Article

Digital Unsettling: Decoloniality and Dispossession in the Age of Social Media

October 1, 2024

In this interview with the SSRC, anthropologists Sahana Udupa and Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan discuss their book *Digital Unsettling: Decoloniality and Dispossession in the Age of Social Media* (New York University Press.2023). Their work explores the intricate ways that digital networks shape – and are shaped by – ongoing struggles against coloniality, through the lens of student-led antiracism protests, data capture, academic practices, and a rise in right-wing extreme speech around the world. Udupa and Dattatreyan offer insight into the fieldwork that informed their findings and the implications for power hierarchies in the contemporary digital environment.

The following transcript has been edited for length and clarity. Watch our full conversation here.

Dannah Dennis
I wanted to start with asking, for both of you, can you give us an overview of where this book *[Digital Unsettling]* fits into your interests, your trajectories, as scholars?

Sahana Udupa
I think this book has arrived at a point when two decades of media research have actually convinced me that there is value in inquiring into the vast interconnectedness, and also the profound unevenness of how media networks touch the lives of millions of people.

When I started my ethnographic study of news cultures in the making of a global city in Bangalore in the early 2000s, I think, I began to see the popularity of emerging digital media, and the boundary-defining characteristics of some of the networks that were evolving at that time. For print journalists, digital media was a specter that could eat into their business. So I started following some of the trajectories of the digital.

And very soon, I landed in what my interlocutors described as a cesspool of *gaali* – it's a Hindi term for abusive cultures with blurred boundaries between joking, shaming, and intimidation. So they're distinctively local, but had started to travel with tremendous momentum with digital networks, and they were also drawing in global vocabularies and

formats. And I started tracking the global dimensions and format-inducing characteristics of digital abusing cultures, which are really global, for instance, how internet memes, and also practices of tweeting, trending, tagging, trolling, and so on, were shaping political discourses. And this led me to collaborate with many scholars for a global ethnographic inquiry around online extreme speech.

It is during this effort that I started centering decolonial perspectives to challenge the idea that extreme speech is a sudden crisis instigated by digital communication. And this work has been developing in different directions. Over a period of time, we've had published articles, edited collections on online extreme speech, and there's an upcoming volume on WhatsApp. And I'll soon be starting a project on small social media platforms. So the book *Digital Unsettling*, I think, helped me to engage in the digital as a frontier and a site of action, both theoretically and reflexively, and in conversation with a trusted colleague and thoughtful scholar. So that's where I position *Digital Unsettling*.

Dannah Dennis
Awesome. Thank you. Yeah, I feel like the book does a great job of showing how some of the worst features of life online are not sudden and new aberrations. I feel like you both do a great job of making that argument – that the way we communicate now is growing out of these long histories of coloniality. Gabriel, how about you?

Gabriel Dattattreyan
Thank you. My earlier work is around youth cultures in India, and so for me, it was a very ethnographic starting point. I arrived in Delhi around 2011, curious of what I was seeing circulating online. Young people in Delhi and Mumbai, the two big metros, were starting to produce and circulate media that indexed worlds far away. I was particularly interested in the ways in which Blackness and urbanity in North America were getting picked up, performed, and embodied in these kinds of audiovisual productions.

That led me to go and start to look around and on the ground, choosing Delhi as a field site, in part because of the prevalent and prevailing discourse around young men from working class backgrounds in Delhi. [There's] a very demonizing discourse that positioned agrarian migrants from the region – but then also migrants from Afghanistan, migrants from Nepal, and then what I found, migrants actually from many other places who were making Delhi their home – as the kind of proverbial demonized "other," the cause and effect of all of Delhi's urban social ills.

And so when I arrived in Delhi, what I found was that these young people had taken up newly-available smartphone technologies, and were taking advantage of very inexpensive 3G, 4G network data packages and were using these new technologies to access all sorts of

media flows that they previously weren't able to. One of which was American hip hop, but only one, right? So I grew really interested in the potentials that this kind of participatory culture opened up for them, but very quickly realized that those potentials also came with the *re*-scripting and re-amplification of caste, race, class, gender, [and other] distributions of inequality.

And so the first book project was really trying to grapple with this contradiction and really trying to think through in their creative media productions. What was at stake? What was possible? What the city of Delhi showed us about digital media and social media in relation to their proclivities and play. And so, you know, I left that project really curious and wondering what social media could do.

