



# COMMUNICATION AS THE INTERSECTION OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2018 EUROPEAN MEDIA  
AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL

**Edited by Maria Francesca Murru, Fausto Colombo,  
Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Risto  
Kunelius, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Leif Kramp,  
Nico Carpentier**

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# **“Yay! I am officially an #estonian #eResident!” Representations of Estonian e-residency as a novel kind of state-related status and affiliation on Twitter**

*Piia Tammpuu*

## **Abstract**

New forms of translocal communication supported by digital infrastructures are seen to extend personal spaces of interaction as well as to intensify the complexity of spatial relations. Using the case of Estonian e-residency, this study examines the concept of *virtual residency* as a novel kind of state-related status and affiliation. Estonian e-residency is a government-supported transnational digital identity scheme which gives non-residents of the country remote access to the state’s digital infrastructure and e-services via means of digital authentication. Drawing on theorisations on the construction of the self and identity in social media, the study scrutinizes the ways in which e-residency is represented among its users by analysing personal “status-updates” about becoming an e-resident on Twitter. The analysis focuses on self-identities and attachments that are accentuated in relation to one’s status as an e-resident, and on the types of *digital subjectivity* constructed around the concept of e-residency. The analysis is based on a small-scale Twitter corpus consisting of thematic tweets (n=525) by individual Twitter users (n=271) who explicitly present themselves as Estonian e-residents in their microblogging practices. Qualitative textual analysis combined with basic quantitative metrics are applied as the main method in the study. The findings suggest that digitally enabled transnationalism and digital nomadism appear as the two major perspectives from which one’s self-identity as an Estonian e-resident are constructed. The significance attributed to one’s status as an e-resident emphasizes the increased opportunities of connectivity and mobility that are seen as part of one’s self-realisation in contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** transnationalism, digital nomadism, e-residency, self-identity, Twitter

## 1. Introduction

Communication technologies reshape the space of human agency by extending the scope of physical and virtual interactions into which people are able to enter (Adams, 1995). New forms of translocal communication supported by digital infrastructures are likewise seen to expand personal spaces of interaction but also to intensify the complexity of spatial relations (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Using the case of Estonian e-residency, this study explores the concept of *virtual residency* as a novel kind of state-related status and affiliation backed by a government-supported digital identity scheme.

In 2014, the Estonian government approved the concept of *e-residency* – the idea of issuing a special digital identity card (the e-resident ID) to non-residents of the country with the aim to give remote access to Estonia’s digital infrastructure and e-services via means of digital authentication and without the requirement of (nor with the right to) physical residency in the country. Although the concept suggests an analogy to physical residency, e-residency is rather claimed to challenge traditional notions of residency, citizenship and territoriality (Kotka, Vargas, & Korjus, 2015) and offer a model of algorithmic de-territorial form of “*stateless citizenship*” (Calzada, 2018). While e-residency does not grant formal citizenship status, it offers a range of digital benefits, independent of one’s location and nationality, that are otherwise available only to the citizens and residents of the state. In this respect, e-residency can also be seen as a means which turns the digitalised nation-state into a globally marketable and sellable commodity (Tammpuu & Masso, 2018).

In addition to theorisations that seek to explain the implications of e-residency, this study aims to examine the ways in which e-residency is represented as a special status and affiliation among its users by analysing personal “status-updates” about becoming an Estonian e-resident on Twitter, the popular microblogging platform. Personal tweets enable the analysis of both individual discourses as well as the ways they come to form certain collectively shared streams of meaning and representation (see e.g. Bozdag & Smets, 2017; cf. Murthy, 2018). The analysis focuses on self-identities and attachments that are accentuated in relation to one’s status as an e-resident, and on the types of *digital subjectivity* constructed around the concept of e-residency.

## 2. Being an e-resident as a novel kind of status and affiliation

Government-supported digital identity systems can be considered as mechanisms of (digital) inclusion which define and delimit the range of digital subjects entitled to particular digital rights and benefits. Digital subjects covered by such systems are usually defined and delimited based on other instruments of inclusion, such



as citizenship or residency. Estonian e-residency as a transnational digital identity scheme targeted to non-residents of the country is based on a different logic in which the inclusion into the digital nation is untied from other forms of territorial and political attachment and belonging. Digital identity systems also appear as mechanisms of digital enablement which give access to different types of digital interactions and consequently reshape personal activity space(s). Hence, a digital identity not only reflects certain aspects of one's personal identity but also enhances particular social identities and relationships through the socio-spatial contexts in which such digitally mediated interactions take place. Thus the question is what kinds of (additional) identities and affiliations e-residency could offer to its holders.

