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Digital nationalism as an emergent subfield of nationalism studies. The state of the field and key issues

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss recent developments in the field of digital nationalism, presenting some of the more recent scholarship in this emergent subfield of nation studies, as well as discussing key issues and potential research questions for future research. Following introductory remarks on the study of nations and nationalisms in their offline forms, I will proceed to the discussion of the most recent studies in the new subfield of digital nationalism. Drawing from the work of digital nationalism scholars, I will also offer several research questions for further study in the field.

KEYWORDS

Nationalism; digital nationalism; online nationalism; social media; online collective identity

Introductory remarks

The idea of the nation is probably one of the most hotly contested and debated ideas in the social sciences. Heated debates over the nature of 'the nation' and the roots and consequences of national identities have been waged by scholars from a wide variety of social science disciplines, from political scientists to sociologists to psychologists (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 1983; E. Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Lawrence, 2013; Mandelbaum, 2020; Özkirimli, 2005; Roshwald, 2019; Spencer & Wollman, 2002). Broadly speaking, scholars participating in these debates have been divided along two fault lines, one related to time and the other related to what we can call ontology. In terms of the time divide, the debates have touched upon the question of the origin of nations, or more specifically, the exact point in time from which we can say that nations exist. In terms of ontology, questions have been asked as to how 'real' the nations can be claimed to be, and here, too, answers have ranged from treating the nations as natural, organically developed communities with roots in the distant past to claims that nations only came into existence in the nineteenth century, with the advent of modernity, industrialization, and a bureaucratic modern state (Breuilly, 2019; Smith, 1987, 1991, 2003).

In addition, the study of nations and nationalism in recent years has been inextricably connected with the study of states. This happened particularly due to the paradigmatic work of very influential modernist scholars of nationhood, such as Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, since nationalism has generally been viewed by them as a fairly recent phenomenon that could only develop in connection with the emergence of the modern bureaucratic and territorial state (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 1983). This way of

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conceptualizing nations and nationhood has remained popular in the field to this day (Breuilly, 2019). Theoretical debates on national identity and nationhood have likewise been subject to what we may call the logic of territoriality and statehood – where nations and national identity were examined mostly insofar as they related to the existence and the power of the modern nation-state (Özkirimli, 2017).

On the other hand, the global rise of Internet 'ubiquity and usage' in the last twenty years or so, coupled with the social media revolution which began in the first decade of our century, has turned the hitherto state-centred logic of nationalism on its head, because, for the first time in history, national identity creation and expression could be freed from the constraints of geography and territory. Indeed, as stated by Eriksen (2007), the advent of the Internet era has been heralded as the agent of globalization, which in the context of national identity meant that people, once freed from the limitations of state borders and territory, would become more cosmopolitan, and that, as a result, national identities would become less and less important over time. And yet, this is not what happened. In fact, Internet (and now, too, social media) offers new channels and avenues thanks to which national identity not only has not disappeared, but, on the contrary, has been 're-embedded' and can flourish (Eriksen, 2007, p. 7). This is evident particularly in relation to diasporas, who have found in the Internet and in social media a useful tool to create and transmit their respective national identities to global digital audiences, especially in contexts where other, more traditional channels for such expression – such as newspapers, TV, public political activism – have been unavailable (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Eriksen, 2007; Marat, 2016; Whitaker, 2004; Zubiaga et al., 2019). The Internet has long ceased to be merely a source of news and information. Particularly through social media, it has become – in the words of Sebastian Maslow – a yet another arena of political struggle and contention as an 'interactive public sphere', connecting and mobilizing a variety of actors and obscuring the distinction between 'offline' politics and the digital world (Maslow, 2011). In addition, social media allows us to study national identity not through the lens of knowledge and information gatekeepers, such as politicians, intellectuals, and public officials, but through the lens of ordinary citizens, or nationalism made 'from the bottom up', rather than the usual, other way around, (Cf. Hearn & Antonsich, 2018; Kaufmann, 2017; Moreno-Almendral, 2018; Skey & Antonsich, 2017; Yusupova, 2018).

States and their governments and leaders have also been quick to recognize the potential of the Internet to assist them with projecting a powerful nationalist message and thus with strengthening their 'soft power' in the global arena. China is a prominent example of such an approach (Ismangil, 2018, 2019; Schneider, 2018a). In a similar vein, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has successfully used Twitter to promote an exclusionary notion of India as a homogenous cultural nation built on Hinduism, as described by Shakuntala Rao in her discussion of what she refers to as 'selfie nationalism' (Rao, 2018).

