NR03 / Conceptualising Digital Public in India

Topic : Research

Chair : Aakansha Natani (IIIT Hyderabad)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The idea of the digital public has gained significant traction in India amidst the rapid expansion of state-led digital public infrastructures and the increasing entanglement of everyday life with platformized technologies. From governance and identity to finance, labor and service delivery, digital systems are no longer peripheral, they are central to how public life is imagined, structured, and experienced. In this context, this panel brings
together critical perspectives that seek to unpack the conceptual, political and material dimensions of the digital public in India. Rather than taking the digital public as a given or a benign space of participation, the panel interrogates the assumptions embedded within it: What constitutes "publicness" in digital infrastructures? How do state policies and regulatory frameworks shape the formation of the digital public? In what ways do digital systems reconfigure the relationship between citizens, markets and the state? And crucially, how are labor, identity, and agency being transformed through digital mediation? Through interdisciplinary inquiry, the panel aims offer a grounded and critical lens on how digital
publics are being made, governed, and contested in India.

Panel Chair- Dr Aakansha Natani, Assistant Professor, Human Sciences Research Centre, IIIT Hyderabad, India
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Bio- Dr Aakansha Natani is working as an Assistant Professor in the Human Sciences Research Centre, IIIT Hyderabad, India. She works broadly on data governance policies, regulations and data infrastructures in the EU and India. She worked as a DC Pavate Visiting Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, UK in 2023. She was awarded the Jean Monnet Module Grant on 'Digital Democracy and Data Governance in the European Union' by the European Commission in 2024.

List of Papers -
(1) The Paradoxical Public? Digital Public Infrastructure and the Citizen-Subject (Dr. Manohar Kumar and Dr. Praveen Priyadarshi)
(2) On The Importance of the Public in the 'Digital Public' (Prof. Shishir K Jha)
(3) Whose flexibility? The shifting contours of control over time on platform work in India (Prof. Balaji Parthasarathy)

Abstracts and Bio -

Paper 1: The Paradoxical Public? Digital Public Infrastructure and the Citizen-Subject (Dr. Manohar Kumar and Dr. Praveen Priyadarshi)

It is argued that Digital Public Infrastructures (DPIs) will enhance citizen participation and engagement with the state in the process promoting civic engagement and developing a culture of transparency and accountability (Zuckerman 2020). Critics have argued that this infrastructure lacks proper governance and accountability (Seth et.al. 2023), requires
integrating governance in its architecture (Massally et.al 2023) , and a proper inclusion of the public it is supposed to serve (Seth 2022) . The contemporary discussion on DPIs is largely organised around the promises and perils of the technology to serve democratic interests. Less attention is given to re-imagine the idea of the citizenship and the public, which requires a significant review and a substantial renovation in their digital avatar. (Hinz
et al, 2019) In this paper we argue that theorising what constitutes public in DPIs is key to making sense of citizenship practices and the possibilities of public action. Unlike non- digital infrastructures that constitute the public both as a recipient of services but also presents a common space that is both a site of association and contestation, the very nature of DPIs reduces citizens to individual entities who cannot act in concert with
others. The nature of action is thus transactional in terms of receiving a service and the nature of voice is affective in terms of articulating a case around the non-performance of service. This model undermines the possibility of the emergence of a public and public action by restricting, for example, the events of grievance

redressal to a digital event between a private citizen and the state. Not only this individualises what in essence is a
public concern, it restricts the possibility of the common space where multiple citizen voices can act in concert, engage in the space of reason, and constitute the public.

Bio- Dr Manohar Kumar and Dr Praveen Priyadarshi are working as Assistant Professors at Algorithm, Governance, Society Lab, IIITD, New Delhi, India. Dr Manohar Kumar has a PhD in Political Theory from LUISS University Rome and has held Postdoctoral positions at IIT Delhi and GREQAM, Aix Marseille University. He is the co-author with Daniele Santoro of Speaking Truth to Power: A Theory of Whistleblowing. Dr. Praveen Priyadarshi completed his Ph.D. in Development Studies from London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), London. His academic interest lies at the intersections of the categories of space, institutions and policy especially in the urban context.

Paper 2: On The Importance of the Public in the 'Digital Public' (Prof. Shishir K Jha)

Abstract- The importance of the role of the 'public', as opposed to the private, in a rapidly developing digital economy has not received adequate attention in terms of broader public policy debates. A cursory examination of the digital growth within the last 3 decades, shows that policy intervention on different aspects of 'digital governance' has been rather sparse. The unprecedented pace of digital growth within several sectors, resulting in the creation of 'Big Tech' digital platforms (Ola, Uber, Swiggy, Zomato, Urban Company), is an unequivocal testimony to various forms of technological entrenchment. A question of interest to us is how does one rethink the role of the 'public', within a largely privately carved digital space. The aggregation and circulation of data is among the most predominant elements of the contemporary economy. 'Big Tech' has become the
'obligatory passage point' for all types of data exchange in the digital economy (Bassens and Van Meeteren 2015), and is literally at the heart of a new socio-technical system. The key issue that we'd like to closely examine is: can public policy interventions ensure that one of society's key resources, namely aggregate data and digital intelligence, is widely available for shared 'public' use. Can governance models propose a more robust use of the 'digital public' (for instance, as brought out in the conceiving of Digital Public Infrastructure and Digital Public Goods)?

Bio- Shishir K. Jha is a Professor at the Ashank Desai Center for Policy Studies, IIT Bombay. He is actively engaged in analyzing and theorizing various aspects of the data economy, particularly the structural dimensions of digitization on information flows. His interests range from the political economy of data storage, data monetization, competitiveness of digital markets, venture capitalism and digital economy, digital identity, and digital governance. He was the National Lead for the launch of the Creative Commons India chapter in 2007.

Paper 3: Whose flexibility? The shifting contours of control over time on platform work in India (Prof. Balaji Parthasarathy)

Abstract- This presentation will argue that the reference to last-mile delivery workers on digital platforms which offer geographically tethered services, as "gig workers", "partners", or "independent contractors", is misleading because these terms signify a degree of control over working time that workers lack. This lack of control manifests itself in, for instance, the number of hours workers are expected to work (undermining the notion of a 'gig' or "independence") which, in turn, determines how much workers can earn (undermining promises of workers being able to earn as much as they want and when they want). The lack of control over time reflects the lack of workers' voice in determining the conditions that govern their relationship with the platform.

The presentation will situate the asymmetries between workers and platforms within broader asymmetries resulting from the structural transformations in the Indian labour market. The presentation will draw on 1369 interviews conducted between 2021 and 2024 with workers on platforms offering services in domains including ride-hailing, food delivery, hyper-local grocery delivery, ecommerce and home services, in the cities of Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram.

Bio- Balaji Parthasarathy is Professor at the International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore and a co-founder of the Institute's Center for Information Technology and Public Policy. His interests are rooted in economic sociology and economic geography, and examine the relationship between technological change and innovation, economic globalization, and social transformation.

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