Comments on Thomas Hylland Eriksen's paper 'Nations in cyberspace' (short version of the 2006 Ernest Gellner lecture, London School of Economics 27 March 2006)

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Thomas Hylland Eriksen's 'Nations in cyberspace' is a thoughtful and thought provoking paper on a timely issue. The proponents of the social communication approach have long considered the impact of electronic media on nationalism and the nation-state. If print capitalism (Anderson, 1983) and education (Gellner, 1983) catalysed the emergence of the nation-state, then what role do television and more recently, the internet have on processes of nation-building and nation-maintenance? Crucially, this is not merely a theoretical question; such debates are reflected in a number of policy decisions about immigration and multicultural politics thus having tangible consequences in people's everyday lives. For example, the reader may recall the moral panics surrounding satellite television for allegedly preventing the integration of immigrants in Germany (for a discussion see Aksoy and Robins, 2000). More recently, debates about the role of the internet in radicalising identity politics have echoed similar concerns.

Eriksen states his argument clearly: 'Nations thrive in cyberspace'. Far from being the global village (McLuhan, 1964), cyberspace emerges as the symbolic terrain in which nations (actual and in waiting) struggle for visibility and recognition. Eriksen points out in the paper's abstract that 'in a "global era" of movement and deterritorialisation, the internet is typically used to strengthen, rather than weaken, national identities' thus echoing Anderson's argument about 'long distance nationalism' (2001).

This deterritorialised nationalism, however, need not always be 'virulent' as Anderson suggests. Eriksen draws our attention to four different types of cybernationalism (namely, independence struggles in absentia, stable hyphenation, surrogate nationhood and the virtual province). Although some of the above (for instance, independence struggles in absentia) can be seen as forms of long distance nationalism, Eriksen extends the argument about nationalism in the electronic age by pointing out that 'virtual nations need neither be oppositional nor secessionist' (p. 10). As the example of maroc.nl suggests, what is at stake is the politics of recognition (Taylor, 1994) within the Dutch polity rather than a diasporic yearning for a lost homeland. Eriksen pushes the argument even further and argues compellingly that the 'most common form of virtual nationalism' is quite simply the deterritorialisation of the existing (and I would add, established) nation. This can take place either through state sponsored policies (the example of the Chileans of el exterior), or as his anecdotal evidence suggests, through the increased sociality that the internet facilitates: the sheer possibility of keeping in touch with friends and family, with the news, the gossip and the weather, as the Norwegian family in Guatemala did (p.10). This observation is in line with Miller and Slater's (2000) arguments about the internet in Trinidad as enacting and furthering 'Trinidadianess' through the consolidation of previously virtual social relationships with the Trinidadian diaspora and the presentation to the outside world of what it means to be 'Trini'.

At this point, one might ask whether it is possible to still talk about nationalism and identity, or whether the above examples simply suggest social interaction and sociality. A social communication perspective implies that it is precisely this sociality that supports an identity. But is it possible to overemphasise the importance of identity in such communicative practices? I would have liked this part of the paper that deals with sociality (not the state

sponsored policy of Chile, but rather the use of the internet by immigrants to maintain links with friends and family) to be further developed.

I now want to briefly turn to an observation that raises a couple of wider questions about the modernist theories of nationalism and the foundations of online research. I will begin with the latter. The argument in this paper about the types of online nationalism is based on the analysis of different websites. My question here is who actually uses these websites? How representative can a website be of a whole community or ethnic group? Is it not inevitable that a website that claims to represent a whole population will most likely be representing the official view of a given community? For example, the author notes that the Kurdish websites have 'few if any feedback opportunities for the users' (p.6) indicating that they are not as interactive and participatory as they might be. The author writes that the Tamil and Kurdish websites are supplemented by personal websites and blogs - it would be very interesting to know the content of these websites and the extent to which they share, or contest the views of the official ones. Although, of course, a website is a much more complex type of text it still raises the methodological questions surrounding textual analysis: to what extent can we infer meanings from the analysis of the websites (especially if they are not including or inviting the participation of their users)?

This observation connects with my second question which involves a critique of the modernist debates of nationalism. Modernist writers (including the representatives of the social communication approach) whilst making an argument about the construction, the building of the nation-state, have assumed that cultural homogenisation is actually achieved. Could it be, however, that Kokoschka's painting was never (entirely) replaced by a Modigliani? By neglecting a bottom-up approach modernist writers may have overstated the case of homogenisation and glossed over the everyday contestations of nationalism. It is in this context that the understanding of the consumption of the above websites could cast light on how nationalism is reproduced or, even possibly, rejected.

The author notes that "a main objective for most of the nationalist websites [.] is to make the plight, the virtues or the beauties of this or that nation known to members of the 'global village'" (p.13). Islam.no, for instance, aims 'to rectify the negative image of Muslims' (p. 8). These observations suggest that these websites are the means through which a community presents itself to the outside world; it would be equally fascinating to see how the members of the same community decide upon this self representation. This process reminds me of Michael Herzfeld's cultural intimacy (1997), a concept that refers to the tensions between collective self-knowledge and collective self-representation. Cultural intimacy can explain how nations present a homogenous and harmonious identity to the outside world whilst allowing for a degree of internal contestation as long as this is not brought to the attention of the outside world.

All these are thoughts I have been grappling with in recent years - I hope that the above can stimulate further discussion. Thanks to Thomas for providing me with the opportunity to re-engage with these debates. I am very much looking forward to the discussion.

References

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