight against the negative portrayals of the Chinese.
2. What may be said in a light-hearted or flippant way can have serious consequences. We request members to think seriously about the impact of comments they make.

3. The Admin and Moderation Teams have sought to make the British Born Chinese website a socially responsible place. This has been through a policy of striking a balance between open debate and responsible citizenship. We seek a forum which continues to be the voice of ordinary British Born Chinese, unfettered by heavy handed intervention or misguided paternalistic oversight. (British Born Chinese site, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2003)

In messages responding to the controversy the discussion forum itself became an institution to be protected. To many users the site now represents British Chinese people. One message summarised the site's contribution:

The British Born Chinese site has always supported the UK Chinese community. This site provides us with a platform in which to air our opinions, it has brought us together and made a positive contribution to many posters' lives. The fact that this site was falsely accused of having started the rumours about SARS/Chinatowns in the UK just goes to show how powerful this forum has become. People of authority are actually paying attention to us! (posted by 'Rosie', British Born Chinese forum, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2003)

Reflexive racialisation also comes to the fore in the regular critical assessments of media representations on both the barfiCulture and British Born Chinese forums. In the latter, the absence of high profile British Chinese media personalities is a recurrent lament. Rare attempts by mainstream broadcasters to address Chinese experiences are given rigorous scrutiny.

One of the British Chinese actors involved in a series of short films broadcast on Channel 4 television posted a message to the British Born Chinese site on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2004 to advertise the programmes, whose title was 'The Missing Chink'. He was met with a vehement response. Many users took exception to this attempt to play on the very term – 'Chink' – used almost unreflectively as a pejorative mode of address towards Chinese people in Britain

... a title like this will just encourage racists/comments. In fact, it would promote the use of such a word – in a positive day2day use – rather than it being treated as it should be: a racial, offensive and degrading slur. (posted by 'Yam chaa', British Born Chinese site, 11th January 2004,)

This debate had a wider resonance because the programme was aired a few days after revelations of the plight of Chinese people in Northern Ireland. Protestant paramilitaries had demanded protection money from Chinese catering businesses, daubing them with the graffiti: 'Chinks out' (*The Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2004).

As a result of the thread, site members wrote letters of complaint to the television channel, for example

The title of this programme 'The Missing Chink' vehemently disgusts me. To think a liberal television channel such as Channel Four would want to use

the word 'chink' in the title for a potentially ground-breaking programme is completely racially ignorant and unjustified (posted by 'supercool007', British Born Chinese site, 12th January 2004)

In total 191 complaints were sent to the British media regulator Ofcom, which took Channel 4's subsequent apology for the programme title in the Chinese press as sufficient redress for any offence caused.

Taken together, these examples of political action demonstrate how contributors to web sites can act as a critical counterpublic exercising deliberative reason in the cause of social transformation (Fraser, 1997; Habermas, 1996). The sites have done much to encourage public interventions on the part of groups largely ignored by established political organisations. It would be easy to mock the seemingly trivial banter often evident on the discussion boards. Yet this atmosphere nurtures trust between site users, a necessary foundation for the more serious expressions of reflexive racialisation. The web sites serve as 'laboratories of experience' identified by Alberto Melucci as 'submerged networks' of everyday life in which 'new problems and questions are posed. New answers are invented and tested and reality is perceived and named in different ways' (Melucci, 1989: 208). The site editors regard their users not as markets to be exploited, but publics to be encouraged and engaged.

The development of these web sites has implications for wider debates about civil society and the potential for political mobilisation through the Internet (Nip, 2004; Van de Donk *et al.*, 2004; Young, 2000). These sites contest the racialised discourses already circulating on other media. The discussion threads are a series of constantly evolving themes, energised by groups largely excluded from mainstream commentary in Britain. The sites themselves are more than new media outlets. By drawing together dispersed users, facilitating social gatherings and encouraging political action, they could become the distinctive social institutions of these emerging British born generations.

However, there are limitations to how far these sites encourage civic participation. At the moment the web sites are self-centred and not read by influential decision-makers, except in moments of crisis like after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 and during the foot and mouth and SARS epidemics. In addition, there is very little evidence of dialogue with other ethnic groups on either site, with the danger that 'narrow band imaginings (...) hardly aid the cause of genuinely democratic deliberation' (Goodin, 2003: 70). Further steps are needed to turn these web sites into enduring counterpublics, projecting oppositional voices into a public realm 'in which free, open and responsive dialogical interaction takes place' (Bohman, 2004: 144). This would require making spaces for the exchange of opinions into more systematic interventions in decision-making processes. Yet given the novelty of the technology, it would be harsh to judge these forums by the inappropriately rigorous standard of a Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1989) and then find them wanting.

Instead their value in encouraging political participation by bringing previously unrecognised experiences into the public domain should be acknowledged (Siapera, 2005).

