BOUNDARIES AND THE INTERNET: A SURFER'S GUIDE

Martin Pratt

Introduction

"Government is about geography. That's why they worry so much about borders. But in cyberspace there is no geography...."
(Internet guru and self-styled 'peripheral visionary' John Perry Barlow in Yahoo! Internet Life, July 1996)*

Internet enthusiasts rarely have much time for international boundaries. They tend to regard them simply as barriers to communication and trade, and they delight in the Net's ability to overcome such barriers. Some commentators have even claimed that the Internet represents the beginning of the end of the political map of the world as we know it. However, while the digiterati may regard international boundaries as something of an anachronism, they still figure prominently in many people's lives. Indeed, in some parts of the world it could be argued that the Internet has actually helped to rekindle public interest in boundary and territorial issues rather than dampen it, although whether its influence has been wholly positive is open to question.

The aim of this article is to examine how the Internet has been used to disseminate information and ideas about international boundaries, with a particular emphasis on its use as a propaganda tool in relation to territorial and jurisdictional disputes. The Internet has made it possible for almost anyone with a computer and an opinion to 'publish' that opinion quickly and cheaply to a potential audience of millions[1], and recent years have seen a proliferation of web sites developed by governments, organisations and individuals offering news and views on boundaries around the world. Some are wonderful resources packed with useful information that can be difficult or even impossible to obtain elsewhere. Others amount to little more than nationalistic rants, although they can still provide fascinating insights into official and public perceptions of a dispute. Others offer more whimsical perspectives on the nature of borders and borderland life. While it may be true that there is no geography in cyberspace in a physical sense, this does not mean that that cyberspace is of no interest to the geographer. Indeed, if you know where to look, there is plenty of material on the Internet for the boundary enthusiast. This article, while not purporting to be a comprehensive guide to that material, will hopefully highlight some of the more interesting starting points.

Government sites

A growing number of government foreign affairs ministries around the world are establishing a presence on the World Wide Web.[2] Many of these sites adopt a low-key approach to boundary and territorial issues, but some take full advantage of the medium to publicise the government's position on a particular question. Perhaps the most striking example is Pakistan, whose pages devoted to Jammu and Kashmir[3] are preceded by a 'slide show' which includes the following comments:

> *In the last 10 years, 60,000+ innocent people have been mercilessly butchered to death by the Indians in the occupied Kashmir.*

> *...The State of Jammu & Kashmir is under brutal subjugation of 700,000 Indian mercenaries, who are licensed to kill by the Indian Government!!!*
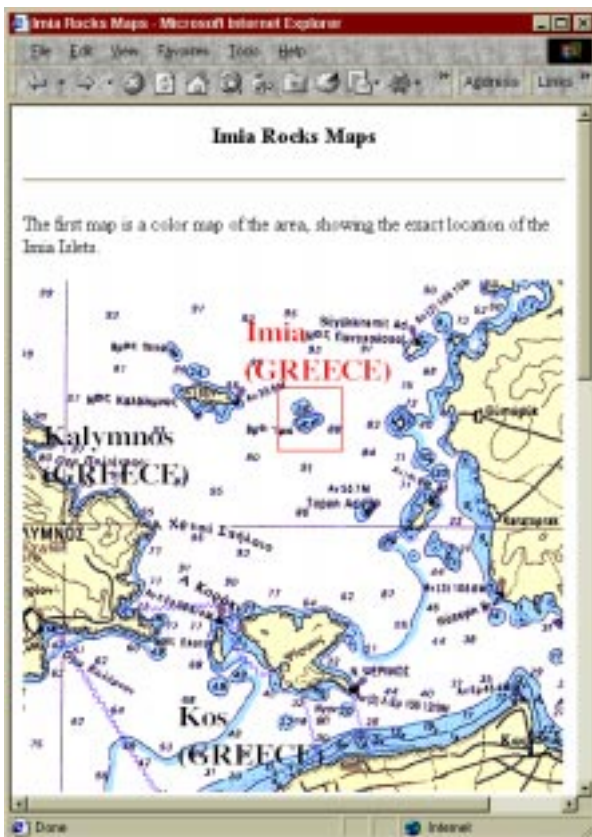
Thankfully, the rest of the pages on the site are less hysterical in tone, although the message is basically the same. Perhaps of most interest to researchers are extracts from books by Kashmir-watchers such as Alastair Lamb and Josef Korbel, although these have clearly been carefully selected to reinforce the Pakistani position.

