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**Imagined communities:**  
Banal nationalism in Barcelona “Locutorios”

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## SUMMARY:

Despite the huge competition that has emerged as a result of the on-going increase in the available ways one can connect to telephone and computer networks, Barcelona call shops, known as “locutorios,” are relatively successful small businesses. As a result of our research using a collective ethnographic fieldwork of “locutorios” in Barcelona, we articulated Michael Billig’s concept of *banal nationalism* and Benedict Anderson’s concept of *imagined community* to show that national imagined communities can be found in these public spaces of connection. The remarkable relevance of national identifications in these spaces, which paradoxically symbolize globalization as few other places do, is not only that they occur without apparent conflicts, but they also allow for coexistence and facilitate the emergence of new imagined communities.

## KEY WORDS:

Call Shops; Banal Nationalism; Imagined Communities; Information and Communication Technologies; Ethnography; Migration.

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# 1 Introduction

About fifteen years ago, Michael Billig introduced the concept of *banal nationalism* in order to describe nationalism's diffuse form in contemporary societies, especially in consolidated nation-states. Banal nationalism is an ideological habit closely related to daily life (Billig, 2006). It is neither an intermittent discourse, nor a condition for social mobilization during war or other times of crisis, but instead is a permanent condition of daily life in established nations. Banal nationalism is an omnipresent mechanism in these societies; it orients perception and makes identification between a language, a culture, a territory and a political community natural (Billig, 2006). The concept of banal nationalism allows us to reflect on the process of how the nation holds together during interwar (or intercrisis) periods, when discursive exaltation is not actually present and the nation continues to exist through everyday practices that are apparently anecdotal and insignificant.

A decade earlier, Benedict Anderson suggested that nations should be understood as *imagined* political communities, stating that “it is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1991: 6). In this article, we link both concepts and show how they allow us to understand part of the success that call shops, known as “locutorios” in Spain, have in cities and towns with a significant migrant population. The *communities* imagined in the “locutorio”, through *banal nationalism practices*, make these shops more than just a place to perform an economic operation, such as paying to place a phone call.

“Locutorios” are small businesses where people go to make calls or to connect to the Internet. As we will see in this article, they are also spaces of connection, where people, technologies, communication systems and national communities are assembled and hybridise. According to the stories that the owners tell, these call shops are not big businesses. In fact, there is some consensus between the owners and managers of the various call shops that nobody can get rich with a “locutorio,” and some report that they even lose money. In this case, some owners and managers may keep the businesses running for community reasons, if not for romantic ones.

These call shops are also an economic anomaly from the side of the user, since their rates are not always competitive. As we have seen, making a call from a “locutorio” may be more expensive than making it from your own home using a prepaid long-distance calling card pur-

chased in the same “locutorio” and other shops that sell the cards. The rates may also be more expensive than calling without a prepaid card and instead using the special fares offered by certain telephone companies for the same purpose. Of course, the “locutorio” prices are not at all competitive in front of the possibility of making a VoIP call, something that can also be accomplished in the “locutorio” itself, paying only for the Internet connection. What then, can these call shops offer so that users continue to use them as a priority choice for their communications needs?

One possible answer to both of the economic anomalies lies in the fact that new networks and communities emerge in these spaces, where people from different nations share a similar migratory experience. Even if inside the “locutorios,” we find numerous examples of banal nationalism that are usually linked to the place’s dominant community-of-origin, these instances fail to separate their users. They are compatible with the emergence of new supranational, or extra-national, imagined communities.

To demonstrate this, we use the field notes obtained between 2003 and 2008, using the framework of two studies<sup>1</sup> [1], during our visits to various call shops in Barcelona and surrounding areas. During these visits, we carried out observations, both participant and non-participant in nature, and talked to the managers and users in the call shops.

In previous publications, we have presented other characteristics of these “locutorios.” For example, we presented the threefold public image of a call shop: as a migrant’s place; a business site; and as a place where seemingly “irregular” activities can take place (the latter, of course, strongly mediated by the events surrounding Madrid’s March 11, 2004 massacre) (Garay, Martínez & Peñaranda, 2004).

In addition, we presented the contribution of call shops in the maintenance and consolidation of ties and relationships; both with the distant countries-of-origin and with the other users who share the call shops’ space (Peñaranda, 2005, 2008). We also discussed the complexity of call shops and their relevance in the conformation of the migratory experience (Peñaranda, Vitores, Martínez, Muñoz-Justicia & Iñiguez-Rueda, 2011), as well as their linking and relational characteristics, presenting

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1. The studies were “Psychosocial and cultural impact of techno-scientific innovations: Processes of change and social reproduction associated with the implementation and use of information and communication technologies” (SEC2002-03446) and “Psychosocial and cultural impact of techno-scientific innovations: The role of public spaces for accessing ICT in the processes constituting social identity and social networks” (SEJ2006-15655-C02-01/SOCI), both supported by the Dirección General de Investigación (DGI) of Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología.

them as stations of associations (Iñiguez-Rueda, Martínez, Muñoz-Justicia, Peñaranda-Cólera & Vitores-González, 2012).

Finally, we examined their contribution to the construction of transnational families (Peñaranda, 2005, 2008, 2010; Peñaranda et al., 2011) and of other social networks and identities (Martínez, Penaranda-Cólera, Vitores & Iñiguez-Rueda, 2011). In continuing our project on the description of “locutorios,” the goal with this article is to introduce the theoretical concepts that can help us to understand the reasons for the call shops’ success, something that can be done by showing their “national” and “imagined” qualities.

