NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES IN A GLOBAL COMMUNITY: DEMOCRATIZING SPACES OR NATIONALIST GATHERING PLACES?

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This article explores the idea of the Internet's capacity to facilitate and perpetuate countless nationalistic agendas and ideologies around the globe. The last two years in particular have shown how new media (social media) technologies, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs provide an accessible and tangible mechanism of social change. However, in light of this praise for these technologies, particularly in the news media, few have stopped to question the alternative consequences of such widespread and accessible methods of communication. The article addresses the following research questions: How do national and ethnic groups use new media technologies to mobilize? How do both local and diaspora communities create new forms of collective memory in the virtual realm, particularly around contested historical events like Holodomor and the Srebrenica massacre? What are the global implications of cyber-nationalism in a world that prizes new media for its inherent "democratizing[1]" properties?

It started with a fruit seller in Tunisia. Then Egypt. Before the global community could even digest this initial spark of uprising, protestors in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Libya and Morocco were revolting against their governments, despite in many cases the threat of severe and even deadly consequences. But how were they able to do it?

The 2011 "Arab Spring" brought about much discussion in academic, mass media, and even everyday conversations regarding the democratizing effects of new media communication. The world watched as governments tried to control crowds of hundreds and thousands of people, many of whom congregated in public squares and streets due the work of online organizers. From the 2009 "Twitter Revolutions" in Iran and in Moldova to the early 2011 domino effect across the Middle East and North Africa, observers have seen the innovative utilization of these media. In Libya, after Qaddafi shut down Facebook in the country, organizers resorted to a dating site as a planning forum—the powerful immediacy of social networks indeed manifests itself in our world every moment.

More than 800 million Facebook users, 75% of whom live outside the United States, interact with more than 900 million objects (groups, pages, causes, event pages etc.) on this social networking site on a daily basis [1]. But aside from the expected celebrity fan pages and dance or sporting events, Facebook also provides a forum for groups like "Kosovo Is Serbia" and "Abkhazia Is Not Georgia." In this virtual space one can also find groups such as "It's Time for Russia and Serbia to Get Out of the Genocide Business" and "Holodomor: We Will Never Forget," or "8372…Srebrenitsa Soykirimi / 8372…Srebrenica Genocide."

While studying post-conflict transformation in Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina for a period of four months during my undergraduate career, I examined media perceptions, the politics of memory, and commemoration of genocide and mass atrocities in Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina. This research analyzed how different groups perceive the portrayal in international media of their victimhood during the wars of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. The media content analysis for this research primarily consisted of observing newspaper and online news articles and examining how international journalists choose to portray the assumed victims and assumed perpetrators of the Srebrenica massacre [2]. In general web browsing, however, I frequently came across blogs, Facebook pages and

[1] It is important to note that the word *democratizing* in this sense refers to the widespread accessibility of the Internet and the ability for any individual or group to voice an opinion through this global network.

tweets dedicated to the perpetuation of national narratives based on the commemoration of certain historical events. This browsing then sparked questions such as: How is it that people themselves actually commemorate or document their own national tragedies, victories or national narratives? Do these online communities then affect offline relations between people?

In 2007, Xu Wu coined the term "cyber-nationalism" in his book "Chinese Cyber Nationalism", which examined the increased use of the Internet to advance nationalistic agendas of non-governmental individuals and groups in China, particularly related to the issue of Tibet [3]. Though much work regarding China has stemmed from Wu's, there remains fairly limited scholarly material about cyber-nationalism in many other parts of the world. In 2008, *The Economist* magazine published an article discussing the phenomenon of cyber-nationalism, which briefly highlights examples from Europe, Eurasia, the United States and a few other countries [4]. While the article primarily focuses on the debates and discussions pertaining to current political issues, it also mentions the manner in which new media sites do provide a space for the debate of highly contested historical events, such as the Holocaust or Holodomor. The article argues that whereas a decade or two ago, someone might have had to spend extensive amounts of time searching for certain propaganda or confirmation of nationalistic ideals, such material is now readily available on more than 8,000 Internet and new media sites [5].

