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Banal nationalism in the internet age: rethinking the relationship between nations, nationalisms and the media

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Banal Nationalism in the Internet Age: Rethinking the Relationship Between Nations, Nationalisms and the Media

Classic authors in nations and nationalisms studies recognize traditional media as crucial for the construction of nations and spread of nationalisms. Anderson (1983), for example, insists on the importance of press capitalism, particularly the simultaneity of reading national newspapers, for the creation of a national consciousness. Gellner (1983, p. 127), in turn, focuses on media technologies and points out that 'it is the media themselves, the pervasiveness and importance of abstract, centralised one to many communication, which itself automatically engenders the core idea of nationalism quite irrespective of what in particular is being put into the specific messages transmitted'. He clarifies that those who can understand the language and style of the message transmitted are included in a particular (national) community and are distinguished from those who cannot understand the message. Conversely, Hobsbawm (1990, p. 142) argues that the content of media messages does matter and explains that the media manage to break down the division between the public and the private, or the national and the local, by making 'what were in effect national symbols part of the life of every individual'.

The latter argument is also echoed in Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism, which refers to subtle, unconscious and unnoticed reproductions of both individual nations and the world as a world of nations. Even though Billig does not devote much space in his book to scrutinize the relationship between nations, nationalisms and the media, he does implicitly recognize the key role of the media in reproducing banal nationalism. The core part of his analysis is based on a one-day survey of 10 British newspapers, both tabloids and broadsheets, sampled on one not particularly eventful day of 28 June 1993 (Billig 1995, pp. 109–111). In the analysis, he shows how the newspapers unwittingly reproduce the world as a world of nations, for example in the categorization of news items into 'Home' and 'Foreign', as well as casually adopt national references, for example in the use of country maps and deictic words such as 'we', 'here' and 'the' (as in 'the nation'). Additionally, Billig more explicitly acknowledges the role of the press, and traditional media in general, as one

of the key agents of banal nationalism: ‘The media of mass communication bring the flag across the contemporary hearth. Daily newspapers and logomaniac politicians constantly flag the world of nations’ (Billig 1995, p. 174).

While all those classic works on nations and nationalisms were written at the time when the media landscape was largely confined to traditional media such as press, radio, television and cinema, the last 20 or 30 years have witnessed radical media developments, which call for the rethinking of the relationship between nations, nationalisms and the media. One such development, critical for the studies of nations and nationalisms, has been the rapid spread of the Internet, initiated by the invention of the world wide web in the early 1990s (Gauntlett 2004, p. 5). As Diamandaki (2003, no pagination) points out, ‘the Internet poses anew the issue of national or ethnic identity. It is another archive, mirror and laboratory for the negotiation of national and ethnic identity’. While some scholars perceive the Internet as the key agent of globalization, possessing a great potential for rendering territorial boundaries meaningless (Mills 2002, p. 69), promoting global understandings (Bulashova and Cole, 1995, in Curran 2012, p. 8) or even enabling ‘new forms of postnational identity’ (Poster 1999, p. 239), other scholars argue not only that nations are very much there on the Internet but also that ‘nations thrive in cyberspace’ (Eriksen 2007, p. 1) and point to, for example, the online presence of stateless nations (Eriksen 2007) or online networks of nationalistic groups (Caiani and Parenti 2009).

In this chapter, I will further examine the role of the Internet for the reproductions of nations and nationalisms, with a particular focus on Billig’s concept of banal nationalism. My discussion will be structured around three fundamental questions: (1) To what extent and how are nations and nationalisms being reproduced on the Internet? (2) What kind of nations and nationalisms are being reproduced on the Internet? and (3) What role do these reproductions play in the construction and sustenance of national identities? I will address those questions separately in three subsequent parts of my chapter. Each part will start with a specific point of criticism of the banal nationalism thesis, which will be developed in relation to wider cultural and media theory, and applied to the Internet age. I will then conclude the chapter by summarizing my key arguments as well as pointing to important gaps in the existing scholarship on banal nationalism and the Internet to explore new avenues for research in this area.

