Migrant youth and new media in Asia

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This chapter offers an overview of key studies and issues regarding new media practices amongst migrant youth in the Asia-Pacific region. Children and young people are usually perceived as the most enthusiastic users of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and young migrants in the Asia-Pacific region are no exception. However, their identities as border-transgressors in the throes of maturation make the role of new media especially salient in their lives. Researchers in the fields of migration, media and childhood/youth are mutually involved in understanding how the nexus of growing up in Asia today as migrants and outsiders, and growing up in a digitally enabled environment impacts the lives of today's generation of young people. Their work explains how, using various digital media with a local, translocal, or transnational reach, Asian young migrants speak to the global youth culture, and share commonalities with migrants in other territories. Their new media practices are globally familiar but also fascinatingly uncommon due to the socio-cultural specificity and the uneven development in the region.

In order to discover the depth and range of research in this area, we have organized the chapter into the following key four research themes: First, there is the issue of the digital divide. Young migrants are very often less well-off and less settled than local children and youths. As such their status transforms them into the information have-less class, i.e., users of inexpensive, low-tech, mobility-limited ICTs; Second, there is the possibility of empowerment through mobile and social media use. New media facilitate and mediate the self-representation of young people, including migrants. This challenges the dominant stigmatizing narrative of migrants used by other social groups in mainstream media. Third, perhaps as a result of the challenge noted above, there are negative attitudes and punitive actions towards young migrants' engagement in new media. Such processes of censure and disempowerment take place in a broader context where moral panics over Internet-related youth problems are rampant. Fourth, the gender dimension is significant. Mobile media and the migratory experience enable young women to explore gender identities and negotiate intimate relationships. This is however in a wider and longstanding context where conventional social norms of femininity continue to regulate their behavior and speech.

Introduction

Asia has been a theatre of large-scale, sustained, and diversified population movement since the 1970s. Due to uneven regional development and historical international relations, different Asian countries and territories have undergone different processes of migration. The newly industrialized countries or territories in East and Southeast Asia, such as Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, have witnessed massive labor recruitment since the 1980s (Asis and Piper 2008: 426). Other high-performing economies, including Malaysia and Thailand, have also drawn workers from the less developed countries in the region. Malaysia is a traditional source country of workers for Singapore; Thai workers take Taiwan as one of their major destinations; the Philippines represents the world's largest labor exporting country into and beyond the region; South Koreans have frequently moved across their immediate border to work and live in Japan during the post-colonial era; Australia regards India as the most importance source of ICT workers; and Hong Kong has seen an influx of migrants from the mainland of China in the first decade of the twenty-first century (ibid; Ryang 2002:895; Voigt-Graf and Khoo 2004:144; Wong 2008:53).

Inside the mainland of China, the transnational migration has been eclipsed by the much larger and more pressing rural-to-urban migration, presently estimated at 260 million (China National Bureau of Statistics 2013). While intensive labor migration is the key characteristic of the Asia-Pacific region, various other types of population movement have emerged, such as international marriage migration, education

migration, return migration, and even unauthorized migration. Overall, the diversified

and complicated migration patterns indicate the increasing integration of regional

labor markets and the burgeoning—albeit uneven and unstable—socioeconomic

developments in Asia-Pacific (Asis and Piper 2008: 424).

The adoption of new media in the region is no less complicated and uneven than

that of the population movement. In more developed countries such as Australia,

Singapore, Japan and South Korea, the Internet has penetrated society, and mobile

phones have become part of people's everyday life (Goggin 2010: 120; Lim 2010: 43;

Matsuda 2010: 31; Yoon 2010: 108). However, the inequality of access to ICTs is

also substantial in these countries, and the concept of the digital divide has dominated

many analytical accounts, policy debates, and planning documents (Qiu 2009:1; *also*

see Chapter 7 by Sun and Qiu in this book). When it comes to less developed

countries in the region, such as China and India, the dichotomy between the

information haves and the information have-nots is more prominent and complicated.

