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# The politics of mediation: subjectivity, value and power in the digital grid of Aadhaar

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## ABSTRACT

Digital data infrastructures act as mediating technologies that shape and manipulate flows and visibilities. Focusing on the case of the Indian digital ID Aadhaar, this article proposes a theory of mediation as a conceptual framework for understanding the role of digital technology in projects for datafication of state governance and national economy. In 2016, the Indian biometric ID Aadhaar was instrumentalised in a nation-wide move towards digital monetary transfers, a campaign launched under the banner of 'demonetisation'. The digital state ID was integrated into Know Your Customer (KYC) systems of financial identification complicating government practices of recording and subjectivation. This process, during which government discourse explicitly drew parallels between political subjectivation and financial control, indicates the growing significance of the digital medium in shaping the relationship between states and their subjects. The notion of mediation proposed here addresses the mutual articulation between monetary transfers, practices of government recording and data valorisation in a context where state projects for digitalisation are increasingly integrated in global digital networks and data platforms.

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## Towards a theory of mediation

In 2009, the Indian government formed a new institution, the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), whose function was to introduce and implement a unified digital identification system for residents of the country. UIDAI, with its head Nandan Nilekani, the IT specialist and founder of the tech giant Infosys, developed the digital ID Aadhaar, which consists of a 12-digit unique number linked to personal biometric data – fingerprints and iris scan. In the following few years, the process of rolling out Aadhaar underwent significant changes in its scale, scope and purpose, most importantly, by being instrumentalised in the drive towards cashless economy and election transparency. These subsequent transformations gradually brought to light an ever-expanding web of social, political and economic relations that are captured and articulated through the datafication of identity. Aadhaar brings into focus the profound social and economic transformations triggered through the transition to a digital medium of recording. Such processes of datafication involve complex operations of establishing new principles of categorisation, abstraction and valorisation in social and economic life (Mejias and Couldry 2019), which are ever more evident when the push to digitalisation is led or facilitated by state actors.

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What I propose here is a theory of mediation that accounts for the heterogeneous material and organisational effects of digitalisation and datafication and how they enable new conduits of political power and economic value. In very broad terms, mediation concerns the problem of how different structures and actors in social life relate to each other and act on one another. Taking cue from the original meaning of *medium* in the Latin language – the middle, the space in-between that simultaneously denotes the material context where actors meet, and the sociality created through the possibility of encounter and interaction (Lewis and Short 1879), such theory of mediation attempts to capture the tension between materiality and process. This tension is central to the case of Aadhaar where the materiality of new digital media infrastructures enables the convergence between informational, economic and political functions of the medium.

Media and communication scholars Andreas Hepp (2012) and Nick Couldry (2008) argue for revisiting the concepts of mediation and mediatisation as analytical tools for understanding the profound transformative effects of digital media in society. Couldry prefers the term ‘mediation’ for its wider scope of meaning, suggesting that this makes it a more appropriate tool for grasping the role of the medium. Hepp meanwhile, adheres to the use of ‘mediatisation’ as a term that is more specifically focused on the role of media. Nonetheless, their analyses share a common focus on the role of media in transmitting and enabling the circulation of information, which ties the role of the medium to theories of communication and to a narrative-oriented interpretation of media.

However, Aadhaar, similarly to other projects of mass digitalisation, points to an understanding of media that is not exclusively informational. Rather, as John Durham Peters (2015) suggests, this is media defined through its propensity to conduct and control different transfers and mobilities. This notion of ‘media’ and ‘mediation’ builds on the materialist turn in media studies and authors like Harold Innis (1986), Friedrich Kittler (1992, 1999, 2009), Marshall McLuhan (1964), Wolfgang Ernst (2012, 2016), Jussi Parikka (2010, 2012, 2015) and John Durham Peters (2015), among many others. Their work in media archaeology shifts the focus from the informational content of messages to the mechanisms and technologies through which signals are transmitted. This move towards the material organisation of communication flows allows a much wider understanding of media that encompasses different modes of the transfer of signals, data, money, commodities and bodies. Harold Innis (1986), for example, in his work *The Bias of Communication*, reads the political and social effect of different communication media by focusing on a broad range of technologies – such as clay tablets, paper presses, post offices, railways and telegraphs – that enable the production and transfer of information. The digital ID Aadhaar exists as a socio-technical arrangement of materials and relations. It is a medium in the sense that authors like Shannon Mattern (2015) and Brian Larkin (2008) situate media within the intersection of infrastructures and the material dimensions of power and resistance that these infrastructures enable. Such infrastructures encompass not only technical artefacts that enable communication but also ‘soft infrastructures’ – practices, institutions, as well as people (Simone 2004).

Digital infrastructures like Aadhaar operationalise data and data architecture as new forms of mediation that enact structures of societal and economic organisation and control. The complex role of Aadhaar in this respect evokes the notion of mediation developed in the works of Karl Marx (1973) in the *Grundrisse* and later by Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978). Marx and Sohn-Rethel both see the very order of sociality as inherently mediated by the institutions of exchange, exchange value, and socialised labour. These institutions are only possible in the context of an organised community that establishes the framework of what value is, and, in turn, the relations of exchange that define the social relations within this community.

