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Mediating Nationhood: Connecting Culture and Power

The link between culture and power lies at the core of any form of nationalism in the modern world. Over the course of the past few centuries, nationalist movements around the world transformed culture into a fundamental basis of social organization and power relationships. Those laying claim to power could no longer rely solely on divine will or heredity, but were increasingly expected to share the culture of those they wished to govern. This tight connection between culture and power came most clearly to the fore in those nationalist movements that endeavoured to make the boundaries of the state coincide with the boundaries of culture: secessionist movements demanding a separate state for their own nation, or unification movements pushing for the integration of culturally similar yet independent political units into a common state. For Ernest Gellner, such ‘fusion of culture and polity’ constitutes the essence of nationalism (1983: 14).

The assumption that culture forms the basis of any legitimate claim to power is shared also by those nationalist movements that stop short of demanding a fully sovereign nation-state. Examples can be found in the recent developments in Scotland and Catalonia: in both cases, claims for national self-determination and independent statehood have gradually receded, and nationalist leaders settled for regional parliaments and territorial autonomy (Greer 2007). Finally, the link between culture and power also underpins the myriad mundane practices and habits of thought that keep nationalism alive on an everyday basis; the routine references to ‘our’ state’ or ‘our’ politicians, for example, or the habitual distinctions between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ news (Billig 1995).
oblique and hardly noticeable ways, these everyday practices serve to consolidate a vision of the world that is segmented along cultural lines, and within which the power to represent is premised first and foremost on the ability to represent a particular culture, however defined.

No nationalism theory can afford to ignore the relationship between culture and power. Very often, however, nationalism scholars resort to a rather one-sided view of this relationship, and define nationalism either as a political principle or movement (e.g. Gellner 1983) or as a particular state of mind, form of discourse or cultural representation (e.g. Özkırımlı 2005). These two types of definitions correspond with two different approaches to culture: one that treats culture as a mere by-product of power relationships and pays little attention to the internal structure and logic of cultural representations as such, and another that examines culture in its own right, but often fails to explain how it relates to the wider economic and political context.

Much of the existing literature on nationalism and the media shares the same drawbacks. On the one hand, we find several studies that are concerned primarily with the processes of political instrumentalization and negotiation through which media institutions, for example newspapers, radio and television stations, or cinema industries, came to be used and perceived as instruments of nation-building or national promotion in the international arena (e.g. Jarvie 1992; Price 1995; Maxwell 1995). On the other hand, we come across a wide array of writings that explore the ways in which various mediated cultural forms, for instance editorials, reports, news bulletins, soap operas, and films, have contributed to the reproduction of nationalist discourse, representations, myths or symbols (e.g. Bishop and Jaworski 2003; Chan 2005; Frosh and Wolfsfeld 2007). Synthetic accounts that embrace both aspects at once and examine how they relate to each other are rather rare (but see e.g. Collins 1990). Standing somewhat aside from this is the growing body of work by media anthropologists, which investigates the mediation of nationhood through the texture of everyday life-worlds (e.g. Gillespie 1995; Mankekar 1999; Abu-Lughod 2005; Madianou 2005; Postill 2006). This literature has important implications for the arguments we develop in subsequent chapters, but is typically limited to a single national context and avoids developing a synthetic account of the media and nationalism as we do in this book.

This chapter starts by discussing the reasons responsible for this state of affairs in the study of nationalism and the media. It does so by means of examining the legacy of Benedict Anderson’s theory of nations as ‘imagined communities’, probably the single most quoted idea in nationalism literature over the past two decades. After identifying the
key weaknesses of this legacy, an alternative definition of nationalism is proposed, one that combines the understanding of nationalism as a form of discourse and imagination with an emphasis on its link with power. The third section of the chapter outlines how this definition of nationalism can be applied to the study of nationalism and the media.

The Legacy of Imagined Communities

As with all theories of social phenomena, the competing approaches to nations and nationalism are inevitably inflected by the social and political contexts in which they are advanced. This is particularly obvious when we look at the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates about nationalism and nations and their ties with parallel nation-building projects. Ernest Renan’s ([1892] 2001) definition of the nation as ‘a daily plebiscite’, for instance, was developed in response to the disputes over Alsace-Lorraine, a territory France lost to the new German state after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71. Unlike his German contemporary Heinrich von Treitschke, who believed that the people of Alsace-Lorraine should be restored to their true German selves even if that went against their will, Renan believed in the primacy of the popular will over and above the ties of language, blood and soil (Harvey 2001). Given the Francophile sympathies of the population living in the disputed territories, this voluntarist definition of nationhood of course challenged the legitimacy of German annexation.

