

# Nationalism and the Internet\*

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**ABSTRACT.** The territorial integrity of nations is often taken as the premise for a functioning, unifying 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. Nations which have lost their territory (such as Afrikaner-led South Africa), nations which are for political reasons dispersed (such as Tamil Sri Lanka or Kurdistan), nations with large temporary overseas diasporas (such as Scandinavian countries, with their large communities in Spain during winter), or nations where many citizens work abroad temporarily or permanently (such as India or Caribbean island-states), appear in many sites on the Internet – from online newspapers and magazines to semi-official information sites and ‘virtual community’ homepages. In a ‘global era’ of movement and deterritorialisation, the Internet is used to strengthen, rather than weaken, national identities.

Although many disagree with various elements of his theory, nobody contests Ernest Gellner’s central place in the research on nationalism over the last few decades. His elegant theory, developed and refined over a period of several decades, from the early 1960s until his death in 1995, famously, and with a hint of the scandalous, was founded on the conviction that it was nationalism that created nations and not the other way around. Nationalism, Gellner argued, was a product of the transition from agrarian to industrial society – a likely outcome but not a necessary one. Like his intellectual hero Malinowski, also an immigrant from Central Europe who became an LSE man, Gellner

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believed in the possibility of combining a love of culture with a politics based on cosmopolitan, non-sectarian values. The theory, never uncontroversial, has the twin virtues of simplicity and lucidity, and unlike other bodies of thought that have influenced our generation of intellectuals, it is actually possible to know when one agrees or disagrees with it.

My personal debt to Gellner's work on nationalism is very considerable. Just as I was about to embark on my first ethnographic fieldwork in an ethnically complex society, reading *Nations and Nationalism* alerted me to the importance of nationalism for any study of culture and modernity. This connection was not self-evident at the time, in the mid-1980s, and it is likely that my year of fieldwork in Mauritius, and much of my subsequent research, would have taken a different course without that seminal book. Not least for this reason, I am grateful for the opportunity to offer a small gift in return, in the form of a lecture which tries to indicate the relevance of Gellner's theory for an empirical field which he never took on himself.

A common objection against Gellner's theory of nationalism is that it is too closely tied up with a particular period in European history, beginning with the Industrial Revolution, Romanticism and the Enlightenment, and ending with Woodrow Wilson and the Versailles Peace Treaty – in other words, Eric Hobsbawm's 'long nineteenth century'. It is obviously the case that most of Gellner's examples were taken from that time and place, and the main, hypothetical case in *Nations and Nationalism*, Ruritania, formerly a province in Megalomania, has a distinctly Habsburgian feel to it. Yet the theory as such was intended to be universal, even if it might require some extra scaffolding here and there to fit circumstances in Asia or the Americas, and it deserves to be taken seriously.

Gellner's theory of nationalism is about political and cultural dimensions of the transition from agrarian to industrial societies. It was conceived and developed as a theory of territorially based identities, which stands to reason since national identities were, and to a great extent still are, territorially based. Although the territorial nature of nations remains undisputed, the growing deterritorialisation of power, culture, politics, economies and people has in recent decades created new problems (or challenges, to keep in line with current newspeak), even for some of the oldest and most established nation-states.

### **Technology and the new complexities**

Ours is an era characterised by migrations which contribute to transforming the nationalisms of our North Atlantic societies, as well as creating fertile conditions for diasporic and transnational identity politics. Gellner occasionally discussed diaspora nationalisms, once describing them as 'a distinctive, very conspicuous and important sub-species of nationalism' (Gellner 1983: 101). In pre-modern societies, diasporas were often occupationally specialised

and frequently constituted elites, albeit with little political and no military power. In modern industrial societies based on nationalist ideology, Gellner argued, such ethnic minorities might be assimilated, seek to be integrated into the original 'homeland' or indeed found their own nation on a new or mythical territory, or they might be expelled or physically exterminated. Their occupational monopolies were unlikely to persist in societies increasingly characterised by meritocracy and occupational mobility, and the drive towards cultural homogenisation would create a chronic tension between the cultural particularity of the diaspora and the national high culture of the state.

