



# Introduction: Critical Explorations of Media Modernity in India

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In October 2018, just as copyediting for this Thematic Section began, India was made the fourth country – after the US, China and Japan – to set up a Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by the World Economic Forum (WEF), the most influential congregation of political and corporate power in our times. The WEF-website announces projects ‘to be scaled across India and globally’ and reports the first focus to be on artificial intelligence, blockchain and drones so as to ‘tackle some of the country’s most pressing socio-economic needs, such as education, healthcare and agriculture.’ Eventually, with machine learning and the application of smart contracts, the aim is to ‘boost productivity and transparency while reducing inefficiency.’<sup>1</sup> In his inaugural speech in New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi projected that ‘India’s contribution to the 4th Industrial Revolution will be astonishing’ and that ‘Industry 4.0 has the strength to drive irreversible positive change in India’ (The Hindu 2018b). He pointed out how, under his government (a coalition led by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP), the “Digital India” program was already in the process of bringing internet connectivity to villages in an unprecedented fashion and how the country’s fast advances in information and communication technologies, optical fibre-infrastructure and biometrical identification were laying the foundations to success under the motto ‘Solve for India, Solve for the World’ (Varindia 2018).

When fine-tuning our editorial approach to this Thematic Section this acutely mediated vision – for all its conjuring of the upcoming and, by implication, “the (next) modern” – alerted us to the striking echo it finds in a “technological moment”, powerfully accentuated by another Indian government over 40 years ago. As media scholars at least of earlier generations know, the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE)-project was conducted in 1975–76 in the wake of the then globally emerging paradigm of space technology. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of the Congress Party, and her scientific advisor Vikram Sarabhai, founder

of the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), in partnership with NASA, visualized SITE to “leapfrog” (as the buzzword went then) the developmental gap in the most “backward” regions of India. Using a satellite to beam television programs (on education, healthcare and agriculture) directly to audiences in 2400 remote villages, it was hailed by science fiction-writer Arthur C. Clarke as the ‘greatest communications experiment in history’ (Krige, Callahan and Maharaj 2013). As Sarabhai put it during the early stages of planning SITE: ‘We are convinced that if we are to play a meaningful role nationally, and in the community of nations, we must be second to none in the application of advanced technologies to the real problems of man and society’ (ISRO website).

When viewed together, what do these two moments of ostentatious technology-celebration tell us about India’s media modernity – the overarching theme this Thematic Section of Culture Unbound seeks to address?

## **Re-projecting the Techno-Nation**

Obvious in both moments is the hyperbole of the official representation and the underlying technological utopianism, i.e. the positivist display, bordering on the fantastic, of technology as the harbinger of the ideal, ‘post-scarcity’ society (see Giddens 1996). Correspondingly, we find the identical blueprint of the marginalized and the poor as the first beneficiaries of the ever latest technology, which in turn continues to be projected as being at the service of those most required to “catch up” in order for an Arcadian society to take shape.

In this context, the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” together with its domestic equivalent of “Digital India”, appears to signify a re-emergence of the markedly national information-communication technology project as a theme. The 1990s had seemed to spell the very end of grand national schemes, particularly in the fields of media technology. Coordinated implementation, last seen with the massive expansion of the national television network in the 1980s, had diffused into a vague interplay, both in terms of rhetoric and practice, between a new variety of agents. Akin to elsewhere in the world, this diffusion in India too was catalyzed by, on the one hand, the “unfettered” neoliberal greed of gain under the mantras of (government) reform and (consumer) choice, and on the other hand, by the liberated and libertarian imaginations in the privatising mass media that immanently challenged erstwhile privileges in defining forms and contents, access and interaction (Appadurai 1996, Robins and Morley 1995, Schiller 1991, Sonwalkar 2002, Wilson and Dissayanake 1996). These seductions often blinded both the sensitivity towards dangers of creeping ethno-religious nationalism as well as the visibility of insidious legal and physical deployments of media technology by national and transnational actors (Gingrich and Banks 2006, Herman and McChesney 1997,

Mankekar 1999, Ohm 2007, Rajagopal 2001).

