The politics and perils of dis/connection in the Global South

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Abstract
Using empirical vignettes of repression against minority groups in the Global South, my essay attempts to contribute to the existing discourse in disconnection studies by contextualising and reconceptualising the notion of disconnection in the contemporary milieu. I introduce the term 'dis/connection' into the existing repertoire to illustrate how the interplay between connection and disconnection serves as a tactic and a technique of both repression and resistance. 'Dis/connection as repression' represents a political practice of modern power that is ubiquitous, diffuse and circulating; it captures both territorial and network ecologies, renders the living condition of the targeted community transparent, making them visible to the gaze of the authorities. Against this practice, I identify the possibility of resistance by conceptualising 'dis/connection as resistance' in the form of an assemblage, namely the interplay between connection and disconnection that is formed through a constellation of things, each paving their own pathways but can cohere at certain events or moments before dispersing again. 'Dis/connection assemblage' follows the logic of media hybridity, is built upon temporary aggregates of media artefacts and connects networks and territorialities in multiple spatialities and temporalities. Within the dis/connection assemblage, people may sculpt their spaces and networks of hope for change.

Keywords
assemblage, digital, dis/connection, disconnection, Global South, repression, resistance

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Following several days of mass protests, in August 2019 the Indonesian government shut down the Internet access in the easternmost provinces of Papua and West Papua – collectively known as the West Papua region. The blackout was conducted along with the deployment of over 6000 police and military personnel to areas where protests took place. The protests erupted in reaction to the mistreatment and racial abuse perpetrated by the police against Papuan students in the city of Surabaya on 17 August 2019. The government slowed down the Internet speed in the region and eventually disconnected the access entirely on 21 August 2019. In its statement, the Ministry of Information and Communication stated that the shutdown was intended 'to accelerate the process of restoring the security and order' in the areas (Haryanto, 2019). Social media blockade was cited as necessary to prevent the spread of provocative messages and rumours. The Internet connection was fully restored on 11 September 2019, over 3 weeks after the protest begun.

An Internet shutdown, such as that enacted by the Indonesian government in West Papua, has become one of the crudest technological measures imposed by authorities to control the information flow in a certain socio-political event. Defined as 'intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information', an Internet shutdown, which is also referred to as 'blackout' or 'kill switch', usually includes a block of access to social media platforms (Access Now, 2018: 2). Access Now (2018) in its #KeepItOn report reported that in 2018 alone, there were at least 192 Internet shutdowns around the world, which happened largely in the Global South, notably in Asia and Africa. The report does not include other types of digital disconnection, such as censorships and content blockings, which is regularly practised by many authorities in Asia, such as in China and Vietnam.

Some of these shutdowns were enacted by the governments to curb mass protests. Furthermore, just like what happened in West Papua, many of the shutdowns happened in areas where vulnerable and marginalised populations live. In 2019 in Myanmar, the shutdown was imposed on nine townships in Rakhine and Chin states where the majority of Rohingya population live – these towns have been the sites for attacks against Rohingya civilians (Article 19, 2019). In India, most of the recent shutdowns occurred in Jammu and Kashmir, a disputed territory between India and Pakistan, where civilian minorities live under constant unrest and violence. In these places, digital connection serves a critical role in assisting local activists and residents in raising their voices and communicating their stories and experiences to a broader audience beyond their localities. And, by so doing, they may expand their network of resistance and even generate the possibility for translocal activism networks to be formed. The Internet shutdown in any of these places literally cut off people who experience violence, injustice and discrimination from telling their own stories and communicating realities on the ground, and thus put the vulnerable population in an even more vulnerable position.

In many places in the Global South, digital connection is a valuable resource for forming and sustaining the network of resistance and activism and, yet, is a luxury and fragile, is economically and socio-politically costly, and even marred with punitive and repressive disconnection. In such condition, is there any place for voluntary disconnection? How shall we frame and conceptualise disconnection both as repression and resistance?

