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## Introduction

### *Mapping Global Digital Cultures*

**Aswin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan**

*July Boys* (Sonti 2006), a documentary film about a software company in Bangalore that develops content for mobile phones (e.g., games and movie clips), opens on a gleaming, high-tech office space in which five young men discuss strategy for their latest software project. We learn that the headquarters of this company, July Systems, is in Santa Clara, California, and that many of the engineers and executives leading the product development office in Bangalore have lived and worked in Silicon Valley before moving back to India.

In exploring the cultural and business logics at work in this software company, the film focuses largely on the office interiors and situates the team's work routines within a transnational network involving tech capitals in India, the United States, and Western Europe. Glimpses of the world outside the office—shots of a noisy streetscape crowded with vehicles and pedestrians—cut quickly to an air-conditioned interior with a tastefully designed break room, neatly ordered cubicles, and a gleaming restroom with a waiting area that has a comfortable couch and a television set. In this swanky interior space, one that seems completely disembedded from the rest of the city, the founder and chief executive officer (CEO) Rajesh Reddy declares that people like him are “geography agnostic.” Other men working in the company also wax eloquent about entrepreneurial energies being unleashed and, on the whole, offer explanations of India's digital

revolution that rest on stories of individual talents and merit. Of course, Reddy-like figures are hardly unique to South Asia and emerge in accounts of digital culture in China, Ghana, and other parts of the world as well.<sup>1</sup>

If this kind of narrative of global mobility, seemingly unburdened by any economic, political, or sociocultural factors reveals one imaginary of the digital, another comes into view in the American television comedy *Silicon Valley*. In an episode titled “Daily Active Users,” we get a rare glimpse into the world of click-farms located in, as one article bluntly put it, “some third world country (think India or Bangladesh)” (Edwards 2016). Toward the end of the episode, a scene of a phone conversation involving the marketing manager of a digital platform start-up asking for “one thousand users every day for the next week” cuts to a shot of a South Asian man waking up in a shared hostel. As he gets ready for work and winds his way through bustling streets on his bicycle, electric wires, cables, air conditioners, and other banal things that make up life in urban South Asia come into view. Just as the nameless man sits down in front of a computer and we imagine a lone user in a dimly lit cybercafe, the camera zooms out to reveal a cavernous warehouse filled with hundreds of men and women working assiduously to generate and boost the number of daily active users, clicks, likes, tweets, and impressions for global digital companies.

Such starkly contrasting narratives and representations offer the dominant imaginaries for understanding digital cultures outside the Anglophone West—tech capitals, unfettered mobility, an expanding middle class, and the support of a neoliberal state, or, on the other hand, as sites for cheap and low-level software testing, call centers, pirate networks, and click-farms. Either way, geography and time seem to become irrelevant as do the historical, political-economic, and social dimensions of the media infrastructures, platforms, and varied user-practices that define digital cultures anywhere in the world today. If the jet-setting software entrepreneurs in *July Boys* imagine a “flat world” à la Thomas Friedman, American television’s take on contemporary digital culture conceives of the rest of the world largely in terms of immense distance and difference.

Steering clear of these distressingly familiar modes of apprehending a world marked by all manner of technological, financial, and cultural flows and frictions, this book analyzes the emergence and development of online cultures and, more broadly, the unfolding impact of digitalization in South Asia as constitutive of our global and digital present. Delinking the Internet from its North Atlantic trajectory, we argue that the digital revolution marks a decidedly global shift with distinct yet connected histories

and inevitably different trajectories, meanings, and effects depending on which part of the world one looks from. Positioning South Asia as part of an ongoing global transformation rather than as an exception or a site of cultural variation, we show that as with other moments of media transition, digital cultures in varied national and regional contexts are also shaped by transnational circulations of ideas, people, technologies, and capital, and are caught up in deeper histories than popular or academic discourses care to admit.

Building on what Guobin Yang (2015) calls “deep internet studies,” this book brings together a diverse group of scholars to examine the role of digital media technologies in reconfiguring the social, cultural, and political contours of South Asia and its diaspora. Collectively, we examine digital cultures in South Asia by situating the development of digital infrastructures, platforms, and users/publics within regional and global contexts while retaining a keen awareness of how the particularities of national, regional, and border-spaces open up opportunities to generate more nuanced accounts of how the digitalization of cultural production, consumption, and circulation are remaking our world.

Since the early 2000s, state and private investments in digital infrastructures (and communication technologies more generally) have led to deepening access to the Internet and a vibrant digital culture across South Asia. With the second largest number of Internet users in the world and growing exponentially as users go online via widely available smartphones with inexpensive data packages, it is no exaggeration to suggest that users across South Asia and the South Asian diaspora will play a critical role in shaping the trajectory of digital platforms, cultures, and politics in the coming years.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the meteoric growth of local language Internet users—just in the Indian context, from 42 million in 2011 to 234 million by 2016—also signals the emergence of vernacular practices that challenge our Anglo-centric understandings of digital cultures (“Indian Languages—Defining India’s Internet” 2017). South Asia thus serves not so much as a strictly defined geographic region, but rather as a site from which to examine the intersections of local, national, regional, interregional, continental, and global forces that shape contemporary digital culture(s).

Playing up the global and interconnected nature of the development of digital cultures seems all the more important at this historical juncture when digital studies programs are securing both institutional space and legitimacy not only in the American, European, and Australian academies but also in increasingly well-resourced universities in Asia. In the

academic marketplace, scholars in a number of disciplines have come to regard digitalization as key to understanding the present. As Gere (2008, 15) suggests, “To speak of the digital is to call up, metonymically, the whole panoply of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity that constitutes much of our contemporary experience.” The emphasis on all things digital is reflected in the proliferation of journals devoted to the study of digital media, the formation of new scholarly associations (the Association of Internet Researchers, for example), and the emergence of new divisions and interest groups within established and powerful scholarly organizations such as the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and the International Communication Association. The ferment surrounding the study of digitalization implies not only diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives but also a growing compartmentalization of digital studies in different disciplines across the humanities and the social sciences.

In relation to this ferment, we wish to position the study of digital cultures in relation to global media studies, an interdisciplinary formation that takes seriously the multiplicity of media cultures as a way to combat the universalizing tendencies of Anglo-American discourse (Parks and Kumar 2003). If the phenomenal expansion of television during the 1980s and 1990s sparked heated debates over how the globalization of media and communication was transforming societies, then Kraidy (2017) is surely right to ponder if it is time now to rewrite the term as “global *digital* cultures.” This not only entails reframing our understandings of media and cultural imperialism, dependency, heterogeneity, resistance, cosmopolitanism, and hybridity but also contending with keywords and concepts including precarity, data, affect, circulation, and sharing that have acquired new valences in an era of digitalization.<sup>3</sup> As Ted Striphas and others have pointed out, the word *culture* itself “has taken on new inflections . . . many of which embody its association with digital computational tools” (2016, 78). Situated within this broader media studies terrain, this book makes the case that regionally grounded studies of digital media are crucial for laying a strong historical foundation for understanding how digitalization is reshaping culture and communication in the 21st century.

### Approaching Global Digital Cultures

One way to approach a topic as maddeningly broad as digital cultures is to start by acknowledging the historicity of, say, the Internet in specific

national and regional contexts. We could thus begin by narrating the story of the Internet from the mid-1990s when digital communication infrastructures and devices began to acquire greater visibility with the launch of dial-up access in major metropolitan centers across South Asia. Of course, this was initially limited to a very small number of people, but by the early 2000s cybercafés had become as integral to the urban environment as public telephones.

