



Nationalism in the Age of New Media: A Review on Emerging Forms and Digital Dynamics of “New” Nationalism

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Abstract

This review tries to examine the resurgence of nationalism in the era of 21st century, where digital technology acts as a major catalyst for societal upheavals and ideological trajectories. With a particular focus on how new media platforms reshape and intensify the nationalist discourse, it also describes in detail the types and their structural formations with political breeding grounds. Drawing on classic theories of nationalism and recent scholarship of digital politics, it synthesizes five main forms of new nationalism: digital ethno-nationalism, populist nationalism, algorithmic nationalism, cultural/consumer nationalism, and memetic nationalism. Furthermore, the review highlights the structural dynamics which are the mechanisms of digital platforms—through algorithms, participatory cultures, and viral circulation—transform nationalism in to a decentralized and manipulable phenomenon. By integrating cases from diverse geopolitical contexts, the paper argues that “new” nationalism is not an ideologically novel entity but technologically adaptive, relying on the logics of digital media to sustain exclusionary as a solidified political identity. Overall, this article contributes to the current debate in new media and nationalism: first, it provides a conceptual framework for understanding nationalism in networked society influenced by digital technology and then, identifies critical research gaps for further studies on digital governance, algorithmic bias, and the affective techno-political dynamics prevalent in post-new media age.

Key words: nationalism, digital age, ‘new’ nationalism, post-new media

1. Introduction

Nationalism, which was historically cultivated through print media capitalism, state education and mass mobilization (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 2006), has significantly reshaped by the advent of new media in the 21st century. Characterized heavily by social networks, algorithmic news distribution, and digital platforms, this new age has accelerated and diversified nationalist discourse in itself. As a result, in particular, it has become a multifaceted political movement, which opens up a breeding ground for both grassroots initiatives and state-backed campaigns to leverage the rapidity, reach, and emotional influence of power (Howard, 2020).

This review attempts to examine the mechanisms and effects of emerging new forms of nationalism with their wider socio-political foundations. Digital platforms use algorithms that emphasize engagement and empowerment, which frequently magnify content that is divisive and emotionally charged, in contrast to traditional media, which functioned within centralized gatekeeping power structures (Benkler et al., 2018). The outcome is a paradoxical environment in which nationalism is both more democratized and decentralized (due to viral grassroots movements) and more manipulated and scrutinized (due to algorithmic bias and state-sponsored disinformation) (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

This review paper attempts to explain the role of new media in facilitating emergent new forms of nationalism and, more importantly, it tries to connect their mechanisms and consequences with broader socio-political underpinnings. Unlike traditional media, which are operated within centralized and gatekeeping power structures, digital platforms amplifying divisive and emotionally charged nationalist content (Benkler et al., 2018) as they employ algorithms which prioritize engagement and empowerment. This new situation, as a result, makes a paradoxical landscape where nationalism connects two conceptual spheres simultaneously: more decentralized and democratized domain (through viral grassroots movements) and more scrutinized and manipulated facet (via state-backed disinformation and algorithmic bias) (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

2. Discussion

2.1.The Conceptual Background

Nationalism, as a long-standing political ideology and a social and political movement, is conventionally understood as an ideology which asserts the predominance of the nation-state as the locus of sovereignty, identity, and belongingness. Foundational theorists such as Benedict Anderson (1983) conceptualized the nation as an “imagined community,” while scholars including Ernest Gellner (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990) highlighted the constructed and historically contingent nature of national identity. Ozkirimli (2010) argues that the whole discourse of nationalism—which is based on the concept of nation-state—makes three interrelated claims: identity claims, temporal claims and spatial claims.

Traditional theories of nationalism are usually imagined in the form of particular theory paradigms. Of these, Kohn's (1944) initial civic-ethnic dualism has been extremely influential: civic nationalism is typically identified with membership-based inclusive groups based on a shared norm of politics, while ethnic nationalism revolves around descent, language, and common cultural heritage. Major modernist theories, worked out by Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1983), see nationalism as a product of modernity with close association with processes of industrialization, bureaucratic state-building, and the homogenization of culture. Nationalism, in Gellner's account, is an industrial society's structural necessity, whereas Anderson emphasizes the symbolic and communicative nature of nationalism, with a focus on the role of print capitalism, shared language, and mediated symbols in the construction of national consciousness. On the other hand, ethnonationalist writers such as Anthony D. Smith (1991) focus on the continued relevance of myths, memories, symbols, and traditions in arguing that nations nowadays are not merely modern but are deeply rooted in pre-modern ethnic groups and histories.