The re-emergence of the grand technology project, that is advertised and conducted by only a small internationalized group of partly non-mandated power holders who couple “development” with forceful national integration, thus also points towards the background of severely compromised democracy that India’s projected contribution to the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” shares with the SITE endeavour. The seamless realization of SITE unfolded in parallel with the swift removal of democratic barriers under the open declaration of authoritarian rule by Indira Gandhi, known as the Emergency (1975–77), which ensured that the ‘nightly arrests, illegal detention, torture and death in jails, voices of dissent silenced by transfers, firing and other means could not be seen on that television set’ (Pendakur 1988: 37). Somewhat in an upgraded mode, that has repeatedly been termed an ‘undeclared emergency’ (The Hindu 2018), PM Modi has, in tune with other populist leaders around the globe, introduced ‘tweet politics’ (Kreis 2017, Pal 2015), i.e. a direct communication with “the people” via social media that largely bypasses democratic institutions such as the parliament and even the cabinet (Chakravartty and Roy 2015, Ohm 2014). The cascading verbal assault, physical violence and administrative oppression against critical media, activists and universities, members of minority communities, low castes and Adivasis under this government are now overwhelmingly, and often brazenly, mediated on a global scale but so far fail to provoke resounding majoritarian condemnation, both within India and abroad (see Banaji 2018). And yet, just like in 1977, when Indira Gandhi was at least temporarily voted out of power, these excesses might eventually not lead to the desired results in elections.

### **Unraveling a Media Modernity: What Can it Mean?**

These resonances between two striking moments of technological celebration in time indicate a well-established connection between media and modernity in India’s postcolonial history and imagination. Equally, and more widely, they tell about the continuous mutual reinvention of this connection under shifting conditions (see Thompson 1995). What they seem to speak of, moreover, is the successive dissolution of a discernible difference between “media” and “modernity” (also) in the Indian context, which the key term of this Thematic Section – media modernity – attempts to capture. Of this process of dissolution, the fading away of an “outside” (a.k.a “the West”), that would both be enforcing new structures and enabling new perspectives, can be seen as one crucial expression. The abrupt and penetrating effects of transnational satellite television post-1991 (Bhatt 1994, Sulehria 2017), which erased virtually overnight India’s carefully groomed technological sovereignty initiated by SITE, are increasingly unlikely to find a qua-

litative parallel in the future. On the analytical level, the successive replacement, for instance, of “modernization” through “mediatization” in academic approaches appears to be but one indication of the same dynamics (see Downey and Neyazi 2014, Udupa 2010): media are not any more just an “instrument” or a “representative” of change; they *are* change, in India as much as across the planet, even if the conditionalities vary greatly (see Sundaram 2010).

Indeed, media modernity refers not only to the globally increasing ubiquity and abundance of media and technology in ever more people’s lives but also alludes to their simultaneous experience of modernity’s ambivalences (Athique 2012, Dirlik 2007, Ståhlberg 2014). At the theoretical level, in turn, media modernity implies an ontological proximity between the two concepts of media (technology) and modernity. They share an adaptability, an emptiness even, that bears the old advantage of form over content as theirs much exceeds the variability of single modern achievements such as democracy or enlightenment or the idea of social justice. Media modernity need neither be democratic nor enlightened nor just (see Alexander 2013, Azoulay 2015, Butler 2009, Sontag 2003). As the two moments we invoked illustrate, under the relentless pressure of Western/global techno-economic advance, the discourse of modernity almost habitually leverages the poor and the disadvantaged as a pretext to reinvent itself – a logic particularly stark in countries featuring substantial socio-economic injustices like India. All the while, the poor and the disadvantaged neither go away nor become less, smartphone in hand or not, and information and communication technology pans out as much to support their democratic citizenship rights as to attack and even erase them.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the mass media as a warning shield against the galloping risks of modernity, as Ulrich Beck once assumed, is thus itself at risk. One of the early theorists of post-industrialism, Beck saw modernity entering a stage of self-reflexion, i.e. of becoming a problem in itself rather than a means to problem-solving (Beck 1986). Even as he was, like most white Western scholars (and politicians), largely ignorant of the postcolonial dimension of this “modernity problem”, he anticipated an increasing cross-societal distribution of the risks that come with the rationalized plundering of natural resources, large-scale environmental pollution, massive waste-production, and growing un(der)-employment and that have now entered debates around the anthropocene and climate change (Latour 2018, Tsing et al. 2017, Zinn 2016). Not quite able to transcend a Habermasian concept of the public, on the other hand, Beck could not conceive of media, both in terms of hard- and software, becoming included in such self-reflexive re-distribution (Ellis 2004, Cottle 1998). As meanwhile being increasingly demonstrated under the personalization and massification of media use and the re-emergence of grand national technology programs, media modernity well inhabits the possibility of a populist avatar of authoritarian politics, of neo-totalitarian surveillance, of ever

