"NEW MEDIA CONFIGURATIONS - CHANGING SOCIETIES? CURRENT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH ASIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA"

Panel 5: Converging Media – Changing Practices: What is new about New Media?

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„Mobile violence: Communalism in India and ICT Intervention"

Abstract

In 2012, communal riot violence in Assam, India spread from its local context to impact thousands of people from the North---East. Rumours of violence spread via text messages (SMS) and falsified images of reprisal violence were disseminated throughout the Internet. These actions eventually led to riots in major urban centres --- including Mumbai, Pune, and Bangalore --- and a mass exodus of people from the North---East. Increased access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in India has been hypothesized to be a positive development, specifically in the arena of democratic practice, the creation of new forms of democratic spaces and engagement, and access to economic and political information. However, when access and political discourse are inherently sites of inequality, this inequality is mapped onto the digital landscape. This does not ignore possible counter---narratives or the potential for change; it demonstrates that there is a vested interest, among political, media, and civic actors, in maintaining a discourse within India that frames events as communal. ICT can therefore act as an arena where coercive social relations are contested, controlled, and reified.

This paper makes steps towards generating a framework on the "performative" and "domesticated" aspects of ICT and its co---constitution of communal violence (Jeffrey and Doran 2013) by examining qualitative discursive evidence on the reporting of the Assam riots in 2012 and the Indian government's reaction to communal threats transmitted through ICT, with a focus on mobile technology. It is suggested that ICT has been domesticated --- performing within the powerful discursive frame of communal riot and discursive event interpretation --- and acts as an arena of inequality and discursive control. The paper explores, using a qualitative discourse analysis of media and government reactions to the Assam riots as a preliminary case study, the government, civic, and media reactions to the use of ICT---transmitted communal threats in 2012. Further, it investigates the particular national, political, and social context of Indian communalism and the potential intervention into communal discourse posed by ICT, how ICT fits into historic media practices, and Indian government reactions to communal discourse. It proposes that though ICT opens new fields of relational interactions, when discourse and access is unequal, powerful discursive frames remain unchallenged, protected by vested interests. Change is possible, though not certain; in a country with extensive media control and a history of communal discourse, ICT may very well reinforce the very structures it is posited to undermine.