Scholarly research on disconnectivity largely has its roots in studies of uses and non-uses of technology focusing on individual (non)users (e.g. Satchell and Dourish, 2009; Selwyn, 2006; Wyatt et al., 2002), all of which shows that

> the motivations for, and practices of technology nonuse on the level of individual agency vary greatly and are often complex and ambiguous, not in the least because some of the same social qualities may be at play in both people's choice to use and not to use digital technology. (Hesselberth, 2018: 1997)

Furthermore, recent studies also conceptualise disconnectivity as a tactic and a form of resistance in navigating the fast-paced, capitalistic, and increasingly complex digital media environment (Kaun and Treré, 2018). Particularly useful for my discussion here is Kaun and Treré's (2018) systematic conceptualisation of the implications of disconnection for political practices and social movements which identifies digital disconnection as repression, resistance, and lifestyle politics. Echoing Kaun and Treré (2018), I, too, see digital disconnection as a site of contestation where both repression and resistance are enacted. Using empirical vignettes of repression against minority groups in the Global South, my essay attempts to contribute to the existing discourse by contextualising and reconceptualising the notion of disconnection in the contemporary milieu. I introduce the term 'dis/connection' into the existing repertoire in disconnection studies to illustrate how the interplay between connection and disconnection serves as a tactic and a technique of both repression and resistance.

Disconnection as repression, of network and territorial politics

Internet shutdowns, such as those enacted by the authorities in West Papua and Rakhine and Chin states, are evidently a type of 'disconnection as repression', characterised by 'power from above, fast pace and a high level of collectivity' (Kaun and Treré, 2018: 8). Beyond that, in these cases, the disconnection took place as part of a larger, more systematic, and longitudinal repressive and discriminatory practice of territorial politics.

Experiencing one of the most repressive media environments in the world, West Papua has a long history of media censorship and the banning of foreign journalists. For a long time, the government has been controlling information flow from Papua to suppress separatist movement fighting for independence. In the meantime, Papuans have endured decades of marginalisation, and exploitation of the region's rich natural resources, and a series of military operations with violent abuses of human rights. Despite abundant natural resources, West Papua is the poorest region in Indonesia, with poverty rates in both West Papua and Papua provinces higher than 20% (BPS, 2019).

Similarly, Rakhine and Chin states, too, have been historically marginalised and ruled under a controlled media environment. These two states are among seven states – the other five are Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Shan and Mon – that takes on the names of seven minority groups who historically were able to negotiate territorial boundaries with the government (South, 2008). For decades, minority civilians in these areas suffered from repression, high-intensity violence and severe abuses of human rights, mainly resulted

from arms conflicts and government-led counter-insurgency operations involving the use of excessive force and firearms. Specifically, the Rohingya Muslim minority in the north Rakhine state continue to face deep discrimination and are denied equal citizenship rights as the government refuses to recognise them as an official ethnic group.

Both Rohingyas and Papuans live in a highly restrictive media environment. In both contexts, local media and human rights activists have been using the Internet and social media to generate an alternative flow of information vis-à-vis the monopoly of information by authorities, and feeding journalists with a diverse source of information. Digital connection is not just a connection to the global networks, but also to connect territories that are, to a certain degree, inaccessible and/or isolated to the outside world. In these two examples, both control over and disconnection of digital networks are territorially emplaced.

In the digital age, we tend to conceptualise the relationship between power and politics in terms of networks. Disconnection (and connection) as political practices are, therefore, largely framed within the logic of the network. The network is perceived as dynamic, while the territory is static. Geographers have pointed out that territory and territoriality are predicated upon the 'mobilisation of a whole series of governmental technologies' (Painter, 2010: 1105) where technologies are politicised and combined with institutionalised practices of measurement and control to create 'political machines' (Barry, 2001). Hence, digital disconnection, as practised by authorities against Papuans, Rohingyas and many other minority groups in the Global South, is a political practice that is enacted based on the logic and politics of not only networks but also territory and territorial factors.

