This paper looks at Broadcast English in the changing landscape of 21st century mass media. It argues that Information Technology has radically affected human communication in a way that will durably and fundamentally have an effect on Broadcast English. With the Internet, broadcasting enters the realm of individual users, effectively bypassing the traditional, institutional gatekeepers. This article focuses on the impact that this radical technological change is likely to have on the internal variation of Broadcast English, on the one hand, and on the part that the Internet can be expected to play in the diffusion of linguistic innovation, on the other.

1. Introduction

Broadcasting has been traditionally associated with two modern media: radio and television.¹ The advent of the Internet in the 1980s and its exponential development in the 1990s permitted the fast expansion of new broadcasting media such as online newspapers, online radio and TV channels. But whereas these new forms of broadcasting are just an extension of the existing – old – media, this progress was also, and more importantly, marked by the creation of a radically new form of public broadcasting that is no longer owned and managed by big corporations but by individuals. This revolution coincides with a democratisation of broadcasting through the massive multiplication of broadcasting sources.

¹ I wish to thank Christian Mair, Jürg Schwyter, and Peter Trudgill for their fruitful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. Any remaining shortcoming, I acknowledge mine.
One of the central issues that this paper investigates is that of the effect on language of this new broadcasting landscape (see Baron 2000; Origgi 2006; Crystal 1997, 2001, 2004, 2006; Georgakopoulou 2005; Graddol 2006; Herring 1996; McArthur 1986; Mair 2006; Sarangi 2005; Stuart-Smith 2007b). This question can be envisaged from a variety of points of view. In particular, I will look at how these new conditions redefine the notion of broadcasting and consider the type of changes which follow from this.

First and foremost, these changes affect the traditional role of broadcasters as gatekeepers ensuring standards of quality, in information content as in language. Beyond the imposition of the mediating presence of the computer in human communication, the Internet defines a new public medium that permits individual broadcasting. As Broadcast English escapes traditional gatekeeping, it enters a new paradigm of language change and variation. The second part of this paper will explore the ways in which the new communicative conditions determined by IT will affect the impact of the Internet on linguistic variation. Crucially, it is argued that the interactive nature of Internet-based communication will allow accommodation to take place between participants, thereby turning Broadcast English into an unprecedented vehicle of linguistic diffusion amongst emerging online communities of practice.

2. Broadcasting and the Internet

Any discussion of the contribution that information technology has had on broadcasting and on broadcast English relies on the assumption that information technologies are germane to the classical notion of broadcasting. For example, McArthur establishes that broadcasting specifically involves ‘the electronic transmission of speech, music, and images for public consumption […]’ (1992: s.v.).

Clearly, this general definition of broadcasting seems to apply straightforwardly to new forms of computer-mediated communication such as email, Internet, chats, blogs and podcasts, at least in a purely technological sense. Indeed, this is already envisaged by McArthur (1986, 1992) for instance when he groups together the old and new media as he posits four major technological shifts that have radically changed human communication as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

However, although McArthur mentions the computer in the fourth shift to electronic media, he does not take into consideration another technological revolution involving the ways in which human beings and computers “interact,” namely the advent of the information highway.

The impact that the Internet and the related computer-based applications had on the way humans communicate is of a magnitude at least as important
“Broadcast Yourself!”

Fig. 1: Technological changes that affected communication (after McArthur 1986: 4–8)

as that of the invention of print. As Mugglestone (this volume) and Schwyter (this volume) point out, the BBC’s action when it defined a style for spoken broadcast (English) language was often compared to the steps taken by the early printers:

the early and pioneering work of the BBC in defining a style appropriate for broadcasting may be seen as somewhat parallel to the influence of printing on the written language [...]. (Schwyter: this volume)

In fact, Mugglestone (this volume) shows how the founding fathers of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English were thoroughly convinced that their action resembled William Caxton’s introduction of print to the written language. In this respect, it is argued that the rapid development of Internet-based technologies itself constitutes the fifth and latest technological shift that has taken place to date. McArthur’s proposal could be extended as shown in Figure 2 if we were to integrate information technology as a communicative shift distinct from the actual device by means of which it has entered our lives, namely the computer. Crystal (2005: 519) goes in this
direction when he proposes that language found on the Internet is so different that ‘it amounts to the arrival of a new medium – often called computer-mediated communication [...]’.  

In the next section, Internet-based communication will be compared with the type of communication promoted by more traditional broadcast media through a range of specific IT-based features that fundamentally modified the way we communicate and in doing so took broadcasting to a new dimension.

3. **A new public, written or spoken medium for the individual**

The implicit bias which underlies the standard view on broadcasting – the one which grounds the definition given above – is revealed quite clearly in a quotation from McArthur (1994: 163–4) where he writes that ‘[b]roadcasting often implicitly or explicitly serves to standardize forms of spoken language, much as printed matter promotes a standard written language [...].’ In his view broadcasting concerns spoken language. Crucially, however, the Internet brought new possibilities to broadcasting.

