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### Peripheries, Mobilities and e-Technologies: The Rise of Regional Social Network Policies

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# Peripheries, Mobilities and e-Technologies: The Rise of Regional Social Network Policies

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Patrick Rérat, Hugues Jeannerat

Abstract: The mobility of highly qualified people is a major issue for regional development and represents a matter of particular concern for peripheral regions, which tend to be characterized by the out-migration of their graduates (brain drain). While regional policies have traditionally focused on the labor market and framework conditions in order to foster territorial development, a new kind of instrument is emerging: the regional social network. This approach to policymaking no longer considers highly qualified people leaving their home region as a loss, but sees them as potential resources to be mobilized and capitalized at a distance. Based on six case studies, this paper elaborates a typology of regional social networks and analyzes their governance and management. It situates this new approach in a more general debate on regional innovation policies with regard to the specific needs of peripheral regions in a time of growing spatial mobility and the ubiquitous use of e-technologies.

## Introduction

The mobility of highly qualified people is a major issue in regional development in the context of the globalized knowledge economy and increased spatial competition. It is a matter of particular concern for peripheral regions, which are often characterized by the out-migration of their graduates (brain drain) (Smith et al. 2014). This population group is seen as essential to regional development, based on the added value brought to the region (skills, entrepreneurship), the strengthening of the residential economy based on local consumption (including tax base) and participation in community life (socio-cultural and political commitment) (Stockdale 2006; Corcoran et al. 2010).

Initially, measures related to brain drain were aimed at facilitating return migration, and resulted in policies encouraging, for example, the creation of attractive jobs and the reinforcement of framework conditions (economic structure, accessibility, etc.). Indeed, it would appear that such a strategy should be successful – as shown, for example, by a survey carried out

among graduates from the Jura region (a peripheral Swiss region), in which approximately 45% of those who have not returned to their home region would have done so if they had found an appropriate job (Rérat 2013, 2014). However, while this result may be seen to legitimize job-creation-based policies, it also shows their limits, as 55% of the graduates would not have returned.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1990s, an alternative type of policy has emerged, with initiatives launched by countries such as Colombia and New Zealand to organize their out-migrations – often labeled as “diasporas” – into networks (Meyer 2001; Lerner 2007; Newland, Tanaka 2010; Ho 2011; Gamlen 2013). More recently, some regional authorities have also developed comparable initiatives. In contrast to traditional regional policies, the movement of highly qualified people from their home region is no longer considered a loss; instead, these skilled workers are seen as potential resources that can be mobilized at a distance, mainly through e-technologies. This way of thinking calls into question the dichotomized distinctions between “here and there” or “return and departure”. What is the purpose of regional social networks (RSNs)? Who are their target publics? How are RSNs implemented and managed? What are the implications for current and future regional policies?

Drawing upon six initiatives (five in Switzerland and one in Italy), this paper presents a typology of RSNs. It also discusses their contribution to a more general debate on regional policies with regard to the specific conditions of peripheral regions in a time of growing spatial mobility and the ubiquitous use of e-technologies.

## 1 Territorial Innovation Policies in Search of Alternatives

In the past thirty years, various theoretical and policy models have placed the region, rather than cities or states, at the core of economic growth and change. The various territorial innovation models (Moulaert, Sekia 2003) provided by industrial districts (Becattini 1990), innovative milieus (Maillat 1995), clusters (Porter

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1998) and regional innovation systems (Cooke 2001) have proposed systematic approaches to regional competitiveness and contributed to prevalent policy practices (Martin, Sunley 2003; Tödtling, Trippel 2005; Cooke, Martin 2006; Asheim et al. 2011).

#### *Networking insiders; attracting outsiders*

These territorial innovation models share a fundamental view of territorial development: competitive regions are the ones able to create, maintain and develop resources through local innovation and knowledge networks. This approach gives prominence to two dialectical territorial knowledge dynamics handled together politically.

First, innovation is regarded as the result of the endogenous generation and use of knowledge enhanced by geographical proximity. Regional innovation mirrors the capacity of local actors to undertake individual and collective actions in a changing socio-economic environment, based on specific regional resources (e.g. social capital or cultural, industrial and technical heritage) (Maillat 1995; Kebir, Crevoisier 2007). Endogenous development is driven by local entrepreneurship and the organizational capacity of regional actors to adapt and innovate in a globalized market (Coffey, Polèse 1984).

