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Rethinking Banal Nationalism: Banal Americanism, Europeanism, and the Missing Link between Media Representations and Identities

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This article questions some tacit assumptions underpinning Michael Billig's banal nationalism concept but also confirms the ongoing relevance of aspects of his central argument. It demonstrates that the taken-for-granted link between banal flaggings of nationalism in the media and national identities is highly problematic. Drawing on a content analysis of seven TV news and current affairs programs and an audience study with 174 children in Bulgaria and the United Kingdom as well as Eurobarometer survey data on adults, this article explores two "derivatives" of banal nationalism: banal Europeanism and banal Americanism. It demonstrates that banal nationalism does not entirely work as Billig anticipated in contexts outside the respective country's national borders, especially regarding examples of deixis in the media coverage or embedded identities.

"Having written *Banal Nationalism*, I hoped that others would then analyze in detail the banality of the world's most powerful nationalism—that of the United States. Instead, it has been the less powerful nationalisms that have attracted attention" (Billig, 2009, p. 351). Michael Billig's banal nationalism concept has been widely used in nationalism and media studies. At the core of his thesis lies the argument that politicians and the mass media "flag" nationhood daily in the eyes of the citizens of established Western democracies. This study contributes to this growing body of research by following the advice Billig (2009) gave when reviewing the concept, namely, to investigate the banality of the world's most powerful nationalism. Originally, my research was oriented toward banal Europeanism (Cram, 2001, 2009) in two European countries: the United Kingdom (UK) and Bulgaria. In 2009, when Billig was reviewing his concept, Cram (2009) was again claiming that there was a EU-focused banal Europeanism, though her argument and empirical evidence seemed different from those in her first work. In 2001, Cram had built fairly closely on Billig's argument, and hence concentrated on the media's role, but in 2009 the media escaped mention; instead, the focus was on "the concept of European Union identity" (p. 109). Inspired by both Billig's and Cram's claims, I started looking for trends of banal Europeanism in two very different national contexts: the Eastern European EU newcomer Bulgaria and the UK, an old but notoriously Euroskeptical EU member state in Western Europe. Instead of finding banal Europeanism in the UK,

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however, I found a derivative of banal nationalism that I had not explicitly sought, but that Billig (2009) urges researchers to explore—"that of the United States" (p. 351), which I label "banal Americanism."

While affirming some aspects of Billig's concept, such as the importance of symbols, the article also questions several of his tacit assumptions and demonstrates the need for further elaboration, especially in relation to the taken-for-granted link between banal flaggings and allegedly banal identities. My findings suggest that Billig's concept cannot fully explain whether and how banal nationalism operates at levels beyond the national, especially in terms of the spread of Europeanism in Europe and Americanism in non-U.S. contexts. Cram's attempts to conceptualize banal Europeanism offer an even weaker explanation. This study makes an initial attempt to conceptually elaborate on the differences in which banal nationalism and its derivatives operate within and outside national borders. It explores three key factors: the problematic assumption that a "homogenous national audience" (Skey, 2009, p. 335) exists, the missing link between banal media representations and identities, and the need to differentiate between the importance of symbols and deixis.

From Banal Nationalism to Banal Europeanism and Americanism?

At the heart of Billig's (1995) concept is the view that there is a "continual 'flagging,' or reminding, of nationhood through the daily reproduction of 'ideological habits'" (pp. 6–8). "The national flag hanging outside a public building in the United States attracts no special attention. . . . Daily the nation is indicated, or 'flagged,' in the lives of its citizenry" (Billig, 1995, p. 6). Two particular aspects of Billig's ideas are pertinent. First, nationhood is flagged by politicians and through the mass media:

In routine practices and everyday discourses, especially those in the mass media, the idea of nationhood is regularly flagged. Even the daily weather forecast can do this. Through such flagging, established nations are reproduced as nations, with their citizenry being unmindfully reminded of their national identity. (Billig, 1995, p. 154)

Billig (1995) convincingly demonstrated in his "Day Survey" of British newspapers how the flagging takes place through the use of symbols (such as the national flag) and *deixis*, defined as "little words"—*we, our, this, here, the nation*—that are "continually pointing to the national homeland as the home of the readers" (p. 11). This study will show the extent to which Europeanism is flagged in the media, first by indicating the share of stories with European reference and then by investigating what kinds of symbols and people dominate these stories; it will also record examples of deixis. Academics who have conducted studies in Scotland (e.g., Law, 2001; Petersoo, 2007; Rosie, Petersoo, MacInnes, Condor, & Kennedy, 2006), however, question some aspects of Billig's theory in "stateless nations," especially the use of deixis as an indicator of banal nationalism. "In newspaper articles will pronouns like 'we' reinforce the idea of 'we the British' or 'we the Scots'? And if there is that ambiguity, how can it be said that these pronouns are powerful drivers of banal British nationalism?" (Crawford, 2011, p. 5). An important contribution this article makes, therefore, is not only to look for examples of both symbols and deixis but also to investigate whether banal media representations transfer into banal identities among a specific audience and are indeed the means through which European identity is "being renewed continually" (Billig, 1995, p. 127).

