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Nation-building and the diaspora on Leonenet: a case of Sierra Leone in cyberspace

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Abstract
The nation-state of Sierra Leone crumbled during the 1990s. A decade-long civil war destroyed the state and brutalized the national imaginings. Despite the lack of institutional structure, some members of its society chose to keep the nation alive through discourse on a listserv, an email forum called Leonenet. Using a multi-methodological approach that incorporated content analysis, interviews with cultural informants, ethnography and participant observation, the findings of the study reported in this article indicate that list members had created a virtual nation, defined as any community that communicates in cyberspace, whose collective discourse and/or actions are aimed towards the building, binding, maintenance, rebuilding or rebinding of a nation. Leonenet was a diasporic communicative space where Sierra Leone’s state-related symbols were generated and then held in conceptual escrow, waiting for the institutional structure to return.

Key words
diaspora • nation-building • Sierra Leone • virtual community • virtual nation
For decades West Africa has been politically and socially unstable. In Sierra Leone a prolonged civil war (1991–2002) left many casualties. The country’s 2002 democratic elections appear to have brought some semblance of stability, and President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah seems to be avoiding some of the grosser errors of past regimes. Nevertheless, the country’s political and economic infrastructure is wobbly. During the 1990s the Sierra Leonean state had retreated almost completely. Institutional structures had disintegrated and the government held little power outside the capital, Freetown. The country was not a unified nation but a loose assemblage of competing factions controlling niche territories. As a result, Sierra Leone as a state and nation existed mostly on the outside: demarcated geographically through borders enforced by neighboring countries, globally validated by the United Nations’ attempts at peacemaking and socially maintained by the Sierra Leonean diaspora. This article, based on a case study of a West African listserv, focuses on one external site where the nation was maintained during the civil war, a virtual meeting place called Leonenet (leonenet@list.umbc.edu).

Why do Sierra Leoneans use a listserv to discuss the problems of their nation? What function does Leonenet serve for its users? The following reveals some answers to these questions and perhaps will promote more inquiry into the intersection of the internet and nation-building. The argument is that a listserv contributed to the nation-building process of Sierra Leone through the creation of a virtual nation.

AFRICA AND THE INTERNET

Internet researchers have yet to provide an in-depth analysis of the role of African cyberculture in the global public sphere. The scarcity of literature is not surprising, given the material and cultural background of the internet was framed by American and British scientists (Abbate, 1999). Nevertheless, if racial politics and identity warrant attention (see, for example, Kolko et al., 2000), so must African cyberculture. The internet has yet to penetrate the political and social lives of a majority of Africans. For sub-Saharan Africa, widespread connectivity and access are lacking. Tettey (2001) concludes that African online forums have neither significantly democratized their users nor influenced local politics. But Franda (2002: 18) does see a small group of Africans using cyberspace, particularly email,1 to participate in international affairs; a growing network of ‘new communicators’ that ‘constitute a “class” more than a “community”’. The larger category of globally-based communities using the internet to help retain their local identities has received more attention from scholars. Elkins (1997) argues that mass communication technologies, including new media, strengthen some ethnic groups, allowing them to nurture their diaspora and preserve their heritage. He conceives these social networks as ‘virtual
ethnic communities’ (1997: 139). Mallapragada (2000) also sees the internet as serving the social and cultural needs of the diaspora, suggesting that for the Indian diaspora, the internet provides a sense of home. Other researchers have focused more specifically on how members of the diaspora construct, negotiate, renegotiate, contest and deconstruct their individual and group identities based on local, religious, national and global ideologies (Bahri, 2001; Iganacio, 2000; Lal, 1999; Mitra, 1997a, 1997b; Rai, 1995). However, to date, only a few published studies (Bastian, 1999; Kadende-Kaiser, 2000; Wright, 1996) have examined how members of the African diaspora are using the internet. In her work on Burundians in the diaspora, Kadende-Kaiser argues that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has ‘facilitated productive interaction’ between two sometimes violently opposing groups – the Hutu and the Tutsi (2000: 121). Bastian’s research (1999) also sees evidence of the internet helping the Nigerian diaspora to fend off fragmentation and schism.

