Digital institutions: the case of ethnic websites in the Netherlands

Ruben Gowricharn & Jaswina Elahi

To cite this article: Ruben Gowricharn & Jaswina Elahi (2018): Digital institutions: the case of ethnic websites in the Netherlands, Identities, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2018.1519239

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2018.1519239

Published online: 17 Sep 2018.
Digital institutions: the case of ethnic websites in the Netherlands

Ruben Gowricharn\textsuperscript{a} and Jaswina Elahi\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Indian Diaspora Studies, VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; \textsuperscript{b}Social Work and Education, The Hague University of Applied Sciences, The Hague, The Netherlands

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This paper argues that ethnic websites function as digital institutions in their community and foster group identity. In doing so, we add to the literature on institutions in two ways: first, we contribute to the concept of institutions by adding the concept of scripts that captures specific recurrent activities and patterns of interaction. The addition of scripts as a requirement of institutions solves the fuzziness problem since they compel us to specify the behaviour and clarifies how scripts fit ethnic websites. Second, we reveal how ethnic websites unite a wide range of functions – notably, as a means of communication, as a platform on which community members can address ethnic issues, as a device through which to build networks, and as a place from which to download materials in the ethnic community – thus fostering the identity of the ethnic group. We substantiate our argument with data from three ethnic groups in the Netherlands.

\textbf{ARTICLE HISTORY} Received 2 October 2017; Accepted 20 August 2018

\textbf{KEYWORDS} Institutions; cultural scripts; ethnic websites; ethnic identity; youngsters

\section*{Introduction}

The concept of institutions includes a diverse category of organisations. Because of general similarities, such as structuring and shaping behaviour, many authors tend to lump disparate organisations together under the rubric of institutions and abstract them from their concrete functions (Abrutyn 2014; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Consequently, the term ‘institutions’ has become a fuzzy concept that only discloses its meaning after specifying the conditions and contexts (Haack 1996). However, since ‘institution’ appears to be fuzzy, we have concluded from the scholarly literature that institutions are required to meet the preconditions of embeddedness, autonomy and culture, though these
general preconditions are insufficient to highlight their specificity. This problem also comprises new media institutions.

Based on personal and professional experience, we have witnessed in the past decades that members of ethnic communities, especially youngsters, display behaviour resembling institutional behaviour. Consequently, we have formulated the initial hypothesis that websites in ethnic communities are performing as internal institutions, in a similar way to language, religion, and intra-community communication (Elahi 2014). In due course, we were convinced that ethnic websites were a new form of institution, and although they were digital in nature, render similar structuring behaviour as other institutions. The scholarly literature however hardly offers a clue as to how to frame websites as institutions, as if they were not a part of community life at all (see Bellini, Filho, De Moura, & De Cassia de Faria Pereira, 2016; Newman et al. 2016). Hence, this paper aims to conceptualise websites as a digital institution, thereby demarcating the subject to the ethnic institution.

We argue that since the general requirements to specify institutions were found to be insufficient, an additional element is required. From that perspective, we added the concept of scripts to specify the institution under consideration. This concept discloses specific behaviour that is linked to specific institutions. Consequently, it is a paramount requirement to specify the institution under consideration. In doing so, we have made comprehensible how the ethnic website performs as an institution. In addition, we attempt to trace the functions that ethnic websites fulfil for members of their respective communities.

This paper argues that ethnic websites function as digital institutions in their community and foster group identity. In doing so, we add to the literature on institutions in two ways: first, we contribute to the concept of institutions by adding the concept of scripts that captures specific recurrent activities and patterns of interaction (Barley and Tolbert 1997; cf. Scott 2005). The addition of scripts as a requirement of institutions solves the fuzziness problem since they compel us to specify the behaviour as much as possible. In so doing, the paper clarifies how scripts add to institutions and fit ethnic websites (rather than on ethnicity or websites). Second, empirically, we reveal how ethnic websites unite a wide range of functions – notably, as a means of communication, as a platform on which community members can address ethnic issues, as a device through which to build networks, and as a place from which to download materials in the ethnic community – thus fostering the identity of the ethnic group.

We substantiate our argument that ethnic websites perform as a new (digital) institution by studying their operation in ethnic communities. However, the choice of one community may affect the outcome, depending on the degree of internal cohesion and cultural preferences. In order to preempt that similar ethnic groups will yield similar outcomes, we chose three
disparate ethnic communities in the Netherlands with divergent reputations: the Dutch, Hindustani and Moroccan communities. We chose the Dutch group since Dutch scholarship standardly compares performances of all ethnic minority groups with that of the indigenousness population. Since the Dutch function as a yardstick, we selected two ethnic groups with opposite reputations, the Hindustanis and the Moroccans. The specificities of these two groups will be outlined in the Methodology section.

