Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South



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8:30 – 9:00 a.m. Registration and Coffee

9:00 - 9:15 a.m. Introduction

Clovis Bergère, Northwestern University in Qatar

Sagnik Dutta, Tilburg University

Harsha Man Maharjan, Northwestern University in Qatar

9:15 - 10:15 a.m. Keynote Discussion

Marwan M. Kraidy, Northwestern University in Qatar Jack Linchuan Qiu, Nanyang Technical University

10:15 – 10:30 a.m. Coffee Break

10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. Panel 1: Platform, Public Culture, and Digital Economy

Cultural Strategies in the Age of Big Tech: Turkey's Response to Foreign

Streaming Platforms

Bilge Yesil, City University of New York

The Limits of the Global Internet: Multilinguistic Meme Makers' Critiques of

Globalization

Sulafa Zidani, Northwestern University

Digitalization and Precarity in the Gig Economy: The Indonesian Experience

Diatyka Widya Permata Yasih, Universitas Indonesia

Entrepreneurial Limits: Short Video Platforms, Livestreaming, and InterAsian

Digitalities

Rahul Mukherjee, University of Pennsylvania

Chair: Sagnik Dutta, Tilburg University

12:00 – 1:15 p.m. Lunch Break

1:15 – 2:30 p.m. Panel 2: Infrastructure, Intermediary, and Environment

Unsettling Consumerist Fantasies: Video Installations on Resource Extraction in

Southwest and Southeast Asia
Dale Hudson, NYU Abu Dhabi

Platform Workers Bill: The Politics of Regulating Workers' Injury in Singapore

Renyi Hong, National University of Singapore

From "Cloudwork" to "Groundwork": Labor Supply Chains and Local

infrastructures of Intermediation in Online Remote Work

Cheryll Soriano, De La Salle University

Chair: Harsha Man Maharjan, Northwestern University in Qatar

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2:30 - 2:45 p.m. Break

2:45 – 4:15 p.m. Panel 3: Activism, Citizenship, and Digital Sovereignty

Repertoires of Activism: Negotiating Al Surveillance in India

Sagnik Dutta, Tilburg University

Between Dependency and Sovereignty: Technology Development, International

Tech Companies, and Digital Identifications in South Asia Harsha Man Maharjan, Northwestern University in Qatar

Making the Digital Homeland: Everyday Data and Citizenship Narratives

Suruchi Mazumdar, OP Jindal Global University

Digital Activism and Authoritarian Legitimation in Post-Soviet Central Asia

Bakhytzhan Kurmanov, University of Central Asia & Colin Knox

Chair: Clovis Bergère, Northwestern University in Qatar

4:15 – 4:30 p.m. Closing Remarks

Marwan M. Kraidy, Northwestern University in Qatar

*Lunch will be provided for participants only. Other guests are welcome to explore the many nearby dining options.

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Abstracts

Panel 1: Platform, Public Culture, and Digital Economy

Cultural Strategies in the Age of Big Tech: Turkey's Response to Foreign Streaming Platforms Bilge Yesil

The global impact of US-based platforms is widely recognized, as they lead various sectors worldwide, from search engines to social media. While much of the existing research focuses on political economic, technological, and regulatory issues, in this paper, I use a cultural framework to discuss how state institutions engage with and respond to the challenges posed by big tech. Using Turkey as a case study, particularly the state-owned streaming platform Tabii, I analyze how the government addresses the challenges posed by foreign streaming services and leverages them as an opportunity to penetrate Global South markets.

Tabii was launched by the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) in 2023. It embodies the regime's vision to establish cultural hegemony while nurturing loyalist production companies and promoting a positive image of Turkey on the global stage. It offers an array of family-friendly content in Turkish, English, Urdu, Arabic, and Spanish, along with access to all TRT channels.