Despite prophecies that predicted a future of identity and cultural homogenization (Amin, 1999; Robertson, 1992; Tomlinson, 1999, but see also Smith, 1990 for quite the opposite opinion), to possess a nationality is still important for the inhabitants of this globalized world. Actually, to have a nationality is not an option; it is not something that we can decide to remove. Even if we may choose to change our nationality by fulfilling certain requirements, which is never easy, we cannot choose to forgo having a nationality.

Being stateless is always an accident, is hardly a premeditated condition and is never a product of your will. There are two reasons for this, one legal and the other symbolic. Legally, statelessness is rare because there are strong restrictions on the possibility of living outside of a national framework. Passports or any identifying documents, such as birth certificates, are essential for the modern nation-state to let individuals, who are called citizens by the virtue of those documents, reside inside its borders and not consider them a foreign body. In addition, the possibility of democratic participation depends upon the documents one can obtain.

Symbolically, statelessness is rare because the modern identification between nation, language, culture, territory and state generates a social pressure toward the defence of one’s own nation as the only way of safeguarding one’s language and traditions (Feliu, 2004). A pressure emerges from the modern social environment to identify with, and defend, “what is ours,” “the land of our ancestors,” “the language of our fathers,” etc. This situation can be described as a globalized nationalism, and involves the legal and symbolic contexts in which current migration flows occur.

In this context, even in the most stable nations and in those without relevant identity discussions, nationality is permanently brought to the minds of the citizens. Michael Billig (2006) shows how a diffuse nationalism is always behind political speeches given at any moment, even if the leaders of the states do not explicitly belong to nationalist movements or political parties.

This author points out the fact that the nation is not only recalled in policies, but also in cultural products, textbooks, streets, official buildings, balconies, and even in the structure of newspapers that utilize the traditional separation between *national* and *international* sections (Billig, 2006). Because of its harmlessness and familiarity, this remembrance, or re-creation of the nation, goes unnoticed for the majority of citizens; it is integrated into everyday life.

However, it is not unnoticed by newcomers, who not only see their foreignness as constantly being remembered, both in the interactions they must have with institutions and in their daily relationships in an often hostile environment, but who also receive those fuzzy signs that recreate the very existence of the country where they live interpellating them as “aliens.” Anderson (1991) stated that what they perceive is the style with which the nation is imagined.

In this context, “locutorios” also offer their own style of (re)creating nations and their own banal nationalism. Users also come from more or less consolidated nation-states, with their own banal nationalist practices, and call shops are a space in which to rediscover them. However, in the same way that these are spaces where original imagined national communities are recreated, new communities are also created around the migration imaginary.

### 1.1 “Locutorios” as a community technological space

In recent years, in most Spanish towns and cities, different spaces have emerged that offer access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) services: libraries, telecentres, call shops and Internet cafés. These spaces have come to meet the growing demand for access to and use of the new technologies accompanying the context of globalization (Beck, 1998). This context is inserted into the dynamics that characterise the information-based society: the predominance of flows and the multiplication of interconnections (Castells, 2000).

Libraries and telecentres, usually promoted by public or non-profit organizations, are “physical spaces that provide public access to ICTs for educational, personal, social and economic development” (Gómez, Hunt, & Lamoureux, 1999) and they offer these services for free. In addition to free access to ICT, these spaces also play a formative role in providing expertise in the use of new technologies for people who are at risk of “digital exclusion.” This is why libraries and telecentres primarily have a community status. In the goals and activities of these institutions, the desire to contribute to mitigating the effects of the digital divide is very

present (Peñaranda et al., 2011).

On the other hand, Internet cafés and call shops are small businesses, so they have a primary purpose of earning a profit. However, even being commercial spaces, they also encourage technological socialization and therefore contribute to the closing or overcoming of the digital divide. Over the past decade, “locutorios” have emerged as the quintessential urban spaces where one can gain access to various technological services at affordable prices.

It should be noted that despite the great boom that this type of shop has experienced in Spain, it seems that the term (and even the space) “locutorio” does not have a global character (Martínez et al., 2011). The concept, and space, of the *Internet café* is more widespread in different countries of the world, as evident by some work and research produced on these spaces in Mexico (Castro & Zepeda, 2004), Taiwan (Chao, Wang, Lin & Lee, 2005), India (Chawla & Behl, 2006), Turkey (Gürol & Sevindik, 2006), London (Wakeford, 2003), United Kingdom (Lee, 1999; Liff & Steward, 2003), Botswana (Mauta & Mutula, 2004), Tanzania (Loth, 2001), China (Hong & Huang, 2005), Sweden (Ferlander & Timms, 2006), Scotland and Norway (Laegran & Stewart, 2003) and Trinidad (Miller, 2004).

The concept, and space, that refers to the term *call shop* seems to be more localized in the Spanish state (Aramburu, 2002; Beltrán, Oso & Ribas, 2006; Cavalcanti, 2004; Garay et al., 2004; Martínez & Peñaranda, 2005; Parella, 2004; Peñaranda, 2005, 2008, 2010; Serra, 2006). Similar terminology and uses are also present in two other countries: Argentina and France. In Argentina, call shops almost always occurs within Internet cafes, with both types of spaces being of interest to the social sciences researchers in Argentina (Finquelievich & Prince, 2007; Moya & Álvarez, 2007; Schiavo, 2004). In France, similar spaces are called *teleboutiques* or *taxiphones* (Scopsi, 2002, 2004).