The relevance of this topic is both theoretical and social. The theoretical relevance embraces the concept of digital institutions, which highlights how the new media perform as new institutions. The paper also discloses how scripts operate, thereby specifying the conditions, context and culture in which the ethnic websites are embedded. Socially, ethnic websites contribute to modes of interaction, communication and internal bonding for ethnic groups. By providing website visitors with the opportunity to engage in networks, interaction and the acquisition of commodities, the institutional needs of the social community, as reflected in the virtual community and bonded by the ethnic website, become manifest. This manifestation of digital ethnic institutions represents a worldwide proliferation in line with the global popularity of the Internet. Thus, they become new forces in (multicultural) societies all over the world, and particularly in Western societies.

The next section reviews the literature on institutions and theoretically outlines how institutions conceptually align with ethnic websites. The third section specifies the selection of the studied websites and describes the research populations, the conditions for access to the website, and the data collection process. In the empirical part, we first establish the preconditions for the websites to perform as institutions by specifying their ethnic embeddedness and culture. Subsequently we highlight the scripts as illuminated in the cultural-specific content of the ethnic websites that drives the visitors. Taken together, we show how specific conditions and cultures enable ethnic websites to act as digital institutions. The last section concludes the paper and suggests some topics for further research.

**Institutions and websites**

What qualifies as an institution is unclear, despite the long pedigree of the concept and its usage across several disciplines. Initially, the concept was used to cover diverse social, formal and informal phenomena, including kinship, political parties, rites, law systems, language and markets; currently, its use is predominantly restricted to denoting formal and macro institutions. In almost every discipline, the concept has acquired a different meaning, most notably in economics, sociology and political science (Abrutyn 2014; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Lowndes and Roberts
This disciplinary differentiation was accompanied by a strong belief in a ‘new institutionalism’, focusing on institutions as the independent variable, while sharing requirements such as legitimacy and their impact on social behaviour through rules, norms and interests (Scott 2005). However, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) point out that ‘approaches to institutions rooted in such different soils cannot be expected to converge on a single set of assumptions and goals. There are in fact many institutionalisms’ (3).

Nevertheless, most scholars suggest a single perspective. For example, Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe institutions as the ‘reciprocal typification of habitualised actions by types of actors’ (72). Similarly, Douglas (1987, 46) proposed a minimal definition of an institution as a convention that leads to legitimised grouping. Barley and Tolbert (1997) define institutions ‘as shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships’ (96). Recent examples include Lowndes and Roberts (2013) who argue for a conception wherein institutions shape actors’ behaviour (in)formally, exhibit dynamism and stability, distribute power, take a messy and differentiated form, and are mutually constitutive with actors by whom they are influenced. Abrutyn (2014) laments that sociologists use institutions to denote any force, mechanism or phenomenon that lasts for a long period or that confers duties, rights and responsibilities like marriage or prosperity rights. Cornell and Hartmann (2007) describe institutions as “sets of social relations organised specifically to solve the problems group members face or to achieve their objectives” (90).

In all these descriptions, institutions feature as a complex web of durable and integrated social roles that generate social bonding, are regulated by habits, conventions and rules, and have a compelling behavioural impact on individuals. Beyond these features, there is no consensus about the conception and operation of institutions. We believe that this minimal consensus can be attributed to too high a level of abstraction to come to grips with the specificity of institutions (Barley and Tolbert 1997; cf. Scott 2005). In spite of his endeavour to universalise the concept of institution, Abrutyn (2014) points out that every institution has its own glue. His examples include love and loyalty which render a family cohesive, while a polity is founded on power. Considering the diversity of institutions and that they operate in different ways, institutions should be acknowledged as highly specific organisations, each with its own logic and functions. The concept of an institution is a fuzzy concept, being only meaningful according to conditions and context (Haack 1996) – even in its minimal variant. Its features as well its modes of operation are difficult to generalise.

Abrutyn (2014) and, to a lesser degree, Lowndes and Roberts (2013) argue that institutions should be embedded, be autonomous and have
their own culture. Since these requirements supposedly apply to all institutions but do not specify individual institutions or their operations, they can be better dealt with as preconditions. Autonomy may vary tremendously across institutions that have varying levels of independence. Similarly, the criterion of culture refers to the rules and practices of specific institutions as researched in organisational sciences. Although scholars largely agree on the preconditions of being embedded, being autonomous and having a culture, their conceptualisation as well as the content to which they refer to may differ significant (cf. Scott 2005). Hence, we narrow down the concepts of embeddedness, autonomy and culture to ethnic groups and employ these notions as sensitising concepts as juxtaposed by definitive concepts. Herbert Blumer (1954) outlines that definitive concepts refer to a clear class of objects with the aid of a clear definition, attributes and benchmarks, while sensitising concepts lack such a precision. ‘Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitising concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. Hundreds of our concepts – like culture, institutions, social structure, mores and personality – are not definitive in nature, but sensitising in nature’ (Blumer 1954, 7).

