

Editor's Note

The last few years have witnessed significant proliferation of digital technologies, online platforms, hyper media texts and other new media materials. From WhatsApp forwards to Twitter trends, from Tiktok stars to YouTube videos - the digital media have entered our everyday lives in diverse ways. Such outpouring of new media expressions is affecting our lives and shaping our 'lifeworlds' in multiple ways. COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown measures across the world have further intensified its uses. For instance, according to a survey by the Statista Research Department during August, 2020, Smartphone users in India spent on average more than three hours on their phones per day during the COVID – 19 pandemic. The same agency also notes in its survey in 2018 that Facebook has the largest number of subscribers in India near about 270 million followed by United States. The irony is that there are still gaps in access and usage of this technology. According to Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) 2018 Internet penetration rates in rural and urban India stand at 173.42 million and 338.84 million respectively that clearly indicate the existence of a digital divide.

Despite these sobering indicators, the growth and spread of digital media is continuous. Few questions are spontaneous to our minds in this context: what does this excessive media consumption mean? How does it shape our understanding of the world? While the all-pervasive presence of the digital media is impossible to escape, as social science practitioners we need to extend our reflections on the nature, content and extension of the digital culture and its implications for society at large. Every container of

information and every way of organising information is mediated through a social structure having a power matrix, an economic, historical and geographical context that acts simultaneously to affect human life. Questions can be posed in this context such as: how to organise and categorise the world around us? Who decides what to be stored as important information? Which information database qualifies to be the 'important' one? Who has the ability to organise specific information? Who has a right to use information and who has not? Amidst answering such diverse questions we find the emergence of a new world that clearly blurs the idea of what is 'true' or 'real', what is 'fake' or 'propaganda'. Thus, on the one hand these technologies bring a democracy of culture by providing information access to larger masses and on the other hand they set limits to the 'authentic contents' by creating 'contents' without 'contexts' as reflected in many of the 'fake vs real' content debates. Walter Benjamin's seminal work on digital culture 'The work of Art in the age of mechanical reproduction' reminds us to observe caution even though modernity has the ability to bring things closer or more accessible to the masses but in so doing, he argues something is being lost: 'aura'. The 'aura' is basically the situational context that makes our understanding more apt and logical. Since digital mediation creates the potential for any object to be seen anywhere at any time, it may affect the meaning of things. For instance, one appreciates the faraway snow-clad Himalayan range because of its situational context i.e the natural distance which creates the uniqueness of this object in relation to other surrounding objects near it. Therefore, the photographic image /contents of consuming places anytime anywhere result in the loss of what Benjamin calls it: an 'aura'. Similar observations have been made by Jean Baudrillard, a French scholar, in his work on Media and Modernity. He is a critic of technology and excess of media consumption as, he argues, this leads us to a hyperreal world. A hyperreality is a fabricated reality and it limits human participation in social world. Technology mediated world therefore needs to be dealt carefully as these sophisticated technologies may

make people confused with actual reality resulting in creation of an artificial hyperreal world.

Within these broad frames of social science discourses on Digital culture, the current issue of Akademos on the theme "Interrogating Digital Culture" aims to provide an intriguing discussion on the role of media in contemporary society from across interdisciplinary studies. The theme of the current issue is guided by the belief that interdisciplinary studies generate a better understanding of the world as it brings together experts from various disciplines to work collectively towards understanding and tackling complex problems of the society. I thank our contributors for sharing their valuable research and keeping up with the demands and deadlines. I also extend my gratitude to our editorial board members and board of reviewers for their valuable feedback, which goes a long way in ensuring the academic rigour and quality of the journal. I also thank on behalf of our editorial board our principal, Professor Kalpana Bhakuni, for her advice and support in the publication of the current issue.

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