



Robert A. Saunders

Ethnopolitics in Cyberspace: The Internet, Minority Nationalism, and the Web of Identity

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Ours is an era in which Internet-enabled mobile devices and cyber-activity of various kinds have real-world political implications. Information, politicisation, and identity are no longer so neatly wrapped within state-defined boundaries, and people are expressing dissent, collective aims, and alternative understandings of the world in a media environment that was unprecedented just a decade ago. *Ethnopolitics in Cyberspace* by Robert A. Saunders examines these trends and is a welcome addition to the literature on nationalism under globalising conditions. While previous books have examined race and/or ethnicity in relation to cyberspace (Leung 2005; McGahan 2008; Nakamura 2002), and a few articles have dealt with a similar subject (Chan 2005; Eriksen 2007; Mills 2002), Saunders' work is the first book-length treatment of the effects of the Internet on minority nationalism. It not only discusses the variety of minority nationalist aims that exist in virtual reality, but also challenges us to rethink traditional conceptions of nationalism (see Saunders' chapters on the Roma and global *Ummah* especially).

Ethnopolitics in Cyberspace displays an impressive disciplinary breadth as it engages with minority nationalism on the Web. Part I of the book takes us through the evolution of the mass media and its role in creating and perpetuating the 'nation' (chapter one). It examines the rise of the Internet, the impact of globalisation, and the gradual erosion of state control over national identity production as a result of these phenomena (chapters two and three). Part II of the book then engages in an empirical investigation of the Internet's influence upon nationalist sentiment among Albanians (chapter four), diasporic Russians (chapter five), Roma (chapter six), and the *Ummah* (chapter seven). Through online and face-to-face interviews, as well as the monitoring of minority websites and blogs, Saunders finds that his four case studies employ the Internet for different ends. He argues that Albanians used the Internet to foment Kosovar independence and currently use it to foment 'virtual propinquity' in the absence of 'national contiguity' (p. 96). Diasporic Russians use it for personal advancement, while the Roma employ the Internet to preserve their culture and the *Ummah* uses it to 'create a viable imagined community' (p. 182).

Saunders is careful to describe the advantages and disadvantages of this medium for minority politics. From a beneficial vantage, for example, *Ethnopolitics in Cyberspace* shows that the Internet allows for minority voices to be heard in addition to statist claims, permits ready communication among dispersed groups, makes minority language learning and maintenance easier, and provides an escape from the prejudices of daily life. Additionally, cyberspace permits minority groups to warn each other of discriminatory activity, pursue economic opportunities, garner support for political action, and impact policy in the non-virtual world. Cyberspace is, however, a 'double-edged sword' (p. 126).

It not only allows for the creation of ‘cybernations’, but it can have a depoliticising and denationalising effect on minorities as well. Saunders argues that the diversity of opinion and information in cyberspace, the predominance of English as the Web-language of choice, the infiltration of the state and consumer culture, and the lack of a ‘real-world’ link to tie many co-ethnics together, all affect the strength of minority nationalism. In fact, Saunders finds that ‘[u]nless one enters cyberspace with an ideological commitment to nation-building, the very structure of the Web tends to subtly but steadily weaken pre-existing nationalist orientations’ (p. 167).

It is difficult to judge the validity of this and other claims that Saunders makes in the book, however. While we know that he engaged in cyberspatial fieldwork and performed in-person interviews, which ‘ranged from 20 to 200’ ‘per ethnic population’ (p. 16 n. 40) in various countries over several years, we do not know how interviewees were selected, the minority group’s composition in terms of gender, age, etc., or how many individuals were interviewed per ethnic group. We do not, therefore, know how representative his sample is when he makes assertions about the status of minority nationalism within his four case studies. It does not help that Saunders’ research subject – the ‘cyberelite’ – is a rather ambiguous concept. While he employs Leung’s (2005) definition of techno-elites at the beginning of the book – ‘members of ethnic minorities who are integrated into the “educational, media, cultural, and political institutions and networks in the West [and] who travel and migrate virtually as well as geographically”’ (p. 12) – this definition does not fit well with Saunders’ description of the Roma or *Ummah* who apparently are not ‘integrated’ into ‘the West’ and suffer discrimination. Additionally, at times the cyberelite appears to be simply someone with access to the Internet (pp. 125, 138), while at others it appears Saunders is referring to specific types of people (p. 168). If ‘the Web can now be accessed by nearly everyone everywhere’ (p. 53), it is unclear how Saunders identified the cyberspace ‘elite’ in order to interview them or why they were central to his study.

Moreover, *Ethnopolitics in Cyberspace* rests on the assumption that we live in a post-nationalist world where ‘the preeminence of national borders in shaping identity is waning’ (p. 57) and where ‘national minorities and diasporas are proving the most effective at winning authority at the expense of the state’ (p. 183). Yet, since ‘[t]here is little direct evidence to suggest that utilization of the Internet by national minorities has significantly contributed to the weakening of the nation-state’ (p. 178) and ‘nation-states do possess some inherent advantages in cyberspace’ (p. 183), it is unclear how exactly the sovereign state is losing authority to minorities through this medium. Moreover, Saunders makes the tantalising claim that ‘[t]he emergence of political [sic] active and Internet savvy elites among national minorities has some important ramifications for the future of state sovereignty’ (p. 87), but fails to convince on this point. This may be due to the largely descriptive, as opposed to analytical, nature of the text. That said, *Ethnopolitics in Cyberspace* applies nationalism – a subject that is far from dead in the post-Cold War era – to an environment that continually grows in importance – cyberspace. It is thus well worth reading.

References

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Tiziana Caponio and Maren Borkert (eds)
The Local Dimension of Migration Policymaking
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Tiziana Caponio and Maren Borkert have brought us this latest edition in the IMISCOE series on immigration, citizenship, and social cohesion. As with previous IMISCOE publications (see Bauböck 2006; Bauböck and Faist 2010; Zincone, Penninx, and Borkert 2011), *The Local Dimension of Migration Policymaking* is an informative addition to the existing literature on migration policies, which is likely to be of use to established academics and younger students alike.

The publication fits into an expanding body of work focusing on the local aspect of migration and in particular on the dynamics of ethnic relations and integration patterns and policies in cities. 'Classic' migration theories, in particular those of the realist school such as Freeman (1995), Hollifield (2000), and Weiner (1995), view the state as a unitary actor possessing the key role in determining migration policies. This perspective has been challenged by research in local settings such as Caponio's (2005) work on local political opportunity structures in Italy, and Penninx et al.'s (2004) work on local integration patterns in European cities. This latter strand of research has illustrated the ways in which interpersonal relations and networks between minority and majority groups vary from one context to another, as relations between migrants and natives escape from direct state control.

Indeed, it also appears that in Europe the state's policy choices are being constrained from above and below, as noted by Caponio and Borkert in the introduction to this volume when they comment on the increasing influence of