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New Nationalism

The Internet Crusade

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New Nationalism; the Internet Crusade

Abstract

Although it is sometimes argued that the nation state is becoming less important and we're heading towards a global village, evidence is also pointing the other way. Nationalism is flourishing – almost every armed conflict in the modern world has nationalistic roots. One of the most visible aspects of the new nationalism is the spread of nationalistic online activities. In this paper we will focus on nationalism on the Internet, how can it be described and explained. We look at Internet users, the reasons for using the Internet, content of online activities, the way in which people use Internet, and the possible consequences of Internet use for individuals and organizations.

Introduction

At first sight, Kamaran Kakel's homepage[#] looks like any other homepage. It has the typical long homepage URL, there's ample use of the <blink> tag, you are informed that you are "the 526.831th person" to visit the homepage since January 10, 1996. The author does not hide himself in small print; he puts his picture (as a college graduate) on one of the first pages of the site. In spite of this 'personal appearance' this homepage is more than just a place where Mr. Kakel is sharing his personal views with his visitors. This site is not about tropical fish, online gaming or Britney Spears. The visitor finds a Kurdistan map and some basic information on the Kurds:

[#] Locations (URL's) of Internet pages are given at the end of the paper.

People of Indo-European origin who live mainly in the mountains and uplands where Turkey, Iraq, and Iran meet, in an area known as 'Kurdistan' for hundreds of years (...) the Kurds found they were treated with suspicion, and pressured to conform to the ways of the majority. Their old independence and traditional pastoralist way of life was rapidly reduced. They were expected to learn the main language of the new state in which they found themselves, Turkish, Persian or Arabic, to abandon their Kurdish identity and to accept Turkish, Iranian or Arab nationalism.

The message is clear; the Kurds are deprived of their homeland. It is a personal and political statement. The message falls within Gellner's definition of nationalism "... a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent" (1983, p. 1).

Nationalism on the Internet

Pages like this one are not unique. A search (with searchengine Hotbot) for pages with "Kurdistan" in the page title returns 1,800 results (June 2001). There are also newsgroups on Kurdistan (like soc.culture.kurdish) and mailing lists. The Kurds are by no means the only nationalistic movement on the web. Macedonians, Armenians, Aborigines, Welsh, Scots, Palestinians, Bretons, Catalans, Basques, Corsicans, Albanians, and Irish present themselves on the Internet. Sometimes they go for their own domain name to establish their own virtual nation. Catalans wanted the .ct top level domain but didn't succeed (Monserrat & Salvador, 1997). The East Timor domain .tp was created in September 1999, within a month after the United Nations established the transnational

administration (there are however fewer than 200 websites with the .tp suffix). The Palestinians have their own .ps domain (March 2000) but it hasn't been fully implemented, only a few websites are operational, among them the Palestinian National Authority website.

Sometimes real 'cyber wars' are fought; the Basque Euskal Herria Journal was put out of business by mail bombs (Vesely, 1997). The guest book of the Armenian Genocide site was flooded with mail from the Armenian Terror site, a site with the telling subtitle "The so-called Armenian Genocide". The top level domain for East Timor (.tp) was attacked in 1999 (Press Release, 1999).

Nationalism is very visible on the Internet. We began this paper with an example of a very personal statement, but most nationalistic websites are not personal at all. Political parties and other groups have their 'official' websites. There are websites by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Washington Kurdish Institute (WKI) and other organizations.

Internet is a medium where organizations, parties and movements present themselves, like a magazine, newspaper, or radio-station. The way of presentation and the audience can be very different. But at the same time Internet is a very personal medium, the 'homepage' is an icon of this personal use. Internet is much more a public/personal space than any other medium. Very often is difficult to distinguish between individual and corporate or organizational sources. Who is behind 'armeniaonline' or Timor Today? What is 'akakurdistan'? And what is the status of the 'Slavic Research Center' in Japan? Some parts of the Internet are almost completely dominated by individual users: mud's, newsgroups (Usenet), chats and BBS. It is almost impossible for commercial businesses

to exploit these free market places of opinions, questions, raves, and rants. There is little money in newsgroups, mud's and chats, is it left to individual users.

