

# Nationalism and the internet 42247



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## Introduction

Over the years, modern technologies have kept on amazing us. Decades ago, black and white television sets were as big as cabinets. Now, we have flat LCD monitors that are so thin that they could be hung on the wall. Telephone units were only to be found at homes or offices because they had wires that had to be plugged into the wall sockets. Now, we have mobile cellular phones that fit inside our pockets. Not only do they allow voice communication, they also allow transfer of other data such as messages, videos, audios, or pictures from one cellular phone to another. Technological advances such as those have caught almost everyone's fancy. We like them fresh even if they cost a fortune. The thing is, the fresher, the smaller, the lighter the better.

A few decades ago, computers were bulky and heavy, much like the earlier television sets. Now, there are computers that are small enough to be held by just one hand. Moreover, computers now are more capable of doing tasks other than computing, word processing, and data storing. Computers, just like telephones and other communication devices, can be used in communication and information dissemination. That capacity is of course almost always associated with the Internet. Apparently, a computer's capacity is not fully utilized if it is unable to provide the user access to the Internet.

These technological advances in communications and information dissemination are part of the so-called globalization. Globalization is referred to as the technological, organizational, and institutional capacity of the

core components of a given system to work as a unit in real or chosen time on a planetary scale (Castells, 2000). While this is a very ambitious attempt to bring about global social changes, the results are far more disappointing than pleasing. Contrary to its concept, globalization, as a social process, operates unevenly across society and between societies and promotes structural inequalities (Evard, 2000). It is then safe to say that globalization has only been beneficial to the West. To further promote the Western ideology of globalization, the West employs the Internet as a tool of globalization (Evard, 2000). However, in this study, we shall see that the Internet is not only a tool in promoting globalization but it is also a tool in promoting anti-globalization (Hamilakis, 2000).

The promises that Internet, or should I say promises of the devotees of the Internet, have for the world are overwhelming right now. Its impacts on modern life will not be sufficiently assessed if it will only be based on online experience and content (Slevin, 2000). The observation that Internet culture is an online culture is unacceptable as it does not really reflect the impact of the Internet on the people and societies offline (Slevin, 2000). This paper will focus on how the Internet promotes national or local sentiments despite being a tool of globalization. As Hamilakis (2002) suggests, experiences and actions of an individual in cyberspace are actually influenced by his/her everyday-life experiences.

### On Sociological Transformation

The transformation that has occurred in the society, as brought about by the Internet, may be accounted as an instance illustrating the silver bullet model

theory. Silver bullet is the incursion of technology that disrupts the current order of things and bypasses, through eliminating of imposed constraints, processes by which parties establish their own places or positions in the new order of things (Rule, 1999). However, Rule (1999) argues that instead of the silver bullet model, it is more applicable to use the land rush model to illustrate the movement that has occurred. What has happened is that there has been a stampede whereby people struggle to secure their positions and pursue traditional interests in a new territory, in this case, the Internet. The Internet or cyberspace has now become a space where actors who were traditionally disadvantaged articulate their political, social, and economic interests (Sassen, 2004). It is in cyberspace where one will find virtual power and digital space convertible to real power and real wealth (Hand and Sandywell, 2002).

As for Castells (2000), the society that we are in right now is actually a new society. This new society's social structure may be characterized by networks. Networks are old forms of social organizations that in our time today have transformed as they are built on electronic networks. Not only that, the society's spatial structure has already been transformed. However, Castells (2000) rejects the further belief that physical space is insignificant as he argues that people's experiences happen in physical spaces/places and accents the importance of physical space as location for computers and apparatuses. As for Wellman and Hampton (1999), this network society is not new.