Although India's ICT industry is burgeoning and has helped the country successfully

carved out a niche in the global economy, the digital divide is notable: the rate of

access to the Internet for the unban households is ten times that for rural ones (Mo,

Swinnen, Zhang, Yi, Qu, Boswell and Rozelle 2013:14). China hosts the world's

largest national population of mobile phone users, and its Internet user population has

overtaken that of the United States to become the largest in the world by 2008 (Qiu

2009:2). However, the Internet penetration is four times higher in China's urban areas

than in rural areas, and computer ownership is found 14 times higher for urban

children than the rural children (Mo et al. 2013:14).

Both India and China have seen the formation of a new information class, i.e., the

information have-less, who populate the vast gray area between the information haves

and have-nots (Cartier, Castells and Qiu 2005: 9; Donner 2009: 93). Numerous

rural-to-urban migrants, laid-off workers and small business owners in China tend to

use inexpensive, low-end and mobility-limited ICT services, such as low-priced

bandit-phones, unlicensed Internet cafes, or low-cost text messaging on the handset

(Donald 2010: 5; Cartier et al. 2005: 14).

The information have-less who enjoy "immobile mobility"

The unequal access to the ICTs is substantial in Asia as well as other regions, but the

binary model of the information-haves and have-nots, which remains the case in

western postindustrial societies, fails to address the particularities of digital divide in a

few rapidly developing Asian countries (Qiu 2009: 7). In particular, young

rural-to-urban migrant workers in China have demonstrated some unique

characteristics in their new media use. These migrant youngsters are no different from

their global peers in regard to the enthusiasm towards new media.

In reality, however, they have become heavy users of inexpensive and low-end ICTs: they pursue bandit-phones which copy or adapt brand originals and are sold at vastly decreased prices, such as Ciphone or Hiphone instead of the more sophisticated and more expensive iPhone; they linger in unlicensed, smoky Internet cafes whose settings are not comparable to the comfortable home base enjoyed by the established urban population; they heavily rely on short message services and shun the more expensive voice call (Donald 2010). Although the ICTs are typically associated with mobility and are promising to keep everyone connected anytime anywhere, these low-end technologies and services offer more limited mobility with low functional choice, often constrained in a particular time and space (Cartier et al. 2005:14).

Such low-cost and low-end ICTs have been performing critical informational functions for young migrants. As Cara Wallis (2010: 58) aptly terms it, new media provide China's young migrant workers with "immobile mobility". Young rural-to-urban migrants are primarily employed in manual labor and service work, facing severe constraints on their control of space, time and mobility. They usually live 'isolated lives' due to their long work schedules, their socio-economic status as underclass outsiders, and the tendency for their lives to revolve around a very small geographic area (Wallis 2010: 61). It is common for them to work 10-14 hours a day, live with co-workers in tiny dorms; and many rarely venture beyond the few blocks where they live and work. Such "immobility" indicates that even although young rural

migrants have moved to cities in seek of employment, their migration does not necessarily entail free-flowing physical mobility.

Rather, their autonomy in controlling the spatial arrangement of their existence is highly constrained by poverty and prejudice (Donald 2010: 4). The virtual mobility offered by mobile phone or the Internet enables them to imagine new identities, to explore modes of expression, and to maintain relationships despite physical distance. The notion "immobile mobility" refers to a socio-techno mode of being there virtually rather than physically. It acknowledges the ongoing spatial confinement of the migrant despite their great movement across geographical distance in the pursuit of work. It stresses the particular significance of new media for a socially and economically marginalized group, that is, new media function as a socio-techno means for China's young rural migrant workers to transcend myriad barriers of time, space, and class in the cities.

While professional use of innovative brand mobile phones is indicative of social wealth and higher-class status, young migrant workers' use of bandit mobile phones or illegal Internet cafés may articulate rebellion against exclusion and marginalization (Donald 2010: 5). Their boundary-jumping forms of digital access signal a determination to be included, and a desire to participate in an informational society. Most rural-to-urban migrant youth in China have been driven to migrate by extreme financial need, expecting that the movement will entail an upward social mobility.

However, being officially identified as rural residents, they are consistently denied access to the social welfare services in the cities, and are forced to live as second-class citizens (Goodburn 2009: 502).

Having been socially and economically marginalized, rural-to-urban migrants are further disadvantaged by constrained access to the ICTs and by their own digital competence, each problem reinforcing the other. While China is promoting the development of information technology for the national economy, the technologies and practices of rural-to-urban migrants are not reliably supported by the state. Nonetheless, young migrants find ways of making the ICTs to work to partially replace absent structures of support (Donald 2010: 10; Cartier et al. 2005: 10). As a social group located on the peripheries of China's success, they occupy spaces and pursue modes of access to the larger worlds of the Internet and other mobile communication technologies.