Banal Cosmopolitanism: Against Methodological Nationalism

The sociologist Ulrich Beck (2000, 2002) has offered one of the strongest challenges to the banal nationalism thesis. Explicitly referencing Billig's work, Beck (2002, p. 28) proposes a counter-concept of banal cosmopolitanism, 'in which everyday nationalism is circumvented and undermined and we experience ourselves integrated into global processes and phenomena'. Beck (2002, p. 28) does not completely dismiss Billig's argument but points out that banal nationalism is fading away: 'banal cosmopolitanism appears to be displacing banal nationalism—involuntarily and invisibly, and throughout the world'. While Beck himself does not provide any empirical evidence for this alleged quantitative change, some authors do document the emergence of banal cosmopolitanism, or other more or less similar concepts, also in relation to traditional media. For example, Szerszynski et al. (2000) point to the cases of banal globalism in the production, circulation and reception of television images and narratives; Georgiou (2012) indicates the instances of banal nomadism in the uses of satellite television by Arab audiences in Europe; and Cram (2001) gives examples of banal Europeanism in such media as *European Voice*. Still, this does not mean that banal nationalism is fading away: other authors continue to document the persistence of banal nationalism in different national contexts and across different media, especially in the press (e.g. Costelloe 2014; Yumul and Özkirimli 2000) and television (e.g. Cann 2013; Perkins 2010). Moreover, when Waisbord (1998, p. 390) considers the idea of regional nationalism in Latin America, which would be based on a shared colonial past, language, religion and also media culture (e.g. telenovelas), he finds out that such regional integration 'may not be sufficient to spawn a transnational identity', specifically pointing to the lack of a political investment in institutionalizing such transnational identity.

Beck, however, goes further than arguing for the quantitative dominance of banal cosmopolitanism over banal nationalism. He postulates that 'what appears as and is proclaimed as national is, in essence, increasingly transnational or cosmopolitan' (Beck 2002, p. 29), suggesting that the national framework becomes more often merely a scam, as in the case of national football teams 'in which players of every skin colour and culture play against one another' (Beck 2002, p. 28). The key problem here is what Beck (2007) identifies as methodological nationalism, that is an often casually adopted research approach which equates societies with

nations and favours nations or nation states as units of analysis over all other possible units, such as cities, networks and communities (Georgiou 2007, p. 19). While methodological nationalism tends to be simplified and exaggerated in Beck's accounts (Chernilo 2006, 2011), it does pose a challenge for scholars of nations and nationalisms: if we limit our units of analysis to nations or nation states and constrict our focus to national issues, we may indeed overemphasize the national and underestimate the sub or supranational. After all, Billig's (1995) choice to analyse national newspapers makes it easier to find instances of banal nationalism, as much as Cram's (2001) choice to analyse European newspapers makes it easier to find instances of banal Europeanism.

While newspapers and other traditional media can rather easily be categorized as local, national, regional or international, the Internet problematizes such categorizations. Consequently, we may wonder: Is it possible to identify national webs similarly to the identifications of national markets of traditional media? Rogers (2013, pp. 125–151) took on such a task in his recent book *Digital Methods*. He explains that the difficulty of demarking national webs lies in the fact that there are multiple ways to identify websites as national. For example, he notes that the National Library of the Netherlands defines a website as Dutch if it is

in the Dutch language and registered in the Netherlands; is in any language and registered in the Netherlands; is in Dutch and registered outside the Netherlands; or is in any language, is registered outside the Netherlands, and has a subject matter related to the Netherlands. (Rogers 2013, p. 129)

Reporting on a number of other possible criteria for identifying websites as national, Rogers argues against any predefinitions of what makes a website national. Instead, he proposes to demarcate national webs through 'devices that "go local"', that is the devices which 'have location or language added as a value' (Rogers 2013, p. 150), for example local versions of Google search engine. While this is surely an innovative way to think about geography online, Rogers' approach falls into the trap of methodological nationalism: it assumes that all websites could be identified as national and imposes national framework on the web without explaining why such a framework would be relevant to the web in the first place.

To What Extent and How Are Nations and Nationalisms Being Reproduced on the Internet?

Trying not to fall into the trap of methodological nationalism, we still may ask: To what extent and how are nations and nationalisms being reproduced on the Internet, particularly in a banal way? The most obvious instances of banal nationalism can be found in Internet content, even though there are relatively few studies on the topic (Sheyholislami 2010; Szulc 2016). For example, in my analysis of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) websites in Poland and Turkey, I identify such classic instances of banal nationalism as (a) categorizations of news pieces and hyperlinks by countries, (b) casual uses of country maps and (c) subtle integrations of national symbols or colours into website logos (Szulc 2016). Still, during my research, I also found some instances of international LGBTQ symbols such as rainbow flags, lambda signs and pink triangles, which point to a broader than national LGBTQ culture. However, sharing Waisbord's (1998) scepticism about the strength of transnational identifications, I argue that the adaptation of international symbols is not enough to claim that the websites' authors 'drift away from their particular national identifications' (Szulc 2016, p. 319).

