Twelve branches spread throughout the region, settled civil disputes, assessed penalties, allowed Scots to borrow excess funds, and funded local churches and the ministry. Arguably, the Brotherhood provides an early example of a Scottish networking at its finest.

Billy also shared the story of Patrick Gordon, a 17th century Scottish soldier of fortune who traveled extensively throughout the Baltic region. Gordon kept a diary where he noted the following meeting of Scots that took place in Poznan, Poland in 1654:

“During my abode in this place I was kindly entertained by my countrymen, to wit, Robert Ferquhar, James Ferguson, James Lindesay, James White, James Watson and others. I was afterwards by their recommendation entertained in the suit of a young nobleman called Oppalinsky, who was according to the custom of the Polonians nobility going to visit foreign countries. At my departure my kind countrymen furnished me with money and other necessaries very liberally, so that I was better stocked now as I had been since I came from my parents….”

Whether it represents an online renaissance or a virtual gathering of the clans, Scottish themed online networking is growing at an astonishing rate. The number of groups displaying the Saltire online has grown considerably in the last five years. From commercial ventures that seek to connect Scots and those of Scottish descent in a shared sense of belonging, to government sponsored organizations that aim to further Scottish business and culture abroad, the explosion in “Scottishness” is a phenomenon that deserves closer examination. Is today’s proliferation of Scottish themed networking unique or just a reincarnation of days gone by? Further, is it effective at advancing the Scottish brand on the world stage?

To answer some of these questions, I was privileged to speak with Billy Kay, a renowned Scottish writer and broadcaster. According to Billy, the Scottish Diaspora finding and connecting with each other in distant lands is nothing new. In his book, The Scottish World Kay provides many examples of Scots venturing abroad and forming networking organizations. Billy views today’s Scottish themed online networking as “a modern way for exiled groups to organize”. During our discussion he provided a fascinating overview of a chapter in his book called “A Forgotten Diaspora”. In that chapter, Billy details the migration of Scots to Poland in the 17th century and the formation of a self-help society called the “Scottish Brotherhood”. The Brotherhood, which eventually had twelve branches spread throughout the region, settled civil disputes, assessed penalties, allowed Scots to borrow excess funds, and funded local churches and the ministry. Arguably, the Brotherhood provides an early example of a Scottish networking at its finest.

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The Diaspora in the 17th century were “networking” and forming systems of governance long before the advent of technology. Is today’s Scottish themed networking unique or just a reincarnation of days gone by? Further, is it effective at advancing the Scottish brand on the world stage?

In 2004, having lived in the US for ten years by that point, I founded the Scottish American Network group on LinkedIn. It was actually born out of idle curiosity. I was genuinely curious to learn how Scottish expats adapted to life in America. What careers did they choose to pursue? How long did they stay in America? What part of the country did they live? How did they adapt to American life? Today, the group includes approximately 600 members from all walks of life. To encourage connections with Scotland, in the last year, I opened the group to individuals that currently reside in Scotland. The discussions within the group have ranged from business, life in the US, culture, the arts, food, whisky, and of course golf and football.
The distinctiveness of the badges or marks of Scottish culture - kilts, tartan, bagpipes etc. is pretty much unique and very easily recognised the world over. Why is it so distinctive? In brief I feel it was an effort to connect with their own roots, the men who had left them in America, in some cases many generations ago, and this leads to a reawakening of ties and an interest, for the emigrant in modern Scotland as well as in historical Scotland. "Scottish themes" can be amusing from business, arts, culture to flirtatious?

The great strength of the groups I am on is that they bring together Scots who are still here with descendents of those who have gone, in some cases many generations ago, and this leads to a reawakening of ties and an interest, for the emigrant in modern Scotland as well as in historical Scotland. "Scottish themes" can be amusing from business, arts, culture to flirtatious?

Susana McIntosh, an attorney based in Colorado connected the clan system and the Scottish impulse to network.

"While it is true that the traditional clan system has been fundamental ways disintegrated by 1746 it didn't disappear entirely. One continuing manifestation has been this persistent Scottish impulse to network - to be somewhat clumsy about it - that thrives down to this very day."

In order to gain an even deeper understanding of "Scottishness" on the web, I contacted Alastair McIntyre an expert, and owner of Electric Scotland. (www.electricscotland.com) a popular destination for visitors with an interest in Scottish history. I asked Alastair what made Electric Scotland unique.

"Simply put it is the massive volume of content we have on Scottish History and the history of Scots at home and abroad. We probably have more information on the Scots Diaspora in history than any other organization in the world. The main point here is that we're very open with all our information and frequently share individual pages with other websites as well as many magazines and other influencers. The key to the site is that we publish new content every day and so there is always something new to read. We explore all aspects of history and so you'll find history of places, agriculture, poetry, sport, industry, literature, Scottish dancing, and of course a good amount on the Scottish Diaspora, etc."

We know that the Diaspora are connected online, but what about those the live in Scotland? Are those individuals making an effort to connect with their overseas brethren? It would appear that they are, but the evidence is not conclusive as Alastair is faced with a startling problem.