Since the early 1990s, regional networks and networking have become a major paradigm of the spatial and social organization of industrial innovation and learning in endogenous development (Cooke, Morgan 1992; Grabher 1993; Saxenian 1990). From the point of view of policy, network building and networking management have become best practices for fostering endogenous regional innovation (Cooke 2001). Cluster policies too have flourished in many regions, stimulating entrepreneurship and collective projects among the regional actors of common or converging economic fields of activity (e.g. contractors, subcontractors, suppliers, research institutes, venture capitalists, co-evolving firms and technology providers, and customers) (Martin, Sunley 2003; Asheim et al. 2011). Regional networking is also at the core of current R&D policies (Asheim et al. 2011), characterized by science parks and “technopoles” and often involving the triple helix relationships of knowledge transfer organized around local research and educational bodies, enterprises and public authorities (Etzkowitz, Leydesdorff 2000).

Second, and in addition to public intervention on endogenous development, scholars and

policymakers have been emphasizing regional *attractiveness* as a major issue in regional innovation and growth (Hallin, Malmberg 1996). In the past, multinational firms and investors have been regarded as determinant competition drivers in developing conditions that are attractive to qualified workers (Kitson et al. 2004), but more recent academic and policy discourses consider culture and creativity as the core of regional attractiveness. This is illustrated by the debated “rise of the creative class” and “creative cities” (Florida 2002; Peck 2005; Scott 2006). Regional competitiveness is perceived here as the local capacity to add favorable amenities and a “people climate” to the development of intensive knowledge-based and culture-based services (Florida 2002). Thus, nowadays urban and regional policies are increasingly designed with regard to the global competition to attract both qualified workers and creative people, and public initiatives have been launched to play the “great game” of attracting and retaining talent.

In brief, the main territorial innovation models and policies are built upon a dichotomized distinction between an internal regional and national arena of intervention and an external global system that is hardly attainable by local decision-makers. Competitive resources (e.g. knowledge, workforce and capital) should be locally retained, maintained and enhanced as well as globally attracted and appropriated.

#### *Peripheries: beyond a single best practice*

This approach to economic and territorial development has raised critical debates in regional studies and given rise to new theoretical insights and policy considerations in the last ten years. One major criticism addressed to established conceptual and policy models of territorial innovation, is that they have led to standardized practices implemented in a rather undifferentiated way across space. Cluster and technopole policies supporting innovation, for example, have flourished in most developed and emerging countries (Martin, Sunley 2003; Tödtling, Trippel 2005). Another model is the creative city, which has become the idealized label under which important urban regeneration policies have been undertaken and by which cities establish their international recognition, attractiveness and competitiveness (Peck 2005; Scott 2006).

The prevalence of these policy models enhances stereotypical techno-scientific and creative activities dis-embedded from their territorial specificities. While technological and

creative best-practice policies prioritize metropolitan milieus and scientific regions, they often fail to address the specific development-related challenges faced by peripheral regions (Tödtling, Trippel 2005; Doloreux, Dionne 2008).

Peripheral regions often cannot play the great entrepreneurial game of Silicon Valley or the great creative game of New York City. On one hand, they build on specific forms of entrepreneurship and face particular structural and organizational barriers to the development of science and R&D. On the other, their peripheral position places them as followers in the metropolitan “war for talent” (Peck 2005). For regional policies, it is therefore important not to restrain public intervention in the local clustering of activities and attracting creative workers. This leads to considering entrepreneurship in broader terms and is the way that peripheral regions build global connections with their specific resources (Legendijk, Lorentzen 2007).

*Mobilities: mobilizing at a distance rather than draining and retaining*

This need for global connections leads to considering innovation in peripheral regions through the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller, Urry 2006). Whereas the main policy models on competitiveness focus on the capacity to create/exploit and attract/retain economic resources within regional production systems, several recent works speak in favor of a more transnational and transregional perspective.

