Social Media, Internet, and Memes Through the Lens of Political Geography

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Abstract

Almost four billion people in the world use the internet which includes forms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, etc. Along with the gifts of such developed communication technologies, many hardships and future problems have emerged. Misinformation leaks, internet trolls, and the newer trend of cyber-nationalism all come with these advanced forms of technology. The purpose of this paper is to define what these negative consequences mean for us, and what our government is doing with this new power. To be able to grasp a scope of what is happening, the history of the internet and cyber-nationalism need to be distinguished as well as showing different forms of use and how they affect us in our daily lives. Looking through the eyes of a political geographer it is important to see if cyber-nationalism deserves its own category yet as a topic of study, and how this is similar or different to the use of propaganda in the past such as World War II. This paper concludes with final thoughts on the internet and cyber-nationalism, and future research possibilities that help to interpret the use of cyber-nationalism and further its study.

Keywords: Cyber-Nationalism, Communication, Propaganda, Geopolitics, Social Media.

1. Introduction

Cyber-nationalism is an old and yet new phenomena in the era of modern technology. People around the world fall victims to the spread of misinformation by radicalized political parties on the internet or even trusted friends who have fallen victims themselves. This misinformation can be categorized as a form of propaganda since its intent is to mislead the reader and pose a certain political point of view behind this twisted truth of information. On the internet there are many forms of communication such as text posts, comments, like buttons, pictures, memes, and the list goes on. All these forms of communication are at the disposal of any person who has access to a computer.

People question as to why these cyber-nationalists have not been restricted from internet usage and the spread of false rumours. However, the virtual world is more complicated than a person's limitations. Millions of people have their accounts hacked each year while using the internet which provides the hacker all the information and access to the person's computer and/or social media accounts. Many people on Facebook users could claim that their friends sent them links to buy new sunglasses, concert tickets, or other items, only to later claim that their account had been hacked and that they should disregard the false information. At that time, the hacker had most likely obtained at least one other account from this transaction which would play a later role in producing the same misinformation cycle all over again.

Before investing too much into a single topic type under the umbrella of cyber-nationalism it is important to understand how the internet emerged and why it led to the use of cyber-nationalism today.

Today, when discussing any geopolitical conflict or problem, the role of the cyber sphere cannot be ignored due to the sharp increase in the number of users of social networks. For instance, there are over 160 million Internet users in the

Middle East. Social media is becoming a central space for political discourse as it can connect people and support political recruiting. Over the past decades, social media has opened new spaces for identity politics, conflict speech and hatred. It can play a role in political processing. Social media have also played an important role in promoting populist interpretations of national interests and sovereignty. State and non-state regimes, such as dictatorships, have developed strategies, developed cyber capabilities, and allocated resources to advance their geopolitical goals.

2. Literature Review

There are few studies on social media and lens geopolitics. Most of them were written in China due to China's nationalists, who used internet as a tool as weapons against its enemies. Liu (2016) gives a sound description of a new trend in Chinese cyber-nationalism by an examination of Diba Expedition. He examines the impact of new cyber nationalism, and the political consequences of it (Liu, 2016). The book examined the relationship between Chinese cyber nationalism and its influence on potential tourists. Nationalism is two blades for governing. In 1990, Chinese nationalism demonstrated the use of the internet against enemies in the economic sector, which occurred in Hong Kong's tourism sector. Innumerable amount of people visits Hong Kong for tourism. Due to the cultural and political differences, Chinese cyber nationalism has been used against Hong Kong. It is important to discover the link between growing Chinese cyber nationalism to Hong Kong and its stimulus on internal tourists travelling to Hong Kong (Liu, 2016). Hong Kong took an incredible downturn in tourism after its cyber-attacks. It is worth mentioning that tourism is one of the largest support industries in Hong Kong, and Interior China is the biggest tourist market. Chinese cyber nationalism has diverse levels of negative impact on possible tourists (Liu, 2016).

Even in 2000, Taiwanese nationalism has taken on a more nativist form, which one might call zealot, and which paradoxically has highlighted the confusion and limitations of this phenomenon.

