Digital Education Initiatives
The Nature of the Beast

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During and after COVID, Digital Education has emerged as clear major, and thick, discursive field with inclusivity being a core concern. Any critique of the inequities in the field must necessarily include the rewiring of academic institutions that appear to be increasingly relying, heavily, on state-business-corporation linkages.

Arising in the COVID years and the slew of measures for online teaching and now, digital universities, online programs by ed-tech companies are a heterogeneous assemblage of Digital Education (DE). DE is held together by a specific cultural imaginary being constructed by the circulation of the National Education Policy (NEP) and the various measures being spoken of by the state. EI in its current avatar has actants such as the NEP policy documents, the numerous workshops and conferences around the NEP which hold the assemblage, organs of the state (the Ministry of Education, or MoE), educational technology (ed-tech) service providers, public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the socio-technical devices (including infrastructure) and regulations (by bodies like the University Grants Commission, or UGC).

The nature of this DE beast is a fascinating one, and it emerges in the public and academic discourses around online learning.

DE as an assemblage

With COVID, DE emerged as clear discursive field as the UNESCO, UGC, and others sent out notices, reports and statistics regarding the switch to online teaching and learning. Later, statistics were compiled by the state bodies about the number of classes taken online, the number of students who enrolled/attended, forms of assessment, etc. Since DE was relatively new, there were no prescribed norms and conventions of the debate/discourse, but specific responses ranged from enthusiasm to scepticism, with concerns about the new inequalities engendered by DE to the possibilities of DE (Pillai 2020). Questions about Right to Education when education is being forcibly moved online remain hanging in the air (Nayar 2022).

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The UGC 'Concept Note' on blended learning underscored the need for "digital tools used should be able to be utilised by the students in order to enforce some control over the speed or topics of their learning" (UGC undated). The UGC's Public Notice dated 20 May 2021 (UGC 2021) stated that a student could take up to 40 per cent courses from the online learning platform, SWAYAM. In February 2022, the UGC opened the gates, allowing colleges to offer online programs without prior approvals (Gohain 2022). Simultaneously, the Ministry issued advisories to the public about ed-tech service providers. From elsewhere, the UNESCO studies and reports on the pandemic's effects on education (school to higher levels) and national measures, including online teaching, also circulated in India.

Evidently, DE was now a major, and thick, discursive field with governments, organizations, policy papers and commentaries all involved in the debate.

Multiple actants made up the DE assemblage.

First and foremost is the state, embodied in the MoE, through the circulars and policy statements, including the National Education Policy (2020). The NEP had a full section devoted to 'Online and Digital Education: Ensuring Equitable Use of Technology'. Controlling funding and regulating processes, the state remains a looming presence in all the debates and outcomes in education and learning systems

Second, the organizations such as the UGC accumulated data from HEIs regarding enrolment and online teaching outcomes. Subsequently, the UGC also became the nodal point from which higher education was beginning to be reconceived as *digital* higher education. With the continued emphasis on the digital emanating from the regulatory authority itself, there was never any doubt about the dominance the digital would come to play in the future policies.

Third, technology firms such as Great Learning and UpGrad tied up with public HEIs and institutions such as the IIITs to offer new, innovative and market-driven courses and programs throughout 2020 and after. All set to expand, naturally, with the call for online programs, it was no surprise that the MoE recently issued an advertisement calling for ed-tech firms to collaborate with the Ministry to offer new programs, online.

Fourth, data formed a core component of the assemblage. Data collection and reports based on them, from as early as 2017, from firms like KPMG, think tanks, centres like the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy and corporate bodies such as India Global Business became an important component of the assemblage. India's online learning demand and supply was expected, predicted these studies, to increase exponentially.