Stalin’s ([1913] 1994: 20) notoriously restrictive definition of the nation as a ‘historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in common culture’, which requires that all these characteristics are present for a group to qualify as a nation, was also heavily influenced by the internal struggles for power Stalin was involved in at the time. His definition was quite explicitly devised as an attack on the rival understanding of the nation formulated by Austrian Marxists Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, according to which a nation was not necessarily attached to a defined territory, but defined by common culture. The Austro-Marxist definition was tailored to suit the complexities of the national question in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose numerous nationalities were so intertwined as to make regional-territorial autonomy impossible. At the same time, this definition presented a threat to the unity of the Russian Social Democratic Party, since it provided leverage for the establishment of rival social democratic parties within the Russian empire (Davis 1978: 73–75).
Although the links between politics and scholarship may no longer be so evident, contemporary scholarly debates about nationalism continue to share affinities with wider political and ideological contexts. Theories emphasizing the mythical, invented character of nations and nationalism are at least potentially compatible with political and intellectual agendas seeking to escape the logic of nationalism and usher in postnational forms of imagination and belonging. In contrast, theories that emphasize the embeddedness of modern nations in pre-modern cultural ties can be used to boost support for nationalist political agendas, or call for better protection of minority cultures. There is of course no doubt that public uses of scholarly arguments often involve simplifications and even misinterpretations. Yet, for better or for worse, it is precisely such simplistic, misleading interpretations that often play a key role in deciding which types of analysis or explanation will come into fashion at a particular moment in time. Especially when it comes to scholarly works that become part of the canon of required readings, it is useful to keep in mind that their popularity is in part owed to reasons that extend well beyond the limits of scholarly deliberations, and are sometimes at odds with the authors’ own arguments and intentions.

It is against this background that we need to assess the impact and legacy of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1991: 6), which taught us to think of nations as ‘imagined political communities […] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’. Arguably, much of the book’s worldwide appeal has to do with the iconoclastic potential of its title, and its compatibility with anti-nationalist sentiments gathering momentum towards the end of the Cold War. Fuelled partly by globalization debates and cosmopolitan visions, and partly by the need to challenge the resurgence of nationalism in post-1989 Europe, these sentiments provided one of the key driving forces responsible for the impressive array of translations of Anderson’s book into local languages around the world. The fact that much of the book is rather sympathetic towards nationalism, and quite explicitly aimed at rehabilitating nations and nationalisms as potentially positive forces in human history (cf. Anderson 1991: 141), did not seem to matter.

The case of the Serbo-Croatian translation, published at a point when nationalist passions were pushing the multinational Yugoslav federation ever closer to a violent disintegration, is particularly instructive in this respect. The short foreword to the book, written by the sociologist Silva Mežnarić (1990), makes it clear that the book was intended to function as an intellectual weapon in the struggle against the rising tide of competing nationalisms in the country. Anderson’s reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism, argues Mežnarić, require a constant interrogation
of the process of nationalization and one’s own involvement in it. As such, they are also bound to open up the possibility of rejecting the nationalist appeal, and choosing the option of not belonging.

Yugoslav intellectuals were not alone in trying to use Anderson’s book to inspire critical reflections about nationalist myths and claims. Takashi and Saya Shirashi, who brought *Imagined Communities* to Japan in 1987, did so with the explicit aim to counter Japanese exceptionalism and the concomitant belief that any comparisons between Japan and other countries are either impossible or irrelevant (Anderson 2006: 211). The Greek translation, which appeared in 1996, had a very similar objective, namely challenging the dominant narrative of Greek national history, as well as countering Greek claims over the name of Macedonia (ibid.: 219).

Much of the recent scholarly writing on nationalism continues to share this anti-nationalist impetus, and often uses the idea of nations as imagined communities as a springboard for developing alternative, post-national or cosmopolitan forms of collective imagination and belonging. If it was imagination that gave rise to nations, argues Ümut Özkırımlı (2005: 205), then the roots of a postnational order also lie in imagination. Although Özkırımlı is not oblivious of the persistence of nationalism and its embeddedness in institutions and everyday practices, he nevertheless insists on the necessity of a ‘thought experiment’ that would free us from the ‘inexonerable logic of nationalism’. In a similar vein, Spencer and Wollman (2002: 255) are refusing to accept the notion that nationalism is here to stay, and are interested instead in understanding nationalism with the ultimate aim of moving beyond national categories and priorities, and envisaging ‘a future where more universalistic loyalties could replace national identifications’.