Two periods can be recognised in the short history of Internet. Originally, the Internet’s impact on the communicative context, through the technology known as hypertext, was such that the common implicit assumption relayed by McArthur could not be upheld any longer. IT had brought broadcasting to the written language. In the second period, thanks to an ever-increasing flow of the network, Internet evolved to be the first truly multimedia medium where information is conveyed and communication takes place through a combination of both written and spoken language. That is to say that information technologies have effectively amalgamated written and spoken communication.

Thus, following Schwyter’s insight, we would be justified in expecting the Internet to function as the first form of broadcasting to influence the written language, provided some institution or body takes up the part played by, particularly, the BBC for spoken language.

3.1 **Public versus private discourse**

In relation to broadcasting, information technology has led to a far greater change than previous technological advances. The most important modification brought to human communication in the latest developments of Internet-

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2 This of course is true from a strictly linguistic perspective. The multimediality of the Internet ranges over a variety of content that extends beyond the strictly linguistic perspective taken here.
related technologies was to have made the reception and the production of public discourse accessible to every connected person on this planet. As a consequence, the century-old boundary between public and private discourse has disappeared at least in its traditional form.

Interestingly, Sarangi (2005) defines public discourse as ‘what goes under the generic rubric of “media discourse” and “political communication” as well as discourse in organisational and professional settings’; it contrasts with the ‘private realm (e.g., family, inter-personal, inner-self etc.)’. That is to say that the division between the public/private realms combines topical considerations (‘political’, ‘inter-personal’) with a technical or medium-related dimension (‘media’, ‘inner-self’). Arguably, the Internet has induced such radical changes in the latter that a fundamental reassessment of the dichotomy is called for.

Although not much can be said on the topical aspects, from a technical viewpoint, the Internet re-assigns the public and private spheres to such an extent that it almost renders the distinction void. Part of what makes public discourse public comes from the fact that it is a form of language which reaches out to a wide audience/readership. Whereas prototypical private discourse is grounded on a one-to-one interaction, public discourse ranges over a variety of one-to-many communication situations. In the case of traditional broadcasting the capacity to produce public discourse and speak to the multitudes is the direct result of a technological advance, as McArthur pointed out. Crucially, the possibility of mastering and exploiting the communicative potential of traditional broadcasting technologies requires a level of technological expertise that leaves such power in the hands of only a few experts with enough financial support.

The Internet, however, has irreversibly disrupted the traditional divide by allowing amateur individuals to produce public content, via language in particular, that can reach an extremely wide audience literally in a matter of minutes.3 In Bourdieu’s terminology, the fifth technological shift argued for in these pages, namely the advent of information technologies, can be regarded as having deeply affected the conditions of access to resources which determine the structure of society (cf. Bourdieu’s (1982: 64) ‘capacité technique’) – where (public) discourse is one of these resources. The Internet has granted access to a resource – broadcasting – that had mostly been restricted to a socially established elite. The technological distance that separates public discourse from any individual speaker/writer in industrialised countries has never been so short, as it depends essentially on owning a computer and being connected.

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3 This is the case with blogs, for instance, which can be updated online from one’s mobile phone at any time.
This technological shift has had a crucial influence on the language marketplace as defined by Bourdieu and affects the very nature of Broadcast English. Crystal (2006: 404), who has been on the frontline of linguistic research on the Internet from the outset, states that ‘[p]robably the most important linguistic effect of the Internet is the way it offers an unprecedented degree of written public presence to small-scale regional and social groups, and thus a vast potential for representing local identities.’ Effectively, the Internet makes public discourse accessible to individuals and non-institutional groups, thereby changing the very essence of Broadcast English. Crystal (2003: 403) writes that before the Internet, ‘[t]he vast majority of traditional writing has represented the language of public record and debate, as manifested in administrative, academic, and expository material (e.g. newspapers, ephemera),’ whereas now texts written by teenagers, marginalised groups, or texts written in regional dialects can achieve public presence. As a consequence, Broadcast English – in its written form initially – is no longer centrally produced, nor under the editorial supervision of some institution responsible for broadcasts. The Internet has brought live broadcasting facilities into every connected home.

As we will see in Section 4, these new technological conditions radically modified the role played by the traditional gatekeepers of language, i.e. those who could ‘maintain the standard’ of Broadcast English.

3.2 Transient versus permanent

Interestingly, it has been argued that the Internet does not offer true public visibility in the sense that even though an individual may be able to place her blog online in no time and produce public discourse, potentially addressing a wide audience, in effect there is very little chance that such a blog ever participates in public discourse as it will only reach a very small proportion of the potential addressees. In this view, writing a blog could be compared to someone addressing London by shouting at the top of her voice at Speakers’ corner in Hyde Park. Public discourse circulated via the Internet would therefore have a much more marginal influence than public discourse as it was generated by the traditional broadcast media.