“Locutorios” and Internet cafés may both be of interest to the academic world, but there are also some differences between them that go beyond being small technological businesses. For example, in Spain, Internet cafés typically only offer Internet access, coupled with the sale of snacks and soft drinks. Users are young video game players or tourists, according to the area of the city where they are located. “Locutorios,” on the other hand, are spaces that have a greater range of services, including the following: Internet access, the ability to place telephone calls, the sale of prepaid phone cards, the ability to photocopy and send faxes, cell phone recharging, the ability to send money and packages overseas and, in many cases, the sale of imported food, snacks and soft drinks.

Although these services are not directed at a single specific population, the in-transit or migrant populations are the primary users of call shops.

In Paris, spaces analogous to call shops (the *teleboutiques* or *taxiphones*, that also offer similar services as call shops, including the possibility of accessing and making use of technology) are characterised as *ethnic shops* by Claire Scopsi (2002, 2004). Located in neighbourhoods with a high migrant population, they function as spaces for meeting and socializing, where transnational links are also established.

This type of business is also sometimes attributed to having a dynamizing and revitalizing role in the social fabric of the neighbourhood where the shops are located (Aramburu, 2002). According to Pau Serra (2005: 14), *ethnic trade* is “an economic activity under the initiative of one or several entrepreneurs of foreign origin and has the objective [of selling] a product (bazaars, butchers...) or a service (hair salons, phone calls...) in a shop.” Other definitions attribute the *ethnic* character to the type of products and services that are offered and the target population for such products (understood *a priori* as a specific *ethnic* collective).

However, we cannot conclude that call shops are spaces used exclusively by migrants, as they coexist and share space and services with students, tourists and the autochthonous population in general<sup>2</sup>. Therefore “locutorios” are considered to be spaces containing a diverse population of people and different types of technology that enable communication, contact and the exchange of information. This is another important feature of call shops: the characteristic of being a relational space, both at a face-to-face level and at a virtual one (Gil & Vall-Ilovera, 2006; Íñiguez-Rueda et al., 2012; Martínez & Peñaranda-Cólera, 2005).

Parella (2004) points out that the opening of this kind of business has nothing to do with migrants’ cultural factors, on the contrary, employment and self-employment respond to other structural factors directly related to the difficulties of the immigrant population with gaining access to the labour market of the host society. Self-employment, in this respect, stands as a form of subsistence linked to the ties that are woven throughout the communities.

Community networks provide information on financing, contacts and suppliers, as well as facilitate mutual aid, contribute to the formation of future entrepreneurs and, of course, provide a cheap labour force,

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2. The term “autochthonous” should only be read in this article as referring to those people whose migration is no longer a part of their personal history, and may be part of their family history although it is more or less remote in time or generations. It must not be interpreted as a position of more legitimacy with respect to anyone in terms of their residence in a country.



as Light et al. points out (1992, in Parella, 2004). Although it is arguable that the “locutorio” is an ethnic business, there is no doubt that in these spaces, networks get materialized, not only in terms of job searches or self-employment, but also in other daily life dimensions where the shops constitute an element of mutual support and relationship formation (Íñiguez-Rueda, 2012; Martínez et al., 2011; Peñaranda et al., 2011; Richer & Doré, 2004).

The kind of news advertised on the bulletin boards of “locutorios,” as well as the news that circulates by word of mouth, are examples of how these spaces have become one of the nodes of migrant population social networks. Notifications about job offers and job searches, home and/or rooms to rent, offers for legal advice and obtaining papers, and ads regarding insurance and leisure activities are shared and exchanged in call shops, making it a place one can go to find information when looking for “clues” about how to move into the host society and to learn strategies for managing everyday life.

Therefore, the “locutorio” is considered to be a necessary step and, as we shall see later, as a meeting place where new forms of relationships and social cohesion emerge between the individuals that frequent the shops. This is an idea that stems from the conversations we heard in call shops and the stories users shared with us: one goes to a call shop to make a phone call or to connect to the Internet, yes, but he or she also goes to find a friend or neighbour with whom to share daily life stories, to ask for advice or just to be there and talk. It appears that inside “locutorios,” the continuity of the migratory experience is not only determined by the technological use, but also by the dynamics generated from the appropriation made of these spaces (Peñaranda et al., 2011).

This characterisation of a “locutorio” as a meeting place, as a space where users build friendship and community ties, and as a place where social networks strengthen, emphasises its relational character on a face-to-face level. But we cannot forget the virtual dimension, which is mediated and perpetuated by the use of technology that allows “locutorio” users to make a phone call, to send an email or a digital picture or to hold a conversation through Skype with those who remain in the user’s place of origin. These daily links and frequent contacts allow us to speak, for example, of the possibility of establishing transnational linkages and, more specifically, of the possibility of *producing* long distance families, or transnational families (Peñaranda, 2005, 2008, 2010; Peñaranda et al., 2011).