The major focus of the e-residency programme has been on supporting location-independent business and work by offering means to act independent of one's (physical) location and be digitally mobile. Moving, as well as the capacity to move between places, either physically or virtually, can be seen as a kind of personal capital that relates to and can be converted into other kinds of capital (Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004; Urry, 2007). Accordingly, the opportunities for mobility can also be sources of a higher social status and power. This highlights the potential of e-residency to advance one's status, particularly in the context where connectivity and mobility are increasingly seen as mandatory elements of self-realisation (Jansson, 2018).

Based on individual applications of e-residency, different groups can be distinguished as the main beneficiaries of the e-residency programme. Among the early adopters of e-residency, there were mostly people from Estonia's neighbouring countries (Finland and Russia). After the implementation of the online application platform in 2015 and the involvement of Estonian embassies as service-points for issuing the e-resident ID, the geographical range of nationals applying for Estonian e-residency has expanded fast (see e.g. Kotka et al., 2015). By January 2019, ca 53,000 citizens from 166 countries had applied for Estonian e-residency and ca 50,000 of them had already been issued their e-resident ID. Altogether, individuals working in virtual businesses and/or interested in location-independent international business (or work) constitute the largest group of applicants since the beginning of the programme in 2014 (as of January 2019, 41% of total number of applicants), followed by the group of entrepreneurs interested more specifically in registering their business to Estonia (27% of applicants).<sup>1</sup> While the majority of applicants has thus a business-related motivation to become an e-resident, there are also those who would like to obtain e-residency in order to take advantage of secure digital authentication in general (9% of applicants). Besides the aforementioned groups, a share of applicants describes themselves as "fans of e-residency" (14% of applicants), thus expressing a more general interest in the concept rather than a clear intention

1 Up-to-date statistics about the application trends of Estonian e-residency are presented on the webpage <https://app.cyfe.com/dashboards/195223/5587fe4e52036102283711615553>

to use it. The main motivations thus allow one to distinguish, on the one hand, business-related vs other kind of incentives for becoming an e-resident, and on the other hand, instrumental, usage-related vs non-instrumental interest in e-residency. On the whole, the applicants of e-residency have been predominantly male (88 % of all applicants). As entrepreneurs form the major target group of the e-residency programme, this may reflect, among other aspects, the global gender gap in entrepreneurship. At the same time, this gender imbalance can be seen as contributing to the reproduction of gendered inequalities concerning digital capacities and inclusion.

### 3. Self-identity and community building on Twitter

Twitter is a microblogging platform designed to broadcast short but regular bursts of content, mainly in the form of users' "status-updates", to audiences beyond a user's direct social network (Murthy, 2018: 12). An important part of the communication on Twitter, similarly to other social media platforms, is about the creation and the presentation of the "self" where the act of tweeting can be seen as an explicit instance of self-production (Murthy, 2018: 31). Accordingly, "status-updating"-practice on Twitter may become a meaningful part of people's identity construction as well as of their identity maintenance: "*I tweet, therefore I am*" (Murthy, 2018: 33; Zappavigna, 2014: 209).

Using Foucault's notion for culturally evolved means and practices that are employed for taking care of the self, Marwick argues that social media embodies neoliberal technologies of the self which impose the ideals of entrepreneurialism and "*self-realisation*" (Marwick, 2013a: 11-14). According to Marwick, social media fosters an "*individualistic, competitive notion of identity that prioritises individual status-seeking*" and encourages people to produce corresponding types of subjectivities (Marwick, 2013a: 17). Being driven by the logic of attention economy that prioritises visibility, ordinary users are apt to adopt marketing and advertising techniques drawn from commercials and celebrity culture to "*self-promote*" themselves via social media platforms (Marwick, 2013a; Page, 2012). This has made scholars view Twitter as a "*linguistic marketplace*", that is a site for self-mediation suited to performances of self-promotion and self-branding (Page, 2012; cf. Murthy, 2018).

