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SCHOOL OF  
DIGITAL MEDIA AND  
COMMUNICATION

# Human and Digital Mutualism

**Code, Culture and Communication**

An Interdisciplinary Conference

21-22 Nov 2025

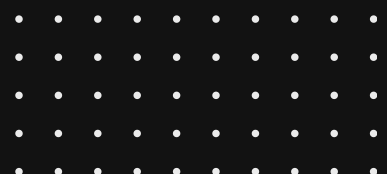


## Book of Abstracts

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**International  
Communication  
Association**  
INDIA



# **Human and Digital Mutualism**

## **Code, Culture and Communication**

**An Interdisciplinary Conference**

**21-22 November 2025**

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School of Digital Media and Communication, Mahindra University

**Message from Chancellor  
Anand Mahindra  
Mahindra University**



It is heartening to note that our School of Digital Media and Communication (SDMC) is embarking on a deeply meaningful conference. Serious and earnest discussions around the symbiotic relationship between technological and manual processes are a much-needed exercise today. Firstly, the spurt of technological advancements has been nothing short of astoundingly rapid. Secondly, the new intersection between humans and machines is more complex and confounding than ever before. As we develop new machine languages, we are constantly learning how intricate the human brain is. We need the intervention of humanities and social sciences in these technological innovations.

That is why it is reassuring to me that a digital media and communication school should take up this challenging discourse. My hearty compliments to the organizers for this meaningful conference and my best wishes for its success.

**Message from Vice Chancellor  
Yajulu Medury  
Mahindra University**



I am delighted that our young School of Digital Media and Communication (SDMC) has partnered with the India chapter of the world's leading academic body of communication, the International Communication Association (ICA), and together, they have organised a conference on a cutting-edge theme. Being SDMC's maiden academic conference, it holds a special place in our hearts and raises new expectations in the academic world as a potential beacon that will shine light on untrodden paths.

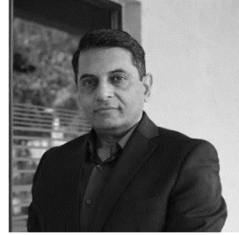
The vibrant theme, Human and Digital Mutualism: Code, Culture and Communication, allows itself to act as an interpretive pool from which other disciplines can benefit, including those invested in humanities, engineering and social sciences. After all, who can deny today that we are all confronted by steep challenges emanating from exciting new technological innovations? We are all keen to discover new methods, even new structures, of academics that speak to our new ecologies. I am confident that the conference will raise new questions and suggest new pathways and directions for the field and practice of mediated communication, and of academic practices at large.

My best wishes for the grand success of this conference.

## **Foreword by Conference Chair**

### **Shashidhar Nanjundaiah**

**Founding Dean and Professor  
School of Digital Media and Communication  
Mahindra University**



### **Uncorking the vortex**

Our contemporary communicative societies are marked by the arrival of the machine not as an intervening processor alone, but as the source and the receiver as well. The entire space and chain of communication are thus shared between humans, machines, and invisible robots. One strand of thought, as claimed by technocrats and determinists, is that this is a slam-dunk case in which both humans and technology stand to gain from the constancy of dynamic interactions and immersions. The other, led largely by critical scholars around the world, is that such an immersive and quantified mechanism dehumanizes communication, depriving it of quintessentially human values.

Mutualism is not new, of course: It is the essence of biological complementarity—for example, between bees and flowers. Mutualism—at least in the way our conference constructs it—does not merely signify an interactive relationship; it is the new ecosystem in which we are asked to dwell. It indicates a system of mutual learning, mutual amplification, and mutual gain. A question only scholars will ask is: Is mutualism really a non-zero-sum game or are we missing something?

Learning is an obvious example as machines are now designed to learn from human experiences, and vice versa. In the vortex of democratised public communication, the process of learning finds itself destabilised. In this new crossroads, our new AI generation may seem happy to outsource the process of learning to artificial intelligence, and in the process undermine institutions that have painstakingly systematised learning as the fountainhead of human endeavour. To negotiate this new technological enablement in a paradoxical way, decoding the process of learning becomes the next human challenge.

A related use case of the new destabilization that is directly related to our media and communication field lies in institutional trust, not only because the media's neoliberal imperatives stand exposed, but because it seems the amplification of public voices is naturally antithetical to social contracts. Thus, para-social relationships with technological interfaces no longer seem merely “para”: They are quickly becoming primary to our understandings. This is the context in which we must critically approach our conference theme.

We hope to unseal the box by (deftly, I hope) curating a series of research presentations and films along with keynote addresses and panel discussions with leading voices of the industry and academia. The presentations of research papers are a result of a stringent review process in which two reviewers were allotted the submitted long abstracts by our review team lead, and then a third reviewer further critiqued them. We ran plagiarism and artificial intelligence (AI) similarity tests via globally reliable platforms. In the end, only a minor proportion of the abstracts we received found their way onto the presentation stage, many with revisions as suggested by our reviewers.

If one truism about Human and Digital Mutualism: Code, Culture and Communication must endure, it is that the unpacking the whole and the sum of its parts will continue beyond this first edition of our collaborative conference by our School of Digital Media and Communication and the India chapter of the mighty International Communication Association. As we conclude this edition, it will be time to uncork another vortex in the next.

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## **Inaugural Addresses**

### **Generative AI in research: Challenges, opportunities, and innovations**

#### **Noshir Contractor**

Former ICA President and Jane S. & William J. White Professor of Behavioral Sciences, Northwestern University, USA

This paper addresses two critical paradigm shifts in communication research: changes in the object of scientific inquiry and transformations in how we conduct research itself. As algorithmically infused societies emerge, researchers must adapt their methods to study increasingly complex sociotechnical systems.

Drawing on technology adoption patterns—substitution, enlargement, and reconfiguration—this presentation examines how generative AI is reshaping research across hypothesis generation, experimental design, data collection, peer review, and dissemination. While AI promises to democratize and accelerate research by enhancing global accessibility and inclusiveness, significant challenges remain: productivity paradoxes, validity concerns, and ethical considerations, including the potential widening of information gaps between research "haves" and "have-nots."

The presentation concludes that advancing more inclusive and globally accessible research requires collaborative intelligence combining AI, AI experts, and domain experts, potentially signalling a paradigm shift in how we communicate scholarship worldwide.

## **Human and digital mutualism: Code, culture, and communication - reflections and perspective**

**Sanjay Bharthur**

ICA India chapter lead and Senior Professor of Communication,  
Manipal Institute of Communication, MAHE

The evolving relationship between humans and digital systems can be examined in a civilisational continuum perspective as well as the more contemporary issue and concerns framework. Situating today's technological environment within long arcs of communication history, it argues that the human-machine interface is neither a sudden rupture nor a purely contemporary phenomenon. Drawing on Harold Innis's time-space framework and other critical frameworks, the talk highlights how communication technologies have historically shaped societal organisation, knowledge flows, and political centralisation. The Renaissance moment of cognitive extension, the tools of empire that enabled administrative control, and the colonial paradox of technology transfer provide a deep historical scaffolding for understanding today's digital infrastructures.

The transition from mass media-centric development to telecom-led economic governance in India as well as other contexts forms a critical hinge in this narrative. With platformisation, networked communication, and unprecedented data flows, humans now co-produce meaning, contexts, and behaviour with algorithmic systems. Yet this mutualism is asymmetric, creating tensions between amplification and dependency, democratisation and control, participation and extraction. India's identity infrastructures, welfare-linked data systems, and expanding digital ecosystem illuminate both the inclusive potential and the risks of a surveillance-data complex.

The keynote concludes by arguing for intentional, human-centric mutualism grounded in ethical design, institutional responsibility, and cultural literacy of machine-generated contexts. The talk positions the digital moment not as an endpoint but as the latest chapter in humanity's long negotiation with communication technologies.

# **Plenary Sessions**





## **“@AI, is it true?” Changing informational needs and practices**

### **Jay Barchas-Lichtenstein**

Senior Research Manager, Center for News, Technology & Innovation, USA

The Center for News, Technology & Innovation (CNTI) is an independent global research center that seeks to encourage independent, sustainable media, maintain an open internet and foster informed public policy conversations. To achieve this, we conduct research studies and publish periodic reports. For each issue area, CNTI presents a series of critical questions. We then assess the current state of the issue, conduct original and collaborative research, and convene cross-industry thought leaders in journalism, technology, research, and policy to facilitate evidence-based discussions. This masterclass will draw on our recent and forthcoming publications to discuss informational needs and challenges with AI chatbots, including some takeaways for journalists and other information providers. We will focus on two parallel research tracks – AI in the newsroom and information seeking with AI.

#### **AI in the newsroom**

Newsrooms have been experimenting with various forms of automation for more than fifty years (Mari, 2024), and research on this topic has accelerated considerably in the last dozen years. One recent review found linear growth in academic publications on AI on journalism over a ten year period, rising from 7 articles in 2014 to 147 in 2023 (Ioscote, et al., 2024). Moreover, AI adoption in the newsroom is a global phenomenon: journalists in the Global South are using these technologies as much if not more than their colleagues in the Global North, and they express more positive views of them (Barchas-Lichtenstein, et al., 2025; Radcliffe, 2025). To keep up with the rapid pace of research, CNTI’s Global AI & Journalism Research Working Group meets regularly. This group puts out regular briefings on specific areas of research to keep working journalists and journalism researchers abreast of the research consensus and open questions. The speakers will share recent findings on communicating about AI for the public

#### **Information seeking with AI**

Between 2024 and 2025, weekly use of AI chatbots nearly doubled in six countries, from 18% to 34% (Simon et al., 2025). And while research consistently finds that use of chatbots “to get news” is relatively low, “information-seeking” is a top self-reported use case across studies, accounting for more than one in five uses (Simon et al., 2025; Chatterji et al., 2025). The line between “information” and “news” is hardly clear-cut (LeCompte, 2024), and information-seeking is also likely to include many topics where users might previously have turned to news sources. It’s increasingly clear that AI chatbots and similar technologies will have profound effects on the information landscape, even if — like social media — their designers did not originally intend or foresee this use. Attempts to characterize user information behavior have primarily relied either on chat logs and app data or on user self-report (Simon, et al., 2025; Chatterji et al., 2025; Rainie, 2025). CNTI combined these approaches through a think-aloud interview methodology that grounds chatbot interactions in users’ larger information and news repertoires. We conducted a comparative study in the US and India [forthcoming, Jan 2026], with a focus on the news user needs (Fletcher, 2024; Verhoeven & Shiskin, 2023) and will discuss preliminary findings, open questions, and considerations for various stakeholders during the session.

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## **Innovation through play**

### **Derek Ham**

Director of Entertainment Technology Center, and Associate Professor,  
Carnegie Mellon University, USA

This keynote will look at creative thinking and what it means to be in a “state of play”, as one wrestles with new technology and develops new and novel systems for the field of entertainment. I spend much time looking and thinking about curricula in higher education. Astonishingly, many of the practices are consistent, and several of the challenges facing students and faculty alike need to be addressed. Very few meaningful conversations on innovation and creativity are being had. It takes a back seat to subjects such as social responsibility, sustainability, design research methods, and design technology. These are essential topics, but what is a design education if you are not taught to be more creative?

That is not to say that creativity and innovation are not happening at design schools, but how it is being done (and taught) is still pretty much a black box. Schools look to recruit “creative types,” whether through a portfolio process at admissions or the gruelling foundation programmes we create to weed out the “best students.” Both systems are flawed, yet we rely heavily on them to keep design schools functioning the way they do. Creativity is, therefore, still positioned as something innate and is done by default for every design student, educator, and practitioner. Nothing could be any further from the truth.

The void of intentional discussions around creativity trickles down to the environments in which it is supposed to be at its highest: the design studio. We must learn to play again if we want to have a meaningful conversation on innovation and creativity in design education. The state of play should be the most critical factor for gauging the health of a design studio, programme, or college. We find creativity and innovation in play, and now with AI we see new road maps to achieving it.

The necessity of being in a state of play to spur creativity is often overlooked and devalued when setting up a design programme's curriculum. Little time is spent on ways to establish playful environments, and as a result, its absence is

found in the background and work of many design studios. Educators must refrain from standing idly by and assuming that play will happen independently. By the time most design students reach college, most have had their fill of traditional K-12 educational experiences that have programmed them when to "play" and when to be "serious."

At the Entertainment Technology Center, we prioritize being in a state of play. Rooted in CMU's legacy of excellence in the arts and sciences, the ETC blends creative exploration with technical rigor in a uniquely collaborative environment. Our students learn by doing: through project-based work and interdisciplinary collaboration. Come hear how the ETC is exploring the new-frontiers AI to help shape the future of gaming, virtual reality (XR), playful robotics, and in-person entertainment.

## **Computational media and empathy: The science of immersive storytelling**

**Sri Kalyanaraman**

Senior Associate Dean for Research, Michigan State University, USA

Immersive technologies have transformed computational media with their ability to blur the distinction between mediated and physical, real-world experiences. These technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), are defined by the 4 Is—immersion (the sense of “being there” which allows users to experience vivid perspective-taking), impossibility (the ability to create mediated experiences that would not be possible in the “real” world), imagination (the creativity afforded by the technology) and interactivity (a sense of mutualism as explicated by the cause-and-effect relationship between user actions in the virtual world and their consequences).

The perspective-taking ability of immersive technologies has led to them being widely proclaimed as “empathy machines”. In addition to empathy, immersive experiences also foster sensemaking, shared experiences, and accelerated futures, with the level of interactivity particularly crucial in creating inimitable experiences. This presentation discusses how the science of immersive storytelling can stimulate scholarship in social good and is especially effective in sustainability research with implications in such areas as climate science, health and well-being, and social equality.

## **Mutualistic media? Rethinking human–digital relations in hybrid publics**

**Sundeeep R Muppidi**

Professor of Digital Media & Communication, University of Hartford,  
USA

In the contemporary digital landscape, the question is no longer whether we use technology or whether technology uses us. Rather, it is how we live with algorithms—how our cognitive, cultural, and communicative practices are shaped by, and in turn shape, computational systems. This presentation interrogates the concept of mutualism as a framework for understanding human–algorithmic relations in contemporary digital publics. Drawing from complexity theory, media ecology, and platform studies, it proposes mutualism as a lens to analyse co-adaptive dynamics between users and digital systems. Applied to media environments, mutualism offers a compelling framework for understanding the co-evolution of human behaviour and algorithmic design.

Yet, mutualism is not a neutral metaphor. It carries ideological weight. It risks obscuring the asymmetries of power, labour, and agency that characterize digital capitalism. Hence, it also critiques the ideological work that mutualism performs—naturalizing asymmetrical power relations and obscuring the extractive logic of algorithmic capitalism. Through case studies on misinformation networks, influencer cultures, and AI-mediated verification, the paper explores the promise and peril of mutualistic thinking, ultimately advocating for epistemic resilience and critical literacy in hybrid media environments. It asks whether we are co-evolving toward justice, creativity, and resilience? Or if we are adapting to systems that extract, exploit, and divide?

## **The first line of defence: Digital care making within technology facilitated gender and sexual violence**

**Nishant Shah**

Associate Professor of Global Media and Director of the Digital Narratives Studio, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

This talk reframes digital care not as a technical or juridical process but as a moral and affective practice that reveals how digital infrastructures imagine care after harm. In the context of Technology-Facilitated Gender and Sexual Violence (TF-GSV), digital care has become the state's and platform's dominant language of responsibility — procedural, retrospective, and reactive. Drawing on feminist and queer theories of care, I propose that this “post-harm” regime is sustained by three sociotechnical presuppositions: technological solutionism, individuation of harms, and discretization of violence. Through these, care is rendered as compliance: harm must first be made visible as content before care can be said to have occurred. I further argue that there are particular computational and platformed responses which are rehearsed and enacted, even heralded as exemplary, but they end up repeating conditions of harm without structurally questioning them. Using empirical cases from the global south and conceptual frames from critical technology studies, I argue for a re-orientation from care as redress to care as maintenance and first line of defence — from governance after harm to care before harm. The essay develops “Narrative Change Practice” as a feminist method for repositioning digital care-making: shifting attention from rules to relations, incidents to conditions, and visibility to vulnerability. By foregrounding prevention, solidarity, and structural accountability, it imagines digital care not as a belated response but as the infrastructural ethic that makes digital life liveable.