One distinctive feature of the ICTs in Asia is that they are a kind of technological boundary jumper—providing a platform of accelerated development for the individual and the group, counteracting backwardness, boosting a sense of modernization and catching up with the west. Ideologically, ICTs are regarded as something good and necessary, particularly by the states that are experiencing rapid urbanization and industrialization. Technology is constructed as a key strategic means for South Korea's "catch-up", and China's "linking tracks with the world" (Wallis 2013: 346;

Choi 2010: 88). For individuals, it has become a means of personal transformation. Young migrants from underdeveloped villages tend to regard technology as a solution to their subjective problems, which may turn around their destiny as poor, un-modern, and low-quality (*di suzhi*) citizens (Wallis 2013: 349).

Yet, individual desires may contradict the state's development strategies, and are thus ruthlessly curtailed. In some cases, young and poor rural residents in China have been deliberately recruited and trained in computer skills, and then placed in data input companies, serving as low-tech laboring subjects with a low wage and little job security (Wallis 2013). They are merely allowed to use the computer for data input and are prohibited from accessing the Internet. These young migrants' desire for technological competence as a means for continuous self-improvement and social upward mobility, (a desire which has been largely ignited by the national discourse and the media promotion), are eventually suppressed for the sake of the state's overall economic aims and the needs of the agents of informational capitalism.

The diffusion of ICTs has contributed to extreme digital inequality in rapidly urbanizing and industrializing countries, transforming young migrant workers into either low-end, unreliable consumers or low-tech, exploitative laborers. In other words, a socio-economic underclass has now been transformed into a disadvantaged information class in the networked world. The rise of low-end ICTs has also been found in another fast developing Asian country, namely, India. As Jonathan Donner

(2009) states, low-cost Short Message Service (SMS) is ubiquitous among small and informal business owners in urban India, but their use of many other functions on the mobile phone is very limited. However, the connections between low-end ICTs and India's sizeable rural-to-urban migrants are yet to be investigated.

Compared to internal migrants, India's transnational ICT workers have received more research attention. Voigt-Graf and Khoo (2004: 148) find that two thirds of Indian temporary business arrivals in Australia work in the ICT industry; and that Indian ICT workers in Australia are very young, with over sixty percent aged twenty-five and twenty-nine. The emigration of Indian ICT workers is inextricably linked to the burgeoning ICT industry in India, particularly in the southern state of Karnataka. Nowadays Australia sees India as the most important source of ICT workers. With some caveats followed by attacks on Indian students and taxi drivers in 2010-2011, Australia is generally perceived by Indians as a clean country with a healthy environment. The shared history as Commonwealth nations provides a shared historical foundation and sense of continuity that supports migration. That is to say, the inequality of access to ICTs can foster the formation of low-end, low-tech information class, in which young migrants from underdeveloped areas often appear as a major force; but that ICTs may also contribute to skilled migration, in which young migrants act as well-regarded technology specialists. The contrast between this migration phenomenon and the low technological mobility recorded by Wallis in China, where aspirations may end in lifelong data entry, is worth further research.

Migrant youth self-representation versus the dominant stereotypes created by other social groups

New media have provided fundamental new opportunities for Asian youth to explore the world and negotiate their identities—much like rock music, travel and backpacking defined the 1950s-1970s for Europeans and American school-leavers. This is especially meaningful for migrant youth, who have stepped across the borders that defined their geographical and social identities and consequently have become 'Other' (Solinger 1991: 3). Previous studies find that the Internet fulfills three principal functions for young migrants:

(1) A source of information about the new society, the homeland and various cultures;

(2) A platform for online contacts with families and friends—both those left-behind in the homeland and those in the new settlement context;

(3) A tool for preserving one's native language (or dialect) and improving host language (or dialect) skills (Elias 2013: 339).

The Internet, together with mobile phones and other forms of mobile communication technology, enables young migrants to establish and maintain a "translocal network" (Cartier et al. 2005: 14). This network has a translocal reach and reflects migrants' attachments to multiple places resulting from their migratory life paths. In other words,

migrants' mobility now has an informational dimension.