Over the last decade, various studies on multinational companies and transnational workers have pointed to new modes of local innovation and entrepreneurship characterized by an increased circulation of resources (e.g. knowledge and investments). Beyond the boundaries of individual regional production systems, these studies shed light on coupling relationships, taking place between distant locations within global production and innovation networks (Coe et al. 2004). On the level of the worker, they emphasize the transnational networks of entrepreneurs and transnational knowledge communities as new fundamental organizational forms of economic and territorial development (Coe, Bunnell 2003; Saxenian 2006). Accordingly, today’s innovative and competitive regions are “learning regions” primarily based on the capacity to be part of *ad hoc* relational and social capital developed across both proximate and distant locations, instead of an *ex ante* local network of firms (Rutten, Boekeman 2012; Malecki 2012).

On the level of policy, considering territorial innovation from a mobility perspective raises the question of how to anchor specific regional activities within multi-local knowledge dynamics rather than enhancing them within regional proximity (Crevoisier, Jeannerat 2009). Thus exploiting “brain circulation” becomes an alternative to “brain drain/brain gain” competition (Saxenian 2005). In particular, highly qualified are increasingly regarded as constitutive players of national and regional development. According to Newland and Tanaka (2010), out-migrants have become strategic resources for local entrepreneurship, functioning as gatekeepers into distant markets and organizations, as mentors providing various services, or as potential investors. Beyond the question of boosting, attracting and retaining regional resources, a new focal question comes to the fore: how to mobilize strategic resources at a distance.

*E-technologies: towards territorial innovation policies 2.0*

In line with these new mobilities, e-technologies have become vital for transregional and multi-local relationships. They represent a new crucial policy challenge as well, since the increasing centrality of ICT in business and everyday life brings into question the geographies of knowledge creation, entrepreneurship, spatial collaboration and innovation (Graham 1998; Leamer, Storper 2000; Morgan 2004). Whereas distance was traditionally seen as a barrier for regional development, virtual online communities may turn distance into potential assets (Grabher, Ibert 2014), and online social networks have become creative and intermediating platforms mobilizing and engaging out-migrants in transnational activities (Meyer 2001; Larner 2007; Nedelcu 2009; Ho 2011; Gamlen 2013).

For regional policymakers, e-technologies provide opportunities as well as uncertainties. On one hand, they offer new potential to participate in global innovation and knowledge networks, regardless of their distance from major metropolises. Thus, they facilitate collaboration between strategic players established in distant markets. On the other hand, new uncertainties are related to the concrete possibilities that e-technologies may bring to a region: How can e-technology constitute a tool for development policy in peripheral regions? How can it help them access distant resources? How do online activities complement geographical proximity (Bathelt, Turi 2011)?

## 2 Peripheries, Mobilities and e-Technologies: The Emergence of New Regional Policies

### Case studies

Over the last decade, various Swiss cantons have developed RSNs in order to take advantage, notably through e-technologies, of having skilled people migrating to other regions. RSNs are defined here in three ways: (1) RSNs gather individuals who have close ties to a specific region but usually do not live there anymore; (2) RSNs are formally organized (as part of a regional policy or of the activities of an organization, for example); (3) RSNs aim to foster the development of a region. These definitions

exclude social networks with other kind of objectives (scientific, cultural or political), as well as strictly local economic networks (gathering entrepreneurs or firms).

This paper draws upon six RSNs launched in one Italian and four Swiss regions (Table 1) that do not have the size, economic structure or centrality to compete with metropolitan regions in the battle for talent. Three of the Swiss regions, Jura, Uri and Valais, can be regarded as rural, peripheral regions in the Swiss context; all three are facing, among other challenges, a loss of university graduates. The fourth, Fribourg, is an intermediate canton characterized by very high demographic growth due to its proximity to two important urban regions (Bern and

