Digital Society (2025) 4:2
https://doi.org/10.1007/s44206-024-00157-4

ORIGINAL PAPER

Digital Media and Social Theory: The View from Xi's China and Modi's India

Ralph Schroeder[1]

Received: 9 July 2024 / Accepted: 11 December 2024

Abstract
The social sciences, and especially theories about communication and digital media, have been dominated by the Global North. This paper attempts to redress this imbalance by reference to two major countries that have also been models in other parts of the world, India and China. In both countries, the autonomy of the public sphere of media is constrained, though less so in India's half-democracy than in China's authoritarian party state. Still, a lively and diverse online part of the public sphere which lacks the gatekeeping function of traditional news can contribute to the autonomy of media. Media reflect society imperfectly, but there is much to learn from two countries where the un-gatekept online public sphere is relatively more important than the traditional gatekept public sphere.

Keywords Digital media · Social theory · India · China

1 Introduction

Theories about the role of media in have been primarily oriented to Western democracies. This paper examines the role of media in China and India, and argues that these two cases can help us to rethink media theories, particularly in the light of the role of digital media. Media theory, it will be argued, relies on ideas about the autonomy of the public sphere (or the 'public arena', which, as will be discussed below, is a more useful term). The autonomy of the media system has always been contested, and this contestation has recently been further complicated by digital platforms, which are not gatekept in the way traditional news media have been. The autonomy of media faces additional challenges in India and China, due to the controlling influence by the authoritarian state in China and by politically-influenced media ownership and regu-

✉ Ralph Schroeder
ralph.schroeder@oii.ox.ac.uk

[1] Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, 1 St. Giles, Oxford OX1 3JS, UK

Published online: 09 January 2025

lation in India. And in China, platforms are controlled within national boundaries, whereas in India, platforms such as WhatsApp and Twitter and other digital media are mostly US-based. This difference in platform technology pales in significance, however, when we consider the strength civil society in both countries, or rather its only-somewhat-cowed strength in India, while in China, civil society is kept strictly within certain bounds even as it provides a more lively sphere of expression than traditional media. In short, the contested autonomy of the public sphere and the comparatively greater role of non-gatekept digital media will allow us to reconsider the role of the public sphere in dominant theories of media from the Global North.

The paper will proceed as follows: first, it will review two analyses of communications research for India and China and for the Global South that can be used as points of departure. Next, it will set out the main elements of the media systems in India and China, including how the public arena departs from how it operates in the Global North even though there are similar yardsticks for comparison. Then the paper will detail some of the major ways that digital platforms have recently transformed the public arena. Finally, it will draw out lessons for theories of media systems in the Global North.

1.1 Background: Challenges to Media Theory from the Global South

It is impossible to review the literature on digital media and social theories in India and China, but fortunately a review article exists, and this can be taken as a point of departure. Zhang and Neyazi (2020) reviewed 'Communication and technology theories from the South: the cases of China and India'. Their literature review concluded with two points: one is that the state should be central to analyses of media, which is a gap that they identified in the literature. That is a gap that this paper will address, arguing that the state is indeed central to both media systems. But their second conclusion is one that will be rejected: they say 'stop looking for theories that are universal' and endorse 'subjectivity' (2020, p. 46). Their aim to go beyond the West as the 'ideal type' or reference point will be endorsed here, but we will see that making India and China reference points requires identifying features of their media that can also illuminate systems in the West or Global North (the two will be used interchangeably here) and beyond. We will return to these points in the conclusion. But first, it is worth providing more detail of their review.

For China, there is more research. The authors focus on 22 books, and argue that 'the most prominent storyline goes like this: Chinese Internet has been greatly controlled by the state, but society manages to grow out of the highly controlled space'(2020, p. 37). They conclude that 'Chinese society is becoming more pluralistic, even though the state remains authoritarian' (2020, p. 41) and they identify the main gap in our understanding as being the collusion between the state and internet platform providers. That gap is indeed impossible to fill since it is not known how much the party-state affects platform companies. Even here, it is worth remembering that in Western democracies too, internet platform providers are said to shape content in non-transparent algorithmic ways, and states are struggling to regulate content for greater transparency (Tambini, 2021). And while Chinese society is becoming more pluralistic, there are signs that the 'highly controlled space' allows not just more

space for bottom-up online plural forces, but also for greater—again, especially algorithmic—top-down control. This greater control, as we shall see, applies especially to the Xi era, which has become more controlling than previous administrations.