The growing prominence of the Internet and other digital media technologies was linked to a discernible shift in national imaginaries that saw governments and market forces in South Asia and across the Global South come to regard digital infrastructures as central to national development. And nowhere was this new imaginary more pronounced than in “vision” documents produced by global consultancy firms such as KPMG and McKinsey that aligned the goals set by international organizations like the World Summit on Information Society with those of national governments that had embraced neoliberal market reforms as the path to globalization. This trajectory has been well documented in the Indian context including in accounts by Sundaram (2000) and Chakravartty (2001) who map how the personal computer and the network became iconic to new visions of progress in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As Chakravartty (2004) shows, this was the period when the fabled correlation between science and the state unraveled, and a move was made toward “combining the discourse of techno-nationalism with the logic of markets” (236).

The idea that robust digital infrastructures held the key to a nation’s fortunes in the 21st century is by no means limited to the Indian context and in fact, emerges as commonsensical to state and market actors across South Asia. For instance, “Digital Bangladesh,” an initiative promoted by the Awami League regime as a part of its Vision 2021 development goals, places the digital at the center of the state’s ambitions for the nation’s place in the global order (Zaman and Rokonuzzaman 2014; Bashar 2017). This is also the foundational premise of large-scale citizen data and biometric identity projects undertaken by India (Unique Identification Authority of India) and Pakistan (National Database and Registration Authority)—initiatives that are part of a longer political history of enumeration and identification in postcolonial nations.<sup>4</sup> Further, when we reflect on the history of information and communication technologies in South Asia and other non-Western regions, we also see how dominant paradigms of modernization that informed efforts to harness media (radio and television,

most prominently) for developmental purposes since the 1950s continued into the digital era as well. Perhaps more crucially, we can discern how user practices very quickly supersede the imaginations that shaped information and communication technologies for development (ICTD) interventions.

Consider the experience that one of us had while observing computer and Internet use at info kiosks in a semirural part of the state of Tamilnadu in south India. Less than a 45-minute bus ride from a large coastal town, these info kiosks were part of an ambitious ICTD initiative funded by a major Indian nongovernmental organization (NGO) in partnership with a global development agency. When a project coordinator discovered that a group of young men had been using the computers in the info kiosk to use software for activities related to a fan club devoted to a film star, the kiosk was closed for a few days. If the young men could not understand that these kiosks were for their *munnetram* (progress) and *valarchi* (growth or development), the kiosk would be shut down permanently and set up in a neighboring village where people understood and appreciated its value. From the perspective of the predominantly urban and middle-class professionals overseeing this development project as well as the leaders of the village *panchayat* (local council), watching films and toying around with Microsoft Paint to design a fan club poster were activities to be frowned upon and disciplined.<sup>5</sup>

Looking back now, we are struck by the fact that academics and policy makers in ICTD circles during the late 1990s and early 2000s could not anticipate that their particular desires and anxieties about the digital divide would be rendered quaint in less than a decade.<sup>6</sup> In 2002, public telephone booths were the primary means of long-distance communication. By 2004, when one of us returned to Tamilnadu for a second round of field research, portents of the mobile phone transforming the communication landscape were there for all to see. Project managers and kiosk operators had begun communicating predominantly via SMS, and conversations with young men at info kiosks revolved around casting votes for contestants on this or that reality TV program. Investments in mobile network infrastructure, new and inexpensive feature phones, and an increasingly competitive telecommunications sector had made mobile communication accessible for a growing proportion of people in semirural areas and, in the process, ensured that the development-oriented info kiosk and other such ICTD interventions were no longer *the* only point of entry into the digital world.

If we step out of the development communication frame, we can also detect the outlines of a history of user practices that have creatively negoti-

ated technological, financial, and sociocultural constraints and affordances that every platform—from USENET newsgroups, chat portals, and SMS to blogging services, social networking sites, and smartphone-oriented instant messengers—necessarily arrives with.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, most online platforms have been sites where everyday uses and creative expressions have, at times, intersected with and reshaped the political in new and unpredictable ways. The 2007 lawyers’ strike in Pakistan, the anticorruption movement in India in 2011–12, the Shahbag protests in Bangladesh in 2013, and the mobilization of anti-Muslim and anti-Tamil sentiment in Sri Lanka over the past decade are but the most prominent and recent instances when the defining role of digital and mobile media technologies and practices in the political domain have become apparent.

While certainly limited in both historical and geographic scope, any such attempt at outlining trajectories of digital infrastructures, platforms, and their role in shaping economies, politics, and cultures does help us reflect on the incredible pace of change that marks the digital and more generally, all media, in regions like South Asia. But more importantly, such accounts suggest that even as we acknowledge the newness that is striking and worth careful study, we need to move away from well-worn narratives of speed and time—of Asian, African, or Latin American societies “catching up” to the developed West or leapfrogging the industrial era to join the digital present. The contributions in this book all underscore the importance of situating ourselves in particular places and times as a way to escape the dominant scholarly and popular tendency to cast the digital outside the North Atlantic region as elsewhere and elsewhere: that is, outside the proper and well-worn paths of technological development. For this is where we inevitably end up when we begin with well-intentioned attempts to internationalize Internet studies and pay attention to strikingly different trajectories of the Internet and, more generally, digital media in the non-Western world.

To be sure, we do not question the importance of attending to the implications of the Internet no longer being a predominantly English-speaking technoscape. Goggin and McLelland (2009) are right to argue that despite the global diffusion of the Internet, we are yet to “systematically chart what is now most salient and significant about the Internet: its great cultural and linguistic variety” (5). However, this call for internationalization is a familiar one to media scholars who have struggled against the methodological nationalism that has haunted film and television studies and is now casting a shadow in the emergent domain of digital studies as well. As Lotte

Hoek's work on South Asian film cultures so powerfully demonstrates, "The shared historical roots, institutional beginnings, aesthetic vocabularies, technological preferences, and competitive forces of South Asia" all reveal the limits and dangers of relying on the nation-state as a container (2013, 8). If our efforts to internationalize digital studies always begin *outside* the Anglophone West, we will have little choice but to reproduce what Anita Chan (2013) calls "digital universalism," an imaginary that positions elite tech centers (Silicon Valley) and Western Anglophone cultures as the purveyors of digital futures that the rest of the world will, in the fullness of time, merely imitate and adapt.<sup>8</sup>

So instead of offering up an account of *difference* from one region of the world, our goal here is to understand the ongoing digitalization of media, communication, and culture in South Asia as part and parcel of global transformations. We take our cue from Kavita Philip (2016, 276) who has argued eloquently for moving away from notions of "core and periphery, originality and diffusion" and to better understand the "heterogeneous temporal and transnational dynamics" that shape contemporary tech cultures. What, then, do we stand to gain by positioning the "digital" between two powerful keywords—"global" and "culture"—that have animated the study of media in different disciplines?

### Situating Digital Cultures: A Global and Intermedia Framework

First, a focus on global interconnections allows us to acknowledge and account for digital media as having emerged from and as part of processes of economic and cultural globalization that have unfolded since the late 1970s.<sup>9</sup> We are less concerned about defining limits on what constitutes the "digital" than with insisting on an implicit recognition that digital media anywhere in the world are caught up in a world-historical process in which social, cultural, and economic exchanges are transnational, multidirectional, and driven by a multipolar and predominantly capitalist media system.