more brutal inequalities and of choking on the ecological consequences of its own inventions.<sup>3</sup> Precisely because of its “empty heart”, however, media modernity also has the capacity to enable a whole new level of postcolonial democratic negotiation that is more existential in its consciousness, more political in its agency and more egalitarian in its understanding of the themes of differences, assemblages, contradictions and particularities that the 1990s first brought on the agenda. Of such a “reflected modernity”, too, there exist many examples. The hashtag-campaign of #metoo during 2017–18 that for the first time got women on a global scale to articulate their various experiences with sexual misconduct, the, often painful, re-negotiation of journalism’s role and tasks, and widespread civic engagement for the right to respect of individual and collective life choices, environmental protection and global solidarity are only some instances of a robust under- and countercurrent (see Bhattacharya 2017, Ståhlberg 2006, Wolfgang 2018).

The media themselves have thus become the space and the resource within which and with the help of which antagonistic scenarios are being contested. Consequently, neither the much increased everyday media-savviness nor the amassed scholarly knowledge of media are a guarantee for “Democracy 2.0” to (further) materialize (see Carr, Hoechsmann and Thésée 2018). Rather, as the essays in this Thematic Section underline, the meanings, overlaps and interrelations of different aspects and locations of this modernity, and of their various media(-tions), are both in quality and quantity so diverse, messy and ‘liquid’, to use Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000) concept, that it is hard to imagine how they will ever fit into any one scenario. This is one reason for us to briefly introduce the essays in the following along a string of key words: history, politics/regulation, language, gender/race/caste and community.

## **An Analytical Geography of Sites and Registers**

The authors of these essays, all carrying Indian passports, were first brought together in a panel call during 2016 towards the Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET) conference on ‘Modern Matters: Negotiating the future of everyday life in South Asia’ (SASNET 2016). These authors live and work, like so many of us, often temporarily at different junctures of the now often precarious global-local connect – Singapore, New Delhi, London, Mumbai – thereby also embodying the ambivalences of the modernity they examine and on whose mediated character they offer here a small but powerful glimpse.

As we have tried to indicate with our little retrospection above, a critical dimension in the understanding of media modernity is (its) history. Remarkably, this has often become sidelined in the compulsive focus of most current media research on the ever latest technological developments. Sarah Niazi, by contrast,

in her essay on early Bombay cinema, delves deepest among the contributors into colonial times, fathoming the discourses around and the distinctive visualizations of the era's 'white' actresses as responses to the challenge of modernity itself: 'ambivalent, harsh and anxious' (page 348). On the other end of the spectrum, so to speak, Sunitha Chitrapu elaborates on tradition, as a variant of both continuing and invented history: an ancient format of Tamil literary conversation – the *pattimandram* (debate) – is 'telemodernised', i.e. re-enacted in the form of a popular TV-show, so as to emphasise an unscathed cultural bond with an imagined 'glorious past' (page 363). Concerning the related trope of temporality, the essay by Arshad Amanullah, centralizing a crucial political incident in 2009 and the active involvement of the Urdu press, throws up the question if 2009 is already "history" or still "currency", thus reminding us beyond its actual topic of the speed with which (recent) history is made in media(ted) modernity.

On a different note, both Siddarth Narrain and, even more so, Aasim Khan bring history to bear on the 'constituted contexts' of media regulation (Parthasarathi 2018), especially with regard to the genealogy of *Hindutva* (Hindu-ness) dominance and the politics of violence. Narrain shows how policies around the circulation of 'objectionable material' on internet-enabled mobile phones have increasingly shifted towards preventive law enforcement. Khan, meanwhile, argues that the long-pending issue of media autonomy has been topped by the ambivalences of individual anonymity, both in terms of evading (government) surveillance and of engaging in online aggression. He argues that emerging digital media activism has an important role to play in closing a historical gap between policy- and technology-expertise on the one hand and critical political culture on the other.

