The virtual space of belongingness Indernet – A long-term observation

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About

Surfing in early June 2012 to the url http://www.inder.net/ one reaches a German language blog, which describes itself in the tab 'about' as:

"inder.net– India Portal for Germany.

inder.net(spoken as "Inder dot net") was founded in the year 2000 by Dr. X, Dr. Y and Z as a platform for communication and information as well as an India network. inder.net is Germany's leading online India portal [...]"[1]

As I look at this representation, I am asking myself, which impression a reader will get from this self-description. Most probably s_he[2] will be impressed by the longevity of this virtual space. The academic titles and the self-claimed leading position might create an idea of respectability and professionalism.

Surfing further on the blog the user can browse an archive going back to September 2000, change between several rubrics, can access English language posts, read the newest Bollywood and India headline feeds in English, can join a football pool for the European championship, see the top stories of the week, look at older surveys, can access job offers in India and Germany, Facebook and picasa pictures, youtube films as well as the Facebook site of inder.net, can subscribe to a newsletter, email updates and rss feed, can click on several advertisements and can give feedback. There seems a lot to be found here.

There is also a tab 'join us' with job offers for editors and interns for different rubrics, web design and public relations. Interested people are addressed with the distanced 'Sie' rather than the more familiar 'Du'[3], they are asked to submit a C.V. and a letter of motivation. inder.net as a non-commercial project of volunteers does not offer salaries, but experiences in journalism, a flexible work environment, access to events and support from and discussions with a *"highly motivated team of experienced online editors".* Thus again the motives of professionalism and longevity are developed. These are also found in the tab 'advertisement', which addresses commercial clients and offers them a mix of different marketing tools including banner and email advertisements as well as raffles, content and event sponsoring, even the design of print media and web pages as well as the production of promotion material is offered.

The self-description in the tab 'join us' is more extensive than the one in the tab 'about', in particular the aim is spelt out more clearly: *"The aim of the project has been and still is to provide well-founded and reliable information, reports and interviews on the topic of India as well as about the German-Indian diaspora and above that to contribute to the topic of integration."*

The focus seems to be on information, not only about India but also about Indians in Germany. Somehow this is related to the German debates around integration[4], but how is left

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[1] Unless stated differently all the quotes from inder.net and the interviews are translated by me from the German original. I am changing the url and anonymise the names of the founders to make it a bit more difficult to trace them online.

[2] Unless it is relevant, I will not specify the gender of a person. The gap in s_he stands for all gender identities we can (not) think of.

[3] Both translate in English to you.

[4] For a critical discussion of the racist content in the integration discourse in Germany see Böcker et al. (2010).

open. Furthermore, it is claimed that this aim has not changed since the beginning in 2000, which suggests a remarkable continuity.

The self-description goes on to claim: *"The high quality of our contents is reflected in many press reports and research projects about us. Increasingly we are approached by newspapers, radio and television for expert opinion and support in research about India."*

Another about: the research project and the article

I got to know the founders and through them the internet portal at a networking seminar, which I organised together with others for the German-Indian Society in November 2000. Since at this point I was already collecting material and writing about people marked (like me and my father) as Indians in Germany, I started to observe the portal shortly afterwards. I applied for research funds some time later and began the full-time research project "The virtual second generation" in spring 2004[5]. At the beginning my interest was directed mainly to the construction and negotiation of ethnic identity (Jenkins 1997, Brubaker 2004). I used the term virtual in a double meaning, referring both to the online space where the 'second generation' met and to the imagination of a 'second generation'. In my ethnographic work I was guided mainly by Miller and Slater (2000). I centred my analysis, however, not on a geographical space but rather on the virtual space Indernet[6]. From here I pursued different paths linking different on- and online spaces, attempting to understand more about how the Indernet was used by different people and what relevance this usage had for them. From Miller and Slater I adapted their analysis of "Being Trini and Representing Trinidad" (2000, 85-116) to the Indernet as "Being Indian of the second generation in Germany and representing India in Germany". In my research process I was guided by the principles of grounded theory, adapting my approach, methods and analysis in accordance with the empirical material and my theoretical deliberations. Thus came, influenced in particular by Mecheril (2003), a shift in interest from ethnic identity construction to racism. Critical racism theory provided me with an analytical tool to understand why the Indernet attracted users, who were in many ways very heterogeneous and could not be described well by referring to (constructed) ethnicity (Goel 2008d). What most of my interview partners and those, whom I observed, however, had in common was that in Germany (Switzerland and Austria) they were ascribed as Indians by others. This was true for those with parents from India as much as for those with parents from Pakistan. It linked the user, who had spent part of his_her schooling in India with her_his parents and family, with the user, who was adopted as an infant from Sri Lanka by white parents and never since had contact to South Asia. Racist ascription and not a joint ethnic identity formed their (implicit) commonality.