The work that media scholars have done in integrating insights from political economy, cultural geography, and cultural studies to understand the complex spatial dynamics of media production and circulation during the global turn of the 1980s and '90s thus remains pertinent to the study of digital formations (Curtin 2003; Govil 2009; Massey 1994; Sassen 2002). By the early 1990s, when the multinodal media world that we are familiar with today was beginning to take shape, David Morley and Kevin Robins argued that a "social theory that is informed by the geographi-

cal imagination” (1995, 6) was crucial to understanding changes in media and communication. Surveying the political and economic transformations that had transformed national economies across the world since the late 1970s, they focused in particular on the increasingly complex spatial relations that the mobility of capital had engendered as the “essential context for understanding the nature and significance of developments in the media industries” (6).

This perspective helps us see that the spatial coordinates of the digital in a particular place in the world will always exceed the boundaries of specific cities, regions, or nations. In fact, it would be ludicrous to examine the formation and global impact of Silicon Valley by remaining within the boundaries of the United States. After all, San Francisco’s emergence as a global tech hub cannot be grasped without mapping its connections with other nodes of finance, technology, and human capital such as Bangalore, Shenzhen, and Accra (Avle 2014). At the same time, there can be no doubt that digital media are increasingly central to the production of a meaningful sense of cultural belonging and locality for people the world over. Understanding the dynamics of digital cultures, then, calls for a renewed focus on the changing relations between economy, culture, and space without privileging the national as *the* dominant, pregiven, and uniformly imagined framework and scale of analysis, while remaining attentive to the creative ways in which nation-states have exerted control over digital infrastructures, platforms, and users.<sup>10</sup>

Second, a global and cultural perspective foregrounds the fact that digital cultures are shaped by distinct and at times disjunct temporalities within the same nation-space (Appadurai 2000). It is worth reminding ourselves that the digital turn during the late 1990s and early 2000s was defined as much by the ups and downs of venture capital backed dot-com economies in cities like Mumbai and Bangalore in India as by ICTD projects bankrolled by organizations including the World Bank and the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development. An emphasis on the temporal dimensions of technological and institutional change assumes even greater importance in the context of postcolonial media cultures given that at a quite basic level, the digital cannot be seen as neatly following on after broadcasting, film, and television and video cultures. As Sundaram (2013, 12) points out, the 1980s and 1990s in India were marked by a “frenetic media multiplicity” when cassette culture, color television, VCRs, cable and satellite broadcasting, and the Internet all arrived with hardly any temporal gaps. The story unfolds along similar lines in Pakistan as well. In

a richly detailed account of new television genres and their impact on political culture, Hashmi (2012) recounts that in less than a decade after the ban on private media ownership was lifted in the early 2000s, there were a total of 54 satellite channels, more than 50 radio stations, 151 dailies, and 68 monthly publications in place.

The study of digital cultures on a global scale thus cannot simply adopt medium-specific trajectories and their attendant disciplinary boundaries in the Anglophone West. The story of digital media in South Asia is, on the one hand, about the phenomenal expansion of communication infrastructures since the mid-1990s. In the span of a decade, industry discourse in the digital and mobile media sectors shifted from educating new consumers about devices and data services to a generation “born for the Internet.”<sup>11</sup> And the ups and downs of state censorship and regulation notwithstanding, the digital media economy has become tightly integrated with the advertising, marketing, print, film, radio, and television industries across the subcontinent. Moreover, the interwoven nature of the arrival of different technologies and media forms—for instance, the uptake of color television and the desktop computer during the mid-1980s—suggests histories of intermediality and media convergence that do not register in mainstream scholarship on digital media.

Indeed, this is precisely the historical amnesia that John Caldwell cautioned against when he argued for an approach to digital media and technoculture as “historical formations animated by continuities as much as invention” (2000, 3). Caldwell’s historicizing impulse—to situate the social and cultural logics of digital media in relation to histories of electronic and broadcasting media—is one we embrace here to avoid framing global digital cultures within the familiar straitjackets of technological novelties that travel the world from some select centers to various peripheries or as inaugurating a decisive break from other media forms.

Third, a focus on global cultural dynamics allows us to think more expansively about digital media as part of the ceaseless remediation of public cultures across South Asia and other regions. Instead of relying on a series of binaries and ruptures—between zeroes and ones, between the digital study of texts and the study of digital texts, between the Internet and other media forms, and so on—a focus on publics and public cultures foregrounds processes of mediation and the continual production of a “zone of cultural debate” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1996, 5). In their influential formulation, Appadurai and Breckenridge pointed out that public culture(s) could take many forms and identified cinema, television, sport spectatorship, and museums as creating a densely interlinked and interocu-

lar arena in countries like India. While this critical reworking of “publics,” “publicity,” and “public sphere(s)” inspired numerous studies of media cultures in an era of economic liberalization and cultural globalization across the postcolonial world (Larkin 2008; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003), we have yet to fully grasp the implications of the current phase of digital culture, one marked as much by vibrant participatory cultures as it is by state and corporate surveillance and data mining practices.<sup>12</sup>

As we pointed out earlier, the terms and debates about globalization and culture have hardly been resolved. But instead of casting those debates as belonging to the quaint world of radio, film, and television, we would do well to revisit and recast them. This is not to suggest that we simply revive discussions of media imperialism-as-cultural homogenization in the era of globally dominant digital platforms (Google, YouTube, Facebook, and so forth). And we are not advocating for a return to the at-times celebratory accounts of cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism either. Rather, we need sustained engagement with the emergence of new public cultures in relation to digital media, by taking into account the connections between, say, social media and satellite broadcasting that transform the production and circulation of news, entertainment, and other media genres (Alexander and Aouragh 2014; Sangeet Kumar, this volume).

Such an intermedial approach is crucial for engaging with the implications of algorithmic processes that now structure the production, circulation, and consumption of various cultural forms (Striphas 2015). But, again, instead of approaching the algorithmic production and curation of culture as marking a clean break, we would argue that digital media cultures the world over are best understood as the product of combustible encounters between emergent data-driven and algorithmic processes, on the one hand, and representational logics that continue to hold sway in the news and entertainment media industries, on the other. To grasp these dynamics calls for engagement with theoretical paradigms and methods that grapple with the specificities of digital infrastructures and platforms while continuing to draw on media and cultural studies scholarship focused on representation, identity, culture, and power.

#### A Framework for Studying Global Digital Cultures: Infrastructures, Platforms, and Publics

Drawing inspiration from Julie D’Acci’s (2004) circuit of media study, a heuristic developed for a cultural and materialist analysis of global television, we develop an analytic framework here that allows us to study global

digital cultures as formed at the intersections of infrastructures, platforms, and publics. Of course, it is conceptually daunting to draw neat boundaries around a specific media infrastructure, platform, or a particular formation of a public. And although all the authors focus on a specific infrastructural dimension (for example, the digitalization of Indian television) or the operations of a particular platform company (Tinder, for instance), the analyses reveal how digital infrastructures and platforms evolve in complex interaction with other media ecologies, and how publics and politics are shaped by these changes. More broadly, we approach the three organizing concepts as pointing to a set of porous and interlinked sites, and suggest that they are best understood by taking an integrated, conjunctural approach that accounts for the economic, political, and sociocultural forces at work in each site. In what follows, we engage with recent scholarship on media infrastructures, platforms, and mediated publics before providing an overview of the book.

