

# Cartography of the Basque Diaspora Online: Preserving Migrants' Digital Culture

*Pedro J. Oiarzabal*

## **Introduction**

This paper aims at presenting an overview of some of the results of my work at the intersection between migration and diaspora studies and Internet and Web studies. My research addresses the potential impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on Basque culture and identity maintenance in the diaspora (see Oiarzabal and Oiarzabal, 2005; Oiarzabal, 2009). It deals with the digital culture created by migrants and their institutions and the need for collecting and preserving it.

Here, I focus on the Basque diaspora case and its expansion into cyberspace by exploring its institutional evolution on the Web, while presenting two Basque diaspora digital archives as good examples of the utilization of new technologies to preserve and disseminate the history of immigrants. By focusing on the Basque diaspora, I attempt to draw attention to the implications that ICTs have on international migrant diasporas such as of the Basque (see Alonso and Oiarzabal, eds. 2010).

When I refer to the Basque diaspora, I am referring to the institutionalized

diaspora, structured around dozens and dozens of associations. These diaspora associations self-defined as Basque, materialized with strong group self-awareness, sustained over a considerable period of time. Diasporas such as those of the Basque are composed of emigrants, who shared a collective identity in their homeland, and who have been forced by structural socio-economic or political conditions or have chosen to leave their land of origin to settle in other countries. There, migrants and their descendants collectively maintain and develop cultural, religious, and political expressions of their identity, and consequently they form a collective identity distinct from that of their host societies' dominant culture. They constitute institutions and transnational networks that maintain explicit and implicit personal and institutional ties of a cultural, social, economic, political, and business nature with the homeland and other countries of Basque presence.<sup>1</sup>

As of March 2009, the Basque diaspora had instituted 211 social, cultural, educational, political, and business associations throughout twenty-four

countries, of which 135 (or nearly 64%) had a presence in cyberspace in twenty countries (or over 83% of the total) in the continents of Asia, America, Europe, and Oceania.

### Methods Used

At the beginning of my research I was confronted with the issue of identifying Basque institutional websites as there was not a complete database. I consolidated partial databases, including the Basque government's registry of institutions abroad,<sup>2</sup> while using web search engines in order to identify the websites. I ended up creating my own database, which today is a public website called <http://euskaldiaspora.com>, which has become a useful tool to access diaspora sites as well as an experiment on hypertextuality.

From a methodological point of view, the Internet was not only an object of research but also a research tool. I was also confronted with the intrinsic characteristics of the Web such as its changing nature as well as with the characteristics of the Web text when analyzing its content (for example, its hypertextuality; multi-mediality—that is, combination of written word, graphics, and audiovisual forms—its potential global reach, and its ubiquity). For the past few years I conducted quantitative, qualitative, and comparative research on both the online and offline dimensions of the Basque institutional diaspora as the Basque diaspora, I argued, is an imagined community projected into cyberspace—a constructed and shared electronic social and cultural space. In other words, the diaspora online dimension is a projection of the physical world diaspora.

### Research Projects

My initial research analyzed the formation of a new online landscape created by Basque diaspora institutional websites, which I defined as the Basque diaspora webscape (Oiarzabal, 2006). A total of 141 people and ninety-eight Basque diaspora associations from twenty countries participated in the research. This included the participation of 66% (fifty-eight) of the total Basque diaspora webmasters from eleven countries in a Web-based survey. I also applied a discursive and rhetorical analysis to ninety websites from sixteen countries as of July-August 2005 as well as hyperlink network analyses of nearly 2,000 links (see also Oiarzabal, 2010 and Forthcoming A).

I complemented the initial research by studying new online platforms that had been created since August 2005 to June 2007 and once again up to March 2009. Due to the ephemeral nature of the Web the goal of this longitudinal study was to track changes of the presence of the Basque institutional diaspora on the Web over time in order to study its online evolution, its characteristics, the usage of different digital platforms and their potential impact on maintaining Basque identity abroad. Some of the questions addressed in this study were: What difference do new online applications such as social network sites (e.g., MySpace, Facebook), weblogs (e.g., Blogger), or podcasting (e.g., YouTube) make for diaspora associations? Are these associations truly facilitating the creation of online communities of “friends” based primarily on a common ethnicity or country of origin? (Oiarzabal, 2010b).

Finally, in 2010 I carried out a study on the users of seventy-five Basque institutional diaspora groups on Facebook (Oiarzabal, Forthcoming B). Three hundred and thirty-three individuals from thirteen countries participated in the research. The goals of the research were to study Basque migrants and their descendants' reasons for using Social Network Sites (SNSs) and for joining those groups as well as to find out the potential effect on their "offline" lives in terms of identity maintenance, community formation, migrant associationism, communication exchange, and information and knowledge transfer. In addition, the study aimed at knowing who the users were as well as at understanding their role and degree of involvement on the analyzed social network groups.

