

Special Section: Essays on Nationalism, Conflict and Media

Challenging the Hegemony of the Nation State in an Age of Conflict and Crisis

Cherian George

Abstract: This guest editor's introduction to the special section "Essays on Nationalism, Conflict and Media" describes the current global context as one where old assumptions about the world lack credibility. The idea of the nation state as the building block of a less violent and more sustainable global order is strained to breaking point. But even as the need for cooperation across borders becomes more obvious, an anti-global, xenophobic nationalism seems only to have strengthened its ideological hold. The essays in this special section explore various dimensions of nationalism and conflict as they pertain to the media. Normatively, they are grounded in the universal humanist or cosmopolitan ideal of world citizenship. This introductory essay argues that not just media but also media scholarship should challenge the hegemony of the nation state, resisting the methodological nationalism that characterises most of the work in the field.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan journalism, Nationalism and news media, Cross-border reporting, South Asia, Media and conflict

Author information:

Cherian George is a professor of media and politics at the Hong Kong Baptist University. He researches media freedom and censorship, and hate and polarisation. His books include *Fighting Polarisation: Shared Communicative Spaces in Divided Democracies* (Polity, 2025).

Orcid: 0000-0003-3711-7563

E-Mail: me@cheriangeorge.net

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Media studies took off at a time when a certain understanding of the international system achieved hegemonic status. In this intellectual environment, two assumptions came to be taken for granted. First, the nation state was seen as the obvious collective vehicle for people to ride to a better life. In the three decades following the end of World War Two, more than 80 new nation states emerged on the world map; the number of United Nations member states almost trebled. When leaders claimed a right to self-determination, the “self” in question referred to nations. Second, global elites assumed that the emerging international order would make war and atrocity crimes less likely. Enlightened self-interest and the entrenching of scientific, economic, and political reason would encourage countries to cooperate; when they quarrelled, most would follow agreed rules.

These assumptions always required some suspension of disbelief. Deep inequalities of power and wealth were the norm in most countries, regardless of their political systems. Getting people to feel part of the same nation was usually an ideological project more than a progressive programme to change the reality they lived in. As for international relations, the decades after 1945 were referred to as the “post-war” era even though wars large and small continued unabated.

The contradictions have become impossible to ignore. Multilateral cooperation is undermined by heightened nation-first logics. The United States under the second Donald Trump presidency does not give even lip service to a rules-based international order. Might-is-right threatens to displace Westphalian norms of sovereignty. Israel’s perpetration of a genocidal war that qualifies as history’s most visible and preventable – made possible only because its democratic superpower patron refuses to stop it – mocks the “Never Again” ethos that gave birth to international human rights.

Bâli and Rana (2026) point out that it is debatable whether there was ever really a golden age of international peace and human security, and whether what we are witnessing now is a break or continuity. There had always been exclusions and exceptions. However, the hypocrisy of the powerful used to be tempered by their wish to win hearts and minds and avoid mass defections from the international order, they note. Those restraints no longer hold sway. But whether one believes that this era is objectively new or just a delayed reaction to what was always a Hobbesian world order, what is clear is that media studies needs to pay more attention to global instability and conflict. Media influence people’s relations across national borders, including their propensity for war and peace and how they deal with transnational problems.

At a time when it is more important than ever that people find common ground with one another, media are responding to multiple crises by looking inward and rallying around their national flags (Galily, 2025; Heimo et al., 2025; Morris, 2025). The kinds of nationalism that provoke the most concern are ethno-nationalisms, which define “we the people” in exclusive racial or religious terms, relegating others to the

status of second-class citizens or unwelcome aliens. However, even when media promote a more inclusive civic nationalism, as liberal outlets tend to do, they tend to treat the nation state as the default imagined community in which they invest their moral obligations. The nation state as an anchor of belonging and as an analytical category has the status of common sense, making nationalism one of the most powerful ideologies in the world (Maleševic, 2006).