In this respect, a key element in identifying communication shifts in McArthur’s (1986) model is directly linked with the way the new technology redefines the possibilities of storing speech. In the case of the Internet, a new public space for written language appeared which offered permanent storage possibilities and, more importantly, which allowed permanent, immediate access. One of the fundamental changes brought to Broadcast English by information technologies lies in the possibility of producing a permanent form of broadcast discourse. Georgakopoulou (2005) contrasts this property of ‘permanence’ held by the Internet-stored texts with what she calls ‘tran-
sience’ as it is found in the more traditional varieties of Broadcast English, such as radio broadcasts for instance.

Thus, while public discourse on the Internet may not reach the same audience as a radio programme broadcast by the BBC, permanence prolongs the temporal extent of such discourse in a way that for Broadcast English is truly revolutionary. Moreover, permanence combined with search engines calls for a serious re-appraisal of the apparent limitation affecting the ‘visibility’ of Internet-based discourse. In fact, the idea of a limited effective publicity for Internet discourse is considerably weakened by the availability of search engines which most often constitute the starting point of a user’s path on the web. The search engines ensure that an individual blog can become visible.

By way of illustration, we could take the case of an American man who started telling of his journey across the United States as he walked from the west coast in California to New York City between April 2005 and May 2006. His personal site consisted in a travel log and picture album of his trip. It attracted more and more viewers, peaking at around 700,000 hits per month, as it received traditional media coverage in The Guardian, on CNN, BBC-News, etc. Structurally, or text-linguistically, this personal homepage functioned very much like a blog as it was updated regularly.

From a linguistic perspective, the sheer number of hits received by such a site is a clear indication of the kind of audience an individual can eventually reach through the new medium. More importantly, though, it is the nature of the new written form of Broadcast English published online which is of interest. The Internet provides public presence to individuals, and small-scale social or marginalised groups: such groups would include linguistically-defined communities.

In the transcontinental hiker’s tale, we find a number of instances of informal and non-standard uses of English (including determiner use Tornado knocked the sign over! I think that it rusted the death; simplified spelling Sumptin ta do!; prepositional phrases Outside of the teenagers throwing rocks at his tent last night, he has had nothing but well-wishers). Evidence of this sort indicates the kind of effect that the Internet can have on language itself as it provides public visibility – recall the 700,000 hits per month – to unedited linguistic material. The democratising effect of online publishing offers an unprecedented outlet to unmonitored forms of the language which

4 The most recent surveys on Internet usage show that in all countries the most visited websites are the search engines; those were Yahoo! and Google for the US in December 2007 (source: comScore at www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=2000, last accessed 5 February 2008)
constitutes the fundamental change affecting public written English, as Crystal (2006: 404) emphasises when he writes that ‘[w]hat is especially interesting, from a linguistic point of view, is that most of this material will be unedited.’

While most aspects of the technological shift analysed in this section affect written language and have, as a consequence, called for a re-definition of Broadcast English, the latest developments in IT clearly show that not only the written form but also the spoken form of the language are affected by ‘the fifth technological shift’. In one of the most recent discussions of the linguistic impact of the Internet, Crystal (2006: 406), although he mainly envisages the modifications reshaping the written language, forecasts that ‘[a] spoken dimension of Internet use, supplementing the present graphic dimension, is in prospect.’ Indeed, what may have been a ‘prospect’ in 2006 is now a well-established language use over the Internet. The main driving force for this has been the rapid adoption of podcasts – quickly followed by videocasts – as a means of publishing spoken material through online portals such as iTunes and YouTube. Obviously, what was true of personal homepages and blogs also applies to these new spoken forms which are also public, permanent and searchable. Chats have also evolved from a strictly written medium to a spoken form with the advent of Skype for instance.

Interestingly, the importance of the tremendous effects generated by the publishing opportunities offered by the Internet was captured and expressed in its most concise form by the new medium itself: the slogan of one of the most active social sites (see Section 5 below), namely YouTube, is Broadcast Yourself. Nothing could capture more precisely the very spirit of the fifth technological shift outlined in the previous paragraphs, as they had to coin a new reflexive form for the verb broadcast in order to best represent what IT, in the shape of one of the latest technological advances it offers, brought to individual users of the language. A public medium, technically accessible to the experts and novices which offers permanent storage precisely opens the possibility for self-broadcasting.

This last argument shed some new light on the topic being discussed throughout this volume: Broadcast English. The obvious consequence of this shift is to increase dramatically the potential for variation that affects the broadcast variety of the language. Effectively, IT takes Broadcast English to a realm of individual variation.

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7 Whereas audio recordings had been around for some time on the Internet (e.g. streaming audio content), the enormous success of the combination of iPods and iTunes speeded up the adoption of new ways to publish audio material on the web.

8 This property has also been likened by Sir Harold Evans, former editor of The Sunday Times, in an interview given on 14 July 2007 to The Wall Street Journal, to ‘a spurious megaphone’ (Varadarajan 2007).
Where will we go from here? Having established the existence of a very recent technological shift in McArthur’s communication timeline, what kind of changes can we expect to affect the English language and Broadcast English in particular? In the remainder of this paper I will entertain three hypotheses.