I started very hopeful, [and] l kind of ended the project quite ambivalent. It was around that time that Sahana and I started to have – I mean, we'd been having conversations for years prior – but started to have conversations about each of our respective trajectories, and projects, and where we were. Sahana proposed this idea of engaging with the kind of deep contexts and histories that undergird social mediation and online spaces.

And out of that initial set of conversations, D*igital Unsettling* – as a concept, as a heuristic, and as a vehicle for a book – came into being. And it was around that time that the pandemic hit. So that's another part of this story, I think, in some ways, and I would really be curious to hear what Sahana has to say about this. But I think in some ways, the pandemic, with its forced withdrawal from face-to-face sociality, and its push towards online spaces and sociality was so telling and important for our project in the way that we were able to think about it, and think about it across multiple spaces and contexts.

Dannah Dennis
That leads really nicely into my next question. Can you tell us a little bit about how you came to write the book together? One of the things I love about this book is the sense of conversations between the two of you, it really does feel like there's an ongoing back and forth. And it makes a lot of sense, I think, to try to write about the internet in conversation with others, because it's such a vast field. And as you do such a good job of showing the global interconnections and resonances across different spaces online. I wondered if you wanted to say a bit more about how you found yourself in conversation, not only with each other, but also with other scholars, or also other fields of inquiry, as you're writing this book.

Gabriel Dattattreyan
Maybe I'll start first with saying a few words about writing. So I think we were both, from the outset, very interested in thinking about what collaborative writing could look like, and

how we could approach collaborative writing in a way that revealed some of the behind-the-scenes workings of how to think with one another. And so we came up with a few key devices for how to do that. Partly that came through our own conversations, or conversations with each other, but it also came through, or came out of the review process. So there were moments, for instance, where reviewers suggested or asked for some clarity around registers shifts, or voicings, and that was really helpful for us to know where transitions or moments of transition in the book needed to be marked more carefully, more specifically. But you know, our intention in the book was to create a dialogic space, [and] to actually do so with some degree of intention and reflexivity. And so I'm really happy to hear that it's landed with you well.

In terms of inspirations, or in terms of bodies of literature that we were in conversation with, there was definitely an interest in picking up critical internet studies literature and working with it, but also departing from it. So thinking about incredible scholars, like Ruha Benjamin or Safiya Noble within our discipline thinking with Sareeta Amrute So thinking about the multiple ways in which the teleological utopian premise of the internet has been pushed against, and has been critiqued, such that race and its reproduction, misogyny, gender violence and its reproduction, and caste and its reproduction get visibilized and become part of – and not only part, but foundational to the conceptualization and conversation around social media, right? Broadly, but then very specific platforms, frameworks, labor arrangements, that social media is generative of.

Sahana Udupa
Just to quickly add – thank you so much, that was quite comprehensive, Gabriel. I'll only add to the first point on how we started this journey together.

I was supposed to say we've been having these conversations on many taboo topics for many years. So you can also see that we – during the journey, there were so many convergences. We were really anticipating similar trajectories of thoughts. So at every point in this journey, I think our perspectives and scholarship converged on our commitment to critical thinking, and our shared experiences of being in the Western academy as immigrants from South Asia. So there are definitely these overlaps and shared journeys that created a wonderful moment of convergence and comprehension. We understood each other. Even before we spoke, we were able to see what we were trying to say.

At the same time, of course, our distinct scholarly trainings and our life trajectories created tremendous moments of generative tension, which ultimately, we hope, *help* the book, because we were missing each other's points at some point. Then, you know, we could come together and clarify in a way that it advanced our argument, [and] advanced our own thinking around critical concepts that we were working with. And we divided the chapters

based on our interests, based on our fieldwork and scholarly interventions, and we worked on some chapters together. And we've made all these very transparent in our introduction.

Then the second part of your question about collaborating with others, in conversation with many other scholars, Gabriel has already named prominent scholars whom we were engaging with, and we continue to engage with. And I would only probably add Sara Ahmed, who has been extremely influential in my work on extreme speech. And she continues to be very important in this work as well.

So our idea was to open up the digital as a sort of discursive channel and material extension of historical processes that started with the modern colonial period. So really, we wanted to locate the digital and place it in this *longue durée* of coloniality. With that, we open up different lenses, different themes. And we are happy to talk about that, as we continue with this composition.