This special issue of the *Global Media Journal – German Edition* is an attempt to stimulate research that speaks to the aforementioned issues. The contributors were asked to address news media and relations between peoples across national borders: a deliberately broad brief intended to be open to diverse ways of approaching the topic. The contributions are not standard research articles but essays, to give the authors more latitude to address issues as they see fit and to shorten the production cycle for a volume intended to respond to our peers' urgent demand for scholarship addressing this current moment. Having said that, all the essays are backed by years of empirical research and analysis. Their authors are a mix of senior and junior scholars whose research is situated on five continents.

At least three broad themes emerge from the contributions. First, several authors highlight ways in which national identity is fluid, and how its contours are a matter of political contention and media construction, shaped by the powerful. Second, since regional neighbours are the most proximal manifestation of the global, the workings of media networks at the regional level are a fertile area of research on journalism's capacity to escape national boundaries. Third, globalised connections do not necessarily produce global norms. What is in short supply is not a transnational imagination as such, but a cosmopolitan ethos grounded in humanist values.

Nationalism as a shape-shifting political resource

Scholars of social identity — and anyone looking at angular national borders on a world map — would have no trouble appreciating that national identities are always fictive (Appiah, 2018; Storm, 2024). Claiming sovereignty over territory is material in the extreme, involving borders defended with fences and weapons. Within those all-too-real borders, however, “nation-building” is fundamentally ideological work, through which citizens come to believe that they share a common identity and destiny — and that people on the other side of national borders do not — even when innumerable facts say otherwise (Fuchs, 2020).

Since national identity is a political construct, it can be shaped in ways that foster international peace and cooperation. France and Germany are a case of two former enemies who have made war impractical if not unthinkable by elevating a common European identity even as they retain their national cultures (Loth, 2024). However, there seems to be no limit to the counter-trend, of stoking conflict through the symbolic construction of cross-border antagonisms rooted in imagined enmities.

Two essays in this collection illustrate just how creative these exercises can be. Shumaila M. Jaffery shows how right-wing influencers in India and Britain have found common cause in their shared contempt for Muslims. Their partnership defies logic. In Britain, the activist known as Tommy Robinson is a White nationalist who founded the English Defence League and has emerged as a leading anti-immigration provocateur. Although ethnic Indians are among his followers' targets, he has been given a sympathetic platform by Indian media outlets. They seem willing to overlook his racism because they identify with his ethnonationalism and appreciate that, like them, he places Muslims highest on the pecking order of people who don't belong.

Also bordering on the bizarre is the Macedonian Name Dispute, the subject of the essay by Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis. While territorial disputes between neighbouring countries are understandably coupled with disputes over names (for example, Senkaku versus Diaoyu), the quarrel that Karyotakis analyses is almost entirely symbolic. Greece does not challenge its small northern neighbour's right to exist or the borders between them, but many Greeks bristle at the country's use of the name Macedonia or North Macedonia, because it evokes the legacy of the emperor, Alexander. Greek politicians, assisted by the country's mainstream media, manufacture indignation over the name as a populist ploy to distract from their failure to address their people's economic woes.

Think global, act regional?

Cooperation with regional neighbours is the most common stepping stone toward a national consciousness that is more open to the world. Formal intergovernmental groupings such as the European Union, the Arab League, and the Association of South East Asian Nations are institutions designed to create transnational identities within their regions without diluting the national. The field of international relations has studied such bodies exhaustively. Our contributors look instead at more grass-roots and private-sector networks, including media outlets with an explicit mission to develop a pan-regional perspective on current affairs.

On the South Asian subcontinent, such efforts are conspicuous by their near absence. When relations are strained between neighbours, particularly India and Pakistan, mainstream media engage in ostentatious performances of nationalism that the uninitiated might confuse with parody: television news presenters even don military uniforms to match their violent language (Tripathi, 2019). Propaganda for war has become normalised. In his essay for this collection, Shyam Tekwani mourns the loss of an organic subcontinental sensibility that was suddenly quashed by the Partition of India in 1947. He argues that hypernationalism in Indian media is not only the result of state censorship and control. It has also come about due to the shrinking space for independent media, platform incentives that reward virality over nuance and context, and influencer ecosystems that multiply the impact of nationalist

narratives. Counter-currents only exist in the margins, not troubling the mainstream but reminding South Asians of what could have been.