4. The Next Gatekeepers

The previous section showed how the new technological conditions opened the domain of public discourse through broadcast media to every connected individual. However, it could also be argued that while the technological possibility exists, institutions and corporations have gathered enough expertise and seduction power to guarantee that they will keep the strategic hold on broadcasting that they have secured over the last century.

As he discussed the future of English in the late 1990s, Graddol (1997) referred to the various bodies which can exert some form of control over the language and specifically over the public variety of the language as the ‘gatekeeping agents’. In his opinion, the advent of the electronic media – McArthur’s fourth shift – had essentially cancelled the action of the gatekeepers. He wrote:

But with increasing use of electronic communication much of the social and cultural effect of the stability of print has already been lost, along with central “gatekeeping” agents […]. (Graddol 1997: 56)

Nevertheless, as it is shown in all the other contributions in this volume, a similar wish for control over the variety of English being broadcast has been very much part of the strategy of the traditional electronic media – radio and TV in particular. The very existence of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English and its contemporary successor, the BBC Pronunciation Unit, confirms this desire to establish some authority on language.

The development of new conditions following the advent of IT and the fifth shift can however be regarded as the last straw in this movement against the institutional action towards the standardisation of Broadcast English that began with the fourth shift. Thus, Graddol speaks of a ‘destandardisation of English’ (1997: 57) as he describes the gradual fragmentation and ‘breakdown of gatekeeping and the shift of control to ordinary users, in turn leading to informal, vernacular or in-group language in public places’ (51). The inevitable side-effect of the rise of the individual would then be the loss of the language gatekeepers.

The standpoint voiced here reflects an opinion that was held by a number of specialists who thought that the digital revolution brought by the Internet would be fatal to the traditional media. Negroponte predicted that ‘[t]he
monolithic empires of mass media are dissolving into an array of cottage industries [...]. Media barons of today will be grasping to hold onto their centralized empires tomorrow’ (Negroponte 1995: 57–8). Thus, the old gatekeepers of Broadcast English would disappear in the dissolution of traditional mass media.

But as Henry Jenkins (2006), the director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT, points out, the digital revolution did not in the end coincide with ‘a displacement of the old media by the new.’ Instead, we see a situation developing where there is convergence between the top-down processes typical of corporations and institutions and bottom-up processes shaped by consumer participation. For the question under scrutiny, this means that the trend towards an ever increasing individualisation of Broadcast English is accompanied by the more traditional top-down, centralised structures.

Going back to the earlier example of www.thefatmanwalking.com, one should emphasise that even if an individual homepage reached public visibility and gathered such an audience, this is in great part due to the relaying of the information provided there through the programmes and websites of traditional broadcasting corporations such as, in this instance the BBC, the Guardian, and CNBC, among many others. This specific case, therefore, constitutes a very good example of the sort of interaction between two types of public discourse advocated by Jenkins (2006) as part of the convergence culture.

This should not constitute such a surprise after all. In a medium dominated by individual voices, users will almost inevitably need to rely on some authority figure to pre-select and dig out for them content worth their attention in the billions of pages potentially accessible on the Internet. Eco (2006: 180) quite rightly emphasises that in an IT age where an exponentially growing number of pages are published every day, ‘[t]he only solution is that there appear authorities, external or internal to the Web, that constantly monitor what is found.’ Although, he calls these authorities filters, Eco effectively writes about the next generation of gatekeepers. In other words, the great democratisation movement initiated by the fifth technological shift will both lead to an individualisation of broadcast public discourse, thereby affecting the variability of Broadcast English, and it will simultaneously call for the recognition of some filtering authorities. In a discussion focusing on the future of Broadcast English, it would be interesting to find out who the next Internet-based – language gatekeepers might be.

A first answer to this question can be found in the behaviours of current users of the Internet. How do they interact with the new medium? As mentioned earlier, an indication of how the Internet is used by the online community on an everyday basis can be derived from the number of hits received by the various sites. In Switzerland, heavy and medium Internet users mention
'using search engines' as the most frequent activity they get involved in when browsing the web.\(^9\) This figure has been increasing steadily (by more than 10\%) between 2001 and 2006. The same tendency can be observed in the overall rankings of the most visited websites worldwide. The first position is regularly occupied by a search engine (Yahoo! on 31 January 2008) and several competitors are found in the top five (Windows Live and Google on 31 January 2008).\(^10\) In other words, it looks as if search engines are used as entry points to the Web and function as the Internet's gates as it were. Therefore, it could be said that the newest form of filtering or gatekeeping that is also responsible for indirectly 'editing' the content — including the language — found on the Internet, to come back to Crystal's (2006) comment (see Section 3.2), lies in the algorithms used to rank the hits on any given query launched by a user. As we saw above, in the exponential surge of individual public discourse published through the Internet, the only guarantee that any individual voice reaches its audience depends on its ability to be retrieved by the search engines and obtain a high ranking on the (often very long) list of relevant pages. Strikingly, whereas the role of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English as guardian of a language standard was quite openly acknowledged and justified, the ranking algorithms are well-kept industrial secrets. Google, for instance, reassuringly claims that its 'technology uses the collective intelligence of the web to determine a page's importance. There is no human involvement or manipulation of results.' Interestingly, the Google search engine, PageRank, originally uses cross-references between pages (i.e. hyperlinks) as one of the key factors to determine the relative importance of a page, and hence its rank. This means that the more often a page is cross-referenced by other sites the higher its ranking will be. Consequently, a page published as part of a big corporate site, such as the BBC's, with complex internal cross-referencing, is given a head start in the race for public visibility, thereby ensuring that the next gatekeepers resemble the old ones. In this respect, it is quite revealing to observe that whereas the most visited site in the United Kingdom is the local version of the Google search engine which faithfully reflects the results obtained for the whole world, more importantly, visitors to this site also visit the BBC's homepage often.\(^11\)