In spite of his interest in historical European diasporas like Jews, Greeks and Armenians, and his mention of contemporary migrant groups like overseas Chinese and Indians, Gellner never paid much attention to the emergent cultural complexities caused by the twin forces of the new information age and communication technology, and large-scale migration from poorer to richer countries. In the last years of his life, he was engaged in exploring political transformations in Central and Eastern Europe and their relationship to nationalism. Moreover, as is well known, Gellner wrote prolifically on Islam and Muslim societies, noting among other things that Islam is 'unique among world religions, in being, so far, clearly incompatible with the widely held secularisation thesis' (Gellner 1997: 84). Yet he chose not to address the problem of the place of Islam in contemporary Europe.

Since Gellner thought of nations as being chiefly territorially based, he saw the uprooted, diasporic variants as an interesting deviation, an anomalous form. As the most powerful political entities, the states, are territorial, and he firstly defines nationalism as 'primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be contingent' (Gellner 1983: 1), and secondly tends to regard the national as synonymous with ethnic, it stands to reason that nations should be territorial. Yet, in one of his very last statements on nationalism, Gellner speaks of the 'de-territorialisation of nationalism', adding that the power of a nation now 'depends on its annual rate of growth . . . and *not* on how much of the map it manages to paint with its own colour' (Gellner 1997: 107). In other words, the social and cultural principles legitimising nationalism and instilling loyalty among its adherents may well operate across a non-contiguous territory. But although he mentions the possibility that 'two or more TV networks [may be] equally accessible in the same "land"' (*ibid.*: 108), Gellner left it to others to work out the implications of these and other new communication technologies for nationalism.

By addressing such questions, my intention is to explore the extent to which the new diasporic or virtual nationalisms expressed through, and mediated across, the Internet confirm or contradict the expectations arising from Gellner's theory, which was based empirically largely on nineteenth-century European nationalisms.

Gellner's theory of nationalism offered an original perspective on the transition from agrarian to industrial society. Emphasising the unifying role

of national labour markets, culturally homogenising educational systems and increased communication because of mobility and urbanisation, the theory presented nationalism as a compatible ideological companion to industrialisation, filling the voids of existential belonging and political legitimation left by the demise of feudalism and agrarian society. Using the ideal-typical emergent nation of Ruritania as an example, he indicated ways in which social entropy – the ironing out of cultural differences – took place, and the measures a dominant ethnic group might take to deal with so-called entropy-resistant groups, that is, minorities which were not easily assimilated. Moving on to his present or what is now the recent past of our societies, Gellner argues that the drive towards homogenisation continues, that the ‘nationalist imperative of the congruence of political unit and of culture will continue to apply’ (Gellner 1983: 121).

The moot point in this argument concerns the definition of the term culture. To what extent is it necessary, for the efficient functioning of the shared institutions of society, that the inhabitants are culturally similar? Is it sufficient that they speak the same language, or do they also have to share a religious identity, believe in the same national myths of origin, and support the same sport teams?

This question cannot be answered conclusively. The problems concerning the relationship between cultural similarity and national identity hover ominously above most theoretical treatments of nationalism, but they can only be resolved at the level of practice or politics. However, we can say something descriptive about the degree of inclusion experienced by minorities, immigrant or otherwise, and their degrees of identification with the nation in which they reside, with another nation where they or their parents were born, or with other social and cultural units. Although cultural homogenisation among immigrant minorities in Europe does in some important ways take place, roughly along the lines predicted by Gellner’s theory, there is no one-to-one relationship between this process and that of identification with the nation. In a current research project on minorities and the media in the UK, Marie Gillespie (2006) reports that many British Muslims felt much more British (and probably less Muslim) before 9/11 and the war on Iraq than they do now. This change is not a result of weakened cultural homogenisation or even exclusion from the labour market, but of a widespread feeling of being less welcome than before. While religious variation may not have been seen as a major obstacle to national homogeneity in the recent past, the European Muslim is now increasingly perceived as the alien within.

Writing about the cosmopolitan middle classes, Gellner comments that they ‘already “speak each other’s language”, even if they do not speak each other’s language’, meaning that they adhere to an internationally shared grammar of interaction and signification. With many ethnic minorities in Europe these days, however, the opposite could be said to be the case: even if they speak the same language as the majority, they no longer feel that they

