'The new town square, the new public sphere': Alternatives to neoliberalising cyberspace in India?

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Abstract

On 21 March 2013 a summit on the future of India's digital media – titled 'Big Tent Activate' – was held at the Taj Palace Hotel, New Delhi. The Google-funded summit, which I attended as a delegate, exemplified the neoliberalisation of India's cyberspace. While I was in New Delhi, I also visited Sarai, an interdisciplinary research centre that is part of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). This intervention briefly critiques the Big Tent Activate's vision of digital public space dominated by global corporates, and offers Sarai's Cybermohalla as an example of a progressive space of alterity within a context of corporate domination. The intervention concludes by reflecting on strategies academics can use to help address complex global North-South geographies of representation in their work and beyond.

Introduction: Accessing cyberspace in India

On 21 March 2013 the 'Big Tent Activate Summit' on the future of digital media in India was held at the deluxe 'world-class' Taj Palace Hotel, New Delhi.

The location was apposite for this gathering of what can be described as the new global class – politicians, business leaders, entrepreneurs, and media groups. The summit was financially underwritten by Google to a rumoured cost of £1 million, as well as by *The Guardian* news organisation and MediaGuru, an Indian media services company. Its main theme was how to challenge India's growing inequalities, in a country with the world's highest poverty rate, through the promotion of market growth. Former adviser on Public Information Infrastructure and Innovations, Sam Pitroda, as a characteristic example of how this issue was treated, proposed activating a 'trickle-down effect' to widen access to the internet. For the small number of artists, activists and academics like myself in attendance, the summit provided a platform for considering what sort of agency and representation disadvantaged communities can have in the future of an emerging digital public sphere that is dominated by global corporate business.

In the global North, the internet has revolutionalised how most people work, govern, bank, learn and entertain. In the US around 90% of the population is connected to the internet. By comparison 13% of the Indian population is connected, and only 1% of the country has access to broadband. At the summit, Google revealed plans to increase India's rates of internet access by incubating new talent in India to support digital market growth. For Google, this was a gesture of 'corporate responsibility', one of several strategies whereby multinational companies offer resources and expertise to a country in exchange for an open market. I argue in the first part of this intervention that the effect of these sorts of transnational 'partnerships' (and the trickle-down model more generally) is to strengthen corporate domination of India's digital public spaces to the benefit of educated elites, but without significantly reducing the inequalities of access that animated the Big Tent Activate summit. As I will show, the de-democratising effects of corporate-based growth in and control of digital media are exacerbated by the Indian state's measures to regulate freedom of expression on the internet.

While I was in India, I also visited Sarai, an interdisciplinary research centre, which is part of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). In the intervention's second section, I describe Sarai's Cybermoholla as an example of internet provision and activity that avoids the neoliberal model prevalent at the Big Tent Summit. Cybermoholla operated five open-access digital labs in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Delhi, where participants were invited to record and digitally share their perspectives on neighbourhood life through mixed media. The neighourbood labs activated emergent possibilities for India's growing digital public sphere, by working with local infrastructure, language and knowledge production to challenge some of the inequalities in cultural practice that characterise the corporate model. The intervention concludes by considering the strategies academics can use to help address complex global North-South geographies of representation in their work and beyond.

Global market forces and India's digital public sphere

Big Tent Activate, organised by Euro-American multinational media corporations with a Delhi-based international consultancy, offers an example of the legacy of India's communications and media liberalisation in the 1980s and 1990s, associated with intervention by the International Monetary Fund (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, 148). Nearly 70 transnational cable and satellite stations were operating in India by 1998 (Thussu, 1999, 127; Sinha, 1997). Today there are around 900 TV channels, more than 94,000 registered newspapers, and exponential growth in social media (Bahree, 2014). Despite huge expansion of media channels, control of the media market is concentrated in a handful of conglomerates that also dominate the country's political economy. In March 2014 Reliance Industries Limited took over the Network18 group, the largest media conglomerate in India, overshadowing media rivals Bennett Coleman/Times, and STAR, owned by Rupert Murdoch (Bahree, 2014). Owner of Reliance Industries Limited, Mukesh Ambani, is India's most powerful media baron and wealthiest man (Thakurta, 2014). With a fast-growing middle-class, estimated to number anywhere between 150 to 267 million, India offers a potentially lucrative market for media corporations. However, the intimate alignment of business and political interests in a tightly controlled public sphere is threatening plurality of representation in the world's largest democratic state (Thakurta and Reddy, 2010; Bahree, 2014).