## **Governing dislocations in the platform economy**

**Vibodh Parthasarathi**

Associate Professor, Jamia Millia Islamia, India

A large part of scholarship on the platform economy views it from the lens of rupture, focusing as it does on the affordances of apps, portals, and algorithms. Amidst this, there is a yet small but growing acceptance to understand the platform economy as an evolutionary process – i.e., one where information and technology have been incrementally harnessed to institutionalise novel forms of market systems. Undoubtedly, the platform economy had disrupted at least three dynamics in ‘the media’ as we knew it. The first, at the technological level, pertains to the complexity of user and backend infrastructures; the second, at the industrial level, deals with the altered relationship between traditional and new actors jostling for value; and the third, at the commercial level, open on to the nature of cooperation and competition witnessed. A close look at these dynamics reveals numerous interdependencies and imbalances that mark the platformisation of media markets. These, in turn, have not only aroused anxieties from traditional commercial actors but also posed challenges to inherited frameworks and architectures of media policy. These challenges include the conduct of distributors and intermediaries, the oligopolist market for digital competencies, the lack of enumerative accountability, and more generally, the tendency of monopsony inherent in the platform economy – all of which cannot be addressed from the lens of rupture alone. Recognizing all this, I want to make a case to theorize platform governance from the vantage point of dislocations. For, unless we recognize these dislocations, and relocations, in and around the extant media economy, efforts to evolve a robust policy response will misconstrue the nature of continuity and change in the platform economy.

## **Regions of attention: Human–AI mutualism in the platformised world**

**Harsh Taneja**

Associate Professor of New and Emerging Media, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA

Technological change has long been associated with globalization. From the export of film and television to the rise of the internet and social media, each wave of innovation has seemed to promise a more connected and borderless world. Today, the expansion of artificial intelligence is often framed in similar terms—as the next stage of global technological convergence. Yet, when we look closely at how attention, culture, and communication actually circulate, we find that regional structures remain remarkably persistent. This talk explores how region continues to shape the evolving mutualism between humans and digital technologies, particularly within AI-driven media environments.

Digital platforms have become the dominant infrastructures through which human attention is organised, measured, and monetised. Over time, these infrastructures have evolved from static intermediaries into adaptive systems powered by machine learning—systems that not only respond to human behaviour but actively learn from it. This co-evolution between human and machine intelligences has produced new feedback loops: audiences generate the behavioural data that train algorithms, while algorithms, in turn, shape what audiences see, value, and believe.

Much of the discourse around AI and platforms emphasizes their globalizing tendencies—the assumption that algorithmic systems dissolve boundaries and produce universal experiences. Yet, empirical patterns of media use tell a different story. What people watch, read, and share online continues to reflect enduring cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural proximities. The regional logics of audience formation that I and others have documented in earlier work—where media consumption and attention flows are anchored in cultural and geographic ties—remain fundamental, even as AI reorganizes the visibility of content.

By bringing this empirical perspective into dialogue with the idea of human–digital mutualism, I argue that region is not a residue of the pre-digital world but

a structuring force in the present one. Recommendation systems, generative models, and attention metrics are not abstract global technologies; they are built upon and continually recalibrated within uneven data ecologies. These systems inherit regional biases in language, content availability, and engagement patterns—and, in doing so, they reproduce the very geographies they appear to transcend.

Ultimately, understanding human–AI mutualism requires seeing technological globalisation not as a process of erasure but of reconfiguration—where regional histories, infrastructures, and habits of attention continue to shape how both humans and machines learn to see the world.

## **Industry Panel**

### **Implications of human-digital mutualism: Insights from the communication industry**

#### **Panellists:**

**Darryl Vaz**, Senior Director, Product and Program Management,  
Broadcast Studio OTT, LTIMindtree

**Derek Ham**, Director, Entertainment Technology Center, Carnegie  
Mellon University, USA

**Jay Barchas-Lichtenstein**, Senior Research Manager, Center for News,  
Technology & Innovation, USA

**Khalid Viqar**, Managing Director, gTools, Automation and  
Infrastructure, Google

**Manish Bhide**, Distinguished Engineer & CTO - watsonx.governance,  
IBM Data & AI

**Nikhil Malhotra**, Chief Innovation Officer and Global Head of AI and  
Emerging Technologies, Tech Mahindra

**Rajat Ojha**, CEO and Co-Founder, Gamitronics

**Rudra Kasturi**, Strategic Advisor - AI, Times Internet, Times Group

**Chair: KV Kurmanath**, Associate Editor, The Hindu Business Line

Though technological advances over the last 30 years have significantly transformed various aspects of the economy and human activity, the pace and depth of disruption caused by artificial intelligence (AI/GenAI) over the last few years are unprecedented.

Technology-human mutualism historically existed in a relative state of balance, where the pace of technological transformation allowed societies and

organizations to ponder over the changes, react to them, and adapt. Moreover, the impact of technology was often confined to specific tasks or industries, such as IT applications that eased systemic processes or digitization of access to information, leaving other sectors to catch up gradually.

This is not the case with digital technologies and AI/GenAI. These technologies have led to an epistemic rupture by disrupting every aspect of the economy and human life at a rapid pace, triggering an intense debate among academicians, policymakers, and the industry around equitable adaptation; intellectual property rights; cultural nuances in large language models (LLMs); financial and compute resources; the impact on education; economy; ethics and accountability; responsible AI; the future of work; and a variety of biases.

AI is impacting a wide range of sectors, including the advertising and media industries. Besides enhancing productivity and efficiency, AI has substantially increased the scope for driving demand and growth.

From helping in the production of creatives to predicting consumer behaviour and building personalised offerings, AI algorithms are playing a pivotal role.

They are also subjected to severe scrutiny for possible biases (gender, cultural, financial, linguistic, and racial) and ‘surveillance’ as pointed out by Shoshana Zuboff, which could lead to skewed outcomes, inequitable distribution of services, and invasion of privacy.

Collaboration and co-creating content with AI can be the way forward, with people in the creative ecosystem learning to collaborate with algorithms and considering them partners, not opponents.

AI is disrupting and transforming the media industry, helping it find newer audiences and present content in newer ways.

The advent of AR/VR and AI has already started changing the way we gamify our learning modules, organize conferences in the metaverse, and develop interactive games. Unless these technologies are adapted responsibly and methodically in academic environments, they could distort the outcomes and impact learning processes.

However, the benefits are not sustainable if they are not built on the foundations of sound policy, trust, accountability, safety, fairness, and

responsibility. These attributes should be factored into the product design at the outset, not as an afterthought.

Experts flag the unwanted outcomes, such as a false sense of confidence or artificial confidence, as AI produces ‘human-like answers’ in no time, making users dependent on machines. This could also lead to a shallow understanding of things and poor learning outcomes.

The panel “Humans and algorithms: Epistemic challenges for industry and academia to achieve mutualism” attempts to discuss these epistemic challenges and find possible pathways to address them.

The Government of India recently came out with a set of AI governance guidelines to provide a framework for the development and adaptation of AI. The industry and academia are the two important stakeholders in this journey. While the former develops cutting-edge technologies to help improve the processes and services, the latter studies in-depth the intersection where digital technologies and society meet. Interactions between the two are fruitful and rewarding.

## **Academic Panel**

### **Uncertain times: The future of higher education in media and communication**

#### **Panellists:**

**Ruchi Kher Jaggi**, Professor, Director & Dean, Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication

**Sanjay Bharthur**, Senior Professor of Communication, Manipal Institute of Communication, MAHE

**Shashidhar Nanjundaiah**, Dean and Professor, SDMC, Mahindra University

**Usha Raman**, Professor, University of Hyderabad

**Chair: Vinod Pavarala**, Senior Professor, University of Hyderabad

Media and communication education is at an important juncture, characterised by rapid changes in technology, shifting industry practices, and profound socio-cultural transformation. As the media environment becomes increasingly digital, data-driven, and algorithmically mediated, academic institutions are compelled to reassess some of the premises on which existing pedagogical and institutional frameworks rest. The long-standing tension between theory and practice, between vocational orientation and critical or liberal education, has acquired renewed salience in this milieu.

The panel, *Uncertain Times: The Future of Higher Education in Media and Communication*, attempts to deliberate on these emerging challenges and opportunities, especially in the Indian context. It brings together senior scholars and administrators from both public and private universities in India to engage with issues pertaining to curriculum design, pedagogical models, institutional governance, and the larger ideological and structural changes sweeping through higher education. The discussion will foreground the pressures of employability, industry-

academia collaboration, and integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence into educational processes. In doing so, it hopes to situate media education within a larger discourse on knowledge production, democratic citizenship, and the public purpose of the university.



# **Technical Sessions**



## **Session 1 Who am I, IRL?**

### **Coding identities and subjectivities**

**Chair: Sunder Bukya**

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mahindra University

#### **Entangled realities: Code, culture and the communication of the digital self**

Priya Goel, Jamia Millia Islamia

In contemporary digital life, humans and technologies exist in a state of constant entanglement. The boundaries between biological intelligence and artificial systems are increasingly porous, producing what can be understood as a form of mutualism—a dynamic relationship in which code, culture, and communication evolve together. This paper explores how digital systems are no longer passive instruments but active cultural participants that shape meaning, identity, and social interaction. By situating the discussion within the framework of digital cultural theory, the study examines how the “digital self” is co-constructed through the interplay of human intention and algorithmic agency.

This research is guided by three central questions:

1. How does code function as a cultural agent influencing patterns of human communication and identity formation?
2. In what ways do humans and algorithms collaboratively produce and transform cultural meanings in digital environments?
3. How can the concept of entanglement reframe our understanding of communication, power, and agency in the digital age?

The study is grounded in digital cultural theory, informed by perspectives from posthumanism, media ecology, and algorithmic culture. Posthumanist scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti challenge the notion of human exceptionalism by showing that agency emerges through assemblages of human and nonhuman actors. Building on this, Alexander Galloway and

Matthew Fuller conceptualize code as both a technical syntax and a cultural text—one that carries ideology, creativity, and social values.

Within this framework, digital systems are viewed as cultural co-authors rather than mere tools. While the concept of co-creation describes collaborative participation between humans and technologies, co-authorship emphasizes shared generative agency—the capacity of algorithms not only to assist but to actively shape communicative outcomes. The digital self thus becomes an emergent construct, continuously negotiated between human cognition and algorithmic interpretation. “Entangled realities” capture this reciprocal flow of influence: humans encode their cultural logic into digital infrastructures, and those infrastructures, in turn, organize how humans see, speak, and relate within mediated environments.

This paper adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology combining digital discourse analysis with theoretical synthesis. Instead of numerical data, it focuses on meaning-making processes within digital ecosystems. Three illustrative cases are examined: (a) algorithmic curation on social media, where visibility and engagement are determined by coded systems; (b) AI-generated communication, such as chatbots or content creation tools, which blur boundaries between human and machine authorship; and (c) meme cultures and digital vernaculars, where humans and algorithms collectively shape trends, humor, and symbolic expression. Through critical reading of these examples, the study identifies recurring patterns of mutual influence and explores how communication is co-produced by human creativity and algorithmic logic.

The analysis reveals three interdependent dimensions of Human–Digital Mutualism:

1. **Encoding Culture into Code.** Humans embed cultural assumptions, values, and linguistic structures into algorithmic design. What appears as neutral computation often encodes cultural judgments—deciding what counts as appropriate, trending, or meaningful.
2. **Algorithmic Mediation of Meaning.** Algorithms filter visibility, rank relevance, and predict user preference. They determine what becomes socially significant, transforming code into a communicative agent. The digital self that emerges is hybrid—formed through both expressive choice and algorithmic feedback.

3. Co-Authorship and Emergent Communication. The interaction between humans and digital systems generates new communicative forms that neither could produce alone. Co-authorship extends co-creation by recognizing algorithmic systems as interpretive collaborators rather than tools of execution. Meaning arises through translation—a negotiation between human intention and algorithmic response.

This mutual shaping redefines communication as a hybrid ecology rather than a human-centred act. Digital platforms, data flows, and coded architectures become integral participants in cultural discourse.

Findings suggest that communication in digital culture is increasingly algorithmically conditioned—structured by systems that learn from human activity while guiding it in return. The “digital self” is therefore a relational entity: it communicates, performs, and evolves through feedback loops with digital environments.

This recognition challenges traditional notions of autonomy and authorship by revealing how digital infrastructures participate in meaning-making. It underscores the ethical urgency of algorithmic transparency and cultural accountability in technological design. Finally, it calls for a new form of digital literacy—one that extends beyond technical proficiency to awareness of how code mediates culture and identity.

The study concludes that entangled realities demand a shift from anthropocentric communication models to an ecological understanding of digital interaction. Code and culture are not opposites but co-authors of the contemporary communicative condition. The future of communication depends on cultivating a balanced mutualism—where human creativity, ethical reflection, and digital intelligence evolve together toward more inclusive and reflexive cultural practices.

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## **Counterpublics on digital platforms: A study of Instagram influencers from Kumaon**

Simran Singh, O.P. Jindal Global University

This study deals with the convergence of platform infrastructures and the cultural expression of regional communities. In recent years, social media platforms like Instagram have emerged as a space where influencers negotiate between cultural expression, entrepreneurial aspiration, and algorithmic control. The available literature on digital platforms concludes that the infrastructure including algorithms, content moderation systems, and visibility logics either coerces the circulation and visibility of opposing ideas or weaves them into the same hegemonic narratives that they oppose (Udupa & McDowell, 2017; Punathambekar & Mohan, 2018; Poell et al., 2022; Noble, 2018; Gillespie, 2018; Vasudevan, 2021). In India, right-wing Hindu religious nationalism is the dominant narrative that promotes the nation as culturally uniform (Rajagopal, 2001; Udupa, 2018), while marginalizing regional diversities. Hence, the objective of this study is to examine how Instagram creators navigate the unpredictability of platform surveillance, algorithmic bias, and moderation mechanisms to assert their diverse cultural expressions. Building upon the literature and research objective, this study draws on the theory of counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), which is defined as parallel discursive arenas that emerge to have counter-narratives in opposition to the dominant public sphere. This study focuses on the Instagram influencers from the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand (India). Established in 2000, Uttarakhand is famously known as Devbhoomi, or the Land of the Gods (Pinkney, 2013). It is a modern, political, and commercial branding strategy (Juyal, 2025) adopted by

the state to promote the high-volume tourism industry, focusing on religious tourism (Sati, 2020). Char-Dham is a set of four pilgrimage sites - Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri, making the region a sacred geography deeply tied to Hindu religious identity. However, influencers from Kumaon use social media, particularly Instagram, to perform linguistic and cultural identity to strengthen their regional belonging (Rai, 2022). Hence, this study aims to understand how Kumaoni influencers utilize Instagram to showcase their distinctive cultural expressions while navigating the precarity of platform infrastructures. Qualitative methods (Brennen, 2017), including in-depth interviews with the Instagram influencers of Kumaon and online observation of their content from April 2025 to September 2025, were conducted. It reveals that Uttarakhand, as Devbhoomi, is a narrative promoted by the state to promote religious tourism that focuses only on the religious and nationalist aspects of the state, giving it a Hindutva framing. However, the Kumaoni influencers have expressed discontent with this narrative, as it homogenises the whole state, leaving no space for cultural diversity. The findings also advocate that Instagram, as a platform, is full of contradictions. The visibility and entrepreneurial opportunities that Instagram provides to influencers also expose them to platform governance, surveillance, and uncertainty regarding content moderation. The Kumaoni influencer, in response to these risks, employs tactics like humour, code-switching, and affective storytelling to showcase their region's diverse cultural expressions. These tactics also subtly articulate dissent without directly confronting state narratives to protect themselves from potential risks. The Kumaon's case highlights the value of a nuanced approach to view the digital platforms as both a cultural archive and a contested ground where local voices negotiate with the platform infrastructures.