One important aspect of Internet content is language. Even though the relationship between languages and nations is a complicated one, Billig (1995, p. 31) argues that 'the world of nations is also a world of formally constituted languages'. The early Internet was considered as facilitating the process of Englishization because English was the dominant language of both Internet content and Internet structure (Dor 2004). However, with the growing number of Internet users based in non-English-speaking countries (see Table 1), Internet content shows the trend towards multilingualism, which is visible, for example, in the introduction of language-specific versions of popular Internet services such as Google, Facebook and MSN (Soffer 2013). Internet structure too is becoming more linguistically diverse. Since the early 2000s, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which coordinates the governance of domain names (e.g. .com, .org, .net), works to internationalize domain names so they could be used in different languages and alphabets (<https://newgtlds.icann.org/en/about/idns>). Commenting on those developments, Hafez (2007, p. 105) argues that 'the multilingual Internet [...] can rapidly become the vehicle of a reinvigorated nationalism'.

Table 1

Top 5 countries with the highest number of internet users in 2005 and 2015

2005		2015	
Country	No of users in m	Country	No of users in m
United States	204	China	674
China	103	India	354
Japan	78	United States	281
Germany	47	Brazil	118
India	39	Japan	115

Source Internet World Stats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm> , accessed: 8.01.2016

Banal nationalism can be traced not only in the language but also in the design of Internet structure. Interestingly, the Domain Name System (DNS) consists of two main types of domains: generic Top-Level Domains (gTLDs, such as .com) and country-code Top-Level Domains (ccTLDs, such as .uk for the UK). Consequently, as Steinberg and McDowell (2003, p. 54) note, ‘even though the internet was envisioned as an arena that would transcend the territorial divisions of the world, the domain name structure reproduces these divisions’. I also argue elsewhere that ccTLDs reproduce these divisions in a banal way: ‘ccTLDs may seem obscure, insignificant and innocent, and they frequently go unnoticed’ (Szulc 2015a, p. 1531). However, some ccTLDs have been purposively dissociated with the countries they are supposed to signify, for example .tv is being advertised as a domain for television-related rather than Tuvalu-based websites (Hrynyshyn 2008). More importantly, DNS has undergone crucial redesigns, which resulted in the introduction of new sub and supranational TLDs such as .cat for Catalonia (Atkinson 2006), .asia (Ng 2013) and .eu for European Union (Zowislo-Grünwald and Beitzinger 2008). Additionally, in 2014, ICANN started launching new gTLDs chosen in a

bottom-up application process (<http://newgtlds.icann.org/>). Many of the newly introduced gTLDs are geographical in scope and refer primarily to cities (e.g. .berlin, .moscow, .kyoto) but also provinces (e.g. .quebec, .vlaanderen) and continents (e.g. .africa). Hence, the latest developments in the design of DNS are diluting the importance of the national framework, initially inscribed in Internet structure.

Heterogeneous Nations and Dynamic Nationalisms: Against Sociological Essentialism

Another criticism of banal nationalism centres on destabilizing the notions of nations and nationalisms. In the book *Mediating the Nation*, Madianou (2005, p. 7) argues that most theories on media and identity, including national identity, tend to ‘essentialise identities, culture and in some cases the media themselves’. Similarly, in his critical engagement with banal nationalism, Skey (2009) points out that Billig fails to acknowledge the complexity of the British society, which in fact includes four ‘national’ groups as well as many migrant communities. Skey (2009, p. 335) also criticizes Billig’s use of the concept of the British press: ‘so-called British newspapers often carry distinct English and Scottish editions, while Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish audiences are all served by their own dedicated press which through the use of deixis, location markers etc. “flag” their stories accordingly’. Furthermore, Petersoo (2007) notes that in Scottish newspapers the deictic word ‘we’ may refer to Britain, Scotland or the editorial team of a particular newspaper. Therefore, she proposes the concept of ‘wandering “we”’ and concludes that ‘there is no simple and banal national “we” in the media, but a kaleidoscope of different “we’s”’ (Petersoo 2007, p. 433). Responding to these criticisms, Billig (2009) points out that banal nationalism acknowledges the fact that different groups ‘struggle for the power to speak for the nation, and to present their particular voice as the voice of the national whole’ (Billig 1995, p. 71), but still they do so within the universal framework of nationalism, that is they take for granted the naturalness of the world as a world of nations.

