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Digital (Un)Commoning as Ethnographic Praxis

In the late 1990s and early 2000s there was a hopefulness that emerging information and communications technologies would usher in an unprecedented, global commons. For instance, notable media scholars enthusiastically prognosticated that new technologies would collapse the distinction between producers and consumers of mass media.[1] The birth of the so-called 'prosumer' heralded the possibility of a more interactive, shared engagement with media forms that would in turn democratize news production, entertainment, and, ultimately, economic production. People across the globe, within nation-states, across differences, and through shared affinities would have contact with each other in ways that were previously unthinkable, invariably creating new publics, even if fleeting or highly unstable. These developments, argued several scholars of globalization, would accelerate already ongoing process that further weakened national borders and, with it, ideas of ethnic and racial difference.[2]

In the decades that have followed, this initial enthusiasm for "web 2.0" and the possibilities it promised has greatly diminished. There has been a growing recognition that the internet, for all its potential for creating a global, digital commons that further blurred the boundaries of geographical, racial, and historical difference, has ushered in revanchist ethno-nationalist projects across the globe. The rise of supremacist and fascist leaning governments across the world has emerged simultaneously with what scholars have dubbed surveillance capitalism, where large tech companies have been given free reign to extract and analyze the date we readily provide on social media for a profit.[3] Instead of a 'digital commons,' we have seen the rise of increasingly networked publics that function as 'echo chambers' that foment what Sahana Udupa and I have described in our recent book as a profound unsettling to the liberal consensus while enriching a handful of elite

global corporations.[4]

In my view, the challenge for us as anthropologists is to recognize how these marked shifts and their effects in the worlds where we practice our discipline might require us to become more creative with our methodological approaches and nuanced in our sensibilities towards what we have historically approached as "the local". In the hyper-mediatized context of the digital age, ethnography and participant observation requires a retooling that recognizes the temporality and spatiality of being with others has radically such that the local material and social realities of people across the world are being actively shaped by their interactions in online worlds. This development, in my experience, requires us to pay close attention to how our interlocutors and participants during fieldwork engage on social media and the kinds of cross-geographic relations they build in and through the platforms they inhabit. It also requires us to be attentive to the broader circulations of media forms that might shape their worldview and political orientations. In the spirit of the upcoming DGKSA conference and its theme of un/commoning anthropology, I describe this retooling of ethnography as a kind of digital un/commoning.

Undoubtedly, social media can't and shouldn't be assumed to be facilitate a facile "commons" especially given the undue influence of large-scale actors and the kind of networked isolation it has the capacity to generate. However, it still has the capacity to offer a mode for resistance, a way to puncture the common-sense rhetoric of the state and other hegemonic forces and create, even if only for a short time, a viable public. In my long-term research in urban India, for instance, I have focused on the ways that young people from socially and economically marginalized backgrounds have utilized creative music and video production and platform dissemination strategies to make visible a politics from below in a period where Hindu supremacy has been legitimized through formal electoral politics.

I've recently been spending time with a group of Muslim, Dakhni speaking rappers in Bengaluru. Bengaluru is a city built on British colonial cantonments and now known

globally as a key technology hub in Asia. It's urban public spaces, media representations, and elected political officials are dominated by upper caste and regional Kannada language speakers. Yet, there is a legacy of pre-colonial Islam in the city. The young men I've gotten to know over the last two years utilize global hip hop's poetic, musical, and stylistic repertoires, to circulate this enduring Dakhni history and make visible a living Muslim Bengaluru that contradicts and complicates common sense assumptions about the city and its publics. Their music and video production, circulated on corporate owned platforms, has had a profound effect on their local communities. In a short period, they have revitalized Dakhi, making it cool for young people to speak the language again. Walking with these rappers in their neighborhood and watching them being greeted with respect from both elders and the youth while seeing their videos rack up views and likes on various platforms, offers a way to see the impacts of creative production on and for social media that push against normative assumptions about their city. Yet, the visibility they create on social media – for themselves and their communities – has the potential to create political backlash. When the group performed during an anti-Citizen Amendment Act (CAA)[5] Protest, lyrics to one of their songs became the fodder for Hindu supremacist hate speech and they became the subject of a doxxing campaign.

Tracking these developments have required me to pay close ethnographic attention to what was happening on the ground while also being attentive to circulation of their music and videos, recognizing and tracking the kinds of encounters and engagements were emerging online around these media forms. With this in mind, attuning to digital uncommoning as an anthropological praxis requires, in my estimation, a close engagement with the correspondences and effects that online/offline worlds generate with each other while keeping in mind the corporate control of the means of production and dissemination of these forms. As AI looms as the next technological horizon, it is imperative we, as anthropologists, find ways to engage at various scales simultaneously to track what technological apparati are being introduced and circulated as a common-sense teleological unfolding that will

inevitably shaped our planetary futures.

Footnotes

[1] See, for instance, Jenkins, Henry. 2006. Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. New York: NYU Press

[2] Arjun Appadurai, amongst others, argued for an attention to globalizations cultural impacts. Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. Modernity at Large. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[3] See Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power. London: Profile.

[4] Udupa, Sahana, Dattatreyan, Ethiraj Gabriel. 2024. Digital Unsettling: Decoloniality and dispossession in the Age of Social Media. New York: NYU Press.

[5] In 2019 the ruling Hindu-centric Bhartiya Janata Party enacted an amendment that granted citizenship to migrants from religious groups in the region, with the exception of Muslims. Widespread protests across the country ensued. See https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/12/why-is-indias-citizenship-amendment-act-so-controversial for more context.