



Article

Knowing Digital Governance from Below

Affective Knowledges and Feminist Resistance in Digital India

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Abstract

This paper considers the question of what it is to ‘know’ digital governance through an experiential, bottom-up lens, and presents some empirical detail from recent fieldwork with feminist movement actors in northern India – both formally organised feminist ‘workers’ and the broader social movement. Despite existing post-structural, feminist, post- and de-colonial work that has demonstrated the importance of understanding partial and situated perspectives, governance through the digital (rather than of the digital) has largely been understood from top-down, policy perspectives that focus on the intentions behind the governance tools. Drawing on digital ethnographic work carried out between 2019 and 2023, I argue that what is revealed through studying digital governance from the perspective of those who are governed is a deeply affective relationship with technology. Working within a digital space, feminists acknowledge and respond to their own perceived lack of knowledge of digital technology: a ‘digital skills divide’. This is explicitly acknowledged; the partialness of knowledge is part of the knowledge itself. In the context of increasing threats and perceived threats in the digital space – of violence, harassment and surveillance – feminists seek to organise specifically around the need for better digital skills and also employ strategies to keep themselves ‘safe’ while organising online. Digital governance from this perspective is a power relationship of socio-technical intimacies as well as a simply an organising structure.

Keywords

digital governance, epistemology, social movements, feminism, ethnography

‘The IT Cell control the online space but we have to fight.’
(from fieldwork notes, 2020)

A major concern for social movement activists across the globe is digital access, resources, and skills. Digital tools, and social media in particular, have become crucial to the various labour that takes place within movements – here conceptualised as ‘movement work’. This includes spreading awareness of a certain campaign or cause, coordinating offline actions, and lowering the bar to participation. At the same time, contestations in the digital space bring new

challenges with regards to censorship, surveillance, and violence, with new iterations of social control emerging from co-constitutive governance and repression from state governance, corporate platforms and service providers, and organised pro-government actors. In India, a noted ‘tech capital’ in the Global South, and the largest democratic society in the world, there is an observable ‘digital skills divide’ between these pro- and anti-government activists. This gap in so-called ‘skills’ goes beyond a gap in access and has previously been observed within movements along class lines (Schradié 2018) but not specifically with reference to gender. Studies that do examine the gendered nature of the digital skills gap more explicitly (Lybeck, Koiranen, and Koivula 2024; van Deursen and van Dijk 2011) are exclusively focused on European contexts and not concerned with political activity. Furthermore, there is a theoretical gap in understanding movement actors’ epistemic engagement with the digital: how they understand (in) the online space.

Drawing on digital ethnographic fieldwork with feminists in India in 2019-2023, this paper presents evidence that although this divide does pose a problem for movement work, feminists are highly cognisant of the divide, and as such are able to navigate and resist in particular ways. Drawing on feminist theories of epistemology with regards to partial and situated knowledges, this argument centres activist agency in digital resistance. It is necessary to think of social media as containing many tools of governance (Gillespie 2018), both human and algorithmic, including moderators, user guidelines, user reporting, keyword filters, spam filters, bot detection, blocklists, content recognition features, natural language processing, and visual content recognition. Yet beyond this, knowledges emerging from social movements can tell us something new and different about the nature of these technologies and tools; in the case of social media, for example, the difference between human and machine moderation is not always an important one to those being moderated. This contributes to an emerging body of work (including this special issue) that seeks to reveal new understandings of digital tools through ethnographic and qualitative engagement with those who are governed. Those who are oppressed and subjugated do not lose their ability to navigate and resist in novel and creative ways, even whilst struggling against the further embedding of colonial-capitalist systems through digital technology (see Srnicek 2017; Zuboff 2019; Couldry and Mejias 2019; Kwet 2019). This focus on agency rather than structure within movement organising gives primacy to the experiential and contextual over the universalist.

Just as feminists have made the case that domestic labour must be understood as unwaged labour in Marxist terms (Federici 1975), we can understand most social movement organising (with the exception of some employees of NGOs, charities, trade unions and political parties) as voluntary labour. Indeed, this is a fact often used to discredit activists, categorising those with time or resources to engage in activism as not adequately representing the subaltern, lower- or working-classes (discussed further in Bagguley 1992). In the feminist movement specifically, the formal employment of feminists has been critiqued as part of a process of ‘NGOization’ – or institutional-colonial capture of radical politics – though

proponents of this have since claimed that paid ‘movement work’ must also be recognised as liberatory (Alvarez 2009; for further discussion see Srila Roy 2015). This concept of movement work remains under-theorised but is useful in providing a link between formal and informal resistance. Classic feminist Marxist critiques of the relationship between labour and value provide a helpful parallel here (Federici 1975): just as unpaid domestic work is crucial to any economy, unpaid movement work is crucial to any democracy. In their recent study of movements outside of protest times in Southern Europe, Mattoni and Ceccobelli have used the concept of ‘organizational work’ to reflect on activists’ digital practices, particularly with reference to trade unions (Mattoni and Ceccobelli, 2024). In this vein, and using a Gramscian conception of ‘good sense’ (Gramsci 1971) – as in knowledge that emerges through activity – we can assume that there is something specific to be learnt about technology from those who use it.

