# Anderson and the Media.
# The strength of "imagined communities"

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ABSTRACT

This is a brief note on Benedict Anderson's influence and more specifically, on his concept of 'Imagined Communities' and its impact on the media. The author reviews the concept in relation to national construction through the media, noting key reasons why Anderson's ideas either took hold or were passed over. The text pays tribute to Anderson's remarkable contribution to the theory of and ideas on national identity and the sway held by culture and media in fostering this identity.

**Keywords:** *The Media, Imagined Community, Benedict Anderson, nationalism, national consciousness*

Benedict Anderson died in December 2015. His sad demise prompted reflection on Anderson's influence on Media Studies. Broaching this question is a daring enterprise given the many authors who have discussed and drawn upon Anderson's work. Accordingly, this brief paper is limited to divulgation and is in the nature of a collective homage by Media researchers to Anderson's concept of 'Imagined Community'. The impact of his work *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983) was enormous, especially in the English-speaking world. In Spain, Anderson's contribution was virtually ignored until well after the translation of his book into Spanish in the early 1990s (FCE, 1993) and the more recent translation into Catalan (Afers, 2005).

By contrast, Anderson's work has now become a key reference in any research on the media and their role in national construction.

For scholars of national construction, 1983 was to prove a watershed, with the publication of Anderson's book and two others. The latter two were: *The invention of tradition*, by Eric Hobsbawm (with Terence Ranger), and *Nations and Nationalism*, by Ernest Gellner. The three authors — Gellner, Hobsbawm and Anderson — were to prove a dynamic trio, in effect mounting a three-pronged inquiry into Constructionism and National Identity. Between them, they sparked a genuine debate on the role played by nationalist ideology in configuring nations. The fact that the

debate came at the fag-end of the war-torn Twentieth Century made it no less timely. With the fall of The Berlin Wall (1989) and the disintegration of The Soviet Union, the issue of nationalism was again an issue of burning international importance. To reflect this, Anderson published a revised version of the book (1991). It is this updated version that is referred to here and in almost all recent studies. Hobsbawm then published *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Verso, 1990). It was at this point that the Yugoslav Civil War broke out in the heart of Europe.

Why are these works important? I believe it is because they finally lay to rest the myth that a nation is more than an ideological construct and narrative. The power of narrative is configuring identity and a national myth was also underlined in the Eighties and early Nineties by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha (1990) — particularly the latter — in connection with literary and cultural studies. Among the authors mentioned in the foregoing paragraph, Anderson articulated a notion of nationalism that implied a different perspective from that taken by Gellner and Hobsbawm. For the last two, nationalism is an alienating ideology that diverts attention from issues bearing on progress and social conflict — such as modernity and industrialisation — as Sabina Mihelj (2011) has noted. Anderson's ideas are thoroughly modern and rooted in historicism, as we noted earlier (Castelló 2011). They are also highly critical of nationalist ideology.

For example, Gellner considered that 'nationalism' invented 'the nation'. Gellner always stresses the pernicious effects of nationalist politics. Indeed, he finds it hard not to lump all kinds of nationalism together. As a result, Gellner's quest to establish cross-cutting ideas means his analysis is ill-suited for discerning between nationalisms driven by States, by independence movements, or by democrats in their struggle to overthrow authoritarian regimes. In Gellner's writings, the use of the word 'intervention' suggests that the nation is something artificial — even false, alienating and created by an ideology. This view is openly criticised by Anderson in his book.

From another standpoint, Hobsbawm also broadly shares this vision, articulating the concept of "the invention of tradition" and tends to underplay the importance of the idea of a nation and the power of nationalism. While both Gellner and Hobsbawm stress the force of the ideology articulated in their discourses, both authors see "the world of nations" as something that is on the way out.

Anderson sees the nation as a modern, volatile phenomenon, framed by cultural and social dynamics and something that is far from over. Anderson's focus on the concept of 'imagination' on the one hand, and on the substantiation of culture and creative processes on the other, is situated in a dimension that links to cultural studies and the media. Without going so far as to call Anderson post-modern, one can say that the concept of 'Imagined Community' is closely linked to the idea of today's fluid times in which the collective imagination and representation play important roles. Anderson's approach is an attempt to escape from more orthodox visions articulate by Marxism on the notion of the nation and nationalist ideology. Some scholars have linked the wider vision to Anderson's open, cosmopolitan nature and background[1]. For Anderson, nationalism can be destructive but may also be based on social and cultural construction and serve to bind people together. In other words, he rejected the automatic demonisation of nationalism then in vogue. As Özkirimli (2000) explains, Anderson abandoned the idea that nations were simply ideological constructs and put them on the same footing as other 'communities' such as those provided by religion or even kinship. Accordingly, he defined a nation as a political community.