I begin by exploring Turkey's streaming landscape, spotlighting significant events such as Netflix's entry in 2016, the rise of local players like BluTV and Puhu TV, and the subsequent introduction of global giants like Disney+ and Amazon Prime Video. Next, I discuss the government's responses to these streaming services and their allegedly harmful content, particularly against the background of the specter of Western (cultural) imperialism. I also highlight the socio-cultural values that inform the programming decisions for Tabii, shedding light on how the government's ideological framework is woven into the narratives and aesthetic choices of its productions. Ultimately, I position Tabii as a response from an authoritarian Islamist government aimed at addressing perceived threats from US-based streaming platforms while recalibrating Turkey's cultural industry in alignment with its ideological agenda.

The significance of this project goes beyond Turkey's national context. As states worldwide contend with the dominance of tech giants, Turkey provides a critical case for examining how state institutions negotiate perceived Western imperialism while simultaneously striving to appeal to the cultural sensibilities of Global South audiences.

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The Limits of the Global Internet: Multilinguistic Meme Makers' Critiques of Globalization Sulafa Zidani

The term "globalization" points to a variety of processes. It is a communication and technology phenomenon characterized by interconnectedness and circulation of information across boundaries. It is a phenomenon of governance and advocacy that allows regulation and activism to be organized across nation-states. It is an economic process that expands capitalist industries across boundaries. Namely, in many of these meanings, globalization has been wrapped in futurist rhetoric that signals prosperity and democracy, inadvertently promising universal connectivity and freedom of movement. Concepts and phrases like "global village," "information highway," "global flows," feed an imagination of a world where rights could become universal and borders obsolete. Today, the delivery of these promises is questionable at best. This is evident in multiple areas, including on the multilingual Internet. In this paper, I examine how multilinguistic youth—a group that navigates crossing languages, cultures, and geographies in their everyday lives—understand the concept of globalization and their own place within a globalized world system.

My work draws from 14 semi-structured interviews with global meme makers as well as in-depth analysis of 287 multilinguistic memes in Arabic and Mandarin (that mix English, French, or Hebrew). I find that, within the context of globalization, multilinguistic meme makers are situated in a complex class duality. They enjoy some access to the benefits promised by globalization, such as international education or travel, which situate them in the middle or upper-middle class economically. Despite their ability to communicate fluently across languages and cultures, they do not enjoy smooth mobility across the barriers of social hierarchies or countries. They express having a lack of agency and feeling excluded by globalization. While some meme makers I interviewed favored the access to information and multiculturalism that they associated with globalization, their experiences and observations lead them to see globalization as mired with inequality. Their complex status can breed resentment, frustration, and ambivalent feelings, which meme makers voice through their memes.

I argue that through linguistic play, tone, style of humor, and other aesthetic choices, multilinguistic meme makers negotiate their power within this globalized world system. Finally, I reflect on conducting digital culture research from an inter-Asian digitalities in my approach, which grants me the ability of tracing the common themes in conceptualizations of globalization and attitudes towards it across Asian contexts.

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Digitalization and Precarity in the Gig Economy: The Indonesian Experience

Diatyka Widya Permata Yasih

The digitalization of work practices and management under the 21st century gig economy has allowed for newly and more effective forms of control over workers—now geographically scattered—in ways barely imaginable until new technologies had enabled it. In Southeast Asia, ride-hailing apps represent the most iconic form of gig work, with Singapore-based Grab being the market leader, followed by Indonesia-based Gojek. There are also some local firms that operate across the region. Through the case of Indonesia, the largest economy in Southeast Asia and the third-largest democracy in the world, this presentation inquires how does digitalization contribute in reshaping of how labor is organized, delivered and compensated? How do workers respond to such transformation in the world of work today? What do the specific experiences of Indonesia, and by extension Southeast Asia, tell us about the role of digital technologies in promoting/challenging emergent forms of social inequalities.