In these places, the distance between countries is made evident with each call and with each instance of sending money parcels. This distance

allows “locutorios” to emerge as a symbolic and legal articulation of the state-of-origin and the state where the user is currently located. Being physically located in a specific country, the call shop becomes a space where services like the management of official documents, the transmission of bureaucratic knowledge and the discovery of the parallels between nation-states are provided.

## 2 Researching in “locutorios”

We carried out the fieldwork in the different call shops of Barcelona and its metropolitan areas between 2003 and 2008, within the framework of the two broader studies mentioned above. The generic goal of both studies was to assess the psychosocial and cultural impacts that techno-scientific innovations associated with the development of ICT entail. More specifically, we imagined that public access to ICT spaces had to play an important role. It was important to understand that this relevance would be rooted, not only in its use as a tool for communication and the transmission of information, but also in the active participation in the generation of new forms of social relationships and new forms of structuring social networks. The latter would be generated virtually and face-to-face, so that they would constitute new personal and collective identities.

The research was conducted through the use of the following ethnographic techniques: observation, participant-observation and interviews. The desire to conduct a study inspired by ethnography arose from the need to work with a type of research that would allow us to complete the usual ways of working with interviews, typical of recent qualitative social psychology practices, with the description of the researched spaces and their uses. This methodology provided us with both the possibility of interpreting the situations generated in them and also an opportunity to understand them.

Ethnography means *a way of addressing the world*, rather than simply being a set of techniques that allows you to gather data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Ethnography can be carried out by focusing on the meanings and perceptions of people in specific social contexts by conducting observational, descriptive, interpretive and comprehensive tasks, allowing one to account for the meanings of the practices of the managers and users of call shops. Ethnography is inductive, focusing on a specific context and recognizing the potential of research done in specific locations. These aspects are especially relevant for inquiring into the *national* or *imagined* meanings that people give to call shops, the objects

contained in them and the communities that inhabit them.

The search for information about the presence of “locutorios” in Barcelona and Catalonia involved a difficult journey through different databases and agencies, as well as through the different services of the local and regional authorities (the Chamber of Commerce, the headquarters of city districts, the service of urban planning for the city, the Barcelona Institute of Statistics and the Statistical Institute of Catalonia). These authorities could not provide us with an exact, or even an approximate number, of call shops in Barcelona and the metropolitan area.

In the absence of specific records, we tried an alternative method of accessing the needed information by searching the Tax for Economic Activities (IAE) database, as well as researching documents pertaining to business registration and opening license requests. Once again, researching the information provided when businesses register presented several limitations since, in the absence of a specific code for the activity of call shops, the entities could be included in several categories of operating licenses (like, for example, code 761: telephone services or code 769: other telecommunications services). We also found that some call shops are often recorded under the code 999: other NCA Services, which is the acronym for the Spanish translation of “Not Included in Other Categories”).

The fact that call shops could be included within several categories, as well as the lack of warranty regarding the updated status of this information, made it impossible to know, with any certainty, the amount of call shops existing in Barcelona at that moment. Even when the Barcelona City Council Urbanism Services finally sent us a document detailing the number of Internet cafés and existing call shops in each district of the city, this information was based on the activity licenses and had very little correspondence to the actual number of “locutorios” we recounted on our walks through Barcelona’s neighbourhoods during the field work.

Serra (2005), in his work on ethnic trade in Ciutat Vella, refers to this difficulty with accessing official information. Serra solves this problem by performing a “manual counting” of ethnic shops. For instance, the researcher says that in 2004, there were 31 call shops in the Ciutat Vella District in Barcelona. In our case, the research was conducted in a considerably larger area (Barcelona metropolitan area), so we decided to continue without that data.

Ultimately, the fieldwork occurred at 16 “locutorios” in different Barcelona districts (Ciutat Vella, Sant Antoni, Fort Pienc, Sants, Poble Sec, Eixample and Gracia), as well as in several municipalities of the metropolitan area of Barcelona (specifically, in Cerdanyola del Vallès,

Sabadell and Castellar del Vallès). The locations were selected by each researcher according to the criteria of familiarity, accessibility or heterogeneity of the sample. The researchers conducted 27 open interviews with the contacts made in the call shops.

Besides the research personnel of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Department of Social Psychology affiliated with the research groups GESCIT<sup>3</sup> and JovenTIC<sup>4</sup>, the field work also involved students from the final year of the undergraduate psychology program, as well as those pursuing a master's degree in social psychology and doctoral-level research students in social psychology. All of the students were previously trained in qualitative techniques for the collection and interpretation of data through ad-hoc seminars and relevant courses for their degrees. The researchers attended weekly research seminars in order to comment on the daily incidences involved in the fieldwork. In those sessions, we answered questions regarding interaction in the field through the strategies of inclusion and contact with the users and managers, as well as questions regarding note taking, writing diaries or interview transcribing.

Due to the diversity of the researchers' life trajectories and personal characteristics, the ways in which they were present in the "locutorio" were substantially different. In some cases, the researchers were Latin Americans conducting research in the call shops where they previously were customers, requiring them to be open about their new status at the beginning of the fieldwork. In cases where the researchers weren't previously this specific "locutorio" customers, integration into the "locutorio" occurred relatively smoothly, since they could present themselves as both researchers and as other call shop users. They were able to explain their life experiences, which were similar to the experiences of the other clients and even the staff that ran the call shops.