Nationalism is flourishing on the Internet. Every possible movement can be found; there are websites, chat channels, newsgroups and mailing lists. And the same conflicts that accompany 'real life' movements accompany the virtual ones. Nationalistic movements existed before the Internet. Internet did not invent them; they're not a consequence of Internet. This doesn't mean the virtual world is a mirror of the 'real' one. The content of websites looks like the content of other media. Online discussions in mailing lists, chats and newsgroups have the same topics as 'real' life discussions.

There are however some striking differences. The content of this new medium is more than an old medium. Because there's no or very little regulation the tone can be much more outspoken, to put it mildly as the following example from the newsgroup soc.culture.kurdish (posted on Feb. 18, 2001) illustrates:#

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> When people say you Turks are cruel and unpopular(to say it  
mildly)  
> then you bitch and cry and say te whole world is unfair to the  
Turks.  
> When they prsent you with facts and figures and photos about  
Turkish  
> atrocities ,you say no everybody is lying.
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Graphic material is often gruesome; pictures of hangings, beheadings, and executions are prominently displayed. The other side is accused of lying; distorting facts and foul play in

Quotations from Usenet and other online source are verbatim.

general. The following message from alt.news.macedonia (posted on Feb. 19, 2001) is an example:

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There is no country in the world with the name Macedonia .Stop
it,there is
nothing else to discuse about.
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Research questions

Looking at online activities undertaken by nationalistic movements, the title 'Internet crusade' is not far fetched. Internet is sometimes used as a battleground. Webpages and e-mails serve as weapons. In many cases it is not a friendly exchange of opinions but a bitter struggle with all possible means. Like the ancient crusades it is about beliefs and territorial claims. Participants range from peaceful activists to violent fanatics. But could Internet play a major role in the development of nationalism? As Anderson (1983, pp. 41-49) demonstrated, printing technology made nationalism - or 'imagined communities' - possible. Other media could play this role again. Meadows (1995) and Fairchild (1998) studied the use of local radio and television by indigenous communities in Canada and Australia. Internet has also been studied; Mallapragada (2000) researched the meaning of the Internet for the Indian Diaspora in the United States and concluded (p. 185):

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I contend that it enables the continuous production of a cultural
identity that is indicative of their complex lives as immigrants.
The Web offers the immigrant populace a space where, unlike in a
more traditional medium, such as mainstream television, the
immigrant can feel at home.
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Arnold and Plymire (2000) came to more or less the same conclusion after studying two websites of Cherokee Indians. We will explore these findings further. What is the meaning of this 'new online nationalism' for individuals who participate and for nationalistic organizations?

Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1983) both had doubts about the claims of many nationalistic movements. This school of thought is by no means outdated (see Smith, 1996). In cited examples it is often difficult to distinguish between 'real' and 'imagined' elements. Kurds do exist but the claim that they can be traced back to the kings of Mesopotamia is doubtful. Will we not enter this discussion. We will study their online behavior and try to understand what this means.

After exploring some theoretical concepts on the use of Internet by individuals and the meaning Internet can have for individuals and organizations we will test these concepts on a group of 30 websites of what could be called 'virtual nations': Kurds, Macedonians, and Armenians. We will describe their main characteristics: how do they define their nation, how is their national identity constructed, what are the main elements? After this description we will confront theories on Internet use with the content and possibilities of these websites.

The nations studied have in common that they are diasporic and are engaged in territorial conflicts. Kurds are living in the traditional Kurdish regions in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Russia and of course all over the world. Macedonia is only a nation state since 1991 and having a conflict with Greece over territories. A lot of Macedonians are living outside Macedonia or Greece. Armenians are spread all over world after the genocide of 1915. Since 1991 an Armenian state exists but according to a lot of Armenians, a great

part of western Armenia is still occupied by Turkey. Internet could be a suitable medium for nationalistic groups from these nations. Communication is easy and there is very little control on content. Because of technology, and the use of the English language, information can be received and understood by a growing part of the world population. Global distribution is very easy compared to other media. Letters, books, magazines and newspapers can be intercepted; radio and television have a limited reach.