The lack of literature about African cyberculture might be due partly to a misperception about Africa and the internet – the digital divide debate. Many writings about Africa and the internet have focused on the lack of a network infrastructure, or the internet’s potential to contribute to state-building (Berman and Tettey, 2001; Kargbo, 2002; Robins and Hilliard, 2002; see Jensen, 2003 for the most comprehensive facts and statistics about African internet connectivity and infrastructure). This valuable scholarly emphasis on infrastructure must be complemented with research about African national imaginings. Even though the internet appears to be a deterritorialized communicative space, Halavais (2000) has shown that national borders do appear on the world wide web. Internet users visualize the nation-state online. Kalathil (2002) shows how these cyber-imaginings affect the ‘real’ world, arguing that diasporic discussions out in cyberspace have an impact on nation-states such as Burma and China.

The ability to nation-build on the internet has yet to be explored fully. There does appear to be an Argentinean ‘national virtual community’ (Boczkowski, 1999: 86). According to Miller and Slater (2000), for Trinidadians the internet is strengthening national identity and on a listserv called Naijanet, expatriate Nigerians have generated a ‘virtual nationalist community’ (Bastian, 1999). Tindimubona (1997) supplies anecdotal evidence that other African discussion groups, including UgandaNet, ZimNet (Zimbabwe), KCI-Net (Kenya) and RwandaNet, are theoretically building and destroying their nations online as well. Abbate (2000) has looked at virtual nation-building during the formation of the Estonian state, finding it to be a progressive force in establishing national identity. Finally, Goggin appears to be the only major work to grapple with the concept of virtual nation head-on. He sees the ‘internet as national’ and as having a cultural and social influence on Australian identity (2004: 5). Ultimately, however, there is little groundwork for the concept of a virtual nation, especially with regard to Africa.
THE NATION CONTINUES

Two premises ground this study. First, that the internet can be used to nation-build, from Benedict Anderson’s (1991) theory of nation-building and the key role that mass media plays in creating ‘imagined communities’. For Anderson, ‘the convergence of capitalism and print technology . . . created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation’ (1991: 46). According to Anderson, the invention of the printing press in the 15th century nurtured an economy of scale which reduced disparity in communication, enabling tribes, clans or factions to reframe themselves under a single discourse of national identity, part of the evolution of national consciousness.

Newspapers, books, magazines and television have been shown to foster national identity and nation-building (Anderson, 1991; Belgum, 1994; Corse, 1995; Karthigesu, 1986; Ryan, 1998). But in African countries faced with political and social strife, mass media often lack adequate finances. Sierra Leone is far behind when it comes to internal internet connections or ‘wiredness’. During the war there were two internet service providers (ISPs), both based in the capital city of Freetown: the University of Sierra Leone and Sierranet. According to figures for 2001, there were only 2000 internet users in a country with a population of almost 5.5 million people (Central Intelligence Agency, 2001). Nevertheless, news and information did travel in and out of the country during the war via the internet. At least one Sierra Leonian newspaper posted its own website (Expo Times, www.expotimes.net); several others were republished on news and information clearinghouse websites such as the Sierra Leone Web (www.sierra-leone.org) and allAfrica.com (http://allafrica.com). Internet communication was only trickling out of the country, but once messages entered the global network, distribution was far-reaching. Here the Sierra Leonian diaspora became a key conduit for further transmission of messages (Jensen, 1998). Much of this communication traveled through the listserv called Leonenet.

Second, despite scholarly admonitions that the internet potentially weakens the power of nation-states (Meyrowitz, 1985; Stratton, 1996; Turkle, 1996), Leonenet appeared to be performing the opposite function by contributing to the symbolic dimension: the nation. It has been argued that the nation is the essential collective imagining necessary for a strong state. In State in Society (2001), political scientist Joel Migdal articulates three areas of state–society relationships which can help to constitute (or collapse) the state: law, public ritual and informal behavior in the public sphere. All three affect the shared meaning that people have about themselves and have a profound effect on how people construct the symbolic aspect of a state. This is the importance of Leonenet: it is a diasporic communicative
space which is nation-building by contributing to Sierra Leone’s informal behavior in the public sphere.

It could be argued that the nation-state does not matter anymore. Some postmodern scholarship regarding international affairs accepts the post–Cold War prognostication that the territorially-based Westphalian state system is in decline (Mathews, 1997; Roseneau, 1990), slowly losing legitimacy in the global arena. Several theorists (see, for example, Mathews, 1997; Rothkopf, 1998) suggest that new media technologies have contributed to the sapping of state-held power. Whether this encourages the rise of a global village (McLuhan, with Powers, 1989) or a fragmented, schismatic world, is highly contested and the notion that there has ever been a static, ideal-type state has been challenged (Migdal, 2001). There are numerous instances in modern history of strong and weak states (Migdal, 1988); nations without states, such as Catalonia (McRoberts, 2001), Tibet and Palestine; and nations against the state – Quebec, Catalonia, Scotland (Keating, 1996) and Basque.