Network	Presentation
Conseil consultatif des Jurassiens de l'extérieur – CCJE (Jura) www.jura.ch	The advisory council of “persons from Jura living elsewhere” was funded in 1982 shortly after the creation of Canton Jura. The cantonal government nominates reputed members from various backgrounds such as industry, culture and research, to bring their technical skills as well as their image to help the implementation of projects. Members are now called ‘Jura ambassadors’.
Connect.creapole (Jura) www.creapole.ch	<i>Creapole</i> promotes the creation of innovative companies. As a part of this, a virtual network ( <i>connect.creapole</i> ) was launched in 2008 to create a database of young graduates and experienced businessmen, enabling them to contact each other. In addition, <i>Creapole</i> has carried out communication campaigns in various Swiss universities (events, visits of business incubators, etc.).
Fribourgissima (Fribourg) www.fribourgissima.ch	The Chamber of Commerce and the Cantonal Government created <i>Fribourgissima</i> in 2010. It aims to promote regional development through a network that gathers people with close ties to Fribourg. The network is supported by renowned personalities, and includes a virtual platform (with various information such as calls for projects, cultural and economic news, etc.), as well as organising events to enable face-to-face meetings.
Südstern (South Tyrol, Italy) www.suedstern.org	<i>Südstern</i> was initiated in 2003 and gathers 1,400 Tyrolean people spread across 90 countries, all of whom have an academic degree and/or an interesting curriculum vitae. The main tool is a website offering services such as forums and a platform for members’ profiles, job offers, etc. The yearly <i>Global Forum Südtirol</i> has been organised since 2009, with workshops and conferences on the future of the region.
Uri-Botschafter and Uri-Link (Uri) www.derurilink.ch	Canton Uri launched <i>die Uri Botschafter</i> (Uri Ambassadors) in 2004 to stimulate ideas and improve its image. This network gathers personalities who have close ties with Uri and is accompanied by various communication tools (website, conferences, etc.). In 2006, <i>Uri-Link</i> was set up to connect people originating from Uri but living elsewhere with companies in the canton. Both programmes now share the same website.
VS-link (Valais) www.vslink.ch	<i>VS-link</i> was founded in 2006 and focuses on the labour market with the slogan <i>VS-link. Talent &amp; business network</i> . Its website is a platform between companies and graduates; it has also published a guide presenting the local labour market, and organised a forum for graduates to meet the main regional employers. <i>VS-link</i> is part of a wider strategy to create highly skilled jobs (research institutes, business incubators, etc.).

Tab. 1: Case studies.

Lausanne), but its economic evolution (notably in terms of highly skilled jobs) does not follow the same pace. An additional case presenting similar features is also analyzed: South Tyrol, a province located in Northern Italy, mainly German-speaking (75%) and bordering on Switzerland. This pioneer project has inspired several projects in Italy as well as in German-speaking countries (such as the Uri RSN analyzed here).

Empirical data was gathered through a one-day seminar conceived as an experts' panel and moderated like a focus group. The seminar was prepared based on a first analysis of the documents (including websites) related to these RSNs, and preliminary interviews with the experts invited to the seminar. These experts were people closely involved in the design and functioning of the six RSNs studied in this paper. A list of points to be addressed were drawn up, and each of the speakers on the panel was asked to address them in order to guarantee the coherence of each talk. Plenty of time was allowed for debates and experience exchanges, so that the authors and experts could fully discuss the core aspects of these RSNs.

The objective of the seminar, and of this paper, is to analyze how and why RSNs have been implemented. It does not provide a global assessment of their impact – given the recent creation of most RSNs, it is far too early for such an approach. The present analysis of RSNs starts with a discussion of their common principle (to mobilize highly qualified people at a distance), and then presents a typology of RSNs according to their specific objectives. Their governance and management are then analyzed. The paper highlights how RSNs, and what could become regional policies 2.0, take advantage of e-technologies.

### *Mobilizing distant resources through regional social networks*

The names, slogans and symbols of RSNs illustrate the desire to mobilize highly qualified people who have left the region, in order to aid regional development in the context of globalization. They all refer to specific territories linked to the external world: Fribourgissima, the black and white network; Uri-Link. The homeland within reach; Südstern (South Star), the network for South Tyroleans abroad; and VS-link (Valais-link). Roots give wings.

This local-global linkage is particularly well advertised by one of Uri-Link's flyers (Figure 1). The local appears with the name Uri, the word *Heimat* (homeland) and the colors of the Uri flag (yellow and black). The bull, with its decorated nose strap and the mountains behind it, recalls some traditional features of this Alpine region, while the iconic Empire State Building in New York City symbolizes the global aspect. Uri, with, through and despite its traditions, wants to take part in globalization: *Das moderne Uri ist global aktiv* (Modern Uri is globally active). In Uri-Link, connections between the local and the global can be built through people from Uri who have left the canton. They are asked to become part of it (*Werden Sie ein Teil davon*) and to join the network (*Jetzt einfach anmelden*), which is made possible by distance-erasing e-technologies (symbolized by the Website and the laptop computer).