Money plays a central role in this type of social mediation by enabling the translation of individual difference into socialised universals. As Rachel O’Dwyer (2019) argues, the role of money exceeds a purely economic purpose of payment and exchange: it underpins social relations through its functions of record-keeping and memorisation. Money serves as records of transactions but also, in Simmel’s (2004, 177–178) poignant argument, coinage and credit money are both conditional on and help to sustain social relations of trust and dependency. These overlaps between the record as a technology of social organisation and control and money as a medium of economic exchange are

especially relevant in the case of Aadhaar, where the national ID becomes enmeshed in infrastructures for cashless payment and allows for complex crossovers between political control and economic transactions.

While Karl Marx and Alfred Sohn-Rethel see social relations as inherently mediated and enabled by economic production and exchange, Michael Mann (1984), in his work on state political analysis, proposes a theory of mediation grounded in what he calls 'the infrastructural power of the state.' This infrastructural power refers to the institutions and technologies used by centralised state power to penetrate the territory of a country and reach its different populations. Mann (1984) focuses on the bureaucratic institutions of the state and what Foucault (2007) would term 'technologies of power', and Mann's use of 'infrastructure' underscores the relationship between infrastructure and institution that I draw upon in my analysis of Aadhaar. The notion of infrastructural power is grounded in the understanding that power and control need to be mediated through various actors, formal and informal institutions, and material conditions that make the reach from the seat of government to its subjects possible. Thus, there is a material and situated aspect to mediation and the way it facilitates the diffusion and penetration of value, ideology, and power in society by enabling their circulation between social groups and across different material conditions. All social relations are mediated in what Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978) calls 'second nature'. Second nature, in Sohn-Rethel's work denotes the socially constructed world shaped by relations of exchange. In the case of Aadhaar, which has become incorporated into cashless infrastructures for monetary transfers, this aspect of second nature and the mediation of exchange becomes entangled with the political value and power that Aadhaar, as a tool for national identification, confers.

The case of Aadhaar is poignant in analysing the role of mediation for two key reasons. First, after the 2016 demonetisation, the digital ID becomes operationalised in infrastructures for cashless payment, collapsing the boundaries between state record and medium of exchange. And, second, much of the discursive justification for its introduction and the subsequent push to demonetisation articulates a critique of the existing infrastructures of mediation in society in the face of 'middlemen' who traditionally facilitate practices of recording, identification and distribution of government subsidies. The vilification of these middlemen reveal the machinations of a process where one type of mediation is replaced with another. In this process, Aadhaar is steeped in the technological imaginaries that underpin digital media, such as the fantasy of transparency (DeNardis 2009; Tkacz 2014). The juxtaposition between middlemen and digital media, however, signifies the ambiguous and controversial role of mediation. As Bruno Latour (2005) argues, the agents of mediation can be interpreted alternatively as either actively intervening into how sociality is constituted, or as neutral and simply acting as conduits. Such distinctions play a central role in the case of Aadhaar, where institutions and actors of mediation are discursively painted as corrupt, biased and intervening into flows and relations they mediate, while the digital is afforded the image of transparency, neutrality, immediate reach and veracity.

My analysis of Aadhaar builds on ethnographic field in Bangalore in 2016 in the months of demonetisation and discursive analysis of state and industry publications related to the architecture of the Aadhaar database and the incorporation of the ID into different infrastructures for cashless payment and political accountability. The analysis of government discourse is supplemented with a genealogy of the forms of mediation that Aadhaar aims to replace. This genealogical approach attempts to reconstruct lines of continuity and rupture across different media including analogue and digital, technical, and pre-technical practices, drawing inspiration from the work on media archaeology of Jussi Parikka (2013) and the archaeological method of Michel Foucault (1972). Works like Parikka's, Wolfgang Ernst research on archives (2012) or Orit Halpern's (2014) work on visibility, construct the political, economic and ideological history of specific technologies. They do not trace a linear history of development but, rather, reconstruct a disjointed genealogy of influences, failures, and ruptures.

All aspects of the notion of mediation that I work with here are informed by the historical, political and social context of Aadhaar, encompassing: the material differences in the organisation of information and the control over visibility and readability that the digital affords; the middleman as

an important figure of economic and political mediation who becomes the antagonising focus of the Aadhaar campaigns; and the convergencies between economic, political and social value that are expressed through the growing penetration of Aadhaar in different spheres of life. All these elements provide the foundations for building a theory of mediation that captures the moments when a particular mode of mediation becomes problematised, dismantled and replaced. These are revelatory moments of rupture that, similarly to the way in which infrastructures become visible when broken (Star 1999), bring the social functions of a medium in plain sight, elucidate the mechanisms through which its material organisation have tangible political consequences, and show how the ‘vessels, containers and environments’ (Peters 2015) that constitute media are not neutral but, instead, play an important role in the distribution of power and value in society.