A second answer is found in the study by Broadbent and Cara (2006), who differentiate between different categories of Internet users modelled on research investigating the diffusion and adoption of technological innovation

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in a population. Typically, a technological innovation – such as that induced by the fifth shift – will be adopted in stages by a given population which allows us to categorise successive groups of adopters following a normal distribution as shown below.

Fig. 3: Diffusion of innovation through time (adapted from Rogers 2003)\(^\text{12}\)

Broadbent and Cara (2006: 163) argue that one can distinguish between naïve, light and expert users of the Internet. Of particular interest to them are the light users, who consist of early majority pragmatists and late majority conservatives. These light users constitute the current and largest wave of adopters who are now turning to the Internet in western countries. According to the research reported by Broadbent and Cara, once the first six months of initial discovery are passed the light users’ typical way of browsing the web revolves around six to seven sites. Moreover, these few sites will mostly be those of brick-and-mortar, well-established companies and, crucially, will also include the portal of their Internet provider (163–4). For this important group of users, the entry points – the gatekeepers – to the Internet will therefore be a portal, as well as the old big corporate groups. Unsurprisingly, the most visited search engines have started offering portal services that combine a search engine with a whole range of pre-selected content and online socialisation tools (email, blog, web albums; see for instance, the Yahoo! or MSN portals).

However, if we believe Jenkins (2006), the future of Internet content will be based on a culture of convergence, bringing together decisions taken ‘in corporate boardrooms and in teenagers’ bedrooms.’ If we have now gained a better understanding of the next generation of gatekeepers ruling over the top-down structure of the Internet, there remains the question of the bottom-up processes starting in teenagers’ bedrooms which will also – possibly to a much higher degree – shape Broadcast English.

5. The Internet and Social Network Theory

The question of the next generation of gatekeepers may indeed be a misguided one. At stake here is the very notion of technological barrier that defines standard gatekeepers. For the action of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English to have any impact at all, it had to apply itself to a form of the language that reaches a wide audience (even if passively) and whose production is mostly in the hands of a technologically selected elite. Although the Internet offers a new form of broadcasting, it also renders this technological barrier inoperative, thereby potentially preventing any form of gatekeeping from taking place. In such a context, an interesting domain of linguistic investigation lies with the specific parameters and rules of language change governing over Internet-Broadcast English. What would these rules be?

From a general perspective, the development of individual, unedited, public, broadcast texts and speeches is expected to lead to a gradual fragmentation of Broadcast English as more and more sites will be broadcasting non-standard messages to quote an expression coined by Crystal (2002). But beyond this first level of analysis lies another more important issue related to the dynamics of language variation both from an internal point of view between the many non-standard voices that compose Internet-Broadcast English, as well as from an external point of view between Internet-Broadcast English and other varieties of English. Referring to the nature of this new linguistic landscape, Crystal (2005: 522–3) describes it as ‘a volatile, unprecedented, unpredictable, and altogether fascinating linguistic situation.’

The evolution of Internet languages is closely linked with the way the Internet is used by speakers to communicate. In this respect, there are some interesting recent trends that should be mentioned. In the 2005 Swiss national census, one of the most relevant reported changes which affect the way the Internet is used by the population concerns the location from which the Internet is accessed. Whereas before 2000, most persons who accessed the web did so from their workplace, the trend was reversed in 2001 as more and more users surf the Internet from home, while the Internet usage at the workplace seems to have reached a plateau, as can be seen in Figure 4 below. As the report points out, this data unmistakably shows that the web is increasingly gaining ground in people’s private sphere and has become part of their everyday life like the traditional media.13

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13 Heavy users surf the Internet ‘every day or almost every day’, they represent roughly 51% of the population (older than 14); while 12% of the population are medium users who surf ‘several times a week’ (Office Fédéral de la Statistique 2007).
A different indicator brings further support to the claim that a new stage has been reached in the communicative use of the Internet. In a recent survey of the most striking tendencies to have shaped the Internet in 2007, Bob Ivins, a senior executive at comScore, an international company that specialises in evaluating the world of IT, has issued a report in which he states that