In my most recent work, I argue that the Indonesian gig economy is growing in a context where stable, long-term employment has never been the dominant model; and this is related to: (a) the informal sector's dominance due to the formal sector's failure to absorb a large workforce, (b) the existing precarity even in formal jobs, which worsened as businesses embraced flexible labor practices under neoliberal policies, and (c) the historically limited effectiveness of broad-based labor movements, as a still relevant legacy of decades of repression under the authoritarian New Order (1965-1998).

Secondly, the gig economy does not represent a new form of work but rather institutionalize existing precarious labor patterns found in the informal economy, to ensure their extensive deployment in the formal economy as a strategy to reduce labor costs. These practices had already begun during the early phase of Indonesia's industrialization under the New Order and were further entrenched by nonlinearization of the economy, along with large-scale capital accumulation and global economic integration.

Thirdly, culturally and politically, the gig economy reinforces the normalization of precarity, where workers view themselves as self-reliant entrepreneurs. This discourages collective resistance and promotes atomization, as structural issues are seen as personal problems. Some community and association have emerged among online gig workers and have helped them to share the responsibilities of navigating day-to-day precarity. But the lack of a unified identity based on their experiences of shared precarity makes it hard for workers to effectively challenge exploitative systems. Past efforts by community, association and union to organize around these issues have been largely ineffective due to the longstanding normalization of precarious working and living conditions.

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Entrepreneurial Limits: Short Video Platforms, Livestreaming, and InterAsian Digitalities

Rahul Mukherjee

Since the TikTok ban in India, homegrown short video platforms such as Moj and Josh have tried to woo content creators who had been part of the burgeoning popularity of TikTok in India. Moj and Josh could not replicate TikTok's algorithms, but were somewhat successful in implementing the TikTok strategy of finding influencers in provincial locations of tier-2 and tier-3 cities. I discuss the role of talent agents in recruiting local micro-influencers in rural hinterlands of India. Moj and Josh were only partially successful in gaining subscribers and more lately have relied on video commerce, and livestreaming and fan gifts to sustain themselves. This has led them to propagate particular entrepreneurial discourses, which are also part of Government of India's entrepreneurship drives that are aimed at solving the job problem in India by making erstwhile informal laborers into formalized/digitized micro-entrepreneurs. The aspirational limits of platform capitalisms are unraveled in the ruptures between influencers' articulation of their individual goals and the aspirational targets set by marketing brands and short video platform talent agents. Some influencers' refusal to engage in the performative networking events with other influencers/celebrities is a challenge to the self-representations of the influencer industry, which borrowing from the work of Hemangini Gupta (2024), one could draw a parallel with efforts of women entrepreneurs to not play by the rules of masculinist entrepreneurship's rituals and practices that misleadingly promote dense networking and neoliberal flexibility.

Lin Zhang's (2023) conceptualization of "entrepreneurial labor" and more specifically, the analytic of the "labor of entrepreneurial reinvention" in China, inserts the socio-material and cultural specificity of labor into the universalizing discourses of entrepreneurialism so as to trouble it. Drawing on scholarship related to "entrepreneurial labor" (Zhang, 2023) and "aspirational work" (Duffy, 2017), I analyze efforts made by talent managers and content directors to link brands and micro-influencers, float discourses of micro-entrepreneurship among small and medium business enterprises in rural hinterlands, and brainstorm ideas about content with creators maintaining a balance between local relatability and aspirational visions. The problems of Indian villagers not being able to trust buying new and expensive products online because the delivery is slow and then having to travel far to get it repaired or serviced later are concerns that cannot go away simply by communicating in regional languages. Considering these infrastructural dimensions points to the limits of inter-Asia borrowings, that is, India-China comparisons, even though such comparisons as this talk argues, are important while thinking of local vernacular creativity in such heterogeneous countries. Entrepreneurial limits as a concept gestures toward infrastructural limitations as well as the inability of platform start-ups to reconcile the contradictions between their projected aspirations and the desires and the everyday struggles of their content creators and users.