In countries with a long immigration history, such as Australia, digital media are increasingly recognized as an important resource for immigrant youth engagement. Digital media facilitate local expressions of identity and belonging (Gifford and Wilding 2013). One would add that this facilitation is local to the user but is enabled and meaningful because of the wide geo-spatial reach of the technology and communicative sphere that it creates. Even if a young person's identity (say on QQ) is only actually visible to 100-500 associates, the possibility that many more will know and recognize their efforts at self-expression brings depth to the identity project. More prosaically, digital literacy and opportunities are recommended as an essential component of youth settlement policies and services.

For young migrants from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, such as young refugees, there is a particularly essential need to solve problems, support one another and seek a sense of belonging with the assistance of ICTs. In reality, the mobile phone has become a technology of everyday life for most refugee youth in Australia, and when given the opportunity to access the Internet, they immediately become users of social media such as MySpace and Facebook in order to communicate with friends in their new settlement context as well as staying connected to those overseas (ibid.). For example, the films and photographs produced by Karen of Burmese youth in Australia illustrate how the ICTs can open up possibilities for

refugee youngsters to exercise different identities and explore different ways of "becoming". In some photos and clips, Karen youngsters present themselves in the centre of the narrative, making fun on the iconic Australian beach while singing Karen songs. Another video clip shows Karen boys playing guitars, drinking beers, singing about love and love lost. This self-representation speaks to the trials of being young, refers to the global youth culture, and undermines the dominant trauma narrative about refugees (ibid.).

Such self-representation, or user-generated and distributed content, takes place in a context where the voice of migrant children and adolescents has long been neglected. Children and young people are often central actors in the process of migration, yet they are absent for the most part in the public and political debates (Block and Buckingham 2007: ix). On the few occasions when they become visible, migrant children/youth tend to be typecast as either vulnerable victims or potential criminals. This stigmatization is located in a broader social context where children's subjectivity is overwhelmingly overlooked, as if they are unable to think, act, or speak in their own right (Block and Buckingham 2007: 36). To give an example, a consistent discursive pattern has been perpetuated by the Chinese press: millions of rural migrant children are reduced into a few simplistic characteristics, namely, poor, passive, and school-aged (Luo 2011). Moreover, China's influential twitter-like micro-blogging, which is renowned for neoliberal comments and diversified opinions, tends to reinforce the existing stereotypes against rural migrant children. Here new media

come to serve as a new channel for messages of prejudice and discrimination against a marginalized social group (Tao 2014-2015).

However, migrant children and youngsters have managed to appropriate new media to speak in their own terms. The emerging subculture "Shamate" in China is one of the many cases demonstrating migrant youth engagement in self-representation. "Shamate" is a virtual and informal group, consisting of Chinese rural-to-urban migrants who are in their late teens or early 20s (Lu 2013). They are usually distinguished with a spiky hairstyle, some body piercing, extremely heavy makeup, and cool-looking clothes from a street market. They often use off-brand cell phones and inexpensive Internet cafes to take unconventional selfies, distribute their photos and comments, and interact with their mates online. The group is named after a deliberately nonsensical translation of the English word "smart", given that most "Shamate" members lack tertiary education and work low-paying jobs in the cities, like a barber, security guard, deliveryman, or waitress (ibid.). While there is much to reflect on with regard to the socio-cultural meanings of the phenomenon, "Shamate" showcases how new media provide a space for migrant youth to represent themselves and have their own voices heard. This migrant-generated content often challenges the dominant stereotyping discourse which permeates the media platforms used by other population groups.

The perceived Internet-related youth problems and punitive approaches

Traditionally, children are expected to accommodate to adult cultural norms; but with new media, they are celebrated for their pioneering exploration (Livingstone 2013). Almost uniquely in relation to the Internet, children's knowledge is widely recognized as being more valuable than that of adults. That is to say, traditional inter-generational power relations seem to be challenged alongside the permeation of new media. In the digital world, the grandchild teaches the grandparent to Skype, the pupil challenges the teacher's knowledge, and even commerce tries to get down with kids (ibid.). The largely unanticipated growth of peer-to-peer culture, user-generated content, social networking and remix culture, is stamping a youthful imprint on cultural domains hitherto dominated by adults.

