Mutations of the interior: The political in the new media regime

Jenson Joseph

ABSTRACT
The article uses the controversy around the March 2018 cover of the conservative Malayalam magazine Grihalakshmi to reflect on the implications of the collapse of the earlier distinctions between the public and the private. Though the magazine cover comes from the field of print media, representing the values and traditions of the old media regime, I argue that it can be understood as a response to the processes through which popular practices of the internet and social media have destabilized the coherence around the notions of the public, the private and the political that we have come to take for granted. I propose that we could try to make sense of the contemporary by relying on theoretical frameworks that engage with two ongoing processes: a) new media’s popularity, and b) the post-industrial economy’s expansion into the domains previously considered as reproductive and/or unproductive.

No one in Kerala would have expected the popular conservative women’s magazine Grihalakshmi to do anything deviating from its staple business of catering to its constituency of demure home-bound readers until March 2018 when a cover photo of one of its issues created a storm in the region. The cover featured a model posing as breast-feeding a baby without covering her breasts fully, instead throwing a loaded look straight at the reader, while the accompanying caption read: ‘Mothers tell Kerala: don’t stare; we need to breastfeed’ (See Image 1). Straying from the routine of the region’s mainstream women’s/home magazines featuring adorned savarna women posing well within the frames of conventional morality on the cover, Grihalakshmi’s unanticipated brazenness led to intense debates online. Did the cover suggest any real intent on the part of the magazine to respond meaningfully to the demands for addressing the real issues of women in the region? Or was it merely an attempt to commercialise the slogans of progressive politics, given its sensational texture? Can we consider the imagery, symbolism, and the message in the photo as politically progressive and as avowable from a feminist point of view? These were some of the questions which were raised prominently in the debate that ensued.¹ The dust settled on the controversy only months later when the Kerala High Court, in June 2018, rejected a charge of obscenity against the magazine saying, ‘obscenity lies in the eyes of the beholder’.

CONTACT Jenson Joseph  jenzenjosef@gmail.com Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt University of Berlin, Invalidenstraße 118, Berlin, 10115, Germany

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For researchers of media and gender, this offers an occasion to think about the new patterns in popular media practices, the emerging new media ecology which effects a mutation of the categories of ‘the private’, ‘the public’ and ‘the political’, as well as the centrality of the motif of gender to these themes. Because, if we try identifying the key impulses evident in the magazine’s gesture, we can pick out a few themes. To begin with, here we see one of the prominent publication houses in the region reconfiguring its customary address to a readership segment which it had come to conserve as feminine and as not-to-be-politicized, in what appears to be an attempt to respond to changing notions about the feminine, the private and the political. Like in most parts of the world, home/women’s magazines in Kerala too have come to sustain their niche readership successfully by adopting the editorial policy that their content will stay clear of discussions on politics and public matters. This editorial policy simultaneously constructs as well as monetises the separation of content into the two broad categories, namely ‘the pro-political/public’ and ‘the non-political/domestic/private’. After all, it is this partitioning that has sustained the marketing logic of Mathrubhoomi Publications, Grihalakshmi’s parent publishing company, bringing it out by targeting women readers, while projecting its own Mathrubhoomi Weekly as meant for discussions on public matters and literature – much like its rival Malayala Manorama has dedicated publications for women readers (the glossy Vanitha and the pulpy Manorama Weekly) and for discussions on literature and public issues (Bhashaposhini). Against this context, the brazen ‘public-political’ address in Grihalakshmi’s March 2018 cover is striking because it announces an intend to let go of its longstanding core marketing mantra, ‘we are a home magazine; we don’t do politics’, as though the old market rationalisation has lost its purchase. It may be pertinent to ask, what prompted a hitherto ‘non-political’ home
movie magazine to abandon the meticulous division of content into matters of the public and the private – it’s very raison d’être? By extension, we could ask, what about the contemporary renders porous the old division between the public and the private that sustained the particular mode of organising politics and life until recently? We will come back to these questions.

