ABSTRACT:

The widespread use of computer-based technologies, mostly the Internet, constitutes a new dimension in the study of virtual nationalism. The use of distance- and time-shrinking information technologies – such as social media, virtual communities and websites of nationalist groups – has changed the structure and context of nationalism as well as the scholarly discourse on related topics in the digital age. Social media enable identity expression, exploration and experimentation; phenomena that are considered natural for the human experience. It is necessary to acknowledge that there are many different factors which inspire and shape the Internet communities and interactions they make within themselves. It is essential to comprehend the motives behind these influences in order to understand the group interactions on social media platforms. In this study the authors focus on the nationalist discourse in virtual communities and on social media; mainly the opposition and resistance manifestations in the cultural and social contexts are discussed. The authors thus offer a set of theoretical outlines on the given topic and base their analysis of some nationalists’ social media posts on the inductive method of inquiry. The study also concentrates on the need to figure out the negative consequences of such social media sharing in relation to various virtual groups and general users.

KEY WORDS:

communication, digital age, nationalism, social media, virtual community, virtual nationalism

Introduction

Technological advancements play a central role in the organisation of society and in the shaping of opportunities and constraints, meanings and ways of life. People and various social groups adapt technology to their needs and interests, transforming the organisation of social life and profoundly changing the structures of current society. Apart from the basic ideologies and pressure groups, the Internet and specifically social media offer a more civil, conscious, confident communication environment compared to the ‘traditional’ ways of information dissemination. Social networks are the pattern of today’s social life and outline the dominant functions and processes related to the rise of the ‘network society’. Although the relationship between the concept of “nationalism” and information dissemination as such is closely tied, many of the conditions, under
which information and communication networks function in nationalist contexts, are rather new. In this study the nationalist discourse in virtual communities and on social media – mainly the oppositional and resistance parts in the cultural and social contexts – are discussed.

The nation is known for being united and holding together. We speak the same language and sing the same songs. We share the same fate and history. So, are we a nation? Or is there a realm of existence waiting to be discovered by all people? Does this discovery mean simply a kind of perception or does it have a more abstract context? Since the issue in question is the existence of a nation as a real realm of our being, we should start from its actual foundations and ontological bases.

An ontological base refers to the true, right, actual, acceptable and sensible reasons and justifications of an object’s existence, i.e. to the basic structure and factors that enable the object to exist as that object; the main ground on which the object raises as if it is the continuation of that ground. We are thus able to explain why this existence is as it is and not (or should not) be some other way. An ontological base explains the congruence of mind, system and fact and directs us to inspect the form and context of this existence in the present time and its adventures throughout the history. This base should be investigated. Since the purpose is to reveal the existence indisputably, its ground in the object/human world should also be revealed.1

The social reality in question is a large social group from the perspective of sociology. This group, the large mass that exists within the structure explained by the concept of “nation”, should have basic structural factors. In addition to the concept of “nation”, we also use the concepts of “public” and “community”. The same ontological foundations are also valid for these social groups.

Nationalism Discourse on Social Media

Anderson argues that the print language laid the bases for national consciousness, which created the possibility of a new form of imagined community – the “nation”. Firstly, language constituted unified fields of exchange and communication. Secondly, language created a power different from the older administrating vernaculars. Anderson further explains that the end result was a fundamental re-organisation of the way the world looks were divided. And then began a global transition to an era of nationalism and increasing internal homogeneity within a global system of nation states.2 Poster divides the third stage of the mode of information into two “media ages”. These “second media age” technologies, exemplified by the Internet, produce qualitatively different possibilities than those of the first “media age”.3 At this new stage, based on the technologically determinist approach, a new sense of community and even a new culture are in question; the determination and transformation of a new form of communication, known as “cyber-culture”, is placed in the centre of our attention.

As the development of this “cyber-culture” breaks through the physical boundaries of all information in all places and at all times, cyberspace will become a more embracing culture.4 However, one of the problems which beset any analysis of cyberspace is the difficulty related to clarifying what it means exactly. The term “cyberspace” hints at a ‘space’ being created where none previously existed.5 There are many competing definitions of cyberspace. Some view it as a “fictional construct; others as imaginary, but in development; yet others as real and present. Some equate cyberspace with virtual reality, others with electronic storage and transmission of information, or with computer-mediated communication, or with communication over computer networks.”6 It is also seen as an individual conceptual space; or as a product of social interaction. Some describe cyberspace

as in no sense a physical entity. As Strate et al. put it: “It’s a thing; it isn’t an entity; it isn’t an organisation. No one owns it; no one runs it. It is simply Everyone’s Computers, Connected.”7