‘speak the same language’. Most of the immigrants are arguably in a better state in their new country than they would have been in their country of origin: they are free from persecution, acute material insecurity and hopelessness, and their children have a wide range of educational and professional opportunities. Yet most non-European immigrants have not been, and may never be, fully assimilated. Many develop precarious and complicated hyphenated identities. Some see their situation as one of temporary exile, hoping to return when political conditions in their country of origin change. Others develop transnational networks with people from their own country, as an alternative or supplement to full membership in one nation or the other. Moreover, this unstable situation, where a certain proportion of the population are neither full members of the nation nor foreigners, is unlikely to end soon. Notwithstanding ongoing cultural homogenisation, identity politics runs its own course, using some aspects of homogenisation (education, technological skills, etc.) to prevent others (religion, beliefs, emotional attachments). It is an irony of the present era that the more similar we become, the more we try to remain different. In a certain sense, we are witness to a twenty-first century version of what has been described as the problem of the third generation in the United States. The grandparents lived in a culture without being aware of it; the parents, moving into a modern society, did their best to remove every trace of that pre-modern and shameful past; while the children try to revive precisely that culture in which the grandparents lived without being aware of doing so, and which the parents did their best to forget.

### **Centripetal and centrifugal forces**

I described our era as one characterised by migration and diasporic identity politics, but it is also one of dramatic changes in the use and availability of new information and communication technologies. The total number of Internet users in the world is currently a little over a billion, or one in six, and the growth rate is spectacular, estimated to average 35 per cent annually over the last five years. The use of mobile telephones worldwide also continues to grow exponentially, not least with respect to text messages, a cheap and fast implementation of mobile technology which, to everybody’s surprise, conquered the world in the space of a few years. A decade ago, text messages were unknown in China. In January 2006, the Chinese sent about 15.6 billion text messages.

Global cultural history of the *Big Ditch* kind favoured by Gellner – the movement from bands and tribes to cities and states – can fruitfully be seen as a movement from the concrete to the abstract: words and numbers are turned into abstractions through the medium of literacy; local communities become imagined communities; vast nations imitate the symbolism of kinship and locality, and so on. In connection with this figure of thought, there is a

widespread notion that increased complexity in social life creates larger and larger communities – not so many years ago, leading sociologists thus predicted the imminent rise of global identities, universal cosmopolitanism and world governments. Notwithstanding the ethnic politics and ‘narcissism of small differences’ so widespread in the 1990s, this simplistic view, like other simplistic views, has some general truth to it. In relation to the Internet, McLuhan’s (1964) cliché of *the global village* is often invoked to argue that since the web of communication is now global rather than national, the community with which individuals identify can also, for the first time in human history, encompass the globe.

On the other hand, individualism – also a major result of modernity – leads us to the apparently opposite conclusion that communities become smaller and smaller, with the individual as the end result. Some of the prophets of the Internet have indeed argued that the individual is an industrial product, and that the multiple identities persons can assume on the Internet herald the end of the integrated person.

As theorists of nationalism have shown, there is no contradiction between individualism and the growth of abstract communities; on the contrary, they are directly interrelated. The nation is a collective of individuals *and* a collective individual, as Louis Dumont wrote many years ago (Dumont 1964). The question here, then, is what kinds of creatures will form what kinds of communities in an electronic age of instantaneous, transnational communication.

Seen together, the increased mobility of people and the rapid spread of new communication and information technologies contribute to creating new conditions for collective identity management. In the early years of the Internet, many commentators believed that the deterritorialised, supra-national character of the Internet would contribute to the fragmentation of populations and the breakdown of stable national identities; some even foresaw the coming of an all-encompassing global identity. Similar prophecies have been, and to some extent still are being made regarding the impact of non-European migration into the European heartlands. Both tendencies have the potential of liberating individuals from place-bound identities embedded in myth and kinship; and, at a macro level, of breaking up the nationalist alloy of place, language, ethnic identity, state, culture and nationality into its constituent components, leaving many options open and few identities unquestioned. In a friendly aside to Gellner’s description of nationalism as the replacement of Kokoschka’s paintings, made up of thousands of tiny coloured dots, with Modigliani’s calm, monochrome surfaces, the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1996) suggests the return of Kokoschka in the teeming, multicultural cities of the present. If nationalism engendered the replacement in the world of many small differences with fewer but major differences, then it can credibly be argued that substantial parts of the world are at least quickly moving back to a culturally complex situation where heterogeneity is the norm and monoculturalism the exception.

At the same time, forces militating against disorder and the dissolution of boundaries remain strong. One of the most interesting findings in recent research on Internet use is that this technology often strengthens rather than weakens national identities, and that it can be exceptionally efficient in reproducing such identities across vast distances, uniting dispersed populations in virtual communities (see e.g. Miller and Slater 2000). Similarly, in spite of the broad selection of TV channels which is now offered to many Europeans, the vast majority prefer to watch domestic channels. The main exceptions are certain immigrant groups, who can postpone cultural integration into the new country by following television from the old country. Far from being a 'disembedding' technology, the Internet has in fact proven to be a 're-embedding' technology. It can easily be used to strengthen identities which might, in an earlier era of slower and more cumbersome communication across oceans and mountains, have been forgotten or changed beyond recognition by the third or fourth generation.