### *Infrastructures*

“Which developing nations have interesting tech stories at the moment?” In the summer of 2017, a podcaster posed this question on Hacker News, a news aggregation website focused on digital technology and entrepreneurship. The most upvoted response was titled “India | Telecom | 110M subscribers on-boarded in 100 days” (erbdex 2017). The user in this case was referring to Reliance Jio, an Indian mobile network operator that launched 4G services in September 2016 and claimed to have orchestrated the fastest ramp-up by any mobile network operator anywhere in the world, with 16 million new subscribers added within the first month (*Indian Express* 2016).

In what was subsequently termed by the press as a “data war” (*Business Standard India* 2017), Jio’s entry into the telecom market was marked by the slashing of prices and an explosive rise in data consumption.<sup>13</sup> The response on Hacker News summarized some of these record-breaking developments and ended with yet another stunning claim—“this *infrastructure* [emphasis ours] as the physical layer coupled with the fact that India has 40% YoY<sup>14</sup> growth rate in Internet penetration . . . has opened up a fintech opportunity in a \$50B market that BCG<sup>15</sup> and Google estimate . . . to be in the tune of \$500B+ by 2020” (erbdex 2017). The language of layers and market opportunities animating such responses point to the centrality of digital media infrastructures in shaping new imaginaries of development, progress, and economic growth.

The question of media infrastructures that undergird digital cultures, however, has not received the kind of scholarly attention accorded to audiences, films and television programs, industries and institutions, and even policy and regulation. Even in non-Western contexts, where infrastructure(s) are marked by their hypervisibility, scholars have tended to ignore the profound impact that a whole range of communication infrastructures—towers, cables and wires, devices, repair practices,<sup>16</sup> and so on—has had on processes of mediation. In focusing on *infrastructures* as key sites for understanding global digital cultures, this book joins the recent infrastructural turn in media studies and other cognate disciplines including science and technology studies, anthropology, and critical information studies (Parks and Starosielski 2015; Larkin 2008; Peters 2015; Graham and Marvin 2001).

Following Larkin (2013, 328), who understands infrastructure as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space,” the chapters in this book foreground the imaginaries and contingencies that digital infrastructures unleash as they become a part of everyday life in South Asia. Infrastructures are composed of both technical, material things (e.g., mobile phones, SD [Secure Digital] cards, set top boxes, satellites) and the “soft” cultural practices that shape the formation of social collectivities and the circulation of media objects, ideas and so on. Further, where digital media in South Asia is concerned, we are yet to fully grasp their historicity in terms of postcolonial states’ infrastructural dispositions, the aesthetic and affective power that infrastructures wield in public culture (e.g., dams, highways, cinema halls, cell phone towers), and, crucially, the layering and convergences of different media infrastructures. Indeed, once we look past the technical and systems-level aspects of infrastructures, it becomes clear that grasping the emergence of digital media as infrastructural to contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic worlds calls for paying attention to the role of imagination—the fantasies, desires, and anxieties about the present and future that provoke, as Larkin puts it, “such deep affectual commitments, particularly, but not only, in developing societies” (2013, 332).

We cannot do justice here to the rich scholarship on infrastructures and work through ideas of scale, relationality, affect, and other issues that Parks and Starosielski (2015) and others have elaborated as critical for understanding media infrastructures in particular. However, approaching the Internet as an infrastructure (Sandvig 2013) encourages us to take into account its built and constructed nature, the ongoing environmental im-

pacts including everything from devices to cloud servers (Hogan 2015), its political potentials (Aouragh and Chakravartty 2016), and, of course, the manifold ways that identity work (along caste and gendered lines, for example) now happens (Gray 2009; Brock 2012; Nakamura 2002).

Building on this scholarship and beginning with the understanding that global digital cultures are structured by profoundly uneven power relations, the chapters in this book align with the conceptual shift from infrastructure to *infrastructuring* that Niewöhner (2015) has proposed. What this allows us to do is focus on the work of producing, maintaining, repairing, and reusing digital infrastructures as an ongoing and continual assembling of technologies, business logics, organizational structures, state practices, and crucially, competing imaginaries. For our purposes, this conceptual and methodological shift enables us to situate digital infrastructures in relation to a longer history of the production of techno-citizens, particularly state-run media projects across the subcontinent (Abraham and Rajadhyaksha 2015; Arora and Arnaudo, this volume).<sup>17</sup> Further, *infrastructuring* highlights the challenges of drawing clear conceptual boundaries around a particular media infrastructure. Intersections with other media forms and systems are crucial as the formation of public cultures cannot be understood without carefully tracing the ways in which existing media infrastructures and digital systems are entwined. For instance, the history of media practices involving videocassette recorders (VCRs) and color televisions in the subcontinent is one that involves tapes spooled with ballpoint pens as much as 8-bit cartridges and “video” computers.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, a focus on *infrastructuring* as an ongoing process helps us explore how a range of platforms are mobilized in specific instances of political work and, in some contexts, begin to acquire the veneer of infrastructures themselves (Plantín et al. 2018). From the perspective of nation-states, infrastructuring is as much about enabling and sanctioning some performances of citizenship (e.g., getting a biometric identity card for yourself) as it is about actively disconnecting entire regions from global Internet and mobile infrastructures (for instance, in the recent spate of media blackouts in Kashmir).<sup>19</sup>

### *Platforms*

That a handful of digital platforms have become gateways to everyday social life and to the worlds of commerce and politics was the animating concern for José Van Dijck’s keynote address at the annual conference of the

Association of Internet Researchers in 2016. Building on Gillespie's (2010) foundational work on the politics of platforms, Van Dijck (2016) raised the possibility of developing and sustaining public values in platform societies, where public expression is increasingly hosted and organized by digital intermediaries. Given the influence that platforms like Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Amazon now wield on a global stage, Van Dijck's framing of digital platforms as public goods marked an important addition to debates on "platform capitalism" (Srnicek 2016) and "platform imperialism" (Jin 2013). While such attempts to outline the role of technology companies and digital intermediaries as global economic actors in capitalist modes of production are valuable, they seldom allow for granular, experiential engagement with state, industry, and user practices coalescing on these platforms.

In fact, as Plantin et al. (2018) point out, media scholars' early interest in digital platforms emerged in part from what they afforded user communities in terms of connection, creativity, customization, and exchange, usually evidenced through the rise of "Web 2.0" in the mid-2000s. The excitement around these possibilities was tempered by calls to pay attention to the political economy of these platforms, that is, their ability to profit from vast quantities of data generated through their use, and their increasing influence in determining and shaping legitimate use. Van Dijck and Poell (2015) even assert that the reshaping of public and private communications by social media platforms' commercial imperatives amounts to a transformation of the political economy of the media landscape. But even a sweeping definition of political economy, as the "study of control and survival in social life" (Mosco 2009, 24–25), does not make space for the full range of moral and cultural resources mobilized on and by these digital platforms every day.