### **Basque Institutional Diaspora Online History**

Before the widespread use of the Internet, the electronic mail, and the Web, Basques began slowly to "colonize" cyberspace, depicted by technologists and media critics as the "last frontier." In fact, the first solid attempts to do so by Basques, individually or collectively, took place in the diaspora. By 1994, the Internet became generally available to the public, and in that same year the first Basque website, <http://www.buber.net>, was created in the diaspora by Blas Uberuaga. In the homeland, the Basque government established its first website in October 1996. Prior to this, the Basque presence on the Internet was related to two mailing lists: Basque-L (December 1993) and [soc.culture.basque](mailto:soc.culture.basque) (July 1996).<sup>3</sup>

By November 1997, there were already sixty-one Basque diaspora institutions registered with the Basque government, but there was only one diaspora association online—the political site from Caracas, Venezuelan Association of Friends of the Basque Country (AVAEH in its Spanish acronym)—which was created in 1996.<sup>4</sup> Following the Basque-Venezuelan association, the earliest pioneering Basque diaspora organizations to claim a Basque corner on the Web were the political association Basque Diaspora Association, from Santa Rosa, Argentina; the educational organization based in Buenos Aires Juan de Garay Basque Argentinean Foundation; and the Basque club from Seattle, Washington, United States (U.S.), all of which established their respective websites in 1997.<sup>5</sup> The Seattle club became the first Basque diaspora migrant club ever to construct an online presence.

Seattle was soon followed by other clubs in Argentina (La Plata), Venezuela (Caracas) and the U.S. (Utah), including the North American Basque Organizations (NABO) in 1998. NABO became the first Basque diaspora migrant federation to organize in cyberspace. Its Argentinean counterpart, the Federation of Basque Argentinean Entities did not establish an online presence until November 2005. In 1999, the Basque Museum and Cultural Center of Boise, Idaho, the Reno Basque Club Zazpiak Bat, Nevada, both in the U.S., and the Calgary Euskal Etxea from Canada also established their own websites.<sup>6</sup>

Nearly 90% of the institutional websites that comprise the Basque digital diaspora have been established in the new millennium. As of December 2005, the

Basque diaspora had engendered 189 associations throughout twenty-two countries.<sup>7</sup> More than half of those associations (ninety-eight or nearly 52%) were online in sixteen countries (or nearly 73%). By June 2007, the diaspora increased by eight new associations and two new countries—China and Cuba. At that time, 123 diaspora associations or over 62% had a presence on the Internet in nineteen countries (or nearly 80% of the total). Nearly two years later, as of March 2009, the diaspora had formed 211 associations throughout twenty-four countries, of which 135 (or nearly 64%) had a presence in cyberspace in twenty countries (or over 83% of the total).<sup>8</sup> At the same time, some diaspora associations have multiplied their online presence by combining different online platforms (forums, websites, and social network sites). Consequently, by March 2009 the institutional or associative diaspora worldwide has organized itself in 157 online platforms, compared to just a few years prior when the number of sites could be counted on one hand. This trend demonstrates a powerful potential for Basque diaspora expression and representation online.

### **Maintaining Identity**

As seen there has been a significant evolution of the Basque institutional diaspora presence online over the years, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Why does the Basque diaspora use new technologies such as the Internet? What difference do they make? And what impact does the Internet have on strengthening and maintaining Basque identity and culture in the diaspora? Due to space constraints, I will only touch bases

on the impact of ICTs on Basque migrants and their descendants' identity.

In general terms, the Basque diaspora is utilizing the Web as a twenty-four-hour easy to use and inexpensive platform to communicate, interact, maintain identity, create and recreate social ties and networks to both their homelands and co-diaspora communities regardless of geographical distance and time zones due to the low cost, effectiveness, and speed of the Internet. Basque diaspora websites are platforms for communication, social interaction, and representation.

The majority of the Basque diaspora webmasters throughout the world argue that the Internet has the potential to maintain Basque identity abroad (Oiarzabal, 2006). Similar to the role of offline communities, the Internet has the potential to inform, and educate people and communities in real time, in a constant and current manner. It is understood as a platform for obtaining and providing information, mainly about the Basque Country and its culture, but also about its political reality. The webmasters acknowledge the capacity of the Internet and the Web to reach beyond the immediate frontiers of their local communities, and consequently, expanding their communities and institutions to limits unknown prior to the Internet. In this regard, the Internet opens the possibility for community creation by empowering diaspora consciousness. That is to say, the majority of the webmasters believe that the Internet also has the potential to help maintain a collective identity, while reconnecting individuals with their identity and with a larger global Basque community—homeland and

diaspora. In sum, they believe that the Internet has the potential to maintain Basque identity in terms of information, interaction, and communication.