The neoliberal marketisation of India's digital media can be seen as driving a "dynamic but disturbed world" with new global capital flows and new global imaginations (Sundaram, 2009, 2). Global North-owned platforms for user-generated content, including YouTube, MySpace and Flickr, have expanded since 2004. These avenues for representation mobilise the possibility to reach larger audiences, however they simultaneously threaten loss of rights, privacy, security, and control over communications (Morrell, 2008). Additionally, while divisions between elite and mass culture may fail to make sense when applied to the post-colonial flux of modern Indian cities (Apparurai and Breckenridge, 1988, 6), they do apply to the internet where the cultural practice of surfing the web remains a sign of social privilege. Given that around 87% of the Indian population is without access, and with state and corporate control over communications, the internet as a medium has the *potential* to be inclusive, but is not yet inclusive in reality.

At the city-level neoliberal urban transformation has been weighted towards growth in the services sector, including digital and information technology, which has best served the English-speaking and well-educated, while limiting blue-collar employment opportunities (Ahmed, 2011). In India the poor are socially and economically positioned according to class, caste and religious matrixes of inequality, compounded by educational disadvantage (see McFarlane, 2014). Urban slum-dwellers are mostly rural migrants forced from land as the result of agricultural deregulation policies by the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization, which have effectively rendered traditional agriculture non-profitable (Ahmed, 2011). If strengthening neoliberalisation around services is

weighted towards the interests of an elite minority, through professional job creation and corporate profiteering, then claims-making around ICT development addressing geographies of inequality must be qualified (see Carvalho, 2013, 149; Ahmed, 2011).

Internet governance and India

Far from being post-territorial, access to the virtual spaces of the internet is contingent upon the conflicting laws of nation states and materialities of digital infrastructure, along with access to devices and education. The internet, combined with the liberalisation of telecommunications, has distributed control away from state government. Protocols were decentralised leading to distributed participation and authority over networking, and, by extension, decision-making over network operations (Mueller, 2012, 4). Yet, territorialism of internet governance - where nation states create their own laws on virtual space which can lead to divisions in physical and virtual national policy - has meant freedom of expression is deeply uneven across cyberspace.

In fact the de-democratising of India's cyberspace by corporate-based growth is being sharpened by state regulation over freedom of expression. Section 66a of the Information Technology Act makes punishable by law offensive or incorrect information that may lead to annoyance, inconvenience or danger. Politicians have justified the act on the grounds of prevention of civic unrest, violent protest and death; however there have been high profile misuses of Section 66a. For instance, in 2012 there was the case of a police arrest of 21 year old student Shaheen Dhada over a Facebook status update that commented on the death of politician Bal Thackeray (Banerji, 2013).[2] In the Indian public sphere representation continues to be curtailed by the vagaries of Section 66a (based on a UK model), along with cyber-security, a global language of English, instead of Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and other languages, and a lack of fibre optics, wireless networks and affordable devices.

Big Tent Activate: towards growth and inclusion?