These web sites have begun to generate institutional offshoots and foster an embryonic civil society connecting British born Chinese and South Asians to other social organisations. A former volunteer on the British Born Chinese web site now helps organise the British Chinese Society, a membership organisation which holds regular social events, some of the proceeds of which are donated to British Chinese charities and voluntary groups (the Society's web site is at [www.britishchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishchinese.org.uk)). Existing campaigning organisations increasingly have their events highlighted in messages on the British Born Chinese web site. In June 2005 users of the discussion board highlighted a public forum on anti-Chinese racism held at the House of Lords, and organised by the Chinese civil rights group Min Quan. Mainstream political institutions have begun to use the barfiCulture site to communicate with the British Asian population. In spring 2004 the British government's Electoral Commission used the barfiCulture site to conduct a survey of young British Asians' views on voting and political participation. The links between the new social institutions of the Internet and established channels of political action must be extended if these emerging media networks are to reach beyond their enthusiastic, but marginalised, participants.

## Conclusions

The web sites we have analysed make significant contributions to the lives of those they engage. Firstly, they expand the interpretive resources available to emerging generations of British Asian and Chinese young people. The medium of digitally mediated textual and visual interaction has broadened the emotional repertoire for discussing ethnic identities.

Secondly the practices of reflexive racialisation modify notions of personalised community and networked individualism. The sites we have discussed are part of an ongoing reconfiguration of personal and collective identities. Individualism and solidarity are in transformative tension. There is no one-dimensional 'group mind' expressed on these forums, yet neither is there a total fragmentation into as many viewpoints as there are members. The sites enable the elaboration of what Iris Marion Young terms a shared social perspective: 'a set of questions, kinds of experiences and assumptions with which reasoning begins' (Young, 1997: 395). Although 'the person may be the portal', the junction point between a variety of individualised networks (Wellman, 2004: 127), that personhood continues to be defined through significant social relations such as ethnicity. New media forms thus update rather than delete existing collective affiliations, no matter how individualistically they are felt and expressed.



Thirdly, these Internet sites illustrate how place and embodied everyday life still matter. Web sites geared to specific ethnicities can re-embed as much as they detach users from their immediate localities. Long-distance connections co-exist with deeply felt attachments to place, whether on the scale of locality or nation (Burnett and Marshall, 2003). As a result 'users of new technologies do not necessarily become cyborgs but instead remain tied to place-based and racially embodied constructions of self-identity' (Adams and Ghose, 2003: 432). The transnational fixation of much literature on the Internet overlooks the local and national involvements that continue to shape everyday lives.

There remain a number of areas for future research which we have not addressed here. Firstly, how does use of the Internet relate to the use of other media such as weblogs, text messaging, conventional broadcast media and newspapers? No media form exists in isolation, and future work should explore how 'real communities of practice employ a whole ecology of media as they think together about the matters that concern them' (Agre, 2004: 416).

Secondly, the relationship between online and offline interactions requires systematic empirical analysis. What proportion of Internet site users meet face to face? What long term impact do these meetings have on senses of identity and political mobilisation? Do interactive media 'question identity while yet building discursive community in ways that other static media can't?' (Nakamura, 2002b).

Thirdly, what is the relationship between the biographies of Internet sites and the biographies of their users? Will they grow old together or will people move on to different sites, particularly when they leave university? How will affiliations to localities and nations interact with a global Chinese or South Asian consciousness over time?

Fourthly, both sites reconfigure the relationship between privacy and publicity by recurrently testing the limits of permissible discourse. For example, the *barfiCulture* site aims to 'build bridges in a community frequently fragmented by religion, caste, sex and race'. Accordingly, 'people who try to start trouble by abusing those from another religion or caste are banned' ([www.barficulture.com/barfi/](http://www.barficulture.com/barfi/)). How do policies on moderation, the deletion of messages and the handling of sensitive topics regulate what can and can't be said? Whose agendas are dominant?

Unfortunately, the rethinking of the public/private binary necessary to address these issues is not so extensive in respect of ethnicity as it is in relation to gender (Pateman, 1989; Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Graham and Khosravi, 2002). Guobin Yang's question is pertinent:

Is it because of the very confusion about the meaning of being Chinese in this age of globalization that an online Chinese cultural sphere is coming into being, as a realm for self-clarification as much as for political action? (Yang, 2003: 486)

The value of these web sites may lie precisely in cutting across such a binary opposition of private clarification versus public participation. The reflexive racialisation encouraged by the Internet can explore highly emotive personal experiences, but in a regular public setting. In offering discursive spaces of emotional support, the Internet affords the expression of often previously unarticulated minority perspectives. The sharing of private experiences in the quest for public recognition can become a form of collective action in its own right.

The new generations of Chinese and Asian young people in Britain have been largely unrepresented in powerful social institutions. The web sites we have discussed constitute emerging public spheres of growing importance as arenas of dialogic self-definition and elaboration. Their development will be an important frontier of both social action and social research in the years ahead.

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