The nation-state dynamic is complex. But a few working definitions can help. First, a nation-state is the entire functioning, geographically-located entity that a group of people associate some portion of their identity with, and the institutions created and the actions exerted by the social grouping in order to establish sovereignty in the world. A nation-state is recognized both within and without as having authority. It is a ‘bordered power-container . . . the pre-eminent power-container of the modern era’ (Giddens, 1985: 120).

A nation is the symbolic aspect and generator of the nation-state, the cultural facet (Gellner, 1983) that contributes to the material form of a nation-state, the ontological core. The container for this state of being is the state: the institutions, doctrines and bureaucratic processes that maintain and reaffirm the existence of a nation. Weber (1947) lists characteristics of the state, such as administration and legislation, which exemplify how the state is the institutional aspect of a nation-state. The underlying legitimacy of the Webersian state is law, order and the sole right to use violence. Given these guidelines, Leonenet can be situated within the nation concept. While it can be argued that the listserv is a power container for imagining the nation, it does not have a centrally-located, internationally-recognized, territorial basis from which to practise the legitimate use of violence, which is why it is not the state.

A VIRTUAL NATION

Leonenet is a communicative space whose members have created a virtual nation. Because Sierra Leone’s geopolitical territory is metaphorically ‘hollow’, some members of its society have chosen to fill that emptiness through discourse about the country. A virtual nation is defined as any community that communicates in cyberspace, whose collective discourse
and/or actions are aimed towards the building, binding, maintenance, rebuilding or rebinding of a nation. Some portion of the community must be members of the diaspora of the nation. Leonenet has the potential to be a virtual nation because its geographically-based state has disintegrated. The symbolic ‘nation’ has no material referent, such as the state and its institutions, no physical or geographical container. Leonenet can be viewed as a space where Sierra Leone’s state-related symbols are generated and then held in conceptual escrow, waiting for the moment when the state returns to Sierra Leone. This is not to say that a virtual nation is a thing. It is not. A virtual nation is part of the process of nation-building. The same phenomenon could be evoked by other diasporas that do not have a geographically-grounded nation to call their own, such as the Palestinians, the Kurds, or the Tibetans.

The three essential activities in which the cyberspace community engages to create a virtual nation are: working on a political project (behavioral); maintaining the signification of the nation (cognitive); and maintaining a sodality (affective). Working on a political project is based on formulations by Castells (1997); maintaining the signification of a nation is culled from Anderson (1991) and Castells (1997); and maintaining a sodality derives from the theories of Anderson (1991) and Rheingold (1993). Further refinement includes structuring the dimensions around three social psychological components, an alignment based upon Scott’s (1965) work regarding national images in which he identifies three characteristics – behavioral, cognitive and affective – as essential to the structure of a national imagining. These elements should be present in the construction of a virtual nation.

The ability to create and sustain a political structure is essential to all nations. An ongoing project, it always requires reassessment and rejuvenation. First, if a group is working on a political project (behavioral), at least three nation-related dynamics must occur: planning and evaluating, problem-solving and direct action. Second, in order for a state to have power, it must create and circulate symbols with which its society can identify itself – flags, constitutions, even soccer teams. By doing so, states and state institutions garner support from individuals who come to feel that they are part of a national community. The idea of a nation is the symbolic realm of the state. Several markers to look for in listserv conversations point to the maintaining signification (cognitive) dynamic. Castells defines nations ‘as cultural communes constructed in people’s minds and collective memory by the sharing of history and political projects’ (1997: 51). The three key aspects of this type of signification are cultural commune, history and news.

Finally, there is the dimension of maintaining a sodality (affective). This relates to Howard Rheingold’s (1993) concept of virtual community. When applied to online social groups, the term ‘community’ is problematic (for varying stances on the term, see Baym, 1993, 1995, 1998; Fernback and Thompson, 1995; Foster, 1996; Jones, 1995, 1997, 1998; Kollock and Smith, 1999; Lockard, 1996; Watson,
Yet it usefully acknowledges the affective component of online interactions. Virtual community, according to Rheingold, is a social aggregate that emerges from the internet ‘when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form personal relationships’ (1993: 5). Emotions often help to solidify and tighten the psychological connections between listserv members.