Within the linguistic marketplace of Twitter, users can employ different semi-otic resources that help them to increase visibility and attain attention. For example, by using hashtags that make their tweets searchable, tweeters can make their professional identity searchable and promote their identity as affiliated within a wider professional field (Page, 2012: 198). Twitter is also unique in facilitating public interactions across discrete social networks by providing an opportunity to communicate directly and in a seamless way via @-mention not only with one's friends

but also with other users of Twitter (Murthy, 2018: 5). Mentioning a user with the @-character serves as a kind of “*amplified*” reference and potential tool for self-promotion since other users may also view the mention (Zappavigna, 2017: 210).

The aforementioned communicative affordances of Twitter also highlight its potential for constructing shared meanings, values and identities to facilitate community building (Stephansen & Couldry, 2014). An effective mechanism of community-building is through tagging that may lead to the emergence of “*hashtags-communities*” (Murthy, 2018) and “*ad hoc*’ *publics*” formed around particular issues or topics discussed on Twitter (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). For analysing how affiliation is enacted in discourse by the use of hashtags, Zappavigna (2014; 2017) has proposed the concept of “*ambient affiliation*” to denote “*social bonding where microbloggers as individuals do not necessarily have to interact directly, but may engage in practices such as hashtagging in order to participate in particular kinds of ‘belonging’*” (Zappavigna, 2017: 216). Hashtags also play a role in performing an identity, as appending a hashtag presupposes that a post on Twitter has an ambient audience (imagined “others”) who may share, or contest, the values construed by the accompanying verbal text (Zappavigna, 2014: 211).

#### 4. Method and data

This study applies a qualitative “*small-data*” approach to researching Twitter, which enables to focus on a particular user group and gain more in-depth understanding of the processes of meaning-making (see e.g. Bozdog & Smets, 2017; Iveson, 2017; Marwick, 2013b; Stephansen & Couldry, 2014).

The Twitter corpus used in the study was compiled through purposeful multistage sampling. In the first stage, the aim was to identify individual Twitter users who explicitly present themselves as (potential) e-residents in their microblogging practices. For that purpose, a systematic monthly-based screening of tweets on Estonian e-residency was carried out by using the “advanced search” function of Twitter and a list of keywords and hashtags referring to Estonian e-residency. The search covered a three-year period, starting from December 2014, when the Estonian e-residency programme was officially launched, to December 2017. In this way, 271 individual Twitter users as (potential) e-residents were identified. In the second stage, a systematic individual account-based screening was conducted among the selected users by using the same list of keywords and hashtags and covering the same temporal scope. In this stage, the English language was set as an additional limitation for the search. As a result, a corpus of 525 tweets including an explicit self-reference about being or becoming an Estonian e-resident posted by 271 individual Twitter users was compiled.

For the analysis of the corpus, a qualitative textual analysis combined with basic quantitative metrics (e.g. frequencies of hashtags) was applied. All tweets were manually coded in Excel and also stored as separate files in the picture format. The coding comprised, on the one hand, aspects which characterise the use of different semiotic resources and multimodality in tweets, as well as the interactive dimension of tweeting (e.g. use of hashtags and @-mentions; attached visuals and other linked sources; the number of likes, comments and retweets of a tweet). On the other hand, thematic codes were inductively developed through the close reading of tweets (e.g. spatial and scalar references included in the tweets; professional, social and cultural references used for self-identification).

In addition, some profile data (e.g. professional field, gender, location), if provided by the particular user on Twitter, were collected about the users selected for the analysis. Profile data revealed that the vast majority of users in the sample were male, with only 10 per cent being female users. This is roughly similar to the overall gender division among applicants of e-residency, as referred earlier in this paper. Technology, engineering, (start-up) business and entrepreneurship, data analytics and consultancy, but also travelling, were the most frequently listed professional fields and activities in the personal Twitter profiles. It is also notable that several users mentioned the fact of being an Estonian e-resident in their Twitter profile.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. *Becoming an e-resident as a “status-update” on Twitter*

The novelty of the concept of *virtual residency* is undoubtedly an aspect that makes e-residency a compelling topic in the social media context. As ordinary microbloggers on Twitter compete for attention and visibility, becoming an e-resident, even if in a relatively marginal and unknown country like Estonia, is therefore an event that is considered to be worth sharing with others. The following tweets can be seen as typical examples of personal “status-updates” on Twitter to announce about one’s becoming an e-resident of Estonia. Usually, these tweets include a hashtag referring to e-residency or e-residents as a common marker:

Estonian Police and Border Guard Board granted me today e-residency of Estonia. Feeling good about it. #E-resident of #Estonia (14/12/2015).