Secondly, the cover also hints at the unsettling of the naturalised ties between the categories of the political and the public, while the domain of the private seems to emerge as the new stage for the performing of the political. I shall try to foreground this aspect by pondering over the reversed gaze in the cover photo which many commentators identified as particularly striking. Yet, it is not simply the stare at the camera which the model Gillu Joseph, posing as the breast-feeding mother, throws at the onlooker that is politically charged and unapologetic about the cover. The primary intention of the stare is not to preempt objectification, which in fact the cover as well as the model are assertively fine with. What gives it a political shade is the unsettling of the normative links between the political and public as such. If the key rationale offered for keeping the domains of the feminine and the private as not-to-be-politicised is the identification of the sphere of the public as appropriate for the staging of the political, the cover photo performs a reversal of this logic. The gaze situates itself in the domain of the private/the domestic/the intimate and is directed at the intruding public eye which is unmistakably rendered as perverse and uncivil. This reversal inverts the hierarchy implied in the gendering of the public as masculine, which originally signified its elevated status vis-a-vis the domain of the feminine-private but is now called out as a corrupting factor denoting decay. Effectively, the political is plucked out of the established equation (i.e. ‘the political pertains to the domain of the public, gendered as masculine’) and is now aligned with the feminine, the private and the domestic. (From now on, I shall refer to the latter set of categories with the term ‘the interior’.)

There are good reasons to argue that this reversal gestured in the Grihalakshmi cover merely mimics the feminist political position which has evolved a full-fledged critique of the dominant public sphere and its masculine foundations. After all, central to the feminist critique of the public sphere is the problematisation of the logic by which the interior is preserved as closed to reform, modernisation and politicisation. For example, the feminist critique implicates media institutions for monetising from the sustenance of the status quo by carrying out the role of guarding the boundaries between the domains of the public and the private. Thus, the feminist political position would expect Grihalakshmi to reform its editorial policy, revamp its content and start addressing its readership politically. In contrast, the controversial cover in question bypasses these political demands for reform, instead resorting to a re-signification of the political by dissociating it from ‘the masculine public sphere’ and by aligning it with the interior, as though they belong together organically.

**The public gaze as perverse**

It is important, I propose, that we try to understand what this reversal means, considering how the classical conception of the individual as political subject has relied on the rather neat separation between the domains of the public and the private. In his
reflection on the window as the threshold that secures the distinction between the public and the private, Thomas Keenan sums up how the classical notion about the political subject is conceived:

The window implies a theory of the human subject as a theory of politics, and the subject’s variable status as public or private individual is defined by its position relative to this window. Behind it, in the privacy of home or office, the subject observes that public framed for it by the window’s rectangle, looks out and understands prior to passing across the line it marks—the window is this possibility of permeability— into the public. Behind it, the individual is a knowing—that is, seeing, theorizing—subject. In front of it, on the street, for instance, the subject assumes public rights and responsibilities, appears, acts, intervenes in the sphere it shares with other subjects. (132)

Keenan complicates this formulation in which the distinction between the public and the private is taken to be rather neat, pointing out that the mediating role of the window is more complicated. The window, he reminds us, facilitates the coming through of light from the outside, rendering the interior domains of the subject vulnerable to ‘the glare of publicity’. What passes through the window, according to Keenan, is the light of publicity – ‘the utterly nonhuman or nonsubjective, always already at work “within” us’ (134) – binding us to the other, much like when we use language. Keenan argues that this breaching of publicity from outside is foundational both to politics as well as to interiority:

Publicity tears us from our selves, exposes us to and involves us with others, denies us the security of that window behind which we might install ourselves to gaze. (...) [But] publicity does not befall what is properly private, contaminating or opening up an otherwise sealed interiority. Rather, what we call interiority is itself the mark or the trace of this breach, of a violence that in turn makes possible the violence or the love we experience as intersubjectivity. We would have no relation to others, no terror and no peace, certainly no politics, without this (de)constitutive interruption. (133-4)

There are good reasons to believe that the Grihalakshmi cover hints at the waning of this regime of the political subject founded on the distinction between the private and the public mediated by the window in its role, either as the threshold that allows the individual subject’s gaze to pass through to the public by securing the latter’s interiority (as in the classical conception), or as that opening through which publicity breaches in from a domain extrinsic to us, which in turn produces our interiority as well as the conditions for politics (as Keenan proposes in his reworking of the classical notion). For it is evident that the magazine’s manoeuvring is based on the realisation that a realignment of the established associations between the public, the private and the political we discussed earlier has a purchase in the contemporary. The shift in the magazine’s set practices of market rationalisation comes in the light of the popularity of a new configuration in which the interior can now host the political organically.