For India, as Neyazi and Wang point out, there are far fewer studies of digital media, and they appeared almost entirely after the 2014 national election, which was also when the internet began to play a significant role in Indian politics (see also Neyazi & Schroeder, 2021). Before then, the literature about the role of information and communication technologies (ICT's) was mainly focused on development (ICT4D). But there has been another theory associated mainly with India; postcolonialism. Yet as the authors note, postcolonial ideas have mainly criticized 'data colonialism', including with China as a new colonial power and with criticisms whereby 'data capitalism' becomes all-encompassing (2020, p. 44). As we shall see, that is misleading for China, first, because the Chinese economy is not capitalist. Jin, for example, has recently forcefully argued the case that China's economy is neither capitalist nor socialist (2023, see also Naughton, 2020). She says that China's strong state capacity and weak civil institutions allow the state's shaping of markets and this constitutes the distinguishing feature of the Chinese economy (the US, in contrast, has weaker state capacity and strong civil society institutions, she says). This distinctive feature is, of course, abundantly in evidence in the Chinese state's shaping of media.

Second, it is still an open question whether initiatives like the 'digital silk road' aim at new forms of colonialism. Lee (2017), for example, sees the geopolitical ambitions of China's involvement in African economies as being quite different from the ways in which Western companies have engaged with them. Another simplification of capitalist data colonialism is that India rejected the 'free basics' initiative imposed by American tech companies (whereby users of platforms like Facebook would get certain services 'free' on their data plans). For India at least, data colonialism paints with too broad a brush, although we will need to address the extreme imbalances in the geopolitics of the world's media. Finally, Neyazi, in other work (2018), has pointed to the vernacularization of the Indian public sphere, whereby non-English languages have been gaining at the expense of English language media. In other words, English-language hegemony, as per postcolonial theory, does not unambiguously dominate the Indian public sphere. In short, as we shall see (and as further discussed below), the state and new digital technologies cannot be reduced to the capitalist logic or to colonialism for the role of the media; the state, as Neyazi and Wang argue, matters, as do larger geopolitical forces. The question is how.

Communication research as a discipline has similarly been criticized for focusing too much on the Global North. Again, it is not possible to review these debates in detail, but Waisbord (2019) has provided an overview of these arguments in terms of how communication as a discipline is organized. Again, his ideas can serve as a point of departure but will also be found wanting. Waisbord argues that the study of communication should be open to all disciplines, but it should also be 'challenging the modernist project of science identified with a single conceptual system' (2019, p.91) and not have a 'single project of intellectual unity' (2019, p.125). That seems to condemn communication research to a lack of coherence: without a single conceptual system, how can comparisons be made? Waisbord wants to 'build bridges' in this post-discipline across certain topics (2019, pp.137–48). Yet a topic-led research

agenda surely, again, would lead to an inability to find common conceptual or theoretical schemata that allow systematic comparison or to identify gaps in existing theories. All in all, Waisbord's and Zhang and Neyazi's call to devote more attention to the South is welcome, but the way forward is to locate media from the South in relation to those of the North without privileging either. That requires developing global frameworks and theories just as other disciplines have done. We can think here of global history (Bayly, 2018) or of how sociology has addressed globalization (Mann, 2013), even if these theories too can be improved upon.

Outside of media theories, too, there are of course broader theories of societal development which pertain across the globe. But India and China have been also at various times been under the spell of distinctive theories (or ideologies) of societal development, which can be broadly categorized as Marxist, nationalist, and liberal, though that is a simplification and there are different versions of these in both countries (Schroeder, 2022). But these theories of societal development have had an impact on their respective media systems mainly in respect to how media should contribute to nation-building and how autonomy or control of the media should be institutionalized. In the past, theories of media in the Global South emphasized media imperialism, and more recently (as mentioned) data colonialism. But for India and China at least, these theories are inappropriate since India has a well-developed and mostly autonomous media system—domestically, and free from external domination but also subject to external influence. In China, there is a state-controlled and autochtonous media system which is sometimes accused of promoting a new digital or data colonialism of its own. Against this background, we can turn to contemporary India and China and comparisons of the role of media in society, which brings us to the autonomy of the public sphere and how it enables the responsiveness of elites to citizens or of states to civil societies.

1.2 Media Theory, the Role of the Public Arena, and Responsiveness

The two countries and others can be put along continuum in terms of the autonomy or lack of autonomy of their media systems and of the public sphere. The autonomy of the public sphere is an integral part of media systems theory, whereby the public arenas of television, radio, newspapers primarily fall within national boundaries (Hallin & Mancini, 2012). In China, there is a long-standing tradition whereby the media have been used for popular mobilization and so under political control, initiated during Maoism and even earlier in Chinese history (Tang, 2016). The role of the media is to guide the public towards a common goal while also allowing the public to voice dissatisfaction with rulers (or emperors)—within certain limits. The autonomy of India's media system, on the other hand, followed Western democratic models after independence, and included a public broadcast system. In recent years, however, this autonomy has increasingly been challenged by the Modi government's majoritarian excesses.