Chinese cyberspace has violated sovereignty. In Asia many food and beverages brands have been accused by Chinese internet users silently supporting Hong Kong and Taiwan independence. The Communist Youth League (CYL) is one major organization that actively pushes the nationalism agenda. A few years ago, the CYL was faced with deep challenges both in terms of its declining organizational function within the Party, and in light of criticism from senior leaders (Kecheng, 2019). In order to rebuild its legitimacy and status within the party, the CYL seized the opportunity to promote nationalism on digital media platforms, with products principally targeting Official media including the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and CCTV are also active in promoting nationalism on social media.

Moreover, cyber nationalism in China keeps striking European businesses It's time to learn more about the dynamics underlying this phenomenon for even a small coffee shop based in the German city of Düsseldorf was exposed to a wave of online pressures after its manager posted a message on Instagram — a service censored from within China — suggesting that Taiwan and China are "separate nations" (Kecheng, 2019).

Russian cyber weapons surge instability because their weapon type and strategies increase the motivation for cyber revenge. The Russian attacks used in Georgia and Ukraine did not finish their victims' capacity to answer in kind, leading to punitive attacks

Nationalist tensions in Estonia (Leary, 2017). In 2007 began with ethnic Russian minorities in Tallinn after building on a World War II memorial honouring Soviet troops that represented heroism of the Great Patriotic War. Where vice versa to Estonia representing a vestige of Soviet occupation (Lobjakas, 2007).

3. Brief History of the Internet

The original networking and computer types are not nearly the same as in modern technology. For the United States the beginnings of computer technology began in the early 1960s in the department of defense. They wanted to create a form of networking that was not using physical paper and logistics which would aid in the speed of response for the protection of the United States. Here it began the creation of multiple types of test networks such as ARPANET, CYCLADES, and Gopher. All these were later replaced by what is known today as the World Wide Web (www. Preceding each website input) or the internet for short.

Soon after in the mid-late 1990s the search engines emerged which is the most familiar today, Google.com (1998). Most likely now this or another search engine in someone's first page when opening any internet browser because of the easy access to information about any topic. However, the history of the internet is different from other nations' perspectives especially that of China's competitor superpower to the United States today.

The beginning of networks and the internet did not even occur until 1989 in China. However, this was already during the time of nationalism with the bloody results of protesting at Tiananmen Square in Beijing (Wu, 2007). Since then, until the early 2000s China had very little public use of the internet and occurred at intermittent rates of users and non-users. Following current trends, China has one of the biggest populations of internet users equalling over 40% of the total internet users in the world.

Even though Chinese will not be discussed much due to lack of texts about its usage of cyber-nationalism, Russia as another rival superpower should be discussed with at least in use of the internet. Russia had also had access to the internet around the same time as China, and similarly did not permit access for the public until the 2000s in Russia's case in 2009 (Denisova, 2016). In the 2010s, it has become one of the leading users in types of cyber-nationalism mainly using misinformation and creating dissent in other nations' people.

4. History of Cyber-Nationalism

The history of cyber-nationalism is short in comparison to that of the internet, or most other historical subjects. According to Xu Wu the first accounts of cyber-nationalism had occurred in China within the communist party for the People's Republic of China (Wu, 2007). During 1994-1995 China's population allowed to use the internet had increased (even though not all were allowed to use it) and had created a bulletin in which the government would send articles and news to be published to the users (some of which were nationalist). This did not mean cyber-nationalism was as prevalent in the 1990s as it is today. Through the creation of multiple news feeds, Chinese students who travelled abroad to study, were able to keep in touch with people from their homeland due to their sense of nationalism.

Soon after the Chinese communist party was able to use this as a way to create a false sense of "homesickness" for students who originally left because of political complications and livelihood restrictions through these types of news feeds (Wu, 2007). They created a sense of what Wu determined as "third-identity" which became a way of giving these students a feeling of exile as well as homesickness because they had moved to another country meaning they were not "pure" Chinese anymore.