However, despite the preconditions, the concept of institution remains at a general level, comprising disparate forms of institutions. In this context, Barley and Tolbert (1997, 98) suggest viewing institutions as scripts which they define as ‘observable, recurrent activities and patterns of interaction characteristic of a particular setting’. Scripts are context specific, event-based behaviour in well-known social situations such as shopping. Scripts consists of a sequence of expected behaviour in a particular context, including specific verbal and non-verbal behaviour that an individual has internalised. Consequently, scripts may differ across cultures (Erasmus, Boshoff, and Rousseau 2002). The suggestion of Barley and Tolbert (1997) implies that scripts are specificities of institutions rather than an institution itself. The concept of scripts is most helpful to specify institutions. Scripts do not equate to institutions, but highlight their specificities as expressed in ‘recurr- rent activities and patterns of interaction’. Therefore, every specific institution is subject to ‘scripted’ behaviour. Thus we solve the fuzziness that characterises the concept of institutions. This requirement needs to apply to ethnic websites in order to establish them as specific ethnic institutions.

Websites have become part of daily life, at least in Western societies. In most studies, they have been researched as sites of information (Hall and Tiropanis 2012) and social network sites (Park, Kee, and Valenzuela 2009; Smock et al. 2011; Wimmer and Lewis 2010). What is often overlooked is that around websites, a grouping of people emerges, that often expresses the lived culture of existing social and professional communities. The latter comprise more than networks, as they reflect social life, foster internal bonding and group identity such as those of families, ethnic groups and
political parties (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Lowndes and Roberts 2013; Zijderveld 2000). Typical of institutions, websites act as bonding glue and shape behaviour. These include websites of families, voluntary organizations, educational institutions, ethnic groups, media, Internet shops, network sites, etc. (Hall and Tiropanis 2012). Considering the vast diversity of websites, however, we demarcate our subject to ethnic websites.

We define an ethnic website as a website that is visited by members of the ethnic community and consequently reflects community issues. The conditions of embeddedness, autonomy and culture are implicit in this definition. They are embedded in the ethnic group, they are autonomous vis-à-vis other institutions, such as language and religion, and they reflect the group culture. In addition, specifically for websites, a computer and a command of digital technology is required to operate and participate in this institution. The technological requirement underscores that in addition to embeddedness, autonomy and culture, and scripts, digital institutions require a technological precondition. This requirement of technology is missing in most discussions of institutions (Abrutyn 2014; Lowndes and Roberts 2013; North 1994; Searle 2005).

Since the ethnic website is embedded in an ethnic community, it comprises social networking sites that are limited to relations, even though they have ‘ethnic’ components. For example, Facebook – probably the most popular and far-reaching of the social network sites – is a ‘book’ consisting of pages, including those about ‘ethnic’ groups and topics (see, for example, Park, Kee, and Valenzuela 2009) that unites a huge variety of functions such as chatting, posting pictures and videos, and receiving updates. Unlike Facebook and similar social network sites, ethnic websites do not offer the opportunity to make one’s own pages. The websites that we focus on are each geared towards one specific ethnic community and reflect its daily life in a similar manner to how Turkish newspapers in the Netherlands reflect Turkish community issues.

Since ethnic websites are embedded in their respective communities, similar to other internal institutions – notably community language, radio stations, voluntary organisations, religion and ethnic schools – ethnic group members find new ways to interact and sustain both bonding and identity. Ethnic websites cater to the needs of an ethnic group, be they discussions of social problems, a functional need for communicating a message (such as announcements), or expressing joy and relief (Castro and González 2011; Elahi 2014; Parker and Song 2006). In this way, they reflect the culture of the group. A similar point – that community websites are embedded and reflect community life – has been suggested by some scholars (see Castells 2004; Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, and Abras 2003; Wenger 1999). One may argue that these features largely apply to websites run by alumni associations, church groups, municipalities, hate groups, etc.
However, the major distinction with ethnic groups is that members are born and raised in the community and their institutional bonding is determined by primary ethnic forces of a specific nature such as language, religion and group identity. It is this socialization in the ethnic culture that render their scripted behaviour.

The embeddedness of the ethnic website calls for a specification of the concept of ethnic community. Ethnic communities are conventionally defined as being bonded by racial similarities, a common immigration history, and a shared culture, including traditions. This is not to suggest a primordial bonding, since the community, as repeatedly mentioned, is both assimilating and ethnicizing, the latter being denoted as ‘constructed primordialism (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Ethnic minorities in Western societies fit this description, although they assimilate to different degrees. Consequently, some sections of these minorities refuse to refer to themselves as ‘ethnic’ or relegate their ethnic identity to a less significant plane. Since members of ethnic communities assimilate partially or wholly while other segments embrace the culture of their parental or home country, the composition of the community becomes ethnically heterogeneous. Hence, we refer to ‘community’ loosely as a sharp demarcation of the group is impossible. The methodological implications of this situation will be addressed in the next section.

