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## Editorial

# Global Communications and Cultural Identities

Pippa Norris

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Many claim that the most recent wave of global communications has increased the interconnectedness between people, companies, and governments worldwide. But has it transformed popular culture so that more people have come to see themselves as global citizens rather than, say, Americans, Russians, or Brits or, at a more local level, Bostonians, Muscovites, or Londoners? Or in reaction has there been a resurgence of nationalism or even parochialism? Growing cultural globalism is often assumed, but beyond aggregate figures, such as trends in news flows, movie receipts, or the number of McDonalds around the world, we know little about what it means for our sense of identity, attachment, and citizenship.

*Globalization* refers to the expansion in the scale and speed of flows of capital, goods, people, and ideas across borders with the effect of decreasing the effects of distance. Indicators commonly used to monitor this phenomenon include levels of international trade or migration. And what about communications? For those with access, it is easier, faster, and cheaper than ever before to e-mail, phone, or fax people around the world, to surf front pages or broadband news programs from Australia to Zimbabwe, and to break down the national barriers of the national news media. <sup>1</sup> In Brunn and Leinbach's phrase, new communications technology has the potential effect of collapsing space and time (Brunn and Leinbach 1991). But we know far less about the impact of this process on our cultural identities and whether global communication has contributed to the decline of parochial and national attachments and to the rise of cosmopolitanism.

*Cosmopolitans* can be understood as essentially "citizens of the world" with a broad internationalist outlook--for example, those who are equally comfortable living and

working in different countries, who are familiar with travel well beyond their national and regional boundaries, and who are fluent in languages. It is commonly assumed that cosmopolitanism is most common among a privileged international elite, the Geneva-educated and Ivy-Leagued sons and daughters of diplomats, bankers, and generals, who are equally at home in financial houses, embassy receptions, and platinum-card airport lounges from New York to Riyadh and Kuala Lumpur. The logic of periodic waves of globalization should have expanded the pool of world citizens, whether driven by the expansion of free trade and empire riding the rails of the Industrial Revolution among the great powers in the late Victorian era or by the global market **[End Page 1]** economy of the post-cold war era. Pressures in the late twentieth century should have encouraged a resurgence of cosmopolitanism beyond elite circles. <sup>2</sup>

Yet, rather than an inexorable secular trend, globalization may experience internal tensions and periodic reverse waves. In Anthony Smith's view, "We are still far from even mapping out the kind of global culture and cosmopolitan ideals that can truly supercede the world of nations" (1995).

*Nationalists* can be understood as those who identify strongly with the nation-state, who have high levels of national pride, who emphasize the importance of distinct ethnonationalistic identities, and who favor cultural and economic protectionism. National identities are usually implicit and inert and may only rise to the surface in response to an "other" in which (rather like Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*) we know what we are by virtue of what we are not. Even though the idea of national identity is widely employed, it tends to be fuzzy, complex, and underconceptualized. <sup>3</sup>

Lastly, *parochials* can best be understood as those who celebrate the idiosyncrasies of diverse local and regional cultures, foods, and traditions, who prefer all politics to be devolved to subnational levels, and who stress the importance of dense communities with clearly defined territorial and social boundaries demarcating who does and does not belong, based on particular neighborhoods, regions, or ethnic or religious identities.

In intellectual and cultural circles, although there are conflicting tugs, cosmopolitanism is usually widely regarded as a highly desirable ideal, whereas parochialism is commonly assumed to be narrow, provincial, and retrograde. Yet both nationalism and parochialism receive legitimacy from the belief that the apparently universal "global" culture carries the risks of standardization and the impoverishment of local cultures, if today the global is understood to be a predominantly American consumer culture (a.k.a. McWorld). This belief justifies barriers to the free flow of goods (import taxes), people (immigrants), or culture (such as nondomestic films). Popular resistance to globalization is widely evident in terms of deep-rooted ethnic conflict and a resurgence of nationalist movements, evident from East Timor to Kosovo and Palestine, as well as more peaceful devolution to regional and local levels of governance, as in Scotland.

Given this understanding, is there any evidence that global communications have produced an emerging cosmopolitan identity that may threaten and supersede traditional national and parochial identities? And if so, is this phenomenon evident

beyond elite circles? An initial look at some evidence is available from the survey on national identity conducted in 1995 by the International Social Survey Program among twenty-six established and newer democracies ( $N = 28,270$ ).<sup>4</sup> The distinction between cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and parochialism can be gauged most simply by the strength of people's attachment to different territorial areas. Respondents were asked to use a four-point scale to show how close they felt to their neighborhood (understood to indicate the [End Page 2] strength of parochialism<sup>5</sup>), country (nationalism), or continent (cosmopolitanism). As we shall see, there are serious questions about whether these measures tap the dimensions at the heart of our concerns. Further research would examine alternative measures of cosmopolitanism as well, but the exploratory results provide some initial insights into the nature of territorial identities.