Not only nations are heterogeneous but also nationalisms are dynamic, continue the critics of banal nationalism. Hutchinson (2006) warns against teleological models of nationalisms, which assume a gradual, linear and irreversible development of relatively stable nations. Instead, he suggests ‘the co-formation of two types of nationalism: a “hot” transformational movement produced by a sense of crisis and a ‘banal nationalism’ that people consume as part of giving meaning to the experiences of everyday

life' (Hutchinson 2006, p. 295). Mihelj (2008) makes a similar distinction between 'nations in fabula' and 'nations in actu', where the former are characteristic of the times of quiet nationalism and the latter of the times of mass mobilizations of national feelings. Drawing on the distinction between hot and banal nationalism, Skey (2009) proposes the concepts of heating and cooling of nationalism. He argues to extend the studies of hot and banal nationalisms to the analysis of the relationship between those two and to ask such questions as how and under which conditions hot nationalism may be cooled down and banal nationalism may be heated up (Skey 2009, p. 340). To acknowledge the dynamics between banal and hot nationalisms, some scholars propose the concept of everyday nationhood, pointing out that ordinary people not only reproduce nationalism unconsciously, as in Billig's (1995) thesis, but also deploy it more consciously and creatively (e.g. Antonsich 2016; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Skey 2014).

What Kind of Nations and Nationalisms Are Being Reproduced on the Internet?

While in the previous part of the chapter I discussed to what extent and how nations and nationalisms are being reproduced on the Internet, I will now draw on the criticism of homogenous nations and stable nationalisms to consider *what kind* of nations and nationalisms are being reproduced online as well as what conditions facilitate the heating of banal nationalism. Particularly, I will consider the role of the Internet for the groups which complicate the idea of homogenous nations and stable nationalisms. One such group are diasporas. Some researchers build on the concept of banal nationalism to point to a quotidian form of diasporic nationalism present on online spaces of different diasporic groups, for example on Argentinian Mailing List (Boczkowski 1999) and The Iranian.com (Graham and Khosravi 2002). Studying media use of Chinese, Japanese and Korean women based in London, Kim (2011, p. 133) too concludes that 'electronic mediation intensified by the Internet provides a necessary condition for the possibility of diasporic nationalism'. Interestingly, all these authors note that the diasporic context provokes intensified, but also increasingly explicit, articulations of national belongings, and that the Internet affords their free and easy expression. This suggests that the diasporic context in combination with Internet communication facilitates the process of heating banal nationalism but we should be careful not to generalize this conclusion to all diasporic communities and individuals.

Another group problematizing homogenous nations and stable nationalisms are stateless nations, that is nations which do not have their own territory or do not have a full independent control of it. Most research on stateless nations and the Internet conclude that the medium is used, often in a banal way, as a new terrain where stateless nations can be articulated and legitimized. For instance, in his research on Kurds online, Sheyholislami (2010, p. 308) points out that ‘new communication technologies have enabled Kurds to begin overcoming the geographical and political barriers that have kept them apart and fragmented’. He specifically mentions the insistence of Kurdish bloggers writing in Kurdish even though many of them have never received a formal education in the language. Besides, Sheyholislami notes that while the bloggers use different alphabets, grammars and vocabulary in Kurdish, the increasingly popular audio-visual features of social media (particularly Facebook and YouTube) facilitate the communication between the bloggers and, thus, help unify them.

Stateless nations also fight for their recognition in the DNS. One example could be the successful campaign of Catalonians who were granted the .cat TLD (Atkinson 2006). Similar though less successful campaigns include the dotCYM campaign for the recognition of the Welsh online community (Honeycutt 2008) and the dotKurd.org campaign, advocating for ‘the identity of Kurds on world wide web’ (www.dotKurd.org; the campaigners managed to recently register the .krd domain as a new gTLD). Additionally, Enteen (2010, p. 68) reports on Sri Lankan Tamils who ‘refuse to recognize the primacy of country-code suffixes to denote nation and location’ and, therefore, do not request their own TLD but instead focus on ensuring the duration and reliability of their online presence to legitimize themselves as a nation. Importantly, by fighting for their own TLDs or explicitly refusing their authority, stateless nations do not dismiss ccTLDs as banal, but consciously acknowledge their ideological load and creatively respond to it, as described in the literature on everyday nationhood. Shklovski and Struthers (2010, p. 126) point out in their paper on the use of .kz for Kazakhstan that the importance of ccTLDs ‘increases in locations where notions of nationalism and statehood are in flux’.