I picked up my #eresidency card this morning. Yay! I am officially an #estonian #eResident! (23/08/2017).

While some users had only a single “status-update” in relation to be(com)ing an e-resident, others tweeted repeatedly about their way to e-residency (submitting the application, being approved and receiving the e-resident ID) or shared their experiences of using the e-resident ID in practice. In several cases, these “status-updates” also provided some photo-evidence, for example such as an attached or a linked Instagram photo of the personal e-resident ID card or a photo of the person (or a selfie) demonstrating his/her e-resident ID. Often these photos had been taken in front of an Estonian embassy or a service-point of Estonian Police and Border Guard Board where the card was issued, thus indicating the involvement of the Estonian state. In some instances, the tweets also took the form of an explicit self-promotion, for example by including a link to a personal blog or to a video clip about one’s personal experiences of e-residency.

However, besides self-representation and self-promotion, these individual tweets form an inseparable part of the marketing communication of the e-residency programme on Twitter. By including @e\_Residents, the official Twitter account for communicating the news and updates of the e-residency programme, into their personal posts, individual Twitter users not only have the probability to be tweeted back by the communication team of the e-residency programme but also attain additional visibility among the followers of the programme on Twitter. As the following examples demonstrate, the use of the account @e\_Residents in the individual tweets indicates a rather subtle and seamless interaction in some cases:

Just applied to become one of the @e\_Residents of #Estonia. [-] (27/10/2015).<sup>2</sup>

Finally got my @e\_Residents card. looking forward to making full use of it. [-] (21/04/2017).

In a similar way, the users also employed the institutional Twitter account @e\_Estonia, aimed at creating the image and reputation of Estonia as “e-Estonia”, an advanced digital society, by posting news on Estonia’s digital developments and innovations on Twitter:

Just applied to be an e-resident in @e\_estonia an amazing initiative (11/11/2015).

Thus, besides seeking personal visibility and attention, the personal “status-updates” about be(com)ing an e-resident also contribute to the promotion and marketing of the e-residency programme as well as to Estonia’s nation-branding in social media.

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2 Here and elsewhere in the text, the symbol [-] marks that the original tweet has been shortened.

### 5.2. *Being an e-resident as an affiliation with an imagined collectivity*

The individual tweets on be(com)ing an e-resident also indicate an imagined affiliation with a broader collectivity of e-residents. On the one hand, this kind of collectivity is constructed around the processes of digitalisation and related agents, as shown in the example below:

[-] I'm happy to be one of those digital people! [-] (21/09/2015).

[-] I'm feeling proud and honored for being a part of digital revolution. [-] (03/11/2017).

An additional aspect which characterises such imagined affiliation, especially during the first years of the e-residency programme, is the imagination of being among the first adopters of e-residency globally:

Proud to be one of the first adapt to global trend #eresidency (02/11/15).

I'm very proud to be one of the first @e\_Residents in the world :) [-] (02/12/2015).

This suggests an imagination of e-residents as a “*pioneering community*”, the concept proposed by Hepp (2016) to typify groups acting as “*intermediaries between the development and the appropriation of new (media) technologies*” and characterised by experimental use of technology and active engagement with its development (Hepp, 2016: 918).

On the other hand, the imagined affiliation is explicitly associated with Estonia, particularly with the notion of “e-Estonia” as the signifier of the Estonian digital society:

Honoured to be in the first wave of E-estonians [-] (26/06/2015).

[-] I'm now officially part of the Estonia e-residency virtual state (10/07/2017).

Independent of whether e-residency is considered within a global or a national framework, a common denominator attributed to the imagined affiliation related to one's status as an e-resident is thus a favourable attitude towards digital technologies and digitalisation in general.

### 5.3. *E-residency as an additional layer of transnational identity*

Since Estonian e-residency does not substitute existing territorial and political attachments but rather provides an additional (state-related) status and affiliation, one's national identity and categories of belonging are presented as co-existing with one's

*“Yay! I am officially an #estonian #eResident!”*

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status as an e-resident. However, as revealed from the tweets below, it is not just one’s nationality that is being emphasised in relation to one’s status as an e-resident but also the fact of being a pioneer among one’s co-nationals in obtaining that status:

Mission accomplished. I just collected my Estonian e-resident card. First Maldivian #eresident of #estonia (10/02/2016).

Only 620 Indians have e-Residency of Estonia! Happy to be 621st Indian! #ProudIndian (30/04/2017).