Identity will be studied within a sociological frame. Although most studies on European identity adopt a social psychological understanding built on Tajfel (1981) and Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell's (1987) social identity and self-categorization theories, scholars have recently called for more sociological input because of the alleged marginalization of the role of society in EU research. Hence, this study will adopt a sociological understanding of identity as an ongoing process (Jenkins, 2004), which implies a "series of identifications" (Woodward, 2002, p. 17). Apart from self-categorization, it involves social categorization—society labeling a collectivity (Jenkins, 2004). The sociological approach allows investigation of both children's self-identifications and society's role (limited to the role of the media) rather than a concentration on individual perceptions alone. As Sanchez (2006) argued, identity is "ultimately grounded in social reality" (p. 33). Billig (1995) himself criticized both psychological and sociological approaches and seemed to embrace a social psychological one involving the study of discourse. He did not, however, conduct such a study. He also assumed that media continually renew national identity but did not probe that assumption through an audience study. Such probing is vital, however, because as some of Billig's critics (Rosie et al., 2006; Skey, 2009) have pointed out, it is problematic to assume that there is "a uniform, homogenous national *audience*" (Skey, 2009, p. 335).

Banal Europeanism: Trends and Issues

Like Billig, Cram (2009) supported her claim that a "degree of banal Europeanism already exists within the EU" (Cram, 2001, p. 352) by making several assumptions about the ways in which European integration has influenced identities. First, Cram (2001) argued that news coverage of EU politicians and events had become "home" (p. 353). Unlike Billig, however, she did not back her claim with empirical evidence. Cram (2001) also assumed that people no longer noticed the EU flag flying alongside their national flags on buildings or depicted on their EU driving licenses and passports, though she admitted that "considerable empirical data is required" (p. 357). Later, she (Cram, 2009) seemed to accept the banality of Europeanism as a given, though she took a different approach to studying it by looking at how the EU has influenced identities in different contexts and claiming that "European integration facilitates the flourishing of diverse national identities," which therefore "encourages the enhabitation of the EU at an everyday level and the reinforcement of a sense of banal Europeanism which is a crucial aspect of the European integration process" (p. 109). This conclusion is based on a few case studies that examined the impact of European integration on national identities. The evidence is hardly enough to prove a point for banal Europeanism even in these contexts, let alone generally. I use the term *derivative* to refer to banal Europeanism because Cram built her notion very closely on Billig's concept. She not only quoted his work extensively but also attempted to base her own research on his concept's main tenets. The extent to which she has succeeded in that respect is highly arguable, especially in her latest research, where she and colleagues (Cram, Patrikios, & Mitchell, 2011) conducted experiments and looked for "cues"—which arguably went against the grain of Billig's understanding. This study will show whether there is an "enhabited" sense of banal Europeanism, and it will also reveal the extent to which Billig's concept can be used to explain its alleged derivatives.

In Billig's case, the lack of an empirical study on the degree of proliferation of national identity can be excused by the almost commonsensical expectation that we do indeed live in a world of nations and people associate with them, this is hardly an excuse when claims about banal Europeanism are made.

To start with, there is no academic consensus on whether there is a sense of or “such a thing as a European identity” (Bruter, 2005, p. xii). Some scholars (Bruter, 2005) firmly believe that there is, while others (Breakwell, 1996) are skeptical. Second, recent EU developments such as the Eurozone crisis and the failed EU Constitutional Treaty referenda show that “the legitimacy problem is real and the lack of a common collective identity is part of the problem” (Sigalas, 2010, p. 244). Although it might sound counterintuitive to study European identity while the EU is in crisis, Díez Medrano (2008) has argued that “now” is the time to do so because the EU covers “a whole range” of policy areas and “has a tremendous impact on the European citizens’ lives” (p. 4). As Bache and George (2006) claim, the development of a common European identity might provide a solution to the democratic legitimacy problem and thereby facilitate the functioning of the EU and its future prospects. If European identity is a means to an end, then it is certainly worth researching the topic. It is also important to ask whether the alleged influence of the media is as strong as claimed. Is the mass media indeed an important agenda-setter in relation to Europeanization? Some academics (a summary in Triandafyllidou, Wodak, & Krzyzanowski, 2009) even speculate on the existence of a European public sphere; however, most evidence suggests that “the European public sphere does not exist” (Habermas, 2006).

Toward Banal Americanism: Cultural Proximity or Universal Spread?

Two caveats are due. First, this study will indeed compare the level of manifestation of banal Europeanism in the media with the degree of proliferation of European identity among a specific age group. But as Lang and Lang (2006) claim, it is important to show not only what the media focus on but also what is missing because the missing topics, people and issues “have consequences, short-term and long-range” (p. 171). Even if we can claim some degree of correlation between media coverage and audiences’ knowledge and identities, the “media/identity relationship” is “not a causal one” (Madianou, 2005, p. 5). TV is likely to be only one identity-building resource among other socialization agents such as school and parents as well as social structures like class and ethnicity (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2013; Slavtcheva-Petkova, & Mihelj, 2013). Moreover, collective identities are multiple, flexible, and constantly in flux. To better understand the role of the media, this study follows Schlesinger’s (1991) advice

not to start with communication and its supposed effects on collective identity and culture, but rather to begin by posing the problem of collective identity itself, to ask how it might be analyzed and what importance communication practices might play in its constitution. (p. 151)