However, the iconoclastic potential of *Imagined Communities* was not the only reason for its popularity. Had it been so, the classic modernist theories of nations and nationalism, which dominated the field of nationalism from roughly the end of World War II to the 1980s, could have provided equally powerful intellectual weapons. For Ernest Gellner, one of the foremost proponents of the modernist approach, the nature of nationalism was ‘amnesiastic’ and ‘profoundly distorting’, and the nation was no more than ‘a vision of reality through a prism of illusion’ (1983: 57–58). Eric Hobsbawm (1990: 177–78) shared these views: for him, nations and nationalism were just ‘symptoms’ and ‘illusions’ that ‘appear more influential and omnipresent than they actually are’. Both authors believed nations and nationalisms were mere reflections of far more fundamental realities: Gellner emphasized the role of modernization and in particular industrialization, while Hobsbawm saw
the prime movers in decolonization, revolution and the intervention of outside powers.

In contrast to Hobsbawm and Gellner, Anderson took national imagination and more broadly the cultural aspects of nationalism seriously, and regarded them as worthy of equally detailed treatment as the wider political and economic determinants. It is this appreciation of the constitutive role of culture and imagination that provided the second key reason for the popularity of Anderson’s theory. It inspired a wide array of works examining the exact content and forms of national imagining over a variety of contemporary and historical contexts, and consequently made debates about nationalism much more attractive to academic disciplines professionally concerned with the internal logic and history of cultural forms: cultural and literary studies, art history, drama and theatre studies, as well as media and communication studies. The understanding of nations as cultural constructs led to a rethinking of established ideas about ‘national cinema’ and ‘national literature’, and gave rise to an outpouring of publications looking into how various nations of the world have been imagined and re-imagined through different cultural forms and genres, including music and dance, radio, literature, cinema, as well as drama and theatre (e.g. Hayes 2000; Hjort and MacKenzie 2000; Askew 2002; Ryan 2002; Wilmer 2002).

It is worth noting that the appearance of Anderson’s book also coincided with the rise of discourse analysis and constructivist approaches to social reality, and with the concomitant decline of Marxist theory and class analysis over a range of social sciences and humanities. Within the field of media and communication studies, this trend initially found its expression in the growth of interest in the media as cultural forms and in the establishment of cultural studies as an autonomous field of inquiry. Although welcome and much needed, this development only rarely inspired truly multifaceted examinations of the media, and instead often worked to the detriment of economic and political analysis of media institutions. More recently, this tendency was coupled with an idealist version of discourse analysis, which neglects the extent to which discursive choices are limited by the social context in which they are made. Even critical discourse analysis, whose proponents often acknowledge that discourse is embedded in social structures and institutions, has tended ‘to treat discourse as a thing that in itself can include or exclude, reproduce social inequalities or effect social change’ (Richardson 2006: 26).

It should come as no surprise that these developments provided fertile grounds not only for an enthusiastic reception of Anderson’s
theory, but also for its rather partial reading and application, which privileged the role of national imagination over the particular socio-economic context of its genesis and diffusion. The other fundamental part of Anderson’s argument, which ties national imagination to print capitalism as a particular mode of production and distribution of the printed word, was often left unexplored. In sum, the popularity of *Imagined Communities* can therefore in part be seen as a symptom of rather unfortunate trends in recent research, which had the combined effect of replacing the one-sided, overly determinist and materialist analysis of nationalism with an equally narrow, predominantly text-based analysis that divorces nationalist discourse from its moorings in social, political and economic realities. As a consequence, we know relatively little about how nationalism as a particular form of discourse or cultural imagination is tied to the institutional structures of modern media and to the broader economic, political and social realities.

