

The Politics of Media: How Technologies are Reshaping our Current Political and Cultural Landscape

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Abstract:

Technology is transforming the political and cultural landscapes of the globe. In this research, careful observation is made towards the global and transnational flow of media and information along with the technological infrastructure that it relies on to communicate those messages. Furthermore, this paper investigates the discrimination that media and technologies have on people, especially in the Global South. Historical accounts are used to guide and explain how the past has resulted in current-day discrimination – particularly regarding the infrastructure. From a political perspective, this paper also observes how governments use technology for protecting national security. Through previous scholarly literature and essays, this paper attempts to discover how technology is used in today's political and cultural landscape.

Introduction

People need only to look back on the past twenty years to see how humans have progressed in technological advancements. As these advancements continue, newer technologies are continuously built on older technologies (Starosielski, 2015). Although this may preserve resources and financial loss, the technique of building on older systems may result in disagreements of political and cultural nature. This is primarily due to political and cultural norms which are constantly changing. Therefore, by building upon older systems, the framework to our modern interconnected society may be flawed due to being constructed upon outdated and unsupported ideologies.

The power in which technology has in society and culture is evermore growing. In an increasing rate, the Western world continues to grow its reliance on technological systems to function in everyday life – which can be seen in companies shifting from paper-based records towards moving their data on digital platforms. Moreover, nearly all communication that is not face-to-face has mostly transitioned to a digital space. Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, Slack, and other similar messaging platforms have risen to provide telecommunications for businesses, organizations, and people alike.

Although these platforms provide an excellent way for people to communicate and interact, there are several underlying issues that must be addressed. Starosielski (2015) reminds readers that internet cables are arenas for political debate as they can easily be disrupted, monitored, or censored (p. 63). Albeit this may not always be an issue especially under circumstances where national security may be at risk. However, the underlying threat always exists that a central force such as the government, powerful companies, or extremist groups may infiltrate these spaces to carry out their own gain.

It seems almost inevitable that technology and society will become even more intertwined, especially as the West and the Global South continue to see technological breakthroughs. As this

occurs, the study of the dichotomy between both technology and society will become evermore necessary. Through a critical analysis of several scholarly writings, this paper seeks to explore how technologies reshape the political and cultural landscapes.

Transnational Flows of Media and Information

It is true that Globalization has resulted in the transnational flows of media and information. Prior to the widespread use and availability of technology, interactions between nations, culture, and societies were restricted due to limitations in communication. Although interaction between nations and cultures were not completely restricted, the limitations presented created a significant barrier to engage with each other – in juxtaposition to today. Historically, before modern forms of communication were introduced into society, such as the telephone, television, internet, etc, people relied on written text to communicate with each other. Written text, such as letters and correspondence, may have taken weeks or months to arrive at its destination, depending on where the piece was traveling.

However, the introduction of modern technology and media remove these former barriers that were once present in communication. Directly, this allows nations and cultures to engage with each other in ways that were not previously possible. Appadurai (1990) reminds us that “media create communities with ‘no sense of place’” (p. 585). Media then becomes a site where people can interact with each other, regardless of where they are in the world – if it is connected to the internet. The latter in the aforementioned sentence is critical to understand, as not all areas of the world have equal access to new media and the internet.

Given that internet cables are infrastructure systems, they must be regulated and monitored by people in charge. This may result in power imbalances and spaces of inequalities. As the internet gets regulated in certain areas, it results in limitations on the access and usage people can have on digital spaces. Starosielski writes on this:

Cable routes are places where media systems can be disrupted... rather than extending uniformly across space, cables have often remained embedded in existing geographies, and their effects on media industries, user experiences, and the politics of circulation occur unevenly around the world... cables can perpetuate imbalances in media production and consumption, an inequality that becomes most apparent in the differing cost of media access. (Starosielski, 2015, p. 56)

As Starosielski explained, the placement of cables has become instrumental in understanding how people can access and engage with others digitally. If people are being disconnected, or disrupted, from this digital space, the representation of people throughout the world becomes lessened – at least on a legal sense. Media can continue to circulate through these regions, even if direct access through the internet is not possible, as geographical places such as Fiji, which has seen a rise in illegal DVD distribution networks (Staroseilski, 2015). Therefore, one may ponder the question, does the legal/illegal label truly provide limitations on the dissemination of media? Although there are certainly other ramifications that are a result of the legal/illegal label of media, there may not be as much limitation in the distribution of it. It can be assumed that media will take longer to reach its audiences in places that are much tighter on their media consumption laws. However, productions can still penetrate nations and communities if the people want it; which was precisely seen in Afghanistan during the late 90s and early 2000s with the film *Titanic* (Hosseini, 2007).

The legal/illegal case of media limitation is an instance of internal restrictions set forth by nations or communities. Sreberny (1991) shares that these internal limitations – or the justification to make certain media illegal is done to “protect indigenous cultures” from the major producers of media in the world (p. 613). Companies such as Time Warner have sought to push back against these restrictions of imports of media as they have felt it is not necessary in some instances, only

where the indigenous culture is at risk (Sreberny, 1990). This is a clear sight that globalization, present day capitalism, and other hegemonic instances are an evermore threat, especially as media conglomerates may attempt to subdue cultures and communities where said media is being imported.