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## **Cultivating indigeneity and resilience on new media:**

### **(Re)construction of the Kurukh past**

Keshav Vivek, SRM University AP

Digital media has become a powerful tool in the hands of India's indigenous communities. Given the residual/marginal nature of programming devoted to the concerns and coverage of indigenous groups by traditional media, video streaming platforms and social networking sites have become spaces for the communication and discussion of issues topical to their identity, way of life, traditions, customs, culture, beliefs, society, polity, and economy. Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin (2002) have pointed out the significance of media in the study and theorization of societal processes and cultural practices in local, national, and transnational discursive spaces, with media content playing a crucial role in the construction of identities, legitimization of narratives, and building of communities. It helps marginalised groups safeguard their cultural identities and counter hegemonic misrepresentations (Downing & Husband, 2005). The discourse and ideology permeating the creation, circulation, reception, and consumption of texts, messages, information, news, entertainment, and political or cultural content in these spaces is focused on the cultivation of indigeneity – defined as a state of being distinct, in ethnic terms, from neighbouring communities as well as being associated with certain territories, in the historical and geographical sense, since pre-colonial times. The concept of indigeneity, emerging in response to local contingencies, global cultural flows, supranational bodies, and national and regional indigenous political movements (Forte, 2010), provides a useful framework for the interpretation of this alternative, anti-hegemonic form of media discourse. Wilson and Stewart (2008) highlight the instrumental role of media in the cultural and political struggles of indigenous groups as well as the paucity of scholarly examination of indigenous content, with reference to Africa, India, and China. Media narratives that establish ethnic distinctions vis-à-vis other groups and/or confirm ancestral associations with specific regions or homelands they inhabited in the past and/or are settled in at present, come to constitute a new, mediatised form of community mobilization. Their widespread circulation, consumption, and emulation, at the communal level,

via YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram reinforces the salience of such episodes, imbuing them with deep historical and cultural significance, allowing members of indigenous communities to explore issues of identity and representation while challenging the traditional/mainstream media's hegemonistic interpretation of indigenous societies and ways of living. Across the globe, indigenous communities have leveraged new media to overcome isolation, reach out to groups with similar worldviews, cultivate solidarity, nurture democratic discourse, and address the skewed visions and viewpoints of dominant ideologies and mainstream institutions (Alia, 2010). The rise of digital media platforms such as YouTube creates fresh opportunities for groups and individuals who seek to represent, reimagine, and redefine indigenous identities, especially those who aim to foreground issues of identity and culture. Jenkins, Ford & Green (2013) highlight attempts by grassroots communities to reclaim control over means of cultural production and circulation. Kumar, Mohan & Punathambekar (2021) underline the establishment of cultures of production with new patterns of cultural affinity focused on language, culture, and region. The content available on Adivasi channels such as Jagannath Oraon Vlogs, Kurukh World, and Oraon TV JH is focused on Kurukh/Oraon history and culture. Indigenous content creators can challenge the mainstreams' hegemonistic interpretation of tribal cultures and ways of life. The proliferation of such YouTube channels underlines a fundamental shift in the way marginalised groups media perceive, approach, and engage with new media. This paper examines how Kurukh/Oraon YouTubers project narratives associated with sites such as Rohtasgarh and festivals such as Jani Shikar into the digital space, utilizing elements of indigenous culture to cultivate indigeneity and build resilient communities. It utilizes the interpretive content analysis approach to examine videos featuring Rohtasgarh and Jani Shikar, selected from the three YouTube channels mentioned above, based on the purposive sampling technique, to unpack the ways in which indigenous content creators counter hegemonic views, establish new modes of representation, build community resilience and resist cultural erasure. That is, how does the circulation of these narratives reflect attempts at the construction of a socially cohesive, politically assertive, historically grounded, and culturally distinct identity for a marginalised community negotiating multiple fault lines – faith, speech, territory, economic organisation, and political administration?

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## Media advocacy and empowerment through digital mutualism: A survey of LGBTQ voices in central Mumbai

Priti Saroj, Amrin Moger, Guru Nanak College of Arts, Science & Commerce; PJ Mathew Martin, University of Mumbai

The visibility and empowerment of LGBTQ communities in India remain uneven despite significant legal progress, such as the decriminalization of same-sex relations in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018). While nearly 10% of India's population may identify as LGBTQ (Times of India, 2023), only a small fraction feel safe expressing their identities publicly. The absence of official demographic data and the persistence of stigma underline the continued need for inclusive media advocacy (Chakraborty & Dey, 2022). Media advocacy

theory emphasizes the strategic use of communication to shape public opinion, influence policy, and amplify marginalised voices (Wallack et al., 1993). Against this backdrop, this study investigates how media advocacy and digital mutualism contribute to the perceived empowerment of LGBTQ individuals in Central Mumbai.

The study applies the concept of digital mutualism—a process in which online communities provide mutual emotional and informational support—to understand how digital interactions strengthen collective advocacy. The research adopts a mixed-method design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to address reviewer feedback and ensure deeper insight into the lived realities of participants. The study hypothesizes that higher engagement with LGBTQ-related digital media correlates positively with empowerment and the willingness to participate in advocacy.

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 30 self-identified LGBTQ individuals (aged 18–30 years) residing in Central Mumbai. Respondents were recruited using purposive sampling through community networks and local NGOs. A structured questionnaire comprising 20 items was distributed via Google Forms between October 10 and 25, 2025. The survey explored media usage, representation, and empowerment experiences. In addition, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who volunteered to share personal narratives about their engagement with online LGBTQ advocacy platforms. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and correlational statistics in SPSS, while qualitative data were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns of empowerment and community support.

The findings reveal that 80% of participants credited social media—especially Instagram and YouTube—for increasing their awareness of LGBTQ issues. Instagram (60%) emerged as the most-used advocacy platform, highlighting the importance of visual storytelling in digital activism. A strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.67$ ) was observed between exposure to LGBTQ media content and self-perceived empowerment. Around 70% of respondents agreed that digital spaces enhanced their confidence in self-expression and helped them connect with supportive peers. Qualitative insights further revealed that digital mutualism functions as an “emotional safety net.” One participant noted, “Online groups feel like family when your real one doesn’t understand you.”

However, 50% of participants reported facing continued offline stigma, demonstrating that online empowerment does not always translate into full social acceptance.

The discussion highlights that while digital advocacy empowers individuals and normalizes queer identities, it also exposes users to challenges like trolling and cyberbullying. Nonetheless, digital spaces remain crucial for countering stereotypes and creating participatory dialogue. Local initiatives, such as Mumbai's KASHISH Queer Film Festival, further strengthen media visibility and collective identity among urban LGBTQ populations.

This study concludes that digital media serves as both a mirror and a megaphone for the LGBTQ community in Central Mumbai. Through the practice of digital mutualism, individuals not only gain confidence but also create collaborative networks that sustain advocacy beyond online spaces. Yet, empowerment achieved online must be supported by offline initiatives—education, inclusive policies, and sensitised workplaces—to create holistic social change. The research underscores that empowerment through media advocacy is most effective when digital participation is combined with institutional recognition and grassroots engagement.

Future studies could expand this research by including participants from rural regions or analysing the influence of regional languages in LGBTQ digital advocacy. By exploring how online solidarity transforms into offline action, such research can help shape inclusive media strategies that bridge India's digital and social divides.

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## **From ritual to reel: Reimagining Kerala's folk characters in contemporary Malayalam cinema**

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Kerala's extensive folk traditions have always been the forms of collective memory that actually live and have artfully expressed themselves through, among others, ritual performances, oral narratives, and the local belief systems. The figures of Yakshi, Chathan, and Odiyan once occupied and shared the same sacred and public spheres they were seen in Who among the Gods, the temple, and in village storytelling circles as the bearers of cosmic order, morality, and fear, respectively. But the rise of Malayalam cinema as the leading cultural medium during that time forced these figures to change their character deeply. They have grown from being the icons of rituals, deeply involved in physical performances, to subjects of cinema grappling with issues of gender, caste, and modernity. The paper is about the transition of the figures from one realm of existence to another and how, in particular, through the three films, Odiyan (2018), Bramayugam (2024), and Lokah (2025), Malayalam cinema reimagines the characters of Kerala's folklore in the virtual world of today.

The paper places the analysis into the multidisciplinary contexts of folklore studies, cultural memory theory, and gender studies to investigate how ritual symbols are interpreted differently in the narrative and visual language of cinema. The text introduces a field of inquiry embracing Richard Bauman's performance theories, Jan Assmann's cultural memory research, and Laura Mulvey's film representation concepts, all demonstrating the great power of

cinema to humanize the connection between the ancient myths and the present-day selves. It also engages with the South Asian narrative in mythopoeic cinema (Nair, 2019; Rajadhyaksha, 2022) and underscores the way the Malayalam filmmakers resort to folk narratives to articulate the contemporary issues of identity, loss, and transition.

In terms of methodology, the paper makes use of a comparative textual and visual analysis of the three films under consideration, which is described as a combination of semiotic and narrative interpretation and visual anthropology. The three films are viewed as cultural artifacts in which the symbols, motifs, and performances of the rituals are represented in a new way for the purposes of cinema. The analysis of each film is done following three interpretative axes: (1) mythic re contextualization which deals with the detachment of folk characters from their rituals and their placement within the cinematic modernity; (2) ideological reframing which is concerned with the re-reading of gender and caste issues, originally inherent in the traditional folklore, in the light of the new, contemporary discourses; and (3) the aesthetic translation, which researches the impact of digital visual effects, streaming aesthetics, and psychological realism on the re-presentation of mythic imagery.

The paper gives prominence to the digital context of the current Malayalam cinema, particularly the transition of the audience from theaters to online streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and SonyLIV. This change has not only widened the circulation of folk tales but also received them in new and non-regional ways, making the storytelling act a global one in the digital world. The filmic visual and sound aspects that are possible through the use of modern technology revive the folk imagination, but at the same time, they disconnect it from its ceremonial space. For example, the digital black-and-white look of *Bramayugam* presents the myth of the Yakshi not just as pure horror but rather as a psychological and political allegory of male dominance, while *Lokah* uses cutting-edge CGI and digital collage to portray Chathan as a divine being who represents the oppressed. On the other hand, *Odiyan* laments the extinction of the world of curers of rural modernity through its protagonist, who is transformed into a representation of loss, transition, and the disappearance of folk cosmology.

Following through this multi-layered reading, the paper asserts that Malayalam cinema is a new place of ritual negotiation, a performance space where the sacred and the secular, the ancient and the digital meet. These revisions not only keep the folklore's symbolic potency alive but also play a role in reshaping Kerala's socio-political imagination. Besides, the films are reckoning with the topics of caste hierarchy, gendered embodiment, and technological mediation they contribute to showing how myths are constantly rewritten to mirror the current power structures and the cultural anxieties.

At the end of the day, the paper regards Malayalam cinema as a continuum of Kerala's ritual culture, that is, myths that migrate through the different media and meanings. The reinterpreting of Yakshi, Chathan, and Odiyan in this manner becomes more than cinematic inventions; they are the cultural contracts that reveal how modernity, technology, and memory merge in the creation of the new spiritual and aesthetic consciousness of Kerala. In this regard, the study of this metamorphosis "from ritual to reel" convincingly shows how the digital-era Malayalam cinema turn into a dynamic archive of folk imagination preserving, transforming, and transmitting the mythic essence of Kerala's collective identity to both local and global audiences.

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## **Session 2 Who's weaving the tangled web?**

### **Emerging complexities in digital media**

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#### **Disability and digital platform inclusivity: A case study of Indian women working from home**

Riddhi Basu, Nirmala MN, Christ University

Every policy integrates a centre that is heard and a margin that is silenced, and the periphery decides who belongs at the centre and who is systemically suppressed. Understanding inclusion, therefore, requires analysing how peripheries intersect, witnessing the heterogeneity of power within hierarchies. Gender often exists at the periphery of policy discourse, and when disability intersects with gender, the marginalization multiplies. While the nation treads towards a 'Digital India', the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, diversifies the understanding of disability and mandates digital inclusivity as a right. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), serve as a global benchmark in making digital platforms POUR (Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust). Yet, the compliance remains ambiguous, and there is very low platform accountability. Disabled women under the gendered gaze are doubly marginalised due to social neglect.

This paper addresses the disjuncture between the promise of digital inclusivity and its actual implementation into the lived experiences of disabled Indian women working from home. Rather than assuming exclusion, it inquires into the extent to which platforms enact accessibility and how disabled women negotiate these imbalanced terrains. While disability policies and accessibility standards vocalize rights, the focus here is on the everyday experiences of women whose work is mediated by digital frameworks. As Deo (2022) observes, women with disabilities often occupy "invisible spaces" in the Indian socio-

cultural context, which transcends into digital workplaces. Collated interview narratives by Varshney (2022) highlight how disabled working women face increased structural neglect, which persists even in digitally enabled labour. Drawing from these observations, the contention of the paper becomes clear: that inclusivity cannot solely be understood within the lines of policy frameworks, but must be located in the practices at the margins.

The study follows a qualitative analysis framework, highlighting the narratives of disabled women engaged in various forms of home-based work, ranging from small-scale businesses to expert-driven professions. It is based on a total of thirty interviews, comprising twenty in-depth interviews with participants engaged in home-based digital work and ten expert interviews conducted with domain-specific professionals. The research questions that drive the inquiry are:

1. To what extent are digital platforms accessible to disabled women engaged in home-based professions?
2. How do gendered experiences of disability affect experiences with digital infrastructures of work?
3. What do these narratives reveal about the contradictions between policy on paper inclusion and actual lived exclusion?

Preliminary findings suggest that accessibility is often inadequately placed at the heart of platform design, with disabled women required to adapt proactively instead of the platform being instrumental in accommodating them. While some women develop resilience strategies through assistive technologies, family support, or informal digital communities, this study highlights the burden of adaptation inflicted on the marginalised subject rather than the digital framework. As Kaur and Srivastava (2021) argue in the context of the pandemic, gendered disability is not solely a technical hindrance of access; it is, by far, a structural issue, where socio-political hierarchies and digital infrastructure intersect to bind freedom and opportunity.

The research gap this paper identifies is the absence of inquiry into platform-level inclusivity in India, particularly about women with disabilities working from home. While policy studies have interrogated rights frameworks, there is a limited survey of how platforms bridge the gap between disability and inclusion. By centring their lived narratives, this paper contributes to reframing

digital inclusivity as not a matter of compliance alone, but sensitive structural redesign, analysing whether platforms can genuinely serve as equalizing tools without developing an intersectional understanding of gender and disability at their core.

In conclusion, the paper posits digital platforms as contested spaces: sites where inclusion is promised but unevenly enacted, and where disabled women's experiences expose systemic and structural deficiencies and exhibit modes of negotiation. It argues that unless inclusivity is reimagined as a structural and cohesive design principle, the vision of "Digital India" risks reinforcing the margins it aims to erase.

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## **Understanding malleable computational media platforms for participatory development communication: A comparative study of Ushahidi (Kenya) and Gram Vaani (India)**

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This study examines how malleable computational media platforms contribute to participatory development communication by comparing Ushahidi, a Kenyan-based global crowdsourcing tool, and Gram Vaani, an Indian voice-based participatory communication system. Both platforms exemplify adaptable, user-centred communication ecosystems that foster citizen engagement and social inclusion in distinct cultural and technological contexts.

Ushahidi's geospatial mapping software has supported more than 150 countries in civic crisis management, climate monitoring, and digital governance (Ushahidi, 2025). Gram Vaani, through Mobile Vaani, has enabled more than 12 million interactive voice calls across 23 Indian states, democratizing access to local development information (Gram Vaani, 2025). The research adopts a content analysis approach supplemented with descriptive statistical analysis, focusing on content generated in 2025. This timeframe captures the platforms' most recent expansion into AI-assisted analytics (Ushahidi) and community co-curation campaigns (Gram Vaani). Stratified sampling will be applied to approximately 250 communication artifacts (textual reports, participatory maps, and voice transcripts). The study is grounded in Participatory Communication Theory and Computational Media Theory, combining sociotechnical and dialogic perspectives. Expected findings include an understanding of how platform malleability enhances inclusivity and communication efficiency across diverse socio-technical systems and how computational participation aligns with contemporary goals of sustainable development and digital citizenship.

**Aim:** To explore and compare the participatory communication patterns and content structures of Ushahidi and Gram Vaani as malleable computational media platforms facilitating inclusive development communication.

**Objectives:**

1. To categorize the major themes, interaction formats, and participatory tools used in Ushahidi and Gram Vaani during 2025.
2. To identify the presence of inclusivity, empowerment, and engagement indicators through descriptive and thematic content analysis.

**Method:** Grounded in Participatory Communication Theory (Slocum et al., 1995) and Computational Media Theory (Aarhus University, 2024), the study conceptualizes participatory media as both communicative and technological ecosystems that adapt to user participation. Participatory Communication Theory emphasizes dialogue, mutual learning, and community empowerment as central to development communication (Nosti Ekebratt, 2018). Computational Media Theory, meanwhile, conceptualizes systems such as Ushahidi and Gram Vaani as malleable and co-constructive environments, where users modify and shape interactions through

real-time feedback, data visualization, and localised storytelling. The theoretical integration positions each platform as a manifestation of “adaptive media citizenship,” connecting algorithmic-driven and community-oriented participation within development frameworks.