In some cases, the researchers neither required the use of the call shop's services on a regular basis nor shared the personal experience of migration. In these instances, integration into the "locutorio" was more difficult, since the researchers felt that their continued presence there was not expected. Ultimately, in almost all cases, the situation was resolved without serious issues and the presence of the researchers was well accepted, with the users and staff showing a general willingness to accept the research. The research seemed to be viewed as an opportunity to share their migration experiences.

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3. Research Group for Social Studies in Science and Technology (<http://psicologiasocial.uab.cat/gescit>).

4. Young People and Information and Communication Technologies(<http://psicologiasocial.uab.cat/joventic>).

The interviews demonstrated the special interests the migrants had in explaining their experiences, both those experiences involving distance and separation from their beloved ones, and the experiences that relate to difficulties with bureaucracy, treatment and reception of the local population, or economic difficulties of everyday life.

### **3 The national community imagined in the “locutorio”**

National identity cannot be thought of as only involving a specific physical territory. Migration and diaspora have generated nations that have a large number of citizens abroad, scattered in different geographical locations. In our fieldwork, we can see, for example, how call shops can become an extension of the national territory, allowing for participation in its politics.

Users of a call shop ran by a Dominicana-Catalan mixed couple talked about politics and upcoming elections occurring in their country-of-origin, and did so in great detail, for example, arguing about the powers of the Central Electoral Board. Dominicans abroad can vote in the presidential election, and there are offices to register for the election located in the United States, Puerto Rico, Spain (Madrid and Barcelona), Venezuela and Canada. In the couple’s “locutorio,” there was some chatting about whether the current president was good or not, and some mobilization and encouragement to participate was perceived. Managers and customers talked about politics very openly and loudly. They argued for extended periods of time about corruption, justice and good governance.

Therefore, to talk about a nation is to speak not of a particular geographic space, but instead about an extended nationality. Within this extension, recognition and exaltation are produced, as are negotiations, syncretism and integrations through the participation of the diaspora. Anderson (1991) portrays this situation as a long-distance nationalism, to the extent that the national bonding of a “locutorio” can be literal, as in the case of a call shop in Carrer Floridablanca in Barcelona, which served as a physical extension of the Bolivian Consulate at a time when it became overwhelmed by the effort required by the increase in the arrival of Bolivians into the region.

It may also be figurative, as is the case with a call shop in the District of Sants, which promotes Colombian music concerts, and, at the same time, directly participates in the organization of the Colombian Independence Day celebration, as well as advertises for businesses as varied as dental clinics, party rooms, dancing lessons or Colombian cuisine.

Similarly, among the diverse services offered in the Dominican-owned call shop, there is the support of Dominican people in the search for employment or legal advice.

All of the above are signs of the banal nationalism that reproduces and sustains, both literally and figuratively, the existence of something like Colombia or the Dominican Republic. Obviously, politics and the bureaucracy that governments produce confirm its existence, but the mentioned activities also show the creation of an imagined community around the idea of the nation-of-origin.

Billig (1998) argues that banal nationalism reproduces daily the mindsets of nationalism, whether in collective rituals, such as sports, or in trivial details, such as the flags used on a cereal box to identify the languages in which ingredients are written. The existence of nations is a given fact shared between those who run the “locutorio,” its users and the researchers who registered it in the field diaries:

“Locutorio Latino” is the name of this place (...). Decorating the call shop you can see flags of Latin American countries and other objects characterizing different regions of the world, for example: plates with images of Venice, Venezuela buses, dolls with Cuban clothing, dancers from Brazil, a map of Colombia... (Journal of field researcher #3).

The appearance of Venice in this excerpt reminds us that the nation is not a natural fact but quite an arbitrary social construction. Other references are possible but unlikely: for example, although transportation, snowmen or ballerinas are probably from a particular region of their country, they are used as a visual metonymy of the whole country.

Through the concept of *banal nationalism*, Billig draws attention to the closer forms of nationalism, which are so familiar to us that we take them for granted. For instance, many call shops have watches with the time in different countries. In one of the shops, three wall clocks are labelled, each with the names of some countries (presumably, those countries which are relevant to their customers). In the first shop, clocks from Peru, Colombia and Ecuador were displayed. In the second, displayed clocks represented Senegal and Morocco, and in the third, Bolivia and Paraguay.

In “locutorios,” the watches with hours representing various cities, which are typical accessories in a stock market, a luxury hotel or a multinational company office, have been replaced by *national* hours. In them, a nation is equivalent to a time slot, something is also a real aspiration of

some extensive States having developed explicit policies of time unification within their territory, as it is the relatively recent case of Venezuela.

To Billig (2006), most of the nationalism that surrounds us is not an aggressive nationalism, but instead is as banal as the air we breathe and, therefore, is as difficult to see. At one point during our research, a researcher, when leaving the phone booth and paying for the time of use, realized that there were bracelets for sale at the counter. These bracelets were woven with coloured threads and had different names of people, countries and signs on them. The researcher found out the cost of the bracelet and inquired into whether the bracelets were brought in from another area. Upon finding out that the manager made them, he ordered a bracelet with the Mexican flag colours and the name of one of his roommates who originated from that country.

Billig argues that any defence, proof, or even the simplest sign of the existence of a nation, can be considered a sign of nationalism for repeatedly reiterating in the most anodyne gesture the process of materializing a community that first and foremost is an imagined one. “Locutorios” are filled with national images that are repeatedly present and that generally inform us of the origin of the owner and/or the manager of the call shop: flags, landmarks pictures, posters, food products, etc. They act as metonymic *references* or *representations* of the place-of-origin. This symbolic appropriation of the nation sometimes includes desktop wallpapers and screen savers with pictures and/or names of the country-of-origin.

