



Future Identities

Changing identities in the UK:
the next 10 years



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Foreword

This Report provides an important opportunity for the Government to consider how identities in the UK are changing and the possible implications for policy making over the next 10 years. For the first time, it brings together many areas of research into a single coherent narrative to analyse how drivers of change may affect identities in the UK in the future.

The findings are based on the most recent evidence from a wide range of authoritative sources. Over 100 academics and stakeholders have contributed to the development of this Report and the analysis is supported by 20 published evidence papers. I am particularly grateful to the lead expert group, chaired by Professor Chris Hankin, which has overseen the work.



Foresight has undertaken this research in response to growing evidence that the UK has undergone significant changes which affect how people see themselves and others. The economic downturn, the effects of globalisation, and increasing international migration have all been influential, while the impact of social media and modern communications technology have created a new 'digital' UK. In particular, the Report discusses an emerging trend towards 'hyper-connectivity', where mobile technology and the ubiquity of the internet enable people to be constantly connected across many different platforms. Hyper-connectivity is already removing any meaningful distinction between online and offline identities, while also blurring 'public' and 'private' identities. The trend could also act to increase the pace of change, leading to more dynamic and changeable identities and behaviours.

This Report shows that 'identity' is not a simple notion. People can have many different overlapping identities which are fundamental to their individuality. Identities can exercise a powerful influence on the health and wellbeing of communities, and the degree to which they can build up social capital. There are important implications for a range of policy issues, such as the collection and use of data by government and the private sector; how individual rights and liberties can be balanced against privacy and security, and how inclusive identities can best be promoted.

I am pleased to publish this Report, which I hope will contribute to the debate surrounding the complex field of identity, as well as providing practical advice to inform decision making in government.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "John Beddington". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Professor Sir John Beddington CMG, FRS

Chief Scientific Adviser to HM Government and
Head of the Government Office for Science

Executive Summary

Identity in the UK is changing. Over the next 10 years, people's identities are likely to be significantly affected by several important drivers of change, in particular the rapid pace of developments in technology. The emergence of hyper-connectivity (where people can now be constantly connected online), the spread of social media, and the increase in online personal information, are key factors which will interact to influence identities. These developments need to be set within a wider context of demographic change: the shift of the large post-war generation into retirement, and the coming into adulthood of young people who have been immersed since birth in a digital environment. The increasing diversity of the UK's population means that dual ethnic and national identities will continue to become more common, while the gradual trend towards a more secular society appears likely to continue over the next decade. A key message for policy makers is that identities can be a positive resource for social change, building social capital, and promoting wellbeing, but they can also have a role in social unrest and antisocial behaviour.

This Report was commissioned to provide policy makers with a better understanding of identities in the UK. It considers the most recent evidence on how identities in the UK might change over the next 10 years. It identifies key challenges for effective policy making and implementation in a rapidly changing, globalised, technology-rich, and densely networked UK. Specifically, the Report focuses on implications for: crime prevention and criminal justice; health, the environment and wellbeing; skills, employment and education; preventing radicalisation and extremism; social mobility; and social integration. The findings link into the Government's wider interests in openness and transparency in policy making.

Key findings

Rather than having a single identity, people have several overlapping identities, which shift in emphasis in different life stages and environments. These are changing in three important ways:

- **Hyper-connectivity:**

Hyper-connectivity is driving social change and expectations, while bringing people together in new ways. By 2011 there were more than seven billion devices connected to the internet, and numbers are predicted to reach 15 billion by 2015. Sixty per cent of internet users in the UK are now members of a social network site, increasing from only 17% in 2007. By offering virtually unlimited storage capacity, the internet allows people to document any aspect of their lives, creating a wealth of personal data which can be 'mined' for insights, by private sector companies and potentially by government. This means that people's online identities have value in a way that is new.

The UK is now a virtual environment as well as a real place, and increasingly UK citizens are globally networked individuals. Events which occur elsewhere in the world can have a real and immediate impact in the UK. For example, hyper-connectivity can have a positive impact on migrant communities in maintaining social connections with family and friends. People have become accustomed to switching seamlessly between the internet and the physical world, and use social media to conduct their lives in a way which dissolves the divide between online and offline identities. The internet enables people to connect with others like themselves and discuss ideas as well as promulgate misinformation, which can quickly become widely disseminated. Hyper-connectivity not only has the potential to increase the pace of social change, but may also make it more volatile. As such, the internet has not produced a new kind of identity. Rather, it has been instrumental in raising awareness that identities are more multiple, culturally contingent and contextual than had previously been understood.

- **Increasing social plurality:**

Society may become more pluralised, and less integrated, as people's identities are influenced by the ageing population, greater diversity and changing patterns of immigration, and the emergence of online 'virtual' communities.