As noted by Steven Vertovec: 'Whereas in previous eras migrants had to make do with exorbitantly expensive calls or slow-paced post, they are now able to communicate with their families abroad on a regular, if not day-to-day basis' (2004: 220). Ayse Çağlar adds that Turks in Germany spend twice as much on telephone calls as the average German (Çağlar 2002). Here Vertovec and Çağlar limit their discussion to the telephone, which is an interpersonal communication medium. If we look at other new media, that family of technologies which make up the Internet – chatrooms, mailing lists, blogs, websites, discussion forums – the emphasis moves from the micro via the intermediate to the macro. The content may be rich and multifaceted, ranging from cool, factual news to personal confessions and engaged political statements. An Iranian in California, who feels that 'The Internet seems able to rescue Iranians from . . . the "vacuum" and "intellectual desert" of the host society' (Graham and Khosravi 2002, quoting van den Bos 2005), probably voices a widespread sentiment, at least judging from the extent of diasporic activity on the Internet.

### **Some constituent parts of the Internet**

The Internet consists of several relatively distinct technologies characterised by qualitatively different modes of communication: some are one-way, functioning as mass media; others, which are bilateral, are more similar to the letter or the telephone conversation; while yet others occupy intermediate niches between the interpersonal and the mass medium. Allow me to make some initial distinctions.

The *website* is probably what most people associate with the Internet. Usually consisting of interlinked pages with text and illustrations, it can be compared with the newspaper or the magazine. Many websites include feedback forms or even discussion forums. A main difference between the older media and websites is that websites can be updated any time, and that

they are cheap and easy to set up. A clever student can, at no financial cost, operate a sophisticated website with a professional appearance.

The *chatroom* is a closed, virtual room where participants have to log on with a unique username and password. Discussions in a chatroom take place in real time, that is with no delays, and they often have an oral, spontaneous quality.

The *usenet newsgroup* is an open space defined by its topic, which could be anything from Kurdish independence to industrial fertilisers. Anyone can read posts on a newsgroup without logging in, but they often have to register in order to place their own posts. Newsgroup posts have more permanence than chatgroups, and are often more extensive and better documented. Discussion forums on a website tend to function like newsgroups, and they are often moderated by someone who censors inflammatory messages and decides when to start a new thread or sub-topic. Both chatrooms and newsgroups require special software, but it is often included in web browsers these days.

The *email list* is, as the name suggests, a regular email despatch from one person to a list of people who have been added to his or her list, voluntarily or not. Some email lists are collective in the sense that everyone can send messages to everyone. The result of such democratisation, I can testify from my own experience, is often that email inboxes are flooded with engaged messages on peripheral topics.

The *blog*, finally, is perhaps the most original innovation to emerge from the Internet so far. Blogs can be accessed directly on the World Wide Web, they are made by one person who is usually known by name and face, and they can be described as an intermediate form between the newsletter, the social commentary and the diary. Some, but not all, blogs involve interactivity in the shape of feedback forms and 'guestbooks'.

All these modes of communication are used extensively by organisations, interest groups and individuals with nationalist political agendas. In fact, the Internet is fast becoming a major medium for the consolidation, strengthening and definition of collective identities, especially in the absence of a firm territorial and institutional base. Some of the nationalist groups that appear to be most active on the Internet are Sri Lankan Tamils, Kurds, Palestinians, Sikhs and diasporic Iranians, as well as others with a precarious relationship to territory, such as diasporic Chileans, and Afrikaners in South Africa. We now move to a few examples which indicate the variety of ways in which the Internet can be used in nation-building.