A mixed-method exploratory content analysis, combining qualitative thematic and quantitative descriptive analysis, will be undertaken.

Data Source and Scope:

1. Ushahidi: Global case summaries, AI-enhanced mapping updates, and civic engagement posts archived during 2025.
2. Gram Vaani: Mobile Vaani transcripts, campaign documentation, and partner reports from 2025 focused on gender, health, and local governance.

Sampling Method:

1. Stratified Purposive Sampling to ensure representation from distinct development domains (health, governance, environment, and climate).
2. Sample Size:  $\approx$  250 items (125 from each platform).
3. Unit of Analysis: Each report, transcript, or participatory record containing user-generated input and platform moderation/comments.

A mapped typology of participatory communication strategies and their technological affordances in both platforms. Empirical evidence of how malleable design—AI integration vs. voice-based interaction—affects inclusivity and engagement. Identification of user-driven vocabulary associated with empowerment and collaboration.

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## **A communication model of technology hype cycles in platform capitalism**

Allan Harold Rex, Mahindra University

Digital technologies such as educational technology (EdTech), blockchain, and software-as-a-service (SaaS) frequently experience a familiar cycle of excitement and decline. They emerge with great enthusiasm, driven by narratives of transformation, only to encounter disillusionment and reconfiguration. This recurring pattern suggests that technology hype is not simply a market anomaly or psychological overreaction but a communicative process embedded within the logics of platform capitalism. This paper develops a communication model of technology hype cycles by integrating theories of diffusion of innovations, agenda-setting, and political economy. The study seeks to explain how these cycles of enthusiasm, critique, and stabilization emerge and evolve through interactions among discourse, investment, and practice.

The central research question guiding this work is: How can perspectives from diffusion of innovations, agenda-setting, and political economy be combined to explain the successive phases of recent technology hype cycles? Addressing this

question repositions hype as a communicative structure in which meaning, visibility, and value are co-produced by interdependent actors, like technologists, media organizations, investors, and audiences, within attention-driven economies.

The first theoretical foundation, Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2003), explains how hype accelerates the early “knowledge” and “persuasion” stages of adoption. Through amplified messaging, emerging technologies appear universally desirable before their actual utility is verified. As adoption progresses, however, the diffusion process slows when user experience, cost, and infrastructure realities reshape perceptions. The second foundation, Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), describes how news outlets, corporate communications, and analyst reports construct salience around particular technologies. Through repetitive framing, using descriptors such as “revolutionary,” “disruptive,” or “inevitable”, the media define the contours of public understanding. The third foundation, the Political Economy of Communication (Mosco, 2009), contextualizes these discursive patterns within structural incentives. Attention-based media models, venture capital funding cycles, and algorithmic curation mechanisms reward amplification and novelty, ensuring that the visibility of technological narratives often outweighs their verifiability.

To synthesize these perspectives, the paper draws on Lev Manovich’s (2013) concept of cultural software, which emphasizes the co-evolution of technical code and cultural meaning. This integration highlights how hype operates not only through storytelling but also through the affordances of digital platforms that algorithmically prioritize content aligned with emotional or sensational narratives. Hype thus emerges as a communicative ecosystem where human and algorithmic actors continuously reinforce one another’s expectations.

Using Jabareen’s (2009) conceptual framework methodology, this study introduces the Communicative Hype Loop, which delineates three interlinked phases through which hype circulates: Narrative Launch, Reality Check, and Pragmatic Uptake.

Narrative Launch represents the initial moment of agenda construction. Corporate press releases, venture announcements, and technology journalism



collectively establish a narrative of inevitability and transformation. This convergence of interests creates a networked amplification of optimism.

- **Proposition 1 (P1):** During a technology's early media build-up, messages that promise "revolution" or claim outcomes are "inevitable" constitute a clear majority of coverage.

Reality Check emerges when technological limitations, regulatory scrutiny, or user dissatisfaction enter the discourse. As feedback loops from users and regulators grow, the thematic emphasis shifts from novelty to critique. News coverage expands to include ethical risks, compliance concerns, and governance issues.

- **Proposition 2 (P2):** When users begin to report concrete operational problems, stories emphasizing ethics, risk, or compliance increase markedly within six months.

Pragmatic Uptake denotes the stabilization phase. The discursive tone transitions toward measurable outcomes, compliance frameworks, and incremental innovation. Technologies move from being symbolic "revolutions" to functional infrastructures. Notably, this phase rarely concludes the cycle, as subsequent technological reframings may reignite new rounds of hype.

This conceptual model complements and extends the Gartner Hype Cycle, shifting the explanation from market psychology to communication dynamics. It situates hype within media ecologies and capital flows, connecting with scholarship on platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017) and algorithmic amplification (Napoli, 2019). The framework also aligns with Couldry's (2003) notion of media rituals, suggesting that technological enthusiasm and disappointment function as collective performances that reproduce faith in innovation.

The Communicative Hype Loop contributes to theory and practice in three key ways. First, it provides analytical clarity by identifying measurable discursive indicators (P1 and P2) that can guide empirical content analyses using computational methods. Second, it offers theoretical integration, demonstrating how communicative processes sustain economic incentives for hype in digital capitalism. Third, it yields practical implications for policymakers, communicators, and regulators by establishing a timing framework to anticipate and moderate inflated expectations.

Ultimately, this paper reframes hype as a predictable outcome of communicative interaction between code, culture, and capital. By understanding the structural and symbolic forces that generate cycles of enthusiasm, researchers and practitioners can better design interventions to promote sustainable technology adoption.

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## The AI and communicative ecology nexus: Foundations of a symbiotic evolution

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Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged from a passive technological tool to an active participant within contemporary communicative ecology. The communicative ecology combines media ethnography, evolutionary communication, and information and communication technologies (ICT) to

explore how communication operates in everyday life and community contexts. The growing presence of machine learning systems, generative algorithms, and conversational agents has metamorphosed the ways humans produce, share, and interpret meaning. To understand this transformation is crucial because communication today takes place within heterogeneous spaces where human and nonhuman intelligences interact. Artificial intelligence is going beyond its role as a mediator of information exchange and actively reshapes communication flows, restructures cultural interpretation, and redefines agency in digital environments. Although the ecological implications of media technologies have long been studied in the context of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and other media classics theories like media ecology that is concerned with the interrelationships among technology, communication, and society, emphasizing that media systems evolve like ecosystems, where each innovation reorganizes social and cognitive patterns, despite their valuable insights, these frameworks share a residual anthropocentrism that limits their capacity to explain how algorithmic systems act as epistemic agents within and have yet to elucidate the distributed, adaptive, and posthuman character of contemporary communication systems. The current literature, therefore, lacks a unified framework that can explain how AI acts as both an ecological agent and a cognitive agent that coevolves with human communication practices. Recent research on algorithmic media has highlighted the increasing autonomy of AI systems in meaning-making processes, yet these discussions are theoretically fragmented. The ethical and normative issues of responsibility, authority, and flexibility in AI-mediated communication have also not been discussed extensively.

The presented paper proposes and theorizes the AI-Communicative Ecology Nexus to bridge this gap. It is an integrated framework based on systems theory, communicative ecology, human-computer interaction, and posthuman theory to conceptualize AI as an adaptive partner in complex communicative environments. The study means to redefine the role of AI not as a facilitator in communication, but as an ecological agent that participates in the meaning-making through the interaction of human and algorithmic intelligence. The framework aims to achieve three interrelated goals: first, to understand AI as an ecological and posthuman entity; second, to link interpretive and

computational traditions within communication research; and third, to clarify the ethical and normative aspects of human-AI coevolution.

This study employs a conceptual analytic approach that combines the theoretical insights of multiple frameworks into a coherent ecological model. The Communicative Ecology Framework provides the structural foundation by distinguishing technological, social, and discursive layers that together constitute communicative ecology. AI functions across all three: it structures technological capabilities through algorithmic layout, reconfigures social relations by shaping networked interaction, and influences discursive formations by generating, filtering, and personalizing symbolic content. Systems theory highlighted feedback loops and nonlinear dynamics within communication processes, which is how humans and AI systems continuously modify one another's behaviour. The inclusion of Posthuman Theory extends this relational ecology by decentring the human subject and acknowledging agency as distributed across human, technological, and material entities. Together, these approaches may reconceptualize agentic communication. The analysis reveals several key theoretical insights. First, AI must be understood as an ecological agent that reorganizes the material and symbolic conditions of communication. AI systems shape the information that is shared, the relationships that are amplified, and how meaning is constructed through generative modelling and data-driven inference. Second, communication between humans and AI unfolds as a process of recursive coevolution, characterised by continuous feedback loops in which each adapts to the other's communicative behaviour. Humans learn to interpret algorithmic outputs, while AI systems, through iterative learning, internalize patterns of human expression, producing an evolving synergy that blurs the boundary between user and medium. Third, this dynamic gives rise to a posthuman convergence of communication, in which agency and cognition are distributed across networked intelligences. In such convergence, meaning is coauthored by human intention and algorithmic inference, creating hybrid epistemic forms that challenge conventional understandings of authorship, authenticity, and autonomy. Finally, this reconfiguration of communicative ecologies raises significant ethical and normative questions. Algorithmic ambiguity, data asymmetry, and the absence of human judgment in digital communication systems complicate the process of accountability. The AI-Communicative

Ecology Nexus study proposes both theoretical and practical implications. It redefines current agentic communication as an adaptive, posthuman ecology that integrates symbolic, material, and computational dimensions. This paradigm invites scholars to bridge the disciplinary gap between critical media studies and computational communication research, developing a more comprehensive understanding of hybrid communication systems. The study also calls for interdisciplinary exploration that combines computational analysis of algorithmic behaviour with interpretive studies of discourse, identity, and affect. This framework highlights the practical importance of ethical reflexivity in designing and operating AI-mediated environments. Recognizing that agency is distributed does not absolve humans' accountability; instead, it demands new forms of accountability that are conducive to shared cognition and coevolutionary adaptation.

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## **Too close for comfort: How hyper-personalised advertising redefines the relationship between people and algorithms**

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It starts innocently enough—with a scroll. You open your phone to unwind, and there it is: an ad for the same sneakers you mentioned to a friend an hour ago. You didn't type it, search it, or shop for it—yet somehow, it found you. Some call it convenience; others call it surveillance. This blurry boundary between comfort and discomfort, between knowing and being known, defines the new reality of marketing in a datafied world (Tucker, 2014; Araujo, 2018).

We now live in an era where algorithms don't just assist human choices—they anticipate them. Advertising is no longer shouting across screens; it's whispering directly into individual minds, curating micro-moments of persuasion. In this dance of human and machine, intimacy becomes both the product and the price. This paper examines this fragile relationship—how hyper-personalised advertising transforms the psychological, cultural, and ethical understanding of consumer-brand dynamics.

Personalization in advertising is hardly new, but its current intensity marks a seismic shift. Once designed for collective audiences, ads are now crafted from digital footprints—clicks, swipes, pauses, and even hesitations—that tell stories about who we are (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015). Algorithms translate these micro-behaviours into predictive models that make advertising feel intuitive, even psychic.

The theoretical foundation for this study draws upon three interrelated frameworks.

First, Zuboff's (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism situates personalization within the logic of data extraction, where human experience becomes raw material for commercial prediction. Personalization here is not just a service—it is surveillance disguised as empathy.

Second, Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) explains why users actively engage with these systems—seeking entertainment, relevance, and validation. The consumer becomes a collaborator in their own surveillance, trading privacy for convenience.

Third, Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002) helps interpret how individuals negotiate disclosure in digital spaces. In this world of algorithmic intimacy, boundaries are fluid, constantly redrawn between what users choose to reveal and what systems infer.

Together, these frameworks position hyper-personalization as both a technological advancement and a cultural condition, one that blurs the lines between persuasion and prediction. Studies highlight that while users appreciate relevance, they also feel uneasy about the unseen mechanisms behind it (Aguirre et al., 2015; Boerman et al., 2017). As Martin and Murphy (2017) describe, personalization often creates intimacy through intrusion.

Most studies have explored personalised advertising from an economic or technological standpoint—measuring its efficiency and click-through success (Arora et al., 2008; De Keyser et al., 2015). What remains underexamined is the emotional, psychological, and cultural experience of being the subject of such precision.

How do consumers internalize the feeling of being seen by an algorithm? When does relevance turn into violation? And do cultural and generational contexts reshape this interpretation?

This study attempts to bridge this gap by moving beyond metrics to meaning—exploring hyper-personalization not just as a marketing strategy, but as a lived experience that shapes how people perceive technology, trust, and selfhood in a digital-first world.

Research questions:

1. How do consumers perceive and emotionally respond to hyper-personalised advertisements?
2. What factors determine whether personalization is experienced as convenience or intrusion?
3. How do generational and cultural contexts influence perceptions of algorithmic advertising?
4. What are the ethical implications of hyper-personalization on consumer trust and agency?

It is hypothesised that while hyper-personalised advertising enhances engagement and relevance, excessive algorithmic intimacy erodes consumer trust, evokes discomfort, and diminishes brand loyalty (Aguirre et al., 2015; Martin & Murphy, 2017)

The research adopts a mixed-method design, balancing quantitative breadth with qualitative depth.

The quantitative component involves a structured survey with 400 respondents across four generational cohorts—Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers. The survey measures perceived usefulness, trust, privacy concern, and discomfort using adapted scales from Boerman et al. (2017). Statistical analyses, including regression and correlation, test relationships between personalization, trust, and loyalty.

The qualitative component includes 30 in-depth interviews exploring emotional and ethical interpretations of personal ads. Participants were asked to recall specific instances where an ad “felt too personal.” Their narratives reveal recurring metaphors of being “watched,” “read,” or “understood too well”—

echoing what Culnan and Bies (2003) describe as privacy calculus, the cognitive negotiation between benefit and risk.

Finally, case studies of global brands such as Netflix, Spotify, Amazon, and emerging D2C companies contextualize how personalization functions across industries and cultures (Smith, 2022). Netflix's personalization is often viewed as comfort; Amazon's, as control. This comparative analysis illuminates how context mediates perception.

The results reveal a compelling personalization paradox—the very mechanism designed to build trust can simultaneously erode it. Consumers appreciate relevance but distrust the precision through which it is achieved (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015).

Younger audiences (Gen Z and Millennials) demonstrate greater acceptance, viewing personalised ads as part of their digital rhythm. They perceive algorithmic predictions as both amusing and efficient (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). In contrast, older cohorts (Gen X and Boomers) report discomfort, perceiving algorithmic intimacy as a breach of autonomy. To them, the ad that “knows too much” feels less like service and more like surveillance (Martin & Murphy, 2017).

This intergenerational divide reinforces the notion that personalization is culturally constructed, shaped by users' comfort with technology, their socialization into digital culture, and broader privacy norms (Turow et al., 2015).

Psychologically, findings support the concept of a “threshold of comfort”—a point beyond which personalization triggers reactance (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015). When algorithms overstep, consumers resist, expressing distrust and disengagement. This is where relevance collapses into violation.

Theoretically, the findings reaffirm Zuboff's (2019) argument that algorithmic personalization is a form of behavioural modification, subtly training users to trust predictive systems. Yet, the study also opens the door for algorithmic humanism—a reimagining of personalization that values empathy, transparency, and consent. When personalization strikes balance, it transforms advertising from interruption to interaction, from manipulation to meaning.



The future of advertising lies not in louder persuasion but in ethical precision. As AI systems evolve, marketers and designers must learn to humanize algorithms—crafting experiences that respect privacy while retaining relevance.

Future research could expand cross-culturally, exploring how non-Western societies interpret algorithmic intimacy. In markets like India, where digital adoption is high but regulatory frameworks are emerging, understanding cultural perceptions of data ethics becomes crucial.

Practically, this study calls for developing “empathetic algorithms”—systems that interpret emotion, context, and consent before delivering personalization. In academia, it advocates an interdisciplinary approach that integrates communication, psychology, and ethics to shape the next generation of marketing thought.

Ultimately, in the algorithmic age, success may not depend on how loudly brands speak—but how gently they listen.

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## **Session 3 Who's the generative generation, really?**

### **Platforms, cultures and ecology**

**Chair: Anuja Premika**

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### **Algorithmic publics and generative AI: Navigating ethical communication in platformised cultures**

PV Satya Prasad, Nitte University; Archan Mitra, Amity School of Communication

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) now saturates the cultural circuits through which contemporary publics encounter information, stories, and symbols. This paper theorizes algorithmic publics—collectives assembled and sustained through recommender systems, ranking, and AI-assisted production—within increasingly platformised media environments. It argues that when generative systems co-produce content and invisibly modulate distribution, the ethical conditions of communication shift in ways that extend beyond truth claims to encompass authorship, agency, provenance, and accountability. Situating the analysis at the intersection of media studies, digital humanities, and communication ethics, the study introduces a three-part analytical lens—visibility, virality, and veracity—to trace how platform affordances and algorithmic governance structure what, and who, becomes intelligible in public discourse.

