

Nationalism and Social Media: Evolving Concepts

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Introduction

Social media have a huge impact on today's way of life in many aspects. The changes social media bring to people's *habitus* can be seen by every single person who owns a blog or a social network account. Life generally becomes more dynamic, communication gets enhanced and social space gets significantly narrowed as now it is easier than ever to establish and maintain contact with people that may not necessarily belong to one's immediate physical environment. One possible perception of this process is that social media and the microcosm they create are basically means of tentative extension of what is referred to be first person (both singular and plural) in the so called *real life* (life offline).

However, social media bring changes to the fields of socialization as well. They reshape the way peers perceive each other in different kind of groups; they reshape the notions of intimacy and the role of one individual in a given group; they reshape the way groups function but also the group's social landscape. The primary change that occurs is the virtual representation of groups: if it is comprised of a few people that know each other, than the virtual representation corresponds to the image of that group in real life; but if the case is a representation of a bigger group whose condition of belonging is not personal interrelations, but a mere interest or shared value, than the step forward is obvious: a rather abstract collective (whose objective existence is a matter of discussion) acquires a virtual image that fortifies its discursive being through the social media. These groups' existence can be based on various grounds – from being fellow fans to a popular culture act to sharing the same political or religious beliefs to sharing the same research interests.

One of the plenty of modes of networking or organization via social media, is the nationalist networking/organization. This relation goes into both directions: besides the fact that nationalism utilizes new media, the development of the new technologies and the advancement of the social media inevitably affect the image, structure and the functions of what is said to be a nation in real life. As it is proposed here, social media even provide an opportunity for an upgrade for the nation and the concept of nationalism, as it affects some of their crucial features.

The main task of this paper is to reflect on the impact social media have on the evolution of the concept of nation and nationalism. For that purpose, the paper is going to review some of the major insights on the relationship between internet and nationalism in general; it is going to try to expose that relationship in the world of 2.0 and it is going to embrace the findings of a small survey conducted on the perceptions of Facebook users about the presence of nationalist mobilization and contents on the platform.

Eriksen's and Bakker's argument: Nations and Nationalism in Cyberspace

The relation between the concept of the nation and nationalism on one side, and the emergence of cyberspace on the other, has been slightly covered by authors that deal with issues connected with nationalism. The initial analyses range usually between some of the formal and legal aspects of the Internet – for example the nationalistic potential of domain names or country codes. It has been argued that internet domain names can be a matter of contest as in the case of Macedonia (Bechev, 2001). The domains that contained the name of

“Macedonia” itself, have been a matter of dispute or contested usage by Macedonian and Greek web pages. Domains containing the name of the Internal Macedonian revolutionary Organization and its variants (VMRO, VMORO, TMRO, TMORO, MRO) on the other hand, have been a matter of contest between Macedonian and Bulgarian web pages. Furthermore, besides the nationalist aspect of the disputable domain names, it has also been suggested that even country codes (extensions like .uk, .de, .mk) can have a meaning in terms of what is known as “banal nationalism” - country codes can shape and reshape identities, serve as a tool during the independence struggle, or it can be even a symbol of national unification (Wass, 2003).

The relationship between nationalism and Internet is far more complex than the formal or legal analyses: it extends a lot to the impact Internet has on people's behavior, the ways of communication and the ways of interaction in society in general. Two of only the few authors that have dealt with this case are T. H. Eriksen (2006 and 2007) and Piet Bakker (2001). In their work, the central arguments deal with several aspects of the nationalism – Internet relationship. Since both of the authors' works converge and overlap at some points, the paper will focus only on Eriksen's approach, as it is in-depth elaborated and more encompassing than the one Bakker.

Eriksen (2007) primarily refers to the Internet as an extension to the already existing features of nationalism, mostly focusing on the phenomena of “nationalism abroad” , referring to the concepts of diaspora nationalism, transnational nationalism and migrant nationalism. He sees the Internet as an important asset for the “independence struggles in absentia” since it can be used to provide networking and organization of culturally diverse groups in a remote

land (for example, the Kurdish diaspora which mobilizes worldwide via the Internet, over the idea of the establishment of independent Kurdistan). Additionally, he offers other examples of nationalism-internet complexities: state-framed nationalism online, which is defined as a government led nationalist propaganda online, whose main actors are the state institutions. Internet can be used for establishing surrogate nation as well. That happens in cases where lack of certain factors prevent the formation of a nation in the real world. It can also be a factor in the efforts for the integration of minorities in the dominant culture and in the improvement of multiculturalism (Eriksen, 2007).

