

# Infrastructures of empire: towards a critical geopolitics of media and information studies

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## Abstract

The Arab Uprisings of 2011 can be seen as a turning point for media and information studies scholars, many of whom newly discovered the region as a site for theories of digital media and social transformation. This work has argued that digital media technologies fuel or transform political change through new networked publics, new forms of connective action cultivating liberal democratic values. These works have, surprisingly, little to say about the United States and other Western colonial powers' legacy of occupation, ongoing violence and strategic interests in the region. It is as if the Arab Spring was a vindication for the universal appeal of Western liberal democracy delivered through the gift of the Internet, social media as manifestation of the 'technologies of freedom' long promised by Cold War. We propose an alternate trajectory in terms of reorienting discussions of media and information infrastructures as embedded within the resurgence of idealized liberal democratic norms in the wake of the end of the Cold War. We look at the demise of the media and empire debates and 'the rise of the BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) as modes of intra-imperial competition that complicate earlier Eurocentric narratives media and empire. We then outline the individual contributions for the special collection of essays.

## Keywords

Infrastructure, Empire, Arab Uprisings, Geopolitics, BRICS

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The Arab Uprisings of 2011 can be seen as a turning point for media and information studies scholars, many of whom newly discovered the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as a promising site to develop theories of digital media and political transformation. Much of this influential research has argued that digital media technologies fuel or transform political change through new networked publics, new forms of connective action cultivating or renewing liberal democratic values and ideals (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2012; Howard and Hussain, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014). As scholars working on South Asia and the MENA through the 'forever war' of the 21st century, it has struck us jarringly that these works, suddenly bringing prominence to innovative social media use by youth in Cairo, Tunis and elsewhere, had so little, in fact nothing, to say about the United States and other Western colonial powers' legacy of occupation, ongoing violence and strategic interests in the region at large. Within Media and Information Studies, it is as if the Arab Spring was a vindication for the universal appeal of Western liberal democracy delivered through the gift of the Internet, social media as manifestation of the 'technologies of freedom' long promised by Cold War social science in the tradition of Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983).<sup>1</sup>

In the last 15 years, across the disciplines of History to Political Science, Anthropology to Literature, questions about the continuity and transformation of US Empire have been at the centre, as opposed to the margins of scholarly debate. As historians, Alfred McCoy and Francisco Scarano (2009) have argued, 'a broad spectrum of contemporary analysts, including staunch supporters of unbridled U.S. power, agree that empire ... is the most appropriate descriptor for America's current superpower status (p. 28)'. In contrast, the deafening silence when it comes to the legacy of US Empire in conjunction with a myopic focus on digital media in catalysing and/or transforming social movements is especially puzzling given the centrality of these same technologies to the ongoing wars in the MENA region, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In this themed section, we attempt to account for the wide gulf that separates the dominant and invariably celebratory account of horizontal social media 'revolutions' and an earlier (today unfashionable) focus on media and imperialism. Erased in all of these hyperbolic accounts of digital and social media, is the structuring logic of Cold War genealogy in the study of media technologies, modernization and liberal democracy in the laboratories of the Third World (Mattelart, 1975, 1994, 2003; Schiller, 1976, 2000; Shah, 2011). We contend that the scant attention to geopolitics and the crises of neoliberal capitalism is also partially explained by the limitations of the discussions of empire that emerged in the field in the 1970s and 1980s. These debates conducted in the pages of this journal, among other venues, in their own way contributed to a largely Eurocentric understanding of cultural imperialism.

As the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings in the region make abundantly apparent, any assertion of the contagious or transformative powers of media and information technologies require a foregrounding of geopolitical histories and the machinations of capitalist crises (Aouragh, 2012b; Dencik and Leistert, 2015; Herrera, 2014; Khiabany, 2012; Tawil-Souri, 2012). In this article, we propose an alternate trajectory in terms of reorienting discussions of media and information infrastructures as embedded within the resurgence of idealized liberal democratic norms in the wake of the end of the Cold War. The

section 'Situating media and empire debates' lays out a brief summary of the demise of the media and empire debates in order to situate our overall conceptual argument about how we are defining infrastructures of empire. We then provide a brief case study, through an overview of 'the rise of the BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) phenomenon as both metaphor and reality, of new modes of intra-imperial competition that might complicate earlier Eurocentric narratives media and empire. The final section 'Looking forward' of the essay provides an overview of the essays that take up our attempts to rethink media and information infrastructures across Asia, the MENA, through the logic of empire.

