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#Kashmir 2016: Notes toward a media ecology of an occupied zone

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the necessity of understanding contemporary Kashmiri contestations of hegemonic Indian state, media and social media discourses through a media ecology framework. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of Kashmiri usage of social media. Analysis of this usage offers an insight into the ways in which Kashmiris and their allies have been able to offer counter-narratives to Indian state and media narratives which have historically underreported, even silenced, dissenting Kashmiri perspectives. A media ecology framework also conveys a sense of the affective publics as Papacharissi notes, involved in deeply polarized debates regarding the relationship between the Indian nation-state and the region of Kashmir (5). Building on an earlier cultural representation framework, this paper argues for a media ecology framework as a way of understanding evolving polarized discourses in the context of Kashmir as an occupied zone.

**KEYWORDS**

Social Media; affective publics; media ecology; Kashmir; self-determination; India

From journalists to army generals, from ordinary civilians to celebrities, from social media militants to trolling armies, a media ecology war is being fought every second in Indian-occupied Kashmir. As part of this media ecology, some of us witness and even participate in a war between affective publics whose polarized discourses are often anchored in hardened narratives. This paper is a preliminary sketch of this media ecology based on the 2016 uprising in Kashmir. While there have been a number of major events since which reveal intensified state violence coupled with state attempts to curb Kashmiri expression on social media and Indian media obfuscation of Kashmiri perspectives, this paper explores the Kashmiri 2016 uprising to discuss how a media ecology framework may be useful in understanding the mediated relationship between #Kashmir and #India. Placing a media ecology approach in the context of previous scholarship on a cultural politics of representation offers a glimpse into the ways in which Kashmiris have been able to intervene in and disrupt hegemonic Indian state, media and social media narratives regarding Kashmir’s occupation.

Despite being named as one of the most militarized zones in the world, the experiences of Kashmiris in Indian-occupied Kashmir remain under-publicized. There are intermittent news reports and opinion pieces from time to time in international news media such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, and Al...
Jazeera about Kashmir as a conflict zone. But the idea that there are massive human rights violations or that this is the world’s longest-running conflict or an intractable geopolitical dispute does not figure often enough in international news. Indian state and media have historically colluded to silence Kashmiri perspectives regarding their experience of Indian governance, the militarization of Kashmir, and large-scale human rights violations, Jamwal argues in ‘Kashmir’s Media Story.’ A 2000 study by Joseph spoke of the lack of reportage on human rights violations in Kashmir (41–42). In his 2014 content analysis of Indian print media, Danish Zargar has called this phenomenon of Indian media not reporting on Kashmiri perspectives ‘partial journalism’ (13). While contemporary Kashmiri journalists (some working for Indian media or the local print media) do offer Kashmiri perspectives, Kashmir social media users directly disseminate their opinions on media events, uploading images or videos on human rights violations, or contextualize their histories for relevant transnational communities of Kashmiris and their allies. In this sense, a media ecology approach would demonstrate not only Kashmiri disruption of Indian state and media narratives, but reveal something of affective Kashmiri publics and their aspirations regarding Kashmiri self-determination. A brief history of the Kashmir region, and why there is a continuing geopolitical conflict and occupation there, is needed in order to provide a context for this paper.