Virtual nations need to be neither secessionist nor oppositional; similarly, the struggle diasporic populations engage in needs to be neither secessionist nor oppositional, and the work of collective identity may simply amount to an enlarging or a de-territorialisation of the existing nation. This, incidentally, may be the most common, if not most spectacular, form of virtual nationalism (or Trans Sovereign Nationalism).8 In countries with large diaspora populations, one might even imagine the development of state-sponsored virtual nations on the Internet, ensuring the continued loyalty and identification of citizens or ex-citizens living abroad. In terms of economic and strategic interests, such an enlarging of the national interest makes perfect sense.9

The territorial integrity of nations is often taken as the premise for a functioning, unified national identity. Yet, the economic and technological developments of recent decades have made it necessary to question this assumption. It can no longer be taken for granted that the people, who identify with a given nation, inhabit the same space, nor can it be assumed that cultural homogenisation takes place at the level of the nation through mass media. When the Internet appeared, many social scientists and commentators predicted that it would threaten the cultural integrity of nations; that the non-territorial character of the Internet would lead to fragmentation and unprecedented cultural differentiation, making it difficult, eventually impossible, to uphold a collective sense of national identity based on shared images, representations, myths and so on. Although it is too early to draw any conclusions regarding the long-term effects of the Internet, experiences so far suggest that such predictions were mistaken. In fact, nations thrive in cyberspace, and the Internet has in the space of only a few years become a key technology for keeping nations (and other abstract communities) together. In this “global era of movement and de-territorialisation, the Internet is used to strengthen, rather than weaken, national identities.”10 With the Internet’s rapid evolution, and in parallel with it, social media becoming widespread, we see that the concepts of “nation”, “public” and “community” are addressed on a different basis in terms of these social groups. The social medium that has the highest number of users worldwide, Facebook, holds an important potential for these kinds of social groups and virtual communities and their interests.

On the other hand, the definition of “community” is rather vague, especially in the era of information dominance. Are those so-called online communities really communities? Are social networking sites such as Facebook communities? Or are they constituted through the use of computer? Identity theories provide us with a certain perspective to understand these issues. Social identities, as self-reflected answers to the question ‘Who am I’ or ‘Who are we’ drawn from experience based on previous social interactions, help people define themselves and give them guidelines for proper social intercourse with others in the social life. According to the identity theories, a community can be viewed as a set of people who share certain distinctive identities. By providing relatively stable, consistent and enduring answers to the question ‘Who am I’ or ‘Who are we’, a community identity serves as a coherent bonding for all community members, which also helps them discriminate themselves from other people outside the community.11

As the most popular social networking site (though definitely not the first of its kind), Facebook allows its users to share their personal information, photos and interesting news and hyperlink links in their profiles, along with providing a forum for discussions and information exchanges on a variety of topics among a virtual network of friends (and friends of friends). In addition to the opportunities for exchange and discussion provided by users’ message boards, there are numerous interest groups and ‘pages’ focusing on a variety of issues, interests and topics; from the most mundane of interests to the most serious political debates and activist initiatives. Members can create their own themed groups on any topic and invite other members to join in. In these groups, the members can post to message boards, add pictures and post news or hyperlink links.


“Nationalism”, rarely discussed and dealt with systematically before the 20th century, started to be handled as an academic topic and analysed through a more objective perspective as late as in the 1920s. At this point, what flavoured the debate on nationalism was its relationship with the process of modernisation. The view that nations and nationalism belong to the modern age once dominated in these musings. According to this perspective, which does not consider nationalism free of such processes as secularisation, urbanisation, foundation of central states and industrialisation, nations became a sociological reality in the period of nationalism, and nationalism created the nations. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's definition suggests, the term “nationalism” is generally used to describe two phenomena: 1) the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity; and 2) the actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve (or sustain) self-determination. The first part of the definition raises questions about the concept of a “nation” (or a “national identity”), which is often defined in terms of common origin, ethnicity or cultural ties, and especially about whether an individual’s membership in a nation should be regarded as non-voluntary or voluntary.

Based on this description, a reminder about the historical path is needed: nationalism, the principal base of the process of forming nation states that shaped the dominant political way of thinking and the world maps in Europe in the early 19th century and around the world in the 20th century, has begun to take on negative connotations in Anglo-Saxon communities and in the countries that share the ideals of the European Union, along with the rise of the ideas of democracy and equality.

That historical acceptance shows that the perception of nationalism varies by community, and its level and effect are determined by historical and cultural dynamics since humans are the products of the national, regional, political and economic value judgments of the communities in which they live. Social production tools only produce people who have specific identities. It is possible to trace this kind of acceptance based on the perception of national identity.

National identities are arbitrary discursive constructs in nature. National identity is substantiated in relation to a historical narration of material events, beliefs and values in such a way that a (seemingly) coherent consistency and continuity over time is rendered. In a broad sense, identity refers to the social positioning of the self and Others. In that spirit identity follows two basic meanings: absolute sameness (among members of in-groups and out-groups) and distinctive or cultural ties. Nationalism, and nationalism created the nations.