## The rupture

On 8th November 2016, during my fieldwork in Bangalore, Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made an unexpected, televised announcement. Starting from midnight the same day (merely a couple of hours after his TV address) the two largest banknotes in use would cease to be legal tender. According to estimates, the 500- and 1000-rupee banknotes accounted for 86% of all cash in circulation (Gupta 2016). In an economy largely operating through cash transactions, this equated to a total upheaval of the means of monetary transfers. The announcement marked the start of the 2016 demonetisation – an event which generates its own explanatory ruptures in a rather Badiouian sense (Badiou 2007). Announced at the end of the religious festival Diwali, demonetisation articulated a project for transition to a cashless digital economy through compelling populist metaphors of sacrifice, national security, and class justice.

Modi’s (2016) address provides important insight into the discursive articulation of the stakes of digitalisation. He evokes haunting figures of malice in the national imagination: foreign terrorists, corrupt politicians, and greedy middlemen to paint a chain of equivalence between the untraceable liquidity of cash, condemned through the notion of ‘black money’, and questions of loyalty, national sovereignty, and economic justice. Modi links the circulation of ‘black money’ to long-standing armed conflicts along the borders with China and Pakistan that date from the time of Indian Independence, and which revolve around territorial disputes for areas in the north-west and north-east of India. Combined with the spectres of internal enemies – corrupt politicians and middlemen – these characterisations serve to justify a move towards the increased digitalisation of social, political, and economic life as a means to foreground and fortify borders between countries, between legal and illegal, real, and counterfeit, honesty and lying.

The shockwaves sent across the country by this brief TV address lasted for months and had dramatic effects on consumption and everyday life. The effects on some of the SME sectors were devastating, including: a 70% drop in the business of trucks and taxis (IANS 2016); drops in real estate prices (Bharadwaj 2016); and the mass cessation of employment for many of the contract workers at construction sites, informal services, and street vendors (PTI 2017). Overall, however, the population was supportive of the Prime Minister’s decisive act. Some praised Modi’s visionary drive to a new digital future, some took pride in enduring these hardships as an act of patriotism, and others, the poorest and most severely affected, hungrily devoured and reproduced tales of crony moneylenders gone bankrupt overnight – conjuring sweet images of class justice that enabled them to forget lost wages, rotten produce, and long hours spent queuing at bank counters.<sup>1</sup>

Modi’s speech articulates the move to demonetisation and a cashless economy by drawing an explicit dependency between the geopolitical and geoeconomic position of India, the developmental project of his government, and a populist claim to power based on his allegations to represent and work for the poor:

In the context of BRICS, it was being said that the “I” in BRICS was shaky. Since then, we had two years of severe drought. Yet, in the last two and a half years with the support of 125 crore Indians, India has become the

“bright spot” in the global economy. It is not just we who are saying this; it is being stated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

In this effort for development, our motto has been ‘Sab Ka Saath Sab Ka Vikas’: We are with all citizens and for development of all citizens. This Government is dedicated to the poor. It will remain dedicated to them. In our fight against poverty, our main thrust has been to empower the poor, and make them active participants in the benefits of economic progress.

The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, the Jan Suraksha Yojana, the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana for small enterprises, the Stand-up India program for Dalits, Adivasis and women, the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Scheme for gas connections in the homes of the poor, the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Beema Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana to protect the income of farmers, the Soil Health Card Scheme to ensure the best possible yield from farmers’ fields, and the e-NAM National Market Place scheme to ensure farmers get the right price for their produce—these are all reflections of this approach. (Modi 2016)

All of the existing digital and digitally mediated projects for access to welfare and state subsidies are subsumed under the umbrella of the Digital India initiative, a nation-wide initiative that has become one of the flagships of Modi’s government, and they are aimed at marginalised communities and small-scale farmers in particular. All of them are implicated in a vision of national prosperity that aims to present the poor as the ultimate sovereign and subject of care of the BJP government.

While Modi’s move was unexpected, his 8th November speech gives a glimpse into a vision of governmentality was already taking shape. This vision rests on the inclusion of the poor, Dalits, Adivasis,<sup>2</sup> women, farmers, and small businesses into digital systems for registration, categorisation, and transactions. These systems increasingly make the access to state mandated services conditional on being registered in the ID database Aadhaar and, through it, other digital infrastructures.

While Aadhaar was introduced long before 2016 by a previous government, mainly for identification within the system of government welfare and subsidies, demonetisation created a sudden and wide-spread need for digital payments and, hence, verifiable digital identity, which significantly accelerated enrolments in this database and the use of the ID (Abraham et al. 2017). Digital identity and digital money became interwoven into discourses and practices that underpin an emerging imaginary of the digital as a medium that shapes normative relationships between political subjectivity, sovereignty, and economic value. While these processes are uniquely shaped by the historical context of Indian politics they are, at the same time, revelatory about the emerging economies of value and control that digital data affords through the means of its combinatorial and calculative manipulation.