In combination, these frameworks illuminate how national identities have been produced historically, reproduced socially, and emotionally maintained in various contexts.

Building on such classical theories, subsequent scholarship has brought post-structuralist insights, which regard nationalism less as a fixed ideology and more as a discursive construction constantly under negotiation and historically contingent (Calhoun, 1997; Brubaker, 2004). National identity, under such an approach, is not a fixed characteristic but a performative and contested practice. Brubaker's (2017) conceptualization of nationalism enacted through online practices remains at the forefront, yet scholars have increasingly built on this in order to explain the role of digital infrastructure, platforms, and algorithms.

Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021) identify three mechanisms through which digital technologies reshape nationalism: the internet's top-level domain architecture, algorithmic bias in selecting content, and the formation of national digital ecosystems. Mihelj (2023) follows on from this with the "platform nations" theory, which demonstrates how digital platforms are not simply carriers of content but cultural infrastructure in the active construction of national imaginaries. Similarly, Huang (2024) argues that social media inscribes "banal nationalism" into everyday digital routines, as affectively charged and algorithmically generated content reiterates national belonging in everyday digital practices. Zhang (2025) further illustrates how China's digital environment enmeshes top-down propaganda with bottom-up online mobilizations, tracing the intersection of soft authoritarianism and digital nationalism.

At the regional level, case studies demonstrate the different ways of digital nationalism in South and Southeast Asia. In Sri Lanka, Facebook led the narrative and upkeep of the 2022 cycle of protests, with approximately 35 percent of the population being on social media by 2025 (DataReportal, 2025). In Bangladesh, studies of the 2024 unrest and the Boishommo Birodhi Chatra Andolon movement illustrate how Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram facilitated rapid mobilization of nationalist grievance frames

among young people (Kabir & Rahman, 2025; Rahman, 2025). Vietnam provides an example of state-led online nationalism, strategically cultivating patriotic narratives among digitally native publics (Luong & Nguyen, 2024), and Myanmar's participation in the #MilkTeaAlliance demonstrates transnational nationalist and democratic demands expressed via hashtag activism (Putra, 2024). The Philippines demonstrates how coordinated fake-account clusters craft nationalist narratives out of elections and controversies over international justice (Cyabra, 2025; Reuters Institute, 2025). In Indonesia, TikTok has provided a platform for Gen-Z users to perform patriotism and national identity, as negotiations between the state and major platforms on objectionable content remain indicative of the significance of digital sovereignty (Reuters, 2025; Sari, 2024; Pratama, 2024). Finally, Nepal's bid in 2025 to ban popular social websites fueled nationwide protests as demonstrators marched while holding national flags, pointing out that efforts to assert digital sovereignty can ironically trigger new controversial street-level nationalism (Associated Press, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025).

In the light of the above perspectives, it can be suggested that defining “new” nationalism is not solely limited to its ideological underpinnings but by its embedded characteristics: platform infrastructures, algorithmic logics, and data sovereignty regimes. So, the concept of national identity today is not only imagined and emotionally sustained but also performed, commodified, and contested in connected sphere of communication.

2.2. Forms of 'New' Nationalism in the Age of Post-New Media

2.2.1 Digital Ethno-Nationalism

Digital ethno-nationalism is the most popular type of "new" nationalism facilitated by social media in web 2.0 era. It shows a strong departure from the way ethnic identities are mobilized, produced and sustained online. In contrast to old media pre-age models of nationalism, founded on state apparatuses, education, and print media for reproducing ethnic belonging, digital technologies allow people and groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers and forge ethnic solidarity in interactive and decentralized ways. Social media enable the construction of bounded communities where symbolic markers—language, religion, historic grievance—are reiterated, often with the aim of establishing who belongs and who does not.