Studies of technology that explore the intersecting oppressions of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, ability and others are increasingly necessary as the digital, and the internet in particular, become increasingly central to the organisation of society. Qualitative and in particular ethnographic studies of digital society and politics in particular are much needed, as the heavy reliance on quantitative, big data methods has led to reductive positivist thinking. This article is informed by digital ethnographic work carried out in the feminist online space in/relating to India between 2019 and 2023, comprising of participant observation and interviews.¹ All participants and anonymised quotations taken from searchable communications are translated and/or reworded to ensure anonymity. This work is situated alongside the crucial emerging body of work seeking to understand digital technological development qualitatively, in terms of its social and cultural effects, rather than simply at face value. Research on new technology often relies on explanations from the private companies or state actors that have introduced them, thus uncritically re-presenting proselytist or marketing information designed to imply effectiveness. This has the impact of producing analysis – whether critical or uncritical – which assumes that technology works as intended. This argument has been made by scholars of gig work and the ‘platformization’ of labour (see introduction to this volume; Nair 2023; Sethi 2023).

The socio-political context in which this discussion is oriented is that of Hindi and English-speaking India. As both an economy focused on digital services and infrastructure, and the world’s largest (procedural) democracy, India is an important context from which to understand socio-political relationships between governance, technology and resistance. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has led to closer ties between corporate and state control – exemplified by the remarkable rise of the telecoms giant Reliance Jio (Mukherjee 2019; Crawford 2023). The ‘Hindutva’

¹ Further detail and reflection on the process of digital ethnography is available in (Crawford, 2023).

ideology of the party combines Hindu theology with ethno-nationalist claims to the nation-state. Hindutva political discourse is explicitly Islamophobic and anti-feminist; as a ‘majoritarian’ ideology, it is anti-minority in general (Jaffrelot 2021). This is usually framed as an anti- or de-colonial framing: a rejection of Western or Muslim control (the Mughal Empire is framed as a foreign occupation akin to the British Raj, in this telling). Nonetheless it is important to note that the BJP’s support base cannot be understood as elite in traditional caste, class, or linguistic terms, nor are their politics simply ‘right-wing’ in a Western framework. Contemporary Indian politics thus both complicates the idea of the subject of social movement politics as ‘subaltern’ (in postcolonial and Gramscian terms) and reveals the dangers of ‘majority rule’ in democratic theory (see Bajpai and Kureshi 2022). Within this context, the feminist movement provides an important framework of resistance for women, gender minorities, religious minorities, but is itself a demonised movement responsible for spreading ‘anti-national’ ideology. In recent years, many of the movement’s most well-known activists have been imprisoned, surveilled, and trolled, both by government actors and their supporters; the infamous ‘IT Cell’.

Like in any national context, it is not possible to describe a formal, singular and unified feminist movement in India; it is fragmented across regional, religious, caste, class, generational, and urban/rural divides. Nonetheless it exists discursively, and my interlocutors all identified with a feminist movement of some kind, whether locally, nationally or globally. There are some shared points of reference that cross borders: sexual violence, domestic abuse, access to education, body image, menstrual health, and gender minority rights are common themes. There are also specific issues and protest events that provide localised focal points for organising and discussion across time and space: from the role of women in the anti-colonial independence movement (Thapar 1993); India boasting one of the world’s first female Prime Ministers (1966); the autonomous women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s and campaigns against dowry, *sati* (widow immolation), and personal laws (Katzenstein 1989); the rise of ‘NGO’-based organising in the 1990s (Katzenstein 1989); the pro-‘loiter’ campaign of the early 2010s (Phadke 2013); the mass protests after the 2012 Nirbhaya (‘Delhi rape’) case (Dey 2018); the campus-based feminist collective Pinjra Tod (‘break the locks’); the 2019 Shaheen Bagh protest (Muslim-led occupation against amendments to citizenship laws); or the 2020 Hathras rape case (Saha, Rodrigues, and Pain 2022).

Any sub-categorisation of India’s 1.4 billion inhabitants will inevitably still leave a large population, and the digital context means the exact identities of many participants were not clear, but it is nonetheless useful to situate the discussion. Participants lean towards the Northern Hindi-belt states (especially Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, but also other major urban centres including Mumbai, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Chennai and Kolkata), urban, and relatively highly educated, but do represent considerable diversity in religion, caste and sexuality. All participants identified as women or gender minorities, and crucially all explicitly identified with the feminist movement(s). The limitations of the generalisability of the argument are highlighted throughout the text. Positionality also plays an

important role here, as a white researcher funded and (usually) situated in the Global North, hierarchies of coloniality, class, race, and language were ever-present in my interactions. Other identities and politics were shared, which allowed trust and friendship space to take root in mutual understandings. The online context allowed us space, and privacy, but also created distance that could not always be broken in the way it might have been offline. My analysis and writing is delimited by my own frames of reference, theoretical framework, and position as an outsider.