Some empirical studies have attempted to specify the uses of ethnic websites. For example, Castro and González (2011), referring to the Mexican community in the USA, mention five usages of ethnic websites: reconfiguring migrants’ ethnic networks; making friends; reuniting scattered people from various locations, including transnational places; identifying old acquaintances and friends; and maintaining connections by engaging in messaging and photo exchanges. Brouwer (2006) interprets Dutch Moroccan websites as a cultural artefact used by youth to create a virtual image of Morocco. These ethnic websites thus connect transnational audiences, functioning as a transmission mechanism and as a podium which shape Moroccan cultural identity. Parker and Song (2006), using British research, highlight the bridging of spatial distances, engagement with other groups regarding public issues and the positioning within society at large. Parker and Song (2006) and Parker (2008) rightly criticise the individualistic perspective on ethnic websites in most research. Due to this perspective, many observers miss the crucial feature that ethnic websites represent ethnic-related (collective) needs.

None of the studies mentioned elaborate on the institutional nature of ethnic websites nor do they dwell on the specific scripts. Consequently, the conceptualisation is limited to platforms and sites, and ignores their social embeddedness in and structuring impact on the ethnic community. A notable exception is Elahi (2014), who, while discussing the use of websites,
depicts their embeddedness in the respective communities. We also emphasize that the topics on ethnic websites are not limited to social problems as argued by Cornell and Hartmann (2007). They include community events, celebrations of religious and public festivals, advertisements for ethnic music, clothing, foodstuffs and the sale of commodities, along with the dissemination of information, such as announcements about going out and cultural events, and communication between co-ethnics (Elahi 2014).

In sum, we define ethnic websites as digital institutions that should meet preconditions of ethnic embeddedness, autonomy, culture, scripts and technological skills to establish their institutional nature. We suggest the concept of scripts to solve the problem of fuzziness surrounding the concept of institutions and to identify the specificity of institutions. This specificity is manifested in recurrent activities and patterns of interaction characteristic in a particular setting and fosters, as typical of institutions, ethnic group cohesion and identity.

**Methodology**

In order to rule out the findings of this research being the result of happenstance, we chose websites of three groups: two ethnic minority and one Dutch website. By comparing their pattern of website use with that of autochthonous Dutch youngsters, we determined the scripted elements of the website visitors. The first ethnic community consists of the Hindustanis, descendants of British-Indian indentured labourers who migrated to the Netherlands from the early 1960s onwards. The majority of the Hindustani community in the Netherlands, estimated at about 175,000 people, lives in The Hague, while major concentrations are also found in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht (Choenni 2014). The other community is the that of Moroccans, descendants of guest labourers who immigrated to the Netherlands during the 1950s and 1960s. Consisting of approximately 350,000 individuals, this group is concentrated in the major Dutch cities, especially in Amsterdam and Utrecht (Nicolaas, Wobma, and Ooijevaar 2010).

Dutch Hindustanis have the reputation of being a quiet ethnic group, performing well in education, employment and entrepreneurship. Despite increasing levels of assimilation, the community has retained many of its ethnic features that have been intensified, in part due to the Indian movie industry Bollywood (Gowricharn 2012). In contrast, the Moroccans started their integration from the Dutch underclasses. For a number of reasons, some of their youngsters are involved in petty crime and enjoy a lower level of moral credit from the Dutch. Moroccans are also mistrusted because of their predominantly Muslim background, in spite of their increasing progress in education, politics and entrepreneurship. In contrast
with the Hindustanis, Morrocan youngsters are regularly discussed negatively in the Dutch media and politics (Bink and Massaro 2012). The oppositional reputation and different integration trajectories of the Hindustanis and Moroccans prevents that similarity in social and economic positions generating the same outcome.

The research population was demarcated to include teens and young adults with an average age of 22 after excluding outliers. Consequently, the ‘community’ under investigation was narrowed down to youngsters in the selected ethnic groups. Most youngsters were familiar with the Internet, which is in accordance with the general command of the Internet in the Netherlands. According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS 2011), in 2010, 99 percent of youngsters aged 12 to 25 had access to the Internet and 90 percent spent time on it daily. Moreover, of all the age categories, youngsters are accustomed to expressing their views on the Internet and engaging in public discussions. These conditions enable participation in digital institutions and meet the requirement to command the technology to operate and participate in the digital institution. According to Dutch studies, visitors to ethnic websites are mostly members of the respective ethnic community. This is especially the case for Moroccans, Surinamese, Arubans and Turkish youngsters (Bink and Massaro 2012; Bink and Serkei 2009; Motivaction 2007). These visits highlight the ‘ethnic script’ as expressed in regular and interactive website visits by the youngsters.