[d]uring the past year, social networking has really taken off globally […] Literally hundreds of millions of people around the world are visiting social networking sites each month and many are doing so on a daily basis. It would appear that social networking is not a fad but rather an activity that is being woven into the very fabric of the global internet.15

As a result, social networking websites represent the last category (in addition to search engines and portals) to really stand out on the list of the most visited websites worldwide. In the top ten, we find MySpace (5th), FaceBook (7th), Hi5(8th), Orkut (10th)16 which gather a total of more than 218,500,000 users.17 Crucially, while this recent sharp increase in the use of the Internet

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as a base for social networking (270% over a year in the case of Facebook), and therefore, from a linguistic point of view, as a place for interactive communication, is interesting in its own right, it is even more striking to notice that it brings the Internet, and the languages spoken there, to a new dimension of social interaction which is truly part of people’s everyday life. The example of the UK is a case in point.

An October 2007 analysis of social networking practices by comScore revealed that the United Kingdom was clearly leading the trend noticed above in Europe. British users of social networking sites spent an average 5.8 hours in August 2007 (against 3 hours for the whole of Europe). This figure can be further analysed into a group of heavy users (the top 20 percent of the social networking community who spend most time online), who spent more than 22 hours, and a group of medium users (the next 30 percent of the social networking community in terms of time spent online), who were occupied social-networking for almost 4 hours. We get a better understanding of the impact Internet-based social networking might have on communicative and linguistic practices if we say that medium users meet their online community once a month, while heavy users spend the equivalent of five evenings out (or in) with their online friends each month, i.e. more than once a week. For the latter especially, the amount of exposure, as well as contribution, to Internet Broadcast English is considerable. Finally, it would be grossly mistaken to underestimate the importance of this new speech community: in the United Kingdom there are almost five millions heavy users (4,971,000).

According to the latest estimates of the British Office for National Statistics, the urban area of Greater Manchester represents a population of 2.55 millions, while the population of (Greater) London is estimated to be around 7,512,400 residents. In other words, a large – and ever increasing – portion of the population in the United Kingdom uses the Internet to interact socially and verbally, thereby actively contributing to the 21st century re-shaping of Broadcast English, and crucially expanding its degree of variability.

A last piece of evidence will be brought to bear in this discussion of the bottom-up processes which affect Broadcast English as a consequence of the fifth technological shift. A new technology is taking social networking on the Internet to a whole new dimension through the development of online three-dimensional universes where users – or rather their avatars – can travel to meet, interact and communicate with other people. Second Life is

such a virtual world, created by its residents, which became accessible to the public in 2003. It is notoriously difficult to assess the exact numbers of residents actively participating in Second Life as one user may have several avatars and as a majority of registered users are not active in Second life, but a fairly reasonable estimate can be reached: two senior executives at Linden Lab, the firm which runs Second Life, evaluated the ratio of active users to the number of registered members to about 10 percent on two different occasions in 2007 (Terdiman 2007). The most recent statistics on Second Life usage, provided by Linden Lab, mention 12,240,161 registered members, hence 1.2 million virtual social actors worldwide.\(^{20}\) Once again, beyond the sheer size of this sample population, it is the communicative practices applied to the new medium that are of particular interest. In January 2008, 543,574 active avatars totalled a staggering 28,143,718 hours of online Second Life activity which amounts to a monthly 51 hour average. In the United States, Second Life avatars spent on average more than 55 hours, while in Germany residents were connected for an average 2 hours every day to the virtual reality of this online world (62 hours in January 2008).\(^ {21}\) The relevance and success of this new online social space has been duly acknowledged by such institutions as Stanford, Princeton, Harvard, University College Dublin, and the University of Edinburgh, as they inaugurated their Second Life campuses. The Reuters news agency has a news centre in the virtual world. In this context, it is not surprising that the then presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy had a Second Life avatar during the French presidential campaign who attended several online, virtual rallies and press conferences, while American presidential candidate Barack Obama’s avatar appeared in Second Life on 31 March 2007.\(^ {22}\)

Arguably, the excitement surrounding Second Life may have lost some of its original strength. However, beyond this specific example, what appears to be relevant in the context of this article is the availability and unquestionable success of a new form of computer-mediated communication which redefines the notion of linguistic interaction (both spoken and written) within the limits of virtual realities. Thus, beside the social environment of Second Life, other


similar online communities interact in different virtual worlds, such as World of Warcraft for instance, to name only the most successful.23

These examples show that the future of Broadcast English is intimately connected with a new form of online socialisation and communication. As Internet-based Broadcast English becomes the variety of English in which very large communities interact and social contacts are built and organised, the new variety is expected to evolve according to the principles of linguistic change, away from the standardising action of the gatekeepers. Effectively, if the bottom-up processes highlighted here continue to gain momentum, it will also considerably modify the dynamics between the Internet-broadcast variety and other varieties of English, as a consequence of the new social and communicative salience of media language. Thus, coming back to the earlier question of the internal and external parameters that will bear on the future of Broadcast English, I wish to put forward three hypotheses.