This 70-year geopolitical conflict is anchored in a longer history, that of the formation of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and its pre and post-1947 politics, which saw the emergence of the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan. The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was formed by the East India Company and sold to the Hindu Dogra ruler Gulab Singh at the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846, in exchange for his collaboration with them to defeat Maharaja Ranjit Singh of the Sikh Empire (Bose 15; Rai 27). The Dogra regime’s harsh discriminatory policies towards its Muslim subjects led to the ‘Quit Kashmir’ movement led by Kashmir’s first Prime Minister, later Chief Minister, Sheikh Abdullah (Bose 18). By October 1947, two months after the emergence of the states of India and Pakistan, Kashmir’s Maharaja Hari Singh is said to have signed the instrument of accession to India. There are a couple of theories regarding why the Maharaja acceded to India even as he may have wanted the state of Jammu and Kashmir to remain autonomous. A conventional theory has been that the invasion of tribal people from Poonch, backed by Pakistan, is said to have determined the Maharaja’s hurried accession to India (Bose 31). Christopher Snedden’s thesis suggests that it was the subjects of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir who were part of the invasion. Their desire for the liberation of the state could be contextualized within events such as a pro-Pakistan contingent from Jammu, communal violence and a large-scale massacre of Muslims in Jammu, and the creation of Azad Kashmir (Snedden 63). Historian Alistair Lamb disputes the fact that the accession preceded the arrival of Indian troops to aid the Dogra regime, making India’s presence in Kashmir an illegal one (157; Schofield 55–56). The instrument of accession was also conditional upon a plebiscite that would be taken to determine the wishes of the Kashmiris themselves, a plebiscite that was never carried out (Dar 3; Noorani 13). Instead, A. G. Noorani argues that the Indian state betrayed the promise of plebiscite and has steadily eroded Kashmir’s autonomy (13).
‘Long resistant to Indian rule’, as Duschinski et al. state, Kashmiris ‘launched a popular armed rebellion in 1989’ (2). As they describe it, the Indian state tried to crush the rebellion through a ‘massive counterinsurgency assault’ (2). Laws such as The Public Safety Act (1970) the Armed Forces Special Powers Act or AFSPA (1990) were and continue to be the legal infrastructure for counterinsurgency, providing impunity to the Indian security forces in Kashmir. These acts have resulted in massive human rights violations. The Indian state’s human rights record in Kashmir has been that of over 10,000 enforced disappearances, reports of 7,000 mass graves, and more than 70,000 deaths (including extra-judicial killings), rape, torture, and detention in Kashmir. The Structures of Violence report by the Jammu & Kashmir Coalition for Civil Society emphasizes the ways in which the state is structurally responsible for this violence (3). Politically, The All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) led by three key players, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Yasin Malik remains a relevant body of parties united by their demand of freedom from India. Since 2010, Kashmiri resistance on the ground (apart from its resistance leadership) appears to comprise of civilian uprisings, stone-pelters and a small group of militants whose numbers are too small to defeat the massive presence of India’s security forces. Hilal Mir states that ‘since 2013, for every Indian soldier or policeman killed, about two insurgents have been killed. The overall insurgents-forces kill ratio since 1989 is about 4:1 (22,000 militants to 5500 forces personnel)’. Brighter Kashmir reports that in 2016, after the extra-judicial killing of a popular rebel commander, Burhan Wani of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, fighting for freedom from India, more than a 100 Kashmiris were killed and over 15,000 civilians were injured. Over 5000 were partially or completely blinded by pellet guns, and many victims of these ‘mass blindings’ as the writer Mirza Waheed terms it, were children and teenagers. Knowledge about these events was continually and immediately circulated transnationally through social media despite the Indian state’s long internet ban for more than four months and more, as I discuss later.

Discussed through a media ecology framework, the events of 2016 offer insights into the ways in which a deeply polarized chasm divides Indian social media discourses about Kashmir and Kashmiri commentary on Indian rule over Kashmir. Drawing on the tradition of Marshall McLuhan’s work on media, Neil Postman argued that ‘technological change is not additive, it is ecological’ (qtd. in Scolari 205). So, Postman’s proclamation is that ‘a new medium does not add something; it changes everything’ (qtd. in Scolari 205). The idea that each given medium changes everything is resonant with the argument that social media has changed the media environment in which we live. Islas and Bernal further argue that a media ecology framework cannot be limited to a McLuhanesque emphasis on technology alone. They suggest an understanding of media ecology as a meta-discipline involving other fields such as semiotics or cybernetics or philosophy (197). Or as they say, ‘media ecology is simultaneously semantic, ecological, and historical’ (Ilsas and Bernal 197). Combining the technological and the representational, scholars like Papacharissi, Tufekci and Sharma have begun mapping the ways in which the news and or events are not only constructed (fake or non-fake) but are transformed through the advent of social media. This means we pay attention to the technological platforms that simultaneously consume, disseminate, and even participate in the production of news or events. On the India and Kashmir politico-militarized relationship, journalists, celebrities, activists, academics and everyday people participate in, and even shape, what will be considered newsworthy in the next second.
While much of the world is not digitally networked, the issue is one of power – those networked change the media environment for those both online as well as offline (Tufecki 18). In this sense, it is important to underscore how social media trends and discourses often shape the ways in which conventional news is reported. In the context of the relationship between India and Kashmir, this paper will explore the ways in which Indian and Kashmiri social media usage shapes and is characterized by evolving discourses of the politico-militarized relationship between India and Kashmir. To begin with, we need to pay attention to a history of cultural representations of Kashmir.