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Panel 2: Infrastructure, Intermediary, and Enviornment

Unsettling Consumerist Fantasies: Video Installations on Resource Extraction in Southwest and Southeast Asia

Dale Hudson

This paper examines two video installations that unsettle consumerist fantasies, maintaining global capitalism's sustainability and also undermining environmental and other forms of justice. Monira Al Qadiri's *Crude Eye* (Germany/Kuwait, 2022) reflects back to the 1980s, when oil extraction was associated with modernization and disassociated from scientific studies, tracking the rise in greenhouse gases and effects of global warming. Riar Rizaldi's *Kasiterit* (Indonesia, 2019) speculates on human dependency on techno-solutions as a means to indulge in increasingly energy- and mineral-intensive, consumer-grade technologies, powered so-called renewable energy. Rejecting single-issue approaches to environmentalism that have facilitated both climate denial and greenwashing alike, both works trace the entanglements of global capitalism and global warming across a number of different vectors.

Monira Al Qadiri's *Crude Eye* conveys wonderous memories of oil refineries in Kuwait that looked like fairytale metropolises, rendered in images of a model with its sparking clean machinery in an artificial environment. Al Qadiri describes the work as "attempts to reconcile a sense of childlike wonder with the toxic environmental destruction that the refinery inherently represents." The childlike faith in technologies both power and are empowered by a childlike faith in modernization and the polity of nation-states, even when they are among the richest in the world. The miniature model of the refinery is shot to appear like the shiny glass towers associated with the Gulf. It also evokes the Gulf futurism—ambivalent attraction and revulsion—of her early work.

By contrast, Riar Rizaldi's experimental film *Kasiterit* and two-iPhone installation *Kasiterit* (extended) locate artificial intelligence (AI) within economies and ecologies that unfurl on Bangka island from the colonial to the global eras against indigenous cosmologies, ending with the provocation: "The consumption of images is the consumption of minerals." Mining tin oxide entangles a thriving economy and brutalist environmental crisis that remarginalize the Indigenous Orang Lom. *Kasiterit* traces competing understandings of land as life. Rizaldi invents the character of Natasha, a solar-powered AI chatbot, who "traces her material ancestry" to Bangka's tin. She confronts viewers that they're watching her on what a "screen made of [her] body parts," themselves "made of capitalism." Her voice engages in dialogue with a digital avatar of Prof. Eddy Nurtjahya, who lectures on plants that might regenerate Bangka's soil, and the state mining company Timah. As such, *Kasiterit* offers a theoretical model for deconstructing consumerist fantasies.

By thinking between the two video installations, I trace different relationships with land that are mediated through digital media, particularly around global capitalism's discourse of sustainability and anti-global capitalism discourses of justice. Although Kuwait's oil extraction was reinvested in state infrastructure, it hardly benefited all Kuwaitis. If anything, it fueled consumerism. Indonesia's tin extractivism is completely severed from the daily lives of indigenous people and migrant workers living at the sites of extraction, yet they make use of consumer good. The works by Al Qadiri and Rizaldi engage in a form of eco-literacy for audiences to understand their own entanglements within global capitalism and responsibilities for global warming.

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Platform Workers Bill: The Politics of Regulating Workers' Injury in Singapore

Renyi Hong

In 2024, Singapore introduced the Platform Workers Bill, a legislation that brought platform workers under the statutory purview of the Workers' Injury Compensation Act (WICA). Implicit in this bill is an acknowledgment that accidents are inevitable and must be governed preemptively. In introducing this legislation, Singapore prided itself for being the first Southeast Asian country to address an unfortunate "side-effect" of the platform economy.