LEONENET

Leonenet is a West African listserv composed mostly of Sierra Leoneans, both at home and in the diaspora. Approximately 350 to 400 members are on the list, with 40 to 50 active participants. A number are academics from Europe and America and at least one journalist from the Washington Post ‘lurks’ on the list. However, the overwhelming majority of participants are Sierra Leonean. Almost all are men, although a small contingent of women submit writings regularly. Whether this gender dynamic emanates from the culture of West Africa or the ‘boys’ world’ of the internet could not be determined. The few women who do post regularly are not meek. Still, for their outspokenness (meaning that they choose not to lurk) they have been labeled with names such as ‘resident feminist’.

Ethnographic evidence for an array of religions exists; Christianity, Islam, secularism and West African religions have been represented and discussed. Some members of Leonenet have acquired undergraduate degrees as well as PhDs not only in the United States and Britain, but also in Sierra Leone at Fourah Bay College. Overall, Leonetters are educated, well-spoken and not poor. English is by far the most commonly used language. However, some Leonetters drop Krio, the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, into their conversations. The use of Krio creates an in-group within the in-group, as there are some westerners on the list who do not know Krio.

The discussions on the list tackle social, political, economic and cultural issues pertinent to present-day Sierra Leone. This is in keeping with Leonenet’s mission statement:

Leonenet is a mailing list for Sierra Leoneans and friends of Sierra Leone. This electronic mailing list is a free forum for discussion, debate and the sharing and formulation of ideas that concern Sierra Leone.

Postings can cover any topic of choice (with exceptions listed below). This includes politics, economics, culture, education, history, geography, architecture, medicine, development, etc. Postings may include news, opinions, observations, humor, announcements, or requests. If it has anything to do with Sierra Leone, it can be discussed. (umbc7.umbc.edu/~leoneadm/Leonenet.htm)

Email length varies from two words to 10 pages. The administrator remains ‘hands-off’, entering the discussion only to nudge the dialogue away from name-calling. (The list is unmoderated and unfiltered.) The guiding principle on Leonenet is ‘all things Sierra Leone’.
METHOD AND DISCUSSION
Entering the virtual nation

Several methods help to understand the social dynamics on the listserv. Using the bricolage approach (as suggested by Wood and Kroger, 2000), the researcher gathers data using multiple resources – ‘notions, techniques and strategies from different perspectives as appropriate to the specific project at hand’ (2000: 25). Because the study involved mostly qualitative analysis, multiple methods were necessary in order to strengthen reliability (Lindlof, 1995). The study included ethnography, content analysis, participant observation and interviews with cultural informants.

The ethnographic sample covered a two-and-a-half-year time-span from 13 December 2000 to 5 May 2003. The goal was to observe the list and then write a ‘thick’ description (Geertz, 1973) of the culture on Leonenet. The focus was ‘online-centric’, similar to Hine’s ‘virtual ethnography’ (2000) strategy. The sample for content analysis was drawn from the pool of all emails sent between 1 January 2001 and 30 September 2002 (a subset of the ethnographic timeframe). More than 30,000 emails were sent during this time. The sample was 781 separate emails, with the unit of analysis being a single email. Coding was performed only on the immediate posting and did not include any previous discussion that might accompany a ‘reply to’ type of email. In order to diminish the chance of historical events creating a content bias, two randomly-selected, constructed week samples were collected. The result was two dissimilar weeks totaling 781 emails (N=781). This design, as suggested by Stempel (1952) and Holsti (1969), increased reliability and significance. Riffe et al. (1993) showed constructed week sampling to be a superior technique for studying newspaper content; Rivenburgh (2000) effectively utilized it for her study exploring social identity theory and national identity as reflected by international newspapers.

The final code sheet was based upon the dimensions of and indicators for a virtual nation, as outlined above: political projects, maintaining signification and maintaining a sodality (see Table 1).

The categories coded for were: planning and evaluating, problem-solving, direct action, cultural commune (broken down into language, religion, labor, art and play, education, health and tribe), history, news and information, personal relationship, shared sense of purpose and other. Even though ‘social body exists only in cyberspace’ was one of the indicators for the dimension of ‘maintaining a sodality’, it was not used for coding in the content analysis. Its appearances were best uncovered using ethnographic analysis of the discourse as a whole. Every theme was mutually exclusive.

Who they are, what languages they use and what they say
Leonenet is a complex web of social interaction. A total of 96 different members, approximately 25 percent of the total subscriber population, posted
the 781 emails in the sample. There was a well-distributed range of activity by numerous Leonetters as well as a fair amount of reciprocity and turn-taking. No single member controlled the subject-line of the list. Topics were diverse. Only 64 of the members could be identified by gender: 57 male and seven female. Three distinct roles were assumed by three Leonetters: one, a news agency, posted articles from newspapers to the list; another, a humorist, supplied jokes and playful bits of writing; a third, a political activist, contributed writings that fell under the themes of political problem-solving and planning and evaluating.