In some call shops we can also find small convenience stores where products and food from abroad are sold. Background music also usually originates from the manager of the call shop’s country-of-origin, although it is rarely traditional music, but rather modern compositions that return us to the present day nation (for example, in one of the call shops, where the manager was Pakistani, there was always modern music playing that was produced on the Indian subcontinent). These objects (pictures, posters, flags, food, music, etc.) act as identity marks that refer to the country-of-origin. They cause recollection of the nation, not only in the physical space of the “locutorio,” but also in the emotions of their users:

...and the music... is like a Sunday... you come... because on Sunday they make food here from my country... here from Peru... I come on a Sunday they put music from my country... and it transports me... as if it were a Sunday at home... or there somewhere... in a restaurant... in my country... and I relax and enjoy... listening to music... and then I want to offer me a “clarita”... and you eat something from your country... and that thing of the people who stayed there... look... you

still suffer (researcher 4, interview 2).

Through the remembrance/commemoration and the feelings of belonging to a place or community, call shops have become a space of nation (re) construction (Garay et al., 2004). In other words, the nostalgia that is shown in the story of this woman through the image of the suffering and the transporting caused by food and music heightens the sense of the existence of something like “your country.”

That being said, we should not forget that call shops are *national* in two ways: first, as we have just said, they are spaces of re-creation of the manager’s or user’s nation-of-origin and, second, they are physically located in the territory attributed to a nation, euphemistically referred to as the *host nation*. These two (or sometimes more) nationalities of the “locutorios” are articulated in these spaces.

Here [in the “locutorio”] it is a place where you get so many things and in particular, I say this much, jobs. For example, a person already working in a household, in the case of women, when they know that Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Colombian girl... well, Venezuelan, either way, through her, they command getting someone for another family member of the Spanish employer, or here, the Catalan family, then, ‘look! “Find me a girl like you” and she brings another one and another one... and this results in employment. A girl already known by recommendation... she helps to get another job to other migrants (interview 1 researcher 5).

This excerpt highlights the fact that people who are looking for jobs, as well as those looking for workers, are characterised, first and foremost, with a single attribute, through their nationality. But it also shows the “locutorio” as a place where both groups of nationalities (here or there) are put in contact symbolically. It can even be noted the elaboration of a complex national recognition to qualify that one can be seeking someone to work for a “family member of the Spanish employer, or here, the Catalan family.”

Paradoxically, continuing with the analysis of the extract, this *national identity* is often a *migrated identity* that brings together a group of people who share a migratory experience. In this way, the “locutorio” is articulated as a national and transnational space, where national identity, shared or not, becomes an excuse to share in the migratory experience. This experience makes not only your existence easier, but also makes coexistence easier. The aforementioned objects offer a space for the construction of shared national imaginaries, although they are not always



common imaginaries: to the national imaginaries of the “locutorio” communities, are added the national imaginaries of the host nation, which are shared between all users, whatever their country of origin:

On papers also... when I did the renewal of my papers... then..... I asked Marlene... and someone... I don't know. Mario or somebody... of those who were there “ah yes because you need this, you need that... but you have to go there” or “Hey... better go there to the SCAI and ask well”... the common that we have among us, because I don't know... I think that we help us... a little... (researcher 4, interview 1).

The underlined text in the previous quotation highlights the emergence of a community. “The common we have among us” and that which is within this community of people are interchangeable, since each represents the community, for example, “Mario or somebody of those who were there.” The strategies that people follow to manage their presence in the host society are shared, and at the same time, the strategies demonstrate how the people handle their mutual recognition (Garay et al., 2004). The “locutorio” is a place where one can ask administrative or bureaucratic questions so that one can learn about the documentation required (photocopies, passport, documents, etc.) in order to perform various tasks, such as family reunification, where parents begin to bring their sons and daughters with them.

It is remarkable that mutual recognition means recognizing the nation-of-origin in each other. When referring to anecdotes of people who found a job or met people in call shops, the most common descriptive is their nationality: “a guy from Peru”, “a gentleman from Argentina”, etc. Thus, in a *banal* way, each person is first seen and presented according to the national origin. It is precisely the non-conflicting character of this identification that, at the same time, both shows and guarantees naturalizing potential: each of us *belongs* to a country in an unimportant way. Maybe it is not as it should be, but at least this is how things *are*.

In the context of banal nationalism, the idea of an imagined community is not trivial. On the contrary, the shared imagery of coming from the same state is powerful and comforting, according to call shop users. As mentioned during one interview, the idea of being with someone from South America is warming, although “if it is Peruvian, better.” The interviewee responds that it is comforting because it supplements the family that is not there.

The nationalist discourse that presents the homeland as one big family touches specifically migrants, who can more easily replace a “fa-

mily” metaphor based on kinship with one based on the nation-state of origin. This sense of community can be demonstrated through the perception of a shared language (“we were more interested in speaking together, we knew, I don’t know, a jargon that you say... well, they understand it...”) or common feelings (“the same feeling”, “They’d understand exactly how I feel... like we are in the same position”), which cause the appearance of an *other like me* in the following excerpt, the *intimate different one*:

the thing is as my boyfriend only speaks with... my boyfriend has his world... and it is far away from the call shops and South American people... mmh... he relates with very Catalan people... and they have their world ( researcher 4, interview 1).