Benedict Anderson's conceptualisation is developed right from the beginning of his book. He defines nationalism and nationality as a "cultural artifact" and the idea of a nation as an "imagined political community, being

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1  Anderson (1936) was born in China and his parents were of Anglo-Irish stock. The family fled to The United States on the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. Anderson specialised in sudies on South-East Asia, where he lived on and off.

imagined as both limited and sovereign" (1991: 6).[2] The authors argue that such a community is limited because its members are confined to the Nation's territory and thus there are individuals who do not form part of it. Although the Nation's members do not know (and cannot) know all their countrymen, they nevertheless feel like a kind of finite family. The Nation is sovereign because it is a community that came into being to replace the power of kings and royal dynasties. Indeed, Anderson draws a picture in which classical religious communities were replaced by modern nations.

Anderson's brief summary of concepts in the book's introduction was a good way of stating his intentions from the outset. However, in my view, it came to distort the way his book was interpreted. On the one hand, many of the works referring to Anderson's book went no further than the first six or seven pages, using (and something abusing) the ideas set forth in them to justify the Media's task in building a 'national imagination'. Many researchers ignored the rest of Anderson's book, which contained many valuable ideas.

As already noted, many of the main papers and studies on national construction and the Media were limited to referring to the concept of "imagined community" in their theoretical sections. In doing so, they jumped to the conclusion that the Media are tools for creating 'the imaginary'. The power of TV pictures nurtures the concept in studies specifically on television and cinema. In my view, this leaves aside the highly productive debate in Anderson's book on the origins of a collective 'national consciousness'. At what juncture did post-Mediaevil communities begin to think of themselves as nations? At what point did peasants and burghers become aware that they belonged to a national community of 'Frenchmen', 'Spaniards', 'Catalans' and so on?

Anderson's answer is that it came to pass with the invention of the printing press, the emergence of national languages, the abandonment of Latin

as a vehicle for knowledge, and the mass cultural distribution that characterises the modern world. The 'imagined' nation is a modernist construct, not a changeless myth springing from the depths of time. The artifice is not rooted in history but in technology. The availability of a new technology for churning out 'culture' established a national language (relegating other vernacular languages to subordinate status) and laid the foundations for the growth of a national consciousness. Anderson's thought was steeped in anti-colonialism and thus he not only saw national consciousness as an exercise in Imperial political and cultural power but also as an opportunity for subject lands to free themselves because nations think in an organic fashion. In fact, Anderson considers that one of the first 'nationalisms' arose in Creole communities as a reaction to Imperial States.

The scope for creating an 'imagined community' is clear from studies on television (and more recently) on the Internet. Thus the availability or otherwise of the technology is available (TV and the distribution network) to push a given idea of the nation (Catalonia, Scotland, The United Kingdom, France, etc.) has implications regarding the scope for articulating a national consciousness. The concept was applied throughout the 20th Century to 'national consciousness' maps in Europe's Nation States regarding the output of State broadcasting corporations (the BBC, RAI, TVE, etc.). The creation and distribution of a given national 'imaginary' was based on the construction of a given national 'imagined community' that highlighted certain traits (language, history, heroes, symbols and so on) and ignored others.

One should therefore highlight the importance for so-called 'stateless nations' of having access to the technology needed to fashion this 'imagine community' and the distinction that should be drawn in the availability of the technology (for example, a public television channel) and the symbolic content broadcast. Such content may merely be a replication of the 'imagined community' of the Nation State, of an 'imagined community' subordinated to a 'superior'

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2   This is a back translation from Spanish and hence will differ
    from the English original.

national community, or even a national community with the same standing as that legitimised by the Nation State). The reader may have his own ideas on which category TV stations fall into, depending on whether they be 'regional' ones in Spain; British ones (both 'regional' and 'national' ones); French regional stations; French and Flemish language channels in Belgium; Spanish-language stations in the US; Russian TV in The Ukraine, and so forth.