The gaze we see on the cover photo does not represent the private individual subject surveying the public domain from one’s secured interiority, nor does it foreground the frame or the window as the threshold between the two domains on the inside and the outside. Rather, it points towards a collapsing of the mediating frame as such, calling for new frameworks to think about the public and the private, as well as the political in relation to them. The cover, by identifying the public gaze as perverse and pornographic, strips the public of its claim to be the natural/normative political domain, effectively pre-
empting the latter’s legitimacy to breach in from the outside and to constitute interiority. Publicity’s inward gaze must return, or must be blocked, but this is not achieved by installing oneself in one’s guarded privacy; rather, the private is rendered already public and political. The political energy implicit in the cover photo represents the desire to castrate the public’s breaching gaze through a gesture of the smashing of the window as the mediating threshold, effectively collapsing the public and the private, the outside and the interior. In other words, the public gaze’s ability to constitute interiority is achieved through a pre-emptive act of letting go of the thresholds that previously secured the domain of the interior. I argue that we must understand this reconfiguration as part of the long history of twentieth century interventions into the biological body through which new value is being attributed to the private, the feminine, the intimate as well as the domestic – domains which were previously categorised as unproductive or not-to-be-mobilised. It is our task to historicise this shift, as well as its implications for progressive politics.

Three challenges emerge in front of us. How do we derive theoretical sense of the changing patterns of dominant media practices today in ways that throw light on the social, cultural and political processes underway? How can we make our theorisations respond adequately to the radically mutated notions about the public, the private and the political – categories the coherence of which we have come to take for granted? Finally, how do we conceive of progressive politics in meaningful ways at a time when the market shows an eagerness to co-opt and monetise the slogans and imperatives of the political? Keeping these questions in mind, this article will use the occasion to generate an account about the contemporary, by mobilising theoretical frameworks that can help us understand the historicity we inhabit today as well as the broader social processes producing the shifts we outlined above. Such an enquiry can be taken up at different levels, but my attempt will be limited to exploring it primarily from the vantage point of media studies, while striving towards a general conceptual account of the contemporary within which such an exploration can be situated. In what follows, I shall chart a heavily condensed history of two notions of the private – vis-à-vis the category of the public-political – that were operational in our cultural imaginary until recently, and the corresponding media regime that these conceptions put in place. In the concluding section, I shall propose three considerations that might help us derive frameworks for historicising the contemporary, namely, the expanding dominance of the logic of neoliberal ideology, the new media regime, and the changed nature of labour in the post-industrial society. Though I anchor my narrative within the contexts of Kerala, the arguments that I make are meant to be of broader currency.

**The media regime until recently: A brief appraisal**

Dominant media practices as well as the state policies regarding the content and circulation of media in India take their forms directly in relation to policing the boundaries of the public and the private, or between the political and the interior. Until recent decades, we have come to conceive the breadth and boundaries of politicisation of our world primarily through modalities of translating them into spatial terms: we designated physical spaces where politicisation is warranted and sought, while trying to preserve certain others as spaces that should rather be kept away from it. This history
compresses the decades-long history of conceiving politicization from the vantage point of its boundaries – a mode that reflected on our relation to media and the corresponding predominant aesthetic forms, until the 1980s/90s.

Historians of media in India have pointed out that the early entrepreneurs of media technologies in India like the print, photography and cinema brought a political edge to their practices even when they did not mean to put them to political use in a conscious way. This was partially the result of colonial rulers (and later, the nationalist elite) struggling to comprehend the peculiar modes in which media forms were put to popular use, deviating majorly from normative ideas about ‘their proper use’. On other occasions, it resulted from plain anxieties about the uncertain outcomes of exposing the natives to mass media and granting them access to media technologies. This paranoia about the always-present potential political edge of the natives’ mass media practices resulted in the first censorship rules in India acquiring its specific characteristic: they were meant to control the circulation rather than the content of media. For instance, in the case of cinema, film historian Ashish Rajadhyaksha sums up the colonial regime’s anxieties about the potential political edge of any film made in India in these words: ‘It began to appear as though all Indian films, in their very existence, were liable to be viewed by paranoid censors as potentially swadeshi, and therefore possessed of subversive content’. (18, original emphasis). The schizophrenic relation that the censor boards and monitors maintain to media practices in general even today suggests that the colonial paranoia has been inherited in its entirety by the nationalist elite after Independence.