This presentation assesses the reasons and conditions for the introduction of the Bill by examining its policy terms and cultural representations. The most common justification for the Bill is monetary in nature: it is meant to replace the inadequate insurance provided by platforms in 2018. For comparison, the payouts for death and permanent disability under platform insurance ranged from \$10,000 to \$30,000, whereas workers covered by WICA would be eligible for up to \$289,000 (Advisory Committee on Platform Workers 2022). Equally important but less discussed, however, is how platforms had sought to profit from injury. Not only were claims made difficult (Koh 2022), but platforms also framed insurance as a handout despite factoring its cost into delivery fees (Chong 2020). Further, platforms used insurance to build Insurtech products, creating expensive microfinancing insurance loans targeted at workers (Grab SG 2024). In this way, platforms did not merely regard injury as a "side-effect"—they profited from it.

In light of this, regulatory control can be seen as a moral imperative. But is policy regulation sufficient? Drawing on speeches and social media discussions, I suggest that the Platform Workers Bill tends to position workers as responsible for their own injuries. This compromise—which erases the class-based nature of injury while making compensation somewhat more equitable—represents a particular neoliberal approach to injury that deserves further consideration.

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From "Cloudwork" to "Groundwork": Labor Supply Chains and Local Infrastructures of Intermediation in Online Remote Work

Cheryll Soriano

Much of the literature on online freelancing or "cloudwork" centers on the role of global platforms in structuring labor relations, often positioning these platforms as the primary unit of analysis. While such approaches have generated important typologies and insights, they frequently overlook the ways in which platform-mediated work is embedded in—and contingent upon—local infrastructures, actors, and forms of intermediation. This paper argues that to fully understand the organization of digital labor, especially within Asia where it is inscribed in high levels of informality and brokerage dynamics, we must move beyond the platform as an analytical anchor and attend to the "groundwork" that sustains it. Drawing on ethnographic research in the Philippines, this study maps a diverse ecology of intermediation and brokerage infrastructures that shape labor supply chains outside and alongside formal platform structures. I identify several models of intermediation—including worker collectives, outsourcing agencies, cooperatives, and platform-independent BPOs—that enable the matching, training, and management of online freelance labor. These intermediaries not only facilitate labor circulation but also provide critical material and organizational support, from coworking spaces and client matchmaking to payroll systems and reputational maintenance. In doing so, they reconfigure how labor is organized, valued, and made visible in the digital economy. By foregrounding these infrastructural and organizational processes, the paper contributes to platform labor and organization studies by theorizing brokerage and intermediation as ongoing, relational, and materially grounded. It also highlights how Global South contexts—far from being peripheral—offer generative insights into the layered, networked, and contested nature of platformization. Ultimately, the paper proposes a shift from "cloudwork" to "groundwork" as an analytic to surface the situated and infrastructural logics that underpin remote digital labor.

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Panel 3: Activism, Citizenship, and Digital Sovereignty

Repertoires of Activism: Negotiating Al Surveillance in India

Sagnik Dutta

While AI enabled algorithmic surveillance of public places has expanded rapidly across cities in the Global South in recent years, there's little scholarship that underlines the particularities of how these surveillance technologies are negotiated on the ground. Legal scholars have argued that the use of AI enabled surveillance technologies such as facial recognition technology has curbed freedom of expression, freedom of association, individual rights and led to discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and ethnicity. Yet the meaning of these technologies needs to be analyzed beyond abstract, liberal legal categories. A lot of the legal scholarship builds upon experiences with these technologies in North America and Europe to the neglect of how the law works on the ground for marginalized communities in the Global South. Lived experiences of those subjected to and negotiating these technologies of surveillance often cannot be captured in entirety by abstract liberal categories. It is important to underline these experiences in scholarship on AI enabled surveillance to challenge the hegemony of liberal ways of thinking about approaches to the same. This paper attempts to address this gap in the legal scholarship through a digital ethnographic exploration of social media debates on the use of facial recognition technology in Hyderabad. The city chosen has witnessed extensive use of CCTV cameras combined with facial recognition technology and the setting up of massive infrastructure to facilitate the surveillance including a centralized command and control structure monitored by the police. Hyderabad has also witnessed the emergence of activism against AI enabled surveillance in recent times. By tracing online posts and campaigns of activists on X, newspaper reportage as well as discussions on social media, this paper attempts to reconstruct affective solidarities, everyday experiences, and vernacular conceptual vocabularies that emerge in encounters with AI enabled surveillance.

