Pathogens, Precarity, and Digital Politics of Exclusion

Radha Sarma Hegde

New York University
radha.hegde@nyu.edu

Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged communities and exposed the inadequacies of social and political infrastructures. The flight of the virus and protocols of shelter have reopened the question of how digital infrastructures are complicit with processes of precaritization and elide bodies already at risk. This essay discusses the need to locate the study of media and technology in the materialities of the precaritized body in order to theorize the politics of systemic exclusion.

Keywords

pandemic, infrastructure, precarity, exclusion, elision

The flight of a virus and its ability to jump species have ravaged communities and redefined the world. Along its necropolitical trail, the virus has repeatedly exposed the inadequacies of social and political infrastructures and brought a heightened awareness of living with other life forms and pathogens that mutate and cross borders. In the name of safety, global publics are being surveilled and tracked through digital modes of mediation, while at the same time, basic services are denied or foreclosed to many due to lack of digital access. Without systemic protection and safety nets in place for marginalized communities, bodies are being deemed expendable or remain uncounted or unrecognized. While precarity has largely been associated with the uncertainty and risk that comes with the flexible reorganization of work (Standing 2011), it also extends beyond the world of work to encompass other forms of intersubjective life (Neilson and

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Rossiter 2005). Most relevant to this essay is Judith Butler's view that precarity is dependent upon "the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence and absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions" (Butler quoted in Puar 2012, 170). The pandemic moment has reopened the question of how informational logics and technologies of connectivity are complicit with systems and processes of precaritization whose local particularities are embedded within broader political and economic circuits.

The pandemic, among other things, has shown how technologies of connectivity and digital infrastructures, both in their presence and absence, have accommodated, extended, and accelerated social systems of exclusion. The goal of theorizing an intersectional internet, according to Safiya Noble (2016), is "to heighten awareness of how global communications infrastructure is not just a site of communications affordance, nor is it made equally and equitably available to all people." The neoliberal view, however, has been to largely downplay or even ignore interlocking global structures of oppression and regard the emergence of a precariat class as an independent or individual problem, unrelated to systemic or infrastructural concerns. The stable instability of precarity, according to David Kergel and Birte Heidkamp (2019), is defined both through and within digital media. Digitality has also effectively enabled the incorporation of precarious life within the circuits of global capitalism (Duffield 2019). To certain segments of the population, the pandemic has in fact made the everyday experience of living filled with risk and violence. Across geographies, the coronavirus crisis has shown that the volatility of precarious life is tied to a technologized, insular, and untenable vision of the individual and the social.

Insularity and Perturbations

"Pivot to survive" is the mantra that institutions have been chanting in order to stay afloat and weather the economic fallout of the pandemic. Prompted by the confidence in the power of technology, there is an expectation of smooth continuity with no jerky interruptions during the transition from our pre-pandemic life to the contactless present. The intense digitality of the moment requires individual bodies and things to find ways to be visible and circulate swiftly through virtual pathways to function and survive. The feasibility of these transitions rests on assumptions that include safe and available domestic spaces, access to technologies, technical know-how, and the bandwidth available for internet access. This fresh iteration of the well-established trope of neoliberal individuation facilitates the solidification of remote forms of control, surveillance, and deep social divisions. The required isolation and social insularity during the pandemic are, in actuality, embedded within hierarchically arranged, interdependent, and intersecting social systems and networks. Racialized capitalism sustains a continuing amnesia about longer trajectories of inequity and violence. Modes of managing the pandemic strategically fold these legacies into newer forms of oppressive datafication. Diverse vulnerable communities are

placed in impossible situations where all systems—social, political, and medical—contribute to and authorize their precarity.

Perturbations or external disturbances to biological systems are accommodated in a readjustment to maintain a state of equilibrium. When social and political systems adapt to make accommodations for volatilities, it is, more often than not, a rush to solve the immediate glitch and restore the illusion of equilibrium. These fixes enable some actors within the system to keep moving and circulating while others are blocked, trapped, immobilized, or suspended in limbo. In more than one context, the pandemic has revealed the extent to which inequities defined along the lines of race, class, and gender are woven into the social infrastructure. In the struggles of the moment, we see particular bodies confined in their precarity and subject to intense surveillance. Infrastructures, as AbdouMalik Simone (2015) astutely notes, always seem to promise something, and so often it seems as if it is a promise intended to be broken. In the current scenario, certain bodies held in impossible situations of precarity seem to be made available for contagion. While this staggering failure of the social system might reflect an overload or an exigency, it also emerges as a constitutive condition of racialized and networked capitalism.