This did not go unnoticed by other superpower nations, the United States and Russia foreign intelligence agencies had found what the Chinese Communist party was doing and decided to restrict their internet usage while paving the way to use the new idea of cyber-nationalism to their own advantage (Denisova, 2016). Scholarly articles show slight information about these two countries coming into the world of cyber-nationalism but touch that in the late 1990s and early 2000s when they followed the footsteps of creating a virtual nationalism for internet users.

Along with the technology advancement in the 2000s, the Chinese Communist Party had become the biggest utilizer of cyber-nationalism as a tool to spread misinformation and promote patriotism. This was able to take place on social media forums, chat rooms, and news articles (Wu, 2007). The Chinese Communist Party was not only able to reach people and descendants of its own nation but also citizens of other nations. According to Wu most of the largest cyber-nationalism pushes by the Chinese Communist Party happened after large political events, which they used to misconstrue information to the Chinese people as well as the world before others were able to present their perspective on what happened (Ex. Indonesia had Anti-Chinese riot).

Wu also mentions that after discussing the Chinese's use of cyber-nationalism, the United States used this tactic for their own purposes during September 11th in 2001 after the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon had been hit by hijacked planes. The United States was able to push strong nationalist feelings for not just the American people but many other countries, and strong feelings for anti-terrorism (Wu, 2007). However, this cyber-nationalism was also used by Warhawks to promote propaganda to warrant the invasion of countries deemed homes to terrorism, which led to the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Today, cyber-nationalism is a widespread phenomenon for internet users, most posts, news feeds and articles have more of political biased misinforming readers to agree or disagree with certain ideas or actions. Even finding information on cyber-nationalism has become surrounded by misconstrued information pointing fingers at different political parties for failures or outrages on current events (Palmer, 2012). We see the creation of new radicalized political parties gaining power through the virtual world as internet trolls (which will be defined later) propagate the spread of hatred and dissent because of the availability to do so.

5. Forms of Cyber-Nationalism

Cyber-nationalism can manifest itself in many different ways. There are four types to be used as the biggest tools for the promotion of political parties. YouTube has been around since February 2005 and has allowed anyone to upload content that he/she wishes except some restrictions like pornography. According to (Burgess & Green, 2018), YouTube creates social relationships between viewers and the uploader of videos. However, YouTube has also been used to promote cyber-nationalist agendas as well. Uploads for the recently created alt-right party have made significant leaps in popularity because of social media such as YouTube and Google searches during the Trump campaign prior to election.

The second form is using Twitter. Most of the Americans and the world have noticed the recent increase in Twitter usage by political parties and radical political groups. Using cyber-nationalism on this platform, the terrorist group known by ISIS has performed covert operations and communications all around the world to commit acts of terrorism.

Hostage to this anti-Islamic Twitter groups have been able to fuel hatred by sending mass amounts of Twitter "literature" to followers showing that Middle Eastern countries are home to terrorist organizations (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Via using Twitter, users are able to communicate their passions within 140 words (soon to be 280). Most scholars would agree that to accurately and credibly make an assumption in political situations would call for more than 140 words, but to the mainstream population this is easy access to quick information (or misinformation).

The third type of manifestation of cyber-nationalism can be found in is memes. What actually are memes some people may ask? According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary a meme is "*an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture*". In Zittrain's article he discusses that memes are actually used to perpetuate and create many different kinds of beliefs and ideals (Zittrain, 2014). Some of the existing well-known memes are the troll face, the doge, and My Little Pony (which created the cultural group "bronies"). Other memes are used as tools that can be used to spread opinions (or nationalist views) such as The Unpopular Opinion Puffin, The Confession Bear, and the Philosoraptor. On meme browsing sites such as Imgur, Reddit, 4Chan, and Tumblr users are able to upload mass amounts of misinformation and political agendas that can cloud judgements of people especially children whose minds are more vulnerable and malleable to this form of cyber-nationalism.