However, the most important aspect of Eriksen's work (2007) is the analysis on the relationship with nationalism and boundaries (both territorial and cultural). Basically, he argues that the somewhat traditional perception of the relationship between nationalism and the territorial-bound community can be transcended by the use of the Internet. It means that territory can be almost a non-factor in nationalist action and that is why virtual nationalism is “deterritorialized” (Eriksen, 2007). Thus the relationship between internet nationalism and cultural boundaries is ambiguous: the boundaries that exist in reality between members of the same or different communities, can be overcome online, and that is why internet nationalism is transcultural and a lot more far-reaching than “offline” nationalism; at the same time they can be perpetuated and fortified by nationalist propaganda.

Nations, Nationalism and Social Media

The findings upon which Eriksen (and Bakker and other authors as well) had built

their theory about “virtual nations” and “internet nationalism”, have been mostly gathered from the good old-fashioned web sites, portals and forums. In fact, their general idea about the possible units of analysis of Internet content were websites, chat-rooms, usenet newsgroups, email lists and blogs (but no blogosphere). That is understandable, since the core of their surveys is built upon examples from the early 2000s, before the expansion of the broadband connections and social media.

One of the main characteristics of the changes brought by these new circumstances is in terms of the decentralization of the sources of information. With the emergence and the rapid increase of the popularity of user-generated content and the exponential multiplication of information sources, the significance of the powerhouses of information distribution or what we refer to as “traditional media” became substantially narrowed. Social media affected the processes of information sharing (and by information we mean everything) by considerably atomizing its sources. The mode of processing and distributing information was altered in a way that the passivity of the “people formerly known as a crowd” started to disappear as their role of information consumers was transformed into a role of information perpetrators; the dominant practice of broadcasting was transformed into a practice of information sharing.

So where does nationalism fit into this grand picture? In the examples from the previous sections, it was particular websites, or chat-rooms, or mailing lists that were the modes of perpetuating nationalist sentiment while the masses were just consumers. Nonetheless, as we see, in the 2.0 world these matters are quite reshaped and far more complex. Hence nowadays, it is not only the official website of the Tamil Tigers or the Kurds

that is the one and only online reference for Sri Lankan or Kurdish nationalism. There are nationalist blogs that are linked or aggregated together, there are Youtube videos, picture sets on Flickr, and even feeds that stream nationalist content; moreover, there are tags on every single of the entries that bring nationalist content together – and this is all about generating and distributing the particular content in a much more effective way than former authors on cybernationalism had predicted.

Another not anticipated change occurs on the social networking platforms (colloquially said, *on Facebook*). Besides providing the possibility to spread various types of data, among them inevitably some nationalist data, (real-time communication, hypertext, media files) and to mix it up together to create a powerful information sharing communities, social software platforms allow establishment of wider communities and networks where by only one click people join in together, as friends or as community fellow members. What is especially important is the latter. In the case the most successful social networking platform Facebook, groups, fan pages and causes have gotten popular to the extent that there is even hardly any user that has not joined some of them (if not plenty). Those Facebook “collectives” are now important method of spreading the word and recruiting people even beyond generic users: 2.0 is inevitable part of every publicity campaign, no matter the budget, since there is an opportunity for subjects to reach much more people (theoretically everyone with an internet access). Having in mind that public relations and propaganda are some of the most important tools in nationalist mobilization as well, it is logical to assume that nationalist mobilization tries to utilize social media as an important tool.