## **Situating media and empire debates**

The US-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003 prompted a renewed interest in debates about the continuities and disjunctures between modes of imperial expansion and decline. These include numerous works across multiple disciplines that have examined the making and transformation of US Empire and the long contradictory history of American exceptionalism.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the first decade of the 21st century saw a renewed interest in the concept of empire more broadly with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2001, 2005) provocations of new modes of all-encompassing networked power on the one hand, to new formulation of state sovereignty and capitalist accumulation by David Harvey (2003) and Ellen Meiksins-Wood (2005).

With some notable exceptions that remain at the margins of the field,<sup>3</sup> we see a visible dearth in scholarship and discussion on the topic of US Empire or issues of empire more broadly in the expanding field of media and information studies over the course of the last 15 years. What accounts for this silence especially as measured against the surge in interest in identifying the catalytic role of media and information technologies in the uprisings of Tunisia and Egypt in 2011?

While there was certainly scholarly interest in the failures of journalistic accountability that led to the marketing of the Iraq invasion and the countervailing influence of Al Jazeera, and subsequent attention to official and leaked information of torture and civilian casualties, most of these works were grounded in liberal normative assumptions that these were but aberrations of US democratic ideals in need of reform.<sup>4</sup> For our purposes here, it is important to remember that the backdrop of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken place against a well-established reliance and expanded use of information technologies in US military occupations beginning as early as 1898 American military occupation stretching from the Caribbean to the Pacific; in similar ways, the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan have, since 2001, served as the catalyst for fusing aerospace, cyberspace and biometrics into a robotic information regime of extraordinary power (McCoy, 2009, 2014).

In this sense, media and information studies researchers might benefit from greater engagement with historians of European and US Empire who have documented the ways in which Western technological advances are often based on particularly violent experiments in warfare and counter-insurgency developed in the Third World. To this point, Rashid Khalidi (2005: 27) writes of French and British air bombardments and became the basic knowledge for textbooks on aerial bombardments.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, in the emerging arena of digital media studies and specifically information studies, the wider geopolitical context has faded from the purview almost entirely.<sup>6</sup> In these discussions across Information Studies, we find some of the most prominent scholarship on the histories of cybernetics and computing and emergence of 'digital utopianism', by Fred Turner (2010, 2015), Geoffery Bowker (2008) and others, have recast and in so doing, erased the material history of the Cold War as it played out across the Third World. In focusing almost exclusively on the perspectives and experiences of elite US and European-based scientists, artists and entrepreneurs, these surely complex cultural and organizational studies, have managed (however unintentionally) to displace the violence of the Cold War origins of cybernetics and digital infrastructure.

For example, in Turner's (2010) retelling of the history of techno-libertarianism, the 'new communalists' are counter-intuitively initially housed in computer labs at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). However, the impact of Cold War suppression, surveillance and the advanced technologies that targeted civilians from the Middle East to South East Asia and across Central and Latin America do little to dirty the aura of Stuart Brand or his countercultural colleagues. In fact, even when historians of information technology like Eden Medina (2014) have uncovered socialist alternatives like *Cybersyn* (cybernetics synergy), a state-of-the-art information system that was designed to rationalize production under the democratically elected Salvador Allende's brief administration in Chile, the larger material and political realities of the Cold War are curiously all but absent in the analysis itself. As historian Greg Grandin (2014) has pointed out, the most important legacy of *Cybersyn*, left unexamined by Medina (2014) and Morozov (2014) in a journalistic account, happened in the aftermath of the Washington-backed coup on 11 September 1973, that overthrew Allende and installed the authoritarian Pinochet regime using the knowledge and platform of *Project Cybersyn* as part of its larger campaign of repression and violence.<sup>7</sup>

It was precisely the interventionist role of the United States and its allies exporting media and information technology infrastructure that spurred an earlier debate about media imperialism. Reaching a peak in the field beginning in the 1970s into the early 1980s, national governments across much of Africa, Asia and Latin America demanded a more democratic communications order under the auspices of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; Nordenstreng, 1984). At stake in these discussions of Western and US cultural imperialism were questions of increasing domination of the US film and television industries, the near monopoly situation in global news-gathering and growing concerns about the first generation of unequal transborder data flows reinforcing technological reliance if not dependence (Alhassan and Chakravarty, 2011: 272). The outcome of the New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO) debates and the role of US media and advertising industries and the ideologically hostile Reagan administration in overtly derailing even the weakest calls for reversing these forms of media imperialism are well known.<sup>8</sup>