If this is the censorial mode in which the reach of politics is sought to be reined in by instituting mechanisms to control the circulation of media, we also have other non-institutional – yet effectively pervasive – modes of setting boundaries for politics displaced entirely onto media discourse. Let me cite another example from popular cinema practices in India. Film scholar Madhava Prasad has argued that the informal ban on kissing on screen that existed in Indian cinema until a few decades ago, was in effect a ban on cinema as a modern medium itself, and by extension, a check on the reach of modernity’s politics as well as capitalist relations in India (100–113). Thus, a close link has always been in operation between policies on mass media and our receptiveness to, or apprehensions about, politicization in general. The evident capacities of modern media technologies to mediate the world for us by altering our sensorium have made the field of media practices an evocative domain onto which we could displace our anxieties about what domains of our life and world could be opened up for politicisation and modernisation. Setting boundaries for the extents of mediatisation was effectively a matter of deliberating on the thresholds of politicisation, and vice versa.

Politics and its boundaries

What does it mean to talk about drawing boundaries for the reach of politics? Moreover, knowing very well that different sets of people, ranging from the colonizer to the nationalist movement, from the peasant to the priest, the Right and the Left, will operate with their own interests in fixing boundaries for the reach of politics in one’s life – as well as in others’, when possible – how do we talk about these modalities in general? At an abstract level, what lies at the heart of any desire to set boundaries for the reach of politics
is the notion that politicisation alters the given essence of whatever is subjected to it. Following from this logic, it then becomes desirable to keep certain domains of one’s lifeworld away from politicisation in a bid to feel that (non-political) ‘natural’ relations prevail at least in some domains of one’s life. Such desires are universal, and not peculiar to conservatives who fight for the status-quo. The universal purchase of the taboos against politicisation of religion or friendship or familial relationship is testimony to this.

One way of minimising the traumatic outcomes of subjecting our worlds to processes of politicisation was to try to reach a collective consensus on keeping certain domains out of the reach of politics’ mediation – a solution that allowed for controlled reform and modernisation while leaving adequate space for accommodating the apprehensions about them. Partha Chatterjee has shown us one aspect of this in his discussion on the modes in which the nationalist movement engaged selectively with Western modernity by operating a split between an inner domain of cultural essence kept outside the reach of modernization and an outer domain of politics open to normative modernity’s reforms (116–135). If we rework Chatterjee’s formulation by bringing within the scope of the analysis not just the nationalist movement (or any particular ideology) but the universal concerns about the stakes of subjecting one’s given life to politicisation, what formulation will that offer us? We will, then, have to modify the framework slightly, conceding that we experimented with a set of different modalities, often simultaneously, to fix the domains and boundaries of politicisation.

The point that I want to foreground will perhaps come through if I invoke the example of two popular catchphrases in Malayalam about politicisation – both of which we no longer hear invoked. One is the title of a 1929 play written by V.T. Bhattathiripad titled From the Kitchen to the Stage – a title that was adopted as such as a slogan for progressive politics ever since. One of the high points in the play, which works with the familiar theme of the reform of Brahmin community practices, is when the educated protagonist invites the colonial/modern law’s intervention in stopping an archaic community practice particularly oppressive to its women. The title of the play stuck as one of the most reiterated mottos of public politics in general for two reasons, I would argue: first, it invokes an appealing binary between the public as the domain of modern politics into which one needs to migrate in order to be a political being, and the domestic as that which is (left) mostly unmediated by politics. Secondly, the choice of the word ‘stage’ in the title to denote to the public political domain that one migrates onwards from one’s private/domestic zones contains in it the strong predominant sense about politics as a site where one performs.

My second example will illustrate an important dimension to the widely held perception about the realm of public politics as the performative terrain. Until a few decades back, a notice used to be seen commonly in public places in Kerala, like in toddy bars, men’s salons and tea shops, which would read: ‘Do not discuss politics here’ – a diktat exhorting the entrants to leave politics outside before stepping in. I do not want to mystify this practice; indeed, it was primarily a matter of the proprietors taking precautions to avoid untoward incidents as they go about with their business. However, I suggest there is an additional way of comprehending this, considering especially that we used to see this notice most commonly written on the walls inside country liquor bars, a place where people – mostly working-class men – would go after a day’s business, ‘to be oneself’, so to speak. This diktat barring the entry of politics, then, indicates an acute awareness of what it can do to the self: that it alters something in us, aspects of which one
should perhaps retain, attend to, and indulge in, from time to time. This wariness about politics and politicisation of life has been central in prompting and determining attempts to set boundaries for the extents and reach of politics’ mediation of our worlds.