## The grid of Aadhaar

Aadhaar has a long biography. The idea of assembling a digital archive of biometric data of the population dates back at least to 2008, when the co-founder of the IT giant Infosys, Nandan Nilekani, introduced the idea in his book *Imagining India* (Nilekani 2009). There, he talks about ‘biometric identification’ as one of the solutions for ‘good governance’ and eradicating corruption. In 2009 Nilekani was appointed as chairman of Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) with the task of developing a biometric database of all Indians. This vision driving the development of Aadhaar and its relationship with the rise of IT private corporations in India signifies the role of the national capitalist class in shaping both governing technologies and concepts of governance. The idea of an ‘all Indian database’ in the case of Aadhaar is thought of not in terms of relations of citizenship and belonging that bind subjects to the nation-state, but rather in terms of the relations inherent to the distribution of aids and subsidies. As the 2016 Aadhaar Act explicitly states in its title, the ID is meant to be used in relation to the ‘targeted delivery of financial and other subsidies, benefits and services’ (Ministry of Law and Justice 2016).

Aadhaar plays a key role in the construction of infrastructures that link the increased circulation of money within banking and digital payment systems to an increased capture of identity. It

reinforces Modi's vision of connecting economic development, social welfare, and an imagination of the digital as a forcefully emerging architecture of governance. *Digital India*, an overarching concept for digitally enabled governance and development spreading across institutions founded during Modi's mandate, has become one of the principle models for articulating this engagement of the digital in a nexus that works towards 'transform[ing] India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy' (Digital India 2021).

This vision of transforming India illustrates how the digital participates in enactments of an economy of the political – both in the sense of calculating and economising the role of the state in issues of governance, and in the sense of reimagining the engagement of the state with its population through a series of transactions (Chaudhuri and König 2018; Jacobsen 2015). The Aadhaar number, which has been key to this transformation in India, ties the capture of political subjectivity to the imperative of economic circulation, creating a relationship that defines both its political articulation and the technological organisation of the UID database.

Nandan Nilekani remains closely linked to the expanded role of Aadhaar. And through Aadhaar, the initial premise of linking digital identification to tracking monetary transfers between the state and its residents, is now encroaching on more aspects of economic and political subjection and subjectivation in progressively more complicated ways. After heading the rolling out of Aadhaar, Nilekani is also appointed to develop and implement a new universal taxation and tax recording scheme, GST, which will make use of the tighter overview of money flows that has been achieved through the 2016 demonetisation and the linking of Aadhaar to all government and banking services. Adding to this, he is also tasked with developing a new electronic health record system that uses Aadhaar together with the IT infrastructure for the national health insurance scheme called Ayushman Bharat. It is safe to say that Nilekani's own vision and capitalist ambitions are tightly intertwined with the national digitalisation strategy, signifying an entanglement between state governance and capitalist corporations that is inherent to Indian state-building (Raianu 2021). However, the types of transformation of the political fabric that Aadhaar and the related projects envision and implement, transcend the role of individual agents.

### **Leakage and middlemen as problems of the medium**

The process of demonetisation and the introduction of Aadhaar are linked together through a common vision of good governance that is specifically concerned with the problem of corruption through the notions of duplicity, liquidity (or leakage), and fraud. The spectre of leakage and liquidity is formulated in the discourse of Modi and his government in a way that binds together the problem of data leakage, leaky national borders that can be trespassed by foreign terrorists, and the liquidity of cash, which makes it untraceable, untransparent and, therefore, prone to being used in illicit and malign ways. The introduction of a digital ID and the move towards digital payments are linked together and justified through rhetoric that condemns the 'middlemen' as 'leaky' figures who have come to personify corruption in Indian society. These concerns inform not just the rhetoric of governmental policies, but also the technological architecture of Aadhaar that aims to centralise identification and replace the middlemen in ration shops with technical interfaces for verification – iris and fingerprint scanners.

Aadhaar was first rolled out in services and benefit schemes offered to marginalised communities where a dense network of middlemen, such as workers at ration shops or local leaders, play a crucial role in distributing food rations, direct cash support, gas, and other domestic subsidies. These middlemen are essential for facilitating the distribution of cash to the poor, helping people to deal with bureaucracy and to manage claims and bank accounts, while, at the same time, extracting a share of the cash that they help to distribute (Khera 2011, 2017).

Throughout the process of introducing Aadhaar, these middlemen become the focus of a discourse, exemplified by Modi's demonetisation speech, that problematises what mediation is. In India, the middlemen have become an institution of their own – people who facilitate the access

to political and economic services and structures of inclusion and participation, and who take on the social role of organising the redistribution of state subsidies or, conversely, who assume duties to mobilise support for political parties among rural, poor, and marginalised groups. Despite their vilification by the proponents of Aadhaar and demonetisation, middlemen, as Partha Chatterjee (2004) argues, enable the government to reach marginalised populations and interact with them. These figures – including community leaders and power brokers, play a key part of the ritual exercise of state power and distribution of state support. They help with navigating the bureaucracy of the state as scribes and brokers of government services. They often fill in the gaps in existing networks and infrastructures, for instance, by securing the last mile of money transfers to villages without local bank branches (see Simone 2004 for a similar example in South African context). At the same time, this crucial function that middlemen occupy is seen as being conducive to corruption and ‘leakage’ on account of the money and information that gets lost down the long trail of mediating actors and technologies (Khanna and Johnston 2007).