Offline identifications such as current home, profession, tribal affiliation and political party were present but not numerous. The sample included Leonetters from Australia, Canada, England, Germany, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sweden and the United States. Many Leonetters’ backgrounds included higher education, making the sampled group in general part of the professional class: numerous university teachers, quite a few lawyers, two information technology specialists and employees from non-governmental organizations and one person from an international governmental organization (IGO; the World Bank). Only a few openly stated their tribe – Mende, Fula, Loko or Krio. Political parties were not a strongly declared identity.

English was used in 80 percent of the emails, with Krio in 3.5 percent. A combination of both in a single posting occurred in 16 percent of the sample and traces (0.3%) of three other languages – Latin, French and Mende – also appeared. The predominance of English mirrors the dominance of English on the internet.3

Table 1: Dimensions of a virtual nation and subsequent themes used for coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLITICAL PROJECTS</th>
<th>MAINTAINING SIGNIFICATION</th>
<th>MAINTAINING A SODALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Planning and evaluating</td>
<td>(4) Cultural commune</td>
<td>(7) Personal relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Language</td>
<td>(8) Shared sense of purpose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Labor</td>
<td>Social body exists only in cyberspace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Art and play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) Health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) Tribe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Problem-solving</td>
<td>(5) History</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Direct action</td>
<td>(6) News and information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The discourse on Leonenet was usually lively and covered a wide range of issues. Table 2 provides a list of the themes found and the occurrence of each in the sample (N=781). Fifteen themes were identified, with four composing the bulk (76%) of the discourse: news and information, personal relationships, planning and evaluating and shared sense of purpose. All four covered the
dimensions for a virtual nation and every theme in the sample had a strong, clear connection to the discourse. Additionally, all three dimensions were represented significantly and almost proportionately in the sample. The list in Table 2 is ranked, beginning with most prevalent.

Table 3 regroups the themes according to the appropriate dimensions. The percentage of the total sample for each dimension is also given. Working on a political project comprised 24.6 percent of the sample, maintaining the signification of a nation comprised 35.5 percent and maintaining a sodality comprised 37.5 percent. (‘Social body exists only in cyberspace’ is included in the table only as a reminder that this is an aspect of maintaining a sodality. It was not a theme found in each email.) ‘Maintenance’ was the new theme label given to the ‘Other’ coding category when it was discovered that all these emails pertained to organizational or administrative functions such as subscribing and unsubscribing. These posts contributed 2.4 percent of the sample.

The most substantial theme found on Leonenet was news and information, which consisted of 171 emails from 42 different sources: Sierra Leonean newspapers such as the Concord Times, The Standard and The Progress; western news producers, including the BBC, Reuters, the New York Times and Associated Press; and other sources with stories pertinent to the cultural backgrounds of the Sierra Leonean diaspora – Africaonline.com (www.africaonline.com), Arabicnews.com (www.arabicnews.com), the Panafircan News Agency and the IslamiCity Bulletin (www.islamicity.com). Postings with information from United Nations/United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) reports, the US Bureau of Nonproliferation and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of emails</th>
<th>% of total sample*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News and information</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal relationships</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and evaluating</td>
<td>129.5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared sense of purpose</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art and play</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance**</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct action</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribe</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* N=781
**Maintenance was not a part of any of the dimensions, but emerged through the coding process
the Lockerbie trial of Libyan terrorists (the verdict) also made it onto the list. The array of news sources was an effort to get any and all possible information about Sierra Leone, as the war had seriously hindered communication networks within the country.

Two people posted the bulk of news and information emails (76%), with others contributing sporadically. An interview with one prime news and information poster provided insight into his role on Leonenet, that of news agency. He was responsible for 53 percent of the news and information articles in the sample; only once did he post a personally written email. Originally from Freetown, he was now living outside the country. He did not see himself as having a specific role on Leonenet, but did think that his postings were valuable:

I don’t see myself as playing any important role on Leonenet apart from the sharing of information. I believe this is the information age and what we know is power. (personal email interview, 28 January 2003)

His views reinforced the notion that having a news agency was essential to the virtual nation. Not only did the news postings play a role in surveillance
and the preservation of power in the nation (Lasswell, 1935), but they also reflected the need for a common, fact-driven, imagining of Sierra Leone. News was always tied to, and building up, national identity. Two years later, when the main news poster stopped posting, another Leonenetter stepped in (unasked) and assumed the role. To date, the news agency role has never been vacant.