Thus, even as we would experiment with a range of modalities of migrating from given existence to political being, one aspect was common to all of them: they all approached the idea of engaging with politics from the vantage point of conceiving the end of politics or the closing limits of politicisation. There were a few modes that did not work with the commonly invoked duality of home as unmediated private vs public as the political terrain. For example, Sree Narayana Guru in Kerala would propose a complex framework that displaced the opposition between the latent real human essence versus the fallen politics of false differentiations, onto a binary of the soul and the body – both of which needed realisation and redemption through collective action, in the path to the formation of the self, as Udaya Kumar’s work helps us understand (43–85). In contrast, the binary of ‘the private home’ vs ‘the political public’ – a far more accessible modality of conceiving politicisation and its limits – is the one that the nationalist movement operationalised and which, in Kerala’s context, the Left politics adopted with certain modifications. This modality, significantly, follows the ancient Greek distinction between natural life and a particular form of life, one with political rights. Repeated invocations of the latter modality and its binary in Indian political history have given ‘the home’ various statuses – sometimes contradictory, sometimes complimentary:

(1) Firstly, home corresponds to the domain one has to step out of, in order to enter into a political existence, like for Aristotle, the household is the domain that sustains natural life, as opposed to a more privileged ‘good life’ – bios politicos – that comes from the participation in the polis.

(2) Secondly, home (and one’s private life) is where one could get back to, from time to time, where one can be oneself. This aspect has crucial implications especially for a political context like that in Kerala where the domain of parliamentary politics is essentially a negotiating table onto which agents of disparate interests bring their specific community locus as well as normative ideas of a larger universal public at the same time. Consequently, home, the household and one’s privacy are then domains that are kept outside the realm of politicisation, in a desirable way. In addition, conceiving and nurturing a space outside the temporality and mandates of the political gained a positive connotation for its ability to figure as a domain that can afford a distance from dominant politics and its ideologies, and as a site from where resistance could be imagined.

(3) Taking together these two statuses that home is afforded as a result of the operation of the binary we discussed above, we see the idea of home emerging and consolidating as central to broader consensus on the patterns and tempo of politicisation, as well as certain ideas about sheer life outside politics. The normative order of politics in post-Independence India has been one of mobilisation–representation–retreat, in which public politics of interest negotiations would take place primarily between men of different communities in spaces and institutions – like political party meetings, trade unions, religious or community gatherings, and so on. If we take the pattern of elections every five years as symptomatic of this,
one could argue that the long intermediate period of ‘retreat from politics’ has been the vantage point from where we have imagined the tempo of normative politics after independence.

Politics, home, mediation

Let us now come back to the theme of media. Much of our practice of mass media technologies, the discourse around them, as well as the governmental policies relating to them, were primarily informed by the felt need to correspond, on the one hand, to this controlled tempo and rhythm in normative politics, and to the sedimented ideas about home as the threshold where politics’ mediation ends, on the other. On the one side, what specific media forms and the attendant aesthetics are allowed entry into our homes has remained a vigilantly policed matter until now. After independence – which is to say, after a long period of intense politicisation, and negotiations with its demands – home, in certain ways, began to be taken up again as a meaningful site from where one could re-engage with the world, and thus re-mediate politics. Let us put it this way: if the nationalist movement, and in the case of Kerala the Left movement, offered us a view of the world, compressing it in one particular way by choosing certain aspects of life for elaboration and intervention at the expense of discarding many details and dimensions of life and the world, we soon began a new exercise of decompressing that world, seeking a re-enchanted relation with it. The space of the home emerged as the site from where one would engage in this exercise, using modern electronic media technologies as the primary mediating tools for renewed relation with the world and its details. The brief period of Radio Ceylon’s glorious popularity among households in India during the 1950s is an early indication of this paradigm – a classic case of the dissent that erupted from among radio listeners in India against the state’s monopoly over mediation (see also Punathambekar).