But becoming an Estonian e-resident may be also presented as an act of protest to express criticism towards one’s national government:

Today I finally became an #Estonian #eResident. Let’s just say it’s a small protest to the embarrassing government we have here in #Finland. (24/01/2017).

This kind of opposition to the national authorities became especially evident in the context of Brexit, which enabled some to highlight the advantage of Estonian e-residency as offering digital residency in the European Union:

Yay! My Estonian e-resident application has been successful! Do your worst, brexiteers... #stayingin #iloveEU (08/11/2016).

The following self-representations illustrate in an even more explicit way how e-residency is presented as another layer of transnational self-identity and affiliation within other (trans)national attachments, experienced and institutionalised through citizenship, residency, tax residency and professional activity. Here the presentation of e-residency as an additional “status” in one’s “collection of affiliations” can also be seen as a demonstration of increased personal capital achieved through such “status upgrade”:

Belgian, resident in Serbia, company based in Estonia, working for African Regional Org. I have now a digital identity; I am e-Resident. (08/10/2015).

[-] Italian citizen, Finnish resident, Estonian e-resident and Russian tax payer. [-] (11/10/2016).

The perception of e-residency as enabling transnationality thus stresses its significance in creating multi-local affiliations and activity-spaces encompassing multiple national settings.

#### 5.4. E-residency as an enabler of digital mobility

Another way of presenting one's status as an e-resident is by emphasizing the capacity to "digitally surpass" territorially bound (national) spaces of action and to relocate flexibly between places while being "connected". Such capacity is emphasised for example by notions and hashtags such as be(com)ing "global", "location-independent" and "stateless":

Application submitted for #eResidency of Estonia (@e\_Residents). Seems perfect for a #stateless international business person. (22/10/2015).

Another step towards being global – received Estonia e-Residency! (30/04/2017).

I'm looking into Estonian e-residency myself #estonia #eresidency #locationindependent (03/07/2017).

The enhanced opportunities for connectivity and mobility obtained through e-residency appear here as premises of (professional) self-realisation and are often captured by the notion of "digital nomad", which is included as a frequent self-reference in the tweets:

Applying for the #estonia #eResidency right now. "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for a #digitalnomad" #freedom #remotework (19/07/2017).

#Estonia E-residency! The card will connect you anywhere. Today Copenhagen. #eresidency #digitalnomad [-] (03/08/2017).

#digitalnomad is also the most frequently used hashtag in the analysed Twitter corpus besides #eresidency and #eresident. Being a "digital nomad" thus turns out to be a more popular category for self-identification among e-residents than being a "digital citizen", for example. However, the use of the hashtag #digitalnomad in the particular tweets does not enable to one to identify all possible connotations that the particular self-reference(s) has for particular e-residents. Yet, it highlights the importance of e-residency in supporting social identities and (digital) subjectivities not only anchored in particular physical or territorial contexts but also experienced and expressed through mobility as in the case of nomadic mode of subjectivity (D'Andrea, 2006).

## 6. Conclusions

This study examined the ways in which Estonian e-residency is imagined and presented as a particular status and affiliation by its holders on Twitter. By em-



phasizing the (digital) benefits and advantages that one has due to the status as an Estonian e-resident, the personal “status-updates” on Twitter about be(com)ing an e-resident generally serve as indications of a “status-upgrade”. As Estonian e-residency does not come to substitute but rather supplement existing national or state-related affiliations, such as citizenship or residency, it is seen to offer a novel kind of transnational belonging and status. In this context, e-residency is also presented as part of one’s (strategic) collection of transnational affiliations (“multiple affiliations at multiple sites”). These manifold affiliations indicate not only one’s “embeddedness” in different socio-spatial contexts but also the scope and intensity of one’s transnationality as a certain personal capital. In general, the significance attributed to one’s status as an e-resident emphasizes the increased opportunities of connectivity and mobility that are seen as part of one’s self-realisation in contemporary societies (Jansson, 2018). “Transnationalism” and “digital nomadism” are accordingly the two major perspectives from which one’s status and self-identity as an Estonian e-resident are constructed.

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### **Biography**

Piia Tammpuu is a PhD Candidate at the Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu, Estonia. She has graduated from sociology at the University of Tartu and received a master's degree in Nationalism Studies at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. Her doctoral research focuses on digitally enabled and supported modes of transnationalism and mobility.

E-mail: piia.tammpuu@gmail.com