The article will proceed in three sections: first a theoretical examination of feminist theories of technology and epistemology, tracing how the feminist premise of positionality has its roots in thinking with/about technology. Drawing in particular on the work of Donna Haraway, and more recent critiques from Black and postcolonial feminist scholarship, this section provides a theoretical framework for the argument. In the second part, I will turn to empirical detail of feminist strategies to navigate and resist digital governance, in particular on social media. These strategies, I argue, are informed by a self-aware perspective on the collective lack of knowledge about digital technology within the movement, understood as a ‘digital skills divide’ between feminists and those that pose a threat to their work. I present three examples here: first, attempts at digital upskilling through the sharing of information, second, moves to the offline, and third, a combination of the two. Ethnographic examples also draw on comparisons and linkages with other anti-government movements, such as the *kisan* (farmers) movement, labour movement, the anti-caste/Dalit assertion movement and the environmental movement (for recent overviews of these, see Singh 2021; Mandal 2022; Sonia Roy 2022). Thirdly, the article will bring the theoretical and empirical strands together – reading these feminist knowledges as situated, and partial, but also as affective, bringing in a further lens of affect theory. Informed by the ever-present anxiety of interlocutors in navigating and talking about navigating digital space, and social media in particular, this section demonstrates that the understandings of digital technology and governance are affective in nature. Finally, the conclusion will draw out the implications of the argument presented here span across lessons for understanding labour organising and social movement organising more broadly.

Part One: Feminist Theories of Epistemology and Technology

Feminist theory has a long history of engaging with technological development, particularly through ‘cyberfeminist’ approaches that emerged in the 1980s. The term refers to both a theoretical endeavour, pioneered by Donna Haraway in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway 1991a), and a subsequent movement of self-identified cyberfeminist activists (largely based in the West). Haraway’s essay creates a cyborg myth: a subject that exists between the binaries of woman and man; human and nature; human and machine; nature and machine. The ‘ironic political myth’ that she presents seems quite ridiculous, and this is entirely the point – such a thing could only exist in fiction, and yet it embodies complete liberation from oppressive hierarchies. Her manifesto is about the liberating potential of technology, but it is

also about its oppressive mechanisms. She is critical of her white feminist contemporaries as too keen to construct a collective ‘women’s experience’ and instead draws on postcolonial and Black feminist scholarship that rejects a unified, natural, essential experience or subjectivity of being a ‘woman’ (Sandoval 1982; Lorde 2012). This destabilising of feminism’s subject leads to a destabilisation of feminism’s objectives (the interests of ‘woman’). This is particularly useful in thinking about and with feminists in India, where theorists and activists alike have done the work of challenging the Eurocentric subject of feminism (Menon 2004).

Haraway is better known for her theory of situated knowledges, the seminal feminist argument that destabilises the objectivity of science and builds on post-structural and phenomenological perspectives to centre perspective in epistemology. She challenges the power dynamic of assuming the ability to hold a universal or complete perspective, the ‘god trick’ of ‘a conquering gaze from nowhere’ (Haraway 1988, 581). She raises many questions: ‘How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinded? Who wears blinders?’ (Haraway 1988, 587) informing the now ubiquitous feature of feminist method that is thinking through positionality in research. Yet her highly oppositional stance to scientific objectivity – understanding ‘nature’ as something that is constructed rather than discovered – is not at all separate from her thinking about science and technology, in fact, they emerged concurrently. Haraway’s cyborg is not merely a metaphor for crossing these boundaries, but it also reveals that we are all already machine and organism, both object and subject. In arguing that ‘we must have agency – or agencies – without defended subjects’ (Haraway 1991b, 3), she lays the path for multiple, contextual, subjective knowledges that are no less scientific.

Despite Haraway’s deconstructive intentions, her work gave rise to a body of literature that was extremely optimistic about the potential of technology to materially aid the feminist cause. Writing in the mid-1990s, in response to Haraway, Sadie Plant coined the term cyberfeminism and defined it as ‘a wave of subversive female enthusiasm for the new networks and machines’ (Plant 1997, 91). She tells a history of women’s relationships with technology that suggests a natural or innate partnership – from weaving looms to typewriters, the operation of machines has often been women’s work. Plant does situate her analysis in ‘Western cultures’ and reminds the reader of this often. Yet despite her intentional grounding here, her conclusions are less obviously presented as situated, and have ballooned towards a universalist framing through subsequent readings. This slippage within feminist theory is indicative of the trend within social theorising more widely – there is a presumed link between new (digital) technology, modernity and progress, and the West – which leads to uncritical, positivist scholarship on digital technology: a circular model of self-fulfilling confirmation of universalist and historicist assumptions. Instead, mainstream Western feminist scholarship has largely shunned Haraway, adopting a critique that focuses on the historical enforcement of patriarchy through technology, arguing that Harawayan thinking ignores ‘material reality’, leading her to ‘lose sight of gender relations through an overemphasis on

the historical variability of the categories’ (Wajcman 2004, 53; 92; citing Haraway 1997). This represents a tendency within Western feminisms to assert a reclamation of an essentialised subject of ‘women’, claiming to counter the ‘undoing’ of feminist gains in the 1970s and 1980s (McRobbie 2004, 255), and an emergence of ‘postfeminist’ culture that asserts individualistic, neoliberal empowerment (Gill 2007).