Media systems theory, developed for Western democracies, has been built upon and extended to India and China (Chakravarty, 2004; Zhao, 2012) but this theory has not yet been extended to digital media. Media systems theory focuses on the public sphere which provides a way for the state to be responsive to civil society inputs.

But the idea of the public sphere needs to be reformulated; 'public arena' is more appropriate since, as Fraser (1990) has argued, what constitutes the public has always been contested rather than, as in Habermas' conceptualization, consisting of a widening sphere of participants. Moreover, for Habermas, mediated publics seek normative consensus based on rational deliberation. What Fraser criticized about this view was that it excluded the struggle by previously excluded groups to become part of this mediated deliberation. Thus the idea of public arenas goes beyond Habermas to include contestation and a contest among competing political groups or ideas (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2022). Put differently, the notion of arena allows for the inclusion of counterpublics, groups which may not have sufficient access to gatekept news media but are nevertheless trying to shape the public space of communication. As we shall see, this is also where new, non-gatekept digital media enter the picture.

The link between media autonomy and responsiveness is that responsiveness relies on autonomous media. Media autonomy includes the norms of the public arena whereby news media should be subject to objective, impartial, diverse, and inclusive information and perform a watchdog role. Further, media should not be unduly skewed by states or markets. These functions have traditionally been performed by professional news media, but political communication is now also performed by digital media. Digital media however, apart from legacy news media in digital formats, do not have to live up to the norms of the public arena; they are not gatekept in the same way as traditional media (though they may gatekept in new ways, as with the algorithmic shaping of visibility on social media or search engines). Further, the public that is represented in the public arena has also changed: while there used to be gatekeepers deciding access to the public arena, now there is more active online engagement among a new range of actors such as partisan or alternative media and political challengers that can avail themselves of the reach of non-gatekept digital media. Civil society has become enlarged in this way, and it may be that the public has become skewed because some actors obtain an outsize influence in a public space where there is increasing competition for visibility or attention.

In any event, the autonomy of the public arena is incomplete. It is an ideal striven for with varying degrees of success and impeded by different forces, as we shall see. But it is still in place as an ideal because of its function in mediating politics and public life. In Western democracies like the US and in Europe, for example, news media play a watchdog role and adhere, albeit imperfectly, to the above mentioned journalistic standards. Such autonomy should ideally also apply in India and China, but does so at best partially in China, and it has been diminished in India. How then does media autonomy nevertheless apply to India and China? The key difference is that the media are not as autonomous as in full democracies. Ideally, they should be more autonomous. But in India, digital media are partly shaped by foreign technology companies and media autonomy is also limited by excessive political and private sector sway over news media (for example, with internet shutdowns, or the government using advertising spend to influence news media unduly, or politicians buying media outright to be their mouthpiece). In China, the party-state exercises strong influence on technology companies, but this control can be a double-edged sword: if it would go too far, the government would lose a major means of understanding the public's discontent (the so-called dictator's dilemma, see Roberts, 2018). Still, digital

media have autonomy within limits set by the party-state. But as mentioned, Chinese media theory posits that the function of media is to mobilize society, and in India, post-independence saw the media as a tool for nation-building and media played a 'paternalist' role (Athique, 2012) before the opening of media markets in the 1980s and 90s. And the Modi government now curtails media critics to some extent.

Even if media systems are national, they also everywhere have transnational components. Nationally bounded systems are currently confronted by the fact that digital platforms, unlike traditional news media, are not governed by the norms of journalism and the public arena. Hence new questions have arisen, especially across borders, about freedom of expression, hate speech, which rules govern the algorithms shaping content, and the like. In this way, platforms such as Facebook, Google, or Baidu are also part of the public arena, albeit without journalistic gatekeeping, though national regulation is increasingly brought to bear on how platforms shape political communication, partly via algorithms.

This is a good point to introduce further normative considerations about the public arena: How should digital media (or 'platforms', if that is preferred) be shaped and governed across borders? China should be open to non-Chinese platforms without imposing restrictions. Similarly in India; that is, the public arena should be open transnationally. The public arena of news media, as we saw earlier, has to abide by the journalistic norms of openness, impartiality, objectivity, inclusivity and diversity, access—in addition to being autonomous from states and civil society and markets. But digital media do not have to abide by these norms, even if they are subject to some negative norms (which the public arena is also subject to): not causing harm or promoting hate. This negative norm is still evolving for platforms in Western democracies, with much current debate over whether there should be regulation by states or self-regulation by technology companies. But in India, the idea of public harm has been extended to cover threats to national security (as with the ban on TikTok and other Chinese apps), a smokescreen for quelling political dissent. In China, harm to public morality or to political stability is also included, again, curbing civil society's online possibilities. Digital media should provide openness to expression and enable connections between those who seek to express themselves—which is far less imperfectly the case in China and also partly impeded in India.