"One thing I can report is that when I look at my visiting traffic report in the old days only some 4% of my traffic came from the UK. Note here that the Scottish Government has done nothing to persuade Google to make stats available just for Scotland and thus we can only get UK traffic reports. If you spend the time you can extrapolate information by getting a city report but that takes a lot of time. If Google can produce stats for US States then surely they can produce Scotland only Stats but they sure aren't going to listen to me but they just might listen to the Scottish Government if they made a request. Today I got some 28% of my traffic from the UK so that tends to suggest many more Scots are interested in finding out more about Scotland in the world."

I can't imagine why Google has not produced statistics for Scotland. If a member of the Scottish government reading this article, don't you think it is time for Scotland to have its own report?

One of the reasons that I created my networking group on Linked was to find out how the Diaspora fared in their adopted American homeland. Given the global reach and appeal of Electric Scotland, I was curious to hear what Alastair had learned about the Scots that he had never before.

"I had absolutely no idea of what Scots did after they left Scotland. That has been the single most important thing. I have learnt and it's an amazing story and likely that story is of far more than the history of Scotland in my opinion. It's also by discovering that, I learnt how Scots did work together to build their businesses in other countries."

However, Alastair view on Scots around the globe is not all rosy. He pulled no punches regarding his assessment of Scotland's efforts to capitalize on its global successes.

"Given the tremendous opportunities that the web has given us to communicate, I feel there is still a total failure to communicate by Scots today. Of course every country in the world has this same failure but I feel given the size of Scotland and its generally favourable impression across the world we are simply not good at it."

Given Alastair's comments and experiences to date, I was curious what he envisioned the future of Scottish online networking may look like. He provided candid feedback which I believe is exceptionally accurate.

"There is of course tremendous
GlobalScot’s face to face networking events are far more effective than its online presence. Scope for networking but in my opinion that can only be achieved by working together and I see no sign of that happening. The Scottish government and agencies such as Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Development International, Visit Scotland, Scottish Chamber of Commerce, Scottish Councils, etc. simply won’t work with other websites. Likewise individual websites of Scottish businesses also won’t cooperate as they see their own website as being the only way they will communicate online. That in my opinion is a massive fault and is why we’re seeing no real progress being made. That’s not to say this is a Scottish problem as every country in the world is the same including the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and others.”

Alastair frequently referenced the Scottish government’s ineffectiveness online and on the world stage. Almost everyone interviewed with while preparing this article agreed that it was necessary for the Scottish government to have an online presence. However, as Alastair notes, the Scottish government’s efforts often appear ineffective at best. Not surprisingly, there are a number of Scottish government-sponsored sites online. However, from my experience, and the experience of others, rarely does the “right hand know what the left hand is doing.”

GlobalScot, an organization which is funded by the Scottish Executive, is one of the more well-known Diaspora networks. It is compromised of executives from around the world and Scottish companies with international aspirations. GlobalScot has a dedicated site as well as a group on LinkedIn. I have been a member of GlobalScot since 2004 and attended the inaugural conference in Edinburgh as well as several other gatherings in the States. I must admit that GlobalScot’s face to face networking events are far more effective than its online presence. GlobalScot’s online presence is a valiant effort that in my opinion has yet to find its feet. Scottish Development International has a dedicated site and there is also www.scotland.org that offers a broad view of Scotland from a historical and cultural perspective. There are many additional Scottish government agencies as well as local governments that have an online portal. The question remains as to whether or not the government and the country as a whole benefits from the government’s online efforts. Measuring the overall effectiveness of any virtual or traditional networking organization is notoriously difficult to do. However, ensuring that all of Scottish government’s online portals and as networking groups are aligned and support each other will be a difficult task.

Ultimately, for Scots abroad online networking provides a little piece of home online. I have often heard from Scottish expats that each time they go home the country looks less and less familiar. Plus, let’s not forget our “American” accents. From time to time I’ve been asked by Scots at home if I am from Canada! Talk about the wind being taken out of my sails! I believe that Scottish online communities provide an outlet for expat Scots to reconnect with a country that no longer exists. Often our conversations revolve around cultural references from Scotland in the 1990s. The country may have moved on since then, but we are stuck recalling the same TV shows and football games from our previous life. Keeping the Scottish sense of humor alive having left the country nearly 18 years ago is also a challenge. Gathering to watch a Billy Connolly DVD, or sharing jokes that most Americans scratch their head at is certainly good for the soul. Thankfully, in today’s modern age, we no longer rely upon the kindness of others for basic necessities. However, the need to associate with “guid” people has not changed.

From all accounts, we have a very long way to go before we capitalize on the explosion in Scottishness online. Crucial to the success of our efforts is full engagement and cooperation of the Scottish government, private entities, the Diaspora in general and those that remain in Scotland. In short, online networking around the Scottish brand can do much more than it is accomplishing today. As technology creates more connections between people, so too does it allow the Diaspora to reconnect with their country, former countrymen and women as well as themselves. In the words of George Santayana, “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

In Scotland’s case, may be our approach to online networking should allow history to repeat itself. May we still have a lot to learn from the Diaspora in 17th century Poland. They understood the importance of maintaining and fostering a sense of Scottishness abroad, shouldn’t we take the time to do so as well?”

Paul McCormack was born in Stirling, Scotland and moved to the States when he was 20 years old. He is a forensic accountant with Connectics, based in Atlanta, Georgia. He can be reached at pmccormack@connectics.biz.

There is of course tremendous scope for networking but in my opinion that can only be achieved by working together and I see no sign of that happening.