NR11 / From Geopolitics to Governance: How AI Surveillance Technologies Centralise Authority Across the Global South and India

Topic : Research

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Significance of the Panel Topic

The rapid proliferation of digital governance infrastructure in the Global South in general, and within India in particular, presents a critical juncture for understanding how developing democracies negotiate the tension between technological innovation, state capacity, and citizen rights. India's ambitious digitisation agenda, spanning Aadhaar, e-governance platforms, facial recognition systems, integrated data ecosystems and more, demonstrates how digital technologies become instruments of both efficient administration and concentrated state power. This panel examines centralisation both as a geopolitical process, where surveillance technologies exported by major powers reconfigure authority across the Global South, and as a state-institutional process within India, where digital infrastructures deepen centralised control through administrative systems and welfare architectures.

The relevance of this panel is underscored by the conference theme's emphasis on governance challenges in developing economies and the need to produce contextualised theoretical insights. While literature on surveillance capitalism and digital rights predominantly emerges from Global North perspectives, the digital governance trajectory of India and the Global South offers distinctive empirical ground for understanding state surveillance.

Contributors can focus on the emerging trend of transposing digital surveillance technologies to countries in the Global South (that are either stridently autocratic or have witnessed considerable democratic backsliding) through strategic trade by the pioneers of AI-driven surveillance models like China. In their research titled, “Exporting the Surveillance State via Trade in AI” (2023), Martine Beraja, Andrew Kao, David Yang and Noam Yuchtman, demonstrate how China, on account of its comparative advantage in surveillance AI, is the leading exporter of such technologies and is particularly likely to attract autocracies and institutionally weak democracies as its importers. The AI Global Surveillance Index (AIGS), compiled by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace further reveals that Chinese companies supply AI surveillance technology to sixty three countries over half of which are partakers in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - indicating a nexus between strategic partnerships and AI diplomacy. What is of pertinence is that myriads of Global South nations adopting AI surveillance infrastructure either constitute authoritative governments or those characterized by abysmally weak state institutions, rampant corruption, low transparency and a poor rights enforcement record. This in turn raises the risk of entrenching structures of oppression and social injustice with a solid state mandate in such countries.

Drawing on Francis Fukuyama’s work, the expansion of AI-driven governance in the Global South may well facilitate aspects of state building, but it will also generate demands for new kinds of state capabilities which are either crippled or altogether non-existent. Research further suggests that in many cases AI led surveillance is being systematically transferred to the Global South. This is often not entirely on their volition, and is being done to consolidate a class of ‘surveillance capitalists’ for manipulating the attitudes, preferences and practices of people, while sustaining an overarching hegemony of political and economic elites anchored in the ‘capitalist core’ of the Global North. These developments call for a deeper research on how geopolitics, global power dynamics and capitalist forces intersect to foster the expansion of AI led governance and what their implications are for institutionally fragile democracies in the Global South, including India. They further emphasise the need for investigating the situated impacts of digital governance in the Global South instead of relying on a universalized rhetoric.

Research Questions

This panel seeks to address the following interconnected research questions:

1. Theoretically and empirically: How does digital governance infrastructure in the Global South facilitate the centralisation of authority, and what mechanisms translate technological architecture into expanded state power over citizens?

2. Institutionally and legally: What are the existing lacunae in regulatory frameworks, constitutional jurisprudence, and policy design that permit the unchecked expansion of surveillance capacities, and how do law and policy interact (or fail to interact) to provide countervailing checks?

3. Methodologically: What innovative empirical and theoretical approaches can illuminate the surveillance dimensions of digital governance, particularly regarding marginalised populations whose data trails become instruments of both inclusion and control?

4. Comparatively: How do India's digital governance trajectories compare with other Global South contexts as well as with that of the Global North, and what lessons emerge for balancing innovation, regulation, and democratic safeguards?

CALL FOR PAPERS

Taken together, these patterns underscore a broader structural transformation where AI-driven governance tools are redefining the terms of state-citizen relations. India's trajectory, while distinct in terms of institutions and capacity, mirrors these broad trends.

India's digital governance ecosystem has expanded dramatically since the launch of Digital India in 2015, with particular acceleration following COVID-19 pandemic responses. Systems like Aadhaar (biometric identification), integrated government platforms, and emerging artificial intelligence applications in law enforcement and social welfare create unprecedented concentrations of personal data within state apparatus. Simultaneously, the regulatory environment remains fragmented. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act and its accompanying amendments to the Right to Information Act have further solidified the basis of a centralised authority of digital governance. Constitutional precedents on privacy and sectoral regulations have failed to coherently address surveillance as a governance challenge.

This context demands urgent scholarly attention because digital centralisation occurs not through explicit authoritarian measures but through the rhetoric of administrative convenience, efficiency, and welfare. Citizens often experience this centralisation as invisible agents - embedded in algorithms and administrative protocols beyond public scrutiny. Moreover, the disproportionate impact on marginalised communities, whose formal inclusion through digital systems paradoxically increases their exposure to state monitoring and control, raises fundamental questions about justice and democratic participation.

Papers Expected

The panel invites theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions addressing dimensions of digital governance, centralisation, and surveillance in India or comparable Global South contexts. We welcome papers that:
- Analyse legal and policy frameworks governing digital governance and identify regulatory gaps
- Provide empirical studies of surveillance mechanisms embedded in specific digital systems or programmes
- Develop innovative methodologies for studying data flows, algorithmic decision-making, and state monitoring
- Examine intersections between digital governance, social inequality, and democratic accountability
- Offer comparative perspectives from other developing democracies facing similar tensions

This panel will collectively advance scholarly understanding of how digital technologies reconfigure state power and democratic practice in developing contexts, offering both theoretical refinement and policy-relevant insights for the India Public Policy Network.