Most RSNs discussed here were initiated and are supported by regional authorities (CCJE, Creapole, VS-Link, Uri-Link, Uri Botschafter) or in a public-private partnership (the Chamber of Commerce for Fribourgissima). Some



Fig. 1: Promotion card advertising Uri-Link.  
(Source: derurilink.ch)

of them also receive private funding through sponsoring (Uri-Link, Uri Botschafter, VS-Link, etc.). Südstern was initiated by graduates who had left the South Tyrol region. It received start-up funding from the province and is now fully financed by private partners in exchange for services such as advertising job offers.

While some RSNs may promote a return to the region, their general purpose goes beyond the sole objective of attraction. In many aspects, the emergence of RSNs represents a change in perspective regarding both high-skill out-migration and regional development. First, out-migration is no longer seen as a simple move from one region to another, but as being more complex (think, for example, of brain circulation and multi-local practices). Instead of seeing migrants as motivated only by economic factors, the importance of social, symbolic and cultural attachments to the home region is recognized.

Second, regional development is seen in broader terms as being based not only on local resources (such as workforce and know-how),

but also on extra-local resources (e.g. highly qualified migrants). While this broader approach to regional development is common to all of the examined projects, their fundamental purpose differs. Three main types of RSN can be distinguished: diffuse RSNs, focused RSNs and RSNs of ambassadors. They have various purposes, target publics and territorial projects, and also mirror contrasts in governance, management and policy issues (Table 2).

*Diffuse regional social networks*

First, diffuse RSNs (such as Fribourgissima, Südstern and Uri-Link) establish and maintain links between a region and its dispersed citizens with the aim of creating opportunities for business and knowledge sharing between the region and abroad. They also seek to promote a positive image of the region. Furthermore, they facilitate direct and informal exchanges between members about job offers, business ideas, and so on, paving the way for potential projects, discussions and collaborations of vari-

	Diffuse RSNs	Focused RSNs	RSNs of ambassadors
<b>Purpose</b>	RSN launched as a knowledge-sharing opportunity in social or economic contexts	RSN launched as a tool to achieve targeted objectives and policy strategies	RSN launched as a pool of competence to achieve, promote and legitimise strategic projects
<b>Target public/members</b>	Broadly defined (e.g. close ties with the region)	Defined according to the objective (e.g. potential entrepreneurs)	Appointed <i>ad personam</i> according to strategic skills (e.g. expertise or reputation)
<b>Governance</b>	Word-of-mouth and buzz diffusion on a broad scale Advertisement through well-known personalities Online networking as driving force, events as temporary anchoring in strategic places	Word-of-mouth diffusion and face-to-face promotion (e.g. events in higher education institutions) Online networking as early tool to instigate face-to-face meetings and concrete collaborations	Regular meetings of ambassadors Events to advertise or to instigate projects involving the ambassadors
<b>Management implications</b>	Risk of losing interest in the network, given its broad objectives and heterogeneity of members Importance of ensuring dynamism and longevity	Ability to mobilize personalities with specific skills Creation of trust between members, to facilitate the development of projects	Granting of prerogatives in terms of initiative or decision
<b>Policy implications</b>	To ensure the site is kept up to date and maintains the interest of its members	To ensure trust in the network and complementarity with other policy instruments	To identify and motivate adequate personalities and to involve them in strategic projects

Tab. 2: Synthesis of the types of regional social networks.

ous kinds. Thus, rather than being seen as a tool with a predetermined goal, the RSNs exist for the purpose of networking, in order to create opportunities that can be seized.

Necessarily, diffuse RSNs are open to a large public. Fribourgissima, for example, includes any individual that has close ties with Fribourg (as their home/adoptive region or place of education) and Uri-Link joins people that feel attached to Uri. Südstern is a little more exclusive as it targets South Tyroleans “with a higher education degree or a cosmopolitan attitude, who have lived abroad for at least two years”. Reaching and involving such a wide audience requires strategies for diffusion, communication and management, with online buzz and word-of-mouth diffusion as the main strategies to attract members. Famous personalities from the region are also enlisted to advertise and legitimize the network (e.g. Fribourgissima and Uri-Link).