The last group complicating homogenous nations and stable nationalisms which I want to discuss are LGBTQs. While in some Western countries LGBTQs have recently been integrated in the dominant notion of national identity (Puar 2007), in most countries, LGBTQs continue to be excluded from the hegemonic national imaginations. At the same time, scholars speak about the growing globalization of LGBTQ culture, the

emerging ‘global gay’ (Altman 1997; Szulc 2017), which is facilitated by the spread of the Internet. Having that in mind, I asked elsewhere (Szulc 2015b) what is left of nations and nationalisms on LGBTQ websites in Poland and Turkey. As I already explained, I found many instances of banal nationalism on the analysed websites, which I interpreted as the process of domesticating the nation online: the function of national references in that case was ‘not to challenge hegemonic national discourses in a public debate but to domesticate the nation, so that queers too feel minimally at home within this overarching narrative [of the world as a world of nations]’ (Szulc 2016, p. 318). I also pointed out that some authors of LGBTQ websites in Turkey refuse to use Turkish ccTLD (.tr) because they recognize its particular connotations of an LGBTQ-free notion of Turkishness (Szulc 2015a). Consequently, such Internet resources as ccTLDs are likely to lose their banality not only for stateless nations but also for those groups which are excluded from a hegemonic version of national identities.

Active Audiences: Against Technological Determinism

So far my discussion has centred on the issues of Internet content and its production as well as Internet structure and its design. In this part, I will move on to consider the criticism of banal nationalism related to Internet use. Madianou (2005, p. 7) points out that most theories about the relationship between media and national identity fall into the dichotomy between strong media and weak identities, on the one hand, and weak media and strong identities, on the other hand. While the former approach overestimates media effects and underestimates the agency of audiences, the latter overestimates active audiences and underestimates the power of structure. Hence, as Mihelj (2011, p. 10) observes, media tend to be seen either as powerful instruments of nation-building in the hands of the elites or as mere reproducers of national discourses. Regarding the banal nationalism thesis, Skey (2009, p. 337) argues that Billig falls into the strong media and weak identities approach because he ‘does not address how different constituencies might respond to the particular media texts or political speeches’. Billig (1995) tends to assume that banal national references in the media reproduce national identity, as much as Cram (2001) tends to assume that banal European references in the media produce European identity. In that sense, both banal nationalism and banal

Europeanism bear the hallmarks of a soft version of technological determinism, which implies that technology strongly influences society and culture.

In his reply to these criticisms, Billig (2009) writes that his model does not assume people passively receiving media messages. Nevertheless, he explains that banal nationalism is mostly preoccupied with top-down phenomena and unconscious, that is so familiar and habitual that they pass unnoticed, aspects of nationalism (Billig 2009, pp. 348–349). In short, not denying the agency of audiences, which is the key preoccupation of the everyday nationhood approach, Billig focuses on the issues of structure, power and ideology. Some works on audiences and national identities follow his model of banal nationalism. For example, Dittmer and Dodds (2008, p. 449) argue that ‘most citizens cannot remember a conscious decision to be national subjects, but rather one day find themselves acting in a national manner’, but the authors also add that later in life the citizens ‘actively claim that identity and consciously project it’.

Slavtcheva-Petkova (2014) too adheres to the central argument of banal nationalism in her research on the role of television in producing national and European identifications among children. Yet, she also offers a more critical insight about Billig’s ‘taken-for-granted link between banal flaggings of nationalism in the media and national identities’ (Slavtcheva-Petkova 2014, p. 43). The results of her research show that Bulgarian children, exposed to a relatively high number of European symbols on national television, tend to reject European identity, while English children, exposed to a fewer European symbols on national television, tend to endorse, but still not embrace, European identity. She explains that this is related to the representation of Europeanness only at the symbolic but not deictic level in the media of both countries as well as to the representations of Europe, mostly the EU, as a superior partner for Bulgaria and as an equal partner for the UK. Slavtcheva-Petkova (2014, p. 57) concludes that those inconsistent results demonstrate that the relationship between media and identity is neither casual nor secure, and that television, or any other medium for that matter, is only one of many identity resources.