India in Kashmir: Cultural representation and media ecology

Ananya Jahanara Kabir has meticulously mapped the Kashmir/India relationship through the lens of a cultural politics of representation, providing a historical foundation that includes a psychoanalytic analysis of the layers of European orientalism, Indian nationalism, and Kashmiri counter-representations. Modernity, Kabir argues, arrived with a colonial Orientalist gaze through the technological medium of the camera. Samuel Bourne and John Burke made the Kashmir Valley the ‘most frequently photographed landscape in South Asia’; it became ‘a territory of desire’ for their audiences of European adventurers, scholars and tourists (Kabir 14). Rather than the frame of the colonial/postcolonial axis, Kabir reads Kashmir’s objectification through the camera’s gaze as its encounter with modernity. Here Kashmir functions as a non-modern other for both the colonial British state and the newly independent Indian nation-state. This non-modern other was the creation of a romanticist Orientalist knowledge production of Kashmir as the site of an ancient Hindu past (Kabir 88).

In a post-independence context (for India, not for Kashmir), Kabir points to another medium, the film camera, which constructs Kashmir’s privileged place in Bollywood films. In these cultural representations, Kashmir remains a ‘paracapitalist’ and ‘eroticised part of the Indian national imaginary’ (Kabir 40). Kashmir became a romantic playground where a new youthful postcolonial urban Indian identity could be explored through films like Junglee, Kashmir ki Kali or Arzoo (Kabir 38). From the 1990s on, during Kashmir’s armed struggle against the Indian state, there was a shift in cultural representations of Kashmir. Roja flamboyantly linked ‘Hindutva-style public culture’ to an inherited imagining of Kashmir through its narrative of a Kashmir that was rightfully Indian but made inaccessible by the activities of anti-national Kashmiris (Kabir 45). Mission Kashmir, Kabir states, is an example of a conflictual attempt to recuperate Kashmir and Kashmiris into the Indian national imaginary (48). If films like Roja and Mission Kashmir demonstrated their possession of Kashmir despite the anti-national longings of Kashmiris themselves, the 2014 film Haider, a film scripted by Kashmiri journalist and author Basharat Peer, pays some attention to the draconian laws, which give impunity for the massive human rights violations in Kashmir. Based on Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Haider tails off, however, into a cautionary tale against vengeance rather than a statement on the relationship between India and Kashmir. A divided loyalty discourse, therefore, safely becomes part of an internal political fracture amongst Kashmiris, and the critique of the Indian state is not evident in the film’s resolution. The dominant narrative of divided Kashmiri loyalties and Pakistani treachery referenced in the 1990s films was also referenced in the 1960s. Less known, and not discussed in Kabir’s work is the 1966 I.S. Johar directed film, Johar in Kashmir. Possibly
as a response to the 1965 war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, Johar shows anti-India Kashmiris as those who are hoodwinked by the treachery of Pakistanis. The film extols the virtues of those faithful to Hindustan. So rather than a binary opposition between discourses of Kashmir as pre-capitalist modernity in the films of the 1960s versus divided loyalties in the 1990s, we could say that there is a complex evolutionary continuity to these intertwined Kashmir discourses through the popular technological mediums of the camera – photography and film – in India’s colonial and postcolonial history.

In response to her thesis regarding modernity and the camera’s destructive creation of desire in Kashmir, Kabir focuses on Kashmiri filmmaking, art, poetry, and artisan creations. Kashmiri counter-representations also become a method, in Kabir’s analysis, to counter modernity’s injurious technological and representational framing. Sanjay Kak’s 2017 curated publication of Kashmiri photojournalism from the 1990s to the present, Witness, also reveals this perspectival difference of the gaze of the camera as seen through the work of select Kashmiri photojournalists since the 1990s. Here the continual and systematic violence and atrocities faced by Kashmiris from India’s security forces are ever present. Two documentary films, Sanjay Kak’s 2007 Jashn-e-Azadi (How we celebrate Freedom) and Iffat Fatima’s 2015 Khoon Diy Baarav (Blood Leaves its Trail) also present a Kashmiri lens on present violence and resistance. What we might say in relation to these forms of photography and film is that they speak to the ways in which it is not modernity’s technologies that are necessarily injurious perhaps, but a historically unequal Kashmiri access to the dissemination and circulation of images anchored in Kashmiri experiences and perspectives. Kabir’s work is invaluable for thinking through the links between technological forms of media, memory and culture that Kashmiris have drawn to create their own representations.