The paper proceeds in three moves. First, it conceptualizes algorithmic publics under generative regimes through a typology that distinguishes synthetic-saturated spaces (where AI-generated content predominates), synthetic-adjacent spaces (where human content is optimised with AI), and synthetic-curated spaces (where human content is distributed via AI ranking and summarization). This typology clarifies how generativity reconfigures the publicity of speech by blurring lines between author and instrument, message

and metadata, and content and conduit. Second, it maps the platform affordances that intensify these dynamics—e.g., low-friction creation tools, synthetic voice/visual filters, automated captioning and summarization, remixable audio, and hybrid search-social interfaces—alongside governance levers such as labelling policies, provenance standards, rate limits, and feedback optimization. The analysis underscores that affordances and governance are co-constitutive: the same interface that enables inclusive creation can also scale inauthentic coordination; the same detection pipeline that flags manipulation can differentially miss harms in low-resource languages and marginalised contexts.

Third, the paper advances digital mutualism as a normative framework for ethical communication in human–AI co-creation. Mutualism is defined as a cooperative interaction that increases communicative capacity while preserving pluralism, accountability, and situated cultural meaning. Operationally, the framework proposes four principles. (1) Transparency with teeth: disclosures that are machine-actionable and user-legible, supported by provenance signals and auditable logs; (2) Shared accountability: obligations distributed across model developers, platform operators, creators, and institutional communicators, rather than offloaded onto end users alone; (3) Participatory calibration: mechanisms for communities to shape recommender criteria, safety thresholds, and disclosure defaults through deliberative inputs; and (4) Cultural localization: ethical guidelines adapted to vernacular practices, linguistic diversity, and region-specific media ecologies, resisting one-size-fits-all moderation.

Illustrative case vignettes examine short-video feeds, AI-assisted news drafting, and conversational interfaces that summarize or reframe third-party content. Across cases, the paper identifies recurring patterns: “style-transfer” homogenization that flattens vernacular speech; paraphrase-and-optimize loops that produce search clutter and aboutness without situated expertise; and feedback learning that privileges engagement proxies over epistemic quality. Rather than treating these as isolated misfires, the paper positions them as structural outcomes of optimization incentives under platform capitalism. The analysis highlights tensions between authenticity signalling (e.g., labels, watermarks, C2PA attestations) and adversarial adaptation; between accessibility gains and the risk of synthetic serendipity crowding out

minority voices; and between safety tooling and path-dependency that normalizes Anglophone standards.

The contribution is threefold. Conceptually, the paper refines algorithmic publics for the generative era by specifying how production and distribution entangle, making the ethics of mediation inseparable from the ethics of making. Methodologically, it offers an evaluative matrix for visibility–virality–veracity that scholars and practitioners can use to interrogate feature launches, policy changes, and communicative outcomes. Normatively, it articulates design heuristics for platform accountability (provenance first, disclosure defaults, frictions for high-reach content, appealable moderation), user literacies (prompt provenance, co-authorship recognition, context windows as sources not authorities), and culturally grounded co-design (community audits, multilingual red-teaming, and locally stewarded safety glossaries). Collectively, these interventions pursue digital mutualism not as techno-solutionism, but as an ethics of relation that centres plural publics and co-created meaning.

By reimagining ethical communication for hybrid human–machine discourse, the paper contributes to debates on media futures, cultural production, and public reasoning in environments where generative systems increasingly script what is said, who is heard, and how truth claims travel. It invites scholars, designers, and policymakers to treat platform affordances, governance, and mutualistic practices as intertwined terrains for sustaining communicative justice in the age of AI.

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## **Parasocial policing and the female public: Gendered visibility, widowhood, and moral economies in Kerala's digital culture**

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Social media platforms have transformed the ways in which individuals perform identity, negotiate morality, and participate in public life. Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube operate not merely as tools of self-expression but as digital stages where cultural norms, gendered expectations, and moral evaluations are continually enacted and contested (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007). In this mediated ecosystem, audiences form intimate yet asymmetrical relationships with content creators, giving rise to what Horton and Wohl (1956) described as parasocial interactions. However, the contemporary digital environment adds a new layer to this phenomenon: audiences increasingly engage in collective moral adjudication, a process conceptualised in this paper as parasocial policing, where creators' visibility and self-representation are actively monitored, critiqued, and disciplined.

Kerala's socio-cultural milieu provides a particularly rich context for examining these dynamics. Despite high literacy rates and robust indices of gender development, the state remains marked by deeply embedded patriarchal expectations, particularly regarding widowhood and female public behaviour (Jeffrey, 1992). Here, widowhood is traditionally associated with withdrawal from public life, austerity, and restrained visibility. The rise of regional Instagram influencers, however, challenges these long-standing norms. Renu Sudhi, a widow and social media personality, exemplifies this tension: through short films, dance videos, interviews, and participation in the prominent reality show *Bigg Boss Malayalam*, she asserts visibility that contradicts traditional scripts of widowhood. While she foregrounds her role as a mother and content

creator earning a livelihood, audiences simultaneously monitor, comment upon, and morally evaluate her actions, revealing the moral and gendered tensions inherent in Kerala's digital public sphere.

The study employs multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) of Sudhi's social media presence, particularly Instagram and YouTube, from January 2023 to August 2025. The analysis is complemented by qualitative coding of audience interactions that invoke gender, morality, motherhood, and economic agency. These interactions reveal a moral economy that hinges on three recurrent discourses:

1. Sudhi's deviation from the expected modesty of widowhood invites corrective policing, where users invoke "Malayalee culture" to reassert patriarchal codes.
2. Viewers oscillate between empathy and suspicion, debating whether her emotions and self-representations are "real" or "performed for fame."
3. Her repeated articulation of financial need, "doing this to raise my children," becomes a discursive shield and simultaneously a site of interrogation, where audiences assess whether her labour aligns with socially sanctioned motherhood.

Theoretically, this paper draws from Banet-Weiser's (2018) analysis of self-branding as gendered cultural labour, Gill's (2007) conception of postfeminist sensibility, and Terranova's (2000) notion of free labour in digital economies. It situates parasocial policing within the wider attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001), where visibility, moral outrage, and affective engagement operate as currencies of value. Digital publics in Kerala perform a dual role: they are both consumers of Sudhi's visibility and agents of social regulation who participate in constructing her moral narrative. The study also draws on Warner's (2002) concept of counterpublics, proposing that Sudhi's audience constitutes a vernacular moral counterpublic that reasserts traditional hierarchies under the pretext of participatory digital culture.

By foregrounding widowhood and motherhood as interlinked axes of digital performance, this paper contributes to feminist digital humanities by examining how local moral economies adapt to and discipline female agency within the global infrastructures of the creator economy. It demonstrates that the visibility afforded by platforms like Instagram is not merely technological but deeply ideological, structured by affective surveillance, gendered labour expectations,



and community anxieties about modernity and morality. The digital platform thus becomes a stage for what Ahmed (2010) calls affective economies, where feelings such as shame, pride, and disgust circulate and accumulate as social power.

In examining Sudhi's media presence, the paper argues that parasocial policing operates as a socio-digital mechanism translating patriarchal moralism into participatory online behaviour. Rather than being passive consumers, audiences enact forms of gatekeeping that sustain local respectability politics in the digital era. This form of crowd-sourced discipline exposes the contradiction at the heart of Kerala's digital modernity: while women are encouraged to be visible, entrepreneurial, and empowered, their visibility must remain legible within patriarchal boundaries of propriety and morality.

Ultimately, this study situates Renu Sudhi not as an isolated subject of digital scrutiny but as a cultural node through which questions of gender, economy, and morality converge in the Global South's media ecology. It contributes to ongoing conversations in digital humanities and communication studies about the ethical and cultural dimensions of algorithmic visibility and vernacular participation. The phenomenon of parasocial policing reveals how code becomes culture and culture, in turn, shapes code as platform algorithms amplify content that provokes moral engagement. This recursive cycle of visibility, moral reaction, and algorithmic reinforcement renders the digital sphere an extension of Kerala's moral public, reanimated through likes, comments, and shares.

Through the case of Renu Sudhi, this study offers an intervention into understanding how gendered moral economies, digital participation, and algorithmic infrastructures intersect to redefine what it means to be a "public woman" in India's evolving attention economy.

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## **Scroll, like, share, and influence: How Instagram reels are shaping political communication in India**

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India, one of the world's largest democracies, has a political culture where communication is vital in shaping public opinion and mobilising citizens. Historically, political communication involved mass rallies, cinema-inspired campaigns, and television debates. Recently, however, the focus has shifted from traditional to digital platforms, marking a clear move towards adopting new tools. Short-form videos like Instagram Reels, WhatsApp groups and channels, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube videos, including shorts and Live, have become key spaces where national and regional political parties compete for attention, spread narratives, and influence voters. The objective of the

paper is to analyse how Indian political parties use Instagram Reels to create political messages, focusing on the themes, strategies, and visual styles that characterise their digital communication. To interpret this phenomenon, analysis draws on three conceptual frameworks. The first is Engagement as Currency, situated within the broader concept of the attention economy. On platforms like Instagram, likes, comments, shares, and watch time function as the currency of visibility. Extending this logic, the study introduces the concept of “attention politics,” where leaders and parties operate like influencers, competing for engagement not only as a measure of popularity but also as a proxy for political legitimacy and electoral support. The second framework, Race to the Bottom of the Brainstem, builds on the work of digital ethicist Tristan Harris, who argues that platforms privilege emotionally charged triggers over rational deliberation. This framework is applied to analyse political Reels in terms of the emotional strategies embedded in their content. The third framework, platformization, highlights how Instagram itself shapes political discourse, pushing parties to adapt to its algorithmic logic and pre-defined content formats. Together, these frameworks highlight how platform rules and attention-driven strategies are reshaping political communication. Methodologically, this research employs a digital content analysis of the 30 most-viewed Instagram Reels from each of the six political parties. The selection includes three national parties—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC), and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M))—and three influential state parties—the Samajwadi Party (SP), All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)—identified based on their prominence in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections results through election commission of India. By examining thematic content, visual narratives, and platform-specific adaptations, the study aims to map the changing dynamics of political communication in India’s digital landscape. This research addresses that politics on Instagram is no longer simply about posting campaign messages. Instead, it reflects a wider competition in the attention economy, where visibility and engagement are central to the struggle for power. In this sense, Indian political communication increasingly mirrors influencer culture and platformization, transforming how leaders and parties connect with the electorate.

## **Understanding social media usage preferences of senior citizens: Types of content, platform choices, and device utilization**

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Media literacy is a critical competency in negotiating today's digital space. The phenomenal expansion of social media in India has marked a shift in communication for all age groups, including senior citizens. Described as "digital migrants", senior citizens are present on social media and depend on platforms like YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp for communication, information and inclusion. Situating senior citizens within the discourse of, "Media Literacy", this research explores how they access, participate and evaluate social media and how these agencies influence their choices while also addressing the challenges of privacy and misinformation.

**Aim:** To explore social media usage by senior citizens, its influence on their media literacy practices, assessing content preferences and their frequency of digital engagement.

**Objectives:**

1. To identify patterns of digital media exposure and how senior citizens assimilate and interpret social media messages.
2. To measure media literacy levels among senior citizens and their capability to critically analyse, verify, and engage with social media information

**Research Question:** How does social media impact and influence senior citizens in their ability to critically evaluate, navigate, and interact with digital content?

The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE, 2024) defines media literacy as "the ability to encode and decode the symbols transmitted via media and synthesize, analyse, and produce mediated messages". However, Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer (2016) argued that "there is still a need for a broad conceptualization of media literacy that is not media specific" (p. 169). Austin and Domgaard (2024) further broadened the range of media literacy to - digital

literacy, information literacy, news literacy, advertising literacy, health literacy, and science literacy- all sharing common processes of accessing, interpreting, and creating messages. Integrating these processes, Austin and Domgaard (2024) propose Media Literacy theory of Change where individuals cultivate understandings, beliefs and behaviours across diverse topics based on their interactions with media content from various sources. This creation and interpretation of media messages will depend on the individuals' age and cognitive abilities. (Hargittai et al., 2019; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011). For example, senior citizens experience physical and cognitive difficulties that affect media usage but by focused cognitive and media training their literacy levels can be enhanced. (Cabeza et al., 2018; Kaiser, 2023; Moore & Hancock, 2022). As Worth and Gross (1974) explained, communication is "a social process, within a context, in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived, and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred" (p. 30). Meaning, therefore, is co-constructed by message creators and receivers, shaped by both the source's intent and the audience's interpretation (Lemke, 2013) while Cho et al., (2024) posit that individuals construct social identity and self within digital spaces. Accommodating these perspectives, the Media Literacy theory of Change links cognitive and affective message interpretation to outcomes such as attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours.

The study employed a quantitative descriptive research approach to identify social media usage and perception patterns. Data was collected through a structured online questionnaire, administered via Google forms to a purposively sampled group of 100 senior citizens aged 60 years and above in Hyderabad City. The purposive and convenience sample was chosen to have access to urban senior respondents who actively engaged with social media platforms. The survey instrument centred on specific domains such as initiation and access to social media platforms, frequency and duration of social media engagement, content preferences, analysis and verification of media content, privacy and technical challenges in social media usage.

The study reveals that senior citizens access social media as a daily routine. A noteworthy observation is most of respondents were initiated to social media by their children or grandchildren, confirming that digital adoption among seniors is socially mediated by family, a critical feature of media literacy's objective of access and inclusion. Media literacy patterns revealed that 40% of

the senior citizens felt very confident operating social media apps and 49% found it very easy to navigate, suggesting competency and adaptability. Seniors displayed digital engagement with 45% sharing content daily, 53% actively participate in online groups and 58% having forged new friendships online marking their transition from passive consumption to active digital participation – a significant outcome of media literacy theory.

The engagement between senior citizens' and social media aligns with, and sometimes falls short of the elements justified by the Media Literacy Theory of Change: ready access, developing agency, critical analysis and skepticism, emotional wellbeing, and adaptive behaviours. These outcomes validate that media literacy is a dynamic process—one that equips elderly adults digitally, empowering them to be participants in contemporary digital ecosystems, while also reflecting the challenges of misinformation and critical verification.

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## **Session 4 Who's framing our world now?**

### **Digital cultures and visual narratives**

#### **Chair: Deepthi Krishna Thota**

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#### **What to expect? Materialism and consumerism in the popular online discourse on maternity**

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Here's what to expect while you are expecting—and reading: In contemporary times, the discourse surrounding perinatal maternity may be breeding a materialistic-consumerist culture, turning the experience of pregnancy and motherhood into a shopping spree. Employing a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach, this study analyses 20 online articles sampled from the popular pregnancy and parenting website, 'What to Expect', to identify impressions that are used to promote a culture of consumption. This study focused on examining whether popular media discourse surrounding maternity conveys consumerist impressions and to identify the dimensions of consumerism in this discourse. It also aims to discuss how these discourses shape the expectations of contemporary parents, the experiences of motherhood, and the implications of those discourses, especially for those in developing countries.

The objectives of the study were:

- To examine if the popular media discourse surrounding maternity has consumerist impressions
- To identify the dimensions of consumerism in the popular media discourse surrounding maternity
- To discuss how these discourses could shape the expectations of contemporary parents and experiences of motherhood
- To discuss the implications of those discourses, especially for those in developing countries.



Employing the RTA framework, six rigorous steps were followed from data familiarization to theme identification. First, for this study, five articles were randomly selected from the website and analysed for the popular themes occurring. Then, open codes were generated, and an instrument was developed. Further, based on the instrument, 20 articles were selected for analysis through a purposive sampling method, focusing on the identified themes. More often than not, the articles are about reproductive technologies that medicalize pregnancy and childbirth or about the latest and greatest products, from the fanciest baby monitors to the most stylish baby clothes, emphasizing spending. Through this analysis, the articles were examined to identify the ways in which motherhood is constructed as a series of products to be acquired or consumed, rather than an embodied-lived experience. The most popular identified themes included medicalization, commodification of childbirth and the Mom-and-me market. We also explored how these discourses shape the expectations of contemporary parents and their experiences of motherhood, as well as the ways in which they contribute to a broader culture of materialism and consumerism. By unpacking the language and messaging used in these online articles, we aim to shed light on how commercial interests have infiltrated the discourse of modern maternity, and ultimately discuss the implications of these discourses, particularly for individuals in developing countries. Study findings revealed that consumerism persisted among pregnant women and during the maternity period, as they sought to acquire the best things to become perfect parents. This website promotes the purchase and marketing of these products as essential during pregnancy. This study focused on one maternity care marketing platform; however, it can be replicated for different platforms. It can further shed light on future studies, including comparative platform analysis and the inclusion of user-generated responses.