Dannah Dennis
I wonder how you would explain how decolonizing or decoloniality works in this book, and what you would want readers to take away from this book about that concept?

Sahana Udupa
We open up three lenses. First, we are interested in the discussions, and some of these are really heated, animated discussions and mobilizations that this term "decolonization" has provoked in recent years — not just in digital arenas, but also beyond the digital. And therefore, in the chapters on knowledge and university campuses that Gabriel will be able to help us understand more, we talk precisely about this – the mobilization around the term decolonization, what has that done?

And second, we are interested in the ways the coloniality can be deployed as an analytic to explore and inquire into colonial continuities that the digital manifests, and how it really reinforces unequal political, economic and social relations. And you see that sort of approach to coloniality as a critical lens, especially in the "Extreme" and "Capture" chapters, but also throughout the book.

And third, we are interested in the ways decoloniality can enable ethical practices, and we call this a "decolonial sensibility." It's a practice of connection and collaboration beyond the academy, and to think about these collaborations differently, and towards liberation, hopefully.

So we therefore, from the very beginning, wanted to document and open up these three lenses, the distinct and sometimes-contradictory trajectories of the discourse of decolonization, while holding on to the liberatory promise of its critical and unsettling

sensibility. So we're not naively embracing this, we really also opened it up as an object of inquiry.

Therefore, we have also shown how decolonization has been appropriated by nationalist regimes. We talk about how a Hindu nationalist regime has appropriated this term. And in my latest phase of fieldwork, I heard that decolonization is the new buzzword for political campaigns. So clearly, that has become a very important rhetoric for xenophobic and nationalist projects in different parts of the world. However, we cannot abandon, for instance, the question of women's emancipation, simply because some alt-right groups have begun to utilize a distorted version of it. And nobody does that. But decoloniality is vulnerable to such attacks and dismissals. Because, I think, it is the language of people of color, of vulnerable communities. It raises difficult questions about historical privilege and present-day exploitation. So when there are xenophobic, nationalistic, and even geopolitical appropriations of the term in some contexts, I think status quo scholars point out the fallacy to dismiss the framework altogether. So that is something that we need to be aware of, I think.

At the same time, in the West, there is also a tendency to romanticize the concept, and gloss over its multiple and, at times, problematic convolutions. So in our book, we have tried to avoid these tempting traps. They were never tempting for us, but probably for some parts of our scholarly world. But then we wanted to foreground decoloniality as a critical framework, as I mentioned, to place the digital in the *longue durée* of coloniality also as an object of inquiry to trace its different trajectories, and as an ethical practice to imagine collaborations among researchers and with communities. So these are the three different lenses. But we were also deeply aware of the different controversial trajectories it has taken in the recent past.

> "We wanted to foreground decoloniality as a critical framework — to place the digital in the longue durée of coloniality, to trace its different trajectories as an ethical practice to imagine collaborations among researchers and with communities."

Dannah Dennis
Yeah, one of the ways that decoloniality or decolonizing has been used as well – in a way that I think gets us into the chapter on campuses and universities – is in this neoliberal window dressing kind of way, like, 'oh, we're a university that believes in diversity,' and all these things that end up being pretty shallow, unfortunately. And I think that really takes a

toll on scholars of color, students of color working in these spaces, to have a university that professes to support them and to be in line with them, but in general really is not.

So I wonder if you wanted to tell us a little bit more about your research on that, Gabriel? Specifically thinking about your time at Goldsmiths, which you write about in the book, and then kind of more broadly in terms of universities?

Gabriel Dattattreyan
Yeah. That's a great segue, I think. So with regards to campus and the "Campus" chapter – one thing I'll say is, first, is that I wouldn't want to name what was happening at Goldsmiths, or for that matter, name any of the social movement work, or student activist work as necessarily decolonial, at least in the way that they were framing it.

So where decoloniality, I think, emerges is in our analytic frame, to really think again about the *longue durée* of coloniality, and to think about the ways in which the *longue durée* of coloniality connects contexts in unexpected ways, right? These are the social media views, these are the circulations of particular images or phrases or texts.