One of the aims of this book is to challenge this trend, and overcome the fragmentation of research into separate strands of text-based and sociologically informed analysis of nationalism and mass communication. No matter how problematic its relationship to reality may be, we need to acknowledge that nationalism also structures the world it tries to describe (Calhoun 2007: 147) and becomes entrenched in institutionalized categories and practices that affect our everyday lives (Billig 1995; Brubaker et al. 2006). Despite the porous nature of cultural boundaries, international migration and the ability of individuals to maintain multiple attachments to places and collectivities near and far, modern nation-states do manage to create and maintain complex webs of cultural traits, social formations and systems of symbolic exchange, and can therefore be treated as relatively stable and thick ‘culture areas’ (Postill 2006: 15–17).

The fact that nations are products of imagination and construction does not prevent them from structuring the world we live in, becoming embedded in a variety of routines and expressions, and acquiring deep emotional legitimacy. As such, they inevitably also impose restrictions on any subsequent attempts at national imagination, and in particular on any individual attempts at identity construction. We may well feel that nationality does not really matter, or may even refuse to identify with a nation, yet we will have little choice when faced with a questionnaire requiring one to tick the appropriate box under ‘nationality’. Self-identification, however complex, will also matter precious little when one is being discriminated against or physically attacked. A substantial proportion of the Jewish population in inter-war Europe was fully assimilated into the respective national cultures, to the extent that many Jews
preferred to identify themselves as German, French or Hungarian rather than Jewish. Yet, in the light of the anti-Semitic legislation implemented by Nazi Germany and its allies, this kind of self-identification carried little weight.

Or, to combine ideas from Anderson and Marx: people do indeed imagine nations, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. Unmasking the principles of the symbolic or discursive construction and reproduction of nationhood is therefore not enough. We also need to understand the diverse social, political and economic mechanisms that condition these processes, and tie them to, on the one hand, the macro-level relations of power, operating through state policies and apparent in the ownership structures of privately owned institutions, as well as, on the other hand, the mundane forms of social interaction, everyday practices and routines involved in the negotiation and reproduction of power relations at the micro-level. To that end, we first need to unpack the relationship between nationalist discourse and power. Unless we do that, the task of critiquing the excesses of nationalism will continue to appear easier than it actually is.

A clarification is in order at this point. It will have become apparent by now that I am consistently using the term national imagination rather than national imaginary. The two terms are often used as synonyms, but for reasons I can address only very briefly I have decided to omit the latter entirely from my discussion. First, in its ordinary sense, the term ‘imaginary’ is often taken to mean the opposite of ‘real’, and this is clearly not how nationalism has been conceived either by Anderson or in this book. Second, the term imaginary, as used in existing literature on nationalism and the media, frequently comes burdened with the baggage of (usually Lacanian) psychoanalytical theory. As such, it is ill-suited for the study of nationalism, primarily because it is based on the rather dubious assumption that concepts originally developed to account for identification and subject-formation at individual level will be applicable to large-scale political and social processes (cf. Walsh 1996). This assumption is rather difficult to sustain, not least because it accepts and takes for granted precisely one of the key tenets of nationalist discourse that deserve critical interrogation – namely, the idea that nations have been constituted as unified subjects and behave as ‘collective individuals’. This approach certainly cannot provide an adequate starting point for describing and explaining the actual functioning of nationalist discourse, whose power – as we will see later on – largely derives from its internal malleability and plurality. The concepts of discourse, imagination, power and legitimacy offer a much better starting point for tackling these issues.
Defining Nationalism: Discourse, Legitimacy and Power

There is of course nothing intrinsically wrong with defining nationalism as a discourse, and nations as imagined communities. In a way, such definitions allow us to capture what is common to all nationalisms and nations, without falling prey to the endless disputes over whether nationalism is essentially a political movement, a political doctrine or a sentiment, or over whether a nation is defined by a common political will or shared cultural traits (Calhoun 1997: 20–22). However, without expanding the definition of nationalism to include the tie between nationalist discourse and power, we are on thin ice. As Jonathan Hearn (2006: 247) rightly points out, nationalism should be conceived not only as a matter of discourse, culture or ideology, but also as ‘an ascendant type in a long and evolving line of forms of social organization, of concatenations of power and culture’. It is true that nationalism is much more than a political doctrine, and that we should see it as ‘a particular way of seeing and interpreting the world, a frame of reference that helps us make sense of and structure the reality that surrounds us’ (Özkırımlı 2005: 163). Nevertheless, nationalism also has to do with politics and with power more generally – not in the narrow sense suggested by Ernest Gellner (1983), who defined nationalism as a political doctrine that requires cultural and political units to coincide, but as a much more broadly applicable principle of legitimation, used to shore up support for different forms of power, be they economic, political or cultural, at both macro- and micro-levels.