Traveling globally at breakneck speed and conjoining species, the zoonotic pathogen COVID-19 has attached the course of the pandemic to a trail of other already existing social crises. From the start of the pandemic, scanning the journey of the virus through digital maps and dashboards flickering with global information has become a daily media ritual. The manner in which the virus descended and attacked bodies set off different alarms about dysfunctional and failing social systems worldwide. With the policing of borders and populations, the dislocation, subjection, confinement, and exposure experienced by precariously positioned populations have been progressively escalated by data-driven infrastructures. The global flight of the virus and protocols of shelter served as provocation for this brief multi-sited reflection on how digital infrastructures and systems elide bodies already at risk.

Figure 1. Belonging. Photo credit: Radha S. Hegde

Dislocation

On a park bench in San Diego at the start of the pandemic, I chanced on a cart filled with belongings that stood out like an installation exploding the notion of stability and shelter. While directives to quarantine have led to fetishizing the safety and security of the home, to the unhoused, protocols of shelter-in-place and social distancing are mostly impossible to observe. Without a coordinated federal response to the crisis, cities in the United States struggle to come up with temporary measures of finding shelter for the unhoused during the pandemic. The relocation of the unhoused to densely packed shelters have further exposed them to the virus. In other instances, the relocation of some unhoused persons to vacant hotels have led to angry opposition by local residents claiming via social media that their quality of life was being compromised by the newcomers to the neighborhood (Slotnik 2020). Considered as matter out of place, to use the words of Mary Douglas (1966), the unhoused are living evidence of the failure of governance, but are almost always recast as symbols of individual failure.

During the pandemic, the lack of internet access for vulnerable communities has posed catastrophic problems. Families scrambled to get unstable wireless hotspots to access school work, medical help, and other basic services (Shapiro 2020). While unhoused populations have limited or no access to the internet, there are concerted efforts by the state to integrate the unhoused into the digital ecosystem. Cities are increasingly trying to create data-driven service systems for the unhoused with the aim of helping them obtain different types of services, but even more to create a data profile to aggregate their histories, which can then be accessed through an application (Bendix 2018). This is an example of the state partnering with the private sector to make segments of the population legible for surveillance and available for identification, verification, and management of their mobility. Many believe these measures will outlast the pandemic and become part of a networked surveillance regime. While their bodies are mostly illegible to the system, the unhoused are rendered available for the generation of data. Digital technology regulates through its structures and ensnares through its strictures.

Subjection

The subject of gender violence during the pandemic presents another site to defamiliarize the meaning of home and shelter. In the enclosed spaces of the home, the subject, subjection, and the systemically reproduced architecture of gendered hierarchies are conjoined. It is here in the repetitiousness of the everyday that the disciplinary apparatus of control fixes the gendered body. During the pandemic there has been a global spike in the number of domestic violence cases. The stress of being confined in the home with one's abuser in a volatile context coupled with limited access to support has made sheltering in place oppressive and unbearable. The surge in domestic violence has led UN Women (2020) to call it a shadow pandemic, another already existing crisis exacerbated by the very measures prescribed as protection from the virus. The home, and the very realm of the personal, becomes the space of confinement and violence. Global data reveals that calls to helplines have increased in various parts of the world, and quarantining at home compounds the perpetrator's use of mechanisms of power and control to isolate and endanger women (Vaeza 2020). Gender equality has become another casualty of the coronavirus (Pollitt 2021).

Cutting off connections and surveilling communication has always been the main strategy of abusers to isolate women from their support systems. During the past year, I have heard several immigrant rights activists talk about the centrality of the digital in recent cases of domestic violence. Access to the internet and the possession of smartphones are crucial to be able to reach hotlines, counselors, and the police when necessary. Technology, however, both supports and disrupts the systemic inequality and injustice that frames this abuse. Today, partner violence has taken a digital turn and is now about gaining access to devices, cracking passwords, monitoring text messages, reading email, and tracking internet histories and app purchases. The latest security devices and smart

technologies are the new tools and accessories of abuse and surveillance, highlighting the fact that partner and family violence, like the virus, cuts across class lines. Immigration status and dependence on male partners for visa status is another aspect of the digital tracking narrative in these conditions of violence. Abusers are able to wrest power from their victims by manipulating devices. Immigrant women in these scenarios are often cut off from their extended families and transnational support systems. Bodies and biographies are made available for digital scrutiny without the consent or even knowledge of the individual being tracked.