At the same time, links have been drawn between child/adolescent problems and their Internet use. There are increasing moral panics about youth crimes that are mediated and facilitated by new media, such as violence, peer bully, pornography, or sexual assault (Spry 2010; Goggin 2010). Digital media are perceived as a suspicious devil that may detriment young people's own or others' safety and wellbeing. In addition to motivating criminal behavior, youngster's use of mobile media is also perceived to threaten culture by encouraging declines in standards of literacy, and a rise in poor communication skills, classroom disruption and cheating. As Damien Spry's (2010:16) comparative study of Japan and Australia finds it, attitudes towards

children's media practices are often based on adult anxieties about putting children at risk, on adult aspirations for a new "Net Generation" of media-savvy creative types, or on the agendas of children's media producers who are driven by commercial imperatives. The political and public discourse on children/youth media use is overwhelmingly adult-centered, indicating a repressive regime of adult consensus. In the name of "protection", legislation by adults tends to control presumed media use excess by children and youngsters, rather than facilitate their use (Donald 2010: 9).

Among migrant families, children tend to adopt the new language and culture more rapidly than adults, which is often facilitated by new media; and parents tend to rely on their children's brokering for practical information about the new surroundings (Block and Buckingham 2007: 336-338). However, young migrants' heavy use of new media is also vulnerable and easy to be stigmatized. Migrant youth rapid adoption of new media and new surroundings is often seen as a potential factor which widens the intergenerational cultural gaps, weakens parental authority and affects family cohesion (ibid.). In some cases, young migrants' media use is even criminalized, as they have chosen low-priced copycat phones or unsupervised Internet cafes. China's party-state once launched a four-month crackdown on unlicensed Internet cafes, with an especial focus on areas where young rural migrants are clustered (Donald 2010: 4). This action has drawn casual links between crime, migrant youth and the Internet, and has criminalized the notion of access to digital

competency among the young poor migrants. It reflects a punitive approach to managing contemporary youth culture and controlling population mobility.

Also, as discussed previously, the "Shamate" photos and films—i.e., young rural migrants' unconventional self-representation—have been ruthlessly mocked and criticized by the majority social groups. Many "Shamate" members have to retreat from public open social media, and turn to more private, stranger-blocked online spaces (Baidubaike 2008). A disadvantaged social group becomes more vulnerable due to the punitive attitudes and actions by local governors and citizens. Migrant youth are often discouraged, if not excluded, from the possibility of self-taught digital literacy. Consequently, they are deprived of areas of competency which might allow access to even minimal social, political and cultural power (Donald 2010: 5).

The dimension of gender

One feature that comes to characterize the labor migration in Asia is women's significant share in the process. In some countries, the feminization of migration has been notable. For example, women in the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, outnumber men among those legally deployed every year; female and male Filipinos are equally likely to emigrate to other countries or territories (Asis and Piper 2008: 427). Female migration in Asia has thus become a main research topic, with a

particular focus on women working as domestic workers (Asis and Piper 2008: 431).

The peer-reviewed journal, *Asia Pacific Migration Journal,* which launched in 1992, has devoted several special issues to migrant women. In regard to the ICT industry, young male professionals tend to dominate the migration process, with females overwhelmingly appearing as secondary applicants for entrance to another country (Voigt-Graf and Khoo 2004: 148).

In recent years, young Asian women's international marriage has attracted increasing research attention, given that the numbers and the share of international marriages have been growing in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, etc. (see for example, Takeda 2012; Bélanger, Lee and Wang 2010; Kim and Kim 2013). The ICTs not only serve as a virtual intermediary for women to engage in a transnational relationship, but also continues to empower them after they successfully enter into marriage. For instance, Japanese women who immigrated to Australia following an international marriage often use web blogging to discuss the husband-wife relationship, daily childrearing experience, social exclusion and racial prejudice (Takeda 2012: 420). Such individual experiences are barely available in the conventional media, but online blogs allow the transnational wives to express themselves relatively freely and get their voices heard.