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Between Dependency and Sovereignty: Technology Development, International Tech Companies and Digital Identifications in South Asia

Harsha Man Maharjan

Although scholars disagree on whether it is possible to have sovereignty in the digital world, the concept usually defines different kinds of autonomy, independence and control over digital infrastructure, data and systems (Couture & Toupin, 2019). Recently, Pohle et al. (2024) introduced a new approach called "unthinking," borrowing from Wallerstein to challenge "previously established concepts," suggesting, among other things, two important points. First, digital sovereignty should be understood as "part of a broader power struggle over digital governance" that is contested. Second, we need to focus on "long-term historical processes rather than isolated events, bringing path dependencies and structural relations to the fore". In this context, I use dependency theory as an approach to understand the connection between digital/technological dependency and digital sovereignty in South Asia through the debates and practices related to the collaboration of international technology companies and state ID agencies in the context of the development of national digital identifications. Although the dependency approach (Packenham, 1992) highlights issues of underdevelopment, domination, and exploitation in the world system, I use dependency as the result of calculation, contingency, and dialogue between two actors, moving away from deterministic understandings of development and underdevelopment, following new political economy (Gamble et al., 1996).

This paper comparatively studies digital sovereignty debates and practices in the sphere of national digital identification systems in South Asia, through the cases of Nepal and Sri Lanka. It examines the changing relationship between tech companies and state ID agencies in the development of these systems. Both countries rely on international technology companies for hardware, software, and systems. While Nepal has been dependent on the French tech giant IDEMIA since 2016, Sri Lanka has been dependent on a Pakistani public company, NADRA Technologies Limited, for smart cards and e-services since 2013, but after India provided a grant in 2022 to Sri Lanka, only Indian companies were allowed to bid. Debates about digital dependency and sovereignty have emerged in both countries in the context of foreign technological assistance. I ask: how have the practices and discourses of the relationship between government ID agencies and technology companies taken shape in recent history in these two countries? Drawing on news media content, policy documents, and social media debates, I argue that the relationship has evolved in the dialectics of digital dependency and sovereignty, in the context of anxieties and concerns about the role of foreign actors in the global economy, the national IT industry, and geopolitics.

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Making the DigitalHomeland: Everyday Data and Citizenship Narratives

Suruchi Mazumdar

This paper explores how marginalized, exiled refugee groups in the Global South such as the Rohingya, an ethnic minority Muslim community from Myanmar, negotiate with platforms and Al- and data-centric technologies to articulate claims of citizenship and nationalism in Bangladesh and Malaysia, Muslim-majority host countries in South and Southeast Asia. Traditionally, digital platforms such as Facebook were linked to personal freedoms through global networks. The scholarship of diasporic uses of technology addresses issues related to digital capabilities, infrastructures, and platforms, as well as the agency/ resistance strategies by diasporic groups. Such celebratory approach has been sobered by the widespread use of technological assemblage for governance. Biometric, Al, and blockchain, which are used by humanitarian agencies, local governments, and corporate actors, foreground the classic security-versus-human rights dilemma. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, are positioned as economic actors and infrastructures, which allow diverse stakeholders (governments, non-profits, large businesses as well as individual freelancers, such as content creators or gig-workers) and end-users to engage in (economic) exchanges in dynamic processes. The challenges of precarity counter the possibilities of visibility and new avenues of audience-making.