Another theme — personal relationships — applied to individual-to-individual social interactions. These emails either praised or criticized the individual in a 50/50 split between positive exchanges (85 emails) and negative exchanges (84 emails). Flattery and invective were two strategies for boosting self-esteem and social control: the former sought to pull the member into the group, while the latter attempted to set a social boundary. Positive emails included simple statements such as: ‘Happy Birthday’, ‘Happy New Year bro’, ‘I enjoyed the humor’ and admiration — ‘Bra, I am devoted to you’ . . . ME BRODER. You fine pass me far far way. You fine pass even Denzel en Will Smith.’ The negative emails were sometimes brief and cutting: ‘Your message sucks’ or ‘I enjoyed reading your political fiction.’ But there were longer critical analyses as well, detailed attacks on the member’s logic. These alternated between rational discourse and plain insult: ‘Sometimes I wonder what you drink when you get up in the morning.’

Conflict and cajoling served to tighten the web (Simmel, 1904). The direct personal exchanges on Leonenet strengthened the social bonds between members. Without them, the group would never have reached the level of a national imagined community. Granted, it could have a common national identity; however, it would not be focused on nation-building. Despite the assertions of international relations realists, which exalt the state above all else, personal ties matter and are essential for the life of a nation-state.

The theme of planning and evaluating appeared as political discussions. Critiques of different policies, institutions and leaders were to some extent the norm. Leonetters analyzed the role of the European Union in Sierra Leone’s fate and the causes of poverty in their country. One thread criticized African leaders and their relationship to an IGO:

The wholesale adoption by African leaders of the policy of devaluation, at the behest of the IMF, is arguably the most conclusive evidence of the mind-boggling failure of African leaders to disabuse themselves of the fallacy that any and all foreign ideas are inherently superior to homegrown African ideas . . . Predictably, each and every one of those IMF prescriptions woefully failed, with resulting searing hardships inflicted on the hapless African masses and crushing mountains of foreign debt shackled to African economies, thereby guaranteeing their collective current demise.

This posting exemplified the ethos of pan-Africanism on the list, wherein the plight and progress of the African continent was woven together with the issues of Sierra Leone. The theme of planning and evaluating flourished
around the Sierra Leonean presidential elections in May 2002. A Leonenetter living in Sierra Leone had this to offer about a ‘female political aspirant’ who might run for the presidency:

She is well traveled and in touch with various important decision makers influencing the Sierra Leone situation. Her critics say she is a lightweight gadfly using the organization for self promotion, bordering on megalomania . . . Her supporters view her as a hardworking professional woman who has the interest of the community at heart.

This writer also kept the list informed about election results throughout the voting process.

Discussing and debating political issues was a core feature of democracy and the dominant political ideology on Leonenet. By exchanging views and supporting candidates, Leonenetters affirmed that the state does matter and is the desired political unit. They were not advocating the dissolution of the state, nor a world run purely by IGOs. They were not creating a virtual tribe or a virtual global village. The international political unit of choice was the democratic state and the discourse focused on realizing it through planning and evaluating Sierra Leonean politics.

Like the theme of personal relationships, shared sense of purpose involved both negative and positive social interaction, expressed in individual-to-group email exchanges, with 59 percent positive and 41 percent negative. Some were calls for help, including a request for a good ‘quick money transfer service’ for wiring funds to someone in Sierra Leone, or for advice about the best Sierra Leonean newspaper to publish an editorial. Leonenetters periodically posted examples of ‘419’ scam letters to demonstrate what the list was not about – fraud and corruption – and to protect members from this type of deception. One summed up the positive potential for the listserv community in a call to continue with their united cause, even though the civil war had ended:

I want to appeal to netters to come up with suggestions on how to help in the development process of Sierra Leone. We have perfected our knowledge of the past of Sierra Leone, debated on issues of war, peace and elections that got us to this stage – a democratic Sierra Leone albeit an imperfect one. Now we need to focus on the issues that will keep this democracy going – shelter for the returnees, food, water supply, electricity, transportation, communications, revitalization of subsistence farming, education, employment, just to name a few . . . as someone mentioned earlier, leonenet is a university. But we need to take this university from cyber space to the streets and villages of Sierra Leone . . . we have a unique opportunity looking at us more than ever before.

The email was a plea to move the shared sense of purpose and social imagining of the nation into the nation-state form.