The final form of cyber-nationalism to be discussed is video games. They have actually been around before the three previously discussed manifestations. Gaming had gained extensive popularity in the 1980s and has now become a worldwide culture where millions of people play games with others all around the world. Psychologists have found that youth are exceptionally susceptible to online chat via video games more than the three previous platforms because video game is physically engaging them as well as mentally (Sherry, 2014). One year ago, an event happened which involved with the online video game sensation league of Legends. A streamer Tyler1 (noted for his unsportsmanlike behaviour, intentional losing and verbal abuse) had been permanently banned through his IP address by Riot (The company that made League of Legends). However, his viewers who became infatuated with the streamer went directly to League forums to petition and advocate for the discontinuation of the ban. He is now currently unbanned but has to follow certain restrictions or faces permanent ban once again. This example shows a type of cyber-nationalism that was used to repeal an executive decision made by the governing source for someone who made the game frustrating for the entire population.

6. Cyber-Nationalism vs. Historical Propaganda

How does cyber-nationalism compare to the propaganda we have seen in the past? To start, propaganda used before the emergence of the internet was not able to be transported as fast and as far in comparison to how quickly cyber-nationalism can travel on Facebook or YouTube. However, does this mean that cyber-nationalism is a more effective tool of propaganda? In the past, physical propaganda has shown to have stronger political effect than that of cyber-nationalism. For example, before World War II and during the rise of the Nazi power, propaganda was placed all over Germany whereas prior to mass propaganda the party had only one area of power (Herf, 2006). After the use of physical propaganda, the party was able to gain significant power and become the majority faction in Germany in the election. Comparing this to the alt-right movement that has recently happened, cyber-nationalism was a tool used by the party to influence people on a mass scale. This only gained the attention of few white supremacists, but mostly the faction of "internet trolls" which do not support as much physical presence as would the Nazi party. The election of 2016 led to the disbanding of a large part of the Alt-Right party because the "internet trolls" were scared most of them by the threatening threat from Anonymous of the White Supremacist Supporters, who "hid behind their screen" supporting the right-wing party, to disclose personal information.

To summarize, cyber-nationalism and propaganda techniques used in history are fairly similar, but physical propaganda had a much larger effect most likely because someone wasn't able to switch screens or websites to ignore the propaganda in front of them like how most people would online.

7. Cyber-Nationalism as its own Subject

Cyber-nationalism has become substantially prevalent in the online community as a form of nationalism, but does that warrant an entire subject of study for this subject? Currently, until more research has been conducted and verified by peer-reviewed sources, cyber-nationalism should just remain as a subtopic under the umbrella of nationalism. But it does need to be studied because of how many people are affected by this phenomenon. Quantitative and qualitative data must be gathered from groups of low and high vulnerability, but do not need to be studied under one subject alone. To study the phenomena effectively, it requires psychologists to study the behaviour and changes in the mind when exposed to cyber-nationalism, geographers to understand the use of space and time, sociologists to understand how this

affects social norms and interactions as well as statisticians to study the quantitative data behind as the backbone to research.

There are already types of research methods in place (that were used in this paper) which are effective tools to credibly locate and access information on this subject. Mining datasets from social media sites are useful for gathering mass amounts of quantitative as well as qualitative data straight from volunteers (terms and agreements), and online content analysis which creates more of the empirical data for research. Virtual ethnography is a vital method when conducting research online because it studies people and culture within the virtual world, which has been proven to be a distinguished type of society from the real world. This type of method mixed with social network analysis on popular browsing websites would be useful to gather public data en masse.

8. Conclusions and Future Research

Overall, cyber-nationalism has been an extreme consequence in the creation of the internet domain and affects almost half of the population of the world, however, continued research and data gathering is a necessity for this topic because current literature is specified in China for the majority of historical research. There is also lack of scholarly articles for cyber-nationalism in general, which contains a multitude of bias from non-peer-reviewed sources. The subject of cyber-nationalism is difficult to understand though it is easy in concept. It must be continually researched to counter the negative effect it is having on our online communities before more drastic or radicalized actions are taken to harm human life.

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