Violence wreaks pain and exacts consequences on vulnerable bodies. Technologies slide from their originally intended banal functions and are repurposed to be instruments of abuse. Ironically, these contradictions are accommodated within the design of these technologies. Ultimately, digital computational systems reinforce and support the perpetuation and tightening of the heteropatriarchal system and its set gendered hierarchies.

Breakdowns and Reset

Words such as *tinderbox*, *time bomb*, *powder keg*, and *minefield* appear often in accounts of crises, typically in reference to already displaced or dispossessed populations. However, this discourse of embedded crises normalizes the overall situation and discounts systemic failures and histories of oppression. A linear notion of crisis as an exceptional eruption deflects attention from the entangled and systemic structures of exclusion. Joseph Masco's powerful argument resonates in the current context that crisis talk seeks "to stabilize an institution, practice or reality rather than interrogate the historical conditions of possibility for that endangerment to occur" (2016, S73). The recent focus on the restoration of the normal, reinforced by the solutionism of technology, further consolidates the status quo and the conditions that ironically contributed to the cascading nature of the crisis.

When it comes to infrastructures, according to Simone (2015), volatility seems to be a default position. He argues that infrastructure is always built upon turbulence, which, while it may be constrained, is always there. While the pandemic has shifted some lives to screens and platforms, it has also interminably extended the state of precarity globally and at different scales. For migrants and refugees in camps, everyday life is about navigating these volatilities in a state of limbo or statelessness. For many in the world, especially in the Global South, breakdown, whether social or digital, is the default position for the systems that both envelop and bypass them. For communities defined by elisions, erasures, and eviction, digital access, internet blackouts, and cellular restrictions are the latest incarnations of state control. Consider, for example, the experiences of Rohingya refugees who were completely cut off from all information about the pandemic due to an internet blackout in the refugee camps imposed by

Bangladesh authorities (Grey 2020). Cutting off or slowing down access to the internet has become a common governmental strategy, especially in South Asia, to silence and discipline groups, allegedly in the name of national security. Information darkness and the stripping away of digital infrastructure are the new forms of political violence that are being inflicted on the precariat.

Precarity in the contemporary context, according to Mark Duffield (2019), represents an expanding lifeworld that exists at the interface between the economy and disaster. However, this interface cannot be universalized or exceptionalized, and I am, by no means, making a case for a common narrative of victimization. These contexts reveal that the violence of dislocation, confinement, and surveillance are enmeshed within mediated regimes and infrastructures of control. According to Lauren Berlant (quoted in Puar 2012), the situation of precarity is the situation of relationality itself, insofar as our dependencies are vulnerabilities. This argument leads her to ask what it means that for so many the labor of reproducing life itself exhausts the body (Puar 2012, 171). This question has gained even more urgency in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when digital modalities of discipline and regulation of populations that have been set into motion.

As I write this piece in spring 2021, India has become the latest epicenter of the pandemic, accounting for nearly half the coronavirus cases reported worldwide (Mehta 2021). People are scouring social media sites searching for oxygen, ventilators, hospital beds, and even crematoriums. In response to the failure of the government, Indian citizens are forming activist networks via social media to provide support (Raj 2021). As the public struggles to crowdsource health support, the Indian government is at work ordering Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to take down posts that are critical of the state's mishandling of the crisis. The corporate interests of the information and technology sector are fully imbricated in all these actions. Biology and technology are completely entangled in the exhaustion, depletion, and sustenance of life.

This current moment of mediated reorganization presents an opportunity for critical media scholars to view social and technological systems from the perspective of those who are digitally bypassed, tracked, or manipulated. Looking at digital infrastructure from these critical locations offers an alternative space from which to understand the dynamic intersectionalities that shape processes of precaritization. Virginia Eubanks (2015) notes that we all inhabit this new regime of digital data, but we don't all experience it in the same way. One could also say we inhabit differing regimes of data whose technologized logics override, bypass, or block bodies from circulating, surviving, or participating in public life. Data-driven technologies serve as conduits for the distribution of power structures and reinforce complex existing hierarchies. The speed, reach, and mobility of the virus mimics, or perhaps parodies, the flight of capital, but at the same time, the virus

strips the covers off outmoded systems that fail communities. Achille Mbembe writes poignantly: "Try as we might to rid ourselves of it, in the end everything brings us back to the body. We tried to graft it onto other media, to turn it into an object body, a machine body, a digital body, an ontophanic body." (2021, S59). The havoc wreaked by this new pathogen is an urgent reminder to locate the study of media and technology in the materialities of the precaritized body in order to theorize the politics of exclusion and the growing complicity of sociotechnical systems.

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Author Bio

Radha Sarma Hegde is professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University.