Moreover, since its usage is free and much easier than the old means of “spreading the

word”, social networking is not limited as an exclusive technology owned and run by centers of power only (political leaderships or organizations). That makes it popular and plausible to be used literally by everyone. The outcome is that now there are people that are not by any means belonging to the elites but manage to affect the cultural reproduction anyway. Some of them, among many other things, might be extremely devoted to the national(ist) cause and try to do a nationalist PR campaign. They would publish various data, link it, spread it, and finally establish groups, pages and causes on Facebook for the sake of recruiting supporters. That way, their message has the opportunity to reach more people than they could even imagine in the media constellation before 2.0. In some way, they are going to certainly affect other people's attitudes towards national issues, even if it is just a short-term provocation. They could spread national myths, calls for action, calls for unity. The effects from nationalist actions online can be questioned, yet, what is the point here, is the potential offered by social networking for them.

Formulated like this, it is implied that social media actually could serve as an open area for the emergence and development of strong and durable forms of nationalism-from-below, or a genuine decentralized nationalist discourse. The first important factor about that kind of nationalism is that there would be no source of power needed, since there could theoretically be a huge number of sources (even individual ones) inspiring and organizing the nation; it would then transform into a from-below formation in which one of the key ways of functioning would be the participatory culture the in-group tendencies of the membership of a given “collective”. That image of nation and nationalism is totally different from everything before: the figure of the national charismatic leadership is not that important; the 'budget' is always welcome but less needed as most of the activities on social platforms are mostly free,

as long as there is accessible internet connection. There is no headquarters that issue orders; yet even if there were, the interactions that happen via social media would definitely scrutinize every important decision on a national question and would not let easy policies to be conducted.

Another important remark to be made here is that the chance that social media activism and organization transfer to reality is not very high. So, nationalist mobilization and spread of content may not necessarily lead to escalation in reality. The re-shaping of the nationalism as a process does not boost the nationalist-motivated action offline. That is why the emphasis should be put on the discursive changes that occur. While nationalist sentiments and attitudes might be perpetuated through these processes, what is really going to be affected is the objective cultural ties in a given national or ethnic community.

In other words, the Internet and social media affect the way that a nation is conceptualized. The changes discussed above seriously challenge some of the crucial perspectives offered by nationalism theorists. The modernist/constructivist/instrumentalist approaches to the nation are challenged with the idea of decentralization as already shown before. If there is a decentralization of the sources, then the whole discourse inevitably undergoes the same process of decentralization. Moreover, the the role of the single, or the most important agent of nationalism is pluralized, meaning that there is no more just one single meta-process of nation-shaping that happens, but rather a plurality of various process that do not necessarily fit in the theoretical framework offered by modernists. Thus, the ethnosymbolist approach gets challenged as well. If it is the plenty of sources and the decentralized communication and the segmented discourse that builds the nation, the role of

the sacred, pre-national, primordial memory becomes ambiguous. It is not the shared memory that prevails, but the one that is most skillfully deployed; it is not the organic ethnic that evolves into a nation through various processes of institutionalization, but it is the dispersed, random ideas that interact with each other that contribute to the nation; it is not a mere “heritage” from the distant past, but a mere consensus in the very present.

Even the Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined, limited and sovereign community, is not immune to the changes brought by the social media (Anderson 1991). One of his premises was that the nation is imagined because its members will never meet the rest of their fellows. However, with the possibility that social networking offers, it is very simple for people that share interests to find each other, and befriend each other, even online. The imagined “horizontal friendship” of the nation gradually becomes very concrete – yet no less imagined. However, some of the examples from social networking platforms, suggest an important change in the discourse; while “offline” nationalists thought of national unification only in a symbolical manner, nationalists on-line make some radical and concrete steps towards it: if in the offline world a call for unification would have had a lyrical or prosaic value, the same call online would be much more direct, coming in the form of invitation for a group membership or any type of online collective that can be joined by a simple click. So, if in Anderson's conception the struggle for getting together with all the members of the nation was condemned to a perpetual failure, in the world of social media that is not the case: at least from the technical aspect, nationalists have the tool for reaching out to all of their fellows in the possibilities for social networking.

Nationalism and Social Networking Survey

Facebook undoubtedly is the most popular social software platform, currently having more than 300 million people worldwide and providing a huge amount of diverse user-generated content. As it has been argued so far, some of the actions that take place on Facebook and some of the contents that circulate there, are carried by nationalists, or at least motivated by nationalist sentiments. In order to grasp the general idea about the significance of those occurrences, a survey was conveyed, focusing on the Facebook users perception on nationalist mobilization and spread of nationalist content. The survey was conducted on a random sample of 98 participants from various areas of the world. The questionnaire contained 6 questions, 3 of which were exploring the users' perceptions on nationalist groups/pages/causes, and the other 3 were considering patriotic/nationalist content distribution on Facebook.