Since 2000 I am observing the Indernet and have archived different parts of it. In particular in the time between 2004 and 2006 I occasionally participated in forum discussions, contributed articles to the editorial section, was on a few occasions in the chat, have exchanged personal messages and emails with other users and attended offline events. My participation was mainly one of a distanced lurker, staying most of the time an observer and hardly considering myself part of the Indernet. Since 2006 I have observed also the standby forum and in October 2011 I joined Facebook to get back in touch with people I had interviewed. Between 2004 and 2006 I conducted more than 80 open interviews about the Indernet with founders, editors and users as well as with observers. Most of the interviews were conducted face to face. When this was not possible, either because the interview partner wanted to stay

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[5] For more information see http://www.urmila.de/english/research/virtual/virtualindex.html (06.06.12).
[6] In the interviews inder.net was mostly referred to as Indernet. I use this term for my model (Mecheril 2003, 44) of the virtual space inder.net, which I develop from my empirical material and theoretical deliberations.

anonymous or I did not have the resources to meet her_him, I also conducted email or personal message interviews. For contacting interview partners I used my own networks among people socialised in Germany and marked as Indians there, contacted Indernet editors and users and followed other interesting traces found on the internet portal.

Most (but not all) of my interview partners were brought up in Germany (some also in Switzerland or Austria) and were ascribed there on the basis of different physiognomic and social attributes as Indians. From the interviews and the observations I concluded that the Indernet provided them a space of belongingness, where they could imagine that the others were similar to them in natio-ethno-cultural (Mecheril 2003) terms and where they were save from racist Othering (Goel 2008a)[7]. The Indernet provided them a space to deal with India while staying localised in Germany, Switzerland or Austria (Goel 2008b, 2008c). This virtual space of belongingness was one (or maybe also several) (sub)space(s), which could be found under the roof of the Indernet. It/they coexisted with other spaces, which could fulfil quite different purposes for other users (e.g. Reggi 2010). Since there were different entry points into the Indernet (the homepage, the forum, the chat, etc.) and paths through it users could use the portal in quite different ways without noticing these differences and imagining doing the same as everybody else. The spaces, entry points and paths were continually changing, sometimes slowly and sometimes abruptly. What stayed was the Indernet as the common point of reference.

In this article I will give an ethnographic account of the development of the virtual space of belongingness up to the year 2012. To do this, I will in a first step contrast the self-description of the Indernet in 2012 with my long-time observation of the development of the portal. Then I will describe the long-time attachment of users to the Indernet, the creation of other spaces of communication by former users and the impact the Indernet had on individual networks, friendships and partnerships as well as on individual careers. I will end with some thoughts on virtual appearances.

From the archive: A history of the Indernet

As I have said before, I have been observing the Indernet since November 2000, a few months after it was founded in June of the same year. Already at that time I was researching about those marked as Indians in Germany and was engaged in organising spaces of the 'second generation' myself[8]. For demographic reasons it was a time when increasingly children of parent(s) from South Asia sought others like themselves and doing so attended seminars, organised dance parties or experimented with the newly developing internet.

The three male founders of the Indernet, who were just starting university or finishing school, started their portal not only at the right time but combined the right skills (design, networking, promotion and dedication) to create something special. Within a few months their internet portal had a professional design, included an editorial section divided into different rubrics, a forum, a guestbook, a chat and a newsletter. Rubric editors and authors were recruited from the natio-ethno-cultural community. Articles were either written by them or copied from other sources. Many links were provided. An events calendar provided information about all kinds of community events, in particular about Indian dance parties. These were discussed in the hardly moderated and rather autonomous forum and guestbook.