What Role Do Online Reproductions of Nationalism Play in the Construction and Sustenance of National Identities?

In the previous parts of this chapter, I traced the instances of banal nationalism on the Internet and discussed the role of the medium for reproducing (and heating up) banal nationalism, notably for the groups

which complicate the idea of homogenous nations and stable nationalisms. In this part, I will follow the conclusions of Slavtcheva-Petkova (2014) to ask the so-what questions: So what if banal nationalism is being reproduced online? What role do these reproductions play in the construction and sustenance of national identities? While those questions are relevant in regard to all kinds of media, the Internet again problematizes the issue. The key difference between traditional media and the Internet, in that respect, is that the latter requires increasingly active audiences: as Livingstone (2004, p. 76) puts it, on the Internet, ‘viewing [...] is converging with reading, shopping, voting, playing, researching, writing, chatting’. Online audiences can easily become, and often do become, not only receivers but also producers of content. Consequently, the role of such information gatekeepers as journalists and politicians, key in traditional media and in banal nationalism thesis, is sharply reduced on the Internet.

Because the production of Internet content is much more decentred, diversified and pluralized than the production of traditional media content, banal reproductions of nationalism through media can no longer be seen simply as a top-down phenomenon. Many instances of banal nationalism identified in Internet content have not been produced by journalists or politicians but the people who usually do not have much control over the content of traditional media, for example Kurdish bloggers (Sheyholislami 2010) or LGBTQs in Poland and Turkey (Szulc 2016). To be sure, this does not mean that the Internet universalizes banal nationalism. Shifman et al. (2014) show that the Internet could be used by non-elites in a similar way to advance what they call a ‘user-generated globalisation’. Analysing the online translations of 100 popular jokes in English into 9 languages, they conclude that ‘the ongoing process of joke translation formulates a global humorous sphere, even if its reach is often not evident to end users’ (Shifman et al. 2014, pp. 739–740). Clearly, Internet users can easily reproduce either banal nationalism or banal cosmopolitanism. However, the key point is that both those phenomena no longer, if ever, simply originate in ‘the elites’ and are transmitted to ‘the masses’. On the Internet, not only are ‘the citizenry [...] daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations’, as Billig (1995, p. 8) explains, but also the citizenry themselves remind themselves and each other of this national place.

Moreover, it seems like the citizenry also tend to browse the web along national borders. In his theoretical paper on the Internet and national solidarity, Soffer (2013) points out that the ritual of simultaneous reading of newspapers, identified by Anderson (1983) as an important practice for creating national consciousness, is decreasing online: people may still read

the same content but ‘the exposure to someone reading the same paper has been replaced by the exposure to people reading unknown content on their digital devices’ (Soffer 2013, p. 54). At the same time, Soffer notes that banal nationalism is very much present online not only in Internet structure and content but also in user preferences. First, he points to the work of Halavais (2000) which examines hyperlinks on 4000 websites and concludes that most analysed websites tend to link to the websites within the same country. Thus, the topography of the web encourages Internet users to remain within national boundaries (though, it should be verified if Halavais’ conclusion still holds true some 15 years after his original research). Second, he refers to the research by Best et al. (2005) and points out that the majority of Internet users in the US relied solely on US news sites when looking for information about the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (Soffer 2013, p. 61). Taking into account the gradual processes of multilingualism (Dor 2004) and localization (Postill 2011) of the Internet, we may predict that Internet users will increasingly browse websites anchored in their linguistic and national communities, though this prediction should be researched rather than assumed.