Demographic change in the UK is leading to shifting intergenerational dynamics. As the large post-war cohort reach old-age, the number of over-75 year olds will increase by over a million, from 5.1 million in 2012 to 6.6 million in 2022, a rise of more than 20%. The Report identifies a shift in attitudes, with the emergence of new transitional life stages being defined by attitudes and roles, rather than age. Traditional life stages, for example between adolescence and adulthood, or middle-age and old-age, are being delayed or blurred together. Shifting intergenerational dynamics will also see a relatively smaller working population. Younger people are likely to find achieving the experiences of adulthood more challenging than previous generations. In 2011, nearly three million adults aged between 20 and 34 were still living in their parents' home, an increase of almost 20% since 1997. People's identities are likely to be under greater pressure in their family and caring roles, as the number of people providing care to older parents is projected to increase from nearly 400,000 in 2005 to about 500,000 in 2041, with most of this increase occurring by 2022. However, these social changes could also encourage the growth of virtual support networks and communities.

The 2011 Census for England and Wales showed that in 2011, 13% of people resident in England and Wales were born outside the UK. The share of the population from minority ethnic groups is projected to continue to rise over the next decade, and to become more geographically dispersed. This could have implications for ethnic and national identities, as there is evidence from surveys that younger people in particular have a more tolerant attitude towards immigrants.

Other identities, such as religious identity, seem unlikely to change significantly over the next 10 years. The gradual long-term trend towards secularisation is set to continue. The 2011 Census shows that the number of people identifying themselves as having 'no religion' rose from 15% of the population in 2001 to 25% in 2011, while the number of people identifying themselves as Christian dropped from 72% in 2001 to 59% in 2011. However, this trend is less pronounced in Northern Ireland, and among the Muslim and the Roman Catholic populations in the rest of the UK. For national identities, growing numbers of people now think of themselves as Scottish, Welsh, or English, rather than British.

- **Blurring of public and private identities:**

People are now more willing to place personal information into public domains, such as on the internet, and attitudes towards privacy are changing, especially among younger people. These changes are blurring the boundaries between social and work identities. The advent of widespread mobile technology and email enables more people to remain connected to their work out of hours. At the same time, posting mobile phone photographs and videos online has led to a cultural shift where many people broadcast their daily lives and experiences, ceding control over some aspects of identity to others with potentially serious consequences for later life. For example, a potential employer might find information online which could make a potential candidate unsuitable. This breakdown in the barrier between public and private identities could be an important and transformative consequence of social and technological change. The widespread use of mobile technology could, in time, allow social media to be linked with spatial tracking and even facial recognition technologies. This would allow people to draw on personal information about a stranger in a public place, changing the nature of what it means to be anonymous in public spaces.

What does identity mean today?

- **Identities are controlled both by individuals and by others:**

An individual's 'identity' is the sum of those characteristics which determine who a person is. This includes a person's perception of themselves as similar to, or different from, other people. People can choose to present certain aspects of their identities, or to disclose particular personal information. Identities can also be imposed by others. As many people now have some online presence, their 'virtual biographies' can be modified or even created by other people and, for example, by companies. Even if a person does not create their own online accounts, their families and friends may discuss them or post photographs online.

- **People have many overlapping identities:**

This Report considers several aspects of identities including ethnic, religious, national, age, family, financial, and online identities. A person can have all these identities simultaneously, although one identity might be more important under particular circumstances. At home a person may find their identity as a parent most important, while at work they might identify as a company employee. Online, they may pursue a hobby as part of an interest group. Understanding which of a person's identities are most relevant in a given situation depends on the context. Identities are, therefore, culturally contingent and highly contextual, but can also be strongly linked to behaviours, both positive (for example volunteering in a community) and negative (such as antisocial behaviour).

- **People express their identities in different ways:**

Whether a person is included or excluded from a group is important in forming their identity. People's identities are partly created by group membership, but also they may choose to adopt an identity which is different from the way in which others stereotype them. A person's identity is central to their values and fundamentally affects health and wellbeing, so freedom of self-expression is important. One of the most significant observations of the impact of online identities is the way that some people can feel that they have achieved their 'true' identity for first time online. For example, some people may socialise more successfully and express themselves more freely online. This is one of the ways in which online identities can transform offline identities.

- **Identities have value:**

People's identities have personal, psychological, social, and commercial value. The growth in the collection and use of personal data can have benefits for individuals, organisations and government, by offering greater insights through data analysis, and the development of more targeted and more effective services. Identities can unify people and can be regarded as a valuable resource for promoting positive social interaction. However, this growth in the amount of available data also has the potential for criminal exploitation or misuse. Trust is fundamental to achieving positive relationships between people and commercial organisations, and between citizens and the state, but surveys show that people are less willing to trust in authority than in the past. The British Social Attitudes Survey asked people *'How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?'.* The results showed that the percentage of people who responded *'Almost never'* increased from 11.8% in 1986 to 33.5% in 2011. Maintaining a balance between privacy, freedom and protection, and regaining trust will remain a key challenge for government in making best use of 'big data'.