‘Leakage’, as identified in governmental discourse on Aadhaar, articulates what is essentially a fault with the medium. The rhetoric of leakage feeds a state narrative suggesting that the new ID is a technological fix for an infrastructural problem with capture and distribution. This technocratic parlance permeates the argument that a new ID and mode of distribution of state subsidies is necessary. Middlemen and corruption are articulated as leakage, while other issues of distribution are seen as problems with capture and faulty data. One of the arguments for introducing Aadhaar, voiced by Modi’s government, is that many people who should have benefited from food subsidies could not do so because they did not have the ‘below poverty line card’ required to claim them (Khera 2017), i.e. that have not been properly captured in state systems of recording. There are also issues with faulty data – allegedly false identities and ‘ghosts’, or duplicates, which are records of people who do not exist but whose share is taken by corrupt middlemen. (Cohen 2016)

The introduction of Aadhaar is situated as a form of mediation that succeeds and aims to replace these brokers and middlemen from the chain of transmission and redistribution of state subsidies and modes of identification and capture. Aadhaar is consistently articulated in opposition to these past forms of mediation in government documents and publications by its creator Nandan Nilekani. In these discourses, Aadhaar represents a fantasy of ‘unmediated mediation’, freed from the corrupting intervention of middlemen. This opposition feeds into a contentious politics of mediation, where one medium is seen as corrupt and corrupting, while the other is presented as neutral, a distinction that mirrors the discursive differentiation between intervening mediators and neutral intermediaries articulated by Bruno Latour (2005).

### **The technopolitics of immediacy**

The utopian vision of unmediated relation between the nation state and the people as its sovereign forms the basis for conceptualisations of civil society from Rousseau’s (1968) social contract onwards. The vision of Aadhaar as ‘unmediated mediation’ is thus wrapped in a particular vision of social organisation, which assumes the separation between political structures of mediation and control and a civil society largely organised around the fantasy of a marketplace where actors meet at a levelled field (Meiksins-Wood 2012). It is worth noting that such ideas of the market as non-mediated have also been criticised (Larsen and Andreasen 2007; Sohn-Rethel 1978).

This vision stands in contrast to the structures of mediation in Indian society, which Partha Chatterjee (2004) refers to as ‘political society’. Political society, in contrast to Western conceptualisations of civil society, is based on structures of mediation between the governed and the governing. This mediation is premised on the separation between these two spheres and the impossibility of articulating a political dialogue within the frameworks of either civil society or customary law. The schemes for government subsidies that form the initial basis for its outreach are part of a system of what Chatterjee (2004) calls ‘entitlements’ (as opposed to ‘rights’) that are not conferred to people on the basis of their status of citizens but on the basis of their status as populations. This distinction points to the uneven, heterogeneous field of ‘differential inclusion’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013),



which complicates the concept of political subjectivities beyond the normative model of civil society based on the citizen-sovereign. Such subjectivities are founded in specific cultural and political identities and groups that, as Chatterjee (2004) claims, manage to exist outside of the framework of capitalist relations and representative democracy.

In the case of Aadhaar, problematising mediation challenges the contingent lifeline of agencies, ration shops, and leaders within communities and groups, all of which make possible the invigorating liquidity of cash flows. Problematising mediation is linked to the issue of capture, (re)distribution and control over economic and political value. The welfare schemes on which Aadhaar builds, providing state support to particular social groups, are grounded on the practice of social and political inclusion, whereby political subjectivation is enacted through a relation of distribution and not of production. The distributive politics of direct cash payments in the Global South reify a social and political vision that is not founded on the primacy of labour as the main subject of governance and intervention. On the contrary, such distributive politics accompany the gradually diminishing significance of labour as a 'form of livelihood that has long been understood both as a historical telos of economic development and as an anchor of progressive politics' (Ferguson 2015, xii). The politics of distribution through direct cash payments invokes practices of building sociality and political order that do not rest on the mechanisms of the market but, instead, upon extra-capitalist principles of mutuality and interdependence.

This role of distributive politics is further complicated through the significance allocated to individual and group votes in representative democracies, which turns the economic and social value of direct cash support into political currency. In the context of Indian politics, the relation between democratic participation and the emergence of a new process of valuation concerning relations between populations and the state, is captured in the concept of 'vote banks' (Srinivas 1962). 'Vote banks' refer to the complex relationship between patrons and their local communities where leaders represent the interests of their community and, in turn, mobilise their electoral votes as currency that can be used to leverage political and economic power. This can be done, for instance, by using the loyalty of local voters to request positions or support from the state.