And so at Goldsmiths, what I grew really interested in as I was participating in the GARA, the Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action, which was an administrative building occupation that lasted over three months, was the ways in which it became evident that social media enabled a kind of connection, that on some levels that seemed superfluous, and on other levels and at other moments and instances felt very deep between what was happening in the UK, and specifically at Goldsmiths. But then also preceding that, in the Rhodes Must Fall efforts at Oxbridge – so a much more direct corollary to what was happening in South Africa. And then more broadly, to student activist work around BLM in the US, and then Latin American movements in the universities.

And so the argument we were trying to make is that the campus continues to be a site of struggle, and that that struggle is materially grounded and meaningful. So it's not just wokeism, for instance, right? But there are real stakes in what's happening at the university level. And, you know, we can look at student activist tactics to think about those stakes, but we can also look at the responses that universities and administrators have to student activism to understand and get a sense of what the stakes are. And so decoloniality and decolonial discourse becomes a pivot by which to understand this back and forth.

And so, you know, thinking about Goldsmiths, and really thinking about the ways that the institution, like many other institutions, has tried to figure out how to create what Sara Ahmed calls "the non-performative," right? And so the non-performative materializes in statements, for instance, that get circulated from administrators. It gets enacted through

social media campaigns that are meant to buttress the idea of the image of the university as a place that's already equal, right, it already produces and holds the potential for everyone to have equal footing, that is inclusive, that's diverse. And really try, through a careful reading of one such instance of campus activism and social movement activism, to really show the mechanisms that are at play when we start to think about the role of social media in these kinds of struggles.

And so I think you mentioned affective counter publics in your question, right? So, you know, one of the things I think we needed to do is try to find the language connected to scholarship around communications, linked to previous discussions and theorizations. That enabled us to understand how those mechanisms – speech mechanisms, deployments of images, and so on, were working. And affect became central to that.

Dannah Dennis
One of the things that really tied this chapter on to the next chapter was recognizing – for me and thinking about how you both wrote about campuses – as a space where not only can students practice imagining a decolonial institution or a decolonial future, but also as a space where, unfortunately, a lot of right-wing attention is often focused. And specifically now, in the era of networked communication online, what happens, maybe, in *one* local university campus can become the target of right-wing extremism across the internet, unfortunately.

So that leads us into thinking about your work, Sahana, on extreme speech online, which is, of course, something that you've been really working on for a while. I used to, in my anthropology of social media class, teach your article, on *gaali* cultures, as a way of introducing mostly American students to the fact that the internet is rough in a lot of ways and in a lot of places. And the sort of online vitriol that we often see is not just limited to the English-speaking American internet that my students were most commonly interacting with.

ButI think you put forward a really good argument that this online vitriol of extreme speech is not something new. It's not something radically aberrant. It's not some new subversion of the norms of liberal discourse, but it needs to be analyzed, as you have said, as a kind of continuity of the *longue durée* of coloniality.

And so I wondered if you wanted to comment more about that, and also talk about the framework that I found really useful that you proposed – of deep contextualization, and close contextualization, as tools that we need to use together in order to understand extreme speech online.

Sahana Udupa

Yes, this has become a global phenomenon. But at the same time, when it comes to analysis, there are real limitations. And therefore in this chapter, we wanted to critique the moral panics in the West around digital revolution, and how it has to be blamed for decimating the gains of the French revolution for instance. That's how I start the chapter, my encounter with a journalist at a club in Munich. And—

Dannah Dennis
That was such a great quote – can you just say what it was, "the online revolution is undoing the French Revolution," or something like that?

Sahana Udupa
"Digital revolution is undoing the gains of the French Revolution." So this is how she presented the crisis: digital communication should be blamed, for instance, for the upsurge of vitriol and unpleasant speech we see today. And this perception of danger in the digital age in these narratives develops from, and *reinforces,* a liberal self-understanding of calm rationality.

And therefore, our key focus in this chapter is to highlight the limits of self-understanding, and to complicate the framing of online vitriol as a contemporary crisis in the liberal social order. And therefore, all those modern panics that recenter the so-called "rational West" as the locus and subject of crisis, so it's constantly re-centering the West, and building on this critique, and based on ethnographic fieldwork among right-wing groups in India and Germany.

We show how a decolonial reading of online vitriol opens up new critical pathways to understand the nature of online material – by which we mean, who is targeted and how? And also, of *knowing what is damaged through speech*. And even that assessment is sometimes colored by this centering of an aggrieved West. And therefore, we wanted to just apply or rather extend our decolonial lens into this problem.