Marginalized digital users are seen as data bodies and data subjects in this scholarship. This project captures the tension between the emancipatory promises and restrictive limits of technology, and recentres marginalized exiled, refugee groups' affective digital creative practices and everyday use and negotiations with mobile communication, platforms (Facebook, TikTok, YouTube), and AI- and data-driven technologies such as biometric smart cards, drones, and blockchain technology. In 2017, the Rohingya community, which faced discrimination over decades and branded Bengalis or the enemy other by majoritarian Buddhist groups, was subject to a genocide and was displaced both within and outside the national borders of Myanmar. The largest exiled groups are currently settled in Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps in the southern Cox Bazar region of Bangladesh. Muslim-majority Malaysia, which doubles as both destination and conduit country for third-country refugee resettlement, hosts more than 150,000 refugee and asylum seekers from Myanmar in conservative estimates (as per data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]). The Rohingya constitutes the largest of the refugee and asylum-seeking population. Over the past half a decade and especially since the pandemic, the online footprint of the Rohingya diaspora grew despite mobility restrictions, undocumented legal status, limited digital infrastructure, and power inequalities across host countries in diverse geographies. This study draws from qualitative interviews with refugee digital content creators and civil society actors across refugee settlements in Bangladesh's southern Cox Bazar region and urban margins in Kuala Lumpur, digital ethnographic methods, critical thematic and discourse analysis of interviews and user- generated digital content, social media posts, and online videos. The paper introduces the conceptual category of digital homeland. It argues that affective creative practices, as constituted by digital family making and archiving/documentation, must be recentred in data justice and humanitarianism, beyond the top-down, data-centric approaches of emergency support and refugee management.

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Digital Activism and Authoritarian Legitimation in Post-Soviet Central Asia

Bakhytzhan Kurmanov (coauthored with Colin Knox, Nazarbayev University)

In recent decades, the global proliferation of digital technologies has fueled a wave of democratic digital activism, exemplified by the Arab Spring and Ukraine's Euromaidan. These movements fostered optimism about the potential of "liberation technologies" to democratize autocracies. However, this promise has not materialized uniformly, particularly across the post-Soviet region, where regimes have proven resilient and adaptive. From Moscow to Dushanbe, a new form of governance—informational autocracy—has emerged. These regimes have not only repressed digital dissent but have also appropriated digital tools to reinforce their legitimacy, control public narratives, and engage selectively with citizens. This dual strategy challenges simplistic binaries of technology as either a tool of liberation or repression.

While a growing body of scholarship has examined authoritarian legitimation and the survival strategies of autocracies, much of this work focuses on foundational myths, state discourse, and limited participatory mechanisms. Despite increased attention to the role of civil society in regime legitimation, few studies have explored how autocratic regimes co-opt or respond to digital activism. This gap is particularly pronounced in Central Asia, where existing literature has mainly analyzed NGO-state relations and the democratic façades of authoritarian regimes. Our study addresses this lacuna by investigating how autocracies in the region engage with digital activism as part of broader legitimation strategies.

We ask: How do autocracies respond to digital activism? Drawing on theories of authoritarian legitimation and digital governance, we propose an analytical framework to assess regime responses. Using qualitative case studies of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—two archetypes of post-Soviet authoritarian consolidation—we examine state strategies for managing, co-opting, or suppressing digital activism. These cases illuminate the complex interplay between authoritarian resilience, digital engagement, and evolving state-society relations in the information age.

Our findings contribute to the growing literature on authoritarian adaptation by demonstrating that digital activism is not merely a threat to autocracies, but also a tool that regimes seek to manage and leverage for legitimation. By analyzing how Central Asian regimes selectively embrace and repress digital activism, this article advances our understanding of authoritarian governance in hybrid digital spaces. We conclude with theoretical implications for the study of informational autocracies and offer directions for future research on the nexus between digital technologies and authoritarian resilience. Ultimately, this article suggests autocracies use four mutually inclusive and escalating legitimation mechanisms (limited participation, outputs legitimation, regime discourse, and targeted repression) to become more resilient through their interactions with digital activists.