Exercising state power to shut down communication channels without warning and arresting dissidents over social media challenges the democratic state. "The internet has become the new public sphere, the new town square", announced the former Indian leader of the opposition, Narendra Modi, via videolink to the assembled Big Tent Activate delegates. The use of the term "public" by Modi, a

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[2] Due to a series of abuses - and subsequent public condemnation - Section 66A was amended so that it now mandates cases can only be registered with the approval of a high-ranking officer, such as the deputy commissioner of police or inspector general (*Banerji,* 2013)

controversial Hindu nationalist, who has since won power, is deeply politicised. If the internet is the new public sphere, it has been marked by incendiary speech, divisions and communication black-outs. The summit agenda was characterised by blurred lines between the critique of heavy-handed cyber security and safeguarding digital growth profits by media representatives who attempted to naturalise the link between freedom of expression and the free market. Criticisms of the inequities of global markets and the role of multinationals in India were conspicuous in their absence, with state and commercial interests apparently aligned. In fact, by convening powerful digital, business and political representatives in an invite-only space, Big Tent Activate actually served to highlight India's structural tensions and dissonances between economic neoliberalisation and plurality of representation.

Attempts to address the ways in which digital media could positively impact upon the lives of disadvantaged communities in India were undermined by their peripheralisation in the programme. Indicative of this piecemeal approach to integrating difference was a breakout session hosted by *Radar*, a small organisation set up by two people from the UK to train citizen reporters in politically and geographically isolated areas. The concept behind *Radar*, which *The Guardian* financially supports, is that marginalised individuals and groups are able to report using simple text messaging, bypassing the need for access to the internet. In the breakout session Dalit women were amongst those who shared their stories with the editor of *The Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger. These women were able to pass hotel security only with intervention from the organisers, highlighting how caste continues to structure aspects of society and space in India. The intent of providing a voice to the disenfranchised - and improving the representation and visibility of the most vulnerable - is undoubtedly important. These aims are nevertheless developed by UK-based organisations that also trade upon the stories, driving asymmetric global North-South power relationships even as they seek to expose and address social injustices.

Cybermoholla: Alternative tactics in an emerging digital public sphere?

The emergent, small scale work of Cybermohalla sought to offer a progressive space of alterity within a cyber context of corporate domination. Founded by young people with Sarai and a local NGO called *Ankur*, Cybermohalla adopted activist strategies to explore and engage ICTs. Five digital labs were located in informal neighbourhoods in the city of Delhi to provide disadvantaged young people with opportunities for learning and education. For example, one of the media labs was located at LNJP basti, Delhi, a non-legal settlement under constant threat of demolition. Each media lab, or "compughar", comprised a room with three computers, portable audio recorders and cameras, and practitioners between 15 and 24 years of age (see Nayar, 2008). Open access labs invited participants to record their own perceptions of neighbourhood life through mixed-media, including animations, audio, photographic diaries and text.

Cybermohalla can be understood as an experiment that engaged with media technologies and software 'tactically' through distributed and multiple local media contexts that are outside of state control:

> The media networks that have expanded and densified in Delhi post-90s are, to a large extent, nurtured in the city's various neighbourhoods which have become fertile sites of innovation, recycling, production and relay. Various social networks accrete around media networks and nodes of production and circulation here, and frequently find themselves in various degrees of conflict with the law. They are saturated with possibilities, but also fraught with social unrest. In the neighbourhoods, the perception of media itself constantly shifts (Sarai-CSDS, 2009, n/p).

Collectively the networks generated alternative forms of knowledge production. The open-ended features of Cybermohalla are reflected in its title which combines the Hindi-Urdu word 'mohalla', meaning neighbourhood, with English to produce a new term that evokes the possibilities of new media technologies. These technologies are not rooted in a "singular space and place, but as de-territorialised forms offer unique possibilities for informal learning that can be actualized in non-linear ways" (Ashthana, 2006, 46). The cyber-activism initiative sought to transform the traditional education process with learning that takes place beyond the classroom, situating it within the local neighbourhood for those who were fortunate enough to live nearby. Multiple representational practices and languages were intended to create pluralised knowledges of life in Delhi's informal settlements. Elaborating this point, Prayod Nayar reflects: "By focusing on the Other—in this case the ordinary, the everyday and the "common man"—Cybermohalla constructs a community for readers-viewers, a community that... brings other parts of the city to us" (Nayar, 2008, n/p).