These developments have necessitated an elaboration of theoretical perspectives on how nationalism operates in cyberspace and how citizens are becoming *netizens*, as noted by Matthew Palmer (2012). Palmer notes that the reasons for which people participate in web communities are strikingly similar to those which inform people's participation in web (virtual) communities. A sense of belonging and community. For nationalism to be reproduced and sustained on the Web we need a sense of separation of 'us' from 'them'. The importance of the principles of 'sameness' and 'exclusion'. Just as

ethnies form around shared cultures and memories, so 'virtual' *ethnies* can coalesce around shared language and 'ideological homophily' (Palmer, 2012, p. 128).

Social changes generated by the rise of online reality and its role in our lives have resulted in a new subfield in the study of nations and nationalism, variously referred to as digital nationalism, cyber-nationalism, and nationalism on the Internet (Eriksen, 2007; Palmer, 2012). As has been noted elsewhere, this field of study is still in its infancy, despite the fact that more than ten years have passed since the appearance of media such as Facebook or Twitter on the scene (Szulc, 2017). In addition, there is a substantial dearth of synthetic sources on the state of the field which would cover larger regions of the world rather than single or two country case studies. For example, the most recent study of the phenomenon of nationalism in the age of social media is probably Christian Fuchs' *Nationalism on the Internet. Critical theory and ideology in the age of fake news and social media* (Fuchs, 2019), but its scope is limited to case studies of Germany and Austria. More study is needed, for example, in how digital nationalism is created and recreated in Eastern and East-Central Europe. Moreover, as noted, for example, by J. P. Goode (2021), digital technologies have so far received little attention from scholars of nationalism and nation studies. One crucial question which should be posed about the future of nation studies given the scale of AIs presence in our everyday lives on many levels is: how digital nationalism and its modalities will change what nations are perceived to be by their citizens, and indeed, what nations actually are.

Digital nationalism – definition, scope, and key research issues

Even a cursory review of literature on nationalism in its more traditional or offline forms will show that the category of nation, and the resulting definition of nationalism – are fiercely contested. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that similar, and often unacknowledged confusion surrounds the idea of online nationalism. Scholars working in the field use a variety of terms when discussing online forms of nationalism, referring to it as digital nationalism', 'online nationalism', 'cybernationalism', and 'user-generated nationalism' (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Saunders, 2011; Shahin, 2020; Trigo, 2003). It is telling that authors writing about online forms of nationalism rarely define the term precisely. For example, writing in 2007, Eriksen mentions 'virtual nationalisms' which are understood as extensions of traditional nationalisms expressed and mediated through the Internet. This is a rather broad formulation. This terminological confusion is exacerbated by the lack of distinctions between possible varieties of nationalism in online spaces. For example, there are marked differences between digital nationalism on the Web prior to the era of social media (1980s to early 2000s) and the era of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (2000s to the present). Arguably, it is with the advent of social media that we can speak of the rise of digital nationalism, for it is the modality based on ease of access and creation of content by the users that as enabled a full-scale resurgence of nationalism in the online space. This does not mean, however, that digital nationalism did not exist before the age of social media. Nationalism could have been promoted by the states through more passive means, such as non-interactive websites, official government websites or online news portals where viewers would have been merely passive recipients of content served to them by the controlling agents (editors, writers etc.). Moreover, some definitions pertaining to digital nationalism seem to be

unduly restricted. For example, a definition of cybernationalism in the *Encyclopedia of Political* Communication restricts the term to mean an extension of traditional ideological movement driven by activists committed to the national cause. Definitions such as these are too narrow and do not capture the full scope of nationalism as it evolves in online spaces. (Wu, 2008) in that they ignore the complexity of motivations and modalities of expression of national belonging employed by everyday users on social media sites.

Taking the above reservations into consideration, for the purpose of this paper we can define digital nationalism as an 'umbrella' term (Hunt, 2016) encompassing all forms of everyday, user-generated, and elite-driven nationalism which use the Internet and social media to create, sustain and project specific ideas of the nation and/or intend to mobilize support for a specific vision of nationhood. Such definition of digital nationalism would by extension also entail the idea of digital national identity – self-identification with and a sense of belonging to the nation created, recreated and expressed online. As defined by Abril Trigo (2003), digital nationalism is nationalism which creates cybernations. According to Trigo, cybernation constitutes a 'national virtual community realized in cyberspace through the performance of the ritual sharing of memories. The virtual space of this imagining community is molded through the recollection of remembrances, the telling of stories and practice of distinct dialectical variance' (Trigo, 2003 cited in Saunders, 2011, p. 58) in a hybrid combining ethnosymbolic ideas of nationhood with Benedict Anderson's oft-quoted constructivist concept of nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006).