This is further complicated by the tensions between studying platforms as computational systems designed and controlled by a few and approaching them as bridges between independently developed and maintained communities of practice. As Brock (forthcoming 2019) argues, critical political economy scholars attempt to account for some of the possibilities that lie at these intersections but continue to undervalue the linkages between desire and user practice. Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard, he adopts a libidinal economy approach, urging scholars interested in digital culture to think about *jouissance* as the enjoyment of use and contending that the libidinal energies accrued through use-as-"play" drive the operations of digital media platforms. These different approaches to studying digital platforms,

their uses, their maintenance, and their influence, however, are united in their focus on *practices* by various actors, indexing dynamic webs of historical, cultural, political, socio-technical, and commercial concerns.

If, following Uricchio (2003), we approach media as cultural practices that envelop technologies, texts, and institutions, then the questions about public values and social good in the age of Google and Facebook must be framed in relation to the affordances of networked media platforms and what states, corporations, and users actually do with them. Further, re-centering enduring concerns like localization in computational platforms reveals the tensions between the “global” and the “local,” and how these tensions continue to be negotiated by policy makers, industry actors, and users across the world on a day-to-day basis.

As we contend with platforms moving from one cultural and industrial context to another, Gillespie’s (2010) approach to understanding platforms as being composed of four interlinked semantic categories—architectural, computational, figurative, and political—is useful to understanding technological considerations and processes of localization. In this regard, our understanding of localization, hybridity, and the circulation of formats in relation to film and television is a helpful basis (Kraidy 2005; Kumar 2005; Shahaf 2014; Waisbord 2004). Scholarship on MTV’s hybrid avatars across the world has shown that localization is a far more complex process involving cultural translations and exchanges that can at times be politically fraught (Fung 2006; Cullity 2002). These accounts also foreground how localization is a multiscalar process whereby shifts in industrial and managerial logics (for instance, producing content locally) go hand in hand with highly charged representational moves that build on and often challenge dominant norms, values, and aspirations in relation to class, caste, gender, and sexuality (Kumar and Curtin 2002; Mankekar 2004). Thinking about localization would allow us to understand, for instance, the cultural shifts that Tinder as a “dating” app needs to straddle in the Indian market (see Das, this volume) or how Facebook becomes shorthand for the Internet at large in Myanmar (see Arnaudo, this volume). Indeed, when assessed in relation to this longer media and cultural history, it is evident that platform localization cannot be merely about local language implementation, subtitling, or technological tweaks that respond to concerns like data speeds and cost.

YouTube’s trajectory in Pakistan—from its entry as a global platform in 2006, its censorship and outright ban in 2008, the protracted civil society struggle, and, finally, the lifting of the ban after the launch of a local version

in 2016—offers an instructive case in platform localization that has global effects. Following the republication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad and the reproduction of purportedly non-Islamic content on YouTube in 2008, the Pakistani state ordered local Internet providers to block access to the platform, with a configuration error then shutting off the site to users across the world for a couple of hours.

Such moments of breakage reiterate how a collection of regional Internets come together to support the discursive and socio-technical arrangement of the Internet as a global network. Digital intermediaries like YouTube are increasingly central to scholarly efforts to read the “coming together” of such regional webs rather than the “taking apart” of a global monolithic network of networks. A culturally grounded approach is crucial if we are to ensure that the study of digital media remains alive to regional characteristics and histories while being responsive to transnational exchanges and relays (Venegas 2009). Further, thinking through the lens of platform localization nuances understandings of the enmeshing of algorithmic and representational politics, and their volatile and uncertain implications.

For instance, the lack of a localized YouTube implementation (and consequently, the lack of control experienced by the state in its efforts to monitor and moderate content) was repeatedly mobilized as the reason for the blanket ban on the platform in Pakistan. The tensions between the state’s impulse to censor content that it deemed blasphemous and Pakistani civil society’s opposition to such heavy-handed control of digital and news media then played out through persistent calls to reinstate platform access. A key example here is #KholoBC (*kbolo* meaning “open” and BC being an acronym for an expletive), a campaign opposing state censorship and content regulation on the Internet. Sparked by a “viral” rap song featuring comedian Ali Gul Pir and rapper Adil Omar, #KholoBC indexed a range of discontents about the limiting of the freedom of expression in Pakistan using religion and national security as smokescreens, culminating in a call to action specifically focused on removing the YouTube ban.<sup>20</sup> #KholoBC also involved a video shot on the streets of Karachi featuring a person wearing a YouTube-branded cube walking the streets holding a sign reading “hug me if you want me back.” Men and women are shown approaching the friendly cube for hugs, as cries of “I love YouTube” and “God, please open YouTube” punctuate the soundtrack.

The routinization of practices that come to define digital media platforms and the sociality that sometimes exceed the platform and spill over

into public life are, in the first instance, carefully engineered. The thoroughgoing “datafication” and “commodification” of every social interaction we have online is undoubtedly a concern that states and various civil society groups worldwide are grappling with. But as the chapters in this book show, the “coded structures” (Van Dijck 2013) that shape our interactions are more than just technical and commercial ones. Moreover, when we situate digital platforms within a broader media matrix in regions like South Asia and the ongoing and contested blurring of boundaries between personal, public, and private realms, the question of how and when publics cohere cannot be answered by focusing solely on one specific platform and its technological affordances. Rather, examining political cultures marked by networked and mobile publics that shift shape as events unfold involves taking into account processes of media convergence and tracing how particular artifacts (e.g. GIFs, memes, and sound bites), ideas, and discourses move across media platforms, gather publics, and mediate the political.

### *Publics*

No account of public political discourse in contemporary South Asia is possible or complete without accounting for the role of digital media and processes of media convergence. Since the mid-2000s, scholars in multiple disciplines have focused on the many astonishing instances of digitally mediated activism around the world, asking what constitutes meaningful participation (Papacharissi 2014; Jenkins 2006; Postill 2014; Yang 2009; Qiu 2014; Kraidy and Mourad 2010; Zayani 2015). Mapping the world of networks, hashtags, memes, sonic cues, and their complex circulation across media systems, this scholarship has been valuable for understanding new forms of mediation that now lie at the center of political life.

Of course, the current phase of social media–fueled political participation is not without precedent. E-mail listservs and bulletin boards were foundational to the formation of transnational “cyberpublics” during the 1990s that intersected with various social and political movements in South Asia including the right-wing Hindutva movement (Rai 1995), the formation of new feminist and queer collectives, and environmental justice groups (Gajjala and Gajjala 2008; Shahani 2008). What is clear now, however, is that the qualifier “cyber” no longer seems necessary to understand the role of digital media in shaping the formation of publics around various issues. That said, in every instance of popular participation that intersects with and spills over into the political, popular, and academic discourse ends

up focusing on the strictly *political* dimensions and the implications that such moments and zones of participation hold for our understanding of the tenets of normative political theory.<sup>21</sup>

Departing from the well-worn tradition of appraising whether this or that communication platform is conducive to activities that fit within norms of rational discourse in public domains, the chapters in this book probe how digital media use on a routine, daily basis might help us discern new imaginations of the “political” that are emerging in South Asia and across the world.<sup>22</sup> It is only when we comprehend how digital media use and everyday life are braided together that we can meaningfully pose questions about *political* impact and, in the process, develop more complex and textured accounts of publics that cohere in and through the digital. Consider, if only briefly for now, two events that unfolded in parts of South Asia that have been roiled by political conflict for well over three decades now.