It is important to note that data about and around digital education was not arbitrary and random, but carefully collated. For example, the Ministry itself accumulated such data from HEIs, especially during and after the pandemic. Indeed, one could venture the argument that it is the data and predictions, the debates and the discourse of DE that spurred the recent UGC/MoE decision to move ahead – and fast – on online education expansion. That is, the DE assemblage generated not only a digital education imaginary but also drove the policy-making process, producing therefore, material consequences.

The Cultural Imaginary of Digital Education

The DE imaginary has multiple components.

DE is seen as a solution to improving enrollment and the "reach" of education to more stakeholders. The NEP states:

> The existing digital platforms and ongoing ICT-based educational initiatives must be optimized and expanded to meet the current and future challenges in providing quality education for all.

Anticipating the potential criticism of digital inequalities, the NEP writes:

> It is important that the use of technology for online and digital education adequately addresses concerns of equity.

The need therefore, writes the NEP document, is ramp up the digital infrastructure:

> Since technology is rapidly evolving, and needs specialists to deliver high quality e-learning, a vibrant ecosystem has to be encouraged to create solutions that not only solve India's challenges of scale, diversity, equity…

Thus, diversity, scale, equality and reach/extent are addressable through the DE model, as the NEP announces:

> Institutions will have the option to run Open Distance Learning (ODL) and online programmes, provided they are accredited to do so, in order to enhance their offerings, improve access, increase G[ross] E[nrollment] R[atio]…

Later, it adds:

> ODL and online education provide a natural path to increase access to quality higher education.

A performance-based model – although this is not restricted to DE – is proposed in the NEP which states: 'Mechanism of performance-based funding to States / HEIs may be devised', but also calls for a 'substantial increase in public investment in education by both the Central government and all State Governments'. In the same breath, it identifies 'extensive use of technology and online education' as a thrust area for funding.

All NEP initiatives will require ICTs, declares the NEP document:

> Technology will be leveraged to strengthen and even undertake the above initiatives. Quality technology-based options for adult learning such as apps, online courses/modules, satellite- based TV channels, online books, and ICT-equipped libraries and Adult Education Centres, etc. will be developed, through government and philanthropic initiatives as well as through crowd sourcing and competitions. In many cases, quality adult education could thereby be conducted in an online or blended mode.

All aspects of education will require a greater use of technology, implies the document.

A key component of the DE imaginary is data. Very early in the NEP document, there are statistics from the NSSO on drop-out rates. Then there is data from U-DISE about enrolment from disadvantaged groups. It calls for a "regular inflow of authentic data from multiple sources including educational technology innovators and practitioners".

Reports on online education or technology from the World Economic Forum and other organizations also provide multiple varieties of data. Data about education is a scientific object in the analysis, but is also an economic object. For instance, the International Telecommunications Union in a Report noted that 63 per cent of the world's population uses the Internet – with the remaining clearly excluded from the very possibility of a global online education initiative.

Pandemics and the Global Digital Humanities

The new DE initiatives that appeared during the pandemic all carried a strong focus on inclusivity. FemTechNet was one of the early movers in this, sharing resources for online teaching. The collective Digital Humanities Now placed on the www for free, a collection of resources relating to digital pedagogy. The Critical Design Lab offered numerous suggestions from differently-abled persons regarding digital pedagogy under the heading 'Accessible Teaching in the Time of Covid-19'

Evidently, inclusivity was the anxiety uppermost in the minds of educators moving online. It is in this context that questions of ICT-related infrastructure were modified to speak to more than concrete-and-metal.

The NEP's ambitions and the state's foregrounding of the online mode demands attention not to just material infrastructure – computers, towers, devices, cables – but on socio-technical infrastructure since the social components of attitudes, behaviour, policies about quality and sharing are inseparable from the 'hard' technical. This is the reason why commentators like Alan Liu have argued that the term 'infrastructure' should be defined as "the social-cum-technological milieu". Take for instance, India's biggest challenge: educational materials (across disciplines) in all Indian languages catering to multiple linguistic communities and regions. What is the

infrastructure *for* this diversity when it comes to online resources and services, especially translations of key texts, materials and assessments (at tertiary levels but also at the primary)?