And here lies the key emphasis of the extreme speech framework that I've also been developing elsewhere with several collaborators. And the interest is on ethnography and historical sensibility in our analysis of vitriol and disinformation in the digital age.

Dannah Dennis
Thank you. I think that similarly, the move in the chapter on data capture is a similar one to think about how it's easy to become very concerned. And I think we should be very concerned about the multiple ways in which we're surveilled online, and our data is being used to make money for other people, at perhaps at our own expense. But this, again, is not something brand new to a contemporary, twenty-first century digital life, but rather, is

grounded in colonial histories of extracting data about colonized people, and using that to enhance colonial endeavors in various ways. And unfortunately, the history of the discipline of anthropology is entangled with this as well.

I wanted to ask about the concept of differentiated exploitation that comes to the fore at first in this chapter on "Capture," but is important for understanding various moments in the book. Do you want to explain a little bit more about what that term means? And how it shapes our lives online?

Sahana Udupa
Yeah, first of all, I think you're absolutely right. And this chapter, we continue that critique. So global data relations that aim to extract and monetize the so-called behavioral surplus. It has problematic trajectories. And unfortunately, anthropology is deeply implicated in this as a discipline. And therefore this liberal-model alarm over data surveillance practices has actually ignored the historical trajectory of these practices, and how these practices were tied to the colonial control of the colonized people. And therefore, the valorized term of human autonomy appears again and again, in criticisms around digital capitalism.

So I tried to push back and say "who are the humans you're talking about?" Right? This valorized entity called human, what is it doing? It is hiding longer trajectories. That's one part of our critique. And we develop this. And we demonstrate that this self-absorbed Western liberal contemplation around digital capitalism fails to fully address the uneven ways in which mechanisms of digital capitalism have unfolded globally. That's where this differentiated exploitation becomes an important concept for us. A good example would be differentiated labor relations that you also mentioned in your question. And it offers, I think, a very important gateway to interrogate this unevenness and the structures of dispossession it depends on and perpetuates.

I think a very striking case that we discuss in this book as well is a corporate content moderation and the kind of unevenness we see in corporate resource allocation for content moderation, linguistic disparity, and the outsourcing of devalued moderation work to the Global South or marginalized corners within the Metropole. So we've been hearing stories about how third party contractors for Facebook employ marginalized immigrant populations, even within the Metropole. So these are the Global Souths in the Metropole, and of course, to actual geographical Global South as well. So corporate content moderation offers a very striking example, for differentiated exploitation.

One other example is the way Facebook handled the Myanmar case. Minoritized language communities will be the most affected because of the ways in which AI-assisted corporate content moderation is being developed today. And therefore, this is something that

exemplifies, unfortunately, the enduring legacy of coloniality and differentiated exploitation. And one other example would be data relations in terms of surveillance of datafied subjects. Here, again, we see that differentiated exploitation is very pronounced. We've been hearing how migrant laborers are also the subject of new forms of surveillance technologies today. And therefore, we employ the concept of *capture.* It signals processes of appropriating and disciplining labor, time, meanings, and bodies for digital capitalist accumulation by laying a recursive trap of continuous online engagement that is observable, traceable, plottable, and in historically specific ways, manipulable. And this – I'm just quoting from the book – but that is how we operationalize the concept of capture to understand different facets of differentiated exploitation.

> "Knowledge production has never been neutral.… How you're positioned, and where your position within a network flow of knowledge matters."

Dannah Dennis
Thanks for that. So I think I want to move to asking about the next chapter on "Knowledge and Citation," another great chapter. Where, again, you're talking about, social media presenting us with, in some ways, things that are wonderful, expansive, creative possibilities for creating knowledge and highlighting the voices of people who have often been marginalized in the past. And much of that is very necessary and important corrective to the narrow practices of knowledge production and citation that are often practiced in academia. But there's also this piece that, you know, we can't be unreservedly optimistic about these new developments. Because there are ways of course in which new opportunities, new avenues for knowledge creation and new citational practice can be problematic.

So Gabriel, for instance, you talk about the story of coming across a video advocating *for* violence, unfortunately, against Sikh people from a Hindu nationalist perspective, arguing for what we might generously – perhaps too generously? – call a sort of alternative vision of South Asian history. Again, drawing on what you were saying earlier about the ways in which the rhetoric of decoloniality has been deployed in South Asian contexts specifically, to sometimes advocate for violence in ways that are really concerning.