In early 2016, fears of ethnic tension arose once again in Sri Lanka as graffiti marked the walls and gates of some Muslim-owned homes in Negugoda, a densely populated suburb of Colombo. The words “Sinha Le” (“lion’s blood”) were spray-painted in Sinhalese, as a sign of Sinhala Buddhist dominance in the island nation. This was not the first time that *Sinba Le* had found its ways into the streets of the Sri Lankan capital. A more stylized logo, featuring the sword-bearing lion from the national flag and the word *le* colored red to denote blood, had already started appearing in stickers on buses and motorcycles (including police motorcycles). Photos of the stickers circulated on social media, with some Sinhala Buddhist youth even drawing the symbol on their arms and posting selfies on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. As civil society groups expressed concern about the campaign indexing intimidation of and intolerance toward ethnic and religious minorities in Sri Lanka, mainstream news media outlets continued to track its rapidly growing popularity and its links to the efforts of ultranationalist groups like the Bodu Bala Sena. When *Sinba Le* is situated amid long-standing concerns around majoritarian angst, perceived dispossession, and ethnic purity, its global resonance becomes immediately apparent. But in tracing the circulation of the logo on digital media and tracking how it gets embodied and integrated into the built environment, it is possible to see how ideas like *Sinba Le* enter digital culture, gather publics, and transmute the terms of politics.

For a different and fleetingly hopeful imagination of the political, consider the events surrounding the third season of the reality television program *Indian Idol*. In September 2007, as the contest reached the final stages,

news reports began focusing attention on how people in the northeast Indian state of Meghalaya had cast aside decades-old separatist identities to mobilize support for finalist Amit Paul. While some fans set up websites and blogs to generate interest and support from the rest of the country and the diaspora, others formed a fan club and facilitated efforts by a range of groups and organizations to sponsor and manage public call offices (PCOs) in different parts of Meghalaya, distribute prepaid mobile phone cards, and set up landline voting booths. Recognizing the ways in which these activities were beginning to transcend long-standing ethnic, religious, linguistic, and spatial boundaries, state legislators and other politicians soon joined the effort to garner votes for Amit Paul, with the chief minister D. D. Lapang declaring Amit Paul to be Meghalaya's "brand Ambassador for peace, communal harmony and excellence." It seemed that this campaign around a reality television program could set the stage for a remarkable refashioning of the sociocultural and political terrain in Meghalaya.

In both these instances, focusing on the explicitly political was understandable given the intensity and seemingly intractable nature of ethnic conflicts in these parts of the world. However, instead of evaluating these kinds of mobilization solely through the question of "effects," we could ask: What happens when such phases of participation fade away? What are the cultural and political implications of zones of participation that last a few weeks or months at best? The answers are more likely to be found in the terrain of daily life, which, in turn, forces us to rethink our understanding of "public" and "public life" in ways that are not beholden to Habermasian ideals (see Hashmi, Mankekar and Carlan, in this volume). Avoiding the theoretical impulse to explain such moments of participatory culture solely in relation to the realm of formal politics is crucial if we are to understand why and how the everyday-ness of watching a reality TV show and sending a text message or putting a sticker on a motorcycle and circulating that image via Instagram becomes deeply meaningful.

Without a doubt, the question of digital platforms' democratic and demotic aspects—the ongoing debate over the extent to which digital platforms shape news and information flows (e.g., rumors, fake news)—is a crucial one. We know that such moments of participation are never entirely autonomous from the interests of the state, media corporations, and various religious, political, and civil society groups with their own vested interests. What such cases suggest is the potential for quotidian digital media use to move beyond a particular media event or location into other

times and spaces to generate, in the process, an altogether new kind of public that does intersect with broader civic and political issues and movements. For it is worth keeping in mind that the world of “public life” is not limited to questions of citizenship or civic engagement but, in fact, can be better understood through the lens of sociability, which suggests not just willingness to talk and engage with others but also the desire for shared experiences (Barker 2008; Weintraub and Kumar 1997). Spaces of everyday interaction such as the street corner, balconies and verandahs, the public phone booth, the cybercafé, and, now, WhatsApp and Facebook groups have been, as Shanti Kumar (2010, 23) points out, “spaces of sociability that are neither public nor private in the liberal-economic sense of state versus market forces, or in the civic sense of communitarian responsibilities and citizenship, but constitutes the heart of public life” across South Asia.

Progressive ideals and expectations about participatory culture(s) encouraging and informing civic/political engagement in conflict-ridden situations are well and good, but only if they are grounded in an understanding of and deep appreciation for what an immense challenge it is to create and sustain spaces of sociability. Pakistani activist Sabeen Mahmud fought to create precisely this sort of community space when she started *The Second Floor*, a coffee shop in Karachi that also doubled up as a discussion forum for activists, artists, and academics. In April 2015, when a prominent university canceled an event titled “Unsilencing Balochistan,” citing pressure from the government, Mahmud invited many of the same speakers, largely Baloch activists, to *The Second Floor* (or T2F). As the discussion about the “disappearing” of thousands of Baloch nationalists wrapped up with a question-and-answer session, Mahmud thanked everyone and left T2F in her car, only to be shot dead soon after by armed motorcyclists at a traffic signal.

In the weeks that followed, global news media outlets carried multiple stories about the threat to free speech in Pakistan and Mahmud’s role in fighting for accountability, pluralism, and secularism. Tributes flowing in from activists and journalists touched upon these achievements, but also thanked her for imagining T2F as a space to conduct hackathons, organize film screenings, discuss poetry, and have conversations about the growing centrality of digital media in Pakistani culture and politics. One of Mahmud’s greatest contributions, it appeared, was to have created a space for sociability that wove the digital into Karachi’s urban culture and, in the process, imagined new relationships between media, culture, and the political.

### Scope of the Book

*Global Digital Cultures* is organized into three parts. The first section joins a broader debate on the emergence of media infrastructures as key sites for the exercise of state and corporate power, the production of citizenship in a digital era, and a new kind of technopolitics that users are increasingly embroiled in whether or not they like it. In doing so, these essays also focus on the link between infrastructures and imaginaries, and explore how far-reaching infrastructural changes hinge on cultural mediations of technological and institutional shifts.

State-sponsored identity projects—be it Aadhaar in India or the National Database and Registration Authority in Pakistan—are arguably the best sites from which to begin exploring how the promises of big data are being mobilized to design new information infrastructures that fundamentally alter state-market–civil society relations. Payal Arora’s chapter in this section thus explores the biometric identity project in India by first situating it in relation to colonial histories of information gathering and surveillance as well as caste and communal dynamics that have shaped the state’s approach to governance in the postcolonial era. Outlining technological shifts beginning in the mid-2000s, in particular the swift expansion of mobile communication and the convergence of old and new media systems, Arora argues that projects like Aadhaar are one part of a larger scale datafication of political communication including the rapidly evolving landscape of broadcast television and the creative data-driven uses of social media platforms by politicians.

Arora’s emphasis on media convergence is taken up in next chapter in which Shanti Kumar examines the digitalization of television following a major policy decision in 2011 that made it mandatory for analog cable TV networks to switch over to a new Digital Addressable System by 2014. Tracking policy and industry discourse surrounding this policy decision, Kumar shows how digital addressability was offered up as the data-oriented solution that would solve the television industry’s long-standing woes regarding audience metrics and advertising in particular. Moving past well-worn critiques of how such moves only serve to consolidate industry power in a capitalist media economy, Kumar situates television’s digital transition within the discourse of “Digital India” that has come to define the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party government’s agenda. At a broader level, Kumar’s essay reveals the value of bringing a historically grounded television studies approach to illuminate the workings of emergent digital platforms and their affordances.