Population movement, together with mobile communication technology, enables Asia's young women to explore gendered identities and negotiate their positions in

the mesh of patriarchy. For China's young rural-to-urban migrant women, mobile phones offer them a new space to shape their gender identities and forge intimate relationships. They typically face "marriage dilemma" due to harsh work conditions and ubiquitous social exclusion (Wallis 2010). While mobile phones and the Internet are transforming the way in which people set up intimate relationships, such changes can be dramatic and turn into a significant life event for young rural migrant women. The stream of text messages and voice calls turns out to be crucial for these girls to get to know their (potential) partners, when face-to-face meetings are difficult or unaffordable (ibid.). Similar to the case of international marriage, technology here serves as the intermediary in rural migrant women's dating and marriage.

Migration may entail individual emancipation from patriarchal conditions, and the ICTs may facilitate women's exploration of gender identity; but conventional socio-cultural norms that rule over gender differences can be perpetuated in the same time. This indicates the blending of technology and social culture, the mingling of the traditional patriarchal norms and technological changes. As Wallis (2010: 62) finds it in her fieldwork, many young migrant women in China believe that it is "inappropriate" or "unacceptable" for them to send out erotic messages, although it is "fine" for them to read it. Social norms of femininity continue to regulate their speech and behavior. While new communication technologies and migratory experiences have facilitated women to explore their identities and negotiate gendered relationships, traditional norms of power are perpetuated in the same time to regulate their speech

and behavior.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have argued that Asian youth migratory experience and their fluid adult-becoming identity add multiple layers to their new media practices. In Asian countries that are undergoing rapid urbanization and industrialization, young migrants have typically moved from underdeveloped areas to burgeoning cities and developed states. In the first place, their migration has been driven by extreme financial need and by the aspiration to upward socioeconomic mobility. However, they are often caught up in the inequality of information access in the host cities/ states, and are transformed into the informational underclass, i.e., users of inexpensive, low-end and low-tech ICTs. While the global high-technology ICTs promise to keep everyone connected anytime anywhere, low-end technology and services offer more limited mobility with low functional choice, often constrained in a particular time and space. Nonetheless, migrant youth in Asia demonstrate a zeal in appropriating new media and a desire of taking part in an informational society.

Existing migration and media studies have marked out the particular significance and especial meaning of new media for young migrant users. The ICTs have provided them with a space to express their own views and concerns in their own terms. Such

user-generated content often challenges, either intentionally or unintentionally, the dominant stigmatizing narrative which permeates the media used by other social groups. In other words, migrant children and youngsters, who used to be rendered invisible in the public discourse, are now empowered by the ICTs to get their own voices heard. Migrant youth own expression via digital media are increasingly valued by migration/settlement policy-makers and practitioners in the field. Digital literacy and opportunities are gradually recognized as an important component of youth settlement policies and services.

Despite the possible empowerment of migrant youth by new media, there are negative attitudes and punitive actions towards their media use. Young migrants' voices via new media continue to be overlooked or ignored in the cacophony of narratives on the Internet. Their own expression via new media can be ruthlessly mocked and be labeled as "problematic" by the majority social groups. This is illuminated by the unfavorable situation of Chinese "Shamate", i.e., the state's young and unruly rural-to-urban migrants. In some other cases, young migrants' engagement in new media has been stigmatized or even criminalized by local governors and citizens. Such processes of censure and disempowerment, led by the mainstream non-migrant social actors, are likely to deprive migrant youth of digital competency, rendering a socially and economically disadvantaged group more vulnerable.

Given women's notable share in the Asia-Pacific population movement, we have

also examined the gender dimension in issues around youth, migration and new media. Again, the ICTs are recognized as a tool empowering young migrant women in Asia, which is no different with that of global migrants. Mobile communication technologies have facilitated young female migrants to maintain translocal connections and express their own views which are rarely available in conventional media. More importantly, the new ICTs serve as an intermediary for young migrant women to explore gendered identities and forge intimate relationships, and the particular significance has been spelled out considering their "border transgressor" status and the dominant patriarchal social norms. Population migration may entail women's individual emancipation, and mobile communication technologies may enable them to negotiate gendered relationships and reclaim their positions in the mesh of patriarchy. Nonetheless, it should be noted that conventional socio-cultural norms of femininity continue to be perpetuated in the digital era, regulating young migrant women's expression and behavior. It implies the blending of technology and social culture, the fusion of conventional patriarchal norms and rapidly changing media.