

Proposal Research Traineeship 2015

1. Title of the Project

Brabos online: Local and regional identities on social media.

2. Coordinators

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3. Project Summary

Although social media allow global communication across space and time, social media are most often used within one's own local network. Online, people may disseminate localized versions of global or national aspects (e.g., a local cover of a popular song). It appears that, on social media as well as in offline contexts, localness is experienced and expressed more strongly now globalization has reached all corners of our societies. This may seem paradoxical at first sight, but globalization consists of an intertwining of many localities.

Little research has investigated the ways that social media may stimulate creation and propagation of local identities. Despite the possibility of social media to communicate with others across space and time, many people stick close to home, even in their social media use. Regional and local Facebook pages and internet sites, such as *Heel Tilburg In Een Groep*, or *Nie Fokke mee Brabant* are very popular. Social media allow people to express and experiment with identities. People use social media to create an image, express who they are, and feel connected.

Therefore, this proposal aims to investigate how local identities are expressed and stimulated through social media. We specifically focus on the expression of identities related to the province Noord-Brabant (region) and the city Tilburg (local). In contrast to some other regions (e.g., Gelderland) the 'strong' identity of Brabant in its entirety is often reported in the media¹

¹ E.g. Minister Plasterk thinks Noord-Brabant, Friesland and Limburg have a strong identity.
http://www.powned.tv/nieuws/politiek/2014/02/plasterk_terug_naar_7_provinci.html

or branded by institutions such as the provincial authorities and the provincial broadcasting company. Current PhD research by Sandra Wagemakers (DCU) however shows that Brabantishness is a complex construction of different spatial layers or scales. The concept of Brabant may differ from place to place and group to group. Because of this, it is especially interesting to use Brabant as a case study to examine the dynamics between local and regional identities.

Regional and local identities may be differently expressed online than offline. The relative anonymity of online interactions reduces the available amount of information that signals individual identity (Walther & Parks, 2002). Because less information is available to form interpersonal impressions of each other, people tend to focus on those cues that *are* available online to form an impression. The lack of other cues makes this impression exaggerated, that is, more fixed than it would normally be when more cues are available. Mostly, the only information that is available about others online is information about social context or social categories that people belong to (i.e., female, student, Dutch, Brabo) and this information thus is primarily used to form impressions. This means that regional and local identities may be exaggerated online.

Online and offline expressions of local and regional identities are closely connected. One might assume that local social capital increases when local identities are stimulated by means of social media (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Therefore, if identities are imprinted more severely online, this may affect expression of local identities offline, perhaps stimulating social capital, cohesion and commitment.

In this proposal, we want to compare local identities (e.g., Tilburg vs. Breda) with identities on a larger scale, such as regional identities (e.g., Brabant vs. Limburg), since we hypothesize that people will identify with location on different scales, depending on situation and context (levels of proximity). Moreover, we want to investigate if expression and propagation of identities online leads to increased identification and connectedness with local and regional communities.

Research question:

- ✓ How are local and regional identities expressed on social media?
 - How do local and regional identities differ in utterances on social media?
 - How are local and regional identities negotiated, exaggerated, acknowledged, or dismantled in interactions within or between communities on social media?
 - Which types of identification (local or regional) are most prominent in various contexts?
 - What are the differences between the online and offline expressions of local and regional identities?

Method/Data:

To answer these research questions, several methods will be applied. Social media provide scholars with the opportunity to collect data on a much larger scale than could be managed in a small project like this in earlier days. Via online applications such as www.twiqs.nl huge databases of social network data can be easily browsed in a short amount of time. Additionally, data can be automatically retrieved from various online sources.

One trainee will gather data (texts and images) from various network sites and describe these data with the use of critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis aims at the relationship between language and social structure. The practice of discourse is constructive of communities. Additionally, some other approaches to the data (e.g., (semi-)automatic content analysis) may be applied as well.

The second trainee will conduct a survey and an experiment. First the student will develop a survey with which he/she can investigate: 1) to what extent people are aware and want to express or disguise their local and regional identities, 2) how they (want to) express their local or regional identities on social media, and 3) to what extent social media strengthen their local and regional identities and make people feel more connected in the same city or region.

In the experiment, local and regional identities are compared in situations of relative high anonymity (e.g., online discussion board) and situations with low anonymity (e.g., Facebook page). The experimental design will be a 2 (identified vs. anonymous) x 3 (regional identities vs. local identities vs. control group). People from and with an affiliation to Tilburg will be asked to partake in the experiment. They will be asked to read a negative review about a local concern (e.g., local football club Willem II) made by (a) someone from Tilburg, (b) someone from Breda, (c) someone from Noord-Holland. By doing experiments like this, it is possible to examine which identities are most prominent in which situation or context.

Both subprojects will strengthen each other through intense cooperation. The project team will schedule monthly presentation and discussion meetings, in order to collaborate intensively.

4. Project timeline

- ✓ February-March: literature, theoretical framework
- ✓ April-July: data-collection
- ✓ August-October: analyses
- ✓ November-December: writing the paper
- ✓ [monthly: presentation and discussion meetings]
- ✓ 2017: conference presentation

Deliverables of the project are the following. First, we aim to have the trainees present their paper at the 2017 Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap, the largest communication conference in the Netherlands and/or at the 2017 Sociolinguistic Circle, a conference on language variation, sociolinguistics and social dynamics of language with a connection to the Low Countries. Finally, we aim to write a paper together with the trainees that will be submitted to Information, Communication & Society.

5. Research Trainee Profile

Bachelor, pre-master, and master students from all departments of TSH are eligible to apply. The student should be enrolled until at least December 2016. Although preliminary knowledge about the topic or method is not needed, knowledge about experimental designs, survey research, or discourse analysis is a plus. Since the discourse analysis predominantly focuses on Dutch texts, the student conducting the discourse analysis should have a good understanding of the Dutch language.

Applications can be sent to Jos Swanenberg: a.p.c.swanenberg@uvt.nl; please provide a resume and motivation letter.