In the previous section, we mentioned the increasing assimilation of ethnic minorities in Western societies. A methodological implication of that trend is that not all members of the community will visit ethnic websites. Because of the varying degrees of bonding and identification within an ethnic group, the social and cultural meaning of an ethnic website will differ among visitors. Therefore, we have to ground our proposition that these ethnic websites reflect community issues on the dependent variable. Forgues (2012) clarified that ‘sampling on the dependent variable is a highly appealing, almost logical, research strategy when one is looking for the causes of an observed event. It is particularly interesting when the event of interest is rare, thereby making random sampling infeasible’ (270). Due to this type of sampling, the selection of websites consisted of ethnic websites which were primarily inspired by the goal of establishing the relationship between the ethnic website and the ethnic community and not of making statements regarding the scale of its occurrence.

We selected the studied websites according to popularity, which is an indicator of recurrent visits. The most popular websites are recorded on delicious.com. Based on their record, seven eligible Hindustani websites were selected. After having exploratory talks with some randomly chosen Hindustani youngsters, three additional eligible websites were added. The same procedure was followed for the selection of Moroccan websites. Eventually, three Hindustani websites and
three Moroccan websites were chosen, taking comparability into account. The Hindustani websites were sangam.nl, kaise.nl and indianfeelings.nl, and the Moroccan websites were marokko.nl, maroc.nl and maghreb.nl. The website sangam.nl has been inoperative for some time since the fieldwork was conducted. The selection of Dutch websites was guided by the experience gained from the choice of the Hindustani and Moroccan websites. Selecting from the large number of Dutch websites was difficult. After determining the comparability of the features, we again used delicious.com to measure the popularity of the sites with youngsters. The selection of the Dutch websites was based on them having similar services and topics to those offered by the Moroccan and Hindustani websites. This brought to light three Dutch websites: tmf.nl, spunk.nl and fok.nl.

Data were collected in 2014. We deployed several research methods, each of which was intended to identify ethnic scripts, validate statements, collect complementary data and check the findings. The first method was studying the websites to find out what opportunities they offered and for what purposes they were used. The second method was the use of a questionnaire on the websites with coded answers, after having conducted a pilot study. The questionnaire was primarily concerned with collecting personal data, the use of media (including the Internet), the youngsters’ motives for visiting the websites, the people with whom they engaged, and their experiences in doing so. This questionnaire was filled in by 85 Hindustani, 95 Dutch and 234 Moroccan youngsters.

The third method employed was the organisation of focus groups, consisting of six meetings in total, and attended by an average of 12 Hindustani, 11 Moroccan and 11 Dutch youngsters per meeting. The average age of the participants in the focus groups was 19. The duration varied from one and a half to two and a half hours. The topics that were discussed were the same as those addressed in the questionnaire, but the added value of the focus groups consisted predominantly in participants being able to better explain their positions, express their feelings and provide and receive cues from other participants. The topics discussed during these meetings were more or less the same as those that emerged in the pilot study and that were elaborated on in the questionnaire.

One glitch occurred in the data collection. The Moroccan website administrators did not allow the questionnaire to be used. We therefore had to resort to Motivaction, a specialised research agency that manages a panel of Moroccan youngsters who are predominantly visitors to marokko.nl. The agency used the same questionnaire that was used on the Internet. The response rate was high: 234 Moroccan youngsters completed the questionnaire. These youngsters were also familiar with the other Moroccan websites.

We do not think this numerical imbalance in the Moroccan sample affects the results because of the qualitative research design and because the
absolute numbers of Moroccan respondents did not enter into any comparison. However, one could argue that the Moroccans were recruited from a panel and therefore represent a different subpopulation. Given this perspective, we ascertain that the Moroccan respondents were familiar with the websites and most likely represented a highly overlapping population. Moreover, the questionnaire was the same and so was the data. Even if one rejects these arguments, in the worst-case scenario, this part of the data can be conceived of as an independent sample with which to make comparisons. The different sources for the Hindustanis and Moroccans offered many opportunities for us to detect inconsistencies, contradictions or other discrepancies. Taken together, the sample of respondents and the variation in the employed methods enabled us to cross-check and validate the separate results, and thus reassured us that the results obtained were reasonably solid.

**Ethnic digital institutions**

In this section, we establish the institutional nature of the websites, their preconditions, specifically embeddedness, autonomy, and scripted behaviour. The requirement to operate and participate in the website community were discussed in the previous section. The highlighting of the preconditions for ethnic websites to operate as institutions, is followed by the scripted behaviour of the visitors. We thus substantiate our argument that ethnic websites, despite similarities, represent digital institutions that are characterised scripts.