Similarly, photography historian Christopher Pinney, discussing the proliferation among lower caste households in India of mass printed images of Hindu gods and less celebrated icons of the nationalist struggle like Bhagat Singh, has argued for a visual history that engages with such practices as part of the embodied and performative politics seeking to constitute one’s own worlds in their homes. The popularity that cheap pulp magazines enjoyed among house-bound women would tell a story similar to this as well (also see Bay). Such practices hint at the combination of the domestic space and access to emerging media technologies as gradually producing a new locus of withdrawing from as well as resisting the ways in which the state would represent or mediate the world for us. Crucially, these ‘home-based’ media practices seeking a remediation and re-enchantment outside the frames of public politics as well as those of the state’s mediation, worked along the commonly held notions about the thresholds of home as where politics’ reach ends, and where one’s own/private realm begins. For this reason, the domains of the home, the domestic, the private, and the interior began acquiring the overtone as realms where resistance to the dominant masculine public-politics could take shape.

To narrow down to the context of Kerala briefly: The widespread disillusionment with the hegemonic Left in Kerala and its chosen modalities of politicisation, which fiercely crushed down almost all (social/economic/political/religious/affective) modes of relating to the world other than the few officially sanctioned ones, had started manifesting in
a range of responses. One of the disaffections with the Left followed from the attempts from different discontented sections to subject to systematic critique the elevation of the public domain as the privileged site of politics, as a consequence of which the private and the associated domains were, on the one hand, left outside the reaches of any meaningful restructuring, and were delegitimised as incapable of holding potentials to offer useful knowledges on things and affairs of the world, on the other hand. This indeed could be considered the crux of the critique that feminism, the (post-nation) Dalit movement and queer politics and scholarship mounted against the Left in Kerala, as well as the nationalist development ideology in other regions. In these critiques, the modality of imagining the end of politics through operationalising a split between public as the terrain of politics and the domestic as that which is kept away from politics is more of a matter of conveniently containing radical reforms and modernisation merely at the peripheral level. Theories of aesthetics borrowed energies from such political critiques as well, as reflected in analyses of the specific emphasis found in practices of realism in the region’s literature and cinema privileging ‘the outdoor’ (as opposed to the interior) as that which can offer us perspective. In short, the domains of the interior were beginning to attain political investments and overtones, even as the dominant public sphere’s claims to privilege as the default domain of the political was increasingly coming under attack from progressive political movements as well as the critical discourse. Keeping this context in our mind, we could examine a set of processes through which new value is being attributed to, and extracted from, the interior/the private/the domestic by the post-industrial neoliberal economy as well as the New Media regime. In the following section, I shall conclude by merely citing some frameworks that identify the above processes as central to the contemporary and its configurations, which I propose as useful for us to make theoretical sense of the transformations underway.

**The regime of the post-industrial ‘bioeconomic’**

The solutions that emerged in the West, meant to propel advanced industries out of economic recession, with impacts across the world, could be one consideration before us. In their book discussing surrogacy as clinical labour, Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby point out that post-Fordist capitalism blurs the boundaries between the reproductive and productive spheres, as a result of which ‘[d]omestic tasks, sexual services, care provision, and (…) the processes of biological reproduction itself have migrated out of the private space of the family into the labor market and are now central to post-industrial accumulation strategies’ (‘Clinical Labour’ 5). Quoting Andrea Fumagalli who has proposed the term ‘bioeconomic’ to refer to the processes through which post-industrial capitalism puts life itself to work by overcoming the separation between production and reproduction, they also observe that the expanding life science industries, however, attempt to sustain these domains they look to monetise as governed by the terms of speculation and informality: ‘the ethical insistence that the biological should not be waged only serves to facilitate atavistic (yet fully functional) forms of labor contract and desultory forms of compensation’ (8, original emphasis). Thus, the bioeconomic regime looks to collapse the earlier boundaries so as to expand the economic into all domains – especially those previously kept outside the reaches of commodification, politicisation and modernisation – while at the same time counting on the sacredness
attributed to these domains to keep them under exceptional, informal regimes of experimentation and speculation. It is this double move that makes the neoliberal investment in the domain of the interior different from how progressive political movements like feminism and identity politics looked to claim and/or reform it.