However, and with the retrospective advantage, it is also apparent that media scholars in this period failed to adequately examine the contradictions of the postcolonial nation state where in many cases the advocacy for the democratization of global media and information flows went hand in hand with silencing national dissent at home (Alhassan, 2004). Moreover, scholars of media imperialism from this period focused disproportionately on the machinations of media and emerging information industries and the United States and

Western state's role in shaping policy and practice, with less analytic interest in the actual 'Third World' itself and the manifold contradictions of postcolonial nationalism. These earlier, albeit, important interventions by media scholars, concerned with the Cold War manifestations of dominant Western cultural and information flows, assumed that the postcolonial state and its goals of modernization and development automatically represented national interest. In so doing, they failed to account for what Achille Mbembe (2001) and Mahmood Mamdani (1996), among others, have called the anatomy of the colonial and postcolonial state and its relationship of dominance defined through logics of racial, ethnic and class divisions over citizens as subject populations.<sup>9</sup>

It was in the early postcolonial era across much of the Third World, when the village and slum became a social laboratory for 'diffusion of innovations' research. Since the 1960s, we have seen different iterations of scholars invested in whether peasants could adopt the rights of individual citizenship or even imagine themselves as entrepreneurs in today's language 'at the bottom of the pyramid', whether they would use condoms, if they would reject communal practices of religious collective identity and whether 'nation building' could take place without the threat of land redistribution or political revolution. Media exposure was meant to promote aspirations for individual mobility, both political and economic as opposed to following prescribed norms or customs. The promotion of individual rights associated with access to media and information technologies became linked to the tightening grip of the state in regulating mass media and information technologies in line with the ostensible objective of national development. From Indonesia through Pakistan, across the Gulf states, Egypt and beyond – we see this almost always happened with the explicit backing of the United States and other Western powers, who set aside their commitment to 'freedom of information' and, instead, supported authoritarian regimes faithful to a modernization agenda without social upheaval (Alhassan and Chakravartty, 2011: 270–275).

Here, it is important to remember that more radical and contested versions of the cultural imperialism critique, which were initially articulated against the backdrop of international socialist and decolonization movements, also imagined new political communities of Afro-Asian and Tricontinental (Latin America) solidarities and economies, however contingent (Lee, 2010). These intellectuals from socialist and decolonization movements, from Amílcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon to Raul Prebisch and Samir Amin as well as Third-Worldist feminist intellectuals, emphasized self-reliance and ultimately *liberated infrastructures* to combat colonial propaganda and build transnational circuits of transport and communication (radio and newspapers) in the service of the commons (Cabral, 1966; Fanon, 1968; Lee, 2010).

There have been very few scholarly works within Media and Information Studies on the legacy of these anti-colonial thinkers and the 'mutability' of radio and broadcasting, wireless and other infrastructures developed for colonial rule but subsequently transformed in the making of national and transnational movements across the Third World from the 1950s to the 1980s (Larkin, 2008). Meanwhile, the falling out of favour of the cultural imperialism framework by the 1990s for certainly more nuanced and less Eurocentric understandings of globalization of media and culture has perhaps unintentionally focused exclusively on the flawed cultural dimension of earlier debates (Chakravartty and Zhao, 2008). Today, early theories of cultural globalization by Arjun Appadurai (1996), John Tomlinson (1999) and Homi Bhabha (2004) remain as influential

as against what are remembered as one dimensional understandings of imperialism, that is, of media imperialism as cultural homogenization. The contested background of racial and colonial violence and anti-colonial struggle that was the backdrop against which these early theories of cultural imperialism were waged seems as if to have little contemporary significance. Thus, beginning in the 1990s, in due course discussions about cultural imperialism quickly faded giving rise to theories of dynamic cultural globalization and hybridity that have remained dominant alongside a notable turn away from a political economy analysis of the emerging field of digital media and technology.

We argue that a more fruitful engagement requires a basic examination of the ways in which postcolonial infrastructures of empire – while part of existing rivalries emanating from the 20th century – are metamorphosed for the benefit of new regional alliances today. The context for digital infrastructure is marked by colonial encounters as well as the history of uneven or fractured capitalism. The earlier manifestations of communication technologies (underwater telegraph and telephone cables, telecommunications networks) and recent digitally networked technologies are both part of these splintered urban infrastructures. We draw from the work of critical geography and urban studies scholars who posit that these infrastructures are material manifestations of ‘new notions of speed, light, power and communications’ (Graham and Marvin, 2001: 40; Larkin, 2008). Media anthropologist Brian Larkin and others are ‘adopting an infrastructural disposition’ (Parks and Starosielski, 2015), that draws from the cognate field of Science, Technology and Society (STS). According to John Durham Peters (2015), these foci often centre on the foundational work of Bruno Latour and make the case for ‘infrastructuralism ... as a way of understanding the work of media as fundamentally logistical’ (p. 35).

