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Modalities of data colonialism and South Asian hashtag publics

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In December 2018, Mukesh Ambani, chairman of Reliance Industries, declared that data colonialization was comparable to “previous forms of colonialization” and “India’s data must be controlled and owned by Indian people and not by corporates, especially global corporations” (Gaur, 2020). These comments came amidst calls for data protection legislation in the country to safeguard citizens’ data rights. Ambani’s comments were a stunning, albeit not entirely unexpected, co-optation of the language of postcolonialism in service of corporate interests. While Ambani’s telecom holdings (including Jio) have emphasized data localization, namely storing data within the country, they don’t currently provide options for Indians to own their own data as Ambani advocates. Fanon’s (1963) cautionary note that the post-independence period would see a transfer of power from colonial rulers to the native bourgeoisie remains prescient in postcolonial countries (100).

While data ownership is a concern relevant to all Internet users, this is a particular problem for hashtag publics given that Internet era companies rely on data harvesting and big data analytics for their business model. In other words, the commodification of activist struggles and minoritized discourses, and overall, the extraction of data about Global South peoples is inevitably part and parcel of how social media companies sustain their profits. Such data extractivism and commodification runs counter to the liberatory praxis grounding feminist, anti-caste, and other movements challenging systemic oppression, including the harms of global racial capitalism. Hashtag activism has been a key part of the revitalized social movements in the last several years in South Asia—enabling activists to build radical digital publics, sustain political momentum for on-the-ground activism, and pursue political education for new audiences. Yet the social media platforms on which these movements have unfolded are controlled by corporate interests, and known to have problems with hate speech and other forms of harassment aimed at minoritized groups (see, for example, Mimi Onuoha and Safiya Noble on algorithmic violence).

Ambani’s appropriation of postcolonial language without concomitant action suggests that decolonizing data ownership cannot be accomplished merely through nativist control or data localization. Moreover, in the South Asian context, decolonizing socio-technical infrastructure, platforms, and policies cannot be undertaken without challenging the entrenched system of caste oppression. We must orient discussions of data ownership around broader material, socio-political, postcolonial, and ecological modalities specific to our local context and informed by data sovereignty movements among

other minoritized publics. While national legislation on data protection and privacy can be an important step in protecting consumers,¹ the neoliberal state can be just as complicit in surveillance. As the 2020 Internet shutdown in Kashmir and the digital surveillance of anti-CAA activists highlights, the Indian government has been known to abuse its state power under justifications of national security.

Instead of corporations or governments stewarding data ownership, we must explore personalized data management contextualized within communities of kinship and care. What would it mean, for example, for digital rights activists to shape data policies alongside community partners? Activists should be able to inform data management practices instituted on social media platforms—including data stored about activists and hashtags, how this data is used and shared, and the ability to delete sensitive data so it is not used against activists. Further, how would our approach to data ethics shift if we foregrounded community ownership and management of social media data? One related example comes from Mukurtu, a digital platform developed for Indigenous archives which enables Indigenous communities to outline access and use policies related to their “data” (the archival collection) based on internal kinship structures (see Christen 2018). Indigenous scholars and activists have also been at the forefront of conversations on data sovereignty (see Kahutai and Taylor 2016, Duarte 2017, see also the Global Indigenous Data Alliance).

A related concern for community data ownership involves the broader stakes of infrastructural politics, namely accounting for the material infrastructure which enables Internet access internationally. The undersea fiber-optic network which allows transnational networking (responsible for almost all global Internet connectivity) and domestic Internet infrastructures within the country are largely controlled by multinational corporations of foreign or Indian origin (see Starosielski 2015, Thorat 2019). Yet equitable alternatives like scalable community infrastructure that support Internet access for minoritized communities to meet their own needs are possible (see the Internet Society report in May 2017 on community networks in Africa). Community networks are low cost, sustainable measures to provide inexpensive connectivity. Importantly, these networks are premised on self-determination and empowerment, allowing the community to build Internet infrastructures to suit its needs and define relevant practices and policies for itself.

Overall, instead of capitalist orientations of profit, commodification, and corporate ownership guiding approaches to data management and infrastructural ownership, these initiatives center community needs and prioritize an ethics of care defined by the community. For activist publics in digital spaces, these discussions of data justice are intrinsically linked with the various issues of systemic oppression given the kind of surveillance, harassment, co-optation, and commodification they experience on corporate-controlled social media platforms. Instead of allowing corporations and the neoliberal government to set the agenda on data ethics, activists are uniquely positioned to apply and extend their liberatory praxis in this context.

Note

1. A Personal Data Protection Bill has been introduced in the Indian Parliament in 2019. For more on this law and contextual analyses of data privacy in the Indian context, see Burman Anirudh and Suyash Rai 2020, Pandey and Gudipudi (2019), Prasad and Suchitra (2020), and

Greenleaf (2020), and work produced by the Center for Internet and Society, Bangalore.

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Dr. Dhanashree Thorat is an Assistant Professor of English at Mississippi State University. Her research draws on Asian American Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Digital Humanities. She is a founding Executive Council member of the Center for Digital Humanities, Pune in India and serves as the lead organizer for a biennial winter school on Digital Humanities.

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