However, the laws restricting the dissemination of certain films and genres may result in negative unforeseen consequences as well. In many developing countries, where there are laws that restrict media access, it may create a space where national productions are disregarded in favor of the American or Western media (Sreberny, 1990). Ultimately, this reinforces a Western/American hegemonic culture in places where this should not be the case. As previously mentioned, this can harm or belittle the national culture and ultimately change the culture to a more Western ideology. Western ideology is becoming ever more present on the globe. Berman (1999) explains that globalization has “given a cosmopolitan character to production and distribution in every country...” (p. 96). This results in almost a cookie-cutter style culture, where the Global South reflects the West. This is a clear example of how imbalances in media production and consumption are constantly causing friction in nations where people consume media that is predominantly imported from Western nations.

Unfortunately, not much is done to bridge this gap between nations that primarily produce media and nations that primarily import media. Capitalism, by default, will try to exploit these markets to make the most money. Moreover, media giants are inclined to not improve these imbalances, and may be more likely to encourage these imbalances to continue to grow (Sreberny, 1990). However, not all developing nations will mostly import media. For example, Bollywood – also known as Hindi cinema – and Nollywood which is the Nigerian cinema industry produce a significant number of media. In fact, Bollywood has developed into the world’s largest film industry, even surpassing Hollywood as “every year a billion more people buy tickets for Indian movies than

Hollywood films” (Thussu, 2008, p. 98). One could argue that the success of Bollywood is a direct result of the Indian diaspora. The desire to stay connected with media from the individual's native country may help grow this market. Appadurai (1990) explains that “deterritorialization creates new markets for film companies, art impressions, and travel agencies, which thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland” (p. 592). A direct example of what Appadurai is discussing is Bollywood – particularly with its international success.

Moreover, in the case of Bollywood, by targeting the global Indian, they are participating in the fetishism of the consumer that Appadurai calls. He further explains that “the consumer has been transformed through commodity flows (and the mediascapes, especially of advertising that accompany them, into a sign...” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 596). Therefore, global Indians have access to media productions through the mediascapes. Ultimately, they have been transformed and attracted to the Bollywood productions byway of advertising aspects of the culture, *mise-en-scène*, and dialects.

Ultimately, Bollywood productions become an excellent case study to understand how these media transcend national borders. Through using streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video global Indians can view and engage with Indian productions. Thus, allowing them to participate in the cultural productions of Bollywood and also enter discourses regarding this media. Moreover, despite Bollywood being the world's largest film industry, in the United States this industry is not the hegemonic ideology that people subscribe to; therefore, it can be a counter-hegemonic force while also being the world’s largest film industry. Additionally, one may argue that India has some of the internet foundations in their infrastructure due to the British occupation. Although the British occupation has resulted in many problems, it has given the nation a strong foundation in a cabled infrastructure, where Indians can now use to participate in digital media discourses. Ultimately, how media has surpassed the geographical boundaries has truly signified the

strength and power that technology, the internet, and digital spaces have on how humans continue to engage, interact, and communicate with one another.

Discriminations, Limitations, and Shortcomings

Although media and technology infrastructures provide access to digital spaces, there are limitations to these systems. As mentioned in the previous section, these infrastructures can be monitored and restricted. Therefore, the question can be asked, who deserves to be a gatekeeper of the media? This question should be particularly asked in nations that are developing. Moreover, when technology is restricted and people's access to digital spaces are obstructed it can lead to systems that are designed to suppress the development of people. As a result, much of this becomes related to current day politics in nations where these restrictions take place.

Technology itself cannot make the choices to discriminate against people; however, it can be used to discriminate. Winners (1980) explains artifacts such as “machines, structures, and systems ... can embody specific forms of power and authority” (p. 19). Unfortunately, government leaders can use these technologies to exert their power and authority over the people. Moreover, this results in the change of citizenship experience (Winners, 1980). These instances can be observed under certain administrations in the United States government. For example, after the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration began implementing higher levels of security and information gathering through the National Security Agency – often abbreviated as the NSA. After several years, it became public knowledge that the NSA was using technologies such as the internet to monitor people's behaviors in the name of counterterrorism. Under this example, one can notice that the Bush administration used the NSA to tap into the digital spaces of citizens. This is clearly an act of them exerting their power and authority over people through technologies. The debate whether that is legal or not is a different argument; however, it does provide insight on how people in authority may use technology to monitor their nations. Additionally, with this occurring, the experiences of citizens will change. It

can be assumed that behaviors will change if people feel they are being monitored and watched – ultimately changing their citizenship experiences, as Winners shared.