Second, although banal Europeanism and Americanism are both described as derivatives of banal nationalism, they are different concepts. Banal Europeanism refers to a supranational identity where belonging and identification are linked to being part of Europe as a continent and/or a civilization and/or the European Union as an organization. Banal Americanism, on the other hand, is related to the widespread process of Americanization, which Billig (1995) largely equates with globalization. He claims there is a “global transmission of American culture” and “the global, transnational culture is predominantly American” but admits that “there has been no detailed study of the quantity and quality of the ways” (pp. 149–150) in which American symbols are flagged globally. His work almost suggests that these flaggings of Americanism are universal across the globe. My findings will challenge this assumption by pointing out

the huge importance of the different relationships the United States and Bulgaria have with Britain. While trends of Americanization are widespread, the UK is not simply one of the numerous countries influenced. It prides itself on having a "special relationship" with the United States and is also in "cultural proximity" (Straubhaar, 1991) to America. Bulgaria, on the other hand, a former communist country, was "in a special relationship" with Russia for decades and is in "cultural proximity" to Slavic nations as well as some of its neighbors.

A Missing Link Between Banal Media Representations and Banal Identities?

The review of the concepts of banal nationalism and Europeanism suggests that at least three aspects need further elaboration—a contribution this article will make. First, Billig (1995) did not empirically explore the relationship between banal manifestations in the media and identities. His underlying assumption was that national identity "is continually being flagged" in the media and is therefore accepted as "an identity of identities" (pp. 92–93). Nonetheless, Billig (1995) took this assumption for granted: he confirmed the proliferation of banal representations of nationalism in the media through his Day Survey, but he did not empirically confirm the strength, nature, and proliferation of national identity. His critics have some ground in claiming that "the very notion of a uniform, homogenous national *audience*" (Skey, 2009, p. 335) is problematic. It is problematic to assume that all people in a nation will unequivocally embrace national identity, especially in the form in which it is banally flagged. Rosie et al. (2006) showed that this is particularly true in the case of the UK, a nation-state of four nations, by demonstrating that in Scotland it is not always clear which banal identity is flagged: the Scottish or the British.

Second, assuming a link between banal representations and banal identities is even more problematic beyond the national level. Do banal representations of Europe transfer into European identities? Even if U.S. nationalism is the most powerful nationalism and has proliferated outside the United States, does it transfer into national identities outside the United States? Put simply, do English or Bulgarian citizens feel American because they are so used to the banal flaggings of Americanism in their national media that they no longer notice the U.S. flag or the U.S. president on TV? Far from it. How does the banality of Americanism in the media, then, influence people's identities in non-U.S. national contexts? This is hardly an issue explored by Billig, who alluded to the global spread of American culture but did not make claims about, for instance, the way American "icons" address foreign audiences as "we." Yet it is an important question. Third, this study offers a partial explanation of this apparent lack of a straightforward link between banal flaggings and identities. Billig described the importance of symbols and deixis in the flagging of nationalism, but he did not actually investigate the interplay between symbols and deixis, or look closely at the link between symbols, deixis, and their impact on specific audiences. The study addresses this issue because deconstructing the essential components of banal nationalism is key to understanding the application and relevance of the concept. Unfortunately, many scholars build their arguments on examples of either symbols or deixis and rarely aim to draw a fuller, though perhaps more disjointed, picture. Finally, even if Cram's argument holds, the question remains as to how banal Europeanism operates. Cram's approach differed significantly from Billig's, incorporating speculations about the media's role (2001), examples of flourishing marginalized identities (2009), and an experimental study (Cram et al., 2011) that investigated whether EU-related cues raise levels of European

identification. What Billig and Cram have in common, however, is that they both take for granted the link between identity and banal nationalism/Europeanism, an assumption probed in this study.

Why Children?

Media scholars have traditionally been interested in children, and whereas academics (most notably Barrett, 2007) have researched young people's national and collective identities, albeit not in relation to media's influence, there is a dearth of studies on the applicability of banal nationalism among children. Phillips (1998) speculated that banal nationalism influences young people in the same way as it does adults, but he did not back up his assumptions with findings. Billig (1995) himself suggested that children are indeed equal participants in the process. In fact, one of his most memorable examples is of U.S. children pledging alliance to the U.S. flag:

Children, in knowing that this is the way in which school starts, will take it for granted that other pupils, the length and breadth of the homeland, are also beginning their day similarly; and that their parents and grandparents, if schooled in the United States, did likewise; they might even suppose that all over the world the school day starts thus. This does not mean that an awareness of national unity bubbles excitedly within the mind of each pupil on each and every school day. But it does mean that the nation celebrates itself routinely. (p. 51)

Not only did Billig (1995) allude to the fact that children are influenced by the manifestations of banal nationalism; he also argued that it has hardly attracted as much scholarly attention as it deserves. This study, therefore, makes an important contribution to the field of nationalism-related media studies by "testing" the applicability of banal nationalism among children. Moreover, the choice of this specific age group—ages 9 and 10—is not accidental. Media scholars maintain that children are active, capable media users (e.g., Buckingham, 2003) and that at these ages they reach a peak in TV viewing (Paik, 2001). Identity scholars (e.g., Barrett, 2007; Jenkins, 2004) also show that pupils actively take part in the process of collective identities and by age 9 not only define themselves through a national identity but also attribute considerable significance to it. Subsequently, by 10 they might endorse a supranational identity such as the European one.