While we also find the conceptual benefits of thinking of media and information as infrastructure following some of these logics, our intentions here are much more earth-bound. Rather than making a metaphysical case for why we need to see ‘media practices and institutions as embedded in relations with the natural and human world’ (Peters, 2015), we understand infrastructure as *both* the material stuff of cables and wires that have long been seen as modern public goods as well as the ‘soft’ and more amorphous networks of cultural exchange shaped by European (and American) colonial power (p. 37). Therefore, in contrast to previous studies of ‘media imperialism’, which are remembered primarily for an emphasis on the unequal flows of culture from the First World to the Third World, here we are collapsing the distinction and drawing on a definition of infrastructure as ‘... a totality of both technical and cultural systems that create institutionalized structures whereby goods of all sorts circulate’ (Larkin, 2008: 6). This unique dual approach shows how, through a maze of tangible wires and obtrusive policies, media and information infrastructures are therefore, indeed, both central as digital nodes for financial transaction and trade, and key in squeezing down dissent or co-opting social movements. Such an analytical angle confirms that online technology infrastructures inhibit powerful transmitters that are linked to intricate systems of cables and splitters; they host metadata storage reservoirs as big as football fields; they manage continuous digital broadcasting streams that are connected to complex satellites networks in space. But while imperial motives outline much of the techno-security alliances, such reconfigurations also depict geopolitical anxieties.

## *Empire in the information age*

One of the prevailing myths of an information society is a borderless world where nation states succumb to the (benign) power of technology freeing the individual and thereby society at large. Four years in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, it is painfully apparent that telecommunications and social media companies alike comply, co-operate and bend to state power – whether Egyptian military regimes or US imperial interests (Aouragh, 2012a). In hindsight, the naming of a ‘Facebook revolution’ seems as hollow an ideological framing as that of the US army liberating Iraq through military invasion. Nation states can restrict flows of communication, monitor content and promote certain parameters of ‘social order’; they can devise the very laws that regulate social media and derive taxes (or allow its avoidance) from their revenues (Trottier and Fuchs, 2014: 21–23). It is therefore important to consider possible alternatives. Might a revamped NWICO 2.0 be a possibility given shifting global power relations as some have argued? India is expected to have the largest Facebook population by 2016 – it grew from 10 million to 100 million users in 1 decade and from 100 million to 200 million in merely 3 years (Thussu, 2013: 244). The fascination with spectacular figures is ironic because the estimated rates shed light on changing *consumption* patterns that have little to do with ownership. But, perhaps inadvertently, *growth* comes to expose an important conceptual blurring that we argue is part of the problem: capitalist consumption turns into a synonym for political or economic sovereignty. In a sense, the ‘rise of the BRICS’ discussion in the field of Media Studies echoes the triumphalism of nationalists political projects now redesigned for the information age. This is apparent, for example, in the current Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi’s ‘Digital India’ programme celebrated prominently by the CEOs of Facebook, Google, Oracle and more. Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Silicon Valley clearly represents the US imprint on 21st century technology as both a matter of hard-material power (control, taxation and ownership of the telecom and the Internet infrastructures) and of soft-corporate power (political control and ownership of the governing bodies both domestically and internationally). Diasporic Indians who registered en masse for an audience with Modi at Facebook headquarters and filled Madison Square Gardens in 2014 are believers of the BRICS’ promise that national flavour of capital offers an alternative to the United States and Western power. Modi’s visit to Menlo Park in September 2015 was meant to woo foreign capital to expand India’s ‘digital infrastructure’ under what is promised as a ‘win-win’ strategy for foreign capital, the sizeable Indian domestic telecom and software companies and the deeply fractured Indian public ranging from urban elites to the vast majority of the nation’s rural and economically dispossessed citizenry.<sup>10</sup>

The uncontested notion of information technology as freedom needs to be challenged with the same critical scrutiny given to the ‘paradoxes of rights’ in debates about the strategic deployment of gender and human rights in relation to neoliberal governance and the imperial ambitions of the United States (Brown, 2002). It is clear that the rise of the ‘network society’, popularized by Manuel Castells, has not undone the hegemony of US capital in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector (Schiller, 2014). And the more recent ties that bind billionaire corporations like Google, Microsoft, Verizon and others to US military interests have similarly not

disappeared. Telecommunications networks and digital infrastructure regimes have become the lifeline of neoliberal globalization enforced by the World Trade Organization, multiple Free Trade Agreements, ensconced in the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and advocated by multilateral governance regimes like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN; cf. Hill, 2013; Ya'u, 2004; Alhassan and Chakravarty, 2011).