Anderson highlighted the role of the popular Press in fostering a national consciousness. The massive daily circulation of these papers meant millions of people shared the same message at the same time. Furthermore, this cultural practice was directly linked to the market. This is why Anderson considered that 'Print Capitalism' created a new way of thinking of a community, creating and 'us and them' situation ('us' being the home market, 'them' being the foreign one). One can speak of a mechanism that created a daily routine. These ideas were complemented by the concept of 'banal nationalism', coined by Michael Billig (1995), who argued that nationalism is consumed daily and almost imperceptibly. What medium is better suited to banalising the national imaginary than television? No other medium can compete with TV when it comes to putting over a powerful message through soap operas, documentaries and drama series.

This said, one should be wary of trying to directly transpose Anderson's analysis to the media and TV. In fact, the author hardly mentions broadcast media (radio and television) as tools in creating such a community. Rather, Anderson's focus is on the birth of the idea of nationhood, not on its reproduction in today's modern media. Proof of this lies in the introduction he wrote in 1996 to *Mapping the Nation*, a collection of texts written on nationalism. In that introduction, he only mentioned the impact of the media as part of a more "media-centric" vision. The contributions in the book covered History, Economics, Geo-politics, Philosophy, International Relations, and even relations between the sexes but not the media. Hence the need to make a sound argument when applying Anderson's ideas to the media.

A common way of bridging this gap is the argument we mentioned earlier, namely, that television is a way of constructing the national imaginary. However, another way that perhaps ties in better with Anderson's work is the idea that a communication system is part of Capitalism's symbolic reproduction; the generation of a cultural industry, marking a leap from 'Print Capitalism' to 'Screen Capitalism'. While Print Capitalism standardised the norms of a common language, Screen Capitalism established the norms of a collective image, a 'banalised' nationalism and at the same time, the whole economic system that lies within in its compass. This dynamic not only implies representations through news programmes and drama but also the establishment of a true 'consumer nationalism', which is articulated through advertising, souvenir shops, sports, musicals, film festivals, video games, emoticons and so on, *ad nauseum*.

As Özkirimli (2000) noted, Anderson's vision of the nation, nationalism and national consciousness has drawn criticism. Some held that Anderson's approach to culture was both reductionist and limited in positing that religious communities and monarchies were replaced by national communities or interpreted through anti-colonial movements. One of the leading scholars debating this issue was Manuel Castells (2003)[3]. He argued that if nations were merely 'imagined communities' constructed to serve the powers that be, they would not (as Anderson argues) be the product of a given history (expressed in common images, language and culture). It is hard to swallow the idea that power is solely exercised by an elite in a top-down fashion in today's inter-connected world. Hence the resistance to accepting the idea that national consciences are fashioned this way.

In addition, use and abuse was made of Anderson's work, especially as part of currents of post-modern thought. The collective imaginary and imagination were heavily exploited in cultural and discursive approaches that were blithely cited by authors such

3  Here we use the 2007 translation into Catalan of the 1997 English edition.

as Michel Foucault and other post-structuralists. The truth is that Anderson was an atypical thinker who is hard to pigeon-hole — which I believe makes him all the more interesting. While Anderson's view of the nation as an 'imagined community' can lead us to focus more on the discourse as a tool or epistemological sphere, he fits in better with historicist views of identity. His book is a historical survey of the formation of nations and is wide-ranging. The sheer breadth of his approach can be seen in his comments on a wide range of cases, in which he speaks of Imperialism, Racism, national languages, culture, censuses, maps, political power, migrations and so forth. His focus is not the analysis of the cultural representation of the nation and even less

a national discourse, even though it is relevant to the construction and transmission of 'national consciousness' through language and culture.

Seen in perspective and following the scholar's untimely death, one must acknowledge the power of the concept of 'imagined community' and the richness of Benedict Anderson's exposition. The seminary work has taken root and promises a rich harvest: research into communication and nationalism is blooming with essays, studies and new lines of thought. While all ideas run their course, Anderson's legacy will be a long one and will foster progress, discussion and debates. His ideas have a great deal to contribute in our modern world for all its technological trappings.

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