The first hypothesis relayed by several linguists who have investigated the English used on the Internet is based on the opinion that one of the expected effects of IT is the ‘destandardisation of English’ (Graddol 1997: 57; see also Mair 2006: 186) echoed in the following comment by Crystal:

> Because the Internet is uncontrolled by the hierarchy of grammarians, lexicographers, publishers, printers, copy editors, and proof-readers who have traditionally established, disseminated, and controlled standard English [...], it seems likely that we will see a much greater presence of informal written interaction than at any previous stage in the history of the language, and thus the rapid emergence and consolidation of usage – several of which will privilege non-standard forms. These new varieties are bound to achieve a more developed written representation than would ever have been possible before, and through the global reach of the Internet they may well extend their influence beyond their locality or country of origin. (2006: 404–5; my emphasis)

In addition to the reinforcement of non-standard forms, the process described here will strengthen a tendency already identified for twentieth century English by Mair (2006: 187), who speaks of a ‘colloqualization’ of written English that brings a greater degree of informality in the written language. That is to say that the technological characteristics of IT described in Section 3 above – in particular through emails and chats – will speed up this phenomenon which originated in the nineteenth century (Mair 2006: 185, citing Biber 2003).

A second hypothesis can be derived from the insights that were gained into the rapid development of worldwide online communities. From a theoreti-
cal point of view, a good analytical vantage point is found in the models advocated for in social network theory. Milroy (1983) in her discussion of the influence of social networks on language argues that dense multiplex networks tend to have a normative influence on the language of its members towards an in-group vernacular. She writes that ‘multiplexity and density are conditions which often co-occur, and both increase the effectiveness of the network as a norm-enforcement mechanism’ (1983: 52). Loose (or spare) uniplex networks, on the other hand, do not offer the kind of conditions which allow to enforce a linguistic norm. Arguably, the type of social networks that online communities give rise to would be best described as loose and uniplex, as they bring together participants from different professional backgrounds, geographical regions, who are (typically) not relatives, who mostly – even exclusively – interact through their online activity. As far as language is concerned, the counterpart of this looser form of network, according to Milroy who cites Le Page (1979) is ‘linguistic diffuseness’ (1983: 182). In other words, according to this theoretical model, the kind of social networks found on the Internet are likely to constitute a vector of language change, since ‘a loosening of close-knit ties is likely to be associated with linguistic change’ (Milroy 1983: 176). Thus, if we take social networks like those we observed above as indicative of a developing trend in Internet usage, we would expect highly virtually mobile individuals to build numerous weak links in a mesh of online networks. For Milroy, such individuals would greatly contribute to the linguistic diffusion of innovation (1983: 201). Thus, if we assume, as it is suggested here, that the key to accommodation processes is the interactive use of language rather than the simultaneous physical presence of the participants, the Internet will act as a powerful catalyst for linguistic change.

Interestingly, loose uniplex networks are linked to geographic mobility (Milroy 1983: 136–7). In this sense, it is not surprising that the Internet should lead to looser social structures as it offers the ultimate, most extreme form of geographic mobility. Linguistic diffuseness can, therefore, be regarded as a direct result of geographic dispersion which prevents any single localised variety from functioning as the norm.

However, social network theorists also argue that in the absence of a localised norm, looser uniplex network structures, through facilitating language change, may ultimately set in motion the development of a new norm or new types of standardisation. In this view, the fifth technological shift would build on previous ‘processes of urbanization and industrialization […] to disperse traditional close-knit networks, and to accelerate linguistic standardization’ (Milroy 1983: 190). Notice that although the first and second hypotheses appear to point in opposite directions – toward de-standardisation and standardisation respectively – they are not incompatible as they focus on two different aspects of IT: whereas the specificities of the new
medium allow the democratisation of public discourse, thereby providing a lot more public visibility to non-standard varieties than ever before, the social dispersion induced by online communities generates a context of heightened linguistic change and – arguably – convergence toward a standard in the new “communities of practice” the technology has made possible (see Eckert 2000, Wenger 1999). In a discussion of this apparent contradiction, Mair (2006: 186) is even more explicit as he names the specific variety which could act as the standard.

[The Internet] “has not only been a powerful agent entrenching the globally dominant position of (standard) American English, the “default” language of the medium, but, above and beyond that, has provided unprecedented opportunities for the spread of lesser-known standard varieties and even stigmatized nonstandards.

If we take the origin and the number of users connected to the Internet to be a good indication of the eligibility of a given variety as a standard, then indeed standard American English would be a strong candidate – in 2008 – to function as the norm for Internet-based Broadcast English. However, it remains to be seen how various key factors will bear on this situation in the future. Graddol (2006: 44), for instance, points out that English has been steadily losing ground against the other languages as the language of the Internet. Moreover, although English still occupies the dominant position, the proportion of Internet users for whom English is not the native language increases rapidly. Crucially, it is not clear how this particular population will position itself in the selection of a linguistic norm for Broadcast English. Finally, an even more relevant proviso comes from social network theory itself which warns that the model ‘cannot easily handle socially and geographically mobile speakers whose personal network ties are not predominantly dense or multiplex’ (Milroy 1983: 198).