About the Report

This Report is the result of a one-year 'Policy Futures' project undertaken by Foresight, in the Government Office for Science. The aim of the Project was to come to a broad and independent scientific view of changing identities in the UK through a synthesis of existing evidence from a range of academic disciplines, including computer science, criminology, the social sciences and the humanities. The Report is based on 20 evidence reviews, commissioned from leading UK and international experts, which explore key aspects of how identities in the UK are currently understood, and how they might change over the next 10 years. These are published alongside this Report. As identity is such a wide-ranging subject, the Report focuses on those trends and issues affecting identities that are of most interest to UK policy makers.

Implications for policy makers in six key areas:

- **Crime prevention and criminal justice:**

There is a distinction to be made between a traditional type of crime which is now committed using a computer, and a crime wholly enabled by the internet. The growing quantity of personal and financial data online, as facial recognition technology, 'big data' and social media together begin to connect information about individuals, means that there will be more opportunities for criminal exploitation and cybercrime. Creating a false identity or stealing another person's identity is often achieved through obtaining key personal information, so the distinction between a person's 'identity' (in terms of their overall sense of self) and the identification used to distinguish between people online is being increasingly blurred in practice. Ultimately, stealing sufficient information could enable a criminal to effectively take over victims' online identities. However, there are also opportunities for enhanced crime prevention, intelligence gathering, and crime detection. 'Open source' intelligence will become more important for detecting patterns of criminal behaviour, but the quantity of data available will make locating and analysing relevant data more problematic, and will require the right skills and resources. The foundation of English law is a liberal society where social identity is, as far as possible, a personally defined and freely chosen individual possession, and so the legal system will need to continue to ensure that people's online and offline identities are protected.

- **Health, environment and wellbeing:**

The environment is very important in forming and understanding identities. For example, many places can be restorative, and so policies which promote green spaces and protect the countryside can be important for health and wellbeing. The implications of changing identities for the built environment, transport, infrastructure, and mitigating the effects of climate change will need to be considered by policy makers. The development and application of biomedical technologies, such as drugs to improve memory and cognition, and developments in reproductive technologies, could have the potential to transform the way that people relate to themselves, each other, and their environment. However, there are complex ethical and practical implications for government in regulating and responding to these technologies.

- **Skills, employment and education:**

Digital literacy is essential in enabling people to make full use of computer technology and the internet to express their identities, and to connect with social media, services, and information. A critical issue for the future will be to ensure that individuals have the knowledge, understanding, and technological literacy to enable them to take control of their own online identities, and to be aware of their online presence and how it could be used by others.

- **Radicalisation and extremism:**

The trends towards greater social plurality, declining trust in authority, and increasing take-up of new technologies may all pose challenges for policy makers seeking to manage radicalisation and extremism. Trends in changing identities in the UK over the next 10 years will be crucial to understanding these issues.

- **Social mobility:**

The findings of the Report indicate that understanding and improving social mobility will become even more complex in the future. Some of the trends suggest that there will be more divergence between groups. Perceptions of unfairness in access to opportunities, rather than actual inequality, may in turn reinforce certain kinds of social identities and increase the potential for collective action. However, as access to the internet and hyper-connectivity increase, information and education may become more freely available and shared, enhancing life opportunities for many individuals.

- **Social integration:**

Greater social plurality, demographic trends, and the gradual reduction in importance of some traditional aspects of identity, suggest that communities in the UK are likely to become less cohesive over the next 10 years. However, hyper-connectivity can also create or strengthen new group identities. Policy makers will need to consider indirect as well as direct implications of policy for communities and people's sense of belonging. It is important to recognise that policies can interact with identities in complex and unpredictable ways. Awareness of this should be built into plans for monitoring policy implementation and responding to outcomes. There are also opportunities for policy to support social integration and acknowledge new forms of community as they develop.

Conclusion

Over the next decade, identities in the UK are likely to undergo important changes, and will be increasingly dynamic or volatile. Simple categorisations based on traditional notions of identities are likely to become less meaningful. This will affect society and influence the way that people live their lives. In future, the UK needs to be considered as much a part of the virtual world as a real place. Increasingly, its citizens will be globally networked, hyper-connected individuals, and this has substantial implications for what is meant by communities and by social integration.

The increasing speed and connectivity of information technology systems offers opportunities for monitoring what is happening in real time, and assessing the effectiveness of specific policies. For policy makers, understanding the changing nature of identity in the UK will be increasingly important for effective policy making and implementation. Failure to do so may lead to missed opportunities to, for example, strengthen social integration, reduce exclusion, enhance open policy making, and make effective use of identities as a resource. Government would also benefit from drawing upon a deeper scientific understanding of people's evolving identities when developing, implementing and testing policies, for example in initiatives such as 'Test, Learn, Adapt'. Policy making across many different areas will need to be more iterative, adaptive, nuanced and agile, taking into consideration the multifaceted nature of people's identities and how policies might affect different groups, or individuals, at different times and places.

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