Some of these norms thus conflict with authoritarian rule or forms of economic protectionism that deliberately restrict free and untrammeled expression across borders, though one obvious exception to this cross-border openness is malicious or criminal foreign interference in domestic affairs, an admittedly difficult idea to pin down but where maliciousness consists, for example, of election interference. These may seem like obvious points, but it should be remembered that universal or global norms for digital media enable self-determination of peoples and nations regardless of the types of governments in power; as per the responsiveness criterion. Foreign ownership or control of digital media thus follows both certain national regulations and principles that transcend the nation.

Platforms are a (relatively) bigger part of the public arena in India and China than in Western democracies, and mobile phones make them even more so. Most people get their news via mobiles now in China (Wei & Lo, 2021). Not in India, even though we know that among English-speaking Indians online, 71% get their news online,

including social media, versus 46% from TV and 40% from print (Newman et al., 2024, p. 136), including foreign outlets such as the BBC with a 25% TV, radio and online audience—the third largest source of news. In India, where the autonomy of the media had been well-established since independence, agenda setting in the online public arena has been heavily skewed in favour of an urban and English-speaking middle class. In China, although internet use is also a skewed towards urban and well-off populations, smartphones are much more widespread than in India. And while economic inequalities are increasing in both countries, a more well-developed media infrastructure in China ensures wider access to online media. For access to diverse content and ability to share content, it is of course the other way around: the party-state in China keeps critical content within bounds and compartmentalizes publics. India's civil society, on the other hand, is raucous and lively and also not compartmentalized even if a smaller part of the population has full access. Hence Modi's efforts to curb free expression and collective action have so far been kept to those areas where the government is trying to silence criticisms of its policies—in other words, where the media obstruct its exclusionary populist and national security agendas.

India has had mixed success in determining its own rules for digital media: the most commonly used platforms in India are not Indian, and so the rules for these digital media are a mix between Indian and foreign regulations. But domestic media ownership is also complicated, since the extent to which media have been used to promote the careers of political leaders and parties varies among the Indian states and regions and languages. To give one example: in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, local parties which also own television channels have been dominant. And several chief ministers of the state have been well-known movie stars, gaining popularity from their celebrity status. Another example is West Bengal, which has been ruled by Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress for more than a decade, and where Bengali language public media dominate. Thus the complex federal system puts a limit on the extent to which India can be described as a single media system.

In China, the party-state has imposed a tight regulatory regime, though one that leaves considerable scope domestically for ambiguity and circumventing the rules as long as the legitimacy of the party-state is not challenged directly. And it is important not to exaggerate the state's role in Chinese media: much of the news in China, within limits, is highly commercialized (Stockman, 2013). But in China and India, digital media add to the online public arena since they are more autonomous compared to traditional news media, and so they play a comparatively greater role: digital non-traditional media create more of a space for cultural and political discussion than in Western democracies. In China, there are non-state and partly autonomous (kept within bounds) non-gatekept niches online. In India, there are not just niches but platforms and a mixture of highly commercial and NGO or civil society based media that provide a lively space for expression. In other words, in both cases, the way that autonomous online spaces counterbalance states and markets mirror the countries' state-society relations generally. And these relatively untrammeled online spaces do not just have a positive effect: they can also be used to spread hate and misinformation.

This brings us to a broader point: social theories generally, like media theories, have also been dominated by Western democracies. But there are studies of India and China that go beyond the West and that are both comparative and theoretical (for example, Duara & Perry, 2018; Bardhan, 2010). The two countries are frequently compared because they are seen as developmental alternatives within the Global South. One yardstick that can be used in the comparison which also applies to Western democracies, again, is the responsiveness of states to civil societies or of elites to citizens. That allows for the inclusion of China which, even though it is an authoritarian party-state rather than a democracy, still seeks legitimacy—sometimes called 'performance legitimacy' (Zhao, 2009). Modi's India has been regarded as going in the direction of authoritarianism (Jaffrelot, 2021) and so away from responsiveness, and also becoming majoritarian and so illiberal and anti-pluralist. But India is still regarded as a democracy, even if an imperfect one (Varshney, 2013), though Varshney has recently (2022) highlighted the undemocratic erosion of civil liberties under Modi. In other words, the norms of the public arena and autonomy of media, even if India and China fall short, can nevertheless be applied, especially as there are now debates about the fragility of liberal and democratic societies (Przeworski, 2019). And apart from unruly online media, part of this fragility is due to attacks on traditional news media that are accused of bias or distortion.

