

DIASPORA AND IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: CULTURAL COMMUNITIES AND THE NATION.

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ABSTRACT. The following article is based on a keynote speech on Diaspora and Identity in the digital age. Cultural Communities and the Nation delivered at Media Culture Days at the College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, on May 17, 2019

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Thank you for inviting me – it’s an immense honor. Also, I am very happy to come back to visit BBU.

Today, I’d like to speak about media and society – in relation to each other, since much of my academic work is grounded in the study of media, culture and society.

With the advent of digital technologies, we have seen the evolution of an information ecology where mass media and horizontal /social media have formed a media landscape that we are grappling to make sense of. What we know is that we are in the throes of the digital era. Meaning that digital technologies are central to contemporary society – in that, digital interaction is the defining characteristic of all human activity, and where by all social, economic, political activities are dependent on information and communication technologies aka ICTs. So media as such are to be conceptualized as deeply integral to social interaction at a local, national and global level.

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To put it simply, in the past decade and half or more we have seen a tectonic shift in the media landscape.

What about changes in society? Every nation around the globe has experienced globalization – in various degrees, national borders are porous very in a variety of ways. So we see a shift in how to understand national society.

Since the past two decades, the movement of populations across counties, regions, and across national borders has risen at an unprecedented degree. Most urban areas, most cities across the globe experience an extraordinary arrival of new populations. This of course is in the wake of the complex processes of what we call globalization. Guest workers, exiles, refugees, immigrants, tourists, now constitute any metropolis, or cities across the globe. The large cross-border dispersal of populations is intensified by the global deployment of production processes and human capital by multinational corporations; and other factors such as ethnic conflicts and war across many regions of the world. Movements of people or shifting populations have altered the local/ national landscape. These movements are well-documented by scholars as Arjun Appadurai.

So let us focus on what happens with movements of population across national borders. Historically, these populations form some kind of new cultural community in the nation of arrival. Yet, they keep some form of connection to their heritage country. Whether, through money remittance (sending part of their income to their relatives or community in the home country), cultural activities, building places of worship (church, temple, mosque), creating local language media, food, ways of dressing and so on.

In contemporary times, the connections are much deeper – enabled by global media, information and communication technologies.

So today in my talk I want to underline this argument that in immigrant nations such as the United States (and also many European nations) the diasporic cultural communities and their contemporary usage of media and communication technologies have altered the notion of the public sphere and to a large extent, disrupted the idea of the nation-state itself.

Let's consider the idea of the nation, and how media have historically been implicated in construction of national identity, or a national consciousness.

By the second half of the 19th century in immigrant societies like the United States the nation state created the concept of nationhood and citizenship that created an inclusive structure for the vast numbers of immigrants and refugees into a community of the nation (Arnason, 1990).

The material sense of citizenship via official state documents were useful yet the nation state would need allegiance from its constituents - citizens - to participate in national projects including during war against other nations.

A national consciousness, a sense of belonging towards fellow community members was being cultivated. Benedict Anderson in his influential book, *Imagined Communities* has described how the thrust of "print capitalism" along with other extraneous factors such as Protestant Reform movement that spread through mass printing - Martin Luther's theses nailed to the chapel door in Wittenberg were printed in German and reached every part of Germany in fifteen days), assisted in this building of national consciousness.

One of the earliest forms of capitalist enterprises - book publishing, and their quest for markets had established printing branches all over Europe, ignoring national frontiers. A first global enterprise, Book publishing was ironically instrumental in nation building. In their continuous search for markets, to reach largest numbers of consumers or readers, printers assembled related vernaculars into a print language (French in Paris, English in London) that later on became "official language" of the state. The official vernacular of print media and its devoted readership has its contribution in the decline of imagined community of Christendom and the rise of imagined community of a secular nation (Anderson):

These print languages laid the bases for national consciousnesses in three distinct ways. First and foremost, they created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken

vernaculars. Speakers of the huge variety of Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper. In the process, they gradually became aware of hundreds of thousands, even millions of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that only those hundreds of thousands, or millions so belonged. These fellow readers to whom they were connected through print formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community. (Anderson, p, 44).

The newspaper, that was 'extreme form of the book' sold on mass scale even while its contents ephemeral, reiterated this very sense of secular community, Anderson points out. The act of reading the newspaper served as a mass ceremony:

Each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked imagined community can be envisioned..... community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. (Anderson, p, 35)

A pan-national language became an important component of national identity providing a sense of homogeneity for national societies.

Immigrants or linguistic groups pose a challenge to this homogeneity of language and so to an imagined national culture and ideology. Societies and nation states have developed ways of inclusion or exclusion of newcomers – the inevitable flows of different ethnic or linguistic groups entering national borders. Linguistic commonality underlines membership in the constructed imagined community of the nation.