Constructivist approach to the nation based on Anderson's ideas informs the work of another digital nationalism scholar Florian Schneider and his work on digital nationalism in China. According to Schneider, nationalism is an 'emergent property' of digital networks, in which networked actors shape and express through a variety of 'discursive practices'. Nationalism therefore is to a large extent a function of the digital space through which it is enabled, sustained, and reproduced. Schneider combines 'offline' and 'online' nationalisms borrowing from Benedict Anderson and Michael Billig, claiming that people 'imagine' their respective nations. His approach bridges the study of nationalism with the study of digital technologies (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995; Schneider, 2018a).

In a recent paper on emerging digital nationalism, Sabrina Mihelj and César Jiménez-Martínez ask a pointed question: are digital nationalisms different, and if so, how, from their more traditional offline predecessors? (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021) The question arises: 'What happens to nationalism when it goes digital?' (Schneider, 2018a, p. 2) In their response to the problem, Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021) state that existing discussion on digital nationalism is largely divided along the lines of two understandings of nationalism. The first one examines nationalism in its virulent, extreme and separatist forms, the other discusses nationalism as an ideology that takes nations for granted as natural units of analysis and obvious points of reference (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). The former framing of nationalism seems to be more prevalent, at least in the mainstream public discourse (and, some would argue, in academic discourse as well). To take just two examples – the discourses around opposition to Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election have been discussed in terms of 'nationalism on the rise' and populist rhetoric (Bieber, 2018). Mihelj and Jimènez Martinez conclude that online, or digital nationalism

has undergone three significant qualitative changes in relation to its offline 'cousin': diversification, polarization, and commodification (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, pp. 1–2). Authors note that social media are easy to use and the entry barrier is extremely low. As a result, people have now become producers as well as consumers of the media. Voices that have been marginalized can now be heard. This gives digital nationalism a significant advantage over its offline counterpart because – unlike the traditional media such as newspapers and TV – Facebook and Twitter do not have powerful gatekeepers interested in promoting a centralized message who could ensure that only one 'national story' is aired or allowed to flourish. For a long time, mass media has served to transmit a unified message of a common, homogeneous nationality, first through print media such as the newspapers ('daily ceremony' of news consumption) and then though broadcast media such as radio and television. The rise of the social media means that is no longer the case (Saunders, 2011, p. 43).

In short, due to the nature of the Internet in general and of social media in particular, 'national stories' promoted from above by state agents are not 'passively consumed' by 'viewers' (as was the case in the world before the Internet age) but are instead actively constructed and reconstructed by a wide variety of both state and non-state actors, including commercial and private users (Schneider, 2018a, p. 6). It is important to note here that I do not wish to claim that non-elite actors had no means or tools to express some sort of national self-awareness or identity prior to the digital age. It is clear, however, that digital spaces and media offer incomparably more convenient and more open-ended ways for such an expression than any other tool ever available in history. This leads to the diversification of actors taking part in the national(ist) discourse as everyday users of online media can now construct their own content related to how they see national identity. What is more, national identities can in this way be negotiated and, often, challenged not only by domestic but also by foreign actors. A good example of this phenomenon is *Polandball*, a meme originally meant as a stereotypical representation of Poland through a deliberate usage of broken English and caricature. Users subsequently started applying the concept to other countries in the form of *Countryballs* (*Countryballs*, n.d.). The *Polandball* phenomenon shows that the new opportunities offered by social media result in a further challenge to the authority of the state – faced with a multiplicity of actors and a hard to control online medium (or media), the state authorities are no longer able to effectively promote the national identity story of their choosing or, at the very least, they have to take into account that their 'story' could be challenged 'from below', since users now can, using comments and likes, 'talk back' at content posted by people in positions of power (Schneider, 2018a). Diversification is accompanied by another danger (from the point of view of the state) – lack of vetting by qualified and impartial gatekeepers means that the extreme strands of nationalism, as well as radical and biased attitudes and misinformation in the form of fake news, can be created and and spread easily, too. This is compounded by the difficulties associated with fact checking and filtering reliable and sound information and knowledge from the informational deluge we all face on the Internet on a daily basis. Taking a hard look at social media in respect to this issue, Ronald Deibert presciently observes that in this 'flood of information' consumers 'resort to cognitive shortcuts that tend to steer them to information that fits what they already believe' (Deibert, 2019). A final aspect of this new online nationalism is commodification, whereby economic practices such as

buying, selling, and advertising become 'key markers of nationhood' (Castelló & Mihelj, 2018, p. 563).