Although unintentional – as much of this work is self-conscious in its analysis of intersectional, in particular racial, difference – much of this work forgets the lessons of postcolonial and Black feminism: bell hooks’, for example, on the marginalisation of women of colour within the West (hooks 2000); Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s on the construction of a ubiquitous ‘third world woman’ who lack agency and cannot escape subjugation (Mohanty 1984); or Saba Mahmood’s on the reduction of agency to an externally defined notion of resistance (Mahmood 2011). Work on feminism and the digital specifically has largely marginalised postcolonial studies (as highlighted by Daniels 2009, 109; and earlier Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright 2002, 26) with the implication of falling into a techno-pessimist/ techno-optimist binary that adopts essentialised preconceptions about the digital as specifically one thing or another. It is impossible to understand contemporary activism without considering the digital (Nouraie-Simone 2014, 48), but we cannot assume that feminists are only using technology in ways that can be read as subversive (Gajjala 2014). The discursive construction of a post-#MeToo ‘fourth wave’ of feminism, one that is intersectional and digitally-mediated (Cochrane 2013), suffers from this Eurocentric reductionism. The digital neither represents absolute liberation or absolute suppression, and the relationship must be examined in individually grounded contexts.

The type of thinking that led to one of the most crucial and enduring features of contemporary feminist methodology in both scholarship and activism – the acknowledgement of positionality, is reduced to a question of diversity and inclusion, rather than an epistemological limitation of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988). There is a dialectic relationship between theory and praxis in feminism, as organisers often draw on emergent concepts, while scholars usually pay close attention to lived experience. It is worth noting that in my own ethnographic experiences, activists never cite this ‘cyberfeminism’ as their own intellectual heritage, but certainly cite ideas that come from or are otherwise expressed by Haraway. I therefore suggest that what is most useful about Haraway’s work is that it provides both a way to think about the relationship between the human/social and the technological as highly intimate, but also a way to think about how we (in the multiple) think about that relationship. Thinking with but stretching the notion of ‘good sense’ (as opposed to ‘common sense’) (Gramsci 1971), meaning the types of knowledge that are developed through practice, can put this to work in a social movement perspective. As the empirical discussion below will show, the lack of or partialness of knowledge of technology was itself a motivator of movement deliberation and strategy.

Within this postcolonial/feminist framework, therefore, we can expect that there are both specific experiences that can only be fully understood and represented through lived experience and/or ethnography's 'thick description' (Geertz 1973), and the potential for the development of generalisable theory as much as from any other context. In the Indian context for example, there are some specificities of political economy that mediate the Indian feminist experience: most notably the dominance of the Hindutva movement in digital space. As I will show across the following two parts, the relationship that activists have to technology is deeply affective, largely in the negative, because the (threats of) violence and surveillance breed fear and anxiety. Although made clear through one context, this focus on sociotechnical intimacies, and understanding digital governance as affective, likely has generalisability – I will return to this in the conclusion. In the next section, I will present empirical detail of the so-called 'digital skills divide' between feminist actors and those they feel digitally governed by.

Part Two: The Perceived 'Digital Skills Divide'

Although debates about digital governance usually focus on the role of state governments and Big Tech, by far the largest concern for my interviewees was anti-feminist actors in the online space. The digital context in which feminist actors were working can best be understood as one dominated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's infamous 'IT Cell'. The IT Cell is the informal moniker for the Party's 'National Information and Technology Department', but more widely considered to be the Party's digital propaganda machine or even 'cyber troops' (Bradshaw, Bailey, and Howard 2021). Participants are particularly active on WhatsApp, but work across social media, to coordinate information sharing and drive engagement, attempting to control political discourse in the digital space. IT Cell actors are both paid party employees (perhaps around 5000, although there is no publicly agreed figure), volunteer party activists (perhaps numbering in the tens of thousands) and general volunteers (perhaps hundreds of thousands). Journalistic investigations (for example, Arnimesh 2020) have revealed this to be a highly resourced, organised and disciplined operation. As well as sharing party and government information (or misinformation), participants run their own social media accounts, anonymous or pseudonym accounts, and bot accounts. They also gather information and carry out targeted campaigns against individuals, including several high-profile feminists (for a personal account, see Ayyub 2024). The use of high numbers of volunteers and anonymous accounts allows official deniability, though the distinction between formal and informal association with the IT Cell matters little to those on the receiving end of their activities. Their activities can be understood as co-constitutive of digital governance, given their (sometimes complex) alignment with both the state and technology companies to achieve greater control over the digital sphere (Crawford 2023).

It will be ironic if they ban Facebook, how will the IT Cell even operate?!
(from fieldwork notes, 2021)²

Furthermore, the IT Cell is often explicitly anti-feminist (or in alignment with a loosely organised anti-feminist movement), in line with Hindutva ideology. Faced with this pro-government ‘countermovement’ (Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012), feminists reflected on the high levels of organisation, skills and resourcing held by those they were targeted by. For example, the regulation debates about the balance of power between state and corporate actors were largely seen as not their concern with one interlocutor noting *‘nothing will change for us anyway’* (from fieldwork notes, 2022) after the sale of Twitter to South African/ US American billionaire Elon Musk. Regulation and content moderation take place on a different (usually smaller) scale and to a different (usually lower) standard across the Global South, as companies invest resources in ‘important’ (Anglo, Global North) markets. At the same time, social media companies have historically been willing to enact policies against their own purported democratic values in markets where they expect less backlash – including India and Brazil, for example. Examples come from the whistleblowers such as Sophie Zhang’s revelations about moderation resourcing across markets at Facebook (Silverman, Mac, and Dixit 2020), or Peiter Zatko claiming the Indian government had agents inside Twitter (O’Sullivan, Duffy, and Fung 2022).