### **Independence struggles in absentia**

The Kurds are one of the largest ethnic groups with a distinctive cultural heritage, language and collective self-identity, never to have controlled a state. The persecution of Kurds in countries where they are numerous – Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran – has, in the twentieth century, oscillated between assimilationism and brutality. As a result, the Kurdish diaspora is large and



sprawling, with substantial numbers in Germany, the USA, the UK, Sweden and Australia. Lacking a Kurdish-language communications infrastructure in their areas of origin, Kurds in exile have developed a variety of media – magazines, satellite TV channels and Internet resources. These have been used to build a shared identity and to let Kurds make themselves known as a nation without a country to the outside world. Some of the Kurdish websites are made by professional journalists, such as KurdishMedia ([www.kurdmedia.com](http://www.kurdmedia.com)), which is edited in, and hosted by a server located in, the UK. The editorial statement says that the website aims to

- Develop a scientific approach to the Kurdish issue, including towards its language, art and culture.
- Create new definitions for the future of the Kurdish nation within the international arena.
- Create a sphere for Kurdish thinkers and strategists to be able to further develop upon the Kurdish issue.
- Introduce Kurds as a civilised nation in the international arena.
- Define a state of ‘United Kurdistan’ as an isle of peace at the heart of the Middle East ([www.kurdmedia.com/about.asp](http://www.kurdmedia.com/about.asp)).

Although the issue of statehood is left largely untouched, the aims of the website are clearly of a classic nation-building kind. However, due to the transnational nature of both the Internet and the Kurdish diaspora, ‘the international arena’ is given much greater attention than in earlier forms of nation-building. Lacking a state which is committed to the maintenance and strengthening of Kurdish identity, the task of creating a Kurdish civil society and collective identity is largely left to private enterprise. Since much of the Kurdish elite is in exile, the Internet has turned out to be a perfect medium for the consolidation of identity and dissemination of news for Kurds. The main Kurdish websites, including KurdishMedia and KurdistanWeb.org, have few if any feedback opportunities for the users and function as de-localised newsmedia. However, such websites, important as they are for the formation of a nationalist elite discourse, are supplemented by personal websites, blogs, newsgroups and chatrooms, where participation appears to be broad, even if it is dominated by students (cf. Bakker 2001).

Kurdish national identity may be said to be in a formative stage. There is considerable factionalism, a complicated language issue involving differences in both dialect and script, and political elites remaining in Kurdish areas tend to engage in minimal cooperation across state borders. It may actually be said that the Kurdish nation reaches its fullest, most consolidated form on transnational websites in the metropolitan languages of English, German and French. With Sri Lankan Tamils, the situation is different. The territory over which they claim nationhood is relatively clearly defined, does not cut across existing state borders, and is populated by a culturally homogeneous majority population. The most important transnational voice for Tamil independence may be the websites TamilNet ([www.tamilnet.com](http://www.tamilnet.com)) and

Tamilnation ([www.tamilnation.org](http://www.tamilnation.org)), which are updated frequently. While Tamilnation is edited in a personal and idiosyncratic style by Nadesan Satyendra, an attorney, TamilNet has many of the functions of a newspaper and TV channel. Largely edited in Sri Lanka itself (unlike the Kurdish websites), TamilNet is considered sufficiently dangerous by opponents of the Tamil independence struggle for its editor, Dharmaratnam Sivaram, to have been murdered in 2005.

TamilNet and other websites dedicated to politics in Sri Lanka, many of them in the Tamil language, play a role both in identity formation among Tamils overseas and in shaping international opinion. However, it must be kept in mind that such websites represent only a small part of the traffic on the Internet. There exists a plethora of personal blogs made by and for Sri Lankan Tamils, overseas or not, ranging from the aesthetic to the militant. Some have language courses in Tamil, chiefly intended for the children of migrants, and some give links to sites where Tamil computer fonts can be downloaded.

As a result of the widespread activity on the Internet among scattered diasporas like Kurdish and Tamil refugees, many peoples have developed a sense of belonging to a community which would otherwise have been difficult to achieve. Chatrooms, newsgroups and blogs mime direct interaction and can, given some time, create a sense of familiarity and intimacy among regular users which bears some resemblance to real-life interaction. Before considering some further implications of Internet nationalism, we shall consider a few more examples indicating other varieties of Internet nationalism.

### **Stable hyphenation**

As Fuglerud (1999) has shown, many Tamil refugees are engaged in long-distance nationalism (Anderson 1992), actively supporting political causes in Sri Lanka; and they were, at least in the early years of their exile, relatively uninterested in the country in which they lived. This makes their situation different from that of many other diasporic groups, whose members may interact more intensively with, and who may in some ways be more integrated into, their host societies. Moroccans in the Netherlands are a typical example of the latter kind of diaspora. Although some have arrived as refugees from the war in Western Sahara, the majority of Dutch Moroccans are free to return to Morocco, but stay in the Netherlands for economic and other reasons. Their most important website is, tellingly, neither in Arabic nor French, but in Dutch. Varied and comprehensive, the website includes subsections on Islam, a wide variety of discussion forums, a newspaper, games and even a dating subsite. The journalistic perspective is emphatically Dutch and European, and addresses its readers as a permanent minority in a European country, offering job advice, links to Dutch language courses and so on.