Dis/connection: the interplay of connection and disconnection as repression

Disconnection as repression is a simple, or even crude tactic. It represses simply by disconnecting. A much more sophisticated form of repression is dis/connection, which refers to a dialectic interplay between connection and disconnection.[1] Here, disconnection can also be framed as part of dis/connection. In other words, digital dis/connection is a more advanced step that may be enacted by authorities, especially those who have routinely enacted disconnections, in the near future.

To better illustrate the practice of digital, dis/connection as repression, I will share the following story of Chinese Muslim minorities in Uyghur, China (see Byler, 2018, for a complete account). The Uyghurs live for the most part in North-western China, in the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang. In 2009, after ethnic conflicts in the regional capital of Urumqi, the Chinese government shutdown the Internet in the region for 10 months (Olesen, 2014). Since then, disconnection continues to be enacted when conflicts flares, though the shutdowns are more targeted. Following the government's provision of 3G networks in 2010 and the proliferation of affordable smartphones in local markets in 2012, Uyghurs began to flock into WeChat, a Chinese social media platform that was made available across the country in 2012 following the bans of Twitter and Facebook in 2009. In the beginning, as Uyghurs use Arabic script, WeChat provided a relatively free space for the Uighurs to cultivate their sense of collective identity. The

script also acted as a form of coded speech; the government censorship body could not decode. For Uyghurs, WeChat primarily functioned as a socio-cultural space, not political. However, the platform also allowed them to connect their personal life-spheres to the broader Uyghurian sphere, where they came together to discuss and identify societal problems, forming a discursive arena that was relatively free. In response to this, in 2014, the Xin Jinping's government launched what they called 'people's war on terror' which essentially a surveillance project targeting Uyghur Muslims (Byler, 2018). Under this campaign, nearly all expressions of Islamic faith are treated as markers of potential religious extremism and Uyghur separatism. In 2016, the authorities started using biometric and digital scanning to track the activities of people online on WeChat and offline through surveillance cameras and facial recognition technologies. Any digital prints that may signal a connection to 'unauthorised Islamic practices' or someone who was accused of doing any of these practices were enough to send Uyghurs to one of the hundreds of detention centres built in the region (Byler, 2018). The project has determined over a million Uyghur Muslims as 'untrusworthy' – they are either scheduled for detention and re-education or already placed in a massive internment camp system.

The Uyghur case exemplifies the application of sophisticated and systematic practices of dis/connection as repression. By employing dis/connection, Chinese authorities virtually capture both territorial and networks ecologies and, by so doing, renders the living condition of the Uyghurs transparent, making them visible to the gaze of the authorities. Conversely, the dis/connection tactic makes it extremely difficult and risky for members of the community to be truly visible to each other and, thus, reduce the possibilities for any type of collectivity to be formed.

Dis/connection as resistance

Dis/connection as repression represents a political practice of modern power that is ubiquitous, diffuse, and circulating (Foucault, 1979). These practices are enacted as part of the operations of power and control to render Papuans, Rohingyas, Uyghurs and other discriminated minority groups, subjects of the state. Since the subject is 'produced by power' (Foucault, 1979), an individual subject appears to lack agency. How do we locate and conceptualise resistance in such a condition?

In the last part of this essay, I propose dis/connection as resistance as a conceptual framework that relies on three propositions. First, repression is never absolute, and people can never be fully reduced to the operation of power. People do have agency; as individuals transform into *a collective*, they can carve possibilities for resistance to emerge. Hence, dis/connection as resistance concerns with practices on a collective level. Second, as an apparatus of modern power, dis/connection as repression spreads through society, and, though it is territorial, it is not localised in any particular space. Hence, the resistance of the struggle against power must also be diffused, combining multiple networks that can navigate multiple spatialities (vis-à-vis network and territorial politics of control). Third, dis/connection as the practice of power is enacted by controlling the visibility of the subjects and the invisibility of the sovereign. In response, therefore, resistance should utilise dis/connection to reverse the control over visibility and invisibility.