In India, for example, Hindu nationalist movements have employed sites like WhatsApp to propagate hate speech, misinformation, and exclusionary rhetoric against minorities, and Muslims specifically (Udupa, 2018). These online practices not only reflect offline tensions but also actively build on them by portraying Hindu identity as under siege and in need of protection. Facebook has also been at the heart of the escalation of Buddhist ethno-nationalist views in Myanmar. There, organized campaigns of disinformation enabled the normalization of violence against the Rohingya, leading to what many international observers have described as genocide (Mozur, 2018).

Diaspora communities similarly practice ethno-nationalist politics online. The Tamil diaspora, for example, has created vibrant online networks to continue the pursuit of Tamil nationalist goals decades after the Sri Lankan civil war, suggesting that virtual spaces make it possible for ethnic nationalisms to transcend territorial constraints (Amarasingam, 2015). Online spaces are used to combine nostalgic cultural exhibition and political messaging, upholding ethnic pride and calling for justice or self-determination.

This new wave of digital ethno-nationalism is characterized by an extreme focus on authenticity, purity, and preservation of cultural heritage. These narratives have been exclusionary and increasingly linked to offline violence, illustrating the ability of new media to reframe perception and action.

2.2.2 Populist Nationalism

Populist nationalism in the digital era is founded on a direct, emotional, and often combative style of political communication that combines the rhetoric of 'the people' with national imaginaries. Unlike traditional political movements, which relied on hierarchical party machines and traditional media, contemporary populist-nationalist leaders tend to make use of social media platforms to bypass intermediaries and build intimate relations with their supporters (Gerbaudo, 2018). Social media gives populist leaders the tools to build an image that is "authentic," "anti-elite," and "anti-globalist," expanding nationalist discourse such as sovereignty, cultural purity, and national exceptionalism.

A high-profile case in point is Donald Trump's presidency and Twitter usage. Trump's tweets continuously invoked patriotic symbolism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and aggression towards international institutions, all of which cumulatively created his presidency as the embodiment of American nationalism (Graham et al., 2020). Similarly, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and India's Narendra Modi have used Facebook and WhatsApp to mobilize massive portions of the populations of both nations and combined religious nationalism with populist appeals (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Populist nationalism of new media is more than rhetoric and constructs participatory ecologies. Users are themselves the active agents in circulating nationalist discourse, typically likes, shares, and going viral on hashtags. These publics are emotively reactive and thrive on outrage, suspicion, and pride. Misinformation, conspiracy theories, and scapegoating pervade, and immigrants, liberal elites, and minorities are repeatedly characterized as being a threat to the "true" nation.

Thus, populist nationalism in the age of the internet is characterized by its cutting edge, its emotionality, and its capacity for mobilizing virally. It is highly performative, politicizing the spectacle even as it redefining the public arena as a war zone of identity and fidelity.

2.2.3 Algorithmic Nationalism

Algorithmic nationalism is the collision of nationalist content with the recommendation algorithms behind such platforms as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. These algorithms that maximize user engagement prefer content that elicits strong emotional reactions—usually outrage, fear, or pride. As a result, nationalist content, especially sensationalized or inflammatory content, gets overemphasized (Tufekci, 2015).

This creates a feedback loop: individuals who watch nationalist content engage with it, and algorithms will recommend more content of the same type, thereby creating echo chambers wherein nationalistic sentiments are nurtured and rarely challenged. Ribeiro et al. (2020) point out how YouTube's algorithm has directed users towards increasingly extreme right-wing content, demonstrating how even fleeting interest in national pride or anti-immigration sentiment can lead to exposure to increasingly extreme ideologies.

Furthermore, online nationalism's modular nature allows it to be customized by subcultures. Youth platforms like TikTok carry nationalist messages packaged in trends and humor, while more traditional ones stay on Facebook and YouTube. Algorithmic nationalism thus does not yield a unitary, unifying ideology but a multitude of forms responding to tastes, leaning towards fragmented but complementary digital identities.