### **Basque Diaspora Digital Archives**

For the past three decades, collaborative efforts between Basque diaspora community-based associations and academic institutions, and the homeland government have been made in order to promote and disseminate the study of the migrant generation by utilizing new digital technologies. The Internet as a global collaborative and creative collective platform is by nature about sharing knowledge regardless of time and space. As an example of this, I would like to briefly refer to two digital archives on Basque migrants and their descendants in the U.S.

A few years back, the Basque government provided start-up grants to the community-based groups, the Basque Club of Reno, Nevada and the Basque Museum and Cultural Center of Boise, Idaho to digitize existing recordings as well as to initiate new oral history interviews with local Basque migrants as a way to preserve their memory for future generations. The resulting work was the "Oroitzapenak" (Memories) Project. Nearly three hundred interviews were carried out, in a short period of time, by the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno on behalf of the Reno Basque Club as well as by the Basque Museum in Boise. The digital recording of the interviews, sound bites, summaries and indexes were made available online.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, local stories become universal via a global medium

such as the Internet.

Another extremely good example is the bottom-up approach lead by the Ontario Basque Club in Oregon. Similar to the previous examples, the Ontario Basque Club's "Sustraiak" (Roots) Project also aims at collecting and digitally preserving the stories of the local migrant generation. There are many relevant digital historical archives regarding migration found across the globe.<sup>10</sup> For example, in the United Kingdom, we have the Irish Oral History Archive, and in the U.S., the Japanese American Legacy Project, established in 1997 to collect the stories of those Japanese and Japanese Americans incarcerated during WWII or the website Immigrant Journeys, which is dedicated to collect stories of immigrants into the U.S.<sup>11</sup> All these cases and many other existing projects are good examples of how to utilize new technologies to store, preserve and disseminate migration history.

### **Conclusions and Open Questions**

Since the early 1990s, the Basque institutional diaspora has progressively established firm ground in cyberspace and has consolidated its efforts to constantly renew its presence according to continuous change and social and technological innovation. Throughout the years diaspora associations have taken up the challenge to mainstream the issue of ICTs into their agendas as these facilitate access to information and knowledge in an unprecedented manner. Consequently, they have opted for using technologies that favor their institutional goals, strategic plans, and activities. Evidence shows that there is a

fast and dynamic adaptability and adoption of diaspora institutions to new Web technologies and software applications that meet social needs or have a social purpose such as, for instance, maintaining and promoting communication, interaction, and networks.

The online presence of the Basque diaspora is neither trendy nor temporary. Those technologies make a real difference for institutions and their respective membership. Their impact on migrants and their descendants' lives, heritage, and cultural preservation is unquestionable. Without those digital technologies, some diaspora institutions would become handicapped in their organizational capacity as well as in their capacity to reach their goals.

Since 2007, there has been an increasing tendency for the diaspora to articulate an online presence in the form of computer and mobile-based social network sites. More affordable, faster, and easier accessibility to the Internet and to an increasing array of free software, programs, services, and tools would surely multiply the use of SNSs in the near future.

Taking into account the issue of the so-called digital divide, and the limited access to the Internet and limited use of ICTs by certain communities within the Basque diaspora, the impact of the Internet is uneven and asymmetric. As of March 2009, 36% of diaspora institutions had no presence on the Web. In addition, the Basque institutional digital diaspora is found halfway between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, constructing a hybrid space where elements of both software architectures come together.

This digital space takes form in the fact that diaspora associations have begun to move away from static and encyclopedic sites, which had traditionally dominated their online presence, to more dynamic and collaborative ones. That is to say, certain associations are increasingly constructing online communities of relationships, by interacting with people who share similar identities and interests, to the detriment of communities of identity, interest, and self-representation. The focus has shifted from displaying information to producing information and transferring informal knowledge by way of sharing it in a constructive manner. The Internet does not only mean that users can influence each other's lives in any part of the globe but they can learn from each other as well as collaborate with each other.

On the one hand, the diaspora has accelerated its presence across cyberspace in quantitative (e.g., additional platforms) and qualitative (e.g., diversity of platforms) terms by increasingly constructing more diverse, denser, and overlapping and inter-linked networks limited by neither time nor space. On the other hand, we are increasingly moving towards a horizontal culture, a horizontal partnership of diaspora community-based associations, academic institutions, museums, libraries and homeland as well as hostland institutions.