Since new media sites allow for the creation of sub-groups, the sharing of individual interpretations of historical events, and decentralization processes of national narratives, we now face an interesting paradox when we discuss the democratization capabilities of these technologies. While we can see the use of new media organizing capacities to create mass popular uprisings against longstanding, repressive regimes, we can also see increasing numbers of nationalist zealots uniting in a largely unregulated and limitless virtual realm.

Benedict Anderson's theory of *imagined communities,* though pertaining to a time period more than 100 years ago, elaborates on the emotional attachment to various media, in particular, novels and print media [6]. Anderson maintains that these materials, taking into special account the power of common language or vernacular, provide readers with ideas with which to form, understand and conceive the nation. That individuals who have never even made acquaintance in person are able to form a common identity through some communication medium continues today through the widespread use of new media fora. He explains that this affinity stimulates the feelings of nation or nationhood, particularly among diaspora communities [7]. We can see this same phenomenon, highly active diaspora involvement, in new media fora, as individuals and groups are able to use carefully crafted words and phrases to generate a communal or national sense amongst the participants. Thus people who have never met face to face are able to congregate and share ideas and create a common notion of what it means to be a part of a certain ethnic, religious or national community. They also decide which historical events constitute their chosen national or sub-national narrative and with which language they accept as properly describing this shared identity and history. Groups often choose extremely traumatic instances of human loss to ignite this sense of brotherhood or unity in order to, in the best-case scenario, commemorate their victimhood, or, in the worst, to perpetuate a specific agenda against another group.

In several online instances, having a shared platform of victimhood promotes a highly problematic portrayal and tense discussion of "the other." For example, Bosnian, Armenian and Ukrainian sites often use their position and number of followers, subscribers or participants to attack the perpetrators of their national atrocities. In other words, Bosnian participants in sites commemorating the Srebrenica massacre might have an entire conversation about the evil nature of Serbs; Armenians, about the inherent barbaric and racist nature of Turks; and Ukrainians, about the hegemonic and ruthless nature of Russians. Online groups all over the world construct their own accepted language for discussions, commemorations and interpretations of events, and they often do so with harsh, generalizing, or false depictions of other nations or groups.

As a scholar of media, and particularly new media communication, and as a journalist ascribing to the idea that freedom of speech is indeed a basic human right, I maintain that the Internet should serve as means of connection and exposure for all individuals and groups, regardless of their ethnic, political, social or personal interests. However, in societies more susceptible to violence, whether due to poverty, poor governance, or recently ended conflict, control of such discussions is in the interest of not only one country's authorities, but the entire international community. While we know that governments futilely restrict Internet accessibility in hopes of keeping their citizens isolated from new ideas and information, little data shows the efforts of government agencies to actually reduce or shut down radical online meeting points. While many governments have deemed cyber crimes such as cyber-terrorism, pornography and identity theft grave security issues, seemingly nothing has been done to prioritize issues of cyber-nationalism. But in more fragile, eruptive social conditions, web hatred perhaps poses much more danger to a society than other cyber crimes.

More research into the usage practices, overall presence of nationalist groups on the Internet, and transition from online discussion to offline action is absolutely necessary to better understand this cyber phenomenon. The abuse of these communication tools, which have quite literally revolutionized the idea of a global community, only validates further restriction. As we have seen in recent years, the Internet does in fact have the capacity to connect important social movements like environmental organizations or human rights coalitions. And of course, the power of the Internet to stir grassroots movements for new and better governance is ever evident. While it is important to recognize and praise these democratizing properties, it remains equally as important to investigate new media's facility for the congregation of those groups or individuals with more destructive and even dangerous agendas.

Some suggested research questions for further data collection and analysis are as follows: How do certain groups use words like genocide, Holocaust and Nazis to differentiate themselves and form sub-groups? How do online groups who serve as points of collective memory use their own nationalistic messaging? To what extent do groups or individuals use "hate speech" in this new space? Have any states taken official government action to limit the discussions or actions of these online groups?

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