After the qualitative analysis, six overarching themes were identified: Medicalization (with the categories of Postpartum medicalization, Medicalization of childcare and Prenatal medicalization); Commodification of childbirth (Gifting childbirth healthcare providers and Birth tourism); Mom-and-Me market (Marketing mom products, Marketing baby products, Offering shopping aid, Postpartum commodification, Promoting products related to pregnancy); Test syndrome (Prenatal Testing); Temporary products (Hospital

Stay Necessities). The medicalization refers to how the child birth is increasingly medicalised, within the category of the postpartum medicalization highlighting that checkup of postpartum is important, along with the six-week medical appointment. Online discourse uses frames such as mothers suffering death during postpartum for such medicalization and that postpartum appointments can prevent serious complications and offer much-needed physical-mental support. In the category of the medicalization of childcare, the discourse tended to normalize that regular pediatrician visits to monitor children's growth and health. Prenatal medicalization emphasised the importance of the prenatal supplements essential for pregnancy health and filling nutritional gaps during pregnancy are considered as necessary. Under the theme commodification of childbirth, several consumerist overtures such as gifting childbirth healthcare providers, personalised gift baskets for labour-delivery providers, birth tourism that involves choosing birth centres that provide home-style facilities and personalised care were observed. Under the category of Marketing Mom Products, the focus was on the growing consumer culture related to motherhood. Breast pumps are promoted as a primary necessity for breastfeeding, noting that it helps reduce burden on mothers, prevents breast engorgement and sustains milk supply. While such consumerist impressions were identified, their implications on mothers and their perspectives and experiences about pregnancy, especially in developing countries, were critically discussed.

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### **Attention economy and the fragmented epic: Reimagining long-form Indian mythology through AI-driven short-form narratives**

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Narrative traditions in India stem from oral communication spread across folk tales and mythological epics. The personification of the hero figure in these episodic narrative traditions and communities is indexical, iconographic and symbolic and may be in contrast to the homogenised lensing from a western enlightenment view. This personification can be a complex entanglement of

societal values and beliefs. The Indian storytelling tradition marked by sprawling narratives, from Ramayana to Mahabharata are also episodic enmeshed with justified subplots and multi-character development. As A.K. Ramanujan famously wrote (1991) in essay - Three hundred Rāmāyaṇas, “In India and Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the Ramayana or the Mahabharata for the first time. The stories are there, always already.” In multiple, variable, and episodic forms, continually adapted over time. In today’s attention economy, dominated by AI-driven short videos and micro-dramas, the long-form epic is being disintegrated to modular single character-driven content. Platforms increasingly privilege brevity, algorithmic

engagement, and instant gratification over sustained narrative immersion. Collective memory and heroism, which form key pillars of communication in traditional societies and cultures, are now extrapolated within the artificial intelligence superstructure, one that relies on vast datasets derived from digital archives, social media interactions, user-generated content, and cultural corpora processed through large language models and neural networks. This paper investigates how the attention economy reshapes narrative structures, particularly the epic and episodic long-form storytelling in contemporary screen media formats. The research aims to probe the central premise of what narrative elements are retained or lost when epics are compressed into AI-driven short forms? How do such shifts affect cultural memory and audience literacy in narrative complexity? How is the triangulation of myth, audience and hero(ine) as in Asian cultures (specifically India) addressed in forming a narrative argument in AI? The methodology involves comparative narrative analysis of long-form epics in Indian cinema with their contemporary micro drama or AI-adapted equivalents. The analysis is guided by theories of the attention economy by Heitmayer’s (2024) dual-stream model of attention, distinguishing ‘flow’ vs. ‘calcified’ attention. It also situates this shift within the framework proposed by Goldhaber (1997), which views attention as the defining scarce resource in digitally saturated media economies and Jacques Rancière’s (2004) - The Politics of Aesthetics, which conceptualizes aesthetics as a “distribution of the sensible” that shapes what can be seen, heard, and felt. To examine how AI-mediated short-form platforms reconfigure aesthetic experience, mythic temporality, and narrative attention to capture fleeting audience engagement. The contribution of this research lies in highlighting the

cultural costs of short-form dominance while suggesting pathways for integrating epic traditions into the fast-paced, AI-curated digital era without losing narrative depth. This paper will also explore how the AI-driven short-form narratives are fragmenting India's epic traditions, isolating heroes into modular, attention-grabbing moments while bypassing sustained trials, relational depth, and moral growth which is challenging Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey (2008) - by compressing transformative arcs into static archetypes. The research argues that complexity and subjectivity in creating characters conceptually may be absent in the manner in which AI develops mediated narratives YouTube channels such as Sanatan Legends AI, BhaktiWood, Augmentables, and House of Ghantee as case studies demonstrate how Indian creators are using AI to reinterpret mythological epics for short-form digital audiences. Each of them is reimagining familiar stories through devotional and visually immersive formats that appeal to the fastpaced attention spans of today's viewers. These platforms are compressing vast epics into bite sized-emotionally charged episodes which offer spectacle and immediacy while subtly reshaping the moral and cultural essence of the original narratives.

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## **Dream Team? An advertising framework analysis of Dream 11's "Apke team mein kaun" advertising campaign**

Susmita Das, independent scholar

As of writing this abstract, the passing of the Online Gaming Act in August 2025 has banned real money games (RMG) that involve financial transactions and an element of chance. Fantasy sports are a notorious example of RMGs wherein results hinge on external events. In fantasy sports, users build virtual teams, risk money on betting, and compete for cash prizes based on real players' performance in the sporting event. This aspect has likened online fantasy sports to a form of sport betting (Houghton et al., 2019) and sport 'gambification' (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018) where areas of sport are increasingly gambled or betted upon. Scholars have found there to be a reciprocal relationship (Kupfer & Anderson, 2021) or symbiotic relationship (Wardle, 2021) between gaming and gambling.

In India, fantasy gaming studies have focused on fantasy cricket from various disciplines. Studies from the data science field have focused on cricket big-data analytics and the use of AI algorithms to predict fantasy cricket outcomes (S et al., 2022; Tyagi et al., 2025). Some research has also explored participant motivations of fantasy cricket among college students (Balhara et al., 2024; Sawhney, 2024) and some have proposed gambling to be the "dark side" of fantasy cricket that lures its often low-income users (Kumar, 2024). The most prominent body of research on fantasy cricket in India has however been from legal studies which traces ambiguities in defining fantasy games as those involving skill or chance (Singh & Talwar, 2024) with the more recent studies elucidating gambling laws thus historically situating contemporary (and ongoing) developments in online gaming regulation in India (Jain, 2025).

In light of this wide body of work, there is a gap in our cultural understanding of the appeal of fantasy games and the institutional/industrial relations within which the Online Gaming Act 2025 was passed. Informed by the Public Gambling Act of 1867 (Jain, 2025), the new Online Gaming Act 2025 specifically bans the advertising, promotion, and endorsement of fantasy games involving real money, the most notable of which in India has been the advertising campaign and the promotion of Dream 11, the fantasy cricket mobile platform, during the men's Indian Premier League of 2025.

This paper is grounded in critical theories of advertising advocated by John Harms and Douglas Kellner (1991) which situates the advertising institution within the broader developments of consumer capitalism, mass communications and culture, and the social and political trends of a given society. Moreover, advertising is a 'privileged form of discourse' (Leiss et al., 2013) as it serves as a bridge to transfer information between production, media, and consumption. Due to its unique institutional position, it serves as a tool for socialization and persuasion (Leiss et al., 2013) and influences consumption by generating cultural meaning around goods. Methodologically, this paper conducts an 'advertising framework analysis' (Wharton & Hardy, 2014), an approach adapted and based on Stuart Hall's influential Encoding/Decoding model (1980) that treats televisual forms (like advertising) as a 'circulation circuit' in which meanings and messages are produced/circulated through visual and aural discourses (During, 2006)

Therefore, to understand the cultural meanings in circulation about fantasy cricket, this paper strives to critically analyse Dream 11's "Apke Team Mein Kaun" ("who is on your team") advertising campaign with the aim to tackle the following interconnected research questions: How is fantasy cricket portrayed in Dream 11's ad campaign? What are the discursive strategies used to construct favourable notions about fantasy cricket? What are visual and aural codes through which social acceptance for gambling is created?

An advertising framework model (Wharton & Hardy, 2014) comprises three areas for analysis at the moment of production, namely - encoding, text, and decoding. The advertising framework method of analysis, thus, enables a critical reading of advertisements to arrive at the various meanings and discourses about fantasy cricket created at the moment of production, that is, within the institutional and industrial circuit of advertising. The paper will analyse the advertising campaign "Apke Team Mein Kaun" which featured prominent cricket and Bollywood celebrities in a series of nine ad films that were aired on major television networks and digital media platforms during the course of the IPL 2025 season.

Some of the early findings indicate that Dream 11 ads subvert and remake the notion of the team from collective spirit of the sport into an individual and competitive pursuit of financial gain. The Dream 11 ads also reposition and

reproduce cricket fans as managers (rather than spectators) of cricket leagues, while commodifying their collective labour for profit. And finally, the ads utilize verbal and visual codes of self-deprecating humour to build acceptable cultural values around sport betting/gambling to its media savvy audiences.

In conclusion, while the Online Gaming Act 2025 bans not only online money games but also the advertising and promotion of such games, it is paramount to decode the discourses of fantasy games that are now in cultural circulation, and the possibilities or consequences that prohibitive regulation may bring. Hence, this paper will contribute towards a nuanced understanding of fantasy games, online gaming/gambling, and in advertising's institutional power.

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## **Exploring ecological advocacy in Nila Madhab Panda's movies with special reference to Kaun Kitney Paani Mein, Jalpari: The Desert Mermaid, and Kadvi Hawa**

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Cinema has long been a powerful medium of mass communication, with a broad reach and the ability to influence and raise awareness among substantial audiences. Even in the digital era, cinema continues to function as a major cultural, social, political and environmental force. Environmental advocacy presents information on ecological issues to encourage audiences to adopt more environmentally sensitive practices and biocentric worldviews (Bish, 2023). Eco-cinema, a subset of environmental advocacy, began in response to the growing ecological concerns and the film industry's recognition of its potential to shape public consciousness. The concept of "Eco-cinema" was first introduced in "Towards an Eco-cinema" (MacDonald, 2004). Considering the adverse effects of climate change worldwide, particularly India's own climate challenges, from severe water shortages in the capital city of Assam, and even urban centres like Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru, such narratives gain heightened relevance. Therefore, this paper endeavours to analyse Nila Madhab Panda's works, linking India's environmental realities to cinematic representation. Guided by environmental communication frameworks (Cox, 2010) and critical analysis highlighting the significance of eco-cinema in Indian visual media as a platform for raising awareness about environmental concerns (Bhattacharya, 2022), the research employs a mixed-methods qualitative design that combines content analysis of cinematic language with a post-screening audience survey.

Though awareness of environmental issues is rising, studies of the specific role of Indian eco-cinema are very limited. Specifically, the works of filmmaker Nila Madhab Panda, who is known for his "entertaining yet socially relevant" movies that offer localised perspective on global climate narratives, remain underrepresented. Although Panda's films have garnered attention for their thematic focus on environmental concerns, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness, thematic nuances, and broader implications of his cinematic eco-advocacy. The study finds conceptual, methodological, and gender gaps in terms of ecocinema consciousness for this study.

This research endeavours to address these gaps by critically analysing storytelling techniques and cinematic language and their impact on audience engagement with sustainability issues. Thus, this research was conducted using content analysis of three of his movies: *Kaun Kitney Paani Mein*, *Jalpuri: The Desert Mermaid*, and *Kadvi Hawa*, and a post-screening survey conducted through purposive sampling. Forty participants (aged 18-45) from varied genders, educational backgrounds and locations were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives.

1. Content Analysis: A detailed examination of the three films was conducted to identify and analyse key environmental themes of the movies and the cinematic language of the director.
2. Post screening survey and Focus Group Discussion: The researcher conducted a post-screening survey as well as an FGD using purposive sampling so as to study the films' impact on audiences, capturing insights on perception, engagement and attitudes toward environmental issues.

#### Objectives

1. To understand the storytelling techniques and cinematic language of Nila Madhab Panda's films, which talk about ecological advocacy.
2. To examine the impact of ecological advocacy on the audience through Panda's movies.

#### Research Questions

1. How does Nila Madhab Panda use storytelling techniques and cinematic language to convey ecological storytelling in his films?
2. What is the impact of Nila Madhab Panda's ecological advocacy in his movies on audience awareness and attitudes towards environmental issues?

The findings indicate that Nila Madhab Panda's films utilise cinematic language and narrative techniques effectively to advocate for ecological awareness. Through contrasting visuals, symbolism, metaphors and stark imagery, Panda conveys environmental challenges — such as drought, water scarcity and climate change, in ways that resonate emotionally and intellectually with audiences.

In *Kaun Kitney Paani Mein* (2015), water scarcity is framed not just as a resource problem but as a symbol of social inequality. The human-nature dualism was portrayed efficiently by showing contrasting relationships with nature in Upri and Bairi Gaon.

*Jalpari: The Desert Mermaid* (2012) addresses gender and environmental ethics through the motif of the disappearing girl child and vanishing water. The fusion of myth and realism was pulled out effectively in the film.

In *Kadvi Hawa* (2017), Panda's stark, desaturated visuals of drought-stricken landscapes serve as both metaphor and warning. The film's minimal soundscape — dominated by wind and silence — evokes a sensory experience of climate anxiety.

This study demonstrates that Indian eco-cinema, when grounded in local realities, can both inform and transform public attitudes toward sustainability. Thus, Panda's work positions Indian cinema within broader discourses of environmental communication and leaves promise for policymakers to include such cinema as a tool to achieve the SDG goals in India.

However, the study faced certain limitations. The audience sample, though diverse, was limited in number and geographical range, and the restriction to three films was due to time and resource constraints. Future research could expand to include additional filmmakers and audience demographics to deepen the understanding of eco-cinema's impact.

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## **Ritual realism: Semiotic representations of faith, food, and language in Lijo Jose Pellissery's cinema**

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Lijo Jose Pellissery's movies explain the social and religious life of Kerala as a complex sign system, where faith, community, and physical elements come together. His films do not just show the literal truth of the story but also create an ideal world of symbols that reveal the strong influence of rituals and social actions on the wider human experience. This paper analyzes the semiotic representations of faith, food, and language in the works of Pellissery's *Amen* (2013), *Angamaly Diaries* (2017), and *Ee.Ma.Yau.* (2018) to reveal the underlying meaning and cultural expression of the themes such as Christian ritualism, culinary culture, and linguistic hybridity. These movies have been chosen because together they map a line of development in Pellissery's cinematic discussion with the sacred and the social, namely, *Amen* brings to the fore faith and divine performance, *Angamaly Diaries* shows corporeal community through the language of food, and *Ee.Ma.Yau.* tackles death and ritual in the midst of the Christian imagination in coastal Kerala. All of them, thus, represent the director's developing semiotic universe, one that portrays spirituality as not separation from the world but constant interaction through life that is experienced, embodied, and shared.

The research initiates by placing Pellissery's cinema within the scope of Malayalam film's realism traditions, which have primarily concentrated on the issues of class, region, and social mobility. Yet, he diverges from the same line by using local Christianity not only as a setting but also as a sign system, an expressive system that communicates faith through the visual and performative excess. In *Amen*, the church festival, choir music, and miraculous narrative create interconnected signs of both divine and human longing, thus redefining faith as a theatrical and linguistic act. In *Angamaly Diaries*, the busy market, meat parties, and dialectal speech change food and language, respectively, into emblems of community identity and masculine performance. Lastly, *Ee.Ma.Yau* reinvents the funeral ritual as a sign event where faith merges into existential absurdity, thus revealing the weakness of belief systems when they encounter death. Throughout these films, Pellissery forms a cinematic language that links realistic sensory with ritual performance, thus introducing the term "ritual realism" for the phenomenon created by the paper. The research has used semiotic analysis as the main method of study; that is, the works of Roland Barthes (1972), Umberto Eco (1976), and Yuri Lotman (1990) provided the basis for interpreting Pellissery's cinematic signs. The writing of selected scenes has revealed and interpreted visual and linguistic motifs, like the church bell, the feast table, the cross, and the dialect, as signifiers that connect the sacred and social. The analysis also takes into account a visual-cultural method and approaches to understand the film's *mise-en-scène*, spatial organization, and colour symbolism as ways of creating meaning that go beyond the narrative function. The paper thus opens up the question of how Pellissery's visual language communicates through recurring ritualised gestures, eating, praying, mourning, and storytelling that are both deeply local and universally human.

