

The Internet is creating Net-States

Gaurav Koley (IMT2014019)
IIIT Bangalore
gaurav.koley@iiitb.org

December 7, 2017

Abstract

A nation-state is a geopolitical entity with the cultural entity of a nation, from which it aims to derive its political legitimacy to rule. A few key features of the nation-state are:

- A Sovereign Government
- Exclusive/Semi-exclusive Citizenship
- Territorial Integrity or Territorial Impermeability
- Nationalism as the core Philosophy

The Web and Internet are two of the most significant technologies that are currently shaping our world. The increased Internet penetration and cheap access has spawned a whole lot of very popular web based services: search and advertising services like those offered by Google, social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram; video stores like YouTube and others.

An individual generates tremendous amount of data pertaining to his or her activities throughout the day, using these services. This data acts as a user's identity or a "Data Double" on the Web with the service provider often being considered as the guarantor of the authenticity of the user. Our profiles at Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Uber are such identities. And they are trusted albeit only to a certain extent.

Also each of these Web Giants have their own governance style, characterised by their rules and regulations which are determined by both policy and the algorithms that run these platforms. Adding to that, the web is increasingly encouraging more cross-border exchanges of goods and services, allowing users and firms to bypass national borders.

These phenomena raises the question of: Are these Web Giants a different kind of nation-state themselves? Is the Internet helping shape Net-States? To answer these questions, we use the theory of sociomateriality.

1 Net States

With the increased presence of Internet and the Web we see a rise of a new class of digital communities which are closely knit, have a concept of memberships or "Citizenship" which acts a means of authentication and are governed by a governing body of moderators and algorithms. They have no physically territorial presence but they do have a very significant digital territory and go to great lengths to preserve that digital territorial integrity. Facebook and Quora are excellent examples of such communities. Like all things online, the interests, affiliations and goals of these groups are knit tighter than what their nation states may dictate.

These communities might seem superfluous and virtual but they do have significant traction in real life. Noteworthy is the fact that online communities actually invoke a passion that nation states were

intended to do when they were formed hundreds of years before. Members or "Citizens" of such communities feel deeply passionate about their communities and are often eager to leverage their community identity in other contexts.

The clash between these affiliations has already started, in some way or the other, in some or other parts of the world. The revolution in Egypt, and to a lesser extent in other countries of the Middle East, was kept alive by the active online communities. It proved crucial in the end. In China, the Party and the people clash less in the streets and more across the forums online. The party doesn't have to send tanks anymore; it sends viruses to take servers down. (Omroutray 2017)

Facebook in particular is one community to worry about because of its historically unprecedented size. With nearly two billion active users across much of the globe, the company wields a potential influence that at least threatens to outstrip the power of some governments. (Alang 2017)

Net States versus Nation States
Population in millions

Social media platform	Countries		
1 Facebook	2060	China	1387
2 Youtube	1500	India	1323
3 WhatsApp	1300	United States	326
4 Facebook Messenger	1300	Indonesia	263
5 WeChat	963	Pakistan	209
6 QQ	850	Brazil	208
7 Instagram	700	Nigeria	190
8 Qzone	606	Bangladesh	163
9 Tumblr	368	Russia	146
10 Sina Weibo	361	Japan	126

Source: Statista

Figure 1: Source: <https://www.statista.com/> (Muggah 2017)

To define these new powerful, digital states, let's propose a new lexicon, Net-State.

Net-states are techno-political entities which are similar to nation states in structure and behaviour. Like nation-states, they're a wildly diverse. Some are the equivalent to global superpowers: Google, Facebook, Twitter. Others are paramilitary operations, like GhostSec which is an invite-only cyberarmy specifically created to target the ISIS. There are also the hacktivist collectives like Anonymous and Wikileaks. (Wichowski 2017)

Regardless of the differences, all Net-States share three key qualities: They exist largely online, enjoy international devotees, and advance belief-driven agendas that they pursue separate from, and at times, above, the law. Formalising these qualities, a Net-State can be termed as an entity which has the following characteristics:

- A Sovereign "Government"
- Citizenship
- Digital Territorial Impermeability

To expand on each of these criterion, A Net-State has a governing body that may be a group of individuals, a corporation, a set of algorithms or a mixture of all of these. Corporate Social Media-esque

Net-States like Facebook and Twitter are run by a government equivalent comprising of its corporate official, moderators and algorithms that define the social media feed. Hacktivist Net-States like Anonymous are governed loosely by a group of core members.