Maroc.nl aims at the creation of a stable, diasporic, hyphenated Dutch identity (d'Haenens and van Summeren 2005). There is no yearning for a return to, or for social reform in Morocco, but instead for recognition and respect as a new kind of Dutchmen. In fact, this kind of website is arguably not nationalist at all, but represents a cultural minority hoping to function as an interest group in a consolidated nation-state. If anything, Maroc.nl represents a reformed, expanded Dutch nationalism.

This is even clearer in the case of the largest Norwegian website representing Muslim immigrants, Islam.no. It aims to represent all the national, ethnic and cultural groups who are Muslim and live in Norway. The two websites have a double aim in common: to strengthen a shared collective identity in a diasporic group or category, and to rectify the negative image of Muslims conventionally projected through the mainstream media. Exclusively using the national languages of their host societies (no English, French or Arabic), they see both the diasporas and the majorities as their audience, but they do not communicate to a transnational diasporic group.

With the Iranian diaspora in the Netherlands, the situation is slightly different. Many Iranian refugees are engaged in oppositional politics involving countrymen dispersed across the North Atlantic area, and therefore need to create and maintain transnational links. Transnational websites uniting exiled Iranians do exist, but van den Bos has shown (2005) that there are a large number of Dutch-Iranian websites (he has found 72) as well. In addition, Iranians in the diaspora maintain connections, increasingly of an electronic nature, with relatives and others in Iran.

This latter use of the Internet is possibly its most important function as a vehicle for nationalism. In a study of the Internet in Trinidad, Miller and Slater (2000) show that transnational Trinidadian families have become more tightly integrated after getting online. Contact with relatives overseas has now become cheaper, faster and easier than it was in the time of the aerogramme and the expensive long-distance call.

The examples we have considered so far indicate that diasporic use of the Internet varies in its relationship to nationalism. Some are content to strengthen and confirm a particular cultural or religious identity in the context of their country of residence; some prioritise interpersonal links with their country of origin; while yet others – presumably a minority – use the Internet to actively promote the political cause of a territorial nation, real or prospective, in a dispersed diaspora, which is brought together as an abstract community only because of the Internet.

My last two examples add even more variety.

### **Surrogate nationhood**

When South Africa witnessed the end of white political hegemony in the early 1990s, some Afrikaners – that is, white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans –

found it difficult to reconcile themselves with the new political realities. Some Afrikaners have championed the building of a 'white homeland', a *Volkstaat*; others have engaged in terrorist attacks aiming to destabilise the State; and yet others have created a virtual nation, or perhaps a nation-in-waiting, on the Internet. Ranging from the virulent to the moderate in their rhetoric, these websites have a few important elements in common with Kurdish and Sri Lankan Tamil sites. They always contain a potted history of the people constituting the nation, arguing why a just world would allow them the privilege of their own nation-state; they praise the beauty of the land and the glory of past achievements; and they make passionate appeals to the international community. In spite of the fact that some of these websites, such as the official site of AWB (the militant *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging*, the Afrikaner Resistance movement), even contain sections with poetry, most of them are singlemindedly political, criticising perceived injustices, and portraying the Afrikaners as a tormented people of martyrs and victims. There is a concern with nationhood, for example in this editorial statement on boer.ca.za: 'This webpage . . . serves as a cultural link-up point which has as its aim, the preservation of the Boer nation. It also supports efforts to obtain self determination for the Boer nation. . . . The Boer Nation is the only White indigenous tribe in Southern Africa' (www.boer.co.za). There is also concern with ethnic identity, which is seen by some as dissolving in the new South Africa. On www.stopboergenocide.com, for example, a contributor states that 'people are again losing their ethnic identity and confused about what to call themselves – Boers, Afrikaners or whites, which are you? They are losing their ethnic identity – and it's not the first time this tragedy is occurring' (<http://www.stopboergenocide.com/29301/index.html>).