We could identify the following research questions which could be useful to future research in the field of digital nationalism:

1) How social media users (citizens) express and utilize national identity online, and what strategies they use to achieve this; how the nation is conceptualized in the everyday 'digital discourse' (Shahin, 2020, p. 2)
2) How – and to what ends – nationalism and the idea of 'nation' is presented, created and sustained in digital and social media spaces by a variety of social actors
3) The motivations and reasons for how regular social media users invoke and use ideas connected to 'banal', everyday nationalism and national identity in digital spaces (Cf. Goode, 2020)
4) How Internet nationalisms differ from 'traditional' territorial nationalisms (Eriksen, 2007)
5) In the light of the use of Twitter by controversial politicians in positions of power, such as ex- US President Trump and India Prime Minister Modi, how politicians use digital media to further nationalist agendas and pursue nationalist policies (Cf. Ouyang & Waterman, 2020; Schertzer & Taylor Woods, 2020).

The need to further our understanding of the connections between 'offline' and digital dimensions of nationalism, as well as the impact exerted on nationalism and its expressions by the cyberspace is as pressing as ever. Recent (January 2020) political events in the US show how Twitter can be used by people in positions of power to mobilize popular support, and powerful political leaders such as ex- US President Trump has not shied away from taking to Twitter to rally their supporters, which in Trumps case ended in his Twitter account suspended in the process. Media reports and Twitter posts have also pointed out that violence which erupted in Washington DC on January 6th had been incited on social media (Guynn, 2020). The need to understand how exactly people experience and live their national identity, nationalism, and patriotism online has never been more urgent.

One of the ways which could potentially yield fruitful insights into the problem of digital nationalism is linked to the field of memory studies. What remains hitherto (relatively) unexplored in our field is how memory and ritual (and their operations) create and sustain national identity specifically in digital settings/online. While major research has been conducted on how these processes work 'offline' – Pierre Nora's work being just one prominent example – much remains to be said about how history, memory, ritual, and national identity intersect in the lives of online citizens. The category of 'digital places of memory' (Stoicescu, 2017) could be useful in helping us appreciate how online modalities impact the lived experience of belonging to the nation in the era of social media. If Nora claimed that the coherent collective national identity no longer existed in France post-1970s and that it was in fact replaced by realms of memory, we could perhaps reverse this argument and ask: does the Internet contribute to the same collapse of coherent national identity fostered by the state or does it, paradoxically, reinforce it? (J. P.Goode, 2021)

That said, perhaps this is not even the right question to ask. Given the plurality of expression and a variety of opportunities for engagement that the Internet of today offers to a diverse crowd of users, perhaps the coherence of state-supported national identity will no longer be relevant anymore as *netizens* will construct their own 'imagined communities' and their own stories about what it means to be Croatian, Belgian, Spanish *etc*. Going further – perhaps out of the nationalism lived and practiced via social media, Internet for a etc. a completely novel form of the nation will emerge over time. Will it be different, and if so, how exactly, from a conventional nation state which for a long time has been taken for granted in our field?

Going back to categories proposed by Nora – will online national communities come up with their own digital 'places of memory', and if so – what will these refer to? The original *lieux de memoire* had a certain structural materiality behind them, be it in the form of physical objects, such as the geographical barriers serving as the country's borders or the person of Charlemagne (Nora, 2001). They always harked back to an object rooted in material reality or a tangible custom or ritual. This is, arguably, not the case with online nationalism but it does not per se mean that *lieux de memoire* cannot exist without physical materiality underpinning them. What, then, will replace physically discernible objects as 'reminders' of nationhood in the digital space? How effective will these objects be at evoking the collective memory of nationhood? In this context, it would be useful to call on the idea of 'collective future thought' as defined by Piotr Szpunar and Karl Szpunar, who understand collective future thought as 'the act of imagining an event that has yet to transpire on behalf of, or by, a group'. Crucially, this act of imagining depends on the past but is informed by how that past is shaped by the present. Furthermore, as noted by the authors, this imagining of 'collective future(s)' is mediated – it happens in interaction with a variety of artifacts of culture: texts, material culture, and (new) technologies, and, especially today, with a variety of digital and social media (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016). What kinds of national collective futures we will be 'imagining' (and in what ways) as a consequence of the role of social media in our lives is one of the central problems for any future research in nationalism and nation studies.