Theory

It is not easy to come up with a theoretical model that can be used to describe and explain Internet use by individuals and the meaning for organizations. One of the problems is the struggle between believers and non-believers in the Internet gospel. Schoenbach (2000) points out that it is impossible to neglect the fundamental discussion between optimists and pessimists when new media are concerned. Wellman and Gulia call critics and defenders Manicheans who “assert that the Internet either will create wonderful new forms of community or destroy community altogether” (1999, p. 1). In the first half of the nineties there was a wide spread belief in the blessing of this new medium. In 1993 Howard Rheingold introduced the term ‘virtual communities’ and two years later Nicholas Negroponte (1995) spoke in *Being digital* about ‘digital neighborhoods’ which was a step further than Marshall McLuhan’s ‘global village’ (1962/1969, p. 43). These terms shaped early thinking about Internet. Until today these voices are loud and clear. A recent article by Rheingold (2000) was called *Community Development in the Cybercity of the Future*. A more moderate version can be found in Slevin (2000). Critical voices were raised later (see Hamelink, 2000) but since the beginning of Internet, theory was mostly normative, or even ‘speculative’. It concentrated not on how Internet was used or

even should be used, but on how it *could* be used. Possibilities and actual use were mixed; assumptions were sometimes taken for theories, individual cases were too often generalized. Anyone who is using existing theoretical concepts should be aware that these concepts are often loaded with normative and speculative elements.

Theory on Internet use should concentrate on at least five different areas.

- *Who* is using Internet?
- *Why* are they using it?
- *What* are users confronted with?
- *How* are they using it?
- What are the *consequences* of Internet use?

The last topic goes beyond individual use. Theory on the meaning of Internet for groups and organizations heavily relies on the related concept of ‘virtual community’.

The first area has to do with the so-called ‘digital divide’. We know that Internet penetration is high in the US and Canada, in the northern and western part of Europe and in Australia, Japan and Korea. And Internet use is strongly related to income (US Internet Council, 2000). It should be noted however that there’s not only a *digital* divide but also a paper and an electric one. There is without any doubt a very unequal distribution of Internet users. But there’s little evidence that the Internet widens the gap between the rich and poor. When Internet use by nationalists or nationalistic groups is concerned we are however confronted with a problem. A lot of these movements are located outside the western world. Is this ‘digital divide’ a barrier for these groups?

The reasons for using Internet are as diverse as Internet itself. Entertainment and information are important but when looking at the most visited sites it is clear that people have very different motives. In the top 10, search engines are dominant, people use these sites to go off to all kinds of places, for all kinds of reasons (*100hot webrankings*, 2001).

The content of the Internet is reason for much concern: pornography, violent online games and extremist politics. Some nationalistic websites – especially white racism pages – have gained some notoriety in this respect. From 1995 on, HateWatch.org monitored these websites. But the initial wave of hatred has faded according to HateWatch director Goldman (2001):

Hate groups have done an extremely poor job of using the Internet to increase their membership. They have utterly failed to gain widespread acceptance for their belief that bigotry, hate and violence are viable responses to human diversity.

Ray and Marsh (2001) studied five racist online organizations (Hammerskin Nation, National Alliance, Stormfront, Aryan Nations, and the Word Church of The Creator) and concluded:

White extremists are interested in recruiting children and others via the Internet, but recruitment of children is more reactive than proactive and far less aggressive than suggested by many in the literature. There is no evidence that the five groups in this study engage in a concerted effort to target children at popular locations where children are known to be active on the Internet.

This doesn't mean that hate groups have vanished or that their language has been cleaned up. Kallen (1998) studied the content of some notorious websites.

In conclusion, the analysis of High Tech Hate messages presented in this paper provides strong support for the thesis that hate-mongering incites hatred and harm against targeted minorities and thereby violates their fundamental human rights to dignity and equality by denying their fundamental freedom from vilification and harassment.

Nationalistic websites could fall within a possible 'dangerous' category; abuse and explicit language are quite common but the above examples indicate that notwithstanding the language used and the ideas advocated, there is little proof of harmful effects because of this content.

Related is the question of control and power: who controls the content? Is Internet organized like any other medium? Compared to other media there is very little corporate control, nobody 'owns' the Internet, anyone can build a homepage, start a newsgroup or an online discussion (Committee on the Internet, 2000). The technology makes it almost impossible to gain control over a substantial part of the net.

