

Introduction: Transformation of nationalism and diaspora in the digital age

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Abstract

This introduction to the four papers that make up this themed section locates them in the wider theoretical perspective from which they originate, and highlights the importance of taking into account digital media and technologies as an independent factor that significantly transforms contemporary nationalisms and social identities. Digital media has intensified and accelerated the relationship between culture and politics. It offers new ways of community-building and identity-making: both top-down and bottom-up, both within the nation-state and beyond its borders. New research will hopefully explore the complex ways in which both elite and lay understanding and practice of nationalism are evolving in competition and collaboration with each other.

KEYWORDS

cyberspace, diaspora, digital nationalism, digital technologies, media, sociology of nationalism

It has been 36 years since Benedict Anderson wrote his famous *Imagined Communities* in 1983. Much has happened during that time. The creation of the World Wide Web has proved itself equivalent to a new industrial revolution. The development of digital technologies has brought about profound changes to many spheres of social life, including media consumption and nation-building. Today, the national “imagination” and people's sense of belonging

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Correction added on 6 April 2021: The Abstract has been corrected in this version.

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to the same nation go far beyond the reach of Andersonian print capitalism. This significantly transforms the very notions of both the nation-state and national identity as well as related phenomena such as colonialism (Coudry & Mejias, 2019) or great power status (Lee, 2019) and many others. The role of media in society is growing every day, and this in turn results in the increasing dependence of culture and politics on media and their logic (Hjarvard, 2013).

Moreover, traditional media logic is now complemented by networked media logic, creating omnipresent hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013). This results in greater "mediatisation" of various spheres of social life, including political communication, personal communication, cultural reproduction and basic norms of social interaction (Baym, 2010; Fuchs, 2014; Morozov, 2013; Nowak-Teter, 2019; Turkle, 2011). The recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown us most strikingly how important digital media has become in shaping national responses to the epidemic by spreading useful tips, support apps, cheerful videos and psychological support (Goode, Stroup, & Gaufman, 2020). At the same time, as the epidemic has stimulated nationally bounded policy responses (Bieber, 2020), including "vaccine nationalism" (Rutschman, 2020), it has also blurred the boundaries of the nation since the virus is a global threat requiring ultimately a global response. The COVID-19 pandemic makes it particularly important for us to understand the changing dynamics of nationalism in the age of digital media.

One of the authors in this section, Michael Skey, recently published a literature review of academic studies on the intersection of media and nationalism (Skey, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this introduction is not to repeat this overview but rather to propose alternative perspectives on studies of *digital* media and nationalism and to point out possible directions for further research from the perspective of nationalism studies.

Castells' idea about how a new global networked society (Castells, 2011) would replace the old world order of nation states became both widely popular and challenged in many ways. In recent years, scholars have addressed the specific question of how the nation as a focus of political identity has not only survived but also flourished in the digital age that accompanied globalisation. It turned out digital connections tend to reinforce national imaginations. As Timothy Snyder once noticed in his essay for *The New York Times*, "Cult of personality used to require monuments; now it requires memes. Social media consumes the public imagination like the giant statues of tyrants from former times consumed public space" (Snyder, 2018). Monuments are quite unlike memes: they are built to last and are typically state projects. In contrast, memes are generated in large numbers from diverse sources, and even the most successful ones have a short half-life. Moreover, methodological nationalism, that is, a way of thinking about the world as constituted of nation-states, informs the creation of "networked societies," often reproducing national boundaries by using country-specific domains and country-sensitive algorithms (Halavais, 2000; Segev, Ahituv, & Barzilai-Nahone, 2007; Shklovski & Struthers, 2010).

Digital technologies often play a vital role in contemporary forms of nationalism. A significant degree of scholarly attention is being paid to topics such as how populist politics uses social media to instigate nationalist sentiments (Krämer, 2017; Pajnik & Sauer, 2017; and many more) with much attention devoted to the importance of ethnosymbolism in Trump's social media campaign (Schertzer & Woods, 2020), that proves that not only the nation but also race and ethnicity is also returning to centre of the political stage in the contemporary world—not that they ever really went away, as Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez note in their contribution to this section. There is a growing literature on how digital media affect identity formation (Glukhov, 2017; Kania-Lundholm & Lindgren, 2017; Mainsah, 2014) and on the engagement of online diasporas into the politics of both countries of origin and destination (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Bernal, 2006; Sablina, 2019). There are a few theoretical attempts to analyse the experiences of transnationalism in cyberspace (Christensen, 2012; Eriksen, 2007). There are also studies of digital nationalism in specific countries like China (Schneider, 2018; Wu, 2007), Russia (Budnitskiy, 2018) or India (Gittinger, 2018). Some approach digital nationalism from a state-led perspective while others look at connective digital movements from below. What brings together these diverse subjects is the continued—and in fact growing—salience of ethnic identification in multicultural societies, as well as the desire to find new ways of boosting social solidarity within them. Surprisingly, though, it is still rare to find more systematic treatments of what are the effects of digital media on the transformation of nation-building, ethnic mobilisation and the fostering of cultural diversity in contemporary societies.