Then, how much of local materials and cultural resources – say folklore, literature, ethnographic data – have been (properly) digitized for online dissemination is a key question that DE must first address. This becomes necessary because as education – already hegemonic with the Global North's intractable control – moves online in an age where local cultures and knowledge-formations rapidly disappear (archives neglected, periodicals crumbling, books published but badly circulated, local libraries starved of funds), the hegemony of Euro-American-dominated materials would become impossible to counter.

From the humanities perspective, are modes of humanistic interpretation shift-able to the online mode? This is a question that requires an extensive debate as to (i) what the humanistic models of interpretation and critique are, and (ii) how these can take recourse to the digital route for their ends. Also, it remains to be seen whether traditional modes of humanistic inquiry would gain or lose when these are 'converted' into a digital format. If the answer is 'no', then how can humanistic inquiry – whose 'natural' focus is not only on interpretation but the locations of interpretation, their frames and the question of the Other – be rendered more heterogeneous?

In all these analyses we find an emphasis on inclusivity and access while retaining a high degree of quality – for example, the rigour of research methodologies are not to be diluted, argue the commentators, even when moved online.

In a recent essay, Urszula Pawlicka-Deger provides a framework for a more inclusive DE infrastructure as a possible model for India's moves towards online teaching alternatives. She lists the following principles that ought to inform what she calls an 'infrastructuring' of Digital Humanities: community-led, non-commercial, "participatory approach to designing and developing an infrastructure", ethical values, openness, diversity and intervention (2022: 539).

Methodologically, Pawlicka-Deger, among others, argues that

> With the rapidly developing technologies, new modes of knowledge production have emerged, which lead to changes in the methodological and ontological dimensions of the nature of the knowledge system. (542)

Further, in order to make the DE initiative more inclusive, we need to address issues as diverse as:

> The insufficiency of software for supporting non-English languages, the dependence on standardized commercial platforms and services [Google Meet, Zoom etc], and the lack of tools and solutions for proper digitization of cultural data… (543).

Inclusivity involves a radical rethinking of how academic institutions and the state respond to the demands of DE. In terms of the Digital Humanities initiatives and approach, the critique of the

digital's power imbalances and inequities must therefore be extended to the rewiring of academic institutions that rely heavily – as the state's moves towards ed-tech companies indicates – on the state-business corporation linkage.

To take just two possible approaches, or resistances, to such linkages, collaboration and Open Access (identified by Alan Liu as the "new scholarly digital ethos", 2018) would enable institutions to not rely on over-priced educational materials (like journals, databases) or expensive platforms for online teaching.

But inclusivity cannot function in terms of just consumption of knowledge. Thus, Open Access cannot be just an open access to read educational and scholarly materials, since many of the sites of knowledge production and dissemination are also prohibitively expensive to publish in. Richard Poynder put it thus in his blog post at the London School of Economics about the much-debated Plan S (for Open Access scientific publications):

> APCs range in price from several hundred to over $5,000 per article. This is unfeasible for the Global South and so researchers would be excluded in a different (but more pernicious) way than they are under the subscription system: free to read research published in international journals but unable to publish in them.

Poynder's argument resonates for those in the Global South because the hegemony over knowledge that persists in the present simply replicates colonial era control over knowledge – which enabled the European to be the knower and the 'native' to be the known.

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We have barely scratched the proverbial tip of the iceberg in terms of expanding DE to be more rigorous, more inclusive and more just. Battling endless cases of plagiarized research – where many careers have been built on such research even in prestigious institutions, some of which are 'eminent', – predatory journals and mediocre methodologies are parallel tracks that also require monitoring. These practices are themselves exclusionary: those academics which falsify research and race ahead condemn the better ones to the slow track. Mediocrity breeds mediocrity and this too is something we should worry about when thinking of Digital Education's future.

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