The novelty of digital nationalism

Multiple studies within the field of digital nationalism draw from traditional, offline theories of nations and nationalisms (Palmer, 2012; Schneider, 2018b). Methodological nationalism – treating the nation-state as a stable and natural unit of analysis and the most important mode of political existence is also evident (Chernilo, 2008). And yet, even those scholars who claim that digital nationalism is a continuation or extension of its offline predecessor admit that it is, nevertheless, 'a different animal' (Schneider, 2018a, p. 2).

Digital nationalism is new in more ways than one, not least because of the characteristic features of technologies on which it relies for expression and dissemination. Saif Shahin notes that digital nationalism enables and reconfigures the relationship between the 'material reality' of the nation as it exists in real life, the nation as an idea, and the way it is created and reconceptualized by ordinary users online, calling this reality 'digital materialism' (Shahin, 2020, p. 6). Digital nationalism is a link between the offline nation as experienced in the so called real life and citizens' lives online, as

'nations transmute from physical to virtual matter – from geographical location to digital landscape' (Shahin, 2020, p. 6).

The Internet, and particularly social media such as Facebook and Twitter, has allowed vast numbers of users to become producers as well as consumers of knowledge and information (Schneider, 2018a). Ease of access and use and the immediacy offered by social media posts have made them ideal vehicles for the creation, expression and projection of nationalism and national identities to audiences across the globe, free from the old constraints of geography, territory, and state borders. Furthermore, the nature of social media allows for national identities to be expressed and discussed by ordinary, non-elite actors. Previously, nationalist discourses had been shaped and controlled by actors involved in 'high level' politics – state leaders, traditional mainstream media, journalists, scholars, and other experts, who could act as gatekeepers and filters of information. This meant that ordinary citizens had been, at best, passive consumers of 'national' narratives presented to them by relevant experts. The rise of Facebook and Twitter makes it possible for new and often contesting 'national' stories and narratives to emerge, challenging the power and knowledge of traditional experts or 'gatekeepers' as well as undermining the power of the nation states in terms of promoting nationalism from above (Schneider, 2018a). The Internet has effectively functioned as a 'cyber civic space' for citizens wishing to oppose oppressive regimes around the globe (Lim, 2013).

As observed by Robert Saunders in his work on ethnic digital nationalism, the decoupling of the media from the geographic limits of state and territory became a new opportunity for 'subaltern' and stateless nations, as well as diasporas, to circumvent the dominant, elite driven nationalisms and begin expressing their national identities in their respective vernaculars and on their own cultural terms (Saunders, 2011). In this context, Saif Shahin examines 'user generated nationalism', defined as 'ordinary ways in which nations are produced and reproduced by common users online – and are interpreted and reinterpreted in the process' (Shahin, 2020, p. 6).

Internet has for a long time been heralded as the tool to bringing about a global revolution whereby people, no longer bound by place-based and territorialized identities will eventually become obsolete (Eriksen, 2007). In a recent paper Anna Triandafyllidou notes that while it is indeed the case that nations are currently facing new challenges as their power is being eroded by globalization and interconnectedness, nationalism is, nevertheless, 'alive and kicking'. Indeed, Triandafyllidou observes that we may be facing a competition between exclusionary 'neotribal' and more inclusive and liberal 'pluralist' nationalisms in the twenty-first century (Triandafyllidou, 2020).

Contrary to prophets of globalization, e-technologies have not led to the appearance of cosmopolitan uprooted citizen. Likewise, globalization has not undermined the power of nation states to the extent previously anticipated. The end of nationalism is yet to come (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2005; Woods et al., 2020)

Conclusion

In conclusion, more research is required into the various modes of emergent digital nationalism. Furthermore, scholars in our field could benefit from engagement with digital media theory and research methods applied in digital humanities (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2016). The study of digital nationalism

calls for a comprehensive theoretical framework combining methods and approaches from the study of offline nationalisms, study of social media, and digital social research. Finally, as emphasized by Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021), we should not limit our efforts to exploring only the more obvious, virulent or xenophobic forms of nationalism and/or nationalism as expressed and sustained by elite actors of politics. Rather, more digital ethnographic work is required to explore significantly under-researched forms of nationalisms from below and everyday nationalisms.

Disclosure statement

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