Cho, De Zuniga, Rojas, Shah(2003) and Thornton (2001) argue that the scenario of social transformation may be understood as the occurrence of

digital divide. Digital divide is actually a sociological phenomenon that reflects broader social, economic, cultural, and learning inequalities or gaps. It is no longer a matter of who has access or who does not have as this matter actually further implies the aggravation of social inequalities. There is a digital divide between developed countries, specifically the US and other developed countries. Recent study shows that this digital divide between developed countries is narrowing (Chen & Wellman, 2004). However, what is worst is that the digital divide between developed countries and developing countries and the digital divide within developing countries continue to widen, as only a few people have access to the internet, and deepen, as the perceived consequences for not having access to the internet continue to become greater (Chen & Wellman, 2004). The report shows that education, socioeconomic status, gender, life stage, and geographic location seem to determine who has access and who does not have (Chen & Wellman, 2004).

As for Hand and Sandywell (2002), these inequalities are results of cyber exclusion. They adopt the global citadel theory to illustrate that the so-called global community is actually a gated community wherein others are not included and are outside of the gate. As a result of this cyber exclusion, the excluded ones suffer from i?? information povertyi?? (Hand & Sandywell, 2002). To worsen the scenario, in the case of the developing countries, they are unable to participate in issues such as cyber-security, intellectual property rights, e-government, and other related Internet issues that have impacts on health, employment and education (Sadowsky, Zambrano, & Dandjinou, 2004). The reason why these developing countries are unable to participate is that they lack financial and humans resources (Baird, 2002).

According to Thornton (2001), the phenomenon of digital divide is not left unchallenged. There have been efforts to narrow this digital divide both in the developed and in the developing countries. Furthermore, Thornton (2001) believes that bridging the digital divide is adjunct with the preservation of local identity. However, bridging the digital divide has not been easy as there are barriers that need to be addressed. According to (Evard, 2000), electronic information system is still costly. Other factors affecting to this costliness are the downloading capability and complexity of the system, the quality of the line for connection, hardware speed, and licensure (Evard, 2000).

On i?? The Interneti??

The Internet is a tool to disseminate information and enhance communication. According to Wellman and Hampton (1999) computer-mediated communications such as the Internet allows asynchronous and real-time communications (Wilbur, 1997), and supports forwarding/sending of messages to a large number of recipients quickly. For Slevin (2000), he believes that to attribute the term i?? new mediai?? to Internet is misleading as the term suggests a sudden invention of the Internet, when in fact, it is closely interwoven with the wider development of mediated communication. In his opinion, the Internet is beyond being just an alternative means of distributing information and communication because it has the capacity to contribute in the transformation of spatial and temporal organization of life (Slevin, 2000).

But how does the Internet really impact the lives of the people? There have been mixed reactions and assumptions as to the real capacity of the Internet to bring about changes in the society. On a personal level, Turkle (1999) argues that the Internet users are able to create virtual personae of themselves. These personae often are the opposite virtual presentations of the users' real selves. At a given time, users can even multiple personae simultaneously. However, in a dystopian point of view, being attached to the Internet is likely to promote seclusion of an individual (Coget, Yutaka, Yamauchi, & Suman, 2002) by pulling him/her away from meaningful neighborhood and household conversations (Wellman and Hampton, 1999).

In a more political perception, the Internet is a means " through which to explore concepts of emancipation, empowerment, and the transcendence to physical subjugation" (Loader, 1997). According to Rule (1999), " Cyberspace is the ultimate technology of liberation" in that it sweeps away all socially imposed fetters to the direct realization of individuals to seek information, form relationships, and pursue crucial interests without stultifying institutional constraints. Hand and Sandwell (2002) illustrate this belief using a cosmopolitan/citadellian paradigm. This paradigm anticipates a global society that will be made possible by the Internet's capacity to democratize communities. Although the Internet does enhance participation among individuals, it is a manifestation of fetishism to be inconsiderate about the de-democratizing capacity of the Internet (Hand & Sandywell, 2002) as apparent in the existence of de-democratizing forces. These de-democratizing forces, such as hardware and software ownership, prevent further public access to the Internet (Hand & Sandywell, 2002)