The implication is that it is possible to put forward a social and media theory that is not Western-centric and that nevertheless applies a global yardstick—responsiveness via an autonomous public arena. But if the yardstick aims at greater—deeper and broader—responsiveness via autonomous media, then the implication is that this should be strengthened in India, in China, and in Western democracies and beyond. This yardstick addresses the current shifts towards more authoritarian and exclusionary populist or ultranationalist political agendas in the two countries and elsewhere. It does not, however, entail a commitment to Western representative democracy or Western political liberalism or to particular economic forms such as 'neo-liberal' capitalism. It does, however, entail that political responsiveness should promote deeper and broader individual or civil society rights, which require certain forms of expression via media. And for media, this yardstick entails a commitment to openness and sharing information, while maintaining protections against harms and hate.

These norms can also be found in some of the political and media traditions in China and India and among their elites and parts of civil society and parts of their public arenas: 'some', because these traditions are currently contested, and only 'parts' of the media serve this function. In China, the Xi government has been strengthening control over media and in India there are currently efforts to foment a Hindu nationalist agenda and curbing media criticisms. These efforts put limits on the responsiveness and autonomy of media. But the Chinese party-state also has to keep media expression alive to some extent so that it can be responsive to the peoples' needs, and it needs private sector media for a vibrant economy and consumer culture. In India, similarly, the private sector's autonomy but also a commitment to a (albeit shrinking) public broadcast sector provide a degree of autonomy. There are also rights-oriented, democratic and pluralist thinkers that champion autonomous media in both countries. If digital media can play their part in countering current retrogressive political agendas and enabling progressive ones, it is useful to think about how they can do so.

As we have seen, the main distinctiveness of media in India and China is that media autonomy is constrained in practice—though not officially. In China, an elite aims to mobilize society via media in pursuit of strengthening the party's ideology. In India, the autonomy of the media, though imperfectly realized in the past, is nevertheless under increasing pressure from a government marginalizing critical voices. The common yardstick, or putting media theory for these two countries into the same frame as for Western democracies, not only allows us to highlight what is different, but also to avoid treating the two countries as some kind of 'other': it is true that China especially (it is less clear for India) is following a distinctive political path—less so a distinctive economic and consumer-cultural one. But whatever that path, China will need media that give expression to the interests of its population. And like India, it will also have a public arena that provides a conduit between elites and civil society that copes with the increasingly complex algorithmic shaping of content. Finally, various channels by which political information can be shared will be needed even if these are ultimately controlled by the party-state or a majoritarian half-democratic government.

Again, it is worth putting this contemporary distinctiveness of media in a longer historical perspective. The authoritarian party-state entails that civil society in China is different. Unlike in democracies, civil society does not independently counterbalance the state, with rights to unfettered expression and association by individuals and groups. But this lack of separation immediately points to the fact that China's civil society had a brief fleeting moment of independence, including a burgeoning middle class (Dabringhaus & Osterhammel, 2019), in the 1920s and 30s. And of course China is not inherently authoritarian because of its culture and the like; the Taiwanese and Hong Kong media systems have functioned largely like those in Western democracies, though in Hong Kong ever less so since the loss of independence. China is thus not on an inevitable distinctive developmental path, including for its media system, despite what the current bluster which pit China against the West would suggest.

Second, media expression of civil society is at its most independent online: that is what sets the period after the era of broadcast and since the advent of the internet apart. Yet only a small portion of online civil society (and indeed of civil society) is agitating for democratization in China; most of the public supports the state but wants to make the state more responsive to its demands, something which the government encourages to some extent, especially at the more local levels. Grassroots pressure has become a globalizing political process, just as consumerism has become a globalizing cultural and economic phenomenon. The lively Chinese online public arena consists not only of online dissidence in the face of censorship but also of rightful resistance (O'Brien, 1996) and of ultranationalist forces (Zhao, 2004), among the three main civil society factions (Palmer, 2019) supported by different elites (intellectual, right-wing, and 'democratizing'). And there has been growing online nationalism in China, also in state and non-state media, which has been amply documented (Schneider, 2018; Wu, 2007; Zhang & Schroeder, 2024). In India, of course, civil society has been gaining strength since independence, even if it is currently under pressure from majoritarian forces, dominated by Hindutva ultranationalists.