Above all, algorithmic nationalism is interfering with traditional ideational and transcendent understandings of ideology and intent. Individuals may not consciously mean other nationalist content but become drawn to its impact by algorithms instead. This disempowers deliberative forms of democracy and engenders moral concern about control of the platform and political polarization.

2.2.4 Cultural and Consumer Nationalism

Consumer and cultural nationalism underscore the symbolic and material dimensions of national identity performed in everyday life. For the digital age, this is more commodified, affective, and visual. Instagram and TikTok, for instance, are now platforms upon which national pride is performed through showing traditional food, clothing, celebrations, or architecture—many now reinvented in an attractive visual format that is both appealing to local populations and international visitors alike (Miller et al., 2016).

Consumer nationalism, by contrast, reworks economic life in the interests of patriotic duty. Campaigns such as India's #VocalForLocal and the #BuyAmerican campaign in the U.S. promote the idea that supporting local industries is a question of ethical duty. These campaigns usually appear in response to economic globalization or regional war and are negotiated through state media and social media influencers (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Digital media also facilitate these types of nationalism to become viral. Aestheticizations of national culture—color, symbols, and rituals—are disseminated widely on filtered videos and hash tags. Simplification or reduction of multicultural complexities often occur in these representations, but also stimulate renewed interest in heritage and belonging, especially among diasporic and youth audiences.

But cultural and consumer nationalism also have exclusionary potential. Enthusiasm for "authentic" culture can quickly translate into repudiation of foreignness or hybridity. So-called soft nationalism can thus be reinforcing hard boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

2.2.5 Memetic Nationalism

Memetic nationalism is perhaps the most uniquely digital form of new nationalism, composed of pungent, symbolic, and often ironic memes conveying nationalist sentiment. Memes serve as cultural abbreviations—digestible, reproducible, and emotionally resonant. Memes, according to Shifman (2013), are likely to incorporate several layers of meaning that require insider information, thereby succeeding as in-group signals.

In recent years, memes have become central to nationalist subcultures online. The alt-right, for example, used memes like Pepe the Frog to advance white nationalist ideologies under the guise of internet humor (Nagle, 2017). Extremist ideologies are made appear less threatening or less severe by incorporating irony and satire into the memes. The same trends can be observed in Eastern Europe, where memes making fun of the EU or praising national strength have circulated within Telegram channels and nationalist Facebook groups.

Memetic nationalism has been adopted by both state actors and far-right movements globally. Russia, for example, has leveraged memes as part of its information warfare tools to reinforce pro-nationalist and anti-Western sentiments within and beyond its borders. Memes are often disguised as real entertainment, and hence highly insidious and difficult to control.

Ultimately, memetic nationalism is emotive and calculated. It standardizes nationalist discourse, diffuses extremely quickly, and evades official ideational conflicts. As such, it is a formidable power in shaping public opinion in the internet age.

3. Conclusions

The resurgence of nationalism in the age of new media illustrates how digital platforms fundamentally transform a major political ideology by reshaping its breeding ground, modes of communication and emotional performance. The five types mentioned above—digital ethno-nationalism, populist nationalism, algorithmic nationalism, cultural and consumer nationalism, and memetic nationalism—represent the multi-layered and technologically adaptive nature of contemporary nationalism. They

all portray an ironically conflicting situation: nationalism is increasingly democratized by going viral from bottom-up mobilization while at the same time being managed by algorithmic manipulation and state-sponsored disinformation.

Along with charting these forms, this review identifies three significant implications. First, engagement between digital infrastructures and nationalist discourses creates urgent questions about the roles of platform governance and regulation. Second, digital nationalism's affective, visual, and participatory qualities necessitate renewed attention to the question of how political identities are constructed, performed, and normalized within ordinary online life. Third, the transnational and global qualities of digital nationalism—particularly by diasporas—tantalizingly complicates nation-state boundaries, extending nationalist imaginings across digital and spatial landscapes.

Future research must move beyond descriptive accounts to comparative and critical analyses that question the role of artificial intelligence, platform economies, and emerging media spaces such as TikTok and the metaverse. Through this, scholars are better able to understand how nationalism, instead of being an artifact of the past, remains a resilient and evolving source of power in building politics, culture, and identity in the 21st century.

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