**Ethnic embeddedness and culture**

The autochthonous websites selected were *tmf.nl*, *spunk.nl* and *fok.nl*. The website *tmf.nl* offers popular music and video clips in addition to ‘games’. The website *spunk.nl* consists mostly of articles written by youngsters to which other visitors can respond. The website also offers a large amount of information for youngsters looking to continue their education and an archive for articles. The website *fok.nl* has many more topics than *tmf.nl* and *spunk.nl* do, including a domain with articles about sports, games, the use of weblogs and headlines for the news, columns, Hollywood gossip, and an overview of the movies on television that evening.

The Hindustani website *kaise.nl* offers a timetable with an overview of Hindustani parties and fiestas in the major cities. Compared with *kaise.nl*, the website *sangam.nl* offers more topics: it focuses on going out but also presents news from the Dutch media or the Hindustani community in the Netherlands. The website looks like a lifestyle magazine, with rubrics such as ‘News’, ‘Lifestyle’, ‘Bollywood’, ‘Love and Relationships’, ‘Going Out and
Leisure’, and ‘Bands and DJs’. The website *indianfeelings.nl* offers more news, all from the Dutch media and the Hindustani community in the Netherlands, Suriname and India. It has a wide collection of *realtone* s of Hindi songs and popular Dutch tunes, in addition to short movies recorded by IndianFeelings TV, with a selection of music clips. The website places special attention on Hinduism and Islam. The entire design concept mimics an online version of a lifestyle magazine with such rubrics as ‘Events’, ‘Interviews’, ‘Reports and Portraits’, ‘Hinduism’, ‘India’, ‘Bollywood’, ‘Suriname’, ‘Sport’, ‘Entertainment’, ‘Body’, and ‘E-news’. Readers of the articles can leave their opinions. Of the three Hindustani websites, it is the only one which offers a dating service.

The Moroccan websites offer both domestic and foreign news, especially about Islam, and contain a lifestyle magazine for women: Yasmina. Like *marokko.nl*, the website *maroc.nl* displays photos of its members, photos from books, websites and e-cards. The website also has an online gaming facility. Visitors can respond to the articles on blogs and also to the recorded messages of other visitors. These sound-recorded messages vary from Arabic songs to Koran recitations. In addition, the website offers an overview of conferences and meetings that may be of interest to the Moroccan community. The website *magreb.nl* contains several news rubrics and columns. Most of the topics are related to Islam. Articles and columns allow responses, and visitors can upload photos. Furthermore, the website has an archive of articles and a timetable for forthcoming events.

The descriptions of the websites reveal that they have the same technological design and a compelling classification with ‘informational’, ‘communication’, ‘entertainment’ and ‘interactive’ components, in addition to forums and chatrooms. However, the content of the websites differs and these differences induce the ethnic scripts that shape the website into a specific ethnic institution. The Hindustani and Moroccan websites provide information on religion, culture and related issues. The music is also from the same culture of origin. In contrast, autochthonous websites lack similar cultural content (Elahi 2014). These websites link the informational function to finding information, while the communicative and interactive functions are linked to establishing contacts and access to entertainment, notably, listening to music.

While the content of the websites reveals that the websites are embedded in their respective communities and culture, the motives of the visitors are very telling with regard to the ethnic scripts. We explored what motives the youngsters had and created a questionnaire that we posted on the selected ethnic websites. The responses to the questionnaire are summarised in Table 1.

A chi-square test, ignoring the Dutch subsample as a benchmark, reveals a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 129.9; \text{df} = 14; p < .001$) between the motives for visiting their websites. About a quarter of all motives relate to ‘Nice
topics on the websites, but these differ significantly across ethnic groups: Hindustanis (25%), Moroccans (21%) and Dutch (47%). A similar pattern is found in the motive ‘The website offers information, products and services that are hard to find elsewhere’, while Moroccans (20%) and Hindustanis (12%) mention ‘Getting informed about what is going on in the ethnic community’ more frequently than their Dutch autochthonous (2%) counterparts do as a reason for visiting a website.