The argument here moves away from the recent debates about the internet and democratization and towards greater emphasis on how both countries engage their

citizens online but also direct them 'from above'. This shift also has potential lessons for the Global North; namely, that with digital media, there has been a structural transformation of gatekeeping and agenda-setting, with new challenges. Examining media and especially digital media amidst a broader theory of societal development in the two countries and beyond allows us to gain a comprehensive but also comparative understanding of media in society.

A key lesson from examining China and India is that the non-gatekept public arena plays a comparatively larger role than in Western democracies. That does not mean that digital non-traditional media are a free-for-all. Indeed, how they can be regulated is currently subject to major political debates. Further, a lot of what this non-gatekept space contains falls outside of political communication and so outside of the public arena altogether (advertising, services, and the like). But the non-gatekept political communication within the public arena plays a significant role. The share of those who get their news from various social media was discussed earlier. Even this does not capture the full share, since political mobilization and coordination also play a part (see, for example, Liu, 2020; Doron & Jeffrey, 2013, pp. 143–64). In short, gatekept media still set the agenda, but the balance in dominating attention in political communication and so the public arena has shifted towards non-gatekept media and this share is comparatively more significant in China and India. The implication is that media theory needs to consider the additional agenda setting function of this non-gatekept input. Under this rubric we could include alternative media, influential social media personalities, the role of search engines in prioritizing content and messaging services in allowing for protest coordination, and more.

1.3 Media and Geopolitical Asymmetries

Media theory concerns the autonomy of the public arena and 'responsiveness', as argued here. But this autonomy and this responsiveness are shaped by the geopolitical order and its asymmetries. There is geopolitical competition over the degree of control over national media systems: how much national champion tech companies can extend their reach worldwide to maximize markets and so profitability. This control operates via laws and regulation of national media and how much these extend—or not—beyond national borders. And apart from the aim to maximize markets, there is also the aim to expand the reach of different visions of the world order. Xi and Modi have both mobilized the ideas of anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle to redefine their histories in light of China's and India's 'rise' in the hierarchy of the international order (Miller, 2021). Whatever the reality of past Western domination, including by means of technology (Headrick, 2010), this mobilization is reshaping understandings of the past in a non- Western centric direction. But how much the visions and realities of this shift materialize further depends on the future of the world order.

The world order that is taking shape now in terms of governance is governed by the 'Brussels effect' (Bradford, 2020) versus the 'Silicon Valley effect' versus the 'Beijing effects' (Erie and Streintz 2021; Schroeder, 2024). Note that there is no Delhi or Bangalore 'effect'. Likewise, the Global South has yet to make a decisive mark on this tripartite order. The three 'effects' have different conceptions of consumer and citizen privacy and of freedom of expression and they vie for international

dominance. This competition is primarily economic, but the reshaping of dominant geopolitical orders concerns a mix of consumer and citizen issues.

Geopolitically, the US (and Europe) are trying to pull India, like a pawn, into the orbit of the Western liberal democratic global order, against China. Whether India follows this pull is not preordained. India and China were part of a non-aligned movement during the Cold War. And there were efforts to push the agenda of the Global South which included a movement to try to overcome the asymmetries of the media dominance of the Global North with a 'New World Information and Communication Order' (NWICO) in the 1970s and early 80s. But these efforts of the non-aligned Global South (China and India have now 'risen' beyond being part of this movement) stalled in the 1970s and 80s, as Getachew (2019) shows. This agenda has not re-emerged forcefully since then. The North-South imbalance is a larger topic that falls outside of an essay on India and China, but the legacy of when India and China were still part of the developing world lingers in its current narratives of 'rise' (Miller, 2021).

It can be noted that the two options within the West, 'Brussels' and 'Silicon Valley', are variants with tensions between them. The EU and the US have basic differences in how much scope there is for markets vis-à-vis the state with more regulation in the EU. But the more fundamental alternatives are the West with its separation of market and state as against China where the market serves the state. India is the 'swing vote' in this geopolitical constellation: will it align with the West or be pulled towards China? The option of a 'bloc' from the Global South in terms of digital governance is not currently on the horizon. The so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) or other South-South alliances do not form a united front against Brussels plus Silicon Valley or Beijing. This absence of an alternative from the Global South, which contains much of the world's population, speaks volumes about the continuing asymmetries in the geopolitical information order.