The self-description from December 2000 differs significantly from that of 2012. The aim was *"to bring together young Indians in the internet, to encourage the communication among*

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[7] For similar analyses see Mandaville (2003, 146), Greschke (2009, 114-121) or Kuntsman (2009, 13-15).
[8] See http://www.urmila.de/DesisinD/Jugend/Seminare/seminarindex.html (10.06.12)

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them, to inform about the projects of the members and about the country India". At this stage the portal was thought of as a platform interlinking other existing internet projects, which never really happened. Besides providing information enabling communication was a major aim of the Indernet. The target group was explicitly defined as *"primarily the generation of young Indians living in Germany"*, even though everybody else was also welcome to participate. With this clear community orientation the Indernet 2000 does not only differ from the Indernet 2012, but also from the the information portal http://www.suedasien.info/ , which was also founded around 2000, still exists today and provides German language information about South Asia for a more academic readership.

In the following years the space of the second generation (Goel 2008a) flourished, the number of editors, members and clicks rose constantly. Within the small community of Indians in Germany (Goel 2007) the Indernet was well known. Even a server crisis in 2002, during which the Indernet could not be reached for several months, was survived with still increasing members and clicks. The guestbook and forum were highly frequented, the events calendar was an important resource and the articles were read. People met each other or kept contact through the Indernet.

During the time of my interviews most of the interview partners were very enthusiastic about the Indernet, but they were also already talking about the old days, when things were different. Some editors had left and started other projects, the guestbook was closed in 2003 due to flaming, the designer did not like the design anymore, I had the feeling that there were few new articles. There were more and more parties and these were attended increasingly by white Germans. At this time 'Indian' music got popular in Germany, the media approached the Indernet editorial team for their expert opinion on Indian matters. Other researchers also got interested in the Indernet. In 2005 hackers attacked the Indernet; the editors installed a new forum designed to the needs of the users. This was appreciated by the users, some of them used it like a chat, lots was happening. But by 2006 the forum increasingly displayed bugs and was often offline. A user installed a standby forum for the downtimes, which was very much welcomed and used by the most frequent posters, but considered competition by the editors of the Indernet. In the same year the project description changed, introducing the style of 2012. It sounded much more professional, addressing in the last paragraph potential advertisers, using the language of the German integration discourse and not anymore focussing primarily on the community. It, however, claimed to be at the "*heart of the community"* (compare Dracklé 2007, 211)*.*

The editors experimented with new internet techniques: audio reporting already in 2003, updates of the forum software, links to youtube clips and a blog to report about a film festival in 2007, a group on the social network StudiVZ[9] was founded and in 2010 Indernet joined Facebook. To me as a long term observer the Indernet, however, seemed pretty dead online: At the beginning of 2009 the forum and the events calendar were taken offline. Since the end of 2007 there were no regular newsletters anymore. Very few articles were posted; there were lots of dead links on the portal. The only thing, which seemed to work, were media partnerships, for example with the film festival.

Then in autumn 2011 the Indernet was suddenly reactivated. The portal disappeared, the url was now directed to the festival blog and this was restructured to become the Indernet. The blog was interlinked with the Facebook page and old articles from the portal were reposted in the blog. In 2012 the Facebook page is organised as a chronic, events of the Indernet history are included. Among the users liking it, there are several, whom I know from the interviews. One of the founders seems very active. A white editor, who joint after I conducted my interviews, is also very present. Other former editors I mainly notice as friends. An Indernet

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[9] StudiVZ is a German version of Facebook (see Neuberger and Gehrau 2011).

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with new technology, style, focus and probably also target group has been developed. An Indernet, which hides the discontinuities it has gone through over it's more than ten years of existence.

A lasting space of belongingness

In 2002 it was amazing how the Indernet survived the downtime of the server without losing users, but rather continuing to gain more. Also the closing of the guestbook in 2003 did not seem to deter many users; they rather adapted the forum to their needs of small talk and off topic banter (compare Greschke 2009, 114-115). The forum problems starting in 2005 had a different effect, the interaction went down considerably and the standby forum became a refuge for some of the most active posters. My impression was that the forum was as good as dead. Signs of life thus took me by surprise as notes from my field diary in summer 2007 show: *"The Indernet forum is almost dead; nonetheless some of the old users come and discuss: A, B, C, D and also E. Fascinating."* [10]

I was not the only one, who had this impression as following posts in October 2007 show. In the evening A posted: "*It is like a cemetery here"* and already two hours later B replied: "*at least there are once in a while stray visitors to the cemetery".* Also on the standby forum, which in early summer 2006 was converted into an independent forum with an own url[11], users showed their continuing attachment to the Indernet forum. In October 2008 F posted on the standby forum:

"I have been going there several times this year and looked whether anybody was looking, but now there is a total error message. Never mind. There was hardly anything happening anyway."