This article's focus is on children as a group that, though under-researched in the context of media and national and European identities, is nonetheless flagged up by Billig. However, it also offers a brief comparison with the trends among adults as evidenced by Eurobarometer surveys. European identity scholarship has made wide use of Eurobarometer surveys, but here the data are mainly utilized for illustrative purposes because of limitations in the formulation of the identity questions. The aim is partially to reveal whether age is a factor that influences the extent to which banal media representations are linked to banal identities.

Why Bulgaria and England?

Three main reasons guided the choice of a most different systems design (MDS) in which different rather than similar countries are compared. First, Bulgaria and the UK are both part of the EU—a unique international organization whose 28 member states have different historical, cultural, political, and economic trajectories in relation to Europe and the EU. By comparing two different countries, a fuller picture can be drawn of the potential factors involved in the European identity process. Billig (1995) claims that the continual flagging of nationhood takes place in “established nations,” namely “those states that have confidence in their own continuity” or what is referred to as “the West” (p. 8). He adds that to demonstrate the role of the media “systematically, it would be necessary to sample the various forms of mass media and mass culture over a lengthy period of time in a number of countries” (p. 109). And indeed, banal nationalism has been explored in various contexts, from Turkey (Yumul & Özkirimli, 2000) to Argentina (Benwell & Dodds, 2011). Second, Przeworski and Teune (1970), the authors of the MDS, argue it is more suitable than the most similar systems design (MSSD) when the researcher is studying levels lower than systems, such as individuals, groups, and communities, which is exactly what this study does. In Livingstone’s (2003) view, analyzing similar countries makes sense only when the nation is the object of study. The final reason is the researcher’s insider knowledge—key in qualitative research. Although it would have been much better to conduct audience studies in all four nations of the UK, this was not feasible. Hence, the audience study focused on England, the biggest and most Eurosceptical of the four, despite the high likelihood that the findings would differ in the other three nations, given the different dynamics between national identities. Here, therefore, *English* will refer to the audience study, but because the TV content analysis is based on programs aired in all four nations, *British* is used when reporting media coverage trends.

Methods

The study consists of two key components: a content analysis of seven TV programs—four British and three Bulgarian—and an audience study comprising 174 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with children in 10 schools in Bulgaria and England. Secondary data from Eurobarometer’s 2010 standard survey are used for illustration and comparison purposes.

Media Content Analysis

Sampling. A pilot study with 50 children was conducted prior to the media content analysis to determine the media sample on the basis of children’s actual viewing patterns and reported sources of information on Europe and the EU. The pilot showed that TV was the main source of news for children and the most important source on Europe and the EU among all mass media, which is why the sample consisted only of the TV news programs children watched most. The findings from the entire study later largely confirmed the results from the pilot study. Children were asked a lot of media-use questions, especially about their sources of information on Europe and the EU, and patterns of parental and school mediation. They were also asked to discuss specific TV programs and to recall where, when, and in what contexts they had seen certain people or symbols. Therefore, this audience study is based on an investigation of the actual programs these children reported watching. In Bulgaria, the programs were two

news editions (*bTV Novinite* and *Calendar*) and a breakfast show (*Zdravey, Bulgaria*), aired by the two biggest private TV channels—*bTV* and *Nova TV*. In England there were four programs: three news broadcasts (*BBC1 News*, *ITV1 News* and the children’s news program *Newsround*) and a children’s magazine (*Blue Peter*) aired by the noncommercial public service broadcaster BBC and the commercial public channel ITV.

The sample was collected through a constructed week sampling on the following days: November 18, 2009; December 10, 2009; December 18, 2009; January 12, 2010; January 18, 2010; January 30, 2010; and February 7, 2010. The aim was to catch a snapshot of typical coverage in a fairly average, non-event period. Non-event means free of Europe/EU-related major events that could have triggered more European coverage than usual. Another aim was to collect the sample as close as possible to the dates of the interviews to better link the trends children reported with the trends observed in studying the actual TV programs they watched.

Measures. Media representations of the EU and Europe were researched through content analysis, using key quantitative techniques as outlined by Berelson (1971) and Krippendorff (1981/2004) and drawing on research studies on EU topics (e.g., De Vreese et al., 2006) as well as qualitative thematic analysis. The main unit of analysis was any news or current affairs program item with one of the following references: European, Europe, EU, Europa, or Euro. The number of stories making references to the United States was also counted. All stories were coded using a detailed coding frame (available upon request). All sentences containing the respective references were thematically analyzed; that is, “the data are read for analytical themes, which are listed” (Fielding, 2001, p. 159) in two stages: initial coding and focused coding. Three main topics will be presented:

1. Salience of Europe, the EU and the United States on the media agenda, that is, frequency of occurrence of European and U.S. stories in comparison with all other topics on the agenda.
2. Topics, actors, and symbols that dominate the European stories.
3. Deixis: frequency of use of deictic European or U.S. references, such as first person plural pronouns and adjectives (we, our, us, ours).

The quantitative questions were analyzed in PASW Statistics 17 using the relevant statistical procedures. The principal investigator coded all media clips, and 10% of the sample was re-coded by a second, independent coder. Inter-rater reliability was tested using Krippendorff’s alpha, which at .8012 was within the acceptable limits.