According to Kono and Clegg, “a thick culture means that a group of members believes in certain ascriptions, that is, cultural identity. The subjects of social media practices, i.e. the topic we are address, are not included in this, eluding its cultural identity components, contrary to the claims of universality. The Internet enables social movements to cross national boundaries in ways simply not possible in any previous era. In this new global era, the existence of online white supremacist social movements has been scrutinised from three distinct angles. First, scholars such as Castells have examined how racial identity and globalisation are connected in online social movements. At this point, we encounter communities and countries that have a myth of origin based on strict values such as nationalism or which gather around a social contract defined with more flexibility and more universal values. The clearest discrimination between these communities and countries is the difference between “thick and thin cultures”.

According to Kono and Clegg, “a thick culture means that a group of members believes in certain assumptions and follows a similar pattern of decisions. Members responding similarly to questionnaire items about...”
culture are a sign of a thick culture. Members believe in the common values of the organisation, and the standard deviation between the sums of their attitudes will be small. In the case of thin culture, members share the common values to a lesser extent, with a greater deviation around the mean score.²³ For instance, in "thin" cultures, the distinction between central and pivotal values is clear, and people respond accordingly, while in "thick" cultures, there tends to be greater disagreement and ambiguity.²¹

The study by Mishler and Pollack is another contribution to introducing the distinction between thick and thin cultures.²² It also enables us to determine the position of Turkey in the relevant cultural differentiation. "The essential idea of thick culture is that societies are distinguished and structures (and individual behaviour) are fundamentally conditioned by a promonational force, unseen but highly palpable, which contains the genetic code of all that is collectively important and meaningful in that society."²⁴ A classic definition of a thick culture is Tylor's understanding of this culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."²⁵

Social media are regarded as having unique language and oratory culture. It has been observed that the oratory tradition, which is a holdover from days when oratory arts were dominant and writing was not yet widely used, still influences the written culture. "Oratory is an art of public speaking, delivering a speech in front of an audience. It has two aims including to persuade and to explain."²⁶ Politicians, artists and opinion leaders can write long posts by splitting them into numbered or long parts. Posts can be shared with determining numbers (1, 2, 3...) and can reach the masses. This can be regarded as a continuation of the oratory tradition.

The 'otherisation' process carried out by chauvinistic identities that despise, humiliate, exclude and even resort to violence against the others is one of the clearest examples that show the relationship between thick identities and the others. On the contrary, thin identity keeps negotiable areas by not choking the community with clear-cut and strict criteria. Thus, a tolerant kind of identity definition comes out. However, we must indicate that thin identity also bases upon certain progress and values, and thus sets bounds to other identities.²⁷ It is clear that Turkey has a strict culture with patriarchal political and cultural values. The most concrete expression of this situation is obvious if we consider the nation's founding values that are clearly defined and never skipped on the historical path.

Nationalism Discourse on Social Media in the Context of Situation in Turkey

As Yasa claims, "The identity of the Republic of Turkey is based on founding values defined as the basic and integrative principles of its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Nationalism, republicanism, secularism, populism, universalism, and realisation are the basic principles, and national independence, national sovereignty, national unification, power at home and in the world, scientism and rationalism, the modernisation of culture and philosophy, humanism and philanthropy are some of the integrative principles. The integrative power of the values and dynamics that define a nationalist, homogeneous identity such as national sovereignty and national unification and the potential of this power to be used in every period should be paid attention to at this point."²⁸

30. This group was established solely in Turkish and today it is not as active. See the group page: I Can Find One Million People to Show the Power of Nationalism! Facebook.com/ [2016-09-02]. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/ groups/54223387548/.
31. For more information and to check out the very interesting fact is that the claims of being 'above' and superior to everyone – along with the speech about proving and conquering – are actually based on the idea that some unknown and unspecified people are better. A sort of Internet 'citizenship' is formed through various actions and by joining certain networks.

In other words, in Turkey, as in many countries around the world, nationalist elites have mostly acted on basis of nationalist assumptions even while fulfilling their mission of internal civilisation, and this passion has frequently been brought to the agenda as the ’return of the repressed’, particularly in times of crisis, right up to the present. It is inevitable that nationalism, the myth of origin of a community which brings that community into existence, through which that community defines its own identity and the Others in it, and even to which that community is connected as to almost the only power bringing its components together in times of crisis, appears in all means of communication and on all social media platforms. This prevalence leads to the fact that people or groups fed with the ideology of nationalism become visible on many social media platforms, particularly on Facebook, and especially in the crisis this country has been going through recently.