While the architects of Aadhaar introduce it as a solution for the unmediated interactions between the state and its populations, its very design shows that, rather than bypassing mediation, the digital ID introduces a new mode of mediation and delegitimises the old ones that have been essential for leveraging access to resources for large sections of the population. It situates populations within the new ontological framework of the database, where algorithmic operations performed on data entries impose new relationships and identities that are not anticipated before (Poster 1995). For example, the Aadhaar database enables the easy slippages between the subjectivities of resident and client through the circulation and utilisation of the unique ID for both governance and financial purposes (Singh 2019).

Further, while it centralises the database repository of population identity information, Aadhaar sustains a vast network of public and private institutions that use the ID for access to services, and banking and registration, as well as new tools like fingerprint and iris scanners and web interfaces through which subjects are enlisted and access the database. Aadhaar does not eliminate the middlemen but, instead, embeds them into the new network architecture, where ration shops are now equipped with finger scanners and where technological glitches make exclusion from the database and the proliferation of service fees much easier (Khera 2018).

### **Truth and value in the technopolitical architecture of digital identity**

In the new organisation of benefits distribution old structures take on new roles. The ration shops for food and grain subsidies become equipped with fingerprint readers and Aadhaar POS (points of sale) because a lot of remote villages do not have bank branches. Thus, to a large extent the process of digitalisation and the introduction of Aadhaar incorporates existing structures of mediation within new socio-technical infrastructures. But new structures of mediation and new relationships

between value, power, and subjectivity are also developed. The architecture of Aadhaar introduces new layers of intermediaries and draws subjects into new economies of value, security, and power.

The introduction of Aadhaar leads to the creation of new institutions of intermediaries that facilitate the access to identification and verification through a combination of technological solutions and contractual agreements. UIDAI grants Authentication Service Agencies (ASA) access to its Central Identities Data Repository (CIDR) over secure leased lines and ASAs use this access to provide authentication services to requesting entities, Authentication User Agencies (AUA), such as banks, government agencies and companies that use Aadhaar for identification purposes. AUAs, in turn, can authorise sub-AUAs to use the authentication service and the channel established between AUA, ASA and CIDR. This way, the access to both identification and the services and transfers it enables is mediated through a series of contracted and sub-contracted actors, points of service (POS) for biometric authentication and network providers.

These new structures of mediation introduce new problems with leakage, duplication, and ghosts, some of which are related specifically to the biometric identification interface. Fingerprint identification has been challenging for agricultural and manual workers whose fingerprints have worn out (George 2018). There are also still problems with fake identities and people whose fingerprints point to other residents, as a result of glitches and wrong identifications, as well as the data leakages from and hacks on different databases.

The architecture of Aadhaar, however, is highly centralised and the control over the biometric database is the monopoly of the UIDAI. This centralisation of control and the striving for de-duplication and authenticity is especially underlined by adoption of the organising principle of a single source of truth (SSOT) in the architecture of Aadhaar and connected databases. SSOT is a principle in data management and the architecture of interconnected databases that is used widely in corporate information systems which include databases managed by different entities. It means that biometric information in the architecture of Aadhaar is only stored in the central database and referenced from there. Thus, it constitutes a technological institutionalising of truth and singularity, through a process of interrogation and hierarchisation between databases. All data should only be stored once and then referenced across the interconnected systems.

The strive towards singularity in the digital grid of Aadhaar speaks to the contested politics of copies and duplicates, which have the tendency to escape control and undermine value. For instance, in his essay on the technological reproduction of the work of art Walter Benjamin (2008) articulates a critical analysis of mediation that underscores how singularity and non-reproducibility maintain capitalist forms of control and valorisation. Benjamin argues that the medium of art is the domain of tradition and authority, and respectively their contestation, for it is through the control of the possibilities for reproduction and consumption that the medium becomes a terrain of political struggle over the means of production and the ideological structures that sustain social relations. The democratisation of art production and reproduction is linked to the gradual withering of the aura – a concept that Benjamin links to tradition, ritual, hypercontextualisation, and the conservative utopia of unmediated authenticity. The hypercontextualisation (the here and now of the production of the work of art) that is implicit in the aura elevates authenticity to a condition through which access, (re)production, and modulation are being controlled. Benjamin's critique of the aura of the work of art analyses the political stakes of mediation by articulating the interconnectedness between authenticity, contextualisation and control. In a capitalist society the aura of artworks is a tool of control, distinction and economic domination. In the case of Aadhaar, the insistence on authenticity and the emphatic rejection of mediation, fraud, and duplicity by developers and legislators plays a comparable role. It politicises the medium through references to both political theories of good governance and to the material politics of data organisation.