To conceptualize the relationship between nationalism as discourse and nationalism as a principle of legitimation, it is worth recalling Pierre Bourdieu’s (1989) theory of social space and social power. Although this theory does not focus directly on nationalism, it is concerned precisely with the relationship between discourse and its broader social context – or between, as Bourdieu would say, the subjective representations of the world held by various social agents, and the objective structures and relations of power which they help engender and in which they are, at the same time, embedded. This relational approach helps us understand that representations are not constructed in a social vacuum, but vary with the position within social space, and are constrained by objective social structures and relations. Constraint does not imply total and absolute determination: although the world cannot be represented in just any way one would like, it is also not entirely determined by objective structures and relations. At any time, the social world can be constructed or represented in several different ways, following different systems of classification and naming, which in turn give rise to different principles of
identity- and group-formation. This multiplicity opens up opportunities for symbolic struggles over the perception of the social world, which are at the same time also struggles over the relative influence of different sets of objective structures and relations of power.

Such struggles occur also within the realm of nationalism itself, between different nationalist visions of the world. Each of these visions defines ‘the nation’ in slightly different ways, drawing on different symbolic resources and applying either a voluntarist or an organicist understanding of the nation, or a mixture of both (Zimmer 2003). In this sense, the nation always functions as a polyvalent symbol, whose multiple meanings are ‘competed over by different groups manoeuvring to capture the symbol’s definition and its legitimating effects’ (Verdery 1996: 228). The contrasting definitions of Britishness offered by the far-right British National Party and the UK’s Liberal Democratic Party provide an excellent case in point. On the one hand, the British National Party defines Britishness primarily by reference to race: one of the party’s major political objectives, as defined in its constitution, consists of ‘stemming and reversing the tide of non-white immigration and to restoring […] the overwhelmingly white make-up of the British population that existed in Britain prior to 1948’ (British National Party 2004: 3). The Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, adopt an almost diametrically opposed vision of Britain: as their constitution proclaims, the members of the party ‘reject all prejudice and discrimination based upon race, colour, religion, age, disability, sex or sexual orientation, and oppose all forms of entrenched privilege and inequality’ (Liberal Democratic Party 2006). This is not to say that all members of the two parties will conform to the same definition of Britishness at all times. Instead, they may well adopt different and even mutually incompatible definitions, depending on the particular context and aims. We will return to these and other examples of internal contestation later in the book. For the moment, it should suffice to underline the coexistence of competing imaginings of the same nation. Without acknowledging this, we can easily fall prey to treating national imagination as homogeneous and even harmonious, and miss its inherently contested nature.

As follows from the above, nationalism can be seen as an internally contested vision and division of the world, which makes us see the social world as fundamentally divided and structured along national lines. The presence of contestation does not mean that the possibilities for imagining a particular nation are unlimited, or that all the different imaginings will be equally influential or widespread. To understand this, we need to remind ourselves that the competing nationalist visions of the world are also involved in the construction of, and are embedded in, the material
institutional structures and power relations that are themselves organized along national distinctions. To be able to function in this way, nationalism clearly needs to entail more than just a particular vision and division of the world. In addition, it must also function as a principle of legitimation – a principle that facilitates its own institutionalization and hence endows national fictions with the power to structure the reality and its representations. As a principle of legitimation, nationalism holds that in order to achieve legitimacy, an institution needs to act as a representative of the nation, or be otherwise devoted to serving the nation and its interests. This principle of legitimation is potentially applicable to virtually any institution, not only to the institutions of political representation such as governments or political parties, but also to various social, economic and cultural institutions, including schools, the family and of course the media.

In this sense, nationalism can be applied even to institutions that are otherwise governed by principles of legitimation that have little to do with nationalism, such as, for example, religious or monarchic institutions – in as much as these institutions also aim to devote their activities to a particular nation. For instance, several religious institutions in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe have reacted to the rising influence of nationalism not by rejecting it, but by presenting themselves as institutions of vital importance for national defence and survival. The support of some of the Protestant churches and movements for German nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century (Baranowski 1995), and the close involvement of different religious institutions in the proliferation of nationalism in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s (Perica 2002) are only some examples among many.