Related to the utilization of new technologies by migrants as well as by academic institutions is the individual and collective production of cyberculture. If anything, the Web is ephemeral. Consequently, there is an urgent need

to protect and maintain our common global culture that has been produced in cyberspace since the invention of the Internet. I would like to conclude by opening up a discussion with the following questions: What can be done to preserve our migration and diaspora digital legacies? And who should be in charge of creating digital archives to store the diverse cultural and linguistic aspects that constitute our online-based cultures? Who would own this digitally created culture?

## References

- Alonso, Andoni and Pedro J. Oiarzabal. (eds.) *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics and Community*. Reno: University Nevada Press, 2010a.
- Gobierno Vasco. *Euskaldunak Munduan. Building the Future*. Vitoria-Gasteiz: Servicio Editorial de Publicaciones del Gobierno Vasco, 1996.
- Oiarzabal, Agustín M. and Pedro J. Oiarzabal. "La Identidad Vasca en el Mundo: Narrativas sobre Identidad más allá de Fronteras." Bilbao: Erroteta, 2005.
- Oiarzabal, Pedro J. "The Basque Diaspora Webscape." Reno: University Nevada Press. (Forthcoming, A).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Diaspora Basques and Online Social Networks: An Analysis of Users of Basque Institutional Diaspora Groups on Facebook." (Forthcoming, B).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Basque Diaspora Digital Nationalism: Designing "Banal" Identity," in Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal. (eds.) *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics and Community*. Reno: University Nevada Press, 2010a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Online Social Networks of the Basque Diaspora. Fast Forwarded, 2005-2009," in Andoni Alonso, Javier Echeverria and Pedro J. Oiarzabal. (eds.). *Knowledge Communities*. Conference Series. Vol. 6. Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2010b.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Gardeners of Identity: Basques in the San Francisco Bay Area." Urazandi Series. Vol. 23. Vitoria-Gasteiz: Basque Autonomous Government, 2009.
- "The Basque Diaspora Webscape: Online Discourses of Basque Diaspora Identity, Nationhood, and Homeland." PhD dissertation, University of Nevada, Reno (2006).

## Notes

- 1 The Basque Country is a region situated at the Spanish-Franco border of the western Pyrenees. The historical Basque territories are divided into three main political administrative areas—the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) or Euskadi, the Foral Community of Navarre or Nafarroa in the Spanish state; and three Basque provinces or Iparralde in the French state—with a total combined population of nearly 3 million people. The size of the population of the Basque diaspora is nearly impossible to determine, as it depends on the operational definition of “being Basque” as well as a complete statistical database. Nevertheless, the Basque government estimates that the diaspora population consists of 4.5 million people (Gobierno Vasco, 1996: 47). However, this figure is extremely difficult to corroborate.
- 2 In 1994 the Basque Autonomous Community government established a registry of Basque clubs abroad (meaning outside the BAC’s administrative limits) as a legal requirement under Law 8/94 that regulates the relationship between the BAC public institutions and the Basque institutional diaspora. For example, Basque associations abroad need to be registered with the government in order to receive any financial assistance.
- 3 Basque-L (<http://groups.google.com/group/bit.listserv.basque-l>), and soc.culture.basque (<http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.basque>).
- 4 Venezuelan Association of Friends of the Basque Country (*Asociación Venezolana de Amigos de Euskal Herria*; <http://earth.prohosting.com/avaeh>).
- 5 Basque Diaspora Association (*Asociación Diáspora Vasca*; <http://www.diasporavasca.org>); Juan de Garay Basque-Argentinean Foundation (*Fundación Vasco Argentina Juan de Garay*; <http://www.juandegaray.org.ar>); and the Basque club of Seattle (<http://www.seattleuskal.org>).
- 6 NABO (<http://www.nabasque.org>); FEVA (<http://www.fevaonline.org.ar>); the Basque Museum and Cultural Center (<http://www.basque-museum.com>); the Reno Basque Club Zazpiak Bat (<http://www.renobasqueclub.org>); and the Calgary Euskal Etxea (<http://www.muturzikin.com/euskalgary.htm>).
- 7 Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spain, Switzerland, the Dominican Republic, the United Kingdom (U.K.), the U.S., Uruguay, and Venezuela.
- 8 Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spain, Switzerland, the Dominican Republic, the U.K., the U.S., Uruguay, and Venezuela.
- 9 The Center for Basque Studies’s oral history archive online, <http://basque.unr.edu/oralhistory/default.htm>, and the Basque Museum and Cultural Center’s page, <http://www.basquemuseum.com/oralhistory>.
- 10 The Ontario Basque Club’s online archive, <http://www.ontariobasqueclub.dantzariak.net/sustraiak.htm>.
- 11 The Irish Oral History Archive (<http://www.ioha.co.uk>); the Japanese American Legacy Project (<http://www.densho.org/archive/default.asp>); and Immigrant Journeys (<http://www.immigrantjourneys.com/resources.html>).