Audience Study

Participants and Procedures. The 174 children interviewed were recruited through schools, as this is the most ethically acceptable procedure. The participating pupils were from six schools in England and ten in Bulgaria, and both pupils and their parents signed consent forms. All children and parents had the option to withdraw at any point, but no one did. The interviews took place between February 2009 and February 2010. Theoretical sampling guided the recruitment. The goal was to achieve a degree of

randomness in drawing the sub-populations. Once a school was approached, all children in the respective age group were asked to participate. The head teachers of schools whose catchment areas featured different socioeconomic characteristics (as determined by their Ofsted reports in England) were approached to ensure a fair representation of socioeconomic groups. Two towns of fairly similar size and distance from their respective capital cities were included. In Bulgaria, the headteachers of all four schools approached agreed to participate, while in England six out of twelve schools approached took part. Once the initial consent forms were returned and interviews conducted, the further choice of schools was based on the same principle, namely, inclusion of as many diverse backgrounds as possible.

Measures. The interviews consisted of questions in three areas: demography, media use and European awareness, and knowledge and identities. The answers presented here are the children's replies to these questions:

1. Saliency of Europe and the EU: "Have you heard of Europe? Have you heard of the European Union?" Children were shown photographs of people and symbols such as their country's representative to the European Commission, the European Commission President, the EU flag, and the euro coin and were asked: "Do you recognize this person?" or "Have you seen this?" If the answer was yes, then they were subsequently asked: "Who is that person?" or "What is this?"
2. European identities: "Are you European?" Also, in a card question the children were shown different identity labels ("child," "boy," "girl," "Bulgarian," "English," "European," etc.) and asked to choose the words that "best describe them."

The children were asked many questions on these topics, including a range of open-ended ones, but the questions presented in this article are representative of the general trends.

Secondary Data Analysis

General trends will be established with a presentation of Eurobarometer data on European identity proliferation. The article will discuss the results of a question commonly used as a measure of European identity: "In the near future, do you see yourself as . . . : 1. Nationality only, 2. Nationality and European, 3. European and Nationality, 4. European only" (European Commission, 2010).

Banal Europeanism in Media Coverage?

The audience study shows that TV is a key source of information on Europe (for 45.8% of Bulgarian children and 50.7% of English children) and on the EU (54.2% and 22.4%, respectively). Whereas TV was the main source of information on Europe and the EU for Bulgarian children, more English children reported hearing about Europe at school (56.7%) or from parents (50.7%, the same share as heard from TV). The quantitative analysis of the frequency of European stories aired on TV reveals a substantial national difference: There are roughly two and a half times more Europe/EU stories on Bulgarian than on British TV. Thus, only 14 stories out of a total of 202 items contained European

references in the UK, as opposed to 67 out of 355 in Bulgaria. Moreover, in another 27 Bulgarian stories the EU flag appeared in the video footage without any textual reference to the EU or Europe. By comparison, there were nearly twice as many U.S. stories as European stories on British TV (Table 1). Even more interestingly, the lowest number of European references and the highest number of U.S. stories appeared in the news program British children watched the most, *BBC's Newsround*. In Bulgaria an opposite trend is evident: The number of European stories is more than three times higher than the number of U.S. stories.

Table 1. Share of European and U.S. Stories on Bulgarian and British TV (N = 174).

Country	TV Stories With:					
	Reference to "Europe," "European Union" or "European"		Reference to "U.S." or "United States"		EU flag	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Bulgaria	67	18.9	20	5.6	45	12.7
United Kingdom	14	6.9	25	12.4	1	0.5

Note: The stories totaled 355 in Bulgaria and 202 in the UK.

A second clear trend is the prevalence of domestic as opposed to European actors and symbols—more so in the UK. Thus, in Bulgaria domestic actors dominated in 58% of the European stories and in England in all but one story of either kind studied. In Bulgaria, although only two EU representatives appeared in more than one story, the European Commission was present in nearly a quarter of the stories and the European Parliament in 12%. The EU flag appeared in a quarter of the stories. This is hardly surprising, given that the EU flag and the Bulgarian flag are usually displayed behind the backs of official figures holding press conferences. By contrast, the U.S. President Barack Obama clearly dominated most U.S. stories in both countries.

Finally, there were no examples of deixis—first-person plural pronouns and adjectives—in either the European or the U.S. stories. "We" and "us" always refer to national identity. Nonetheless, there were two notable qualitative differences. First, whenever the national was described in relation to the European in the UK, the relationship was portrayed as one between equal partners, whereas in Bulgaria the nation was depicted as isubordinate to Europe and the EU member states. Given the overall low number of references in the UK (14), any conclusions should be drawn with caution, but the following two examples provide an interesting indication of this phenomenon. In one instance the reporter talked about a cancer drug that would be available in the UK "as well as the rest of Europe," while in another example, ringtone website payments were presented as a "big problem in this country and around Europe." The journalists did not refer explicitly to the UK as part of Europe, but they implied it is such, without indicating any attribution of superiority.