Institutions therefore clearly play a key role in translating representations of the world and the classificatory systems they entail into objective structures and relations. As such, they are also central to the exercise of power conferred by different representations and classifications. In order to become taken for granted elements of reality, and achieve power to form and transform that reality, the groups engendered by different visions of the social world need to become enshrined in particular institutions that act as their representatives. Or, as Bourdieu argued: ‘the power of constitution, a power to make a new group, through mobilization, or to make it exist by proxy, by speaking on its behalf as an authorized spokesperson, can be obtained only as the outcome of a long process of institutionalization, at the end of which a representative is instituted, who receives from the group the power to make the group’ (1989: 23). Once perceived as real, a group such as a nation, and more specifically the institutions and individuals that are recognized as its
legitimate representatives, also wield particular forms of power, that is, the ability to affect the world in some way or another, whether by means of physical force or symbols. This understanding of the ties between representations, institutions and power constitutes the core of the approach to nationalism and mass communication adopted in this book.

A caveat is required at this point. Introducing the issue of legitimacy into a debate about nationalism – a debate, that is, about a discourse that has been enmeshed in a lot of violence and served to justify political regimes, policies and actions that hardly anyone would want to regard as legitimate – may of course seem problematic. Legitimacy is a vexing concept, not least because it is value-laden, and because human values are not universal. A regime that looks abhorrent to one observer may well seem entirely legitimate to another – at the very least, it will appear legitimate to the regime’s rulers. Yet we do not need to enter such muddy waters in order to be able to discuss nationalism in relation to legitimacy. As Christopher Ansell (2001: 8706) points out, part of the trouble with the notion of legitimacy is that it implies a fairly static, measurable quality possessed by a regime or institution. Such a static notion cannot account for the manifold practices and processes through which legitimacy is produced, maintained, or weakened – that is, practices and processes of legitimation. These include processes of explaining and justifying a particular institutional order (Berger and Luckmann 1967), along with the self-referential, self-justifying activity of rulers and institutions themselves (Barker 2001). Most importantly, such processes do not necessarily succeed in generating consent by the subordinate, and may in fact not even be aimed at generating it.

It is such processes that we have in mind when saying that nationalism is a principle of legitimation. Nationalism assumes that to be legitimate, an institution needs to act as a representative of the nation, yet it does not at the same time require that representativeness be established by means of democratic voting. Or, as Jack Snyder (2000: 36) cogently puts it: nationalism is ‘a doctrine of rule in the name of the people but not necessarily by the people’. This peculiar feature makes nationalism imminently compatible not only with democratic rule, but also with the forms of authority characteristic of the Middle Ages and the early modern period, when those who exercised power, as Habermas ([1962] 1989: 8) puts it, represented their power ‘before’ the people, and not ‘for the people’.

To recapitulate: nationalism, as understood in this book, is both a particular type of discourse and a specific principle of legitimation. On the one hand, nationalism is an internally contested vision and division of the world, which sees the social world as fundamentally divided and
structured along national lines. On the other hand, nationalism is also a principle of legitimation, which holds that in order to achieve legitimacy, an institution needs to act as a representative of the nation, or be otherwise devoted primarily to serving the nation and its interests. This principle of legitimation is potentially applicable to virtually any institution, including the different media institutions, and facilitates the embedding of the subjective nationalist visions and divisions into objective relations and categories that affect our everyday lives. After this initial ground-clearing exercise, it is now time to consider what the definition of nationalism developed in this section means for our understanding of the relationship between nationalism and mass communication.

**The Media and Nationalism: Imagined Communities and Facilities of Mass Communication**

Defining nationalism in the manner outlined on previous pages clearly requires us to reconnect the text-based analysis of national imagination to the analysis of the material and institutional structures and settings within which they are produced, circulated and consumed – in short, the various *facilities of mass communication*. These include three kinds of things involved in either recording or transmitting information: (a) common codes, such as languages and alphabets; (b) information and communication technologies, for instance paper, magnetic tapes, DVDs, the printing press, microphones, cameras, radio and television sets, mobile phones, personal computers and the like; and (c) institutions that govern or run the production, use or distribution of information by relying on these codes and technologies. The latter comprise both the relevant legislative and executive bodies responsible for such things as choosing and implementing different laws governing the public use of languages, alphabets or grammars, as well as the various privately or publicly funded institutions such as publishing companies, television and radio stations, computer software and hardware suppliers, advertising agencies, record labels, film production companies and distributors and so on.