Concerned with the emergence of new technologies, and the many desires, anxieties, and uses that swirl around them, Rahul Mukherjee explores the cultural meanings of mobile technology by beginning with mainstream advertising and Bollywood films. Through close, thematic readings of landmark advertisements and filmic depictions of mobile phone use over the course of a decade, Mukherjee outlines how a range of media industry professionals imagined and crafted the very idea of a cellphone “user.” Delving into the world of informal and pirate networks, Mukherjee shows how vernacular mobile phone use emerges at the intersection of key mediating personas (mobile phone shop owners), specific technologies (small and portable micro-SD cards), and practices of circulation and sharing that remain largely invisible and illegible in digital studies scholarship. Finally, Mukherjee explores public controversies stemming from deep-seated anxieties (cellular radiation, for instance) to foreground the “affective encounters between human bodies and infrastructures” that mark our engagement with new communication technologies.

In the final chapter in this section, Daniel Arnaudo offers a critical survey of the development of digital media in Myanmar and specifically the emergence of a networked public sphere in relation to the transition toward a democratic political system. Outlining the control and censorship regimes in place for several decades (1961–2010), this essay identifies the formation of the Burmese Internet in exile as having laid the foundation for the modern, largely mobile Internet culture that is now in place. Not surprisingly, the development of digital media in contemporary Myanmar is symptomatic of wider conflicts that structure political culture, particularly along ethnic, religious, and gendered lines. Moreover, the development of mobile and digital infrastructures in Myanmar reveals the profoundly unequal relations of power that shape digital cultures and, in particular, the dominance that platforms like Facebook wield. In a context marked by low literacy levels, low levels of ICT use, and poor regulatory oversight, initiatives such as Facebook Zero (offered by Telenor starting in 2014), which allowed individuals to use Facebook without using their data, result in an exceedingly narrow view of being online and indeed, what the Internet is.

The second section of this book thus focuses on the relations between digital infrastructures and specific platforms, and in particular the range of industry and user practices indexing social, cultural, economic, and political concerns ranging from intimacy to immigration. The section begins with Vishnupriya Das’s chapter tracing how local and international smartphone-based dating apps like TrulyMadly and Tinder mediate possibilities for intimacy in urban India. Through close readings of texts like

brand-sponsored online videos and television commercials, and in-depth interviews with industry actors, Das situates the politics of desire and discovery—both social and sexual—in notions of “dating” mobilized by these platforms. Her work points to the importance of such platforms in negotiating the pleasures and anxieties of gendered performances of sexuality and selfhood.

Shruti Vaidya and Kentaro Toyama’s chapter broadens the remit of the platform-oriented study of digital media by examining the personalization of hearing aids and the everyday experiences of deaf young adults. By providing students of a Mumbai-based nonprofit academy with such digital devices and encouraging some of them to decorate and personalize their devices in collaboration with an artist, Vaidya and Toyama unravel how designing for display, instead of designing for discretion, can affect one’s relationship with the hearing aid. Their work attempts to remedy the omission of day-to-day negotiations with disability as a focus area for those interested in the emergence of digital devices as key platforms for self-expression and the reinforcement of identity. Joyojeet Pal examines another dimension of self-presentation, surveying the use of Twitter as a channel for political branding in the case of Indian politician Narendra Modi. Pal argues that Modi was able to project himself as a tech-savvy leader and signal a careful embrace of modernity through his tweets, thereby wresting control of the narrative from mainstream news media outlets. In doing so, Pal also draws attention to how platforms such as Twitter help embody notions of entrepreneurial uplift into technoscience-based promises of social transformation.

In the final chapter in this section, Sangeet Kumar evaluates the attempts to produce audience interactivity via Twitter on television news channels in India and focuses on how networked publics on social media platforms can torpedo the goals of institutionally imagined participatory viewing. In examining hashtag wars as a terrain of audience engagement and discursive struggle, Kumar shows how the immediacy and simultaneity afforded by platforms like Twitter can reshape television’s “liveness” and speak back to notions of convergence mobilized by media industries.

In the next section on publics, the chapters trace the impact that digital media, their complex entanglements with established media systems and, crucially, the ongoing blurring of lines between the personal, the private, and the public have had on political culture(s) across South Asia. Purnima Mankekar and Hannah Carlan’s chapter focuses on convergences between digital platforms and other media (television in particular) to analyze how

the arrest of a student leader in Delhi contributed to the virulent and deeply affective form of nationalism that has come to define Indian public culture. Tracing the movement of news, images, and sounds across media platforms, they draw attention to the circulation of specific affective responses (e.g., a set of tweets, a particular newscast) as fueling the broader public conversations about national identity. Drawing on a rich body of feminist scholarship, Mankekar and Carlan develop a more expansive understanding of the idea of remediation and show that the convergence of old/new media and the intertextualities that shape contemporary public cultures the world over lead to a thoroughgoing reconfiguration of Hindu-Indian nationalism.

Sahana Udupa's chapter continues this focus on acrimonious debates about nation and national belonging on social media in urban India. Defining confrontational verbal cultures as "online nation-talk," Udupa argues that such talk contributes to the development of nationalism as an exclusivist ideology. Analyzing discursive continuity and disjuncture in the nation-talk mobilized by middle-class actors on Twitter around a specific hashtag (#ModiInsultsIndia), Udupa shows how self-proclaimed liberals and Hindu nationalists make claims about what the nation ought to mean and to whom.

Middle-class publics in Pakistan becomes the focus for Mobina Hashmi's chapter in which she examines a range of Pakistani online publics to ask how the performance and presentation of Pakistani identities is shaped by a negotiation between norms of private and public behavior. Situating her analysis of online publics in the historical context of two earlier forms of Pakistani media publics—the official state-centric version produced by PTV (Pakistan Television Corporation) from the 1960s to the early 1990s, and the early years of the postliberalization media explosion—Hashmi shows that new online publics are, by contrast, messy and varied. Exploring official websites of television channels such as Aaj TV and Geo News, blogs linked with newspapers such as the *Friday Times*, and amateur videos of weddings, dance parties, encounters with sex workers, and a range of discussion forums, Hashmi details how these online spaces publicize the intimate and private spaces of conversation, opinion, and socializing.

Muhammad Nabil Zuberi develops thematic readings of a set of manipulated images that went "viral" and provoked radically different responses during an episode of political violence in Bangladesh in 2013. The focus here is on a particular manipulated image of Allama Sayeedi, a charismatic Islamic orator and a popular leader sentenced to death by the Bangladeshi

government for war crimes committed during 1971. Zuberi explores the reasons the image produced such different responses from people who had a common history, religion, and nationality, as well as the role that digital media played in reconfiguring the boundaries between fact and fiction in contemporary political culture.

Finally, Wazmah Osman explores the circulation of pictures of Afghan and Pakistani women in the aftermath of 9/11 and critically evaluates their framing as victims and as contentious symbols of nationhood. Through a case study of four Af-Pak women activists, all named Malalai, she shows how these images are mobilized by local and international power elites who often benefit, materially and culturally, from the conflict and instability in the region at the expense of human rights.