The picture is different in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), whose postcolonial nation-building history did not cast neighbouring nation states as the existential Other like in South Asia. The LAC region also has much more significant diaspora populations. While the Indian entertainment media that flood smaller neighbours' screens do not try to be anything other than Indian, LAC is home to media giants that are self-consciously translocal, such as TelevisaUnivision, the world's largest Spanish-language media company. Indeed, media and migration in LAC seems to showcase how transnational connectivity stimulates postnational imaginaries. But in his essay, Gabriel Moreno-Esparza suggests that such assessments must now be revised substantially. Recent migration across the region is marked by highly politicised forced displacement. Within the hybrid media environments through which these movements are publicly framed, nationalist and securitising discourses have gained ground. Solidaristic narratives and practical support networks persist but must now contend with xenophobic hate speech on social media, plus digital technologies that surveil, categorise, and control migrants.

Like Latin America and the Caribbean, the Arab world is characterised by linguistic, cultural and religious commonalities across national borders. To the outside world, the best-known Arab media organisations with a regional footprint are Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya and Qatar's Al Jazeera. Naomi Sakr, in her essay in this collection, provides an eye-opening survey of newer and smaller independent digital media initiatives that counter the nationalist agendas of authoritarian governments with a sensibility and support networks that are pan-Arab. Some, such as Raseef22, were established with the region in mind from the outset (the digits in its name refer the number of Arab countries). Others began with a national focus (such as Nawaat, founded by Tunisians) but evolved to address the wider region. Through networks such as Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism and Febrayer Network, practitioners from different countries share skills, provide mentorship, and team up to generate resource-intensive reports. The centrifugal force bringing them together is not only a shared language – an effect that should not be overstated since spoken dialects vary greatly across the region, Sakr notes – but a common condition of authoritarian rule. This pushes both producers and their publics to find strength in collective dissent, she observes. Contrary to stereotypes associating pan-Arabism with intolerant Islamism, the movement that Sakr documents is oriented toward justice, human rights, and global connection.

Prospects for a more cosmopolitan journalism

The 20th century's two grandest transnational political visions, communist internationalism (Pons, 2014) and Islamic internationalism (Bennison, 2012), are currently not exactly in fashion. Much more influential today is the banner of decolonisation.

With faith in social and economic progress falling worldwide (Wike et al., 2025) and the United States no longer even pretending to be a benevolent superpower, there appears to be a growing sense in the non-West and even in the West of a shared experience of being let down by the US (Turcsanyi, 2026) and the world order that it helped install. The image of America as Empire, once found mainly on the fringes of critical scholarship, is now the stuff of mainstream commentary.

That shift has presented an opportunity to authoritarian governments. Academics driving postcolonial scholarship now warn that its language is being hijacked to distract from these states' objectionable human rights records (Altinors et al., 2026). Those with the capacity to project such ideas include India (Chakravartty & Roy, 2023), China (Zhang, 2023), and Türkiye (Yesil, 2024). Externally, they advocate for a just, rules-based international order while defending domestically the authority of strongmen to make up the rules as they go along. Thus, it is clear that transnationalism, like national identity, can be grounded in respect for everyone's shared humanity – or not.

Iran is another country where the state selectively mouths transnational, anti-imperial tropes. Tehran-based scholar Shahriar Khonsari, in an interview that appears in this collection, notes that the Islamic Republic has always claimed to identify with other Global South struggles. Now, having been attacked by the war machines of Israel and the United States in 2025 and 2026, Iran's visage of a victim of imperialism seems to resonate with many bystander publics around the world. Global public opinion opposes the war, for which most blame the US and/or Israel (Gallup, 2026). Memes and short videos mocking Trump's failure to achieve a quick and decisive victory, created by Iran's abundant creative talent pool, have been appreciatively shared even by Americans (Myers & Thompson, 2026). Khonsari, however, argues that Iran's attempts to position itself globally as an anti-imperialist icon is deeply hypocritical, since the government has no qualms against siding with other autocratic global powers and shows little concern for the human rights of the Iranians it says it is fighting for.