The Indian government does not have an equivalent set of general pages on the Kashmir dispute, but it does offer a selection of material relating to the current conflict in the vicinity of Kargil.[4] Another site, maintained by the Indian army, focuses on the Indian military operation in the area.[5] Pakistan also has a special Kargil site.[6] All of these sites are imaginatively designed and frequently updated, and both governments clearly see the Internet as an important element in the battle to win hearts and minds in this long-running and highly volatile dispute.

News of an Indian territorial gain near Kargil is announced on the Indian army web site

Other governments which have enthusiastically utilised the Internet in support of their territorial claims include Ecuador and Peru over their boundary in the Cordillera del Cóndor[7], Greece and Turkey over the Aegean Sea[8], and Ethiopia in connection with its border war with Eritrea.[9] The case of Ecuador and Peru highlights one of the potential drawbacks of the medium if a site is not updated on a regular basis: for while the Peruvian foreign ministry site has been revised to reflect the successful conclusion of the Brasilia Agreements in October 1998, the Ecuadorian site is still displaying a document denouncing Peru's *"Ten Great Errors"* concerning the dispute! The web site of the Ecuadorian embassy in Washington, D.C.[10] is rather more up-to-date, but the failure of the foreign ministry to withdraw this provocative document appears tactless to say the least.

The Greek and Turkish foreign ministries both make use of maps on their web sites to illustrate their claims to Imia/Kardak Rocks

Elsewhere, government web sites tend to be more restrained in their language, occasionally to the point of banality:

> *The dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia over the two small islands of Sipadan and Ligitan began in 1969. The Indonesian government believes that the issue could be resolved through deliberations.*[11]

However, others are a little more forthcoming and the following are all worth a visit:

- **Australia**: national interest analysis relating to the 1997 maritime boundary agreement with Indonesia[12]
- **Israel**: reference documents relating to the peace process[13]
- **Japan**: *Japan's Northern Territories*[14]; statement on *The Basic View on the Sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands*[15]

Communities of interest

In three out of the four disputes discussed above, both governments involved in the dispute have felt a need to publicise their claims via the Internet. In the fourth example – Eritrea and Ethiopia – only the Ethiopian government has done so. At first sight this may appear to place Eritrea at a disadvantage in the information war, but in fact Eritrea has an equally useful, albeit unofficial, resource: the Eritrea Online Community Network, known among its members as *Dehai*. Managed by a team of voluntary facilitators, *Dehai* seeks *"to provide a forum for interested Eritreans and non-Eritreans to engage in solving Eritrea's problems by sharing information, discussing issues, publicizing and participating in existing projects and proposing ideas for future projects"*. Despite charging a US$20 annual membership fee, the network has over 3,000 members and several lively e-mail discussion groups. The *Dehai* web site also includes a substantial section devoted to the conflict with Ethiopia.[16] Although many of the contributions on this site are just as myopically one-sided as the propaganda put out by the Ethiopian government, *Dehai* at least

offers an opportunity for open debate, which in some ways gives it more credibility than an official Eritrean site would have.

Another interesting boundary-related online 'community' is the *Falklands-Malvinas Forum*, a site established by a group of *"professional Peace Makers"*[17] to help fill what they perceived as a gap in the reconciliation process between Argentina, the UK and the people of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands:

> *After the 1982 Falklands-Malvinas War, the previous and very cooperative relationship between Argentina and the United Kingdom was disrupted. It took several years to reestablish the diplomatic relationships, and even more time to institutionalize the diplomatic arrangement known as the 'sovereignty umbrella' that allows development of joint ventures without even discussing the problem of the Island's sovereignty. All along this process, a three-party dialog including the Falkland Islanders as full participants has been missing. The Falklands-Malvinas Forum creates a neutral space for the various interested parties to express their views.*[18]

The site includes background information and position papers on the sovereignty dispute and the 1982 war from the perspective of each of the three parties, together with material on the *"hot issues"* of oil, fishing, tourism, agriculture and conservation. Most interesting, however, is the discussion forum (or more accurately fora, since postings in English and Spanish are distributed separately) which seems to have succeeded in generating a genuine exchange of views between a diverse group of people from both claimant states and the islands themselves. Some of the discussion is rather trivial and there are a few tiresomely strident voices, but that is par for the course with online discussions. Amid the dross there is evidence of a valuable grassroots dialogue taking place which would have been inconceivable before the Internet became accessible to ordinary citizens. Similar fora dealing with other territorial disputes doubtless exist elsewhere on the Net, sometimes in the form of mailing lists, sometimes as newsgroups – although finding them may require some perseverance. A useful list of resources for finding specialist mailing lists and newsgroups can be found at Hal Doran's *Internet Sources for Journalists and Broadcasters*.[19]

A final 'community of interest' worth mentioning here is the *int-boundaries* mailing list which IBRU founded in October 1995 to facilitate scholarly discussion of issues relating to international boundary delimitation, demarcation, management and dispute resolution. The list now has over 300 members in more than 40 countries around the world, including some of the most influential names in the field of boundary studies. Membership of the list is free and is open to anyone with an interest in international boundaries. Details on how to join can be found at the *int-boundaries* web site[20], which also includes a searchable archive of messages posted to the list.