The anti-feminist digital campaigns generally take one of three discursive forms. Firstly, there are attempts to represent feminism as anti-national in terms of being a legacy of Western colonialism – this generally takes the form of presenting feminists as English-speaking, upper-class, liberal and secular. Though there are important post- and de-colonial critiques of a singular ‘global’ feminist movement from within the feminist movement (for example Mohanty 2003; Menon 2012), this instead represents an effort to construct an alternative, decolonial anti-feminist position. Secondly, and sometimes overlapping despite internal contradictions, there are attempts to capture and in a Hindutva sense ‘indigenise’ the term feminism itself, painting mainstream feminists as ‘psuedofeminists’, while asserting ‘real’ feminism as being aligned with ‘traditional’ Hindu beliefs and values including the sanctity of divine feminine energy, chastity, and gendered family roles. This is a particularly complex space, as there are many individuals aligned with the BJP, ‘Hindu-rights’ or Hindutva project who self-identify as feminists – perhaps the most well-known is Bollywood actress turned BJP MP Kangana Ranaut. Thirdly, there are attempts to imply feminists are anti-national through their supposed associations with ‘Islamists’, ‘terrorists’, and ‘jihadis’. These Islamophobic tropes generally take the involvement of any Muslims in the feminist movement as evidence. Beyond these discursive contestations, many feminists have faced violence and threats of

² All quotations are from feminist activists, either via interview or online discussion. Some quotations are paraphrased or in translation to prevent digital searchability.

violence, for example through doxxing. There are also legal implications for feminist activists – especially with the strengthening and broadening of police and state powers, for example through the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act (UAPA), 2019, and the Uttar Pradesh Digital Media Policy, 2024.

All of this provides the context for feminist responses: both to endure and resist in digital space. Although there are of course feminist technology experts working within India, and the work of specific campaigns, organisations and NGOs must not be ignored,³ there is also an overall sense of overwhelm. There is a resource gap, of course, as anti-feminists are either working alongside or directly resourced by state and ruling party. Yet the problem of a lack of ability was one that arose repeatedly in conversations and online discourse. I have referred to this as a perceived ‘digital skills divide’ to best echo the well-known problem of the ‘digital divide’ (van Dijk 2020), although it remains a highly complex, affective understanding of the feminist position, and the question of ‘skill’ is about both learned abilities (in terms of ‘good sense’) and knowledge. Traditionally, the digital divide has been understood in terms of access, but working with feminists reveals the experience of navigating the digital is also highly gendered, and organised according to intersectional oppressions of class, rural-urban location, caste, or linguistic background. Here I am echoing work on platform labour that finds that the digitisation of the gig economy merely perpetuates existing inequalities and precarities (Nair 2022). The descriptions of and responses to this digital skills divide that I encountered were varied, and I have organised them into categories for the sake of re-presentation here. The first is an explicit focus on digital training and upskilling – a direct attempt to acknowledge and counter the problem. The second is a re-turn to the offline – an attempt to circumvent or sidestep the problem. The third combines the two, and uses the offline as a ‘safe space’ to provide training in the pursuit of challenging the digital skills divide.

In 2016, the prominent journalism platform Feminism in India launched the #DigitalHifazat (digital safeguarding) campaign to raise awareness of gendered violence online. This followed a research project funded by international human rights think-tank Freedom House, which found that many high-profile activists had already faced violence and suppression as a result of their vocal feminist stances, but that those affected ‘lack support and understanding to respond effectively’ (Feminism in India 2016). Examples of gendered harassment online listed here echo those I have outlined above; demanding or sending unwanted sexual content; voyeurism and stalking; identity theft; sexualised abuse and harassment. The report further raised the issue of inadequate and ineffective reporting mechanisms, either in-platform on social media, or through law enforcement. The subsequent campaign centred feminist voices and intersectional perspectives (across hierarchies

³ I would like to acknowledge the important work of colleagues at the Internet Freedom Foundation; Software Freedom Law Centre; IT for Change; Feminism in India; Common Cause India; CPA Project; and the Digital Futures Lab.

of dis/ability, caste and sexuality) to raise awareness about issues faced during online organising, and called for creative ways to work towards a ‘feminist internet’.

Activists often sought to ‘safeguard’ or protect themselves online through digital campaigning itself – both formal attempts to raise awareness of issues like this one, but also less formal sharing information about platforms with each other through social media content. For example, several leading accounts in 2021 shared information about WhatsApp being an unsafe platform for organising. This was on the basis that WhatsApp is owned by Facebook, and so purportedly was a less ‘secure’ than other platforms such as Signal or Telegram. Discussions about password protection, the purpose of VPNs and proxies, encryption – all attempting to demystify these concepts for each other, with an explicit focus on what was important for feminist organising. For example, activists often do not publicly share the full details of an event or meet-up: this is the case both for in-person and online events. If they are shared in private and semi-private messages, but those messages are compromised, the safety of all attendees is compromised. While the nature of the threat (doxxing and harassment) was clear, the means of the threat was usually vague. The logic of security was not based on a detailed discussion of encryption practices here – after all, it could be argued that the biggest threat to privacy remains analogue, in that in the creation of an online space that anyone can join, regardless of the platform, the largest threat is still just traditional monitoring. WhatsApp also continues to fight the demand to break encryption in the Delhi High Court at the time of writing (Bhan 2024).