In Bulgaria, on the other hand, two thirds of the stories depicted Europe as something Bulgaria looked up to—an excellent example to be followed while pursuing goals not yet accomplished. Often the main topic was entirely unrelated to Europe, but the reporters inserted a sentence or two to justify decisions through reference to the European example. Thus, one of the news items was about the health reform in Bulgaria, which has led to a reduced number of hospitals. “The European example shows that there are too many hospitals in our country, which is why there should remain less, but better equipped,” a reporter concludes without backing up her remark with facts. The “we” here is the national “we” as opposed to the “European example,” which by implication comes from outside Bulgaria’s borders. Other stories clearly recognize that Bulgaria is part of Europe, but always with negative connotations, for example by describing Bulgaria as the country with the “fastest aging population in Europe” or “first in Europe in number of heart and brain diseases” or “most corrupt.” Comparison between Bulgaria and Europe is always to Bulgaria’s detriment. Europe is depicted as an out-group whose example the new EU member should follow to truly become European.

A second notable qualitative difference concerns the focus of coverage. A majority of European-related stories in Bulgaria had a clear EU focus, either with explicit mention of the EU (52.9%) or through implicit reference to practices in European countries. Precisely the latter kind of stories displayed a juxtaposition between the national “us” and the European “them.” In the UK, meanwhile, roughly half of the stories included a reference to Europe and only three were about the EU.

All in all, the analysis of the media coverage shows that the European topic is considerably more salient on the Bulgarian media agenda than on the British one. There were roughly two and half times more European stories in Bulgaria, representing nearly a fifth of all news stories. The number of European stories on British TV was considerably lower; in fact, Bulgarian TV had three times more European than U.S. stories, whereas there were two U.S. stories for every European story on British TV. Moreover, European symbols such as the EU flag and key European institutions were often present in the coverage in Bulgaria, but European symbols and people were virtually invisible on British TV. By comparison, the U.S. president dominated all U.S.-related stories. These trends point to banal flaggings of Europeanism on Bulgarian TV and potentially of Americanism on British TV. The use of flags—both national and European—even in stories that did not refer to Europe or the EU is a perfect example of Billig’s (1995) banal nationalism and potentially of Cram’s (2001, 2009) banal Europeanism. The flags are always there, but hardly anyone notices them. However, though banal Europeanism in Bulgaria and possibly Americanism in the UK appear to operate on the level of symbols, the case is otherwise when looking for deixis. There was no identification with the European or the American collective identity through words such as *we*, *us*, *our*, or *ours*. Whenever such words were used, they referred to the national identity.

Nonetheless, one notable national difference was that the qualitative references to Europe in Bulgaria imply an inferior position for Bulgaria and often an out-group description of Europe. By contrast, the rare instances of references to Europe in the UK described the UK as a full-fledged part of Europe and/or an equal partner. Part of the explanation might be that the Bulgarian coverage focused on the EU as a supranational organization. Bulgaria only recently joined the EU after years of attempting to fulfill the necessary conditions for membership as set by the EU, so it is unsurprising that the media coverage still reflects this pre-accession power relationship. And as expected, there was no deixis in the U.S. coverage

in either country. Overall, even though Bulgarian TV aired a significant percentage of European stories and constant images of European symbols through which Europe is daily “flagged in the eyes of its citizenry” (Billig, 1995, p. 6), the lack of deixis and the description of Europe as an out-group suggest that these are trends of banal Europeanism in the making rather than the banal Europeanism Cram (2001, 2009) describes.

Banal European Identities?

Do the banal flaggings of European symbols on Bulgarian TV and the invisibility of Europe and more substantial presence of U.S. symbols on British TV transfer into banal collective identities?

The level of awareness of Europe and/or the EU and the recognition of key symbols seem to reflect the trends in the media coverage. Bulgarian children saw the EU was a considerably more salient actor than did English children (Figure 1). Nearly all English children and three fourths of Bulgarian children had heard of Europe, $\chi^2(1, N = 174) = 18.02, p < 0.00$, but 30% more Bulgarian than English children had heard of the EU. Similarly, more Bulgarian than English children recognized important European symbols such as the EU flag—84% versus 49%, $\chi^2(1, N = 174) = 24.16, p < 0.001$. Bulgarians were also more familiar with their European commissioners and their members of the European Parliament. In England, only 5% recognized the name of their commissioner, Catherine Ashton, while in Bulgaria, 43.9% said they had heard about their then European Commissioner Meglena Kuneva, $\chi^2(1, N = 174) = 30.85, p < 0.001$. Similarly, more Bulgarians recognized their members of the European Parliament, and only 13% of English children as opposed to 33% of Bulgarian youngsters correctly described the euro as Europe’s currency, $\chi^2(1, N = 174) = 6.82, p = 0.009$.