Many of the Afrikaner sites are bilingual written in Afrikaans and English, as are the discussion forums associated with them. Like most of the websites I have spoken about, they aim both to consolidate and strengthen the internal group cohesion and to canvas for support from outsiders. Unlike the other groups considered, however, Afrikaners still largely live in South Africa, though many feel that they have been deprived of their civil rights. Their virtual nations on the Internet therefore function both as a compensation for the nation they have lost (twice, in fact; first to the British after the Boer Wars, and then to the African National Congress) and as rallying-points for future and imminent political action.

### **The virtual province**

An underlying issue in all the examples discussed so far, except perhaps the last, concerns the problem of divided loyalties. Apart from clear-cut immigrant websites like Maroc.nl and Islam.no, where the main topic consists in finding a balance between integration and preservation, the issue of divided loyalties is not tackled explicitly, though it is a main reason why the websites

were set up in the first place. To varying degrees, diasporic populations develop networks and loyalties in their countries of residence, sometimes at the cost of gradually losing their commitment and loyalties towards the home country. My examples so far have suggested that the Internet has considerable potential in strengthening transnational loyalties not only across ethnic and national lines, but also – and perhaps predominantly – along them. It can bridge the territorial abysses that separate people ‘of the same kind’ from their metaphorical brothers and sisters, and counteract cultural assimilation into the host country.

The final example I am going to introduce shows that virtual nations need neither be oppositional nor secessionist; that the struggle engaged in by diasporic populations need neither be secessionist nor oppositional, and that the work of collective identity may simply amount to an enlarging, or a deterritorialisation, of the existing nation. This, incidentally, may be the most common, if not most spectacular, form of virtual nationalism. Some Norwegian friends of mine lived in Guatemala as foreign aid workers in two periods. During the first period, in the early 1990s, they felt isolated, receiving little news of events at home and feeling out of touch with their friends in Norway. Returning to Guatemala after a few years in Oslo, they had a broadband Internet connection installed in their house. They were suddenly able to follow Norwegian news, gossip, weather forecasts and public debates just as well as any other Norwegian, regardless of location, and their eldest daughter could stay in touch with her friends continuously through email and IRC chat. This change, brought about in the space of a few years, is not trivial in matters pertaining to national identity.

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. However, the only example of this kind that I have come across so far is from Chile. During the military dictatorship (1973–90), roughly a million Chileans left the country, and the majority did not return after the reintroduction of democracy. There are people registered as Chileans in 110 countries around the world, even though many lost their citizenship after fleeing from the Pinochet regime.

In recent years, the government has actively sought to reintegrate overseas Chileans and their descendants, not by encouraging their return, but by enhancing their sense of Chileanness, which might in turn benefit the state through investments and ‘Chilean’ activities scattered around the globe. Chile is officially made up of thirteen regions, but increasingly a fourteenth region, called the region of *el exterior* or *el reencuentro* (the reunion) is mentioned in official and unofficial contexts. The Chilean government’s website ([www.gobiernodechile.cl](http://www.gobiernodechile.cl)) has a first-order link to a subsite called ‘Chilenos en el

exterior', and there has been talk of giving voting rights to Chileans abroad. Initiatives have even been taken to allow Chilean artists living abroad to apply for government funding.

The use of the Internet by states, in order to stimulate and kindle national loyalty among nationals living in diasporas, is likely to become both widespread and controversial in the near future. Granted that most debates about immigration in the receiving countries deal with integration, this kind of measure is bound to be perceived by them as a negentropic force, to use Gellner's term. Be this as it may, I have tried to show, through the cursory presentation of a handful of deliberately divergent examples, that the Internet is a communication technology which has the potential of making political boundaries congruent with cultural ones, as Gellner puts it in *Nations and Nationalism* – even when both kinds of boundaries are thoroughly deterritorialised.

I have described four varieties of Internet nationalism: state-supported (Chile), surrogate (Afrikaner), pre-independence (Kurdish) and multiculturalist (Moroccan-Dutch). A fifth, which I cannot discuss for lack of space, is the oppositional, exemplified in Uimonen's (2001) work on anti-government websites developed by expatriate Laotians in the Laotian language, partly directed at the minuscule minority in Laos who have access to the Internet. A sixth variety might be the diasporic Chinese identity, which is increasingly actualised on the Internet, but which has fairly weak links with China itself. The question that remains to be addressed, which we are now prepared to make some qualified, even if provisional, statements about, concerns the similarities and differences between Internet nationalisms and territorial nationalisms.