Again, India can align itself in different directions, but to date it has only been able to exercise autonomy in choosing rival models; it has not put forward a rival governance vision like the three 'effects'. And China's and India's strength in this asymmetric order are quite different. For social media, China's position is weak, since its social media companies have yet to gain a foothold outside China, with TikTok the exception. But take, for example, the governance of data, perhaps a crucial and growing element in the future of this order: Kokas (2022) makes the argument that China has an advantage since Chinese tech companies can expand into American markets but not the other way around. This is not exactly a Chinese form of data colonialism but simply a reflection of a geopolitical and geoeconomic shift towards a less Western-centric and more China-centric geopolitical order. The clearest example of how Xi's reforming zeal is increasingly making itself felt is his push to extend social credit system which includes a Confucian legacy (Knight, 2020). Xi's reforms will no doubt also affect the use of AI (Roberts et al., 2021), though it is too early to tell how these policies are being implemented. And a clear example of how geopolitics shapes Modi's media policies is his ban of TikTok, a clear case of how foreign policy can be used as a pretext to pursue a domestic political agenda (Mishra et al., 2022).

India is thus in a weaker position: Mody (2023: 286), for example, has pointed out that India's information technology (IT) sector is often held up by the government as

India's 'crown jewel'. In fact the contribution of IT to GDP until recently (2005) was quite limited (2%). This is hardly a thriving IT sector that could make for the autonomy of India's media. Likewise Bhatia (2022) has documented how the telecoms sector is largely financed by India's public sector banks, a form of 'financialization' which means that this part of the media infrastructure's lacks independence from the state. In other words, Indian telecoms are heavily reliant on state lending and cannot sustain themselves by markets alone. But without independence from states or markets, the media system's infrastructural autonomy is limited or at least hemmed in. To this we must add the pressures whereby US tech companies, and increasingly Chinese ones, have far greater resources to push into the Indian IT, telecoms—and now especially digital media—markets.

2 Conclusion: Bringing the State Back in and Digital Media Theory Beyond the Global North

This essay has argued that responsiveness and autonomy are needed for the media system to reliably transmit or convey the demands from citizens or civil society to elites or states—and vice versa, for elites and states to be accountable to citizens and civil society. This is not just a Western idea: we can think of how national liberation movements in China and India sought to make the state more representative on behalf of the people, and how these movements conceived of the role of the media in this pursuit. So if this is not just a Western idea but a modern one, it raises questions about how the people should be represented via media, in practice and as an ideal to be striven for. This is therefore also an idea about how to enable 'bottom-up' rights, and how a 'top-down' effective modernizing government that provides rights and extends them, including for expression and representation via media, can be strengthened?

In conclusion, new questions can therefore be raised on the basis of the analysis put forward: do media theories need to admit of variety—as with media systems theory, or the literature on the varieties of states or capitalisms? Or are there universal features, modernizing and globalizing, which posit an ideal type of the role of media in society which can be used as a benchmark or model? To be sure, it is both, but the more universal features of media systems would mean that states could compete not just for geopolitical domination or domination of their vision (as discussed earlier), but rather to lead by example for the rest of the world in terms of autonomy and responsiveness. Put differently, how well the state (recall that Zhang and Neyazi want to bring the state back in; my question was how?) can serve its people, via media: in terms of societal modernizing and globalizing aims, deepening and broadening rights by means of responding to people via more autonomous media that allow demands for democratizing and being more inclusive and diverse and pluralistic to be heard.

Again, to come back to what was said at the outset: Zhang and Neyazi (2020), it will be recalled, argued that the state needs to be brought in more centrally into media theories in the Global South. Here, it has been argued that the key role is that the state must leave scope for the autonomy of the public arena, so that political elites can be responsive to citizens. Inasmuch as private sector tech companies also enlarge that scope, by allowing pushback against government restrictions and regulation that curb

open and free expression, that also extends the autonomy of the public arena. Still, that scope is limited in China and under pressure in India. But a non-gatekept online public arena also extends this autonomy somewhat. While the growing prominence of the non-gatekept public arena is increasingly under scrutiny, it serves counterpublics and will diversify media systems.

Zhang and Neyazi pitted an authoritarian state against growing pluralism in civil society. That conclusion still holds, though under Xi and Modi, the balance is different: Xi has a strong technocratic state apparatus at his disposal, and he can manage the online public arena so that it is kept within bounds, even as it grows into an increasingly diverse and dense feedback mechanism which poses challenges to the state as well as allowing greater control. Modi's government can cow the un-gatekept online public arena, but it will counterbalance his majoritarian efforts even if it can also support them. Stronger autonomy of the public arena in India will allow the forces of plural elites and civil society groups to contend the direction of the country. Whether Modi can channel them to keep his agenda in power remains to be seen. In both countries therefore, the online public arena plays a larger role in contesting the future: it may not democratize them, as early theories of the internet posited. But states need to be responsive to it, as they do in Western democracies, where the online public arena is currently regarded as something to be tamed, though those states will also continue to need to be responsive to challengers and bottom-up un-gatekept forces.