An important remark has to be made on the conceptualization of the questionnaire. Besides the initial aim to deal with nationalism issues only, an adjustment had to be made in order the attitudes of the wider public to be met. The terms patriotism and nationalism can be often taken as very close if not overlapping; as well, people with more nationalist-minded behavior tend to use the label patriotic for what common sense says is nationalist. In order more nuanced and in-depth answers to be collected, separate interviews were supposed to be carried, which was beyond the capabilities and the resources available for the preparation of the paper. The research methodology had to be limited to a simple online poll that would be simple and compact enough to attract the attention of as many people as possible. That is why, despite the obvious distinctions, in the questions the categories patriotism and nationalism

were used as similar and close one to another.

The initial hypothesis of the research built upon the discussion above was that Facebook users have been often targeted by nationalist groups/pages/causes and that they have spotted and probably even reacted in some way to a nationalist content on Facebook. From the 98 respondents, the vast majority (85%) have answered that they have been invited “to join a patriotic or nationalist Facebook group/page/cause or to a Facebook group/page/cause that was somehow related to national identification/national identity”. From those who answered positively on the first question, more than half said that they “sometimes” receive such invitations, 26% said they get invited rarely, and 21% said they get invited all the time. Almost two thirds of them have never joined such a group/page/cause, 5% have joined by mistake, 14% joined because they agreed with the values promoted by that group/page/cause and 12% joined just for the sake to be able to discuss and see the content of the group/page/cause. It is worth mentioning that some of the respondents had a remark on the distinction between nationalist and national liberation causes; they joined group in support of Palestine and Chiapas liberation movements but they would not necessarily see that as joining a nationalist cause.

Regarding the nationalist content, only 4% of the respondents said that they have never seen nationalist (or patriotic) content being posted on Facebook; more than half said that they see such content frequently. The most surprising answers were gathered for the last two questions though. Almost two-thirds of the respondents said they were never tempted to leave any feedback on such content, while only 5% have “commented and/or liked such posts”; 23% of the respondents said that they have left feedback, but mostly for the sake of

arguing or publicly disagreeing. A substantial part of the respondents (5%), have opted for other answers, in which they have elaborated their opinion on nationalism and nationalist content as an inherently bad phenomena, and that their feedback would only perpetuate negative feelings. On the question if they have ever posted nationalist or patriotic content themselves, more than three quarters of the respondents said they have never done that; only one respondent said they did post such content in order to express their national identity and feelings, and the rest said they posted nationalist or patriotic content from other reasons (mostly in order to ridicule it).

The results generally support the hypothesis and the whole discussion on the interaction between nationalism and social media. What was proven was that there really is a significant amount of nationalist content reaching up to people who were not even that much interested in it (what can be concluded by the answers on the questions number 5 and 6). At the same time, the impression that there are efforts for nationalist mobilization through social media was proven to be grounded on solid basis as there is also a significant since the majority of the respondents said they were invited to join nationalist/patriotic Facebook groups/pages/causes. Although not very supportive, many of the respondents helped spreading the nationalist message by leaving feedback or even unlikely publishing some nationalist-related content or by joining groups/pages/causes just for the sake of debating with the members.

Concluding remarks

The outcome of the survey shows that nationalism has become an inevitable part of the Facebook experience according to the perception of the vast majority of the respondents. The reasons are a matter of further research, but a good starting indicator is its high visibility. Nonetheless, the general perception that nationalism is prevalent on Facebook platforms proves the claim that nationalism has grown important in the world of social media. That kind of development is contrary to some of the predictions that the new technologies and the post-industrial society would bring a demise of the concept of nationalism. At the same time it proved nationalism is neither archaic nor outdated, but it is integral part of every segment of society no matter the change of circumstances. Finally, the mode in which nationalist mobilization functions has been altered: its relation with territorial and cultural boundaries has become more flexible; and new modes of nationalist action emerged as social media provided agents of nationalism with the ability to easily reach deep into society.

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