Like cyber Gods, these anonymous entities can insist on 'public private partnerships', 'pro-market pro-poor' development interventions and allocate URL names and addresses to some nations while precluding others, Palestine being a case in point (Aouragh, 2011; Tawil-Souri, 2012). New ICTs are thus protected through an inherited inequality between North and South. Dominant ICTs are part of the counter-revolutionary dynamics in the MENA (Alexander and Aouragh 2014). Whilst they toe the line of (befriended) local dictators they are also protected through an inherited inequality between North and South. This is caused by the combined problem of being bounded by neoliberal rules in the ICT sector at large (Saleh, 2011) whilst a forced inheritance of colonial infrastructures meant a late (uneven) development (Hanieh, 2013) of post-independent infrastructures.

But how relevant are these distinctions in the 21st century, with the rise of Brazil, India, and most significantly China, alongside much of Europe in fiscal crisis since 2008 and the United States exposed as debtor to the former 'Third World'? Scholars within Media Studies have described these shifts as the rise of 'Chindia' (Thussu, 2013: 31). Of course, the statistics from China are dazzling (Thussu, 2013: 246), and it is indisputable that these represent some of the most extraordinary growth rates in the world. This is related to a recently re-emerging notion of BRICS, which has been adopted and uncritically popularized as we argue below. Nonetheless, it is widely accepted that the 'emerging' BRICS economies destabilize the unwritten pact of financial distribution.

### *Inter-Asian shifts or 'Third World' revenge?*

Historically, geostrategic claims are manifested through military battles. In the context of the 'Third World', the impressive anti-colonial struggles together with the decline of raw materials have changed this. However, the geostrategic management continues to a large extent because oil (thus the Middle East) is a major exception for US capitalism, the dominant imperial power in our age. While relying on offshore naval and air bases to guarantee this balance, the United States also constructed an economic world order that primarily suits itself. In this *Carter Doctrine* and *Washington Consensus*, anyone stepping into challenge this unfair equilibrium will be punished by force or disciplined through the shamelessly selective utilization of global institutions including the United Nations (UN), Group of Seven (G7), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

But while all this remains true, there seems to be a new *cold war* on the rise that is shaking up the global pattern and in due course imposes new geopolitical configurations. The top-5 list of largest economies in terms of purchasing power parity includes two BRICS countries (India and China). Since its popular appeal reflects the legitimate dissent to western capitalist dominance, we agree with Zhao (2015: 67) that while it offers no ideological alternative to neoliberalism, the attractiveness of BRICS should be taken seriously. However, it is necessary to identify the underlying conceptual problems and

show the contradicting outcomes. Considering the similarities between BRICS and non-BRICS economies regarding political institutions, demographic differences, and rates of economic growth and inequality the BRICS economies manifest stark internal differences to the extent that the biggest strength of BRICS appears to be its acronym (Sparks, 2015: 65).

It comes as no surprise that so-called 'developing states', with greater economic leverage having been humiliated for decades, are pushing back in attempting to gain a greater foothold in setting the terms of global 'financial architecture' outside of the Bretton Woods institutions of the World Bank and IMF (Biswas, 2015). So it is important to pause and make sense of the allure that happens at the backdrop of telecommunication industry strategy.

It is telling that the BRICS Development Bank and the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are meant to 'complement' rather than compete with each other in funding crucial infrastructural projects. BRICS policies contest hegemonic structures of cyberspace on a discursive level. Moreover, the many debates about joint Chinese–Russian UN proposals, as those against the Indian, Brazilian and South African (IBSA) visions, reflect clear geopolitical differences in areas of the Internet governance and cybersecurity. The battle over the Internet infrastructure is also attested by the *Internet Roundtable for Emerging Countries* in Beijing 2012, the *World Conference on International Telecom* in Dubai in 2012 and the *NetMundial* in Sao Paulo 2014. After requests via the existing channels were systematically blocked, they now express critique against US dictates regarding the Internet protocols and the general telecom logic in their own conferences. BRICS' concern for the Internet signifies how closely related imperialism, technological infrastructure and regional Inter-Asian connections are, this correlation is central to our argument. We will therefore take a closer look at this geographic, political economic and technological triangle.