At this point, we need another reminder. Although it once shaped the world’s history and maps, nationalism has been assigned with negative meanings and values through the historical acceptance of the concepts such as democracy, universality and rejection of marginalisation, and has been pushed into a hidden corner at the social level – except during explicit crises – like many similar concepts. Therefore, it is inevitable that the relevant concept becomes more visible on a social media platform that allows one to express his/her thoughts and opinions using anonymous identities without the interference of good manners or face-to-face communication. Anonymity lifts inhibitions and can lead to unusual acts of kindness or generosity, or it can lead to misbehaviour (harsh or rude language) and acts that are illegal or harmful. People use the protection of anonymity to reduce the social risks of discussing unpopular opinions and taboo topics, and to create different personas to reduce the social risks of discussing unpopular opinions and taboo topics, and to create different personas to
Of course, this citizenship is mainly based on how we fulfil our ‘service’ to our nation on Facebook (citizen – a member of the Turkish nation, a follower of Atatürk’s principle). You can be a citizen and prove how good a citizen you are by participating in the required protests, joining the groups that will prove the power of Turks and inviting all the people on your friend list to join the cause. The people who generate an official discourse and wear an official ‘face’ on Facebook first try to ‘found’ a Turkish nation or a ‘face of Turkey’ so that they can claim its superiority.

As well as the efforts to generate a ‘face of Turkey’, the presentation of this ‘face’ is also important. According to this rhetoric, we should both convince ourselves of this superiority and prove it to the world. Behind all this number fetishism is a lack of confidence and the fear of being ‘low’ in the hierarchy of nations. If Turks are ‘above everyone’ and all enemies of the Turkish nation are ‘naturally’ below, to whom should we prove this superiority? Paradoxically, various forces want to ignore or split the Turkish nation. The threat is real since these forces are competent. Then is it Turks who are ‘below’? This tension, one of the main conflicts related to Turkish nationalism, is also one of the most prominent themes of the efforts to prove Turkish superiority on Facebook.

Conclusion

It is easy to claim that there is no way to escape social media. They are more than just a concept; use of social media is becoming a lifestyle because social media are a form of our ‘presence’ in the society of today. It is not a luxury or a game anymore. Serious institutions are taking online social networks more and more seriously because reaching people has never been easier. The new developing communication tools are providing the individuals with new values that require some changes in the traditional value structures. This new interpretation process demands new decision-making strategies, which develops a certain controversy between the value changes and the decision-making. These factors show us the potential of communication advancements.

Because of its potential for high-context communication, Facebook is endlessly extremely popular in Turkey. Many observers and commentators of the current affairs, such as the professional blogger Mike Butcher, have also attributed this popularity to the early translation of Facebook into Turkish, Turkey’s generally young population (the median age is 27.7 according to the Turkish population living abroad, while noting that Turkey’s Facebook to Turkish nationalism, is also one of the most prominent themes of the efforts to prove Turkish superiority on Facebook. The question of finding out to what extent nationalism is approved also makes us join these closely watching the incoming messages and forward the outgoing messages with more consciousness. This filtering position has been achieved not only by the automatism of the algorithm, but also by the awareness the users have created for themselves through reading the incoming messages and forward the outgoing messages. This filtering position has been achieved not only by the automatism of the algorithm, but also by the awareness the users have created for themselves through reading the incoming messages and forward the outgoing messages.

Media have become a widely discussed media form, which nonetheless is in plain sight due to the creativity of individuals and the society as a whole is somehow vanishing. The main impact of the digital age on citizens and their daily life can easily be seen throughout the responses on social media. It is interesting that even if the messages are so negative, the people do not give up mass media, e.g. watching television. Watching news is especially important since it represents attempts associated with learning about life and being ready for it in its positive sense. However, excessive watching of news creates a limit that causes a burnout; people might give up their natural optimism. Most important is that, even if the audience members possess some unique reception traits regarding the richness of perception, interpretation, recollection, binding or developing, this news could be normalised and unified. That also means the creativity of individuals and the society as a whole is somehow vanishing.

Creating and confronting the Others is becoming an art and a kind of human engineering in the late modern age, and the new media are an effective tool for it. The individuals are positioning not only themselves, but also the Others via their re-positioning. With the help of the modern technologies and new media, it is much easier and efficient. Through the different roles the individuals gain as senders and receivers, they filter the incoming messages and forward the outgoing messages with more consciousness. This filtering position has also an impact on the individual. Thus, the impact of the media and visual spectacles is always much more powerful than the influence of the ‘ordinary’ press. The words ‘social’ and ‘society’ have become the key concepts in all fields of social studies. Citizenship – often seen as positive – also ties each individual to a state with boundaries that limit mobility. However, ‘society’ and ‘social facts’ are losing the importance once attributed to them within today’s ‘liquid modernity’.

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