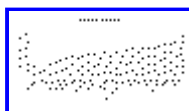


Table 1 describes the broad distribution of parochialism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism indicated by respondents in twenty-three nations, grouped by [End Page 3] [Begin Page 5] major region. The results are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. The most striking finding is that far more people continue to identify with their nation (87 percent) and their neighborhood (74 percent) than with their continent (58 percent). Nevertheless, the majority of the public do have some sense of a supranational identity, feeling at least at some diffuse level close to "Europe" or "Asia" or "North America."

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were run to predict how close respondents felt to their neighborhood, nation, and continent, with a range of factors that could plausibly be associated with these identities, including levels of national development, social background, experiential factors, and political attitudes (Table 2). An initial exploration of the comparative data suggests the following pattern.

Parochialism, defined as a sense of attachment to one's local neighborhood, is most strongly associated with how long people have lived in an area, and it is commonly stronger among those who live in rural areas, older generations, the less educated, women, and those of lower economic status. It is linked to feelings of national pride and is most often found in less developed countries.

Nationalism, defined as feeling close to one's country, displays a fairly similar profile. Nationalism is stronger among those living in less developed societies, older generations, the less educated, women, and those with high levels of national pride as well as anti-immigrant attitudes. These patterns are largely in line with expectations derived from the literature.

Cosmopolitanism, defined as a sense of attachment to one's continent, is less satisfactorily explained here. Indeed, in many respects (although not all), [End Page 5] the profile of cosmopolitans is not that dissimilar to the above patterns. Contrary to expectations, cosmopolitanism was also found to be stronger among those who live in less developed countries, older generations, the less educated, and those with a sense of national pride. Interestingly, citizens of European Union member states were no more likely to have developed a strong sense of European identity than those who lived in other regions of the world, and indeed residents in the old Warsaw Pact belt were slightly more likely to identify with Europe. The only stronger and more

distinctive indicators concern the fact that cosmopolitans were drawn disproportionately from the more affluent strata, they were more likely to have language skills and to have lived abroad, and they were more liberal toward issues of immigration.

Two reasons, in particular, may help explain this somewhat muddy profile. Perhaps a major limitation or flaw in this analysis concerns the measurement of cosmopolitanism, which is a complex concept. As David McCrone and Paula Surridge remark, "National identity is one of the most discussed but least understood concepts of the late 20th century" (1998). The idea of nationalism is subtle and elusive and contains many fragmented qualities bundled under one heading. The measures in this study probably fail to capture the many complexities involved in gauging cosmopolitanism, too, in part because feelings of national and cosmopolitan identity may prove highly contextual and conditional, dependent on the "other" as much as the self. In Scotland, I feel English. In the United States, I feel European. In Europe, I feel American. In India or Indonesia or Korea, I feel "western." In many airports, I feel confused!

On the other hand, if we accept the operationalization of the concepts, the preliminary analysis presented here may lead us to question the common assumption of a trade-off between attachments to the locality and nation-state, on the one **[End Page 6]** hand, and a broader sense of supranational identities, on the other. Our territorial identities may be multiple rather than a zero-sum game. In short, the growth of satellite television and the World Wide Web, bringing home instant news of events in Kosovo, Kashmir, or Kazakhstan, may plausibly have encouraged a new wave of cosmopolitan citizens of the world. But we need to go much farther to understand the impact of global communications on cultural identities in general, and our feelings of cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and parochialism in particular.

## Notes

[1.](#) For a new study of the pattern of political communications in postindustrial societies, see Norris (2000). For an excellent summary of the literature on the global patterns of news flows, see Mowlana (1997). For an overview of recent trends, see UNESCO (1997).

[2.](#) For a good discussion, see Featherstone (1995).

[3.](#) There is an extensive literature on the concepts of nationalism and national identity. See, for example, Anderson (1996); Billig (1995); and Gellner (1983). The most thorough empirical work on national orientations within Europe from 1973 to 1990 can be found in Niedermayer and Sinnott (1995). See also Taylor and Thomson (1999).

[4.](#) For other work based on this survey, comparing West and East Germany, Britain, Sweden, and Spain, see McCrone and Surridge (1998). The codebook for all the variables in the ISSP survey is included as a technical appendix to this book.

[5.](#) The ISSP survey also asked respondents about their closeness to their "town or

city" and their "county," but for ease of interpretation these results are not presented here because they proved similar to the responses to "neighborhood."

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