Aside from its potential to liberate, the Internet is believed to have the capacity to homogenize culture (Stratton, 1997). According to Stratton (1997), it is made possible by the capacity of the Internet to deterritorialize people, images, commodities, money, and ideas?? also known hyper-deterritorialization. Homogenizing culture by promoting Western culture is evident in the usage of the English language as the language of the Internet (Evard, 2000 and Loader, 1997) and the prominently West-produced information available online (Evard, 2000). Consequently, the nation-states are being challenged to promote counter actions of homogenization to preserve national culture/identity/integrity (Stratton, 1997) and to unify people (Evard, 2000). This has been the reason for some Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore for implementing Internet censorship (Evard, 2000). However, for Castells (Slevin, 2000), the cultural dimension of computer networks does not seek to facilitate a new unifying/homogenizing culture as these networks, are in fact, diverse and are made up of different cultures.

### On Power Relations

According to Mills (2002), Hand and Sandywell (2002), Evard (2000), Castells (2000), there will be a change in power relations. Power will be decentralized (Loader, 1997). There will be a shift of power from the traditional holders of power such as the state to the new holders of power such as individuals, organizations, groups, and multinational corporations. Nation-states will be competing with them for power (Slevin, 2000). These traditional forms of social organization will be reconstructed (Slevin, 2000). All of these will be made possible as access to information becomes a new form of status



distinction (Hamilakis, 2000). However, Evard (2000) adds that this shift would only be a relative decline, and not an absolute decline, in the state's roles or powers as the new holders of power gain what the state loses. There will be new forms of power and politics at the subnational and supranational level but the most powerful ones would be the centers of international businesses and finances (Sassen, 2004). As for Hand and Sandywell (2002), the ruling elites and dominant classes will employ modern communications technologies to further boost their power and control.

As for Stratton (1997), he believes that the formerly silenced groups are now able to express themselves and their opinions over the Internet. These groups and individuals are now able to actively participate, as creators and receivers of information, unlike before when they were merely passive audience of the traditional media (Stratton, 1997), being the producer of information in one-way communication (Slevin, 2000). Moreover, the Internet will serve as a communications platform wherein groups and individuals can voice out their opinions on the failure of the traditional authorities such as the state (Slevin, 2000). In addition to that, since the information flows and transcends boundaries, Mills (2002) believes that the nature and significance of sovereignty are also bound to change as territorial control becomes more difficult. In this case, traditional functions of the state such as defense, citizenship, and surveillance will be challenged (Loader, 1997).

### On Virtual Communities and Cybernations

Hamilakis (2000), Mills (2002), Slevin (2000), and Foster (1997) adopted Benedict Anderson's imagined communities to describe virtual

communities. They all agree that the two communities both possess this characteristic: although members of the community will never have the chance to meet everyone else, the image of communion among them still lives on. In addition to this, communities may also be defined as “ sets of informal ties of sociability, support, and identity. They are rarely neighborhood solidarities or even densely knit groups of kin and friends (Wellman & Hampton, 1999).

In defining what a virtual community is, Wilbur (1997) argues that it is not advisable that the concept of virtual community is fitted into some known social reality. Old concepts should not be used in defining new phenomena. It is fine that a rich concept has many definitions. Every meaning that we ascribe to the concept of virtual community is a construct based on how the concept appeals to us. For Foster (1997), communities found in the Internet are virtual but may not be sufficiently communal. For Slevin (2000) believes that virtual communities and textual cyberspaces existence depends on real people and real organizations.

Cybernations are referred to as non-territorially-bound communities (Mills, 2002). According to Hamilakis (2000), although it is believed that the Internet is a medium that transgresses national and other boundaries, hence, defying the ideology of seclusion we call nationalism, the Internet is actually used as a tool to reproduce nationalist discourses. In his paper entitled, *Cyberspace/Cyberpast/Cybernation: Constructing Hellenism in Hyperreality*, he uses several websites that present the Hellenic culture as the main theme. In this particular case, Hamilakis finds out that the Internet is used to further enhance the sense of community among diasporic Greeks

worldwide and to disseminate Greek culture, spirit, and values at the local level in the host country.