And Sahana, of course, you've written about this too, in previous work looking at sort of archiving as history-making in the Hindu nationalist movement online.

So what lessons should we draw from this as scholars, thinking about these possibilities and these pitfalls of digital knowledge production? And how does this relate to your broader concept of digital unsettling?

Gabriel Dattattreyan

The first thing I'll say is, knowledge production has never been neutral, right? f we start from that premise, the potential for production outside of the licensed and legitimated sites for knowledge production – namely the university, but then also its ancillaries [like] think tanks – and it's circulation [of that knowledge] It's the potential to be able to find something that is at stake, or that matters, when we start to think about social media and digital channels. There's already an unsettling right there, once that potential is taken up and realized. But then, as you rightly said, that potential can be used to many different ends.

How you're positioned, and where your position within a network flow of knowledge matters. So the example I gave of that video popping up in a conversation that I was having with a former participant of mine, a young man that I'd met in Delhi, doing research on hip hop. He was a b-boy, a dancer who was making an argument to me about – so this was around the time of the farmers protests, right? In Punjab. And we were having, you know, one of our regular sessions, where we would chat on WhatsApp, either through a WhatsApp video call, or sometimes just text back and forth to each other.

And he, you know, over the years had been growing increasingly enamored and interested with the Hindu nationalist project, he started to see himself as a Hindu. When I first met him, he hadn't imagined himself as a Hindu. And so this conversation is an ongoing conversation. And he was looking for evidence to support his position that the farmers were seditious, right? That they were committing an act of sedition, that they were anti-national.

And so he found this video and he shared it with me. And it became this really like, for me, this really important moment where I was like, "Oh, okay." Here's this young man, he has not had any schooling beyond secondary school. He's trying to have some facility within a conversation, he's trying to draw on what he has available to him. The internet has made available certain resources.Through his networks, he's been able to access very specific artifacts, productions, and now he's mobilizing with me to make a point and make an argument.

So I mean, that was a moment for me to really think through how what could be romanticized as again, a potential as a kind of liberatory trajectory in terms of knowledge production doesn't necessarily play out. If we're thinking about someone who's positioned like him, right? So perhaps for a PhD student, or an undergraduate student who's in the academy, someone who's sitting in a position of already-relative connectivity, where there's many different ways they can access information. They have the tools, or perhaps they've learned the tools, or they have the potential to learn the tools to differentiate some sources from other sources. Sure, it's amazing, but if we're talking about someone like him, it becomes potentially dangerous.

Sahana Udupa
I think that that's exactly what we were documenting. The article that you refer to, Dannah, the article on online archiving as history making – I was meeting many of these people, and also people who are affected by this practice. So how, right, Hindu nationalist volunteers had developed this digital practice of assembling facts, figures, and arguments, as an ideological exercise. And this was peer-driven. This was net savvy. This was also a sort of non-expert take on history.

This was also the time when I came across the term "screenshot mafia." So journalists and politicians I met – they were telling me that whenever they voiced criticism against exclusionary nationalist politics, a troll army would emerge, and someone, or a bunch of them would target them by throwing at them screenshots of what they had posted. So they're long posts, yeah? They would have made some mistake, there will be some factual error. And that screenshot would be used to undermine their entire political position, or even their professional standing.

And hence, online archiving as history-making differs from conventional archiving. It is a more dynamic endeavor, it's filled with what could be called posts and commentaries rallied against opposing narratives. It's not a static exercise of designing and maintaining portals for a display of information. Or – it's not just about mere creation of data, it's much more interactive.

I started arguing that online archiving for religious politics offers a very sobering, and even troubling picture of the digital commons. And it actually unsettled some of our Universalist claims, and around much-celebrated user generated content. This was in 2015. I think practice has continued to this day. And it is amplified today, through very heavily funded and elaborately organized digital influence operations. So it has reached a different scale today.

Dannah Dennis
For sure, thinking of what is sometimes called in the US context "alternative facts," or even whole alternative histories and concepts of the world. It's something that the internet has enabled in ways that can be really concerning.

I want to draw on a point that I mentioned before about how it's really refreshing, I think, to read a book by anthropologists that does have such a wide geographic perspective as this. You know, I do think there's, of course, lots of value in the very focused geographic work that we often do. But this book is really looking at the Internet, and practices of social media, from a variety of different vantage points in India, Germany, the US and the UK as the four main sites that you all are drawing from based on your own histories and life

experiences – but also pulling in other relevant points of comparison from lots of places.