With reflexivity built into the multi-media and cross-language project design, Cybermoholla could only catalyse partial representations by the disadvantaged and socially marginalised. The project was small in scale, networking with 450 young people in a city of around 16.75 million. It should also be observed that global North organisations gave support to Sarai's Cybermohalla project. Along with the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Sarai-CSDS is financially aided by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology, and the Dutch aid organization HIVOS (Nayar, 2008; Lovink, 2002). Significantly, however, Sarai-CSDS offers a permanent research centre in Delhi that convenes leading Indian scholars and activists, and attracts international visiting scholars. Spatially and politically networked cyber-initiatives, such as Cybermoholla, which are also rooted at the local level, can offer vital potentialities to enhance visibility, plurality and knowledge production in India's digital public sphere. In the case of Cybermoholla platforms were provided that performed a multiplier effect for young and disenfranchised voices. By catalysing the representation of marginalised groups degrees of pressure are applied to the Indian

government and global corporates to acknowledge and address social injustices. These kinds of networks that represent alterity are necessary in a digital public sphere that increasingly speaks to political and economic power in contemporary India.

Conclusions: Pluralising cyber-geo spatialities

The concerns of this piece are marked by the overriding issues of which public and whose culture is represented in cyberspace, and what the future publics of this fast accelerating and augmenting digital public sphere are. Two billion people are currently online worldwide. The Google Executive Chairman and former CEO, Eric Schimdt, calculates that the rest of the world's population – five billion people – will come online in the next five to seven years, mostly through mobile technologies, which will radically change the demographics of internet users and modes of representation.

Cybermoholla placed multi-media methods of representation into spatially and politically marginalised neighbourhoods in Delhi to attempt to document slum-dwellers accounts of everyday urban life. It sought to offer alterity and unsettle mainstream cyber-culture by providing a networked platform in and through which the dispossessed can communicate in a variety of mediums and languages. Undoubtedly, a challenge can be made to Cybermoholla's impact given that the project was small-scale and the neighbourhood media labs were temporary. Moreover, access to education and representational platforms should be a basic right provided by the state, instead of administered through international NGOs. Yet, it remains the case that attempts to forge distributed governance, create access to education and resources, and diversify representation can and should be enabled by a range of actors across the so-called global North-South 'divide'. In the context of neoliberal capitalism the implications of a digital divide is resulting in India's elites shaping political discourse by harnessing ICTs. It is from this political context that Cybermohalla can be recognised as part of networked spatialities that activate alternative forms of knowledge production (see Jazeel, 2014). Instead of resolving structural material and epistemological inequalities, multiple entry points are staged in its gestures towards catalysing cyber-activism and representing difference in a global South megacity.

Writing this as an academic based at a UK institution, the question of what can be done to support spaces that offer progressive alternatives to the dominant neoliberalising model is a challenging one. Reflecting on my visit to Delhi, first as a delegate to Big Tent Activate, and then to Sarai-CSDS, one answer would be to contribute to spatialities where those in positions of privilege can learn lessons and exchange knowledge with power-differentiated stake-holders. It may include, for example, applying for funds available to academics in well-funded research cultures and using these resources to collaborate with multi-level partners across the global North-South, involving, potentially, policy-makers, politicians, NGOs, creatives, technicians, community representatives, local residents and researchers.

In doing so, we may think through what groups and spatialities are currently formulating and driving research agendas, and attempt to reddress imbalances of power or exclusions within future collaborations in the field. Opening up knowledge production and exchange is, of course, further enabled by publishing in suitable platforms for network building and communication such as open access journals instead of behind the pay-walls of a multinational publishing house.

Greater cultural sensitivity to variation in uses of language, meaning-making and technology would support these avenues for pluralising spatialities, including cyberspace. While this intervention is written in English, it is patent that if language acts as a metonym for the challenges of transnational collaboration and improving cultural understanding, we will have to clear more space for alterity to critically address complex interstices of global North-South inequalities and geographies of representation in our future work

Acknowledgements:

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