If the open dimension of such a network reaches a large number of people, it may also make it difficult for members to identify its concrete use. Similar to other online platforms, they need to overcome ephemeral buzz and require continuous management effort to update and entertain the discussion forums and the Website content. As a part of this, advertising the RSN, credibility building and entertainment are achieved through events held regularly both inside and outside the region, with both online and face-to-face relationships promoted in parallel.

### *Focused regional social networks*

In contrast to diffuse RSNs, focused RSNs are more clearly goal-oriented; they are launched as strategic tools to achieve a specific goal in a given policy framework. This is the case of VS-Link and connect.creapole, which are parts of an economic policy to enhance entrepreneurship and job creation in the Valais and Jura. Their objectives are to advertise job offers and to link potential regional partners (enterprises or investors) with external project developers or young entrepreneurs, in particular, students and young graduates. These projects are not exclusively dedicated to regional out-migrations, but young migrants are seen as being more predisposed than others to develop or get involved in projects in their home region.

The promotion and communication of these RSNs are also more focused. Proactive advertisement and contacts are often achieved through face-to-face meetings in higher edu-

cation institutions located outside the region; students may also be invited to visit particular enterprises in the region (connect.creapole) or to meet the main local employers (VS-Link).

Finally, trust in the network and in its organizers is crucial in order to establish an RSN as a credible intermediary. Thus, policy support given to the platform enhances its credibility and legitimacy.

In focused RSNs, e-technologies are regarded as tools to instigate concrete entrepreneurial projects and face-to-face collaborations. In other words, an online network is not an end in itself, but a catalyst for new projects that enhance regional development.

### *Regional social networks of ambassadors*

RSNs of ambassadors gather renowned personalities from the region, in order to advise, initiate, facilitate, legitimize and/or co-develop specific projects. This is the case of CCJE and Uri Ambassadors, both of which have been launched to support regional projects. They also promote new initiatives and communicate a positive image that a region can capitalize on in order to achieve strategic policy objectives.

Networks of ambassadors are much more closed communities than other RSNs, with members appointed *ad personam* according to their skills and the objectives set forth by regional authorities. They can be appointed for their personal expertise (acting as advisors) or reputation (acting as image endorsers), or for their connections to other networks (acting as mediators or gatekeepers into cultural, social and economic milieus outside the region).

Ambassadors' involvement in and influence on projects is a central issue for this kind of RSN. If ambassadors are mobilized to advertise or give credit to projects run by regional authorities, but are not able to have any influence on it, they lose their motivation to engage in the network. Thus, there is a fundamental tension between the desire of local authorities to control regional projects and the need to accept that external ambassadors may influence them.

## **3 Discussion**

While traditional interventions focus on the attraction and retention of the highly skilled, new strategies try to mobilize them at a distance through regional social networks. Regional emigrations are the privileged targets of such poli-

cies, as out-migrants often maintain a sense of belonging and a particular attachment to their home region.

As expressed in the seminar by one person in charge of a Swiss RSN, the impact of these policies “is not yet measurable, but already noticeable.” For a peripheral region, an RSN can promote and develop an image of dynamism not usually attributed to such spaces. Local companies can also profit from an RSN in their recruitment program as well as in prospecting new markets where some out-migrants live. For out-migrants, an RSN is a way to keep links with their home region, to gain information or get involved in projects. They may also return to the region following a job offer. At the same time, an RSN may paradoxically facilitate out-migration through relationships with out-migrants who give information related to external labor and housing markets, etc. However, as one RSN designer declared in an interview, “This risk has to be taken, as the most important thing is that members maintain their interest in the network so that they become a resource for regional development in the long term.”

A key element mentioned by all interlocutors is the necessity to ensure the long-term efficiency of RSNs, and to maintain interest among members. Thus management is crucial not only in technical terms, but also in terms of keeping the network dynamic and active. For diffuse and focused RSNs, it implies the use of e-technologies (Website, etc.) to reach many people, enable contact between members and involve them in discussions, debates or projects. Management is essential as Web platforms and forums are notably based on fads and are thus very fragile. The challenge is to ensure the dynamism of an RSN and the ability to go beyond an ephemeral craze. Ambassador networks are of a different nature; they involve only a few personalities. It is therefore important for its management to clearly define their prerogatives and competences (particularly in respect to the political authorities) in the fields of tangible projects.