Actually, the shared language and common feelings are two faces of the same coin. Through both, the idea is expressed of the social comfort that conveys recognizing another person as an equal. An imaginary equality occurs, but with very specific outcomes, such as the possibility that your interlocutor understands you without excessive detours or explanations. This understanding takes place thanks to the similarity of the lived experiences (“we have experienced the same ... or lived the same...”), which causes similar affects (“feelings are very similar... feelings are very, very, very similar...”), and contrasts with those which may have autochthonous people (“no, here they would not understand you... or... or... they understand... but... they do not feel... do not feel...” “for they haven’t experienced it... they do not feel it... that’s it...”). This contrast is essential in order to understand how the unfamiliar or unknown user, *the same other*, from the “locutorio” becomes, under a shared imagined community, someone who “has lived what you have” and who allows you to return to your “original” self, compensating for the nostalgia felt “even for five minutes” when “speaking as you spoke there.”

### 3.1 The new imagined communities in the “locutorios”

The above did not intend to show the operation of national or ethnic, categorization in call shops, but instead, it is a sample of how diverse communities are built in these spaces through the use of banal nationalism, which is not to say that call shops are nationalist spaces. Actually, any ethnic or national affiliation of these places presents numerous limitations that preclude their configuration as nationalist spaces. These limitations arise for at least three reasons: the unclear nationality of the

owner, the heterogeneity of its clientele and the emergence of new communities in these spaces.

First, the geographical origin of the call shop's owner is not always evident. Although there is a shared belief that owners of call shops are foreigners or immigrants, there are call shops where the owner is Catalan and/or Spanish, as reported by the people managing the shops. Serra (2005) stated that the supposed fact of the foreign ownership of call shops, and thus of any *ethnic* business, cannot be generalized.

Second, similar to *halal* butchers, certain hair salons or even with call shops themselves, at first sight, the businesses seem to be aimed exclusively at immigrant users (we could even say that they are geared towards a specific *ethnic* collective). However, a diverse clientele frequents these spaces. As noted by Aramburu (2002), locals frequent some *halal* butchers, as well as certain Arab or Caribbean hairdressers, whether because the patrons are in the neighbourhood, because the patrons appreciate the shop's products or services or because of the business' lower prices.

The same concept applies to call shops since, although we have nicknamed them "*the Dominican call shop*", "*the Pakistani call shop*", etc. in our field diaries (be it because the manager may have such nationality or because the elements that decorate the space connote this nationality), the shop's services and products are not directed at a specific population. For example, a "locutorio" run by Dominicans will not limit calls to the Dominican Republic, but it will allow for calls placed to other countries or geographical areas.

Call shops, for the kind of products and services they furnish, are not intended for an *a priori* specific *ethnic* community or a specific nationality, but rather, they are directed "to a religiously and nationally transversal clientele" (Aramburu (2002). That is, they orient themselves towards covering the *new* demands of the whole population, be it immigrant or not. In our fieldwork, we observed a heterogeneity of locals and tourists who frequented the call shops. Locals and tourists use information and communication technologies in a similar manner to the migrant or in-transit population: students surf the web, guys play games, girls chat, tourists check their e-mail, housewives charge mobile phones, etc.

Third, the social networks that arise from the ease of ICT connections not only generate the recreation of an imagined community, but they also produce a multiplicity of imagined communities. In call shops, a specific imagined community of a particular origin is recreated, in addition to other "imagined communities," such as those that refer to the entire world region where the country-of-origin is situated: Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America or Europe.

An example of how the experience of migrants is linked to the creation of imagined communities of a broader scope than national communities is found in “locutorios” oriented towards Indian or Pakistani customers. Despite clashes between Pakistan and India, in these call shops there is a good relationship between people from both countries. This non-conflicting relationship is undoubtedly tied to the fact that in Barcelona, both groups share the experience of being migrants, so they share similar difficulties linked to rejection or stigma, and therefore also share feelings, as we previously mentioned. The national imagined community is diffused in favour of a regional imagined community (with which they share difficulties and rejection by the local population, etc.), which prevails in the interaction at the “locutorio” (and possibly in other contexts of interaction) over the conflicts in the countries-of-origin, allowing contact, relationships and even friendships.

For these reasons, the adjective *ethnic* does not characterise these spaces well enough, nor does the adjective *national*, although it is true that both clearly correspond to at least an important part of the practices taking place in call shops. This *ethnic/national* character instead refers to the symbolism (photos, flags, music, posters, screensavers, etc.) that is found in call shops. These symbols act as a unifying element for certain groups, forming the imagined community.

Many of the studies developed around the concept of *ethnic* commerce did not intend to inquire about the socio-political and ideological implications of the term *ethnic* as a social category, and it is not the goal of this study to do so with the term *national*. While they are problematic, these concepts allow us to better understand what happens in call shops. But one has to be careful with the socio-political implications of using the adjectives *ethnic* and *national*, since the use of the terms can contribute to the reification of certain recurring representations of immigrants and their activities (Aramburu, 2002).