Many of the negative emails for shared sense of purpose struggled with the function and the shape of the listserv community. ‘There is no leadership role
here. It is a listserv and nothing else. This is just another classic example of Sierra Leonean Pa-ism," and 'this issue (not unlike idle commentaries about ballgames) cannot clearly define the functional role (if there is any) of Leonenet'. Again, the idea of agon appeared as a necessary dynamic for social cohesion (Simmel, 1904), helping to tighten the bonds between the individual and the group.

The theme of problem-solving was about extending the political discourse beyond the listserv community in order to provide answers for the problems of the weakened nation-state. There were discussions about the diamond trade and suggestions for rejuvenating the Sierra Leonean economy. Corruption was addressed and simple solutions were given:

'Tough Love' you write? Man that is just the antidote we need for our poisoned society,' and 'Now is the time to protest'... If you keep silent now, do not protest when things go bad later. Be insistent and very vocal.

More complex strategies were offered as well. Leonetters tried to unravel the problem of tribalism through political reconfigurations:

We should experiment with a Temne president this time in Sierra Leone. After all they are nothing more than 30% of the population, they control a vast area of the country and they are Sierra Leoneans.

Leonetters reiterated the need for democratic institutions such as free and fair elections and an unfettered press. They clearly saw themselves as having an active role in nation-building. The prevalence of the problem-solving theme showed that the community was not concerned with mundane issues. The revival and survival of Sierra Leone was imperative. It was a high-stakes conversation that was trying to evoke a nation.

At the other end of the spectrum was the theme of art and play. This appeared as jokes, poetry, wise sayings and ribaldry. One person poked at US politics: 'Is Bush thinking about Pogo's statement "I see the enemy, it is US (republicans)?"' There was also a variation on a Keats poem, retitled 'Ode to a Leonenet Urn'. The writer included an undisclaimer at the bottom of their email: 'Rearranged without permission – the Colony fight back.' Another list member wrote short two-person plays or dialogues that dealt with relationships. A more obscure insider's example of play and humor was a jingle about sanitation recited in the streets of Sierra Leone in the 1970s:

Nor put am dae (3 times)
Na dorti
luk fly da pass
arata dae pass
puss dae pass
dog dae pass
ah ah put am nay u dust bin.
Several jovial replies reminisced happily about flies, rats, dogs and life in the homeland.

The purpose of art and play seemed first to create levity in an often heated forum. In addition, the humor and art conveyed cultural beliefs through metaphor. Despite the ongoing tragedies in Sierra Leone, Leonetters encouraged progress and recreated culture with words. One member said, ‘Tit nor day mooning.’ The expression conveyed not only a sense of hope but also Sierra Leonean ontology, reinforcing how Leonetters should be as members of a nation that was striving for the return of the state. It was play, but it was serious too.

**A system of flux**

The findings demonstrate that the images and the dynamics of a virtual nation were present on Leonenet. However, most significant was how this discourse was proportioned. All three dimensions for a virtual nation had substantial presence (see Table 3, ‘Total for dimension’ column). What this suggests is that in order for a virtual nation to occur, there must be a functional balance of all three dimensions, close to equal proportions for each one (see Figure 1).

The quantitative threshold for how much activity must occur, i.e. how much maintaining a sodality, working on political projects and maintaining the signification of a nation happens, must be seen as relational. The specific percentages can fluctuate within each dimension as long as the activity is redistributed across the system. A specific bottom-line threshold cannot be determined by this study, but this is not essential for seeing the basic dynamic. The important distinction is proportion. If one of the dimensions becomes too highly valued in the discourse, then the content and structure of a virtual nation weakens or disappears. Not only do the activities become disproportionate, but so do the underlying social psychological elements (behavioral, cognitive and affective). If maintaining a sodality becomes too prevalent, then the listserv develops into a place for virtual friendships or a simple social-gathering oasis. It would lack a unifying purpose beyond sharing affect, would become more like a meet-and-greet online bar, where users might vent about the events of their day. If maintaining the signification of a nation significantly outweighs the other two dimensions, then a purely cultural commune, filled with aesthetic and philosophical text objects, will solidify. The nation would be discussed; however, the conversations might remain at the level of intellectual sparring or simple information exchange. If the balance of the virtual nation swings all the way to working on a political project, then a political forum (or virtual stump) will dominate. The list becomes a place to discuss politics only, which is closer to a state-based activity and further away from nation-imagining.
CONCLUSION

Leonenet is a mire. It is a minefield. It is a playground. It is a talking shop. It is a forum for DISCUSSION OF SIERRA LEONEAN issues. But is it? (from a posting on Leonenet)

This study demonstrates that the digital medium of a listserv has enabled Sierra Leoneans to engage in global cultural processes. Leonenet exemplifies an essential new dynamic in the world – the imagination as a social practice (Appadurai, 2000). Whether Leonenet is a key component in the new global political order is a matter for history to decide. At the very least, it provides a distinct local piece to the global collective memory.