The BRICS understand well that the ICT infrastructures are a lifeline because it is a necessity for sovereign capitalist accumulation, more than the desire to diversify cultural production. Prominent in the debate about techno-infrastructures is the BRICS plan for an alternative cable system with which to challenge US centric networks that is potentially both cheaper and promises to be more secure.<sup>11</sup> This cable is the most media hyped example of the BRICS desires to go straight into the heart of the matter and circumvent the existing imperial infrastructures. It was supposed to start in 2014 but was delayed and finally aborted. The silence and secrecy around it suggests internal conflicts and possible US pressure, and eventually, what began as a BRICS cable resurfaced as a Brazilian cable (connected via Portugal). The bitter irony is that this fibre optic cable system is mainly geared to increase access to BRICS economies (Zhao, 2015: 72). In other words, to benefit the BRICS corporations *already* embedded in a US-led global economy.

A multilayered approach that brings domestic resistance, regional geopolitics and global imperialism together helps unearth this intricate relation between 'development', technology and capitalism. We will then understand how exploitation and inequality are rooted both in general capitalist modes and systems and their 'local' social relations. It is much more difficult to shed light on these dialectics because a BRICS type bipolar view obscures the Inter-Asian (East-South/South-South) dynamics. An uncritical approach, wedged to the symbolic values of BRICS, in fact constrains media scholars to see these

conflicting realities and thus to acknowledge that rivalries are both indigenous and grafted by geopolitical interventions (Major and Miller, 2004: 8–12).

As global media and communication remains embedded in liberal western discourses of individual freedom, the increasing importance of China and India are no doubt interesting venues for further critical analysis. But instead of mapping the growth of new telecom and information technology (IT) billionaires across China and India, it is surely of more analytic value to consider their mutual relationship to unprecedented conditions of inequality across both nations. Similarly, we might wish to pay more attention to the reconfiguration of regional alliances by looking at China and India in relation to United States and Western interests in the Middle East and Africa. In this regard, the technological poster boy, India is *also* the world's largest importer of arms. This must be understood, among others, as part of its closer cooperation with Israeli cyber warfare technology and close cooperation between India and the United States around counterterrorism. These cooperative arrangements have been engineered around motives that have very little to do with challenging United States and Western power and often contradict BRICS loyalties.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, they serve the translocal financial interests with the highest revenues. Similarly, China's ventures in Africa are driven less by South-South solidarity as opposed to the promise of untapped markets and resource extraction (Hall, 2011). It could be argued that this rise of capitalist de-westernisation by 'the rest' is something to be cheered. Rather than cheerleading powerful states, our aim is to unmask the covert structures of dominance and exploitation undermining the possibility of justice and equality. Although blithely obfuscated by the focus on *difference*, we show the *similarities* between large and small imperial powers.

BRICS captures the imagination of millions because of the power of wishful thinking, and it keeps the dreams alive by conveniently alluding to the legacies of Bandung. But the fact it is re-emerging, in the debate about alternative ICT infrastructures and some sort of international solidarity, is *precisely* why it deserves critique. These complexities should raise alarm not pride. As observed most clearly since 2011, the alliances with local dictators against popular struggles are often bargaining chips for power struggles aiming first and foremost for regional control. These juxtapositions exemplify the paradoxes that this special issue investigates. Within the larger global counter-hegemonic blocks, there are other blocks and competitions reflecting a world framed by what we might consider intra-imperial struggles.

Control of technological infrastructures on a global/international scale is intimately connected to imperial material domination. A focus on material infrastructures in the study of media and communications raises immediate questions about possible alternatives. On the one hand, there are tangible dependencies, partly due to US-based and owned corporations, and thus the ease of interception of data that come from data storage on US soil. On the other hand, these dependencies are maintained by potential military retributions against any challenge to existing geographic equilibrium. Inasmuch as the rhetoric surrounding BRICS is discursively empowering, there is little evidence of either a NWICO 2.0 or a 'non-alignment 2.0' (Khilnani et al., 2012).

In these times of extraordinary crisis there is a banality of binaries found in the language of west/non-west ownership. There is a reason why the *Silk Road 2.0* – also an

alternative infrastructure led by powerful BRICS member China – has not once mentioned Palestine despite it being the most convenient route connecting the region to Europe. The motive is not solidarity but self-interest as we have discussed above. But this is not the complete story, there is also another factor that produces such judgements, these contexts signify ‘instability’, which is often a code for those dynamics of resistance. We therefore consider unsurprisingly that such grassroots defiance – rhetorically deeming the region ‘unstable’ – are often found unsuitable for certain infrastructures. *Tamed* inhabitants and *manageable* geographies (stability) are in other words the prerequisite for the production and distribution, and thus accumulation, of capital.