In itself, the recognition of the importance of material and institutional aspects of mass communication in the formation and spreading of national imagination is of course far from new. It can be traced over a range of different theoretical approaches to nationalism, and constitutes a recurrent element of scholarly literature on nationalism ever since the mid-twentieth century (Schlesinger 2000). One of the earliest and most
prominent examples can be found in Karl W. Deutsch’s (1953) *Nationalism and Social Communication*, which takes into account not only the institutions and technologies of the periodical press, radio and television, but also the standardized systems of symbols such as languages and alphabets, the material facilities for the storage of information such as libraries and public monuments, and even collective memories and habits. For Deutsch, the existence of such facilities of communication in fact provides the single most important basis for the formation of ‘a people’, which he defines as ‘[a] larger group of persons linked by such complementary habits and facilities of communication’ (ibid.: 70). All that distinguishes such a group from a full-fledged nation is power, more specifically ‘a measure of effective control over the behaviour of its members’ exercised either through informal social arrangements or through formal social, political or economic institutions (ibid.: 78).

Three decades later, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Elizabeth Eisenstein developed similar arguments to Deutsch, though each with a somewhat different twist, and without explicitly drawing on Deutsch’s work. For Gellner (1983: 127), the new medium and style of mass communication, namely the ‘abstract, centralized, standardized, one-to-many communication’, coupled with the concomitant standardization of languages, ‘itself automatically engendered the core idea of nationalism, quite irrespective of what in particular is being put into the specific messages transmitted’. The key therefore lay not in the specific content of messages transmitted, but in the sheer existence of shared, centralized and standardized channels of communication, which distinguished those who could understand the messages from those who could not. Anderson’s (1991: 32–36, 42–43) explanation was, at its core, no different. One of the key factors contributing to the rise of nationalism in Europe and European colonies also lay in the modern means of communication, namely print technology, and more specifically in its ‘half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction’ with the capitalist system of production and human linguistic diversity. The introduction of print gave spoken vernacular languages a new fixity, transforming the continuum of local vernaculars into clearly distinct languages. Aided by the capitalist drive for ever-expanding markets of readers, these languages in turn gave rise to unified fields of communication and exchange below Latin, and were also increasingly adopted for purposes of administration and hence execution of power. Last but not least, the new media of mass communication, including, in particular, newspapers and novels, also promoted the creation of imagined communities of readers, who, although never meeting in person, felt they all belonged to the same national community.
Several other key theorists of nationalism, as well as historians and communication theorists concerned with the social and cultural impact of print and communication technologies (e.g. Innis [1951] 2007; Eisenstein 1979) could be added to this list, all sharing the same basic conviction about the tight link between the particular facilities of modern mass communication – most often the printing press, but also radio and television – and the spreading of national consciousness. However, none of them actually succeed in explaining why a group sharing certain facilities of communication should think of itself as a nation, or why common facilities of communication should necessarily induce cohesion and agreement. It is of course true that, as Anderson (1991: 32–36) argues, print capitalism establishes a particular relationship between the newspaper and the market of its readers, which gives rise to the nearly simultaneous consumption of the newspaper by thousands or even millions of readers, who all potentially share an awareness of each other as members of the same community, without ever meeting in person. However, we have little grounds for suggesting that this ‘extraordinary mass ceremony’ will inevitably result in the formation of a national imagined community. In short, Anderson (ibid.: 26) may well be correct that ‘[t]he idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation’, yet this same idea also corresponds to several other imagined communities, including particular village or city inhabitants, religious congregations, and even professional groups.

Examples abound, regardless of which facilities of communication we consider and which historical period or part of the world we turn to. For instance, one of the predecessors of modern newspapers in Europe, Anzeiger (Advertiser), published in Dresden in 1730, did not address itself to a national audience, but ‘to all those within and without the city who would buy or sell, lease or rent, lend or borrow’ (quoted in Smith 1979: 8). Although this publication fits the category of print capitalism, and is published in a vernacular language (German) rather than Latin, it does not aim to appeal to a whole nation. Another case in point is provided by the multiple forms of collective imagination fostered by the various newspapers published in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Shanghai alone was home both to Chinese newspapers like Shebao and Minguo ribao, to newspapers tied to native-place communities such as Ningbo baihua bao (Ningbo Vernacular) and Guang-Zhao zhoubao (Guangzhou and Zhaoqing Weekly), as well as to the Japanese paper Shanhai, which regularly brought news not only from Shanghai and Japan, but also from Korea (Goodman 2004: 2). Similarly complex webs of relations between imagined communities,
languages and communicative facilities can be found in nineteenth- and
twentieth-century Europe. While playing a crucial role in the building of
European nations, various technologies, including telecommunication
networks, railroads, highways, energy systems and various consumer
products, were also used for the purposes of collective integration at a
transnational level (Misa and Schot 2005).