Responding to these three propositions, in the following discussion, I identify the possibility of resistance by conceptualising dis/connection as an *assemblage*. Translated from the French *agencement*, the term emphasises the ongoing and dynamic state of the interplay between various components, rather than a static whole (DeLanda, 2016). I conceptualise dis/connection as resistance as the interplay between connection and disconnection that is formed through a constellation of things, each paving their own pathways but can cohere at certain events or moments before dispersing again. I utilise *assemblage* to break down some of the binary thinking around the scale/spatiality (local vs global, online vs offline) and temporality (long term vs short term) of resistance and the making of the resistance movement. While this conceptualisation may seem abstract, I build it by synthesising and systemising empirical materials I gathered from various social movements such as the Tunisian uprisings and the Malaysian Bersih movement (see Lim, 2013, 2016). Dis/connection *assemblage* is neither an easy nor instantaneous undertaking, but it is not an impossible endeavour. Observably, people and the activists associated with the Rohingyas, the Papuans and the Uyghurs, too, have started forming such *assemblage*, although they are operating under great repression and in an ad hoc basis.

This *assemblage* includes, but is not limited to, the practices of digital disconnection as resistance on a collective level, as conceptualised by Kaun and Treré (2018), which 'concerns the use of tactics that force adversaries to disconnect, along with the (almost) completely eschewing of digital media and the partial disconnection from specific platforms as form of political resistance' (p. 11). Such a tactic is commonly embraced by activists all over the world to display their resistance in the case of a shutdown.

Digital disconnection, however, represents just one of the diverse tactics that can be enacted as part of the *assemblage*. Beyond that, dis/connection *assemblage* operates multiple connections and/or disconnections. It follows the logic of media hybridity that pays attention to the flux, in-betweenness and liminality (Chadwick, 2017) and is built upon temporary aggregates of media artefacts that are old and new, digital and analogue, online and offline, mainstream/corporate and alternative, and internal and external (to the collective), involving human and non-human subjects (Lim, 2018a; Treré, 2018). When one route is disconnected, the other connects. When to connect on one platform signals vulnerability, it disconnects and diverts to other platforms. The hybrid ecology is multi-tiered; information flows through the path of least resistant. Its resiliency relies on its redundancy. Such ecology connects networks and territories in multiple spatialities: inter- and translocals, the locals and the global, the minorities and (supportive individuals and groups in) the majorities, the inside (of the territory) and beyond. It also traverses multiple temporalities, connecting short-term tactics and events with long-term trajectories of the resistance.

At the heart of dis/connection *assemblage* is its malleability to navigate in/visibility, the interplay between visibility and invisibility. The authorities, notably in repressive systems, exercise their power through the economy of visibility, to render the power invisible and the people visible. In this milieu, dis/connection *assemblage* allows individual and groups within the resistance movement to be temporarily invisible from the gaze of the authorities to cultivate itself – in creating, expanding, and sustaining the movement (Lim, 2018a). At the same time, it also allows individuals to be temporarily and routinely visible

to each other as well as to the public. On the one hand, the *assemblage* provides multiple possibilities for cultivating political *spaces of appearance* (Arendt, 1958) where bodies – corporeal and/or cognitive – gather and appear together to present to power. On the other hand, the *assemblage* also generates multiple pathways to carve *spaces of disappearance* (Lim, 2018a), where the collective is temporarily invisible from the surveillance gaze. Within the dis/connection *assemblage*, navigating between *spaces of appearance* and *spaces of disappearance*, people may collectively weave their spaces and networks of hope for change.

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Note

1. In my earlier work, I employed the term dis/connection to illustrate how mobile social media users are embracing the interplay of being simultaneously connected and disconnected (Lim, 2018b).

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