The selection of these three films is also methodologically important. They form a consistent line in Pellissery's development of themes and styles, from the lyrical spirituality of *Amen* to the corporeal chaos of *Angamaly Diaries* and the metaphysical despair of *Ee.Ma.Yau*. Each film has a unique social background, but there is still a common semiotic thread: the performance of faith and community. *Amen* sees faith as a show of devotion, where liturgical aesthetics join with vernacular humour. *Angamaly Diaries* unfolds through a reception of food that sustains as well as deciphers the concept of consumption toward self-hood and social hierarchy. *Ee.Ma.Yau* turns the Christian funeral into a

reflection on mortality and ritual absurdity, probing the boundaries of faith and the performativity of grief. This triad thus offers an all-encompassing range for studying Pellissery's semiotic building up of culture, rituals, and meanings.

Based on the modern media environment, this paper acknowledges that Pellissery's visual techniques are indicative of the conversation between conventional and new film technology. His bringing in handheld cinematography, long takes, and team choreography transforms social interactions into captivating visual rituals. His films, though heavily grounded in local Christianity and the Malayalam language, have a semiotic property that goes way beyond the local boundaries, thus addressing everyone's concerns with the issues of faith, death, and acceptance. In this light, Pellissery's cinema acts as a cultural repository where religion and modernity are in a state of conflict or coexistence, each one reinterpreting the other through the medium of imagery.

The research finally concludes that Pellissery's films are the ones where the discipline of ritual realism is greenlit, and the divine is seen through material and linguistic practices of everyday life. This, therefore, would mean that the transcendent has been completely gone from its previous position. The characters and the people in his films communicate in the language of faith, food, and talk; thus, they create a society where no one can tell the difference between the divine and the ordinary. The research finds itself among those discussing how the Indian regional cinema uses visual and linguistic symbols to encode religious identity and collective feeling. Through deciphering the signs in Pellissery's movies, this article not only positions his work in a larger realm of cultural semiotics but also unveils the process through which his films transcend the local Christian experience and become a universal language of human expression.

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## **Session 5 Who tells stories anymore?**

### **News media in the algorithmic world**

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#### **Redefining journalism competencies in the age of AI:**

##### **A case study of Mumbai's media ecosystem**

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping global communication. Educational institutions across the world are adapting to this technological shift. Journalism education stands at a critical juncture. In India—particularly in Mumbai, a dynamic media capital—AI is not only transforming newsroom workflows but also challenging the foundational skills and ethical frameworks traditionally taught in communication and journalism curricula. This study critically examines how AI tools are influencing news production, editorial processes, and audience engagement, and what this means for redefining journalistic competencies in the digital age. Through a mixed-methods approach involving interviews with 15 practicing journalists and 120 surveys with diverse Mumbai-based media students, this research explores the complex interplay between automation and human judgment. Journalists report using AI for data analysis, real-time fact-checking, and personalised content delivery, while also voicing concerns over editorial autonomy, job security, and the erosion of professional identity. On the audience side, findings reveal a generational shift—digital-native consumers show increasing comfort with AI-curated news, yet remain cautious about emotional depth and credibility. Framed by gatekeeping theory and the sociology of news production, the study argues that traditional models of journalistic education must evolve to address algorithmic influence, data literacy, and ethics in AI-mediated contexts. The majority of respondents (55.6%) are uncertain about the accuracy and trustworthiness of AI-generated

news, indicating a cautious or undecided attitude. A significant portion (33.3%) do not believe AI news can be trusted, reflecting concerns about credibility, bias, or lack of human oversight. Only 11.1% expressed confidence in AI-generated content. This suggests that while there is growing exposure to AI in journalism, trust remains a key barrier to its acceptance. The skepticism underscores the importance of transparency, editorial oversight, and accountability in AI-driven news production. The Mumbai case underscores the urgency of integrating locally responsive, ethically grounded pedagogical approaches into communication programmes. Qualitative interviews (n=10) with media educators brings to light the integration of Artificial intelligence and it's underplay in educational institutions in Mumbai. It is evident from global studies, integrating AI with teaching tools and exposing students at the undergraduate level to ethical use of AI is the way forward. Majority of educators agree that readers may receive fast updates or information presented through news media but they risk missing the richness and emotional depth that only real human storytelling can deliver. People connect with stories when they sense the human touch. If journalism relies too much on AI, it risks losing that emotional bond. Readers want more than just facts—they want stories that move them and make them reflect. This is where AI often falls short. In conclusion, the data suggests a belief in the enduring value of human journalists, but also an acknowledgment that AI could play an increasingly significant role in shaping how news is created and disseminated. As AI technology continues to evolve, future discussions will likely centre around how to best integrate AI into journalism while preserving the integrity, creativity, and ethical standards that human journalists bring to the profession. By foregrounding practitioner and audience perspectives, this research contributes to the global conversation on AI and journalism, advocating for a reimagined curriculum that prepares future communicators for a rapidly transforming media ecosystem.

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## **Predatory journalism: An AI-assisted critical discourse analysis of news corpus**

Francis Philip Barclay, N Boobalakrishnan, Akila S, Showkat Ahmad Jan, Central University of Tamil Nadu

To adopt an AI-assisted approach and automate digital news discourse analysis, this study introduces the Research Prompt Engineering Framework (RPEF) that sequences eight procedures in an iterative loop: development of the research instrument; pilot study; validation of the instrument; selection of application, prompt philosophy and appropriate model; prompt engineering; content analysis; evaluation and recalibration of the engineered prompt till saturation. After structuring the framework and describing the process, this paper applies it for a case study of Predatory Journalism and develops a Master Prompt for specified usage on deep-research AI applications. At a time when news production is exploding in the competitive digital space and demanding analysis and the manual-lexical analysis of news discourse is time-consuming and riddled with a plethora of issues, such as researcher subjectivity, this paper uses prompt engineering to automate corpus analysis at the granular-level and expose Predatory Journalism—an unethical contemporary news trend that is prioritizing sensationalism over substance and exploiting reader emotions for clicks, views and shares. Although this paper prepares the Targeted Master Prompt for the expressed purpose of identifying impressions of Predatory Journalism, the framework proposed has far-reaching evaluative and analytical potentials for adaptation and application in a multitude of industries, institutions and contexts, including education, for the multimodal analysis of texts and assignments. Based on comparative tests between manual and AI coding methods and the study findings, the nuances, effectiveness and appropriateness of AI use in contemporary media research are discussed.

For the case study, an ‘a priori’ research design and a quantitative media content analysis approach are employed to validate a pre-defined research instrument and the engineered research prompt developed from the research instrument to examine impressions of Predatory Journalism in a sample of online news articles on sexual violence reported from India. Barclay and Laskar (2025) conceptualised Predatory Journalism to identify its impressions in news text while reporting sexual violence. Adapting their model, this study identifies

the generic parameters for the operationalization of Predatory Journalism and the construction of a measurement instrument for the present study. A comparative analysis was conducted between the manual coding and AI-assisted coding with 200 cases (10 items multiplied by 20 news articles) and an intercoder agreement level of .772 was achieved. The same sample of news text on sexual violence was analysed using the engineered research prompt and the research instrument, using manual coding.

While the AI application took an average of 20 seconds to process a prompt for analysing a news item, the manual coding was performed by expert coders. While the subtopic of crime was covered in all the news articles analysed, 18 of them covered legal action and 15 included public responses to the crime committed. Study results also identified a popular media tendency to frame the sexual crime as a case of extreme violence using words and phrases such as “most brutal”, “shocking” and “sensational”, which the AI application skilfully identified on par with human coders. There was also a media tendency to narrativize the sexual assault, offering hyper-detailed narrations of the event in chronological order that were crafted like first-person accounts. Such hyperdetailed narrations that embedded graphic and lurid details could trivialize the crime and retraumatize the victims.

In terms of intercoder agreement between manual and AI coding, reliable levels were identified for items on Dehumanisation ( $\alpha = 0.732$ ;  $r = 0.579$ ), Narrativisation ( $\alpha = 0.718$ ;  $r = 0.560$ ), and Sexual lingo ( $\alpha = 0.889$ ;  $r = 0.800$ ).

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## **Populist outrage and the algorithmic subject: A media framing study of India's Got Latent controversy**

Lydia Glory Jose, IILM University

The escalating reliance on complex digital infrastructure mandates a conceptual shift toward “Human and Digital Mutualism”, recognizing that technology is not merely an external tool but an integral constituent of social reality (Coeckelbergh, 2024; Katzenbach & Pentzold, 2024). While the goal of traditional digital humanism is to align technology with humanistic values, a

more critical perspective that is critical digital posthumanism is necessary to address the profound political and societal power embedded in these socio-technological changes (Coeckelbergh, 2024). This study focuses on the intricate synthesis among Code, Culture, and Communication within this mutualistic paradigm, that highlights specifically on how algorithmic governance provokes traditional human agency and how media framing biases shape social reality in India's context.

The reasoning behind code is the digital representations of human beings that are being transformed every second. The Human Digital Twin (HDT) can be understood as the digital model of the self that keeps uploading complete physical, physiological, emotional and cognitive data and also stands as the first and foremost example (Fontes et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2024). These HDTs are established on the basis of a Society 5.0 that continuously depends on data and the union of physical and cyberspace that are governed by AI systems (Fontes et al., 2024). The multiplying of digital content through message generation further expands the digital intervention of human interaction (Katzenbach & Pentzold, 2024). The continuous duplication and automation raises ethical apprehensions about the human agency involved, which can mean an overdependence on technology for self-improvement of risks that can modify identity and social co-existences (Fontes et al., 2024). Crucially, if HDTs achieve autonomy and context awareness, they may make decisions or express sentiments that bypass the human originator's moral judgment or intent, leading to severe accountability uncertainties (Fontes et al., 2024). To understand this, the study suggests the need to create abilities like 'digital empathy' to make sure there is consistency between AI representations and the emotional needs of human beings as well (Kabalska & Wagner, 2025). The challenges posed by these emergent digital subjects emphasize that automated technologies are "things that are in the world with us," actively shaping transactional reality rather than being passive additions (Katzenbach & Pentzold, 2024).

Cultural production in the networked world is heavily mediated through media framing, a systematic process of selection, emphasis, and interpretation that influences how complex social and political issues are understood (Muir et al., 2021; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). In India, this mechanism is central to the country's highly politicised media landscape. Analyses of Indian policy discourse confirm

systemic media bias, notably providing significantly high coverage to the middle class and political statements while often neglecting marginalised populations. Moreover, these discourses continue on social media which reiterates these biases rather than cancelling them out. The intricacies in such dialogues of digital mutualism in India was showcased by the widely reported controversy that surrounded the comedian Samay Raina's online show, *India's Got Latent*, in February 2025. This event prompted massive public engagement and media coverage. This showed how online critique rapidly escalates into online shaming, which was framed by the media as a social issue with moral uncertainties and both positive and negative depictions. This study will be following the theoretical framework - Framing Theory and will be trying to answer the research question: What is the role of Human Digital Twin in the digital news media's construction and framing of 'India's Got Latent' controversy? This research question will try to understand the controversy's perceptual nuances and moral uncertainties that can be engrained in media representations, which helps in informing critical policy debates and furthering the understanding of strategic communication in the algorithmic age.

To study the interaction of digital entanglement and biased framing the full paper will utilize a focused Qualitative Framing Analysis. This study will be primarily guided by Giles and Shaw's (2009) systematic approach to media framing analysis and will utilize thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterned responses and salient meanings within the data. The data collection will be that of digital news articles retrieved from news websites and will specifically focus on the India's Got Latent controversy. This will be collected from major English digital platforms (The Hindu, The Times of India, The Indian Express, The Print, Scroll) over a period of one month which was the peak of the event (i.e., February/March, 2025). The pervasive nature of HDTs and the fragmentation of public discourse through polarised framing necessitate a decisive scholarly response. This research contributes to the argument for a critical digital posthumanism (Coeckelbergh, 2024) by empirically examining how code-driven subjectivity and culturally situated communication practices define human-digital mutualism in an Indian context.

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## Human–machine interaction and journalistic autonomy in newsrooms

Amaresh Jha, UPES; Sanjeev Ratna Singh, Chandigarh University

The rapid integration of automated technologies in newsrooms has irrevocably transformed journalistic practices, recasting the contours of editorial judgment, ethical responsibility, and professional autonomy. From real-time dashboards tracking audience behaviour to the algorithmic scope of trending topics, news production now is human-machine assemblage. For example, reports by Reuters Institute reveal that 61% of editors worldwide rely on analytics dashboards. In the meantime, Algorithm Watch found that sensational and

emotionally charged report types automated by bots are 20% more likely to be produced and amplified than any form of investigative and public-interest journalism. It thus becomes crucial to ask how editorial independence and ethical journalism survive in this automated, data-driven media landscape?

This research sets forth to explore human/machine relations in Indian digital newsrooms and implications for journalists' autonomy, ethics, and professional identity. By relying on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), the study adopts a relational understanding of a tool as a dynamic socio-technical network, in which both technologies and academicians exercise agency. I rely on ANT because it transcends the human versus machine duality, insisting on the symmetrical relationships of influence. It provides a relational orientation to study how journalists seek to negotiate control, push back automation, and renegotiate the boundaries of their profession. As opposed to other approaches, ANT does not see technologies as an external context but as a crucial element of journalistic practice. Where traditional media sociology focuses on organizational structures and normative roles, ANT affords a material-semiotic standpoint to understand how machines, codes, and platforms become integral to the exercise of editorial judgment.

This is a purposeful and ongoing empirical mixed-method research. The qualitative and quantitative approaches would be combined in the thesis due to the use of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, as well as algorithm-assisted content analysis. The sample size is 45 participants who are the journalists, reporters, editors, and data analysts of five major digital news organizations in India, which are two legacy and three digitally native. It is founded on competent sampling methods to validate to represent the variations in the models, levels of technological adoption, and ownerships. The data collection includes the description of the research setting, the interviewing of the participants on the autonomy, accountability, and influence of algorithms. The interviewing is related to the concepts of algorithmic transparency and ethics of the automated news content production. The observation applies to understanding the social relationships in the commitment of algorithms to the content creation by people. The content analysis, in its turn, would be detected before and after the implemental use of automated technologies to a story.

Two-tier data analysis is performed by the application of the first for the coding and theme development of the concepts' variations. The second is the development of the visualization scheme of the social associations between the journalists and human and nonhuman agencies, such as software applications and dashboards, inspired by ANT. The selected methodological tools also identify what non-human agencies consist of, such as CMS. It allows for enhancing clarity of the power mapping or network analysis while ensuring the depth of interpretation. Reliability is ensured through the triangulation of the varied data types as used for the interviewing, case notes, and story analysis.

Findings of the study suggest that automation technologies tend to work as double-edged tools. First, they streamline editorial operations and increase their efficiency by providing meaningful data insights. Second, they subtly reconfigure journalistic autonomy by highlighting new hierarchies of the dependence on the technologically-enhanced and/or corporatised metrics. On one hand, many journalists argue that automation helps make catchy headlines or assists with the prediction of what the audience would prefer to hear. However, on the other hand, it reduces the diversity of editorial decisions and steers publishers and editors to serve the subordination to metrics. In addition, according to the interviewed journalists, the lack of understanding about the priorities and filtering mechanisms of the automated systems potentially undermine transparency in editorial operations.

Another issue that is emerging among the current study's respondents is that professional ethics might become overshadowed by the focus on the real-time analytics and audience engagement scoring. Moreover, high reliance on the dashboards might even contribute to a situation when virality overweighs veracity, subordinating the public service journalism values to the commercial imperatives. The interviews also suggested that the audience does not always trust the automatically generated pieces of news. It is mostly due to a discrepancy: while the news gathered by AI is by far faster than a human can do, it lacks the necessary context sensitivity and critical orientation.