### Conclusion

Since media and communication studies began in the 1970s, its object of study has changed in fundamental ways. Media were, at first, thought almost wholly within the frame of the nation-state, its national politics and culture. Since then, the diffusion of continuing technological innovations, driven by the world economy, has changed the media landscape beyond recognition, producing the digital and globalized world that we inhabit today. Drawing inspiration from Appadurai and Breckenridge's (1995) statement on global modernity, we have worked with the premise that the digital is now everywhere, it is simultaneously everywhere, and it is interactively everywhere. But it is not only everywhere, it is also in a series of somewheres, and it is through one such somewhere, South Asia, that this volume engages with the cultural dimensions of digitalization.

In conversation with recent efforts to grapple with the global character of the Internet and the plurality of digital cultures (Goggin and McLelland 2017), our goal here has been to bring together scholars with a shared interest in the rise of digital and mobile media technologies, the ongoing transformation of established media industries, and emergent forms of digital media practice and use that are reconfiguring sociocultural, political, and economic terrains across the Indian subcontinent. It goes without saying that the media landscape in a region like South Asia is simply too vast and diverse for any one book to carefully map.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the India-centricity of South Asian studies remains a challenge. However, we do hope that, collectively, the chapters here map considerable new terrain and set the stage for more regionally grounded explorations of global digital cultures.

## Notes

1. See Avle and Lindtner (2016).
2. According to various reports that track Internet use across the world, South Asia accounts for 615 million users. See, for instance, “Internet Usage in Asia” (2018). Further, 74 percent of the Internet user population reside in the Global South, including Asia (48.7%), Africa (10.9%), Latin America (10.5%), and the Middle East (3.9%). Only 26% of the world’s Internet users live in the Global North: Europe (17%), North America (8.3%), Oceania (0.7%) (“Internet Users in the World” 2018).
3. See Peters (2016b).
4. See Breckenridge (2005) for debates on South Africa’s HANIS (Home Affairs National Identification System) Project.
5. Referring to ICTD projects in India, Mazzarella (2010, 783) argues that “although the discourse of development helped to legitimize the Internet as an ‘appropriate technology,’ its emphasis on functional solutions also helped to obscure the Internet’s more ambiguous emergent potentials.”
6. The newer forms of digital inequality unleashed by these transformations, however, continue to remain on the research agenda of scholars across disciplines. See Robinson et al. (2015).
7. For pathbreaking work on queer life-worlds in the digital era in Asia, see Shahani (2008), Dasgupta (2017), and Yue (2012). Also see Risam (2015) and the special issue on ‘Gender, Globalization and the Digital’ in *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology*.
8. It is becoming increasingly clear that our understanding of digital culture(s) in Anglo-American contexts has been structured by the specificities of White technoculture. As Faye Ginsburg (2006) points out in her account of digital media practices in indigenous communities, “concepts such as the digital age have taken on a sense of evolutionary inevitability, thus creating an increasing stratification and ethnocentrism in the distribution of certain kinds of media practices, despite prior and recent trends to de-Westernize media studies” (129).
9. For a more detailed account of digital culture emerging as a response to the demands of mid-20th century warfare and Cold War politics, see Gere (2008). Elton and Carey (2013) also point out that online services were being imagined in several countries besides the United States. Benjamin Peters’s (2016a) rich account of the Soviet Union’s plans to build a nationwide computer network also reveals the importance of decentering the United States when it comes to writing global Internet histories.
10. In an important study, Wu and Taneja (2016) show that the world’s Internet traffic flows have become increasingly “regionalized” rather than tied to Anglo-phone media capitals and circuits.
11. See, for instance, this advertisement for MTS, a prominent telecom player in multiple national and regional markets: <https://www.youtube.com>
12. See Philip (2005). Also see Schwarz and Eckstein (2014) for a wide-ranging set of essays on the issue of pirate media cultures and global modernity.
13. One gigabyte (GB) of high-speed Internet data was made available for as low

as 76 cents, making it the world's cheapest Internet data plan. Consequently, total mobile Internet data consumption in the country reportedly skyrocketed from 0.2 billion GB per month pre-Jio to 1.2 billion GB per month, with Jio subscribers alone using up to 1 billion GB (Bhattacharya 2017). This is also said to have led to a massive surge in the use of the Internet for video streaming (Akolawala 2017).

14. Year over year (YOY), in this context, refers to the comparison of Internet penetration at one particular time period with that of a similar time period, on an annualized basis.

15. BCG refers to the Boston Consulting Group, a management consulting firm with offices worldwide.

16. For more on cultures of recycling, repair, and reuse, see Sundaram (2010).

17. For scholarly accounts of state-run media projects, see Roy (2007) on the Films Division of India, Mankekar (1999) and Rajagopal (2001) on state-run television in India, Hashmi on television in Pakistan (2012), and Abu-Lughod (2004) on television and nationhood in Egypt.

18. Further, given the dominance of textual and visual approaches to understanding media cultures, it is hardly surprising that the sonic dimensions of the digital turn have received comparatively less attention. We outline the importance of bringing a sound studies perspective to South Asian media studies in an essay focused on sonic cues and political cultures (Punathambekar and Mohan 2017). Also see the Sounding Out blog for a series on gendered soundscapes in South Asia, curated by Monika Mehta and Praseeda Gopinath (<https://soundstudiesblog.com>).

19. See Rao (2016).

20. See <http://pakistanforall.org> for more details on this media campaign.

21. For an overview of scholarship on publics and politics in relation to the digital, see the annotated bibliography on "Networked Publics: Inter-Asian Perspectives" by Padma Chirumamilla, available online at [http://tvri.ssrc.org-content/uploads/2016/11/InterAsia\\_Padma\\_Chirumamilla\\_Annotated\\_Bibliography-CM-review.pdf](http://tvri.ssrc.org-content/uploads/2016/11/InterAsia_Padma_Chirumamilla_Annotated_Bibliography-CM-review.pdf)

22. Among the various theoretical frameworks that have been developed to describe transformations in South Asian public culture, and particularly where ongoing changes in media and communications are concerned, perhaps the most influential one has been Appadurai and Breckenridge's statement on public culture in India (1995). There is now a rich body of scholarship that has built on critiques of Habermas's original theorization of the public sphere (see, for example, Warner 2005), particularly in relation to mediated public cultures in a range of postcolonial societies. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to review the scholarship on media, publics, and politics in the South Asian context, but our contributors draw on a range of work in this tradition in mapping how digitization poses new challenges to this area of study (Mankekar 1999; Cody 2011; Rajagopal 2009).

23. Given that the foundation of "South Asian" media studies is largely English and Hindi-language centric film and television in India and the Indian diaspora in the United Kingdom and North America, if all we produce are Indian accounts of the digital in South Asia, we will miss making connections across places and spaces that do not feature prominently in contemporary geopolitical maps. We regard this anthology as part of wider efforts to think regionally. See, for instance, Banaji (2011). Further, there have been a number of interventions in the past two decades

in the humanities and the social sciences to take seriously historical networks of exchange that do not recenter North Atlantic perspectives. One such influential formation is the Inter-Asia framework, which approaches Asia as a dynamic and interconnected formation spanning Central Asia, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East (including Turkey), and Russia. See, for instance, Kuan Hsing-Chen's *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Culture Studies* and various projects under the InterAsia program of the Social Science Research Council (<https://www.ssrc.org>). For a detailed consideration of the media studies–area studies impasse in relation to the study of digital cultures, see Lamarre (2017). Also see Shome and Hegde (2002) on the importance of acknowledging that we all write *from somewhere* as a way to decenter Anglo-American scholarship.

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