So the idea of the nation and national identity thrives under these conditions until the early decades of the 20th century.

In fact, in the post-colonial nations in the mid-20th century, mass media were heavily used to cultivate national consciousness and allegiance to the republic or the nation carved out disparate princely/tribal states unified into a modern nation-state. India is an example where the regional monarchies were stripped of political power to form a modern nation-state, and the republic's first Prime minister enlisted poets and song-writers whose work was aired on the state-owned All India Radio to cultivate a sense of national consciousness.

Subsequently, most of the late 20th century witnessed large scale dispersion of populations across national borders - what we call diasporas. Of course due to many factors - war, conflict, emerging ideologies, and certainly faster efficient transportation technologies.

In the past century these dispersed populations came together across borders in new in physical spaces. A Chinatown, a Little Italy, or Little India became features of large metropolitan cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Toronto, London, or Singapore. These 'ethnic enclaves' are spaces in the city where diasporic populations of particular national, linguistic, cultural affinity clustered. Their shared language and cultural history enabled them to form networks and garner 'social capital' that eased their transition to the new country and facilitated economic, cultural and political life. For people dispersed from a region or a nation, these spaces of arrival in enclaves would not seem so far apart from spaces of departure.

In the 21st century, in the age of hyper globalization, there is yet an accelerated, prodigious movement of people across borders. Diasporic populations swell exponentially. Also, these contemporary diasporic populations are too diverse - in that they are from many varied linguistic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, to be contained in enclaves. Their need for 'social capital' is different from the immigrants of 20th century.

Now, in the digital age, 'connectivity' to their heritage culture - a key notion of diasporic cultural life does not depend on physical proximity. the local physical networked formations do exist but global online networks have gained far more currency beyond those local networks. Some have called this 'transglobalization.'

Further, these diasporic populations are not only tied immediately to territory of their departure (or their heritage nation) but through electronic capabilities, are connected with multiplicity of nations and cultures across the globe. So they are connected with diaspora in other countries. For example, within the online ecology consisting of news, literature, music videos films, fashion and entertainment bulletins, the Indian diaspora in the USA would be very much connected to the Indian diaspora in England. Or the Indian diaspora and the Pakistani diaspora connect over Bollywood films and music channels.

So while the very local micro-spheres of communicative practices within the diasporic communities practiced through: cultural events, celebrations such as Independence day- (of India, South Sudan), church, poetry readings, musical events, community centers or clubs, tend to continue; in the digital era, the diasporic communities have acquired a a veritable online life. The communicative practices of diasporic communities are predominantly a measure of the online ecology. And so the existence of digital diasporas.

Alright, so what do these developments mean for the nation and the idea of a national public sphere?

I want to suggest this:

In the digital age, the texture of every day diasporic/or immigrant life is transformed. The infrastructure of digital networks has forged unprecedented transnational diasporic networks - in that immigrant populations live veritable hyphenated lives - with hyphenated national identities. For example, we have Vietnamese-Americans, Bosnian-Americans, Chinese-Americans whose lives are literally straddled across national and cultural borders as they are connected with relatives, friends religious/or cultural communities across national borders.

Thomas Faist (2008), has suggested that the new transnational approach to mobility goes beyond the traditional binary concept of emigration and immigration. By contrast, contemporary transnational mobility should be understood as manifold processes linking together countries of origin, destination, and onward migration, and as a nexus of networks for sustained and continuous cross border transactions. So from the vantage point of diasporic cultural communities, the idea of a nation state and belonging is very much disrupted.

Further, as Stuart Hall (1990) argues, the new diasporas are a product of interlocking histories and cultures... a product of a "diasporic consciousness." This then is vastly different from the notion of "national consciousness" that the nation-state of 19th and 20th century tried to cultivate. Most diasporic populations at their various gatherings will sing the national anthem of the country but also the national anthem of their heritage country.

What then about media and the national public sphere?

There is a variable geometry of relationship here - between the local and transnational news media networks; between media (top down information) and horizontal (social media networks) communication. Then there are the vibrant multidirectional flows of ethnic or language media content across national borders - for example, Chinese language content on Chinese satellite TV, Brazilian Telenovelas, Mexican soap operas, Bollywood films, country specific news networks in language media watched by ethnic populations. All this has fragmented the national public sphere and rendered it a massive global dimension.

So if mass media had once contributed to building a national consciousness, a national identity today's convergent, fragmented global media might have advanced a global or a multi-national consciousness or multi-layered identity.

I leave you with this thought. Thank you.

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