Nonetheless the implications of the perception alone are interesting. If WhatsApp is considered less safe because of its ownership by Meta (Facebook), despite its encryption practices being equally stringent, the perceived threat is not simply technological but socio-political. The discussion sparked criticism within the movement, with some feminists arguing that centring security concerns raised the barrier to participation by moving discussions to a less popular platform, which would be far more harmful to the movement. This debate reveals activists’ concerns about capitalism and coloniality in the spaces they are navigating – they see these as concerns that have to be weighed up and balanced against the need to reach people. Though unresolved (with some activists moving off WhatsApp and many continuing to use WhatsApp), this debate is useful for organisers in that it reveals the ways in which knowledge is partial, and this partiality is explicit; allowing activists to have strategic conversations about their movement work. Rather than suggesting all activists learn about the technical process of encryption, organisers attempted to balance safety with accessibility.

A second strategy is to limit or forgo use of the digital entirely. Some interviewees spoke of taking time offline for their mental health, due to exhaustion, or because of concern and/or pressure from relatives. Contrary to critiques of digital activism as easy or lazy, those who had chosen to be less involved online spoke of admiration about colleagues and comrades who had the ‘energy’ or ‘bravery’ to be ‘so visible’ online. Many also noted that street-level protest is increasingly difficult after the recent arrests and violent suppression. For example, at the Shaheen Bagh protest

against the Citizenship Amendment Act, there were violent attacks at the protest site, on university campuses and in Muslim-majority neighbourhoods, facilitated or at best ignored by the police. Many activists have faced direct police brutality, and many have been imprisoned without trial under the UAPA. Many younger activists spoke of a desire to see offline protest on the scale of the 2012 Nirbhaya or 2020 Hathras street protests, but could not imagine how the same amount of momentum could be created in what they experience as a highly authoritarian public sphere.

Work on social movement ‘ongrounding’ (Khan, Natarajan, and Bhalla 2021) in the case of the climate movement is useful in understanding how some movement work is being taken offline as part of a backlash to technological dependency. The *kisan* (farmers) movement is another example of mass, offline protest in recent years, with a blockade of key routes in Delhi in 2020-2021 during the *Bharat Bandh* (India Shutdown), successfully forcing the repealing of the so-called ‘Farm Bills’ which sought to deregulate and (neo)liberalise the agricultural markets. The protests received particular praise from the international trade union movement as an example of the power of collective labour organising, and from techno-pessimist commentators as an example of the power of offline activism. Nonetheless, the movement did make use of social media to raise awareness, producing large amounts of video content, and even hosting mass zoom calls with international and diaspora supporters. At one such call about the role of feminists in the movement, I found that discussions were focused on the possibility to build a *‘feeling of community and solidarity at protest sites’* (from fieldwork notes, 2021) across boundaries of class, caste and gender, that was not possible online. Furthermore, the problems facing those organising online may be considered *‘not a priority’* (from fieldwork notes, 2023) as the rural-urban divide in digital access remains prevalent. Nonetheless, even in movement work that centred the offline or on-ground, efforts in the digital space did not go unnoticed or ungoverned, as revelations about government collusion with social media platforms to censor pro-movement accounts and content have since emerged.

Anything you put on social media can have repercussions and it is important to think about that. (from fieldwork notes, 2019)

These strategies sometimes overlap, for example in the case of offline education about online safety. I attended one such event in Delhi in 2019, during which feminist activists from several different groups and organisations met to discuss the problems and strategies to address digital safety. Attendees had to provide an explanation of their reason for wanting to attend and be approved by the organisers. There were digital skills experts present to lead the training. The antifeminist groups described above were clearly front of mind as the most pressing threat, but concerns about police and state surveillance, the role of Big Tech, and protection from punitive employers were all raised. The offline space allowed conversations that I had not seen before and have not seen since to take place, for example accusations of named government officials *‘funding the trolls’* and sharing of details of private messaging networks for coordination of movement work. In the next section I will return to the framework of situated knowledges to argue that those knowledges can

also be deeply affective – as in experienced through and informed by emotional responses – as these feminist experiences of the digital are usually laced with anxieties.

Part Three: Affective Knowledges and Experiences of Social Media Governance

Building on Haraway's insights and approach, outlined in part one, this section analyses accounts from feminist organisers working in the online space (focused on Hindi- and English-speaking northern India), and finds that the affective or emotional aspects are central to most individuals' experience. This is something that is not commented on in existing social movement literature, which has largely understood social media as a useful communication tool for activists (e.g., Gerbaudo 2012) or as a distraction, discouraging would-be activists from participating in 'real-life' (offline) campaigns (Morozov 2009). Beyond this techno-optimist/techno-pessimist binary, I find that activists perceive the digital space to be extremely threatening. I have organised their concerns into key themes of surveillance, violence, and the digital skills divide, though many of these were overlapping. Drawing on feminist knowledges in this way reveals that they do not need to understand how social media works in terms of its architecture and algorithms to understand the ways in which it can be used to govern. In fact, removing this focus on the way certain content moderation or platform regulation tools are described and marketed by the platforms themselves reveals different things about these tools.