The implementation and development of RSNs raise several questions related to both external communication (making the network visible and recognizable, attracting members) and internal communication (making the network alive and durable). External communication is designed differently in the different case studies: advertisement campaigns, mobilization through renowned citizens, or word of mouth (friends, etc.).

The experts interviewed highlighted the fact that attracting members is not enough if they do not identify with the objectives of the RSN in the long run. Thus regular management of the site and attentive follow-up are necessary in order to maintain the members' interest. This requires a time investment difficult to assume on a voluntary basis, and so projects usually imply at least one part-time job.

They also highlighted how important it is to guarantee the credibility and stability of the network. One way of doing this is to have the network set up or recognized by public authorities. This public credit provides a fundamental difference to platforms such as Facebook or LinkedIn, which, according to our experts, cannot be seen as an alternative to ad hoc RSNs due to several fundamental issues, such as the lack of confidentiality, fewer opportunities for real interactions and discussions between members, difficulty in managing thematic or geographic subgroups of members, dependence on external technical decisions, etc.

Nevertheless, while e-technologies provide new opportunities to reach distant members of a network, on their own they are not sufficient to turn these members into resources for a region. The organization of events in the home region is a way of reminding members of a common identity, of enabling face-to-face meetings and of making the network known to the local population and media. Some conferences, for example, aim to gather all of the network's members for presentations and discussions around themes related to the development of the region (e.g. Global Forum Südtirol). Other events invite out-migrants to rediscover their home region and the opportunities it offers, and in other cases, meetings take place outside the region, in engineering schools (Creapole) or abroad, in order to prospect new markets (Fribourgissima).

According to our interviewees, focused objectives and concrete projects are crucial in order to meet the challenges of a virtual community (participation, dynamism, longevity, etc.). This makes the network known and credible and gives members the opportunity to identify with it in the long term. Lastly, RSNs enable the mobilization of skills and ideas that are of interest for the region as well as for members. In other words, RSNs are anchored in face-to-face events and concrete projects in the region of origin as well as in distant and strategic places, and are entangled in online and offline activities.

## Conclusion

The projects analyzed in this paper show that mobilities and e-technologies can provide new opportunities for peripheries that will reduce the need to play the traditional game of attraction. Mobilizing regional emigration through RSNs appears a pragmatic alternative, enabling a region to benefit from skills and resources at a distance. Through their social, emotional, cultural or symbolic ties with their home region, out-migrants can be mobilized as ambassadors, advisers or mediators. Nevertheless, RSNs are not considered replacements for traditional initiatives seeking to improve local conditions of regional innovation, rather they are seen as a necessary and complementary strategy, whereby thinking about local development becomes thinking about distance as well.

From a general perspective, important critical issues regarding peripheries, mobilities and e-technologies in regional policies can be drawn from our analysis of RSNs. Traditional regional policies aim to attract creative and highly skilled workers to the region, and this competition is mainly played according to the rules of metropolitan regions. For peripheral regions facing the out-migration of their skilled workers, the war for talent often appears, at least partially, as a lost battle. Are RSNs thus a policy of the poor?

A simple interpretation could reduce RSNs to being chosen by default. However, such policies, although more likely to emerge in peripheral regions today, reflect deeper socio-economic changes in territorial development, which should be taken seriously in future regional policies. In a world characterized by a growing mobility of people, knowledge and capital, territorial innovation should not be restricted to the local capacity to generate/exploit and drain/retain strategic resources, but should also take part in and take advantage of the networks built by globalization. In this view, peripheral regions can be regarded as pioneers rather than followers.

In such a context, e-technologies obviously serve as a new strategic tool for regional policy-makers. However, they should not be idealized. To be effective, online RSNs have to survive the short life cycles of fashion. Furthermore, while virtual spaces facilitate knowledge-sharing across distance, geographical proximity remains significant when it comes to concrete projects and partnerships. Thus e-technologies are not *per se* the new policy best practice. They

must be applied in a more systematic approach of territorial development based on multi-local relationships and the mutual engagement of regional authorities and distant key players.

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## Notes

- 1 The survey found out-migration to be motivated not only by labor market factors, but also by social ties and the living environment.

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