These governing bodies largely determine the entirety of the functioning of the Net-State and are mostly free from influence from outsiders (read sovereign) as are nation states.

These Net-States also have a equivalent system of Citizenship which enables its members to access the state machinery and get benefits. These benefits may be access to news, as in the case of Net-States like Facebook and Twitter, access a variety of online services like email and AI based personal assistants as in the case of Google, or job offerings, in the case of LinkedIn.

This citizenship also serves as an identity to other places. For example, one can use their Google or Facebook credentials to login to various websites. YouTube/Quora fame turns one into a celebrity in real life as well. GitHub contributions gets one jobs in real life and the list of examples can go on.

Net-States, while being the champions of cutting across national boundaries, having members across the globe, advocate strong digital boundaries of their own. Net-States prefer to live in silos. While the citizens may have citizenship of multiple Net-States, the data they create and share with the state remains tightly controlled by that state and is usually never allowed to be exported or deleted. Other Net-states may have restricted access to citizens' data but that too remains at the mercy of the Net-State government.

2 Nation State vs Net-State

While Nation and net states seem to have a lot in common, they represent very different concepts. The former is based on the idea of tribes, that common ancestry, language and cultural heritage are enough to build the foundation of a state. The latter is built on the idea of like mindedness. People with similar goals come together to build and be part of net states.

Another key difference between Nation states and Net-States conceptually is that it is assumed to be the case that a person will be part of multiple Net-States and they are. However, a person will usually be citizen of a single nation state.

The level of democratization that Net-States have inherently within them cannot be modelled by the nation states. This partly from the fact that the populace of the net states helped define the state. Change in governing structures and constitution equivalents are faster and much more deliberated upon by the citizens in Net-states than in Nation States. Net-states are infusing us with new values, ones that are not always national in nature: a growing number of people see themselves as 'global' citizens.

A country's sovereignty will be increasingly difficult to maintain as there will be a conflict between loyalties of virtual and real citizens. Even today, the opinion polls are conducted globally on variety of complex issues affecting the politico-economic scenarios.

As the number of internet user keeps growing, from 3.4 billion to soon reaching over 7 billion by 2020, the Nation-states are facing the cross-border influences and grappling to unite their citizens. (Dr. Govind 2016)

If we look at the global scenario, the internet is a major factor for dynamically changing cross-cultural habits, entertainment, education, economy and politics. The internet is encouraging more cross-border exchanges of goods and services, thereby allowing consumers and firms to bypass national borders.

An example of cross-cultural habits that the Internet is infusing in us is Memes. The creation of a

meme is simply found in the number of times Internet users share it and spread it around. Anyone can upload a picture and caption it, but only when it reaches a certain scale and others also start to use it does it become a meme.

From a theoretical standpoint, this is quite the democratic process. This underlines the fact that, at its heart, the culture of the Internet Nation is a democratic one. On the Internet, everyone can take part in the discussions and express themselves. The billions of people connected through the Internet create a powerful and active network democratically granting influence to other people, governments and companies.(Rharbaoui 2017)

So we can say that Net-State culture works in large numbers, with unprecedented scale, and it is participatory. India is often deemed the world's biggest democracy. To think about it, Net-States like Facebook are actually the largest democratically-operating structure on Earth.

And the formidable vehicle that allows this phenomenon to happen is English, the language of Net-State is the same as that of business and technology, and every "citizen" of the state learns it as a 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th language. Having a common language across continents and countries facilitates sharing the same piece of content over and over again, just as Latin did in the Middle Ages and French during the Enlightenment. It creates conditions in which information can appear faster and spread faster.

The immediate consequences are political. Some countries are leading the way, with Denmark recently announcing its appointment of a digital ambassador in Silicon Valley to do diplomatic work with the world's largest tech companies. If that's a positive development, the widely debated question of fake news and its potential contribution to the election of Donald Trump may be on the other side of the spectrum. (Rharbaoui 2017)

So what's the next step for these online democracies? Send their own representatives to countries. Google did it in 2006. Facebook is doing it now. It is preparing a foreign service that will do what is generally done by ambassadors. This is Facebook reaching out global heads of states directly as a unique entity which is not tied down by national boundaries.(Omroutray 2017)

3 Internet: The Driving Force

The idea that Net-State are becoming as powerful as Nation-states in the global scenario is a reality and the Internet is the driving force behind this change. Never before now, humanity had a technology as such, that breaks down all barriers of distance and accessibility. For the first time in Human history, we have access to a technological construct, the Internet, which has revolutionized information and communications. On the Internet and the Net-states that we rising, we are participants. The Internet uses us as much as we use the Internet.