A media ecology framework might extend a cultural politics of representation approach in a number of ways. It is imperative in the context of social media usage to pay attention to the ways in which events on the ground interface with print, televisual and, in turn, social media. An interface in media ecology is quite simply the place where ‘readers/viewers/users interact with the media’; it is the site where media interact with each other and co-evolve; it is the site where ‘political, social and economic actors express and interact with technological devices and humans’ (Scolari 216). Where media interact and co-evolve, they become intermedial – both in the sense of the hybridizations of technological devices, but also in the sense of print or televisual media produced and consumed in a social media economy. In this sense, Scolari argues that ‘the interface is a deeply political device that expresses social, economic, and cultural forces’ (Scolari 216). In the Kashmir context, as with others, the webbed interface of political, social, economic and cultural forces transforms the representational approach centering on language, or even the visual, into what I name as representational shards. These shards are components of a multifaceted media ecology, which force us to pay attention to the affective and conflictual ways in which Kashmir is itself an intermedial conflict zone. Here online and offline events can be characterized as an interface rather than a binary. While representations may be visualized as shards (bytes of information or opinion) that coalesce at the interface, I suggest that we continue to retain the importance of paying attention to overarching narratives and discourses within a media ecology approach.
Narratives allow us to discern the kind of discourse or political position that a particular social media user may subscribe to. Tufecki has argued for the attention to ‘narrative capacity’, which may be used by a social movement ‘to frame the story on its own terms, to spread its worldview’ (192). It may be useful to remind ourselves in relation to social media that narratives (plotted in time and space) can be scalar – i.e., a tweet or a status update anchored to emojis or visuals or videos, for example, can still belong to or participate in a dominant narrative or disrupt it. Tufecki also suggests that social media usage may have ‘disruptive capacity’ or the capacity to ‘interrupt the regular operations of a system of authority’ (192). I harness Tufecki’s theorization of disruptive capacity in relation to narrative contestations. For example, a quick search on twitter for the phrase ‘Kashmir is an integral part of India’ would highlight a whole range of tweets that reference this phrase as a narrative; it would also reveal that this narrative is a contested one. In the context of Kashmiri social media use, disrupting Indian state, media and netizen narratives have become a crucial element. For the purpose of this paper, I situate narratives as part of a Foucauldian notion of discourses in order to reference contestations of power through tweets or through the uploading of particular images or videos.

Scholarship regarding the internet or social media usage in the context of Kashmir is not necessarily new. In her 2006 study of the official webpages of Azad Kashmir (or POK) and Indian-occupied Kashmir Maya Ranganathan suggested the potential of the internet to ‘construct and reinforce nationalist ideologies through systematic and clever presentation of historical elements’ (279). Ranganathan’s study is based on the frameworks of ideology and representation. A lot has changed in India and Kashmir since Ranganathan’s study, and Ranganathan herself has probably moved on from the thesis that nationalist pedagogy works in a top-down manner. This does not mean that ideology and representation in the form of pedagogy disappear, but it does mean that selective nationalist histories are both performed and contested daily in ways that were previously unforeseen. Much of this has to do with the social media usage as a dominant factor in India as well as Kashmir in the last decade. Gul et al.’s 2016 study, which does take into account social media in the context of Kashmir, has examined the 2014 Jammu and Kashmir elections. This study draws on quantitative methods to make observations about user behavior on twitter using sentiment analysis – i.e., positive or negative emotions. While the study seems useful in producing overall statistics regarding user behavior and a generalized account of the attitude of a particular demographic toward an issue during Jammu and Kashmir elections, it doesn’t necessarily move between the overall picture that statistics can be useful for, and the scalar and interfacing politics of a social media ecology regarding a particular political event or issue. In 2013, Shuddhabrata Sengupta wrote about the use of facebook and youtube to disseminate the Indian army’s human rights violations after the 2010 uprisings in Kashmir. His account links Kashmir to the ‘global trend of the usage of ubiquitous recording devices’ in ‘the production of atrocity images by state and non-state combatants’ (73). In this sense, it is an early instance of discussion on the use of social media in Kashmir to contest Indian state and media silence about the brutality of India’s security forces there. Inshah Malik has discussed Kashmiri use of digital media. Locating her discussion within a queering of citizenship framework, she argues that Kashmiri usage of the internet can be read as a “coming out” for repressed "Kashmiri
desires” for azaadi or freedom (483). These studies, while useful, don’t situate social media usage in a media ecology approach. A media ecology approach focusing on Hindu majoritarian nationalism has been drawn on more generally in relation to studies of South Asian media and popular culture (Dudrah et al. 105), but these accounts do not take account of the India and Kashmir relationship. In this conflict zone, affirming the oneness of a Hindu majoritarian nation-state has different consequences in light of Kashmiri aspiration for self-determination. These consequences range from disruptions of hegemonic narratives to outright social media wars, which assert or contest the notion of Kashmiri azaadi or freedom from the Indian nation-state.10