Both in discussing the interpretative range of what constitutes 'objectionable material' and in focusing on hate speech as one crucial component of such material, Narrain also attends to facets of the broad field of language as a condition of mediation and communication that all five contributions at least touch upon in very different ways. While hate speech casts language as a signifier that uninhibitedly denies belonging and legitimacy to designated "others", Chitrapu contends that the televised Tamil *pattimandram*, through its polite and regulated idiom, is brought to the effect of alleviating acute anxieties over social and economic changes amongst viewers who can identify with that tradition. In a variation of this logic, the press that Amanullah critically engages with was willing, under the directed influence of the Sunni *ulama* (religious leadership), to use a language – Urdu – that has increasingly been reduced to be the tongue of the Muslim minority, against the public efforts of an even further marginalized denomination within Islam, the *Ahmadis*. The sober language of technicality and policies, on the other hand, that Khan seeks to digitally reconcile with the expressivity of critical

political culture, finds some resonance in the proposed union of ‘the aspirations of the West with those of the East’ that Niazi finds in Bollywood cinema (page 347). Significantly, Niazi in her piece dismantles this expression as a lingual code for sexual discrimination against the ‘white’ actresses in the Bombay film studios of the 1930s.

In evaluating the “moral” vulnerability and the “modern” power of these actresses, Niazi charts a very particular constellation of gender and race, both on and behind the screen, that calls for further research in contemporary contexts. Gender and caste, meanwhile, are brought into relation by Chitrapu who unravels the traditional idiomatic comfort zone of the TV-pattimandram as hardly questioning its ostentatious Hindu Brahmin provenance and as pricing the inclusion of women’s voices with a solid patriarchal framing. In a more concealed fashion, we find the dimension of caste also where South Asia scholarship still too rarely even suspects it, namely amongst the readers of the Urdu press, i.e. within the Muslim minority. As Amanullah shows, the religiously “deviant” group of the Ahmadis represents only one amongst other marginalized and low-caste groups within the Muslim community who find themselves up against a hostile alliance of Urdu media and the Sunni upper-caste ulama when they try to mediate independent religious or critical political agency.

From a very different angle, Narrain equally breaches the conventional and homogenising angle on Hindu majority-Muslim minority, without denying its centrality in the current political scenario. He underlines, however, the self-organising of violent/vigilante groups, particularly via WhatsApp, along short-termed political and topical lines. Similarly, Khan elaborates on the shifting formations of digital activist groups in correspondence with evolving technologies and policies. Overall, finally, the regionality of the approaches assembled here is one distinctive feature that both transcends and variegates the “India” in our title. While most pronounced in Chitrapu’s focus on Tamil as a historical, social and lingual location of contemporary television production and in the prominence of the film city of (erstwhile) Bombay in Niazi’s essay, Narrain follows aggressive digital action in its repercussions between the South of India and the North-East. Completing this geographical spread, Amanullah and Khan focus, implicitly and explicitly, on North India.

Together, while leveraging a spectrum of empirical settings and analytical standpoints, the contributions to this thematic section underline the intrinsic connection between modernity and media and demonstrate the genealogy of media modernity as an open concept, a permanent interplay, and a lived ambivalent reality. Its further critical exploration, it is to be hoped, will open ever more avenues leading away from the often unquestioned authority of modernity over both communication policy and media studies in India and beyond.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup><https://www.weforum.org/press/2018/10/world-economic-forum-opens-centre-for-the-fourth-industrial-revolution-india/> ; the term “fourth industrial revolution” has been invented by the World Economic Forum itself.

<sup>2</sup>The potential refinements of politically motivated surveillance through the implementation of the biometrical registration of all Indian citizens (the Aadhaar – ‘Fundament’ – System) may serve here as only one example.

<sup>3</sup>India is already the fifth largest producer of partly toxic electronic waste, with a growing tendency, while also serving as a dumping ground from large amounts of electronic waste from the West (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/waste/can-india-manage-its-toxic-e-waste—60891>). Particularly the smartphone and the culture of its fast replacement with the latest model has been identified as one of the ecologically most detrimental communication devices (<https://www.fastcompany.com/90165365/smartphones-are-wrecking-the-planet-faster-than-anyone-expected>).



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