So, in reality, the driving force behind the rising Net-States is not Internet, the technology, but Internet, the collective, which consists of both the technology, the people using it and the corporations which created the everyday services that we use.

While Facebook indeed brought the world closer with its social network, it is the people that form that network. It is the fact that 2 billion people use Facebook for keeping in touch with friends and colleagues, read news or just to share memes, that makes Facebook as powerful as it seemingly is.

The systems have evolved over time, as mentioned previously, in a participatory fashion. The people as well as the technology together have made Net-States as they are.

To look at it from the socio-materialistic perspective, it is the intricate relationship between the Internet, the platforms (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google) and the user (or "citizens") from which

the Net-states derive their power and legitimacy. Without the backing of the billions of users, Net-States like Facebook and Google would not have the soft power that they enjoy. And without the technological advancements of the Internet and Social Media/ Search/ AI on these platforms, people wouldn't have the global access to information and communication as they do. It is the Social Machine of the platform and its users that creates the Net-State.

To conclude, it was the confluence of a number of technologies — the telegraph, the train, the printing press, and more - that enabled the nation state to form in the first place, unifying far flung people through physical and ideological links. And now, we are immersed in a technological platform that we turn to for media, for socializing, for finance, and community, the question arises regarding what role the nation state plays when affiliations have become closely knit and passion evoking than they are in the form of a "country." Indeed, as these Net-states, which exist in the digital realm, continue to grow, we are coming in terms with change in the idea of a country itself.

References

- [Ala17] Navneet Alang. *The nation of Facebook*. 2017. URL: <http://theweek.com/articles/734883/nation-facebook> (visited on 12/05/2017).
- [BF99] Tim Berners-Lee and Mark Fischetti. *Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web by Its Inventor*. 1st. Harper San Francisco, 1999. ISBN: 0062515861.
- [BH17] Jamie Bertlett and Sam Haselby. *The end of a world of nation-states may be upon us*. 2017. URL: <https://aeon.co/essays/the-end-of-a-world-of-nation-states-may-be-upon-us> (visited on 12/06/2017).
- [Cas17] Doug Casey. *The End of the Nation-State*. 2017. URL: <https://mises.org/blog/end-nation-state> (visited on 12/06/2017).
- [Dr 16] Dr. Govind. *The internet is the new geography: Nation-states beware, netizens are the citizens of the future*. 2016. URL: <http://www.firstpost.com/tech/news-analysis/the-internet-is-the-new-geography-nation-states-beware-netizens-are-the-citizens-of-the-future-3694889.html> (visited on 12/05/2017).
- [Kot17] Steven Kotler. *What Is The Future Of Nation States? – Better Ask Facebook*. 2017. URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevenkotler/2014/05/09/what-are-the-future-of-nation-states-better-ask-facebook/%7B%5C%7D7550ace4720b> (visited on 12/05/2017).
- [Mug17] Robert Muggah. *Countries are so last-century. Enter the 'net state' — World Economic Forum*. 2017. URL: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/11/countries-nations-net-states-globalization-populism/> (visited on 12/06/2017).
- [Omr] Omroutray. *Can Facebook & Google claim to be the new nation states? — The Young Bigmouth*. URL: <http://theyoungbigmouth.com/2011/06/01/can-facebook-google-claim-to-be-the-new-nation-states/> (visited on 12/05/2017).
- [Rha17] Younès Rharbaoui. *Culture of the Internet Nation*. 2017. URL: <https://salon.thefamily.co/culture-of-the-internet-nation-756a1e9b6ee5> (visited on 12/06/2017).
- [Ste15] Maximilian Stern. "The Internet and the End of the Nation State". In: (Feb. 2015). URL: <http://www.theeuropean-magazine.com/maximilian-stern--2/9580-the-internet-and-the-end-of-the-nation-state>.
- [Wic17] Alexis Wichowski. *Facebook and Google Are Actually 'Net States.' And They Rule the World — WIRED*. 2017. URL: <https://www.wired.com/story/net-states-rule-the-world-we-need-to-recognize-their-power/> (visited on 12/05/2017).