One objection to the argument here could be: Chinese media are the party-state's propaganda, and so not an autonomous public arena that is responsive. The reply is: partly. It is true that the Chinese media system partly departs from the theory put forward here. But Chinese media are also to large extent led by the private sector, and journalists, also in the public sector, have internalized journalistic norms (Zhu, 2012). More importantly, the online public arena has diversified and grown, and provides a conduit between civil society and the party-state but also a bottom-up counterweight to top-down media. It is managed and kept within bounds, but it will be increasingly difficult to massage into party-state support. Further, some of the support for the party-state, in the form of being rabidly pro-Chinese, is also difficult to manage. In short, China is at one end of the continuum of least responsive and least autonomous public arenas, but it is not entirely so (unlike, say, North Korea). The Indian media system's autonomy, in comparison, is skewed towards dominant political forces, but in this case a lively online public arena will provide a strong counterweight to the ruling government. Western media theory, where autonomy and responsiveness are less impugned by shortcomings, can nevertheless learn from these two cases because the online public arena here, too, has been deemed to be outside the norms of the gatekept public arena and the source of dysfunctions: but this dysfunctionality, and the additional scope of the mediated public arena, can be a boon to political responsiveness as well as the opposite.

One other element that needs to be added to current theories of digital media is disinformation. This topic is currently much discussed, but it can be subsumed here under the rubric of the non-gatekept online public arena. To be sure, there are deliberate dis- or misinformation campaigns. But the main point is simply that online, and outside of news and other institutional information, much information misleads because it is not subject

to gatekeeping. This results in an underground of rumors which, in China, also leads to a distrust in the state control. In India, the lack of a strong non-skewed public arena similarly leads to a lively underground in which non-gatekept information can flourish. Here, too, there are lessons for the Global North: one question about digital media concerns the robustness of an autonomous public arena that citizens can rely on, including how this autonomy copes with unreliable information. Further, if private-sector tech companies are responsible for the bulk of this non-gatekept content, they also face a constraint; namely, their reputations, which may suffer and so lead to less market reach and less revenue. If tech companies from the Global North rely on markets in the Global South, they will need to ensure that they are not blamed for harms or social instability in places where media laws and regulation operate differently.

Will the public arena in the two countries gain greater autonomy? Certain pressures point in that direction, including market forces and new technology uses and the growth of cosmopolitanism among urban middle classes but also the rapid adoption of mobile technology more widely. A different way to arrive at this conclusion is to note that in all media systems, there is competition for attention or visibility in the public arena. A diverse or inclusive and yet coherent public arena is desirable where forces contend to set the agenda without any of them dominating. This pluralism is weak and bounded in China and diminished but still thriving in India. Autonomy enables this pluralism, but the online non-gatekept public arena also needs to foster it, though often without existing institutional guardrails. That is why tech companies are rightly seen as too dominant even if they also foster counterweights to the state and to media control. That is an uneasy conclusion, but looking across China, India and the West allows us to see the positive side of a story that is too easily now seen as negative. And tech companies, like media generally, face accusations from political groups that they are biased (in other words, lack autonomy). Hence the onus is on digital and traditional media to restore or contribute to the belief in the autonomy—and so legitimacy and integrity—of the public arena.

The autonomy of the public arena provides a yardstick, but future research will need to add precision to this idea: In the pre-Internet era, it was relatively straightforward to gauge their autonomy. Now, among the main complicating factors are digital media companies. The question then is how much their private ownership provides scope for expression in India, where they are sometimes pressured to take down or keep content online by the government (Gorwa, 2024: 158–60). At the same time, channels like YouTube (owned by Google) allow criticism of the Modi government that is not gatekept. In China, despite private ownership, digital media are kept within bounds by the government, but the mechanisms whereby this happens is not known. And again, digital media provide a forum for expression in China which is relatively untrammeled compared to tradition media. Pinning down the scope of how digital media extend the public arena and how they are constrained is a major agenda for comparative research (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023).

Digital media infrastructures in China are developing strongly, so the outlook is that the government's control over its autochtonous media will require ever greater sophistication and surveillance. The party-state is shaping its media infrastructure into an instrument of control, but tensions are bound to grow as this infrastructure also supports a lively online public arena. India's digital media infrastructure is weak and its public arena is a fragmented battleground, increasingly shifting online. And while Modi has strong

support online, he also faces strong opposition. The role of media—including digital media—reflects broader socio-technical development but can also shape it, both in India and China and beyond. Digital media theory should provide the analytical tools to grasp these changes.

Acknowledgements The author(s) would like to thank two reviewers of this journal for very helpful comments.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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