BRICS is a label born from the fantasies of one of the worst offenders in the banking sector who co-caused the financial crash of 2008. In the end, BRICS does what it was called for when it was a crafted as a Goldman Sachs label. It was meant as an ideological instrument (hoping that fast-growing brown capitalist entities will form a civilized front) in the midst of the 9/11 momentum to benefit the war on terror. It neatly fits the triumphant *end of history* projections following the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The redrawing of a new *world order* celebrated the birth of a post-ideological geopolitics with the invasion of Iraq in 1991 during which the remnants of the non-aligned nations were subsumed in market liberalism.

But it is beyond the subversive language of ‘non-western’ BRICS and *within* its own localities that we perceive the actual alternatives, in the brave networks of local, regional as well as global activists, scholars, hackers and journalists who play an important role in challenging hegemonic infrastructures.

## Looking forward

This themed section features scholarship that focuses on new manifestations of rebellion and resistance in the Inter-Asian context. The articles expand on some of the themes outlined above. In ‘Crypto and Empire’, Gürses, Van Hoboken and Kundnani examine the counter-surveillance movement in response to the Edward Snowden revelations. They focus on how the abstractions of balancing privacy and security in the digital age ignore the linkages between surveillance, deeply held notions of racial supremacy and empire. National security surveillance is bound up with processes of racialization involving flawed notions of ‘radicalization’ of ‘suspect populations’. Much of the counter-hegemonic encryption in response to mass surveillance efforts are not neutral but shaped by the political economic conditions in which they are imagined and developed, and therefore, sometimes counter-surveillance technologies are aligned with ‘national security’ interests.

As discussed earlier, a legacy of postcolonial state-control shared across all polities in this region continues alongside the relatively new wave of protests, but growing influence of transnational corporate media and technology firms is shaping the design and use of media and information technologies for surveillance and propaganda. In the second paper ‘Google in China’, ShinJoung Yeo focuses on the case of Google and its emerging US-based Internet Empire. She exposes how a rationale of the nation state misreads the larger impact of Google’s relationship to China and the geographical expansionism of the Internet markets.

The crisis of capitalism and the dictates of empire overlap more than ever as seen by the manipulation and control of citizens and consumers in the wake of mass protests across the region. Ergin Bulut examines the case of Erdogan's Turkey. To this point, Ergin Bulut examines the crucial case of Turkey following the Gezi Uprisings of 2013 and explores the ways in which infrastructures of empire are manipulated for the benefit of new Inter-Asian alliances and long-established 20th century rivalries. Bulut maps the shifting terrain between social media companies (specifically Facebook) and the nation state under the increasingly restrictive policies of the Erdogan administration, initially hailed as a 'role model' of Middle Eastern democracy. As activists effectively used social media for protest, countries such as Turkey have begun to think about legalizing the Internet censorship – calling it *regulation*. It urged social media companies to open offices in the country for more 'collaboration'. The social media giant Facebook shut down several pages of activists, Kurdish oppositional party and politicians. Moreover, the ways in which Facebook's terms of service are most of the time interpreted along the lines of the state rather than activists or oppositional groups.

The case of Turkey speaks to the rise of regional powers and the paradoxical global competition developing simultaneously *between* and *within* intra-imperial struggles. This brings us to our final piece. Jack Linchuan Qiu develops his theory of working-class network society in the world's factory of China. His article examines how infrastructures of surveillance and accumulation have been 'cumulatively' contested by distinct generations of emergent working-class social media activists. This piece brings to light the complex political imaginaries and negotiations that shape the terms of resistance in China, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings of 2011. It is precisely because empires and dictators neither enjoy the full hegemony of the peoples' will nor are able to exercise total violent suppression of the peoples' demand that there is need for counter-revolutionary strategies.