The new media regime and ‘the epistemology of outing’

If the old media regime monetised the reproduction of the separation between the public and the private by appealing to our desires to sustain the distinction between the two, today’s new media regime looks to monetise the opening up of the private domain by the post-industrial neoliberal economy. New Media’s expansion is predicated on what Tiziana Terranova calls ‘free labour’ of the user, who is the producer of the new information that the digital media looks to monetise, and whose life domains often become the very site of production of new information. Moreover, as Wendy Chun points out: ‘existing social media platforms reverse the position of public/private, because the subject who acts is increasingly on the inside rather than the outside. Subjects act publicly in private, or are “caught” in public acting privately’ (95, original emphasis). Chun argues further that this leads to an epistemology of outing: ‘the revelation of mostly open secrets to secure a form of privacy that offers no privacy’ (95). The light flows from the interior to the outside, like in the Grihalakshmi cover photo, which came out during the height of New Media’s popularity, astutely anticipating its viral circulation online and intense discussions among internet users. In contrast to the classical scenario where publicity’s light coming in from the outside constitutes the interiority of the subject, in the case of the networked subject, subjectivity is presupposed. As Chun says: ‘online subjects – YOUs – can never be silent; they can never resist by refusing subjectivity’ (154).

Conclusion

The pre-emption of the possibilities of resistance through invisibility, silence and withdrawal under the new media regime poses serious challenges to imagining political action in meaningful ways. Yet, nostalgia for an older regime cannot be the vantage point from where we conduct appraisals of these transformations. After all, what animates the domain of popular practices of new media forms is the humungous enthusiasm about the explosion of older normative notions about privacy, publicity and politics, with unpredictable and often unpleasant results as well. The controversial Grihalakshmi cover was primarily a manifestation of this enthusiasm: it propelled public discussions about the most intimate aspects of life; many women social media users, drawing inspiration from the assertive gesture in the cover, responded by publicly posting their own photos in similar poses, exploding the boundaries between the public and the private. It is true that privacy is what today’s media looks to monetise, and not the constant simulation of the boundary between the public and the private. However, these processes wreck privacy as well. As Chun asks: ‘rather than pushing for a privacy that is no privacy – a security that fosters insecurity – what would happen if we demanded more rigorous public rights? If we fought for the right to be exposed – to take risks and to be in public – and not be attacked?’ (xi). It is clear that for those for whom normative privacy never offered freedom, there is not much at stake in looking to reverse the processes by which the new media and the post-industrial economy
mess with the distinction between the public and the private – a factor which perhaps explains the pervading enthusiasm to rather embrace these processes by making oneself available for such experiments and expositions. What such enthusiasm entails is still an unfolding story.

Notes

1. See the reports by Sharanya Gopinathan and Aashika Ravi to get a general sense about the controversy and for their excellent commentaries on the range of political positions articulated on social media around the cover photo. This essay will not engage much with the issues and themes that were raised in this debate, not because those are lesser questions, but because our progressive political traditions have devised discursive and analytical tools to address them adequately and to use such occasions to popularise the desire for social change.

2. Chatterjee’s argument is that the history of anticolonial nationalism in India begins not when freedom was first raised as a political demand, but much before, when the leaders of the movement already declared the inner domain of culture as the sovereign territory of the nation even while admitting the superiority of the coloniser/the West in the outer domain (of trade, technology and modern thought). He uses this argument to problematise the dominant (Western) historiography of the nationalist movement which has relied only on the archive of events and negotiations that took place in the normative public-political domain to construct its narrative, without paying attention to the cultural domain – the real terrain where the national identity, based on a difference with the West and a departure from tradition, was forged. In revising Chatterjee’s formulation, I suggest that we could understand the constitution of the inner domain as not just the actual site of nationalist politics, but simultaneously also as an attempt to sustain a domain outside of all politics, where ‘the political’ in general – both modernity’s as well as that of anti-colonial struggle – is denied entry.

3. Recently, Menon and Sreekumar have looked at the popularity of ‘home-films’ among the Muslim community in North Kerala to argue that these films engage with a range of themes intimately related to the community’s social, and cultural position in Kerala – mainly, large-scale migration from within the community to the Persian Gulf and the emotions that get attached to a long history of it – in quite distinct manner than mainstream media and political discourse deal with them.

4. See for example, Radhakrishnan’s discussion on the deployment of space in Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s films, and by extension realist cinema in India.

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Notes on contributor

Jenson Joseph is Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow at the Department of Gender and Media Studies for the South Asian Region, Institute for Asian and African Studies (IAAW), Humboldt University of Berlin.

ORCID

Jenson Joseph http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5378-9506
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