### **Virtual nations and the theory of nationalism**

Gellner's theory of nationalism emphasises changes in the quality of interpersonal relationships as a result of increased mobility, standardised education and large-scale labour markets following the industrial revolution. Some of the central features of nationalism, in his theory, are:

- shared, formal educational system
- cultural homogenisation and 'social entropy'
- central monitoring of the polity, extensive bureaucratic control
- linguistic standardisation
- national identification – the abstract community
- cultural similarity as a basis for political legitimacy
- anonymity, single-stranded social relationships

In my examples of transnational nationalism, some but not all these elements are in place. Diasporic groups rarely have their own, exclusive educational

system, but it should be noted that segregated, private schools have been on the political agenda of several minorities in Western Europe for some time. They obviously do not have their own state either, at least not in the country where they live, and in some cases – Kurds, Tamils – not anywhere else either. Deterritorialised, virtual nationalism on the Internet also distinguishes itself from territorial nationalisms through its keen interest in the outside world's gaze on itself. A main objective for most of the nationalist websites I have visited is to make the plight, the virtues or the beauties of this or that nation known to members of the 'global village'. The widespread use of English indicates a wish to communicate outside the virtual nation itself. This is unsurprising, granted the setting of these virtual nations in an overcrowded world where others' attention and recognition have become truly scarce resources.

A main difference between various cases of Internet nationalism concerns their relationship to the country of origin. Some minorities clearly envision going back to an improved, or newly independent nation; others accept that they have no home other than the diaspora. Thus, the transnational Kurdish websites and the Dutch-Moroccan ones convey very different identity projects; independence for the mother country and acceptance in the country of adoption, respectively. In general, nonetheless, the two main principles of belonging in human societies, those of kinship and territory, are brought into tension with each other in a diasporic situation characterised by a heightened awareness of cultural differences among majorities as well as minorities. Attempts to develop territorial nationalisms encompassing several ethnic groups, and subjecting them to the same processes of cultural homogenisation, are counteracted by identity politics spokesmen who insist on group differences, such as ethnic discrimination in the labour market and other, related processes. Although members of ethnic minorities in urban societies interact extensively with members of the majority as well as those of other minorities, various kinds of resources follow informal, ethnic lines – jobs, spouses, gossip, housing. At the same time, migrant diasporas rely on the state in which they live for a number of resources that cannot be obtained through their virtual nations. What the Internet nation has to offer is chiefly a sense of identity which can be exploited socially, politically and economically, but only at the cost of entering into a tense, sometimes conflictual relationship with the territorial state.

At the same time, we must conclude that with the Internet creating an invisible, but perceptible umbrella covering scattered diasporas in numerous countries, one's German Kurdishness or Moroccan Dutchness is more likely to persist than it would have in an earlier era, where encapsulation or assimilation were the most likely long-term outcomes. The political and cultural effects of diasporic Internet nationalism in the 'homeland' are also frequently perceptible: at times, the elites-in-waiting use the Internet to coordinate their takeover plans; at other times, diasporas actively support militant and sometimes violent groups 'at home', knowing that they

themselves need not pay the price for an increase in violence (Anderson 1992), remaining as they do in the comfort of a peaceful diaspora.

It is in this diasporic world of imperfect integration in a territorial polity, and similarly imperfect membership in a dispersed nation, that Internet resources help create a sense of social cohesion and cultural integration. Both would have been difficult to achieve under a different technological regime. However, unlike the Gellnerian model nation-state, which was territorial and bounded, this kind of situation is inherently unstable. Both the territorialising forces of the nation-state and the deterritorialising forces connecting people to a nation which is elsewhere or perhaps only in cyberspace persist, and are at odds with each other. The territorial nation-state, as described analytically by Gellner, can be compared to a patrilineal kinship system, where all rights and duties are tied to a single principle. The diasporic, plural, changing, complex, contemporary nation-states, and certainly their minorities, conversely resemble matrilineal systems, where it becomes a task of paramount importance to balance opposing principles. As Ernest Gellner knew, there is no easy way out, but pluralism must be a part of the equation.

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### **Selected websites**

<http://www.awb.co.za>  
<http://www.boer.co.za>  
[http://www.gobiernodechile.cl/chilenos\\_exterior/](http://www.gobiernodechile.cl/chilenos_exterior/)  
<http://www.islam.no>  
<http://www.kurdmedia.com/>  
<http://www.kurdistanweb.org/>  
<http://www.maroc.nl>  
<http://www.stopboergenocide.com>  
<http://www.volkstaat.za.cx>  
<http://www.tamilnation.org>  
<http://www.tamilnet.com>