Khonsari, like all the contributors to this special issue, thus rejects the idea that going transnational is necessarily an improvement over closed-minded nationalism. They can coexist and reinforce one another. Implicitly or explicitly, most of the authors in this volume support a cosmopolitan ethos of world citizenship, which they believe media should be guided by and promote. This is not about dismantling the world system of nation states but about recognising the harm caused when nation states define and delimit people's moral horizons and promote exclusive notions of who belongs.

One of the most concerning developments of the past decade or more has been liberal democracies' vulnerability to right-wing populism, with their racist and anti-immigrant visions of the nation. Such trends are more understandable in countries with weak and shallow democratic roots. But in what were once regarded as the

world's most consolidated democracies, where most mainstream news media and public intellectuals spoke out strongly against politicians and parties who stoked hate, it has been disconcerting to see the far right continue to grow. Cosmopolitanism is more compatible with liberal democracy than is racist, anti-global populism — and yet it is the latter that is showing discursive power, driving the conversation in many Western democracies.

This paradox is the springboard for an essay by Anne Grüne in this collection. Grüne argues that cosmopolitanism's vulnerability can be seen as a failure in communication or a kind of cultural lag. What's needed is a dialogic cosmopolitan communication that normalises the mutual understanding of our globalised existence. Culture, in her view, must catch up with reality. Even if people do not step out of their own countries, they at least indirectly experience the global in their everyday lives. These encounters — through the goods they purchase, what they see in the media, and whom they meet in diverse neighbourhoods — are potential symbolic resources for cosmopolitanism. But such everyday cosmopolitanism is poorly articulated, such that even those living it struggle to describe it, her interviews show. Media, she suggests, can help by developing and circulating the interpretive resources required for *de facto* global citizens to process their hybrid realities in ways that strengthen their societies' resilience against racist, nationalist and anti-global politics.

Asking media to take on this mission may seem quixotic. Many media outlets actively support the opposite cause of promoting intolerance. Even more are content to sit on the fence and report the decline of democracy and the assault on human rights as if these are just like any other newsworthy event requiring no emotional investment. However, this is not the whole picture of the global media landscape. Silvio Waisbord, in his essay for this collection, shows that cosmopolitan journalism already exists, even if it is not common practice. Examples can be found within the outputs of major international news organisations such as Al-Jazeera, BBC World, and Reuters. For other exemplary work, journalism educators and practitioners seeking inspiration can refer to the many lesser-known independent public interest outlets around the world that Waisbord documents in his essay.

To help conceptualise cosmopolitan coverage, he suggests angling on global forces, global objects, and global communities. Global forces are long-term, structural trends that may not be obvious, such as how climate change affects infectious disease patterns. Paying attention to global commodities or products would reveal, for example, how consumption trends in rich countries affect livelihoods in poorer ones. As for reporting of global communities, this could investigate the voluntary and forced movement of peoples and the impacts on the places they move from, through, and to. Waisbord argues that what makes such stories cosmopolitan rather than merely international is their normative grounding in universal humanist values. They offer de-centred perspectives that do not treat the well-being of the media outlet's home country or main market as the ultimate touchstone when doing

journalism in the “public interest”. They thus challenge the hyper-nationalism and xenophobia that currently infect many societies around the world.

If the numerous exemplary stories that Waisbord highlights remain exceptional and not the norm, it cannot be because they are not interesting or newsworthy. He suggests part of the problem is organisational. Global journalism as he explicates it is not a conventional beat. It cuts across many standard areas of coverage, from business and politics, to labour and lifestyle, and food and health. Because it belongs to everyone, it seems to belong to no one. It is a beat hiding in plain sight, another case of what Grüne describes as cultural practice falling behind the reality curve.