In fact, imagined communities not only conform to the meanings brought from the community-of-origin, but also with the interactions and syncretism occurring at the places-of-destination. There, people not only meet with others of the same national origin with whom they may share certain affinities, similarities, etc., but they also meet with members of the local population and migrants from other countries, therefore having to also negotiate multiple meanings, including those related to nationality. This is especially true with stereotypes and prejudices whose negotiation implies a constant game of confirmation or denial of what one really “is.” For example, some Argentinians that are not from Buenos Aires show a willingness to clarify their origin (“...but I’m from Cordoba”)

to set themselves apart from the Buenos Aires Argentinians and the stereotypes that are often associated with Argentinians who come from the capital city.

## 4 Conclusions

Autochthonous banal nationalism is certainly not so banal for immigrants. For this reason, the nationalism of call shops can be understood as an *opposing* nationalism. As Billig (2006) says, in an *international* world, it is important for nations not to be confounded with each other or overlap, rather they must remain symbolically separated to preserve their *differences*. This national discourse can be found in some careful practices relating to the preservation of traditions, rites, accents, etc. This can be read in terms of opposition, of differentiation from the locals, of recognition of their identity and of the characteristics that enable them to differentiate and be identified (something that allows you to feel located, and gives you a sense of belonging to a particular place). These marks of identity are sometimes interpreted as problems relating to the integration into the host society or as a kind of identity closing that hinders this integration, but De la Haba and Santamaría (2004) point out the following:

In urban environments, the constitution of (self-)specific domains (even ethnically marked) is an immediate mode of accommodation that groups in [a] situation of multicultural cohabitation have. In these contexts, the identity claim of public space, its objects and their related physical referents[that] should not be interpreted univocally as a negation of coexistence, but rather as a reflection of the social or cultural distances, and above all, as a mode – varied, unfinished and subject to permanent reformulations or commitments – of managing departures and socio-cultural recognitions. (2004: 129)

In this sense, ethnic or identity marks that characterise “locutorios”, far from representing a lack of integration or a resistance to the values of the host community, show us the strategies that migrants use while seeking to participate in a way of life that involves recognition, which is something that, according to Taylor (1992), is a necessity for the creation of the modern *self* inserted in a multicultural world. However, it is also something that shows *de facto* that subjects are already integrated as they try to live their national membership in an alien national environment, thus appropriating this new space (Delgado, 1998).

The rootlessness that migrants can feel when leaving their country and the melancholy resulting from the experience of distance, as well as the estrangement from the experiences in a *new* society, can be relativized “by the experience of continuity in identity provided by being immersed in a network, a network where you meet equals with whom to share distance, mobility and the experience of the migrant” (Garay et al., 2004: 6). Both aspects (*shared national* identity and the access to vital information for migrants) contribute significantly to the success of Barcelona “locutorios.”

“Locutorios” are not only spaces containing technology, but are also places where migrants meet and share their experiences and concerns. Call shops are not only generating relationships with the places-of-origin mediated by technology, but are spaces that have been converted into meeting places for the migrant population where relationships are mediated by physical proximity and by sharing a space, rather than only being mediated by technological devices.

Continuity, variation or fluctuations in identity are, therefore, not only the result of technological use, but they also have to do with the dynamics generated inside places like call shops and the appropriations that users make of these spaces, transforming them into meeting places (Peñaranda, 2005). Apparently, part of the success of call shops comes from the creation of a space where all share something: the migratory experience, along with the experience of belonging to the same imagined community, first a national one and then a regional one.

For the moment, globalisation does not seem to produce a homogenizing effect on populations. Instead, it appears that the opposite occurs: the fact that globalization occurs in the context of globalised (banal) nationalism multiplies spaces and territories in which nationality is performed. Each time a nationality is performed, it renews its vigour. However, at the same time, these national identifications do not possess the strength of the traditional nationalist identification with a strong, antagonistic, conflictive, jesting and chauvinistic nation.

In the “locutorio,” manifestations of national identity are lived without apparent conflict. This does not imply that this is a “weak” identification. On the contrary, in the “locutorio”, as in much of the migrant’s daily life, the first identifying feature used is nationality, which is what gives one a self and is the first thing that someone recognizes in another individual.

Ethnographic techniques allowed us to research the imagined national senses of objects, people and communities, and at the same time, avoid the reification of those senses. They can offer us a dynamic por-

trait of the imagined nationalities, especially in their interaction with the local nationality and the nationalities of other migrants. This lets us see the process by which new communities may appear or old ones redefine themselves. The citizenship of a country is demonstrated in the “locutorio” when the formation of networks and the expression of emotions occur (Belli & Gil, 2009).

In this article, we have articulated the concepts of *imagined community* and *banal nationalism* in order to provide a description of a contemporary urban space. Both are complementary concepts and do not describe the same idea. However, both are required in order to offer a complex vision of the relationships lived in the “locutorio”: a space where emotions, experiences and identities articulate. Banal nationalism brings the imagined community – from the perception of a *banal* national item, like a postcard with a small flag on one side, emerges the imagined community. All of the signs of a national re-creation (for example, with objects of common use) reflect the more general representations of the nation. They are often items that do not represent the entire nation, but instead only represent the most popular parts, those often known through the tourist market. Still, objects of banal nationalism can serve as excuses to share the migratory experience and to facilitate coexistence through the creation of a new overriding community-building scenario and ultimately to generate a shared identity in terms of an (inter)national imagined community.

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