This continuing attachment to a forum, where nothing really happened, fascinated me. After noticing that also G posted on the Indernet forum in summer 2007, I sent him_her an email and asked about this attachment. G replied quite soon:

"*I don't think one can talk of a reactivation of the forum. For a short time there was a slight rise, but that seems to have slackened now. I don't really know, since I only sporadically come, when I do not have anything else to do. Why I come at all, I do not really know myself. There is no logical reason. I think I have not totally abandoned the forum after all. And once in a while one meets old friends."*

In 2010 I observed that G again came back to the Indernet. This time the editors had sent an email (probably to all those, who had registered for the newsletter) with an invitation to join a football pool for the world championship. Within a few days several registered and many of the names were known to me from my observation and interviews.

This coming back to a space, the inability to abandon it even though nothing much is happening, indicates that a bond has developed not only to the other users of the Indernet but to the space itself. The Indernet has gained an importance for many of its users, which goes beyond what is easily explainable for them. In my analysis the (or at least one of the) reason is that the Indernet provided those socialised in Germany and marked as Indians there with a space of natio-ethno-cultural belongingness, which they needed, could not find anywhere else in this form and thus was more than just a space. Accordingly, when the

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[10] I am anonymising both nicks and names of users. In order to avoid my interview partners being traceable in Facebook, I might use several letters for one user.
[11] I will continue to call the forum standby forum in order to secure some anonymity.

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Indernet was reactivated in November 2011 it soon gained a lot of likes in Facebook, among which again I recognised a lot of names[12] including G.

When I joined Facebook in October 2011 I found a group, which was called 'inder.net– best Indian portal ever'. As far as I could see it was started in the summer of 2010 by one of the former Indernet users H. When J posted the question, whether not already a Facebook page of the Indernet existed, H answered that this group was *"the replacement for chat, forum and guest book".* H then appointed J as an administrator of the group because of his_her *"inder.net loyalty"* for many years. This – as well as the reference to the guest book, which was closed in 2003 – shows that both H and J have a long common Indernet history. It also indicates that there was still a need for such autonomous spaces of interaction and that the Indernet Facebook page did not cater sufficiently for this need. In October 2011, however, the group did not really seem to me a replacement for chat, guestbook and forum. There were some likes, but the posts were mainly written by H. This changed after H and K updated the group in November 2011 to the new Facebook group format and renamed the group 'inder.net-supporters reunited at Facebook'. They added lots of new members, many of whom again I knew. The group became much more active with several people posting though not displaying as much interaction as the Indernet forum or guest book. How many of the poster had already been users of the Indernet I cannot tell by observing only. Also as a lurker I cannot tell in how far the Facebook chat is a replacement for the Indernet chat.[13]

Using other spaces

Although at the zenith of the Indernet forum some users almost seemed to live there, were logged in as long as they were online and posted round the clock, all of them had also other lives and used other virtual spaces. In summer 2006 users on the replacement forum talked about which other forums they use. M's post displays that there were and he_she used several spaces online linking South Asia and Germany:

"Here [the standby forum, ug], the Indernet forum more or less, then the (new) forum of pak24 (German-Pakistanis), then ishq-magazin (India lifestyle magazine), then the forum of 1do3.de (nothing happening there however) and then recently I am hanging out in the StudiVZ forums ..."

Although the belongingness to the Indernet seemed for many to remain, it might not have been the only space of natio-ethno-cultural belongingness for them and for the daily interaction it could be to some extend replaced through other spaces. In 2006 Facebook was not yet popular in Germany; people rather used the social network StudiVZ. Many of the Indernet users seem to have gone there as not only M's post shows, also N mentioned in an Email to me in 2009 that he_she used to communicate with many former Indernet users on StudiVZ. In spring 2007 P posted on the Indernet forum:

"No offence, but this forum is more dead than alive. I think most are now in StudiVZ [...] The biggest group of Indians in StudiVZ is inder-kinder [children of the Indians, ug]."

Q, who contacted me in 2007 because she_he was interested in my work on those marked as Indians in Germany and was looking for contact with others like his_her, was also a user of StudiVZ and appreciated, how he_she could get to know people there and maintain friendships there although he_she considered her_himself as rather introvert. Q learned

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[12] Identifying Indernet posters or my former interview partners on Facebook is, however, not that easy. In some cases I only know the Indernet nicks and cannot identify the real names in Facebook, in other cases there are nicks on Facebook I do not recognise unambiguously.