When we look at how people are using Internet, concepts of interactivity and/or participation are very prominent. It is assumed that people use Internet in a much more active way than other media. Participation in discussions, chats, and mailing lists is relatively easy. Publishing is also much easier. A homepage can be set up within 20 minutes. These features fascinate people and are partly responsible for the great expectations regarding Internet (Naughton, 1999).

Interactivity and participation are closely related to technology. When we look at the most common technologies used, we can distinguish:

- *Chats*. Direct personal contact, many people communicating at the same time: IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and ICQ (pronounce as “I Seek You”) are the most used technologies, anonymous participation is possible, and lurking (anonymous following discussions without participating) is difficult.
- *Usenet - newsgroups*. There are thousands of newsgroups. Google, the current owner of the Dejanews archive states that there are “more than 500 million messages - a terabyte of human conversation dating back to 1995.” (Google, 2001). Anyone can participate but lurking is very common, among frequent (and prominent) users there is a strong feeling of netiquette.
- *E-mail*. This has two basic forms: personal communication between two or within a small group of people, very widely used, little known about it. And mailing lists: the one-to-many list, and the discussions list where any member can send to the whole group. Some groups are moderated.
- *Websites*. Sometimes only presentation, information, news, and pictures without communication or participation; in other cases websites can have features like online discussions, guest books, forums and/or mailing lists.

When it comes to the consequences of Internet use, critics are certain that heavy Internet use could lead to social and personal disorders: isolation, depression, addiction, strengthening of anti-social and political dangerous ideas and promotion of violence and unacceptable sexual behavior (see also Evans, 2000). The evidence for personal disorders is however not very convincing (LaRose, Eastin & Gregg, 2001).

Optimists stress that Internet could make this world a better place. Central in their belief is the concept of the 'virtual community' - one of the most used buzzwords in Internet-speak. Virtual communities could have personal, social and political consequences. The fact that people participate in online discussions, chat with others, seek or exchange information could have an influence on gender identity and self awareness (Van Zoonen, 2000). It could be important for people for their ethnic or group identity (Franklin, 2000; Mallapragada, 2000), it could play a role in the development of personal identity and friendship (Utz, 2000), and is hoped to strengthen political participation. John December (1997) believes in "... the stubborn tendency of people to exploit the online medium so that it becomes part of their way of protesting. This demonstrates to me that online communities do exist and that there is meaning to the word Netizen." But still it is not very clear what the concept means. It is not a category that lends itself to precise analysis, in the words of Denis McQuail: "there are many different kinds of online associations and it is not helpful to treat them as equal candidates for the same concept" (2000, p. 134).

The idea of virtual communities is important for the study on nationalistic Internet movements. In 'real life' we would not call political parties, women's organizations or trade unions communities. Yet, when speaking about Internet, we do. People who live in the same region, city, village, state, or neighborhood live in a community. Sometimes

people, who are unified by ethnicity, share the same language or the same religion feel that they belong to the same community. But there are some important differences when we compare virtual groups to 'real life' communities - apart from the geographical aspect:

- Membership is *not voluntary*; in most cases is very clear that you belong to a group: you're black or you're not.
- There's little room for *peripheral membership*. Virtual communities have lots of half-members, sometimes-members or pseudo-members. There's even a name for them in newsgroups and mailing lists: 'lurkers' (people who receive and read messages but don't contribute to the discussions).
- Membership in real communities is *visible*. In virtual communities you are almost anonymous by definition. There are some virtual communities who are only open to non-anonymous members while some discussion groups and mailing lists are moderated.
- Real communities have the power to *force* people into certain conduct or to define norms for everybody. This is exceptional for virtual groups. Franklin (2000) gives examples of group pressure when it comes to manners, language or subjects that are covered in discussion groups.

Virtual communities with a counterpart in real life can be more successful, Weinreich (1997): "there is no such thing as a 'digital community.' 'Communities,' which means groups of people sharing their lives, co-exist in real life or they are not a community!"

Nationalistic websites

Websites about Kurdistan, Macedonia and Armenia were chosen with the search engine DirectHit, where websites are ranked by popularity so only sites with many visitors (in some cases over a million) were chosen. Questions concentrated on how people see their nation, what do they show visitors, how do they define their national identity.