Conclusions

While traditional media have been recognized as key for the construction of nations and spread of nationalisms, the Internet tends to be perceived as the key agent of globalization. In this chapter, I aimed to critically evaluate the latter assumption and investigated the role of the Internet for banal reproductions of nations and nationalisms. First, I showed that online we could quite easily locate the instances of banal nationalism, reproduced both in traditional ways (symbols, deixis, language) and in new ways (ccTLDs). At the same time, I discussed some works which point to the instances of banal cosmopolitanism on the Internet. The existing literature, however, tends to present banal nationalism and banal cosmopolitanism as opposing rather than accumulative forces, suggesting a quantitative dominance of one over the other. Second, I examined the role of the Internet for the national identity of groups which complicate the idea of homogenous nations and stable nationalisms such as diasporas, stateless nations and some LGBTQs. Research in these domains shows that those groups do not challenge the idea that the world is, and should be, a world of nations. The Internet usually becomes for them a kind of counter public (Fraser 1992), where they are allowed to articulate and legitimize their distinct national identities or their denied belongings to a particular nation,

though in a more explicit rather than banal way. Third, I considered the common criticism of banal nationalism about the active role of audiences in consuming, interpreting and embracing banal national references in the media. I pointed out that, regarding the Internet, such criticism is problematic since online audiences often become not only receivers but also producers of content.

Reviewing research on banal nationalism and the Internet, I also identified two important gaps in this area of study. The first one is related to paying little attention to the ‘centre’, that is to the US. One of the most innovative aspects of Billig’s book was that it shifted the focus from the extreme nationalism of ‘others’, that is of weak or new nations, to the mundane nationalism of ‘ours’, that is of the established nations of the West. As Billig (2009, p. 351) confesses: ‘Having written *Banal Nationalism*, I hoped that others would then analyze in detail the banality of the world’s most powerful nationalism—that of the United States. Instead, it has been the less powerful nationalisms that have attracted attention’. Indeed, it proved to be much easier for me to locate scholarship on stateless rather than established nations, diasporic rather than autochthonous citizens and marginal rather than central parts of the world. Most remarkably, the research on online banal Americanism as being reproduced in the US is virtually non-existent. The mechanism at work here is the exnomination of the US nationalism, that is the fact that US nationalism occupies the privileged position outside of naming: what is particular to the US becomes universalized. As Billig (1995, p. 149) explains, it is only Hollywood stars, like Meryl Streep, that can drop the confines of nationality and become universal icons, simply ‘stars’ or ‘mega stars’, rather than just Italian stars, like Sophia Loren. Similarly, it is only the US government that is allowed to use the generic .gov domain, while all other governments are required to nationalize the domain by adding a ccTLD to it (e.g. .gov.uk for the UK government). The low visibility of banal Americanism is of course no excuse for neglecting it in our research. To the contrary, I agree with Billig (2009) that we should intensify our efforts to make the invisible visible and advance our understanding of how banal Americanism is being reproduced and universalized, also on and by the use of the Internet.

The second gap in the scholarship on banal nationalism and the Internet is related to paying little attention to audiences. Just as the research on traditional media, so too the works on the Internet in this area are largely confined to content analysis. It is true that the production of Internet content is more decentred, diversified and pluralized than the production of traditional media content, and that the Internet blurs the distinction

between media producers and consumers. But this does not mean that we can give up on studying online audiences altogether. In general, as Livingstone (2004, p. 82) points out, audience studies are concerned with the experiences that are private rather than public, are regarded as trivial rather than important, are concerned with meanings rather than overt practices and are experiences of all society not just the elites. In that sense, audience studies clearly go hand in hand with banal nationalism thesis. Moreover, audience studies are also much preoccupied with the issue of context of media consumption or use, which I believe could add a new impetus to the study of banal nationalism or everyday nationhood. Hence, our questions should be not only about how audiences use the Internet to reproduce or challenge particular national identities or the world as a world of nations, but also about where, when and using which Internet devices or online platforms they routinely reproduce national symbols and meanings or more actively flag their nationality.

Banal nationalism is not necessarily a never-ending phenomenon. I agree with Billig who stated some 20 years ago that

History has created nations and, in time, it will unmake them [...] Maybe, nations are already past their heyday and their decline has already been set in motion. But this does not mean that nationhood can yet been written off, and its flaggings dismissed as pastiche or nostalgia. (Billig 1995, p. 177)

My short review of research on banal nationalism and the Internet, presented in this chapter, shows that the emergence and spread of the Internet itself will not tip the scales in favour of banal cosmopolitanism. While analysing the impact of any new medium on society and culture, we should take into account not only the affordances and limitations of that medium but also how its design already reflects deep social and cultural structures and, even more importantly, how that medium is being employed along or against dominant social and cultural discourses. The Internet does afford easier and quicker international connections, but it also fosters banal reproductions of individual nations and the world as a world of nations.

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