The significance of Leonenet within that collective memory is its formation of a virtual nation. The social phenomenon is more than just political rambling or philosophical prognosticating. The interactions are a case of an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) forming in cyberspace and synthesizing to build a nation. Assuming that Migdal (2001) is correct about the importance of the informal public sphere and the state, Leonenet becomes one of many essential spaces for generating the symbolic realm of the nation-state. Virtual nations become a new addition to social and political group formation in the global public sphere.
This case study is merely the beginning of theory-building about internet diasporic communication and its growing relationship to the nation-state. Further research is needed to refine the virtual nation model. A comparative analysis of several other diasporic listservs formed by displaced groups such as the Tibetans or Kurds would be useful. Including a stable nation-state political forum for contrast could shed more light on the proportions of the functional balance. Is it imperative that the group be stateless? What happens to functional balance when the group is a diaspora, but the nation-state is alive and well? A closer look at how identities are constructed and reconstructed on a single listserv would be productive also. What are the differences between national identity on the listserv and national identity in the ‘real’ world? Does the email forum allow greater, newer interpretations of what it means to be a member of a nation?

For policymakers, the utility of a virtual nation might be the key focus. What can we do with virtual nations? Can a listserv be harnessed as a political instrument to effect change? Can virtual communities generate positive, durable material that is easily manipulated for foreign policy ends? One of the more recent trends in internet research (Chen et al., 2002; Katz and Rice, 2002; Quan-Haase and Wellman, 2002) has been to look (in cyberspace) for the presence of Putnam’s concept of social capital: those ‘features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’ (1996: 34). Does the internet foster or harm social capital? The implication is that if the internet does affect the production or reduction of social capital, then the medium either needs to be acknowledged as detrimental to social capital, or harnessed in order to produce more social capital. The latter action draws upon Putnam’s own theoretical project, calling for the commodification of human interactions. Erecting an ‘agenda for social capitalists,’ he asks, ‘How can we . . . replenish our stocks of social capital?’ (1999: 403).

A virtual nation seems to be a prime site for the production of social capital, a commodity that writers such as Kaplan (1994) and policymakers might see as useful for state-building in West Africa. Good intentions aside, this could be a grave error. To reify the listserv into a tool for nation-building, as opposed to acknowledging the power of the medium as the process of nation-building, is to fetishize human interactions. In the West, it is commonly known as consumerism and accumulation, or ‘good capitalistic behavior’. But according to West-African ideology, over-consumption and hoarding are often thought of as witchcraft (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993) or socially destructive behavior.

Probably the best approach for studying West-African virtual nations is not to commodify the imaginings, but to acknowledge the progress. As Lonsdale has stated, Africans need to solve their own political problems; as ‘a common
political language and its inventive usage by the divided members of a political community can be produced in only one way, by historical process’ (quoted in Geschiere, 1997: 205). The discourse of Leonenet is what Lonsdale describes: a common and creative political language.

Ultimately, then, Leonenet is a social practice for nation-building which can affect outcomes. A colonial mentality may still pervade global discourse, but Leonenet shows that that point of view continues to be an inaccurate and stereotypical image of Africans. Claims that Africans are not working towards unified nation-states are false. Leonenet is a case of the diaspora building a nation in the global public sphere via the internet.

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Notes

1 According to Jensen (2003), email is the most dominant means for entering cyberspace for sub-Saharan Africans. High telephone rates make staying online and waiting for websites to appear extremely expensive and therefore less likely to be done.

2 Identifying markers such as email address, date and time have been removed from the postings quoted in this article in order to protect the confidentiality of Leoneneters. As a consequence, email discussions are not cited according to specific source, URL and date. This is in accordance with guidelines agreed upon between the researcher and University of Washington's Human Subjects Review Board.

3 As of March 2003 (during the time the study was conducted), 35.2 percent of all text on the internet was written in English. The second most prevalent language was Chinese, at 11.9 percent. African language usage online was statistically imperceptible (Global Reach, 2003), even though it was estimated in September 2002 that there were 6.6 million Africans online, which was 1 percent of the world total (Nua Internet Surveys, 2003).

4 This is a reference to patrimonialism and paramount chieftaincy.

5 ‘Teeth do not mourn’ (even at a time of sorrow, there is cause for humor).

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