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Participant Bios

Clovis Bergère is the director of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South at Northwestern University in Qatar. His research explores youth as a contested political and social category in Guinea, West Africa, with a focus on digital media and urban life. He previously served as a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. He holds a PhD in Childhood Studies from Rutgers University and has taught at Rutgers University, the University of the Arts, and the University of Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in *Public Culture*, *International Journal of Communication*, *African Studies Review*, and *Journal of Childhood Studies*.

Sagnik Dutta is a researcher at the Department of Cultural Studies at Tilburg University where their research focuses on digitalization in the Global South and associate professor (on leave) at OP Jindal Global University. Dutta's research focuses on the everyday life of data colonialism, AI, securitization, and emergent technologies with a regional focus on India. They are particularly committed to decolonial, queer, and feminist approaches to technology. Their publications bring together political theory, socio-legal studies, and communication studies. Their work has been published or is forthcoming in prominent peer-reviewed journals such as *Big Data and Society*, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *Law and Social Inquiry*, *Ethnicities*, *Feminist Theory*, and *Legal Pluralism and Critical Social Analysis*. Their monograph, *In the Shadow of Minority Rights*, has been published by Cambridge University Press.

Renyi Hong is associate professor at the Department of Communications and New Media at the National University of Singapore. He is interested in labor and its relationships with affect, technology, and capitalism. His first monograph, *Passionate Work* explores the uses of passion as a means of generating a milieu of endurance for those left out of the good life. His monograph in development, *Work's Plasticity*, examines the biopolitical relationship between human adaptation and computational media. His works can be found in *Social Text*, *New Media & Society*, *Cultural Studies*, among others.

Dale Hudson is associate professor at NYU Abu Dhabi in the Film and New Media Program and the MFA in Art and Media. His latest books are Reorienting the Middle East: Film and Digital Media Where the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean Meet (2024), co-edited with Alia Yunis, and Documentary Habitats: Transmedia Ecologies (forthcoming, 2026), co-authored with Patricia R. Zimmermann. He has curated for the Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival (FLEFF) since 2007 and coordinated Films from the Gulf for the Association of Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Association (AGAPS) at the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Film Festival since 2016.

Marwan M. Kraidy is Dean and CEO of Northwestern University in Qatar, where he also holds the Anthony Shadid Chair in Global Media, Politics, and Culture and founded the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South. A fellow of the International Communication Association, he previously served as founding director of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication and associate dean at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of thirteen books, including Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization (Temple University Press, 2005), Reality Television and Arab Politics (Cambridge University Press, 2010), and The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World (Harvard University Press, 2016). His current research focuses on digital sovereignty, Turkish television drama, political graffiti, and music video aesthetics in the Arab world. He serves on the boards of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Center for American Studies and Research at the American University of Beirut.

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Bakhytzhan Kurmanov is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Policy and Administration at the University of Central Asia (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan). He previously served as an assistant professor at Maqsut Narikbayev University (Astana, Kazakhstan) and as a graduate teaching assistant at Nazarbayev University. Kurmanov's professional experience includes work with the United Nations Development Programme, the Asian Development Bank, and several Kazakhstani think tanks. His research interests encompass open government, digital activism, authoritarian politics, memory politics, and nation-building, with a primary focus on Central Asia. His work has been published in several leading journals, including the Journal of Eurasian Studies, Journal of Contemporary Asia, Swiss Political Science Review, Communist and Post-Communist Studies, The Information Society, Post-Soviet Affairs, Central Asian Survey, International Journal of Educational Research, and Asian Development Review.

Harsha Man Maharjan is a Global Postdoctoral Scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South at Northwestern University in Qatar. His broader interests include media studies, critical data and digital studies, infrastructure studies, and science and technology studies. His current research examines national digital identification systems to explore its implications for governance, the global economy, citizenship, and social change.

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