[13] The non-public interaction can be only assessed by active participation, offline observation and through information by the users (see Miller and Slater 2000, Greschke 2009).

about the Indernet through my articles. On StudiVZ he_she found a inder.net group, but had the feeling that it was quite inactive. She_he, however, told me that there were many posts on the walls of the 'inder-kinder' from other 'inder-kinder'. This might be an indication for a decentralised replacement of the forum and guestbook.

While I joined StudiVZ only for a very short period, I extended my daily observation early to the standby forum. Here I was able to continue keep track of many Indernet users. A post from F on the Indernet forum in 2007 shows that users were interested in others following them: *"Well, B, if you are looking for me, I am around the corner on the standby forum".*

In June 2012 the standby forum is called 'India forum – for Indians and those interested in India' and several former Indernet users are still very active here or visit it occasionally. It still has a similar structure to the last Indernet forum. By far most posts can be found in the rubric 'greetings, wishes, humour, small talk and off topic', a rubric which was also very active on the Indernet. There are also discussions about politics, culture and society as well as an events calendar, which is regularly updated. In contrast to the Indernet there is also a rubric 'Indian scripts and languages'. Most of the contributions here are requests of transliterations for tattoos, something I never noticed on the Indernet.

The standby forum started as a 'forum for Indernet addicts' in order to provide these a space during the downtimes of the Indernet forum. As such it was welcomed in particular by the most active users. When the Indernet editors accused R, the administrator of the standby forum, in spring 2006 of competition and plagiarism, several of the users disagreed and answered back like F: *"R was there for us Indernet addicts, when we needed him most".* F then continued to accuse the Indernet editors of not providing adequate replacement and of not having been there for the users. I had also been surprised that during the downtimes the Indernet editors did not link to the standby forum, where the users were, but rather to an old Indernet forum, which remained inactive.

While many of the most active posters migrated to the standby forum, not all where happy with this. The user with most posts on the Indernet, who had also fulfilled the position of an unofficial moderator there, refused to come along. The user A did migrate, but then became uneasy about the standby forum and its administrator. In spring 2006 she_he posted on the Indernet forum:

"I read somewhere (I think it was on Urmila's homepage, but I need to check that) that this forum was thought of as an answer to the campaign 'Children instead of Indians'. I liked that idea very much. Even though it is a totally normal forum like any other German-Pakistani, German-Afghani, German-whatever forum as well. But it is something from Indians for Indians and friends. And that is why I don't like Mr. R at all as an administrator of an Indian site. [...] It is bad enough that on Wikipedia etc. for all Indian topics only non-Indian authors are used. Given that, the administrator of an 'Indian' forum doesn't have to be also a non-Indian. Furthermore the standby forum nowhere makes it explicit that the forum is not made by Indians."[14]

User A thus influenced by my analysis confirms my interpretation that the Indernet is important for the users, because it is made by the natio-ethno-cultural community for the community. However, one year later, when the Indernet forum is still basically inactive A's nick registers again on the standby forum. Her_his dislike of the non-Indian administrator does not seem to have been more important than his_her wish to interact with the others.

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[14] The campaign 'Children instead of Indians' in 2000 was directed against the immigration of foreign IT professionals. It was the first time that Indians were at the centre of a racist campaign in Germany. See Goel (2008a, 135) for a short description of its importance for the Indernet.

For many the standby forum seems a good enough replacement, but not one which can replace the emotional bond to the Indernet. In his_her mail in summer 2007 about the activities on the Indernet G had told me: "*For some time I was quite active on the standby forum. It has become a full-fledged competitor to the Indernet. Several, who because of the Indernet bugs have migrated there, finally stayed there. I go there frequently, because sometimes there are really interesting posts. But it does not play an important role in my everyday live.*"

At the time of the conflict in spring 2006 the Indernet editors had written in their forum: "*We accept that the standby forum is a product of inder.net.*" and "*Quality will finally assert itself.*" In terms of an active forum, the quality seems to be on the side of the standby forum, it has now been active for more than six years, while the Indernet forum after 2006 never picked up again. In terms of creating a major impact on the lives, however, the Indernet still seems to be more important.