Enthusiast sites

Some of the most interesting and informative boundary-related resources on the Internet are maintained not by governments or organisations but by private individuals or small groups with a special interest in a particular boundary or dispute. Some of these 'enthusiast sites' are overtly political, but others attempt to provide information from a more neutral perspective.

The issue which appears to have stimulated the greatest number of enthusiast sites is the dispute between China and Japan concerning sovereignty over the Daioyu/Senkaku Islands in the southern East China Sea. The screenshot below shows a web page in which each image is a link to another web site with a pro-Chinese perspective on the dispute,[21] and there are many other similar sites elsewhere (both pro-Chinese and pro-Japanese). Such sites illustrate the way in which the Internet has

provided a new channel for public protest and offer an indication of the depth of feeling that territorial disputes can arouse – one does not have to be able to read Chinese to understand the gist of the site symbolised by a burning Japanese flag!
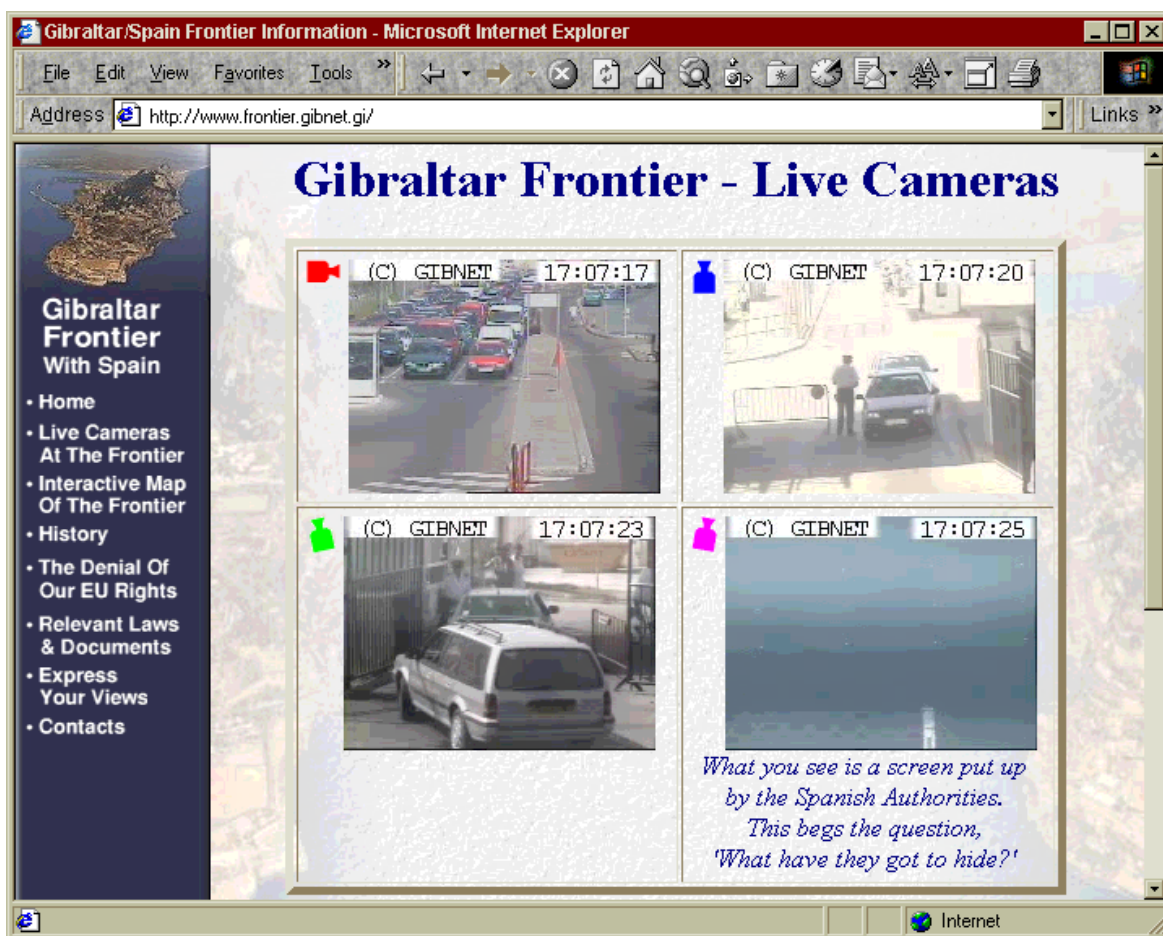
A list of web sites supporting the Chinese claim to the Daioyu/ Senkaku Islands