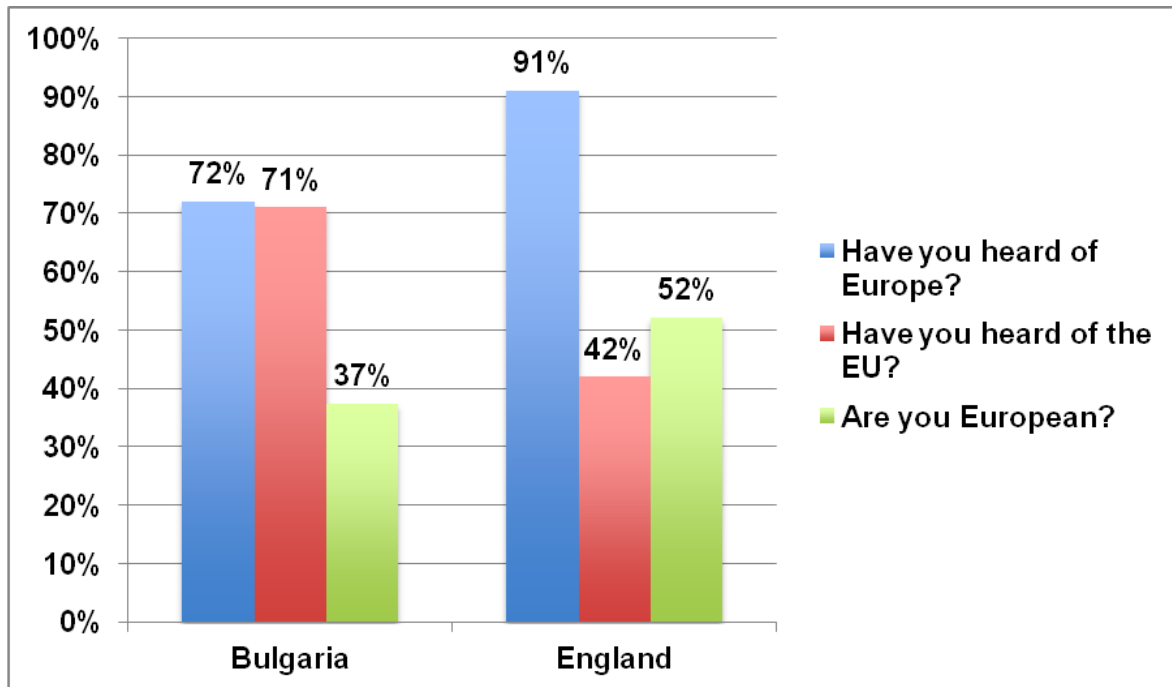


Figure 1. Children's European Awareness and Identities in Bulgaria and England (N = 174).

Most did not recognize European personalities past or present, such as the European Commission president, key member states' leaders, or historical figures. Among more than 30 national and international key figures shown in the UK, the most recognizable face was that of U.S. President Barack Obama (Table 3). A total of 86.6% of the English children recognized Obama, followed by 82% who recognized Queen Elizabeth II and 77.6% who recognized then Prime Minister Gordon Brown. In Bulgaria, on the other hand, the three most recognizable faces belonged to national figures: Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (92.5%), the national revolutionary Vasil Levski (83.2%), and the mayor of the town where the children lived (76.6%). The U.S. president came in sixth with 55.1%—considerably lower than in the UK, which again suggests the banality of U.S. nationalism in the UK. Similarly, the U.S. flag was recognized by more UK children than the EU flag: As many as 86.6% had seen it, as opposed to 49% who recognized the EU flag. The opposite trend was evident in Bulgaria, where 84% recognized the EU flag and 46.7% the U.S. flag. In both countries the national flags were most recognizable of all.

Table 2. Children's Recognition of Key Symbols and People in Bulgaria and England (N = 174).

Recognition of symbol or person	Bulgaria		England	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
EU flag	90	84.1	33	49.3
U.S. flag	50	46.7	58	86.6
Country's European commissioner	47	43.9	4	6
European Commission president	5	4.7	0	0
U.S. president	59	55.1	58	86.6
National prime minister	99	92.5	52	77.6

Nonetheless, the trends of potential banal Europeanism in Bulgaria and banal Americanism in the UK evident in the recognition of symbols were not replicated at the level of identities. European identity was not particularly salient for children in either country but was slightly more salient among English children, who in general were not as exposed to or as aware of the key European symbols as Bulgarian children were. Only 20.6% of Bulgarian children chose the word *European* to describe themselves, in contrast to 28.4% of English children, $\chi^2(1, N = 174) = 6.25, p = 0.001$. Similarly, while only 37.4% of Bulgarian children replied yes when asked "Are you European?" the proportion among English children was 52.2%, $\chi^2(1, N = 174) = 3.71, p = 0.05$. This finding is interesting because it suggests that the majority of children in Bulgaria have not internalized European identity despite their constant exposure to European symbols and subsequent recognition of them. Children were not asked identity questions related to Americanism because the interviews were conducted in the same period in which the media texts were recorded, whereas the finding about the banal flagging of Americanism came to light only subsequently. However, it is safe to assume that, if asked whether they are American, the majority of children would reply negatively.

Eurobarometer Trends

The Eurobarometer data suggest that the majority of the two countries' adult populations likewise do not endorse European identity. Overall, 43% in Bulgaria and 28% in the UK defined themselves as European. Different factors potentially influenced adults, in that more Bulgarian than UK adults reported feeling European whereas the opposite trend was evident among children. Detailed explanations are explored elsewhere (Slavtcheva-Petkova & Mihelj, 2013) but a possible reason is that Bulgarian children find it more difficult to endorse the kind of ideal identity offered by the media (and other socialization agents) of a Europe they are constantly trying to catch up with but still lag behind, whereas parents have had the opportunity to engage more fully with the whole process of Europeanization and to endorse it more wholeheartedly. When Bulgaria joined the EU, the children in the sample were only 6 and 7 years old.