According to my observation there are also other spaces like Facebook, the business network Xing or autonomous offline forum meetings, where Indernet users meet. For these, however, I am lacking systematic observation and interviews. Thus, I cannot assess their extent, what kind of motives are behind the networking and whether new spaces of natio-ethno-cultural belongingness have developed[15]. What I can tell from incoming emails is that there are still people looking for an exchange with others, whom they consider to be natio-ethno-culturally similar to them. These, however, do not necessarily have to be others marked as Indians as Q wrote in 2007:

"*Somehow I just now need contact to others from the second generation. Although they do not really need to be children of Indians, they can be also children from other countries of origin. Already to be part of the group 'Wow, you speak German really well' on StudiVZ is really great!*"

Friends

Observing the Indernet as a lurker, I was drawn to those subspaces, which displayed most interaction, the forum and the guest book. The articles never kept my attention for a long time. In the chat I was feeling like an intruder at a private party. Thus I needed the interviews with editors, users and observers to understand the different types of usages of the Indernet with different entry points and paths through the portal. While there were some users, who only participated in the interactive parts, others solely read articles or consulted the events calendar. From the interviews I also learned more about the non-public communication in the chat, through personal messages and email, in instant messagers, via phone and offline at parties and private meetings (compare Greschke 2009, 142).

Communication had been one of the central aims of the Indernet and something very important for many of my interview partners. Many had been brought up with little contact to others socialised in Germany and marked as Indians there. For them the Indernet offered the possibility to meet others natio-ethno-culturally like them. For others, who had grown up in the natio-ethno-cultural subcommunities of their parents, the Indernet gave them the possibility to meet people on their own (compare Mandaville 2003, 135) and people from outside the subcommunity of their parents. Finally, it offered also people, who were not marked as Indians or who were not socialised in Germany (Switzerland or Austria), to get in contact with these. One important way of getting to know people was through online interaction, the other was to attend offline events advertised in the calendar.

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[15] Compare Miller (2011) for how varied Facebook can be used.

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Looking at the Facebook accounts of my interview partners, I can see the lasting effects of these meetings through the Indernet. In many friends lists I find several other Indernet users. In some cases I can see that intimate partnerships, which developed already in the mid 2000s, still last[16]. M tells me in a Facebook message in 2011:

"About the longevity of the Indernet network: I knew W already before the time in the Indernet forum, but only through the continuous 'contact' on the Indernet, did we get to know each other really. Today he is full-fledged member of our family. He organised my wedding and adopted the role of a real brother. Soon he will even move into the same house as my mother. I am also meeting T and two other girls on a regular basis."

The Indernet had a major impact on the personal lives of M, W and many others. They would not have known each other in the same way without the portal. M also kept contact to me on an irregular basis over the years: he_she read my blog and sometimes commented, asked me about material for a university assignment, added me on Facebook after receiving my email (I was not able to find M through the Facebook search function) and when I asked whether we could meet to talk about the longevity of the Indernet told me he_she would be happy to meet me, but had nothing to say about the Indernet. Already in the Facebook message M had concluded: *"Noteworthy is that the Indernet, which brought us together in the first place, is not mentioned today anymore."*

The Indernet has lost its relevance for many, but leaves impacts and can be used to reintroduce oneself. V contacted me a few years ago, because of some articles I had written, she_he introduced her_himself to me as having met me at an offline forum meeting. In 2011 V then wrote me an email:

"This Indernet meeting was really something special. Yesterday after one of my classes a student came to me and told me: 'We know each other.' And really he_she was at that meeting. It is almost ten years ago and we did not have any contact, but he_she remembered me. Droll. It is a pity that the Indernet is no longer updated."

V had met M (although since M introduced her_himself with his_her name rather than with the nick M V thought she_he was somebody else). I had a similar experience when conducting interviews for a different research project in Switzerland in 2008[17]: When I met my interview partner L, he_she greeted me remarking that he_she knows me from the Indernet. While I had no clue that I might know my interview partner already from the Indernet, L exactly knew, who I was, when I contacted him_her by email. Like M L told me that he_she was still in contact with several of his_her Indernet friends and at least one of them had become a close friend. In contrast to M L seemed to be still interested in the Indernet and through his_her friends, among whom were several (former) editors, knew what was currently happening. But L was in our conversation very careful not to uncover inside information or his_her nick.