Another interesting protest site is the *Gibraltar Frontier Website*, created by a local Internet service provider to highlight Spanish *"harrassment"* of Gibraltan citizens by creating *"unncessary queues and delays"* at the border crossing between Gibraltar and Spain. The site features four continuously updated views from cameras overlooking the crossing, one of which is now masked by a screen allegedly erected by the Spanish authorities, prompting the response: *"What have they got to hide?"* Although it would be easy to dismiss these 'webcams' as something of a gimmick, it is hard to deny that they help to generate a sense of involvement in the issue which a more static site would struggle to achieve.

If there was a prize for the most informative personal boundary-related web site, Wilson Krukoski's *Boundaries of Brazil* site[22] would certainly be in the running. Although the full site is only available in Portuguese, much of it has been translated into English, French and Spanish, and there are numerous illustrative maps and photographs which are accessible even to the linguistically-challenged.

Other commendable resources developed by individuals include Cyril Rodrigues' pages on Guyana's borders with Suriname and Venezuela,[23] Brian Whitaker's collection of material relating to Yemen's boundary disputes with Eritrea and Saudi Arabia,[24] Arfan Tinawi's *Boundary Waters Bibliography*[25] and Lawrence Schäfer's guide to fisheries in southern Africa.[26]

The Gibraltar Frontier Website uses 'webcams' to demonstrate alleged harrassment by the Spanish authorities at the Gibraltar-Spain border crossing

Academic and institutional sites

Numerous research groups and international bodies with boundary-related interests have published material on the Internet. Among the best sites are those maintained by the South China Sea Informal Working Group at the University of British Columbia,[27] the United Nations Division of Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea[28] and the International Court of Justice[29], which now publishes transcripts of oral pleadings in cases before the Court the day after they have been submitted; in the Kasikili/Sedudu Island case between Botswana and Namibia, which is currently under deliberation, the written pleadings of the two sides have also recently been made available on the Court's web site.

Miscellania

There are many ways of thinking about boundaries, and the Internet offers tasters of just about every approach. Those with eclectic tastes and/or an interest in boundary curiosities might try Stephen DeLong's essay *'Fraid at the Edges,*[30] Barry Smith's *On Drawing Lines on a Map,*[31] an account of life among Karen refugees on the Thai-Burmese border,[32] Piet den Blanken's of photographs of the *"manhunters"* of the German border patrol at work along Germany's border with Poland,[33] and the *Between Friends/Entre Amis* gallery of images of the Canada-USA boundary.[34] Sadly, the entertaining *Micronations Page,*[35] devoted to 'countries' which have been declared independent by individuals or small groups but which have (so far) failed to achieve widespread diplomatic recognition, has temporarily been withdrawn from the Web, but hopefully it will reappear in due course.

Getting around

All of the sites mentioned in this article, plus many others, can be accessed from the

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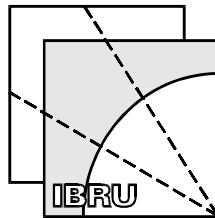
'boundary-related links' page on IBRU's own web site,[36] which also offers a searchable archive of news from previous volumes of the *Boundary and Security Bulletin*, a selection of essays and other boundary-related documents not published anywhere else, and updates on forthcoming publications and events. Other people who have compiled lists of boundary-related resources include Paul Hensel[37] and Karla Tonella.[38]

If you find a web site which interests you, a useful trick for finding related sites is to enter the address of that site in the search form of search engines such as AltaVista or InfoSeek with the term 'link:' as a prefix (for example 'link:www-ibru.dur.ac.uk'). This will return a list of sites which include links to the site in question, all of which will have (at least in theory) some thematic connection. This can be a much effective way of finding information than a keyword search, which often returns thousands of sites which have little or no relevance to the subject on which information is sought, especially when just one or two key words are used; the keyword 'border' tends to be particularly useless – unless, of course, you are seeking information on border collie dogs....Whatever technique is used for searching, it is worth remembering that even the biggest search engines admit to having indexed only around 15% of all the content available on the World Wide Web, so don't despair if you don't find what you are looking for straight away. With patience and a little serendipity, you will almost certainly find something to interest you eventually.

