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## LINKING PITTSBURGHERS FAR AND WIDE WITH THE DIGITAL TOOLS OF TODAY

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What, if anything, can be gained when Rust Belt (Tech Belt? Post-Industrial Belt? Midwestern Cooperative Corridor?) cities form alliances in cyberspace? It might be meaningful; it might spin a connective web; it might be smoke and ephemera.

The Great Lakes Urban Exchange wants to find out.

(First, does Pittsburgh even qualify for membership? Bubby Brister, a Steelers QB in the early 1990s, famously recalled the problems of winter play at Three Rivers Stadium with the wind blowing off the lake, and we have to presume he was talking about Lake Erie, so, yeah, we're solid.)

The Great Lakes Urban Exchange (or GLUE, [gluespace.wordpress.com](http://gluespace.wordpress.com)) met over the Groundhog Day weekend in Buffalo to "craft a new narrative for industrial cities of the Great Lakes region, [a] multiyear initiative that will use new media to build networks for change. GLUE will engage young urbanists in an effort to bolster regional identity, envision livable urban futures, and tell stories about the people creating them."

Fine. OK. How does identity-bolstering and future-envisioning help those regions in a concrete way -- today, tomorrow or two decades from now? And how can GLUE's pilot program help us reconnect the Pittsburgh Diaspora, the old and, especially, the young who have left town for greener pastures (read: available jobs)? Can it help us win back our lost sons?

Their ideas?

Their money?

Can anything?

Reality check: "The reality is that most regions export their talent. [Kevin Stolarick of the Martin Prosperity Institute] developed a measure called the Brain Drain/Gain Index that compares the percentage of an area's population in college to the fraction of college grads in its work force. The upshot: Ten percent of regions are brain gainers; nine in 10 experience brain drain," writes Carnegie Mellon expatriate **Richard Florida**, whose new book "Who's Your City?" hits stores next month.

So we're all draining brains, Pittsburgh and Boston and nearly everybody else. That's what happens in college towns. Instead of preventing Pittsburghers from leaving town, perhaps we should be staying in touch with the ones who leave -- a citywide exit interview? (waitaminute, that's the Diaspora Report's job) -- and concentrating

on recruiting new brains, who will surely leave us, but who cares? Brain circulation, as Burgh Diaspora blogger Jim Russell calls it, is better than no brains at all. (He's at burghdiaspora.blogspot.com.)

**Richard Florida** says the world is spiky -- cities are still important, in a geographic sense, and a chart that measured intellectual and material output would spike in and around urban centers. But Thomas Friedman says the world is flat -- Asia is on the same plane with Pittsburgh. In either event, where there are spikes, there is a greater opportunity these days for the people living in the spikes to communicate flatly with each other. Detroit can talk to Cleveland. Buffalo to Pittsburgh.

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But so what? We're obviously rambling in search of a thread for this column, which brings us back to GLUE (I think). And the Rust Belt Bloggers Network ([rustbelt.ning.com](http://rustbelt.ning.com)). And IntoPittsburgh, the fledgling network of Pittsburghers past and present who are hoping to find a way to reconnect in a way that benefits the city in ways small and (maybe) large. Jim Russell is advancing the network with his "Globalburgh" at [Pittsburgh Quarterly](http://pqblog.pittsburghquarterly.com). See [pqblog.pittsburghquarterly.com](http://pqblog.pittsburghquarterly.com).

It's Facebook, for cities and their human capital. Part marketing, part networking, part posting a bunch of stuff online and hoping somebody reads it.

It seems that a lot of places are trying to do a lot of the same things that a handful of enterprising Pittsburghers seek to do, so it must be a good idea, right? The distinguishing factor, the Jim Russells of the world believe, is the notion that Pittsburgh's emotional umbilical cord is somehow more durable than the ones connecting other cities to their native born.

Then again, Cleveland's Chris Varley thinks the same thing: "It is a counterintuitive and controversial idea to think that diaspora is a good thing for a region, but in fact it is. The more people outside a place who share a tie to a place, the more likely it is that those people can be called upon to help support the region and its up-and-coming generations. For proof of that you can look back in history to the original Diaspora, and the support networks that exist outside of Israel that still feel strong ties to a desire to support the development of this geographic place" ([techfutures.net/2008/02/the-cleveland-diaspora](http://techfutures.net/2008/02/the-cleveland-diaspora)).

We're thinking alike. So why not band together? That's the point of GLUE -- obsessing over arbitrary city boundaries is soooo 1900s. Obsessing over regional boundaries; now that's progressive thinking.

If IntoPittsburgh can't find enough willing partners, maybe IntoGreatLakes can achieve some kind of critical mass.

OK. And then what?