Instead, as Michael Skey has already noted, most research focuses on extreme cases and the negative connotations of nationalism (2020, p. 5). We argue that digital technologies create new opportunities for ordinary people to participate in the symbolic construction of community and social movements, whether it be state-led patriotism or an oppositional minority movement (Yusupova, forthcoming). In other words, nationalism became even more engaging and entertaining in the digital age. It is no longer an elitist enterprise: it became more accessible for ordinary folk, which makes it an attractive framework for making sense of daily life in an increasingly complex world. The possibility to engage whenever it is convenient makes nationalism an attractive way to be politically active and feel a sense of purpose and belonging through engagement in the digital domain. The “daily plebiscite” of nationalism, to recall the classic phrase of Ernest Renan, is now happening in cyberspace, when people chose which symbols or news to share, comment or “like.” There is always something new to discuss online with compatriots or co-ethnics every day, something up-to-date and something you have to have an opinion about since everyone is talking about it (Greenfeld, 2014). Therefore, cyberspace becomes a crucial space for national imagination and community boundary making from the bottom-up. These and other phenomena need further analysis that can inform up-to-date understandings of contemporary forms of nationalism.

This special section aims to propose new perspectives on understanding the mundane role of digital technologies in ongoing transformations of nationhood, national and ethnic identities and diasporic transnationalism within and between states. It is about how the participatory character of new media changed our understanding of practices related to nation-building and nationalism as community formation and identity reproduction.

The special section consists of four papers that offer diverse visions on various elements of nationalism and transnationalism today, based on presentations at the workshop in Durham University on 14–15 March 2019. From a theoretical understanding of the role of nationalism in new ecosystem of digital platforms to the effects of artificial intelligence (AI), these papers contribute to a deeper understanding of how contemporary nationalism is being boosted by digital technologies.

Sabina Miheji and Cesar Jiménez-Martínez propose to shift the focus from “hot” online nationalist events to more “banal” and mundane practices of nationalism that then trigger more visible manifestations of nationalism on the Internet. They closely look at significant qualitative changes that digital media brought to nationalism, such as diversification, polarisation and commodification. They argue that the participatory opportunities of digital technologies have enabled a wider range of actors to participate in public communication, thus making national imagination more fragmented and nationalisms potentially more diverse. In their view, the commodification of nationalism comes from the political economy of digital platforms, where nations are increasingly imagined and communicated as communities of consumers. Emotions and ideas also transferred into tradable “commodities,” which are valued through various types of currency such as attention, users, data and money. Importantly, this paper, written by media specialists, highlights the value of interdisciplinary dialogue between nationalism scholars and media and communication scholars, suggesting many meaningful research questions and new hypotheses.

Paul Goode's paper addresses the impact of AI on nationalism by adopting a structural approach, looking at the progression of the technology from robotic process automation through machine learning to cognitive engagement. Nations compete to master this new technology, which means that “imagined communities become both easier to imagine and easier to fake.” Goode fosters an important debate over various implications that AI causes for states' territorial control, cultural homogenisation and international inequality. In this paper, he advances a theoretical perspective that the defining element of state sovereignty shifts now from territorial control to the management and manipulation of population data due to the development of AI. In its turn, this could lead to the cultural homogenisation of the state's population. The systematic gathering of data on mundane national practices means that they can easily be learnt and then replicated by AI which “in effect, achieves the nationalist vision of representing every member of the nation as interchangeable, but in a more abstract format in which interchangeability is a function of derived social practices.” This already has been shown through troll attacks, where success often depends on their adoption of convincing national personae.

In her paper on online ethnic identification and the migrant community of Persian migrants to Israel, Aya Yadlin-Segal proposes the term “lived ethnicity” as a tool for digital identification that works towards socio-political inclusion of ethnic minorities in oppressive national contexts. The novelty of this study is its consideration of both global and local dimensions of online ethnic self-articulations that represent themselves simultaneously on individual and collective levels with a focus on the logic of participation. She looks closely at the dynamic of online participation in Iranian community Facebook groups and shows how “After years of rejecting their ethnic identity under the influence of the Israeli melting pot, participants attested that they were finally able to reclaim their ethnic heritage, all through online environments” and even see these Facebook groups as constituting a “home.” Thus, she shows how the online production of ethnicity facilitates its reproduction offline. In a broader sense, she argues that the members of oppressed communities find online environments to be liberating spaces, allowing them to negotiate ethnic social hierarchies established in the nationalising societies by routine ethnically marked self-expressions in their everyday life constructing a global community with its own alternative hierarchy.

Ivan Kozachenko analyses how social media enables the Ukrainian diaspora to feel a powerful sense of engagement with the dramatic political changes under way in their homeland. The 2014 Maidan Revolution triggered a surge of sympathy for the losses of territory and lives that Ukraine suffered, but also brought optimism that this time around the system of governance could be reformed—in part because it was assumed that Western assistance would be forthcoming. Among the 32 subjects he interviewed, he found some differences between the “old” and “new” diasporic communities in terms of their attachment to their new host country for example, or how national holidays should be celebrated. Overall, there has been a strengthening of civic inclusivity, overcoming the long-standing division between Russophones and Ukrainian speakers. At the same time, some Russophones grew more interested in learning Ukrainian and disengaged from Russian online platforms.

All four papers presented in the issue cover different aspects of the broader question of the impact of new information and communication technologies on the construction of identities and shaping communities in a highly dynamic and interconnected contemporary world. Overall, the papers reflect on both the new possibilities of digital media which equip users for nationalist demands and their expression in daily life. The articles agree that globalisation, fostered by digital technologies, now provides more varieties of interactivity with the world than before (Baym, 2010). It not just helps to reproduce national imaginations but also creates new markers and tools for the creation of ethnic and national boundaries. Although in this special section, the authors answer some important questions, they also identify some opaque areas and propose many interesting hypotheses that need to be tested and new research questions that yet wait to be answered. So, we hope this issue is just a start to the meaningful discussion of the role of digital technologies in contemporary nationalism that goes far beyond populist politics on one side and a vague definition of new forms of transnationalism on the other.

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