The Indernet has created networks of strong and weak ties, linking many people socialised in Germany (Switzerland and Austria) and marked there as Indians. These networks can to some degree be mirrored or reactivated in Facebook. The communication of the Indernet might continue, but no longer under the roof of the Indernet.

Recognition and career

I did not only get to know people through the Indernet and extended my network, I also built my academic career on it. I was paid for researching the Indernet, have attended many

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[16] Both between those marked as Indians and those with a white spouse.
[17] See http://www.urmila.de/forschung/religion/religionindex.html (09.06.12)

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conferences and published numerous articles. The Indernet thus had a major influence on both my career and social recognition, and not only on mine: Several students have written assignments or dissertations about the Indernet, among them the former Indernet editor Würtz (2004), a student of me Paske (2006) and from another university Reggi (2010). One of my former student researchers reflected about her experience in Florea (2010). Androutsopoulous (2007) included the Indernet in his research about ethno-portals.

Many party organisers, d-jays and musicians increased their publicity and extended their professional networks through the Indernet. One of the early editors left the Indernet to found her_his own promotion and events agency and now publishes a print magazine, which caters to a similar readership as the Indernet does. The sports editors left the Indernet because their own project on Indian football, which they had started before joining the Indernet, needed all their attention and seem now to be earning their living as freelance sports journalists. The first designer of the Indernet seems to have become a professional designer. The technical administrator studied a related subject. Most probably there are other careers, which were promoted through the Indernet of which I do not know anything.

Certainly social recognition is something most of those closely involved in the project have gained, in particular the founders (compare Mandaville 2003, Hugger 2009). The authors of the 'about' on the blog and the Facebook page of the Indernet highlight how exceptional the Indernet (and thus also the founders and editors) are. The major dates referred to on the Facebook page include the Indernet being awarded a special recognition by the German president in 2002, meeting the Indian ambassador in 2006, organising a press conference for the famous Indian singer Sonu Nigaam in 2007 and ends with: *"Recently [...] one of Germany's leading foundations, nominated X as one of the jury members for their 2012 initiative [...] which is a joint project by the RBS and the Max Mueller Bhavan New Delhi."*[18]Including this in the 'about' suggests that not only X was chosen because of his involvement in the Indernet, but that this is important for the Indernet.

Appearances

In the self-description the Indernet has always taken care to highlight its particular achievements. In 2012 the Indernet claims – as has been quoted at the beginning of this article – that the research projects about the Indernet reflect the "*high quality of our contents*". This claim seems neither to be impaired by the fact that in none of my articles I have written about a 'high quality of the contents' nor the increasing reserve in our interactions[19]. It is supported by statements like Dracklé's (2007, 211) that inder.net is one of the two most well-known natio-ethno-cultural communication platforms in Germany.

As long as I have been observing the Indernet it seems to me that it has been quite successful in being perceived as a professional and reliable source (compare Mandaville 2003, 145). In 2004 a journalist, who had quoted the Indernet as a source, replied to my question why he_she considered the Indernet a reliable source:

"*The news are up-to-date, the articles are not written non-professionally, I did not notice spelling or typing errors. The individual articles seem to be in all rubrics – as far as I can tell by a brief glance – for all intents and purposes comparable and not as if somebody did not take the trouble.*"

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[18] English in the original.
[19] At the beginning the editors were very supportive to my project, even though they carefully guarded internal information. With the time they got more reserved. We had one conflict, when in an article I had not anonymised my source sufficiently and they disagreed with my analysis.

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The Indernet was approached at this time by several journalists for their expert opinion. In 2008, at a time when I considered the Indernet to be quite dead, I met a policy consultant at an internet conference, who told me that she_he had got a very professional reply from the Indernet and that she_he had the impression of an active internet portal. Others also seem to have a different impression from me. Since at least 2007 the Indernet is the media partner of an annual Indian film festival, it organised the press conference for Sonu Nigam, they have lots of advertisements and get prices for raffles. Even during the time when online little happened, the Indernet seems to have been actively pursuing some projects.

In 2012 I argue the Indernet does not function anymore as a space of natio-ethno-cultural belongingness, but still carries the memory of having been one and thus also keeps to some extent the attachment of the former users. Beyond this the Indernet has developed further as have its users and other projects. The joint roof of the internet portal has vanished, the different subspaces have changed, migrated and are now less closely linked. The networks and spaces of belongingness are now less centralised, more individual and more difficult to observe.

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