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*   Yahoo! Internet Life article on John Perry Barlow:
        http://www.zdnet.com/yil/content/mag/9607/barlow9607.html

1   One survey suggests that the global 'online community' now exceeds 200 million people, nearly
        60% of whom use English as their working language. Other European languages account for a
        further 25% and Asian languages 15% (source: Global Reach web site:
        http://www.euromktg.com/globstats/)

2   A fairly comprehensive listing of foreign ministry sites is maintained by the United States
        Institute of Peace at http://www.usip.org/library/formin.html.

3   Pakistan's Kashmir pages = http://pak.gov.pk/kashmir/index.html. Visitors wishing to
        avoid the slide-show can skip it by going directly to
        http://pak.gov.pk/kashmir/index-kashmir.html

4   India's Kargil pages = http://www.meadev.gov.in/opn/kargil/kargil.htm

5   The Indian army in Kargil = http://www.vijayinkargil.org/

6   Pakistan's Kargil pages = http://pak.gov.pk/special/kargil/index.stml

7   The Ecuadorian foreign ministry site can be found at
        http://www.mmrree.gov.ec/errores/errors01.htm and the Peruvian site at
        http://www.rree.gob.pe/polexter/peruecu/default.htm

8   The Greek site is located at http://www.mfa.gr/foreign/bilateral/ and the Turkish site at
        http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/ad/ade/default.htm

9   Office of the Government Spokesperson of Ethiopia = http://www.ethiospokes.net/index.htm

10   Ecuadorian embassy in Washington, D.C. = http://www.ecuador.org/ecuadorperu.html

11   Statement of the Sipadan-Ligitan dispute by the Indonesian Department of Foreign Affairs =
        http://www.dfa-deplu.go.id/world/bilateral/asia/sipadan.htm

12   Australian national interest analysis =
        http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/nia/1997/1997018n.html

13   Israel's peace process reference documents =
        http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/peace/basicref.html

14   *Japan's Northern Territories* =
        http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/index.html

15   *The Basic View on the Sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands* =
        http://www2.nttca.com:8010/infomofa/region/asia-paci/senkaku/senkaku.html

16   *Dehai* Eritrea-Ethiopia pages =
        http://www.primenet.com/~ephrem2/eritreanoau/newoau.html

17   At the time of writing, the link to the page describing the founders of the
        Falklands/Malvinas Forum was broken. Some additional information can be found (in
        Spanish) at http://www.inter-mediacion.com/

18   Introduction to the *Falklands-Malvinas Forum* at http://www.falklands-malvinas.com/

19   *Internet Sources for Journalists and Broadcasters: Finding Newsgroups and Mailing Lists* =
        http://www.synapse.net/~radio/finding.htm

20   *int-boundaries* web site = http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists-f-j/int-boundaries/

21   *Bao Diao Related Web Sites* = http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/6887/diaoyu3.htm

22   *Boundaries of Brazil* = http://www.info.lncc.br/wrmkkk/index.html

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23   *Guyana's borders with Suriname and Venezuela* =
      http://www.guyanaguide.com/border/index.html
24   *Yemen Gateway* = http://www.al-bab.com/yemen/pol/int.htm
25   *Boundary Waters Bibliography* =
      http://www.colba.net/~nsimard/Index.html/Docs.html/index.htm
26   *Domestic and International Law of Fisheries in the SADC Region* =
      http://cdserver.ru.ac.za/cd/cdlaw/
27   South China Sea Informal Working Group = http://faculty.law.ubc.ca/scs/
28   UN Division of Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea = http://www.un.org/Depts/los/
29   International Court of Justice = http://www.icj-cij.org/
30   *'Fraid at the Edges* = http://hawk.fab2.albany.edu/fraid/fraid.htm
31   *On Drawing Lines on a Map* =
      http://wings.buffalo.edu/philosophy/faculty/smith/articles/drawing.html
32   *Life on the Thai-Burmese Border* =
      http://metalab.unc.edu/freeburma/borderlife/contents.html
33   *Manhunters of the German Borderpatrol* = http://www.iaehv.nl/users/robr/manhunt.html
34   *Between Friends/Entre Amis* = http://humanities-interactive.org/canadianborder/index.html
35   The Micronations Page: http://www.execpc.com/~talossa/patsilor.html
36   IBRU web site = http://www-ibru.dur.ac.uk
37   Paul Hensel's *Borders and Territory* links = http://garnet.acns.fsu.edu/~phensel/territory.html
38   Karla Tonella's *Border Crossings* =
      http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/resources/bordercrossings/ incidents.html

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