The table also reveals that although all three groups had specific scripts when visiting their websites, Hindustani and Moroccan youngsters, compared to autochthonous visitors, had much more similar scripts that drove them to the ethnic websites. The autochthonous teens and young adults tended to visit a website primarily because of the products and services being offered, the topics and the language. For Hindustani and Moroccan youngsters, language, to know what is going on in the ethnic community, background information on their culture and (specifically for Moroccans) meeting people of the same ethnic group were specific scripts linking them to the websites. They also mentioned that they were interested in their ‘own music and movies’ that were downloadable from the sites. In addition, Moroccan respondents said they were interested in religious information, thus highlighting a unique script. This finding contradicts previous studies (Brouwer and Wijma 2006) that contend that visiting ethnic websites was based on the one-sidedness of Dutch news. According to Table 1, visiting an ethnic website is primarily motivated by factors intrinsic to the ethnic group. These visits express the embeddedness of the websites as well as the reflection of the culture of the ethnic community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Autochthonous</th>
<th>Hindustani</th>
<th>Moroccans</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting people from the same background</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting informed about what is going on in the ethnic community</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding background information about own culture in Dutch media</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-sidedness of Dutch news</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about own interests being one-sided in Dutch media</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenient and pleasant language</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nice topics on the websites</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website offers information, products and services that are hard to find elsewhere</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>920</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the numbers in the table represent multiple answers in terms of visiting ethnic websites. As reported before, the size of the Moroccan group is larger than that of the Hindustani and autochthonous Dutch groups. The number of motives listed was correspondingly larger. Since there is no quantitative comparison involved, we report percentages to highlight the relative differences. The differences between the percentages reveal the preferences of the ethnic groups for the topics.
The variation in motives enables two inferences to be made. The first is that most of the distinguishing features between autochthonous and ethnic youngsters largely correspond with individual and community-related functions, respectively (see, for example, Parker and Song 2006). Finding products and ‘nice topics’ (the last two rows in Table 1) were individual motives that apply for almost three-quarters of the autochthonous respondents; ethnic minority were much less driven by these motives when visiting the websites (see, for example, Elahi 2010; Jaksche 2006). Secondly, ‘own interests being one-sided in Dutch media’, ‘cultural background information’, ‘knowing what is going on in the community’ and ‘relating to people from the same background’ reveal the communal nature of the motives. The websites thus display functions in terms of a platform – a device through which to meet people and a place from which to obtain ‘stuff’.

**Scripted participants**

Table 1 revealed differences between the three groups and highlighted scripts across and within ethnic groups. These scripts consist of culture-specific content and motivated the participants to visit the website, and consequently enables us to specify the websites as an institution (Barley and Tolbert 1997). Such scripted behaviour refers to differences in, for example, religious customs. It is not the number of visitors that matters here, but the specificity of the visitors’ website behaviour. For reasons of space, we will disregard differences among Moroccans and Hindustanis and restrict ourselves to illustrating the specific issues that characterise the scripted behaviour linked to the websites. We make sure that the quotations express repeated voiced reasons for visiting the ethnic website.

Many ethnic minority voiced their preferences for chatting and engaging in social relations with co-ethnics, and some of them were in search of romantic relationships. In the focus discussion, this emerged as a decisive reason to visit the website. A Hindustani youngster stated:

‘I chat occasionally in the chatrooms and forums of kaise.nl. Then I know for sure that the girls I am chatting with are Hindustani’. (Hindustani male, 18 years old)

Communicating with co-ethnics generates the feeling that one can chat with much more ease. As one Hindustani youngster put it:

‘We derive much pleasure and joy by talking about Hinduism and Bollywood (...) You can discuss things and ask questions ‘’ (Hindustani women, 20 years)

Bollywood features highly among the Hindustani youngsters. They use ethnic websites often to indulge in downloading movies, ringtones, songs, and wallpapers. The subculture of Bollywood provides much pleasure for the youngsters. Moroccans also resorted to downloading stuff
from websites, but their range of music and movies included Western commodities. Pleasure was also derived from chatting as voiced by both Hindustani and Moroccan youngsters. The similarity in ethnic background makes youngsters feel more comfortable in discussing ‘ethnic matters’, compared with discussing such issues with youngsters from a different background. Naber and Te Poel (2012) underscore that due to similarities in life, culture and social background, people get along more easily as they often share the same interests, standards and values. Visitors repeatedly expressed that their cultural values were better understood on ethnic websites. As a young Moroccan woman put it:

‘I would like to discuss the option to enter marriage as a virgin, without being judged about it. I have the strong feeling that Dutch people are unable to understand that and will dismiss it as old-fashioned. On Moroccan sites, I can share this issue with other Moroccan girls without being judged’. (Moroccan woman, 19 years old)

Other young women voiced similar feelings. In particular, female Moroccans were pleased that the website offered a forum for women to exchange experiences, extend advice and share good practices. Jaksche (2006) reported similar findings.

The forum ‘Music’ includes movies, leisure, discussions about music and opportunities to share music downloads. On all the websites, the youngsters use links from YouTube to highlight songs or artists. The content of the topics differs: Hindustani websites offer Hindustani and Indian music and Bollywood music and movies. In the focus groups, Hindustani respondents said that they visited Hindustani websites predominantly because of the topic of going out for Hindustani nightlife. As one respondent noted:

‘If I feel like going to a Hindustani party, the first place to look for that information is kaise.nl. There you always can see what is going on [the] coming weekend and where...what artists will perform. For other issues, I look at other sites’. (Hindustani female, 20 years old)

This social function of the website includes news about movies and cultural events, especially among Hindustani youngsters (Gowricharn 2009). However, similar usage was also present in the Moroccan community. The Moroccan websites were culturally more mixed, as they discussed Moroccan pop music and artists, Western and even Bollywood music and movies. On the autochthonous websites, only Western music was discussed (Elahi 2014).