In his second book, *Rebooting India*, co-authored with Viral Shah, Nandan Nilekani refers to electoral politics in his interpretation of the technological principle of SSOS. They write

Equally important, individuals should be able to view their voter records so that any changes in their records can be quickly noted, a process that can be made easier through automation. Once the data is available, political campaigns can use it as a single source of truth. (Nilekani and Shah 2015)

This entanglement of issues of data organisation and retrieval, with the political problem of the veracity of electoral votes, shows the complex way in which the materiality of digital data becomes a device for the articulation of relations of power. The material organisation of data relates to the problem of mediation of power, and it captures and translates value in society through a long and complex history of mediation as a political problem.

### The *populus* grid

In his November 2016 speech, Narendra Modi (2016) evokes a pivotal link between finance and sovereignty, through which he articulates a notion of the *populus*. He binds together the prosperity of the population (the poor and the middle class) to the government's ability to exercise control over the liquidity of cash and to demarcate boundaries of nationhood, legality, and truth. The vision of popular sovereignty that Modi paints in his political discourse links together the problematisation of mediation with the construction of notions of value, political subjectivity and popular power. Aadhaar is an important part of the complex interrelation between finance, digitalisation, and popular sovereignty through which the population is not only subjected to a new form of control and oversight but is also re-constituted. Rather than being simply a 'transactional identity' (Chaudhuri and König 2018; Jacobsen 2015) that is based on a new mode of interrelation between the state institutions and their subjects, Aadhaar is also, importantly, a new technology of representation. Lawrence Cohen (2016) notes that Aadhaar breeds particular technopolitics where the relation between state and its subject is seen through the model of 'nation-as-archive' – a scheme, in which the governance of populations is replaced by practices of data governance, such as the primacy 'single source of truth' as a framework for ensuring legitimacy and democratic representation.

The technopolitics of Aadhaar are further complicated by the passing of the Aadhaar Bill as a Money Bill in 2016. Money Bills in Indian parliamentary politics represent legislation pertaining to matters of state budget and taxation. These are only approved by the lower house of elected representatives, *Lok Sabha*, and do not have to pass through the upper house, *Rajya Sabha* (Datta, Malhotra, and Tyagi 2017). The use of Aadhaar for accessing state subsidies and aids was instrumentalised by Modi's government as an argument that the bill concerns state budget policies and can thus be passed by the lower house controlled by BJP, bypassing anticipated opposition of the upper house.

Money Bills entered Indian politics as a colonial legacy, which not only reproduces the bicameral structure of the British parliament but also the specific relationship between political representation, sovereignty and finance established in the English model. This link has a long history dating to the times of Magna Carta, when the demands for political representation of the nobility were grounded in the argument that they contribute to the revenue of the Crown. The maxim 'no taxation without representation' that captures the essence of their demands was later at the heart of the movement for sovereignty in the North American colonies of the British Empire, giving birth to what was considered the model for a liberal democratic government.

The current model of the Money Bills, in British and in Indian parliamentary practice, underlines a somewhat complicated interpretation of this initial claim to representation and sovereignty based on the collection of tax revenues. Through a series of reforms, the last one dating from 1911, the British parliamentary system has limited the power of the House of Lords in matters pertaining to the budget of the state. According to the 1911 law, legislation that concerned the finances of the nation did not require the approval of the House of Lords and needed to only be voted for by the elected House of Commons (Murray 1973). This rule that underpins the Indian Money Bill policy reverses the logic of the initial relationship between representation and monetary matters of the state: instead of posing taxation as a precondition for representation, it confers sovereignty over

the finance of the state to the structures of popular representation. More importantly, it suggests a model where the sovereign subject of the state is constituted through a relationship between representation and finance. In this regard, rather than thinking of population simply as a recipient of subsidies (adopting a 'transactional identity'), the logic of sovereignty allows popular power to be defined in relation to control over the way that monetary value circulates within territory of the country.

This logic of sovereignty makes the connection between Aadhaar and the event of demonetisation even more significant. While the passing of Aadhaar as a Money Bill is largely interpreted as part of the counter-democratic populism of Modi's government (Venkataramakrishnan 2019), it reaffirms a mechanism of representation that manifests a notion of 'the people' that is not necessarily grounded in populism as antagonistic political model (Laclau 2005). Rather, it operates through economic and political dimensions of value that are used to craft and manipulate the parameters of the popular subject.

The choice to pass the Aadhaar Bill as a Money Bill points to the deeper issue of how the *populus* is constituted by the structures of power and the role of the medium in enacting this. The complex entanglement of money, data and power in the case of this national ID runs across multiple levels of how mediation functions on three levels: as a mechanism for the diffusion of power; as a logic of control and its link to data capture and inscription; and as a principle for the constitution of political subjectivity and sovereignty. While the first two of these levels of mediation were discussed here through the entanglement of Aadhaar with the distribution of welfare (in what has been termed 'transactional identity') and through the solidification of technological regimes of truth (in the architecture of the database), the link between finance and popular sovereignty suggests that Aadhaar redefines the *populus* as a political subject. Since popular sovereignty is articulated through control over monetary flows in the country, the *populus* becomes an instrument for the regulation of the mobility of national and global capital.