An analogous intertwining of integration and disintegration, linking
and de-linking, can also be found below the national level. As Susan
Douglas’ (2004) study of US radio reminds us, broadcasting had indeed
played a crucial role in helping people around the world to imagine
themselves as a nation, yet the very same medium also helped perpetu-
ate the multiple ethnic, racial, generational, class, regional and gender
divisions within nations, as well as allowed individuals to tune into
imagined communities fuelled by subcultural rejection and subversion
of mainstream national tastes and preferences. Much the same applies
also to the functioning of language as a basic facility of communication.
From the centre, the introduction of a common language may well be
seen as ‘unification’, yet when observed from the periphery, the same
process can be interpreted as ‘cultural invasion’ and ‘linguistic assimila-
tion’ of non-dominant groups and languages, such as for instance Welsh,
a Celtic language spoken in Wales in the United Kingdom, or Occitan, a
Romance language historically spoken in Southern France as well as in
parts of Italy and Spain (Burke 2004: 167). To take an example from
beyond Europe, when the Directorate General of Information and
Broadcasting in India attempted to change the English name of All India
Radio into Hindi ‘Akashvani’ (Sky Voice), newspapers in Tamil Nadu
reported protests against the ‘imposition of Hindi’ (Kumar 2006:
261–62). The attempt at promoting Hindi as a national language was
therefore perceived not as a welcome instance of integration into the
nationwide media sphere, but as an unwelcome invasion of a foreign
language.

It is true that different communication technologies may be prone to
different forms of social and cultural appropriation, and hence also
display elective affinities with different kinds of collective imagination.
Radio, for example, proved to be a versatile technology, and its relative
accessibility made it amenable to a wide variety of uses inspired by
bottom-up experimentation and appropriation, and thus to a range of
small-scale or local forms of collective imagination. It is not a coinci-
dence, for example, that radio was and still is one of the preferred facil-
ities of mass communication among various minorities. Newspapers and
print media in general often performed a similar function, yet their
impact remained limited to literate segments of the population, and to
those able to afford them. As such, they were also inclined to foster elite forms of collective imagination and identification. On the other hand, film and television, although appealing to audiences across gender, age and class divides, were also rather costly enterprises, and therefore, compared to radio, more vulnerable to both state appropriation and corporate interests. As a consequence, they were much more often used as means of promoting particular forms of collective imagination on a large scale – national or even transnational. None of this, however, makes any of these technologies as such particularly conducive only to national imagination.

In short, to assume that any facility of communication is uniquely predisposed to serve as a purveyor of national imagination or as an instrument of integration is misleading. As the above-mentioned examples suggest, facilities of mass communication are able to accommodate a range of different kinds of imagined communities, and can simultaneously cut both ways: serve as instruments of integration, while also being used as tools of exclusion and fragmentation, and often simultaneously so. An increase in the intensity of communication therefore does not necessarily bring about agreement and cohesion, but can instead end up enhancing differences and fostering internal conflicts. Furthermore, even when cohesion is achieved, it does not automatically assume a national form (for similar arguments, see e.g. Connor 1994: 28–66; Schlesinger 1991: 158). Shared facilities of communication may therefore represent an indispensable, but certainly not sufficient, means of achieving and maintaining cohesion within a certain group, and of spreading national imagination.

This has important implications for the understanding of some of the recent developments in the sphere of mass communication, including the rise of satellite television and transnational broadcasting, the proliferation of diasporic media and the establishment of the various Internet-based transnational channels of communication. Much of the recent literature tends to suggest that these phenomena present a serious challenge to the national order of mass communication, and encourage entirely unprecedented links between the media, nations and states. Yet if the ties between older means of mass communication and national imagination were not as tight as it is often assumed, we need to qualify such claims and develop a more nuanced understanding of relations between mediation and identification in different historical periods. This route is pursued in Chapter 2.
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