Affect theory refers to the study of the experiential, and in particular emotional aspects of a certain phenomenon or thing. It has had limited but useful application to the study of digital technology (for example Stark 2019) revealing the ways in which feelings are translated into data through digital media and data analytics, and focusing the 'intimate embodied entanglement' of 'living with' digital technologies (Bødker and Chamberlain 2016, 1). The dominant emotion I encountered when speaking with activists was anxiety – encompassing both clearly articulated worries and fears and a more general sense of unease about navigating the online space.⁴ I had noticed this very early in my research, but it was something that came up repeatedly and consistently, both explicitly and implicitly: and so here I have included illustrations both as quotations and general impressions. I have organised the discussion according to what the anxiety was largely focused on, thematically, in order to best reflect on what this focus on anxiety, on affect, tells us about the tools of governance themselves. This is of course a somewhat manufactured categorisation, as conversations were free-flowing and semi-structured, or I was merely an observer.

⁴ One caveat to note here is that the majority of the data collection took place during the early years of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Anxiety about surveillance and threats to privacy were constant themes. I first encountered this high level of concern with privacy in the process of digital ethnography itself, as an outsider engaging in participant observation, I was aware that my data collection had the potential to add to the sense of being watched in digital space. I decided to offer participants the option to remain anonymous to me by conducting online interviews without video, via voice note, or via messaging. All of these offered the participants a level of anonymity, and more importantly, control over what they chose to share. Despite my commitment to ethical and risk assessed data collection, management and sharing, I could not reasonably guarantee that our online communications were private, as there were many mechanisms outside of my control. Many feminist journalists, for example, have reported on the dangers they face online (Waisbord, Posetti, and Harrison 2020; Khemka 2023), and the Indian government's liberal use of the NSO Pegasus spyware is now well-known (Barik 2024).

You get both men and women pretending to give you advice but really it is just a comment about your body. (from fieldwork notes, 2020)

The experience of navigating online space, and social media in particular, as described by my interlocutors and noted extensively in media and communications literature (for example Baer 2016; Bhatia 2022), is highly gendered. It is difficult, goes the adage, to be a woman or gender minority online. This is particularly the case for activists who are using the internet to highlight and resist gendered oppression, be that campaigning for women to have equal access to university facilities in Delhi, fundraising for women's shelters in Assam, or raising awareness about the dangers of new trans rights legislation at a national level. One issue that came up in particular was censorship, with women and gender minority activists feeling that their bodies were 'morally policed' far more than others. Despite being online, women and gender minorities do not have the option to detach from their corporeal experience through their devices. Any (re)presentations of their bodies will prompt reactions. This might involve images being removed, tagged as explicit, or flooded with comments if they were deemed inappropriate. One activist described having an image removed from Instagram because the outline of her nipple was visible through her shirt, but abusive content posted about her on other accounts – which she had reported through the in-platform mechanisms – were left up. Another issue that came up regularly was doxxing⁵, as many either had personal experience of it directly, through friends and comrades, or had faced threats. Whether or not these threats could be substantiated was unknown – and this was

⁵ Doxxing (sometimes doxing) refers to the public, online publishing of private, identifying information about an individual without their consent. The term comes from shortening the word 'documents' to 'docs', and came into common usage around the mid-2010s. Outside of English the same, transliterated term is usually used. Like in most of the world, there is no specific law against doxxing in India at the time of writing, although various parts of the Penal Code and the Information Technology Act might categorise doxxing as a form of cyber harassment.

perhaps the point – doxxing is a highly affective digital tool in that its primary aim is to inflict fear, with a secondary aim of inciting offline violence.

The things people will say online are more scary.

Even though it's through a screen they say they will find you and hurt you. (from fieldwork notes, 2023)

Beyond the potential for offline violence, many activists spoke of the encounters they had online as themselves violent. The comments they would receive were usually about their bodies, and often highly sexualised, ranging from 'compliments' to rape threats. The anonymous nature of much of this abuse – granted by the architectures of the social media platforms themselves – added to this heightened sense of fear. Many activists spoke of their private worries that many of the accounts they had received abuse from were actually men they knew offline, thus meaning their anxiety was not lessened by logging off. Others spoke of the struggle not to 'take personally' or internalise the abuse, citing severe mental health impacts. The intersectionality of the misogyny was also noted, with Muslim women facing specific targeting on the basis of religion and gender, or Dalit women on the basis of caste and gender. Thinking with Haraway here challenges the idea that the digital is removed from the material or the corporeal. The projections and representations of our bodies that are recorded and shared online (consensually or otherwise) are not removed from us, but part of us.

We lack support and understanding to know how to respond. (from fieldwork notes, 2023)

As described above, feminists felt they were particularly vulnerable because of their own lack of understanding and knowledge of the digital space in comparison to those they feared: in most cases these were seen as pro-government, young, male, well-resourced actors on social media. In line with the global trend, there is a traditional gender gap in the digital divide that is both a problem in its own right, and feeds this anxiety. Activists worried they did not know how to respond to abuse and harassment. This was expressed as a belief that they had less knowledge and resources to both understand the spaces and structures they were navigating, and to use them effectively as activists while enduring and resisting harassment and abuse. In this way, digital governance and repression were co-constituted by the government, corporate platforms, and anti-feminist countermovement actors, as the activists did not speak about them as separate problems (Crawford 2023).