Addressing methodological nationalism

Media studies as a field – like the humanities and social sciences in general – is susceptible to the same blind spot as the media we study. When media scholars advocate or analyse media’s social responsibility or public interest journalism, for example, the community we have in mind is reflexively the people of a nation state. This tendency in academic work has been critiqued as “methodological nationalism” by Beck (2003; 2007). “[I]t equates society with nation-state societies, and sees states and their governments as the cornerstones of a social sciences analysis,” Beck says of this approach (2007, p. 287). “It assumes that humanity is naturally divided into a limited number of nations, which on the inside, organize themselves as nation-states, and on the outside, set boundaries to distinguish themselves from other nation-states.”

It may appear that the sub-field of international communication transcends this paradigm, but no. Just as most newsrooms’ international desks are not quite global or cosmopolitan, as Waisbord points out, Rantanen (2010) notes, “information flows in international communication studies have been defined primarily by their nationality and thus ‘naturalised’, making a particular medium represent a particular nation-state or even its culture or identity” (p. 27). Volkmer (2012) has pointed out a “methodological paradox” within communication studies: the field has been slow to escape this paradigm even though communication as a social phenomenon is one of the key drivers of the changes that make methodological nationalism an anachronism. It does not help that most universities (like most media) are national or subnational institutions. Even when academic institutions have a global footprint and derive significant income from markets beyond national borders, they tend to leverage on their home country’s reputations (an Australian university attracts foreign students because it is Australian, for example), rather than attempt anything substantially cosmopolitan.

The national container has thus become “the ‘natural’ ontology for media futures”, making migrant experiences and other hybridities anomalous or invisible (Robins & Aksoy, 2005, p. 19). Even most scholars trying to be globally comparative

unthinkingly allow themselves to be sucked into methodological nationalism's gravitational pull. Inspired especially by the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004), journalism studies compare media across national media systems, overlooking the fact that every country's media landscape is hybrid. Of course, grouping and classifying things is a necessary part of doing social science. But using a chosen classifier presumes that variation between the different groups is greater than the variation within each group. On some dimensions, such as media law and policy, this is generally true when we classify by country. But whether media practices are best analysed through a national lens is doubtful, given the immense diversity of media types in most countries and the globalisation of genres and norms. State media, independent public service media, commercial tabloids, elite newspapers, the financial press, independent nonprofits, NGO media, and citizen journalism within a single nation state have little in common with one another. But each may be comparable to equivalent media types in other countries.

Therefore, correcting methodological nationalism is not just the right thing to do. It also opens the way to more interesting research. Naomi Sakr's and Silvio Waisbord's essays are examples of the strides in knowledge building and theorisation that are possible when media scholars resist methodological nationalism and look for patterns regionally or globally. Sakr's exploration of an emerging network of alternative pan-Arab media outlets (like those outlets themselves) is not clouded by the political systems in which journalists operate. She is thus able to show that national conditions are a key contextual influence but not a determinant of journalistic norms and practices. Similarly, Waisbord's articulation of a global mission and agenda for journalism, based on actually existing journalisms around the world, would not have emerged from a low-resolution focus on the "average" or "normal" journalism prevailing in countries around the world.

Collectively, the essays in this collection spotlight how media can exacerbate international conflict and undermine global or neighbourly cooperation at a time when nation states' interdependencies should be more obvious than ever before. The essays call for a cosmopolitan journalism that rises to the challenge of the "cosmopolitan condition" that Beck (2003) says defines the 21st century. They find inspiration for such journalism in historical practices, emerging initiatives on the margins, and in the everyday hybrid experiences of people who live under the noses of journalists. Media, too often part of the problem, could thus help publics see beyond the politics of fear and hate that incline nations toward hard and abrasive borders.

Conflict of interest declaration

Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis's essay draws on his doctoral research, which was supervised by Cherian George. For this reason, George recused himself from discussions about accepting his abstract or publishing his final manuscript, which were decided solely by the journal's editors.

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