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Future identities

Foresight Future Identities (2013)
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Identity in the UK is changing. Over the next 10 years, people's identities are likely to be significantly affected by several important drivers of change, in particular the rapid pace of developments in technology. The emergence of hyper-connectivity (where people can now be constantly connected online), the spread of social media, and the increase in online personal information, are key factors which will interact to influence identities.

These developments need to be set within a wider context of demographic change: the shift of the large post-war generation into retirement, and the coming into adulthood of young people who have been immersed since birth in a digital environment. The increasing diversity of the UK's population means that dual ethnic and national identities will continue to become more common, while the gradual trend towards a more secular society appears likely to continue over the next decade. Identities can be a positive resource for social change, building social capital, and promoting wellbeing, but they can also have a role in social unrest and antisocial behaviour.

Hyper-connectivity is driving social change and expectations, while bringing people together in new ways. By 2011 there were more than seven billion devices connected to the internet, and numbers are predicted to reach 15 billion by 2015. Sixty per cent of internet users in the UK are now members of a social network site, increasing from only 17% in 2007. By offering virtually unlimited storage capacity, the internet allows people to document any aspect of their lives, creating a wealth of personal data which can be 'mined' for insights, by private sector companies and potentially by government. This means that people's online identities have value in a way that is new.

The UK is now a virtual environment as well as a real place, and increasingly UK citizens are globally networked individuals. Events which occur elsewhere in the world can have a real and immediate impact in the UK. For example, hyper-connectivity can have a positive impact on migrant communities in maintaining social connections with family and friends. People have become accustomed to switching seamlessly between the internet and the physical world, and use social media to conduct their lives in a way which dissolves the divide between online and offline identities. The internet enables people to connect with others like themselves and discuss ideas as well as promulgate misinformation, which can quickly become widely disseminated. Hyper-connectivity not only has the potential to increase the pace of social change, but may also make it more volatile. As such, the internet has not produced a new kind of identity. Rather, it has been instrumental in raising awareness that identities are more multiple, culturally contingent and contextual than had previously been understood.

Society may become more pluralised, and less integrated, as people's identities are influenced by the ageing population, greater diversity and changing patterns of immigration, and the emergence of online 'virtual' communities. Demographic change in the UK is leading to shifting intergenerational dynamics. As the large post-war cohort reach old-age, the number of over-75 year olds will increase by over a million, from 5.1 million in 2012 to 6.6 million in 2022, a rise of more than 20%. The Report identifies a shift in attitudes, with the emergence of new transitional life stages being defined by attitudes and roles, rather than age. Traditional life stages, for example between adolescence and adulthood, or middle-age and old-age, are being delayed or blurred together. Shifting intergenerational dynamics will also see a relatively smaller working population.

Other identities, such as religious identity, seem unlikely to change significantly over the next 10 years. The gradual long-term trend towards secularisation is set to continue. The 2011 Census shows that the number of people identifying themselves as having 'no religion' rose from 15% of the population in 2001 to 25% in 2011, while the number of people identifying themselves as Christian dropped from 72% in 2001 to 59% in 2011.

People are now more willing to place personal information into public domains, such as on the internet, and attitudes towards privacy are changing, especially among younger people. This breakdown in the barrier between public and private identities could be an important and transformative consequence of social and technological change. The widespread use of mobile technology could, in time, allow social media to be linked with spatial tracking and even facial recognition technologies. This would allow people to draw on personal information about a stranger in a public place, changing the nature of what it means to be anonymous in public spaces.