One activist spoke of her surprise that most privacy breaches online were actually the result of individuals accidentally sharing information about themselves, rather than through hacking. For example, sharing a selfie at your local restaurant might reveal which neighbourhood you live in, if the name of the restaurant happens to be visible in the background. What was interesting here was the self-awareness about the lack of digital literacy and skills, if she could have been so 'silly' about this detail, what else did she not know? I found this awareness to be both motivating

and limiting for activists in different ways, as discussed in the next section. Despite the widespread anxiety about social media, this shouldn't be confused with techno-pessimism: lots of these actors are 'extremely online' and love social media – but are navigating it with extreme hesitancy and even paranoia.

This affective relationship to technology is an example of how a situated understanding can reveal new facets and dynamics of that technology, beyond the technical, intended, or indeed marketed. For example, the difference between a human or a machine scanning an image for data was unknown, and furthermore irrelevant, to someone who had their content censored. Was their post deemed inappropriate by an algorithm or had a user reported it? Did that even matter? The intimacies that activists experienced with social media – which after all purposefully creates a deeply individualised experience – should lead us to challenge the idea that technologies are not inherently emotional.

The study of emotions as affecting participation in social movements is an advanced field: anger and revenge are motivational; trust and respect maintain collectives; success can drive complacency (Jasper 2011). Fear and anxiety are generally understood to be negative, and de-motivating (Williamson 2011), but can nonetheless sometimes inspire a greater sense of collectivity (Crossley and Eyerman 2005, 43). Nonetheless there is limited reflection on the agency of the activists in navigating these emotions: in a response to 'rational choice' approaches, much of the literature assumes its subjects to be 'irrational', rather than challenging this binary of rationality/emotion entirely.

Conclusion

Tools of digital governance are intentionally opaque, which is a problem for social movements. The social media companies who design the spaces in which much of this work takes place are intentionally opaque – the architecture is unknowable. As I have argued elsewhere (Crawford, forthcoming), we can think of this in terms of Foucault's governmentality because with a lack of knowledge – both by design and through a 'skills divide' – social movement actors are pre-emptively reacting to the way that they imagine themselves to be being governed: be that being monitored, threatened, restricted in digital space. Attempts to create social control through algorithmic governance are thus successful, though perhaps not in the way that they are often intended.

This assumption that technologies work as intended is also common in popular and global discourses about digital politics – such as the moral panic around the Cambridge Analytica scandal following the 2016 USA presidential election and the 2016 UK Brexit referendum – which claims the company was able to carry out uniquely effective microtargeting to successfully manipulate the outcome of these elections (Cadwalladr 2018). Subsequent analysis has found these claims to be grossly overstated, neither unique to Cambridge Analytica nor effective in achieving the microtargeting of information (Risso 2017; Jakee and Fink 2024, 3). As well as

highlighting ‘side-effects’ of a certain tool or technology, social and political ethnographers are able to centre agency in their analyses, thus showing how people interact with technology in the ‘everyday’ (Scott 1985) – including navigating and resisting new forms of governance and harm caused by new technologies. Ethnographic and social movement perspectives are able to bring into question the effectiveness of these tools, and reveal that through an understanding of their own lack of knowledge, activists and organisers are able to respond to issues of digital governance. As I have demonstrated here, affective knowledges are only revealed through this type of work.

As technology develops, efforts to know new tools in objective terms often re-emerge. Most of my fieldwork took place before discussions about Artificial Intelligence (AI) were particularly prevalent, yet the findings presented here, with regards to affective and situated knowledges, should certainly have resonance. There is renewed moral panic about the ability of AI to ‘replace’ workers, that, at least in an economy and society that relies so highly on informally employed domestic labour such as India, may be unwarranted. Instead, as ethnographers of the datafication of labour have demonstrated (including in this special issue), the manufactured ‘intelligence’ so far largely remains highly ‘artificial’, in that it is derivative, repetitive, and causes more social harm than good. AI is already used to reinforce patriarchy and misogyny, as well as other social harms, for example through deepfake pornography (many examples are presented by Murgia 2024). These insights should be stretched to think about movement work too.

The need to continue resisting was reflected in my interlocutors’ acknowledgement of the need to protect the benefits of social media for the movement. People spoke movingly about their spaces of community and learning, and opportunities for freedom of expression and resistance that can be created online, in the context of a patriarchal offline world. The possibilities of technology to empower people with disabilities, for example, came up as a key feature that must be defended. With growing digital repression, through internet shutdowns, surveillance, and censorship, the space for digital movement work may well be closing, at least in India. Democratic activists across the world ought to consider their own relationship to technology and governance, especially with regards to efforts to control labour and society. Thinking through the deeply affective experiences that activists have with technological control can both challenge the binary between digital and corporeal, and motivate resistance. Our knowledges of digital tools may be unavoidably situational, partial and affective, but the acknowledgement of this can better inform movement organising and strategy.

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