Of course, it makes sense. The internet is global, right, in a sense, and we are looking at sort of global patterns of social life that are played out and enabled by the internet.

So in your chapter on home and field, you're talking about the blurring or even the erasing of, what we might think of as sort of the traditional anthropological distinctions between home and field. And, you know, for those of us who do our research about life online, for better and for worse, perhaps, in some ways, that distinction is almost entirely collapsed sometimes.

So I'm curious if you can comment on what that has meant for you as anthropologists, and what it means for the analytical project of this book.

Sahana Udupa
It's been such an influential trope for anthropology, with a very problematic colonial genealogy, as well. Because it was about the comfort of the home and, and the sort of exoticism of the field. So those distinctions have very problematic genealogies.

In any case, the blurring of this home/field distinction is definitely a digitally mediated condition. Digitalization has, again, to use our term *unsettled,* and in some ways decoded the distinction between home and field, and all different ideas that come with it, the ideas of distance and nearness. Now, there's also a temporal distinction, and of course, the distinction between "us" and "them."

This blurring, however, comes with different kinds of anxieties. It comes with many different barriers, and also, of course, a newer forms of energies and effects. So we try to grapple with this particular blurring by describing it as *network exposure*. Just to quote from the book, a network exposure draws researchers into evolving, shifting, and haunting webs of connection that demand researchers' attention, agility, and quick reciprocal action. So especially those of us who are on social media, trying to understand online communities, or who are very actively sharing our research interests and research results on our digital networks, we *are* in this state of network exposure. And we realize that the field is constantly speaking back to us. And this gives us the responsibility to clarify what are the stakes of our project, and why are we doing this, et cetera.

But it also carries very specific risks, especially when the research is about topics like right-wing political cultures. Therefore, we reflect on network exposure by bringing forward our own journeys across multiple homes and fields. And here you see India, Germany, US, UK and several more, and how our journey urges us to think about scholarship and collaborations differently.

So we do something about this reflection as well to think about collaborations differently. For example, extreme speech is not just an object of analysis, but it is also a part of our experiential reality, as we navigate these multiple homes and fields, and also we don't leave behind the field, and we don't change the field, because it's not working for us anymore. Or it's not comfortable for us, but we feel for our multiple homes. So the field is haunting us as multiple homes. And that, I think, is something that has been both rewarding as scholars, but at the same time, extremely depressing when you witness all different dark communicational practices erupting on these multiple fields. And not just on digital networks, but also when we witness different kinds of forced evictions and violence in our multiple homes, and we often feel helpless. And that's not a good feeling. Therefore, I think home/field offers us a very interesting heuristic to open up these questions of connection.

Gabriel Dattattreyan
That was so well-said. The only thing I would add is that, you know, the minute the home/field distinction is critically disturbed or unsettled – the minute we take it upon ourselves to do that work, partially because of our positions, as Sahana said, it's hard not to, as immigrants scholars, disturb it by our mere presence. Our very presence in the university actually disturbs distinctions between home/field, but the minute we make home our field, that also produces another unsettling. So, writing about Germany, for example, or the UK, and racial politics, colonial politics in either case, you know, it produces – there's the luxury of feeling at ease, it's something that gets very quickly lost. And I think that that's a political decision. It's a move to recognize, right, that scholarship and scholarly endeavor always is ensconced in the political, whether we articulate it as such or not.

Authors

Sahana Udupa is Professor of Media Anthropology at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich), Joan Shorenstein Fellow and Berkman Klein Fellow at Harvard University, and the founder of the Center for Digital Dignity. Across ongoing research projects and several books, Udupa's work has traced the transforming media and urban landscapes of late capitalism. Her recent work has focused on online extreme speech and AI and content moderation.

E. Gabriel Dattatreyan is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at New York University and co-editor of the *Multimodal Section of American Anthropologist,* the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association. His research examines how digital media shapes and is shaped by performances of youthful becoming, racialized difference, gendered performance, and depictions of urban life.

Dannah Dennis is an anthropologist and Program Officer for the Data Fluencies Project at

the Social Science Research Council.

Read more about this research in Digital Unsettling: Decoloniality and Dispossession in the Age of Social Media*, available now from New York University Press.*