Regarding religion, only fok.nl, kaise.nl, indianfeelings.nl, marokko.nl and maroc.nl offered space for this issue. On indianfeelings.nl, the content is predominantly informational, and religious music is shared. On Moroccan websites, discussion about religion is predominant. Reasons for visiting an ethnic website include more than the specificity of the issue and the need
to find a safe haven: for some youngsters, that search was also governed by practical reasons. The following response from one youngster is most revealing.

‘My parents can’t explain everything to me. They perform many religious acts, just because they have to and they never enquired why…. On Hindustani websites, I always look for information about it. Often, I can find something useful or someone has already discussed it as a topic. You can notice that many youngsters have the same questions’. (Hindustani woman, 21 years old)

Ethnic minority can also feel socially excluded. As one Hindustani male put it:

‘With Google, I can find a lot of information about Hinduism. But some Surinamese habits and customs, you can’t find…. On Dutch websites people find you weird if you start asking questions about these habits and customs; they easily find you ill-integrated or something like that’. (Hindustani male, 19 years old)

This feeling was widely voiced, especially among the Moroccans.

‘…as soon as you start talking about Islam [on non-ethnic sites], you are being attacked. Does not matter what you want to say…. On Moroccan sites, you are not attacked on that issue. For me, this is the most important reason why I’d rather not discuss this subject on Dutch websites’. (Moroccan male, 17 years old)

These Moroccan youngsters insisted on discussing sensitive matters in ethnic circles where ethnic concerns were understood and where they could talk freely (Bink and Serkei 2009). Of all the websites studied, religion is most often discussed on the Moroccan websites. Visitors to these websites praise their chat partners for being pious.

The results presented herein highlight a wide range of topics, notably the desire for romantic relationships with co-ethnics, discussions on specific ethnic community topics such as entering marriage as a virgin, a timetable for community nightlife, obtaining ethnic music and movies, and information about religious issues. In addition, the ethnic websites provide a comfort zone as their visitors are in the presence of their own circle, whereas social exclusion and a lack of understanding from the autochthonous population was voiced as a concern outside of these forums. These features of interaction establish the content of the script that drives the visitors. While the broad range of topics represents the firm entrenchment of the website in the ethnic community, the websites themselves act as a platform, a place from which ‘stuff’ can be downloaded, a means through which to disseminate and obtain information, and as a device to build a network. This participation and interaction also sustains ethnic identity and the internal bonding of the community.
Conclusions

This paper starts from the observation that ethnic websites perform as digital institutions, but that the concept of institutions is too fuzzy to highlight its specificity and operation. From the literature, we distilled the preconditions of embeddedness, autonomy and culture as requirements for ethnic digital institutions to operate. We suggested the concept of scripts to solve the fuzziness surrounding the concept of institutions, thus establishing the specificity of the website as an ethnic institution. In addition, we disclosed how scripted behaviour were expressed in a variety of functions, including a platform for expression, a site from which 'stuff' can be downloaded, a place to disseminate and obtain information, and as a device with which to build a network and engage in transnational relations. We thus established that ethnic websites are a new form of digital institution that are part and parcel of daily life and which reveal new forms of bonding and expression of ethnic group identity.

The empirical material for this research consisted of websites targeting three groups: Dutch, Hindustanis and Moroccans youngsters in the Netherlands. By visiting the website, the groups illuminated their own scripts, although those of the Hindustanis and Moroccans overlapped to a certain degree. While the comparison between these social groups transcends a case study, the argument in this paper still requires additional exploration. Youngsters are most familiar with the Internet and, therefore, constitute the proper category with which to start a study on the performance of digital institutions. However, it cannot be ruled out that other social categories, such as older adults or professional groups, might yield different results. In addition, this study focused on ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. Acknowledging that ethnic minorities differ widely in the Western world and that they are socially stratified in various ways, more ethnic minority websites need to be compared in order to comprehend the institutional performance of their websites fully.

This research draws attention to some important theoretical concerns. The first is that the conceptual fuzziness of institution is at risk of losing its discriminatory power in denoting social phenomenon. Considering the increasing number of digital institutions, they must be specified in each and every case. Second, the distinction between the online and offline world is becoming increasingly blurred as their components become ever more integrated. Specific knowledge about modes of integration, the skills required, and the operation of this ‘mixed world’ has rarely been raised. Although this research has started the task of addressing these issues, they still require further investigation.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References