6. Conclusion: the impact of Internet-based Broadcast English

The third and last hypothesis considers one particular issue related to the external influence of Broadcast English on other varieties of English. In a recent report on the impact that the TV series *East Enders* has on the phonology of the English spoken by 36 Glasgow youths, Stuart-Smith (2007a, 2007b) sums up the very widely held view amongst sociolinguists that broadcast varieties can only have an indirect influence on language variation (through lexical innovations, awareness of variation, or language attitudes).

She writes that ‘[t]he consensus seems to be that since we cannot interact with television characters in the same way as with our friends, neighbours and workmates, television dialects are unlikely to affect our own speech’ (Stuart-Smith 2007a: 3). Thus, Trudgill (1986) writes that

the electronic media are not very instrumental in the diffusion of linguistic innovations, in spite of widespread popular notions to the contrary. The point about the TV set is that people, however much they watch and listen to it, do not talk to it (and even if they do, it cannot hear them!), with the result that no accommodation takes place. (40)

Traditionally, the main argument against the possibility of the media impinging on language change revolves around the absence of actual face-to-face interaction between e.g. the radio show host and the audience. As Stuart-Smith (2007a: 1) emphasises, ‘a key process of language change is diffusion, or the spreading of linguistic innovations across geographical regions’. In order for diffusion to take place, one speaker must modify, i.e. accommodate, her speech to that of her interlocutor (see Trudgill 1986, Chambers 1998). Without face-to-face interaction, accommodation cannot occur which prevents the diffusion of linguistic innovations.

The fifth technological shift dramatically changes the situation as it brings an element of interaction in the form of communication mediated through the Internet. While this does not constitute an instance of face-to-face interaction in a strict sense, it certainly provides an appropriate communicative framework in which participants interact and can accommodate to each other’s speech (e.g. FaceBook dialogues, both spoken or written, or chats). In fact, even though standard accounts posit that linguistic diffusion through accommodation requires face-to-face interaction, early research on this phenomenon proposed a simpler condition for accommodation which only involves interaction. For instance, some strong empirical support for this view can be found in the work of prominent precursors in accommodation theory: Giles and Powesland (1975: 163) mention empirical work where accommodation is shown to take place in the speech of subjects exposed to some recorded input. These findings are also echoed in earlier work by Webb (quoted in Giles and Powesland 1975: 150) using tape-recorded stimuli. In other words, accommodation does not depend on physical co-presence, but on the interactive nature of the communicative exchange between participants; a situation that the fifth technological shift has brought into our lives.

Thus, if I am right in arguing that the inherent interactivity of IT radically changes the nature of the relationship between speakers and Broadcast English, it follows that Broadcast English should now be regarded as a new factor in the dynamics of language variation and change. A legitimate question to ask in this context would therefore be ‘how influential could Broadcast English be then?’.
Once again, linguistic theory can give us some clear indications on the kind of answer to bring to this question. According to Trudgill (1986), two fundamental parameters enter the equation of his model for diffusion. The first factor is demographic. Trudgill argues that ‘the larger the population of a city, the more likely an individual from elsewhere is to come into contact with a speaker from that city’ (1986: 39–40). As we saw in Section 5, the combined population of social networking sites is twice as big as that of the Greater Manchester area. Even if we were to distinguish the various communities attached to the different social networks, the demographic weight of the Internet in a revised model of linguistic change is therefore considerable. The Internet would effectively be the first broadcast medium to allow accommodation to take place via its channel and function as a proportionally powerful vehicle of diffusion, while Internet-based Broadcast English – both written and spoken – would constitute the variety that rides this technological tide.

The application of the second factor to the new conditions determined by IT turns out to be even more interesting, and puzzling too. Trudgill explains about this second factor, which he calls geographical, that ‘other things being equal and transport patterns permitting, people on average come into contact most often with people who live closest to them and least often with people who live furthest away’ (1986: 39). If the general, very marked drift noted in the previous section reveals itself to be more than a craze, then the geographical dispersion of the online communities reviewed above will call for a complete re-appraisal of the mechanisms governing linguistic change. Essentially, online social networks offer the unprecedented possibility to have extremely large communities that are geographically disjoint. Effectively, the Internet creates a new geographical dimension, that of the web, the epitome of which is a virtual world like Second Life, which can cancel real-life geographical distance and redefine the map of language contact.

To conclude, the combined effects of IT on the diffusion model, as well as on the internal variation of Broadcast English mentioned earlier, converge to create the perfect vector of linguistic change: a diffuse variety endorsed by a very large, non-normative community that is geographically dispersed. This of course is quite a surprise if one considers the birth certificate of Broadcast English established by the Advisory Committee on Spoken English.

While it remains to be seen to what extent other factors will come to bear on the scenario pictured here, I hope to have shown that through IT, Broadcast English has entered an age of both radical changes and irresistible linguistic importance.
7. References


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