Conclusion

The comparison and contrast between the banal flaggings of symbols in the media and the collective identities of 9- and 10-year-old children as media audiences, as well as the general trends observed in representative surveys among adults, suggest that although there are trends of banal Europeanism on the level of symbols and their recognition in Bulgaria and of banal Americanism in the UK, this is certainly not the kind of banal nationalism Billig (1995) describes in his seminal work. A number of key differences were noted. First, in Billig's (1995) Day Survey banal nationalism seemed to be manifested at the level of both symbol (flags displayed on buildings) and deixis (constant reference to a common collective national "us"), but in Bulgaria banal Europeanism operates only on the symbolic level. European stories featuring EU symbols such as the EU flag and European institutions constituted a substantial proportion of the coverage on Bulgarian TV, in contrast to the UK, where there were fewer European stories. Accordingly, Bulgarian children were considerably more aware of the EU and its symbols than English children were. But although an EU flag might be flown or other EU symbols might be constantly present in people's lives, as Cram (2009) claims, there is little reference to a common collective European "we." A national "us" seems differentiated from a European "them" in both Bulgaria and England. These findings partially confirm some aspects of Billig's central argument—namely, the importance of symbols and the occasional use of deictic pronouns in reference to a national "we." But neither country provided many instances of identification with Europe in the news. In most stories in Bulgaria, Europe is presented as the EU: a distant entity whose rules Bulgarians need to follow to become fully European. Unsurprisingly, the majority of Bulgarian children reject this wishful identity. Yet interestingly, more than half of English children endorse European identity, despite the invisibility of Europe on British TV. In this regard, the additional analysis suggests the heavy influence of other factors: socialization agents such as school and parents, travel opportunities, and socioeconomic status. This article's main theoretical contribution is to demonstrate that the media/identity relationship is neither causal (Madianou, 2005) nor secure but depends on a range of contextual factors, and TV is only one identity resource among others. This article thus supports Skey's (2009) claim that national audiences are not uniform and age seems to be an important factor, because Bulgarian children and adults felt different degrees of attachment to the EU. The study contributes meaningfully to the field of nationalism studies and the role of the mass media by showing how children are active participants in these processes. But whereas Bulgarian children were exposed to more banal manifestations of Europe and recognized European symbols more often than their British peers, who in turn were more exposed to key American "icons" and found them more recognizable, the study did not discover any significant link between the salience of these media representations and children's identities.

Furthermore, the study challenges Cram's (2001, 2009) expectation that banal Europeanism would work more or less in the same way as banal nationalism. The banality of Europeanism is apparent only on the symbolic level, not on the level of deixis. Even more problematic is the exploration of banal Americanism in the making, which in the UK is apparent in terms of symbols and recognition of key symbols and people, such as the U.S. flag and the U.S. president, but conspicuously lacking on the level of identification through deixis and potentially by people. Straubhaar's (1991) "cultural relevance or proximity" (p. 39) notion seems to provide a reasonable explanation of some of the trends observed, but it is far from helping to unpack the full picture, especially considering additional political factors such as

the UK's "special relationship" with the United States, which potentially contributes to America's greater salience on the media and public agenda there. The media appear to play a role in promoting this "special relationship" from a very early age. However, banal Americanism is not as universally widespread as Billig assumes, and the role of the media differs across national contexts. Further work is needed to elaborate the concept of banal Americanism by conducting a separate audience study coupled with a contextual analysis.

In sum, this study's findings might surprise explorers of banal nationalism and its derivatives, because although they affirm some basic tenets of Billig's argument, especially the importance of symbols on both a national and a supranational level and of deixis in terms of reference to a national "we" (whatever that "we" is, in the UK context), they also challenge Billig's (1995) core assumption about a default link between banal representations and identities. In explorations of the potential for both banal Europeanism in European countries and banal Americanism in non-U.S. contexts, this link seems to be missing. It may be that this link is much more straightforward when exploring banal nationalism within national borders, and that Billig (1995), when formulating his notion, did not extend his scope to supranational banal identities or national identities operating outside national borders. Nonetheless, because even his original work lacked an audience study, it took the strength and omnipresence of national identities for granted rather than exploring them. Therefore, this link is worth exploring in future studies, even those on banal nationalism.

Finally, this study has a number of limitations. First, the audience study is not representative, and although it reveals interesting trends, further work is needed to establish whether these trends are generalizable. A larger, representative quantitative study in several European countries could work toward this end. Moreover, the audience study was conducted in only one of UK's the four nations and is not, therefore, indicative of the views of children from the other three nations, where the interplay between the national and the European dimensions is likely to be different. Second, the media content analysis is entirely based on a sample representative of the specific group studied at a particular period of time rather than of the overall population. Third, the Eurobarometer data are used as a general indicator rather than a proper measure of levels of European identifications, precluding firm conclusions about the proliferation of European identity. Further, the way the Eurobarometer surveys measure European identity is problematic because of the inherent antagonism between the European and national identities in the question. Investigation of the relationship between children's national and European identities, however, showed that such an antagonism rarely exists (Slavtcheva-Petkova & Mihelj, 2013). Similarly, the quantitative measures of European identity in this study, though fairly limited, are nonetheless representative of the qualitative findings that became apparent during the interviews. Finally, the study was conducted at the beginning of the most recent economic crisis and worldwide recession, which adversely affected some eurozone countries. This crisis has arguably led to more European media coverage, and it will be interesting to see whether and how the increased coverage affects the process of European identity formation.

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