In terms of technology, it is vital to understand who makes the decisions on how it is used and monitored. Winners argues that because people often view technology as an apolitical object it doesn't matter at all. However, he warns the use of this language because the way technology is used matters significantly. Therefore, the argument continues that technology should be viewed as “politically significant in its own right” (Winners, 1980, p. 21). The necessity to label technology as political stems from political leaders' need to regulate and control technology – thus being gatekeepers themselves. One cannot view technology simply as an artifact that exists without recognizing the consequences that come along with technology when being used by political beings.

Moreover, new inventions and the advancements of technology are usually a result of necessity. Often this necessity is derived from capitalism and the desire to increase profit. For example, in the case of Cyrus McCormick II, he used his reaper to “weed out the bad element among the men” particularly those who were in the labor union (Winners, 1980, p. 21). Given that McCormick was not interested in employing those who were members of the labor union, as they made it difficult for McCormick to exploit their work, McCormick used this opportunity to remove the workers from their jobs through technology. One can notice these situations occurring today in the instance of McDonalds. Corporations such as McDonalds choose not to employ as many workers on the registers as they are now able to take orders through mobile kiosks. This has cut down on the number of workers McDonalds needs to maintain, thereby, saving the company money. This is precisely what Deleuze (1992) refers to when he mentions that “technological evolution must be, even more profoundly, a mutation of capitalism” (p. 6). Therefore, one must ask themselves how capitalism and technological advancements are being intertwined in one.

In terms of discrimination and current shortcomings, modern technology such as the internet relies on older systems that were in place during colonial times. As previously stated, the wires that connect the internet were placed in the prior century. These cables focused on the transmission of information between Europe and North America (Starosielski, 2015). Due to the abundance of infrastructure in those areas, it becomes much more affordable to transmit data through these locations; thereby, sacrificing the risk of the information being tapped into through foreign countries (Starosielski, 2015). Although this paper previously discussed this issue in the former section, I reiterate it again simply because it shows the discriminations placed in certain areas of the world. The same Euro-American areas of the world are privileged with media accessibility and the routing of information through cables that run through their territories.

Although, as Appadurai mentions, media creates spaces with “no sense of place,” the sense of no place is limited to the digital arena (p. 585). Media is performative and thus requires a space to do so. In the natural world, this space is the cables that run undersea. On an infrastructure level, how people access and engage with media relies on physical places. The limitations people experience are a direct result of limitations of having infrastructures operate globally in several nations, territories, and communities. However, in juxtaposition, the way people perceive media does not reveal these limitations, shortcomings, and discrimination. Therefore, Appadurai is correct when he says media creates spaces with “no sense of place” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 585). However, I would place emphasis on the word sense, because sense does not equate to reality. The digital arena must function on a sense of place due to its infrastructure, but how people perceive it gives it no sense of place.

Conclusion

Technology has an evermore stake in the lives of people today. The means by which people communicate, interact, and engage with one another has grown to incorporate technology. However, by incorporating these new technologies, people run into the risk of losing confidentiality and privacy. Although companies such as Facebook provide means to communicate with one another through messaging apps, Facebook then holds access to all messages and information in their servers. Therefore, the individuals communicating do not necessarily own the right of privacy anymore, as people historically maintained. Companies are not the only way privacy is restricted in technology use. As discussed earlier, undersea internet cables pass through various nations, thus being bound to their laws. Therefore, any information that passes through those territories may be susceptible to being read as well.

Although one could argue that many benefits are resulting in a more globalized, interconnected, cosmopolitan world, there are criticisms that also include media and technological discriminations. Western media is one of the largest distributors of media/cinema. From a capitalistic standpoint, this may be a positive aspect to globalization; however, for those who participate in cultural studies, people can recognize that media has significant influence over the people who consume it. Despite the immense control Western media has on the world, developing nations are rising to produce exceptional amounts of media. This paper analyzed a case study of Bollywood productions in India, which are now one of the world's largest film industries (Thussu, 2008, p. 98). It is remarkable how Bollywood has grown into the media giant it is today. However, one could argue that for it to have seen its success, it must have also sacrificed some of its own beliefs to become globally capitalized.

This paper sought to understand how technology engages with politics, particularly dealing with how people interact with each other through technology. The debate on how internet cables lie

on the ocean floors, how media restriction laws, and cultural hegemony occur via the media are relevant and political matters. Moreover, the foundation of these technological infrastructures are bound to the colonial era, thus leading to discrimination inequalities of use. Therefore, I argue that until we move away from continuously building on pre-existing infrastructures, there will always be discrimination and unequal privileges in media accessibility. Inequalities are constantly built into the everyday human world, therefore, it is evermore vital to continuously seek to understand these inequalities and attempt to revert them.

Ultimately, technology is used in various ways to discriminate and exploit people. The political power it provides people in governmental authority truly shares the power these systems have over the people. Whether it may be how people view and experience citizenship, how governments monitor people's actions, or how inventions are used to reduce the amount of employment needed – which saves capital – technology has a political role in public discourse. Although technology itself may not actively be making the choices, the way they are designed and imposed onto people has lasting effects.

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