Our modest intervention aims to spark new conversations about the centrality of empire to our understandings of media and information technologies. Beyond initiating new research interest, we wonder if renewed interest in the centrality of colonial violence and empire might also force larger disciplinary discussions that have yet to take place about *our* ethical responsibilities in these fields. And in so doing, that we might within our scholarly associations and elsewhere join our colleagues in related fields in taking up principled stances in support of contemporary collective struggles for freedom. We are reminded of feminist theorist Neferti Tadiar's invocation on the significance of a politics against empire, in this case the call across a number of disciplines (from American Studies and Asian American Studies to Anthropology and growing) for the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) of Israel. In a plenary address at our initial workshop on the infrastructures of empire that was held in April 2014, Tadiar argued,

The organizing of U.S. and international solidarity campaigns with the BDS Palestinian movement, including the very campaigns for academic and cultural boycott fueling the debates about academic freedom, provides an important, though by no means the only, example of the way principles of social association ... are operating within the symbolic-communicative work of struggle. In these campaigns, people align themselves politically as a matter of experiential attributes (of colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia) that make them connect, through

communicative modes (speech, writing, gesture) bearing the affective and cognitive charges created in defiance and resistance against shared as well as connected forms of violence. (Tadiar, 2014)<sup>13</sup>

As we finish writing, the drums of war are again deafening in the wake of the Paris attacks of November 2015. Mediated spectacle and affect responding to the brutality of the Paris attacks by Daesh (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)) brings to light the invisibility of the endless violence and tragedy of the US-led War on Terror across the Middle East and South Asia. Building on the themes above, in the postscript, Gholam Khiabany addresses how we might rethink solidarity efforts to redress the racism against refugees who are forcedly displaced and today have come knocking on the borders of empire.

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### Notes

1. In fact, Manuel Castells, author of one of the most influential books on the 2011 social movements (*Networks of Power and Outrage*) was awarded the Ithiel de Sola Pool Award by the American Political Science Association in 2013. Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983), author of *Technologies of Freedom*, was an influential Cold War media modernization expert promoting the benefits of commercial media technologies in instilling liberal democratic and market aspirations across the Third World. For more see Mattelart (1994).
2. An exhaustive review of this scholarship is beyond the scope of this article. Some of the most influential and directly relevant work for scholars of media, information and US Empire include the following: Kaplan and Pease (1993); Khalili (2012); Grandin (2006); Gardner and Young (2005); Martin (2007); McCoy (2007, 2009); Mitchell (2011); Vitalis (2007).
3. These notable exceptions include work by Mattelart (1994) and Boyd-Barrett (1977), who have both been active in these debates since the 1970s, as well as newer works by Winseck and Pike (2007), Boyd-Barrett (2014), Chakravartty and Da Silva (2012), Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009), Hills (2007), Freedman and Thussu (2011) and Kumar (2012).
4. Many of these works such as Deborah Jaramillo's (2009) *Ugly War*, *Pretty Package* and Lance Bennett et. al.'s (2008) *When the Press Fails*, and others by journalists covering the war remain important in archiving the collusion between military and corporate/media interests in the United States with the assumption that an informed public would contest US military interventions in Iraq and elsewhere. However, few of these works locate their critiques within the longer history of US settler colonialism or imperial interventions nor do most of these works engage with debates about empire conceptually.
5. The bombardments in Iraq, Morocco, Libya and Syria were unprecedented in their deadly force and therefore served as crucial laboratories of later military technology.
6. The exception to the absence of focus on geopolitics in the information studies fields is found in the security studies focused scholarship on 'cyber warfare' within mainstream North American political science in works by Ronald Deibert (2013).
7. Greg Grandin critiques popular technology writer Evgeny Morozov's essay in the *New Yorker* on Cybersyn that covers similar ground to Eden Medina's (2014) book *Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile*.

8. See Boyd-Barrett (1977), Mattelart (1994), Nordenstreng (1984), Nordenstreng and Schiller (1979) and Schiller (1993).
9. This argument is developed in greater detail in Alhassan and Chakravartty (2011).
10. For more on Modi's visit to Silicon Valley in September 2015 see the following: <http://www.siliconbeat.com/2015/09/24/googles-sundar-pichai-and-silicon-valley-welcome-indias-pm-modi/>; <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/9/27/indian-leader-narendra-modi-faces-disillusioned-supporters-on-us-visit.html>
11. See <http://oldephartte.blogspot.com/2013/09/21-sept-blogs-im-following.html>; <http://research.dyn.com/2014/07/brazil-winning-internet/>; <https://chintanclub.wordpress.com/2013/07/17/internet-security-oxymoron/>
12. India and China growing rivalry. Ian Brenner Time, 16 February 2015 (page 6/briefing).
13. Tadiar N (2014) Dead exchanges and the potentials and possibilities of anti-imperialism today. In: *Plenary address at workshop on infrastructures of empire*, 26 April. New York: New York University and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Available at: [https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn1/crmuploads/new\\_event\\_3/{2B644D55-E5C0-E311-93FD-005056AB3675}.jpg](https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn1/crmuploads/new_event_3/{2B644D55-E5C0-E311-93FD-005056AB3675}.jpg)

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