All the websites are hosted in the western world. Sometimes on a national server: Sweden (2), the Netherlands, Japan, Germany (2), and Canada. Most websites however have other URL's: com (13), net. (2), org (3) and edu (5). The diaspora is very visible, members of the (virtual) nation can be found everywhere.

When we look beyond the URL there are some distinct features. Almost every site has the same elements: completeness, symbols, maps, history, news, politics and actuality.

Completeness. In almost every case the webmasters of these sites want to cover every aspect of life on their websites: history, culture (art, music, architecture, poetry, literature), economics, women's issues, geography, geology, anthropology. But things like traditional recipes, folktales and tourism are not forgotten. The website 'Virtual Macedonia' is divided into 16 different sections, among them sports, science, travel, health and media.

Symbols. Flags, coats of arms and anthems are very prominent. The same goes for historic relics and places of interest. On almost every Macedonian page (for instance on "the Republic of Macedonia") you can see the traditional red flag with

the yellow sun. Kurdish sites like the “Kurdish Worldwide Resource” show the red, white and green flag with the yellow sun.

Maps. Making clear what belongs to their country and what doesn't, is an important aspect. Kurdish maps show their homeland in five different countries; Armenians point out that Turkey occupies the western part of their country while Macedonians show that half of their country lies in Greece.

History. Important facts are repeated over and over again. In particular atrocities by Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Bulgaria, and Greece. Macedonian history goes back to a time before Alexander the Great; Kurds go back to Mesopotamia while Noah's Ark (and the roots of the whole western and Christian civilization) is located in Armenia.

News, politics and actuality. Links to media, reprints of articles in elite media (New York Times), documents of international organizations (UN, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International). Conflicts with other parties are covered: with the Kurdish community, between Armenians and Turks, between Macedonians and Greek.

The aim of these websites is to (re)construct a true nation and to create counter-knowledge about a specific region. This is done by presenting it as complete and historical as possible. A more semiotic analysis (see Wakeford, 2000) could reveal the personal and cultural significance of these pages. It is very possible that the Internet plays an important role in the creation of this kind of identity.

How can people use the sites? It was assumed that users could interact and participate. Every website was searched for the availability of interactive communication possibilities: chats, mailing lists, e-mail addresses, Usenet information, forums, and guest books.

Four of the 30 websites were off line during the research (autumn 2000). Of the remaining 26 websites six did not offer any e-mail service at all, only two had some one-to-many mailing list, there were no discussion lists. Six websites offered chat possibilities, only one website mentioned a Usenet news group. Five websites had guest books; three had a message board and one an online poll.

Websites serve mainly as presentation media: the nationality is on display, interactivity is not very important. A new medium like this can have some significance for personal use, you'll find information on topics that you consider as very important for your personal life. In most cases there is no real organization, while the technology is in most cases not very stimulating when it comes to participation.

The nationalistic websites provide information, represent an identity, sometimes have guest books, mailing lists and chat rooms. Compared to other media the entry barrier is low. Some people actually become publishers of their own website, others participate in discussions or newsgroups. But even Usenet is a place where not many people participate, in the sometimes crowded newsgroup alt.news.macedonia the same names are repeated over and over again, and these names also appear in other groups like soc.culture.greek because of cross postings. This however could be really important for those who participate. In general visitors of websites - maybe those of newsgroups also, do not

participate, meaning that they read words and look at pictures, or 'lurk' in the case of newsgroups. This may seem very modest but it's no less important.

Conclusion

If there's any digital divide, it's not very visible when we look at websites by diasporic people. In some cases the 'virtual nation' do look like global villages. Reasons for Internet use are not very clear yet, in fact they can be very diverse. But the websites studied offer a clue. There is very little participation and entertainment, in most cases it is just information (or to be more correct propaganda). But according to the amount of visitors, it is something that is enjoyed very much. Content can still be very explicit in some cases, but there's little proof that it has harmful effects. These websites can be important for some groups or individuals, research points in the direction of strengthening identity. But for the majority of users/visitors it is less important. This modest job is done very well. Websites offer a very fast service, very complete, very cheap and they reach more people every day.

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