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## **AI at the Ballot Box: Media Literacy and the Role of Generative AI in the 2024 Lok Sabha Election**

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The intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and political communication is emerging as a critical area of concern in contemporary democracies, particularly in the Global South (West, 2023). As generative AI technologies are becoming increasingly accessible, their use in electoral campaigns raises questions about information authenticity, algorithmic manipulation, and voter susceptibility to misinformation (Nie, 2024; Dawson & James, 2024). UNESCO (2023) underscores the urgency of advancing digital and media literacy as core civic competencies in the age of synthetic information. Against this backdrop, the 2024 Indian Lok Sabha elections which was part of a global “super election year” involving over 50 countries has marked a pivotal moment in the integration of generative AI into political messaging and electoral strategy (Munoz, 2024). This study investigates how generative AI reshapes political messaging, voter perceptions, and media trust during this pivotal election cycle. Situated within the framework of Actor-Network Theory, the research conceptualizes AI as a non-human actor influencing political behaviour alongside traditional media systems. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study combines a structured survey (N=150) conducted in the urban centres of Bangalore and Mysore with in-depth interviews of political strategists. Quantitative findings reveal that while 94.7% of respondents were aware of AI, a significant perception gap exists between voters' confidence in identifying AI-generated content and their actual exposure to it. Social media and YouTube emerged as dominant vectors for AI-driven election content, with young voters (aged 24–27) showing higher receptivity, especially toward visually engaging or humorous formats. Meanwhile, strategist interviews confirmed AI's strategic deployment for micro-targeting, narrative shaping, and real-time voter sentiment analysis. The study surfaces a dual narrative where AI enhances personalization and outreach but concurrently raises ethical concerns around misinformation, deepfakes, and electoral integrity. Trust in AI-generated content correlated strongly with higher education levels, pointing to the urgent need for digital literacy to critically engage with emerging media technologies.

This research contributes to Asian media studies by offering evidence-based insights into the sociotechnical dynamics of AI in a major democracy. It calls for robust regulatory frameworks and media literacy interventions to safeguard democratic values in an age of synthetic information.

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## Documentary Films

### **Chair: Gunjan Sharma**

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### **Kitchen Films (Telugu)**

Lavanya Ramaiah, OP Jindal Global University

*Kitchen Films* emerged from a year-long series of participatory workshops held at Kudali, Badampet, in the Sangareddy district of Telangana. The workshops were produced by Yakshi- a resource and creativity centre for rural women, youth and children established in 1992.

The films were facilitated by Lavanya Ramaiah, whose film practice privileges the intimate and everyday over the spectacular. In these sessions, a group of young rural women—most of them mothers and wives who had never before touched a camera—began exploring filmmaking as a medium of self-expression. What began as an introduction to cinematic language became a profound inquiry into selfhood, agency, and the politics of representation.

The name Kitchen Films itself carries multiple resonances. It refers to the domestic space that shapes the women's everyday lives and the social roles they inhabit, while also reclaiming that very space as one of creativity and authorship. Within the constraints of domesticity—its routines, repetitions, and invisibilities—these filmmakers discovered a cinematic vocabulary grounded in lived experience. Their cameras turned toward what is often dismissed as trivial: a pot simmering on the stove, the sound of chores, the gesture of care. In doing so, they transformed the private into the political.

Initially conceived as part of a fellowship programme engaging with ideas of liberty and constitutional rights, the project soon moved beyond abstraction. As the women filmed their homes, conversations, and silences, what surfaced were the layered inequities that define domestic life. Their stories revealed forms of intimate violence—psychological, emotional, and structural—that are rarely spoken but deeply felt. The films are not confessional in a conventional

sense; rather, they are acts of quiet witnessing. Each film bears the imprint of a specific life, yet together they form a collective portrait of gendered experience in rural India.

The tone of the *Kitchen Films* oscillates between tenderness and critique. They are personal and humorous, yet sharply observant of how power and control operate within households. Everyday labour—cooking, cleaning, caring—is rendered with an unsparing eye and subtle irony. This gaze, both self-reflexive and empathetic, situates the filmmakers within a lineage of feminist art practices that question the politics of visibility.

For Lavanya Ramaiah, the facilitation of *Kitchen Films* became an act of co-learning. Working closely with the participants, she reflected on how instinctively they navigated the “politics of the personal.” Their engagement raised difficult questions about the nature of authorship and access in cinema:

1. How can the time-intensive and resource-heavy process of filmmaking become meaningful within the overburdened routines of women’s lives?
2. Is cinema still a privilege reserved for those with social and economic mobility—largely men?
3. What would Indian cinema look like if more mothers, wives, workers, and farmers could tell their own stories?
4. Can access to the tools of cinematic expression truly be democratised?

Through such questions, *Kitchen Films* becomes more than a creative project; it is a social and aesthetic intervention. The films reveal how storytelling can serve as both resistance and release, how the act of filming can transform passive observation into authorship. The process itself—sharing, shooting, watching—becomes a mode of solidarity.

In their modest scale and emotional precision, these films reimagine cinema as an extension of everyday life rather than an escape from it. They affirm that the kitchen, often seen as a site of confinement, can also be a site of artistic origin—a space where women reclaim narrative control and redefine what filmmaking can be.

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## Ti Nadi Hoti (She Was a River) (Marathi)

## Shashank Gadilkar, Savitribai Phule Pune University

“She was a river —but her lips were covered with the torn blouse of exploitation.”

This opening line shatters the sanctified image of the river — once a symbol of creation and purity — and exposes her as a victim of human greed. This is not merely the story of a river; it is the story of every violated body, every silenced woman, every wounded soul that continues to flow, unseen and unheard. The documentary explores the transformation of the river into a woman — a goddess turned into a slave. The river, which once gave birth to civilisations, is now polluted, drained, and desecrated in the name of progress. Through haunting poetry and symbolic imagery, the film portrays how the city, in its hunger for growth, assaults both nature and womanhood. “She was a woman — but there was a pipe digging a canal through her womb”. This image becomes the film’s spine — raw, disturbing, and brutally honest. The “pipe” is not just a tool; it is the metaphor for human intrusion, for a civilisation that consumes without care.

Every tower that rises from the soil of the city extinguishes its cigarette on her chest —a chilling reminder that every urban comfort rests upon someone else’s suffering.

Visually, the film speaks in metaphors. The trembling surface of muddy water, the heap of stained clothes on the riverbank, and the blood-soaked footprints—all come together to form a visceral language of pain. When the river speaks, she doesn’t plead; she warns. “Come carefully,” she says, “strip your whiteness—bring only your bare bones.” It is a demand that we shed our fake civility and confront the truth of our collective cruelty. The filmmaker approaches her, and she laughs — not out of joy, but out of scorn. Her laughter echoes like a woman fallen into the gutter — a sound of despair turned into mockery. The river is no longer divine; she is torn, used, and thrown away — “a repeatedly ripped bag”. “She was not a mother anymore... she was the corpse of motherhood.” Through these words, the film transforms maternal imagery into a vision of death — the death of nature, of compassion, and of humanity itself. In the film’s central passage, the camera peers into her cupped hands — a haunting tableau filled with faces of the oppressed: sex workers, landless



labourers, violated women, and forgotten children. She carries them all within her, becoming the vessel of collective pain. She says, “I have quenched the thirst of all—even Ambedkar came to me.” Yet now, she whispers, “What flows in me is not water anymore—it is blood.” This revelation marks the turning point — the river’s transformation from a source of life to a testimony of death. In the final scene, her voice returns: “When men like you strike me, the water does not stop—it turns into blood.” This closing line is both an accusation and a lament — the culmination of centuries of violence, where purity itself bleeds under the weight of civilisation. Cinematically, the film flows like the river it portrays — calm on the surface, turbulent beneath. Every frame is infused with silence, decay, and defiance. The camera neither glorifies nor victimises her; it listens. The sound design merges the hum of factories, temple bells, and whispers of the current, blurring the lines between prayer and pollution. *“She Was a River”* is, therefore, not just a poetic documentary — it is an elegy. An elegy for the rivers we have killed, for the women we have silenced, and for the humanity we have drained. It forces us to ask uncomfortable questions: How long will development justify destruction? How long will we worship the goddess while desecrating her body? And how long before the river’s blood reaches our own doorstep? This film stands as a mirror — one that reflects the guilt we refuse to acknowledge. It blurs the boundaries between the river and the woman, between ecology and morality, between life and death. It is not about the death of a river alone; it is about the death of empathy. In the end, what flows is no longer water. It is blood — the last testament of a river that once gave us life.

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## **Bhram Nagri: The Land of Pushkar (Hindi/English)**

Danish Khan, Janvi Singh, Harsh Chaudhary, Anirudh Kuchibhotla, Hitakshi Bachchani, Nikhil Sharma, Ananya Nair, Gauri Durga Chakraborty, Bennett University

Created by students of Bennett University's Times School of Media, *Bhram Nagri: The Land of Pushkar* is an experimental documentary that feels like a trance, a psychedelic meditation that drifts between dream and reality. Brought to life by Anirudh Kuchibhotla, Danish Khan, Hitakshi Bachchani, Janvi Singh, Harsh Chaudhary, Palak Sharma, Ananya Nair, and Nikhil Sharma and supervised by Prof. Gauri Durga Chakraborty, the film challenges the very idea of what a documentary can be. It is not structured around facts or narration but around sensation, rhythm, and emotion.

Set in the mystical town of Pushkar, Rajasthan, the film unfolds through the voice of an atheist wandering through a place drenched in myth, divinity, and contradiction. What begins as a search for clarity becomes an inward journey into the nature of belief itself. Pushkar transforms into something almost unreal, a fever dream where faith, illusion, and identity blur together in shifting hues of light, sound, and silence.

The title *Bhram Nagri* holds the film's entire essence. The word *Bhram* may mean Brahma, the creator; Brahman, the ultimate truth; or bhram, illusion. *Nagri* means city. Together, they create a world suspended between creation and confusion, between divinity and delusion. The film exists in that very space where faith is not a conclusion but a question, and every truth is open to interpretation.

Visually, *Bhram Nagri* is deliberately raw. The camerawork is rugged, handheld, and imperfect by design, reflecting the restless state of both the narrator and the town itself. It feels alive and spontaneous, capturing Pushkar in its truest form unpolished, unpredictable, and human. The uneven lighting and improvised compositions add a tactile quality, turning imperfection into texture. The camera doesn't just record; it experiences. Every frame feels instinctive, as if the lens itself were questioning what it sees.

The film moves with the rhythm of thought rather than plot. Its flow is fragmented, hypnotic, and immersive scenes bleed into each other, sound

dissolves into silence, and moments appear like flashes from a dream. It doesn't seek to guide the viewer; it invites them to drift. Watching *Bhram Nagri* is like falling into a waking hallucination, unsettling, poetic, and strangely beautiful.

Sound is at the heart of this experience. Instead of traditional devotional instruments, the film builds its atmosphere through layered ambient textures, distorted drones, and subtle echoes that mirror the chaos of the narrator's inner world. The sound design feels spiritual and industrial at once... distant yet intimate. It draws the audience inward, creating a sense of suspended reality. Every tone, every pause, carries emotional weight, pulling the listener into the rhythm of the town and the turbulence of the mind.

At its core, *Bhram Nagri* is a dialogue between belief and disbelief. It does not tell viewers what to think or what to feel. It allows them to interpret. The atheist at its centre doesn't find God, but he begins to believe in the idea of belief - in the human need to hold on to something larger than oneself. The film mirrors that realization: it doesn't deliver answers but instead opens space for introspection.

Behind this film is a team of students who treated the process as an experiment rather than an assignment. Their collaboration created a film that feels organic and unpredictable, shaped as much by accident as by intention. Each member contributed to its unique language from the grounded cinematography to the layered sound design and poetic editing. The result is a film that feels alive in every sense, constantly shifting and reinterpreting itself. *Bhram Nagri: The Land of Pushkar* is a fever dream captured on film, a psychedelic journey into the heart of faith and illusion. It is trippy, raw, and deeply human, a cinematic experience that refuses to be explained. Open to interpretation from the first frame to the last, it invites viewers to surrender logic and simply feel.

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## **Beyond the Binary: Voices of Working Trans Community (English/Kannada)**

Bhargavi D Hemmige, Sunil Kumar, Chanakya Vyas, Abhilasha R,  
Jain University

*Beyond the Binary* is a documentary film conceptualised and executed as part of the subject Gender Studies, it is an initiative by Prof (Dr) Bhargavi D Hemmige as a part of a minor research project on 'Representation of Transgenders in Media' funded by JAIN (Deemed-to-be-university) with the support of Faculties, students and research scholars. The project aims to shed light on the realities, aspirations and resilience of the transgender community people who are often seen but rarely understood. The film emerged as a collaborative educational and creative effort to challenge stereotypes, confront social prejudice and humanize a community that faces oppression despite its strength and vigour.

The documentary begins with a powerful opening scene, an image that most of society is familiar with but chooses to overlook. A transgender woman stands at a traffic signal, hand outstretched, as the world moves past her. The voiceover reminds viewers that this fleeting image has, for many, become the entire narrative of what it means to be transgender. But that is merely the surface. The film immediately shifts its focus from pity to power, introducing audiences to four remarkable trans women who have carved meaningful spaces for themselves in a world that once rejected them.

The first story introduces a makeup artist whose brushes do more than beautify—they heal, affirm, and empower. Once ridiculed for her identity, she now stands as a symbol of transformation, using her art to rewrite perceptions. Her studio becomes a metaphor for the renewal of colour and faith, where colour and faith come together to create dignity.

The second voice is that of an activist, whose courage and conviction make her a symbol of change. From speaking out at protests to negotiating with authorities, she represents a relentless fight for equality and recognition. Her words resonate not only for inclusion, but also for justice and respect, a reminder that advocacy is not just about policy, but about existence.

The third story highlights a community journalist; a storyteller determined to reclaim the narrative. Denied representation in mainstream media, she becomes her own voice and the voice of her community. Through her reporting, she breaks the silence and ensures that trans stories are told with sensitivity and truth, not sensationalism.

The final story is about a radio jockey who speaks more words. Every movement becomes a statement of identity and acceptance. Her art transcends gender, embracing the freedom to exist and express without limitation. What runs through these personal stories is a common thread – a statement of humanity. Between moments of struggle and triumph, the film captures quiet reflections: sipping tea, scrolling through a phone, adjusting a sari. These glimpses remind us that beyond labels and activism, they are simply human – everyone with dreams, routines and emotions.

The documentary ends with a heartfelt call to “look again”. It asks the audience to look beyond the frame imposed by society, to understand that transgender people are not outsiders seeking space – they are integral members of the community to which they always belong. *Beyond the Binary* is more than a film; It is a statement, an act of recognition, and an invitation to sympathy.

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### **Mahashamshana: Jahan Mrityu Amar Hai (Hindi)**

Krish Gaba, Diti Menghani, Aditya Raj, Rahul Tiwari, Paarth Sharma, Basim Sheikh, Adrija Dan, Ashiti Jha, Bennett University

*Mahashamshana* is a contemplative documentary set in the timeless realm of Manikarnika Ghat, Varanasi — the sacred cremation ground where the boundaries between life and death gently dissolve. Revered as one of the holiest sites in Hindu belief, Manikarnika is a place where the funeral pyres burn without pause, day and night, and where the air is thick with chants, smoke, memories, and an unspoken understanding of impermanence. The film ventures deep into this extraordinary landscape, capturing not only the physical

rituals of death but also the emotional and spiritual currents that sustain the people who live and work there.

At the heart of the documentary are the Doms — the traditional cremation workers who have, for countless generations, carried the responsibility of tending to the sacred fire. Through their hands, families find closure, souls find release, and tradition finds continuity. The film observes their labour with empathy and respect, revealing a community that embraces a duty both burdensome and divine. For them, tending the pyres is not merely a profession but a form of eternal service, binding them to a spiritual lineage older than memory.

Amid the drifting smoke and the ever-flowing Ganges, *Mahashamshana* introduces us to the many lives that coexist with death's constant presence: a young boy hauling logs with quiet determination, a flower seller whose whispered prayers mingle with the wind, and a boatman who believes the river has the power to cleanse every sorrow. Their voices and stories add unexpected warmth and humanity to a place often viewed solely through the lens of fear.

As dusk deepens and the flames shimmer like scattered constellations upon the water, the film captures the profound rhythm of the ghat — a rhythm that speaks of acceptance, continuity, and the eternal flame that links all of humanity to something far greater than itself.

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**SDMC Production Team**  
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