There are also examples wherein the Internet was used beyond merely in presenting a nation's culture. The Internet may be used as a tool to advocate a nation's claim to self-determination. In the case of the Tibetans, the official website of the Tibetan government that is in exile aims to foster communion among Tibetans worldwide as well as to lobby their claim for self-determination in a global political realm that they are able to reach with the use of the Internet. In the case of the Chiapas rebellion, the Internet was used by the Zapatistas to mobilize support locally in Mexico as well as internationally. This case is a perfect example on how people who did not have access to the Internet were able to be mobilized with the help of mediators who did the offline organizing. The case of the Yugoslavs in successfully ousting then President Slobodan Milosovic by information dissemination over the Internet is another example of the failure of the state to control the flow of information (Mills, 2002) and to take control over communications (Loader, 1997).

In these examples of cybernations, the political information that they dispatch may be categorized into three (Evard, 2000):

1. Information that carries political messages that are potentially destabilizing;
2. Information that carries culturally dominating information;

3. Information that speaks about and speaks for the state by those outside the state.

In addition to that, Evard (2000) suggests that information is directional/purposive and never neutral.

### Synthesis

Based on the sources that have been reviewed, the Internet, as a tool of globalization, so far, has not been beneficial to the developing countries. There still exists a wide gap called the digital divide between the developed and developing countries. The reason behind this is that electronic communications system is still costly for the developing countries.

Due to the capacity of the Internet to further enhance participation among individuals who have access to it, people are able to communicate and send information to other people beyond physical boundaries. As a result, there is shift of power. In this shift of power, the state loses some of its roles and authority. As the state loses power, other non-state actors and individuals gain what it has lost.

The Internet is believed to promote globalization and homogenization of culture among people in the world. However, there have been cases that the Internet was used to promote nationalism and local sentiments of communities/nations. In the case of cybernations, these virtual communities are able to promote their nationalistic sentiments and localities globally. Up to some extent, there have been cybernations who challenged the states and eventually overthrew them. This could be due to the states inability to

control the information that flows within its territory and from inside to outside and from outside to inside of its boundaries.

In my opinion, digital divide may not always be caused by lack of financial and human resources. The moves by Singapore and Malaysia to censor the Internet are purposive. The limited access to information, as a consequence of Internet censorship, is a state-implement measure to prevent citizens from downloading or sharing contents that are considered to be detrimental to national integrity. In this case, this is also an illustration of digital divide between the state and its citizens wherein the state has the better position between the two. This could also be a contributing factor to the widening digital divide between the developed and developing countries. While more developed countries have been very supportive and eager to advances in the communications and network systems such as the Internet, there are developing countries who regulate their citizens' access to the Internet.

In the case of cybernations, successfully bypassing the state does not necessarily mean that it is factual in every occurrence. Instead of putting the pressure solely on the states, I would like to argue that the battle or competition between the states and the individuals or organizations who show dissident actions online does not end when one party succeeds. The battle is always ongoing as both parties are taking actions to outwit each other and be ahead of the other. Digital divide may be applied to the gap between the state and the individuals or organizations who are both competing for power. In this case, the goal is to widen the gap by leaving the other party behind significant margin.

To conclude, in my opinion, there is a greater challenge than narrowing digital divide. For developing countries, communications systems and infrastructures may be costly but they are not necessarily the requirement in bridging the gap. It is illogical to provide systems and infrastructures to people who do not know how to use them. More importantly, the systems will be unusable if these people are illiterate. Education is the first step in bridging the gap. Instead of providing the systems, education must first be provided. After all, computers do not and cannot work by themselves for the users will be the ones to operate them.

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