In 2016 the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) introduced Aadhaar for the purpose of identification in the Know Your Customer (KYC) regulations and required banks to establish the necessary infrastructure. KYC is a standard for identifying customers in financial transactions and for opening bank accounts. The KYC introduced by the Basel Committee aims to "help to protect banks' reputation and the integrity of the banking systems by reducing the likelihood of banks becoming a vehicle for or a victim of financial crime and suffering consequential reputational damage" (Basel Committee on Banking Supervision 2001, 3). Largely conceived as a security measure to filter out black money, it is based on international financial regulations, such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and the Basel Committee recommendations. These recommendations aim to regulate and prevent terrorist and criminal transactions and they are part of what some authors call the 'securitisation of finance and financialisation of security' (Amicelle and Jacobsen 2016).

In articulating the need for demonetisation through the relationship between black money and national security, on one hand, and the supranational economy of BRICS, on the other hand, Modi essentially lays out the mechanism through which the national grid of Aadhaar acts as a vehicle for reconstituting key elements of the political landscape. The linkage between Aadhaar and KYC is part of this complex instrumentalization of the *populus* as a political subject that is constituted in relation to both national and supranational concepts of sovereignty.

## Conclusion

Theorists of the state have long seen the nation state as a political entity that is inherently mediated through the intersection and interaction of different spheres of social, economic and political life. This analytical prism is present in conceptualisations of nationalism, such as Benedict Anderson's (1983) 'print capitalism', which stresses on the circulation of narratives and the mediating function of language and literacy as key to understanding the cultural and social emergence of the modern state. It is also present in Marxist state theory, where the institution

of the nation-state is interpreted as operating through different types of mediations and a mediator itself (see Bob Jessop 1990).

Aadhaar as a state-wide initiative links practices of recording, capture, control, and valuation across multiple layers of social, political, and economic life. It serves as an example that underscores the need to approach digitalisation with conceptual tools that transgress disciplinary boundaries and that link together a politeconomic notion of mediation with an analysis of the materialities of digital infrastructures and the new relations and roles afforded through them.

The focus on mediation in the analysis of Aadhaar is not an attempt to argue for the 'mediation of everything' (Hepp 2013; Livingstone 2009), a claim that is, on its own, futile as a methodological standpoint. Rather, the theory of mediation introduced here as an approach to datafication and digitalisation interrogates the mechanisms and implications of replacing one type of mediation with another. These processes of replacement reveal the interdependencies between informational, logistical and political aspects in practices of mediating. The redistribution of government subsidies entails the accumulation of political influence and the control over means of identification and recording. In the process of replacing past forms of mediation data metabolises these past practices of mediation. Rachel O'Dwyer (2019) has argued that the relationship between record and money is one such aspect that digital data reinforces and reactivates. As the case of Aadhaar reveals, the convergences between government record and access to financial instruments and infrastructures for monetary transactions in India are uniquely influenced by historical practices of social and political mediation in the country, through which economic value and political inclusion are mutually articulated. In the context of new material affordances of digital databases and transactions, however, key concepts and practices like citizenship, value and sovereignty are transformed and incorporated into new networks of public-private partnerships, global financial standards and geopolitical considerations.

Aadhaar provides a model for the analysis of other similar initiatives where the parameters of new forms of mediation are influenced by the context of local political and geopolitical ambitions, for example in Estonia where the digitalisation of governance comprises increasingly articulated imperatives for territorial sovereignty from the former USSR (Kaljund 2018). Such cases show the heterogeneous and complex effects of digitalising citizen and resident identities. As datafied identities are incorporated within networks and infrastructures of different scales, the stakes and meaning of political subjectivity need to be rethought. While states build their claims to legitimacy and sovereignty on control and accountability over datafied subjects, in both internal and external politics, the opportunities for populations whose records are converted into fungible data to exercise control over these different scales remains limited.

## Notes

1. I refer here to the compelling account of on-the-ground work and research during the first weeks of demonetisation, given at a public talk at the CPI(M-L) office in Bangalore, by Kavita Krishnan from AIPWA on 14th December 2016. Krishnan gave a talk 'Demonetization – Economic Crisis – People's Resistance' during which she described the efforts for organising resistance against the demonetisation and the work of her group among small vendors and manual workers in Delhi. One of the extremely interesting experiences she discussed was the power of media and the spoken narratives of wealthy people losing thousands and millions of rupees as a result of demonetisation. These stories reinforced the representation of demonetisation as a means of redistribution and class justice and made the work of progressive political groups much harder by perpetuating an interpretation of the events in progressive political terms, namely that this period of hardship, loss of jobs, loss of cash, and bankruptcy for small businesses was seen as a necessary struggle on the pathway to economic justice as the wealthy lose their unjust riches.
2. A collective denomination for the various native communities and tribes on the territory of India, who have existed for centuries outside of the caste Hindu system and, if subsequently assimilated in it, were treated as lower caste untouchables.

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