A media ecology of #Kashmir 2016

Through a media ecology lens, narratives of India as a successful and democratic postcolonial nation in Kashmir have been continually exposed and shattered through a barrage of hashtags, updates, tweets, instagram postings or whatsapp or snapchat group messages. These representational shards constitute an intermedial interface that expresses Kashmiri understandings of memory, history, and a continuing counter-narrative of the present political and militant moment that suggests that India is a colonial occupying force in Kashmir. To say that Kashmiris are able to reach transnational human rights communities, scholars and activists interested in the Kashmir issue through social media is not to diminish the long history of Kashmiri resistance before its advent. It is to suggest that this longer history forms a kind of intermedial interface with the present moment. In the present moment, political satirists, artists, fiction and non-fiction writers, avant garde and documentary filmmakers, creative activist historians, continue to produce, share, and comment on Kashmiri struggles within a much longer history of resistance. As Suvir Kaul has argued, ‘for young Kashmiris, such critical and cultural work has in fact become a crucial form of activism, particularly in a period when it is increasingly clear that India’s growing economic and military power and its capacity to silence whatever meager international attention is paid to Kashmir seem to close of all paths to political self-determination’ (102). This intermedial interface with the past disrupts the (post) colonizing narratives of the Indian nation-state.11

And it is this contemporary access (also characterized by the struggle against intermittent internet bans in Kashmir by the Indian state) to the technological potentiality of instantaneous transnational circulation and dissemination, to virality, that ensures access to Indian and international circuits of connectivity. Social media platforms such as facebook, twitter, whatsapp or snapchat also provide the materiality of community for Kashmiris and their allies within their varied locations. So, while the role of the artist and the critic toward a proper functioning of democracy may still be necessary, as Kabir has suggested in relation to the cultural representation framework, social media usage has become a major factor in disrupting the hegemonic narrative of Indian democracy in Kashmir. It is precisely because of these disruptions by Kashmiris and their allies that a media ecology lens on the Kashmir/India relationship reveals the affective intensities of a deeply polarized set of discourses through categorizable users: Hindutva trolls, soft Hindu nationalists, and secular nationalists; and Kashmiris who want azaadi from India, but differ in the means and ends of the meanings of freedom.
Here, the intermedial interface between online and offline activism is often as aggressively political as it is porous.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on one event and its immediate aftermath on twitter: the killing of Burhan Wani, 21-year-old commander of the militant group Hizb-ul-Mujahideen on 8 July 2016 by India’s security forces. Following the killing, the Kashmir Valley experienced mass civilian uprising and protest against India’s security forces and corresponding curfews (digital and physical), killings, complete or partial blindings by pellet guns, and censorship. The civilian uprisings demonstrated massive popular support for Burhan Wani as reported by the newspaper *Dawn*. As the late, assassinated, Shujaat Bukhari, editor of *Rising Kashmir* explained, civilian support for militancy in Kashmir had risen in last decade due to brutal repression of non-violent civilian uprisings in 2008 and 2010 among other political factors. Burhan Wani also represented a new era of social media militancy. Social media became Burhan Wani’s method for legitimizing militancy in Kashmir. As Bukhari argued, he would send through video messages, which would ‘go viral in Kashmir’; these videos addressed ‘the topics of Indian injustice and the need for young people to stand up to oppression’. Michael Safi has used the term ‘whatsapp warriors’ to describe social media militancy as well as the network of support for this militancy.

For the purpose of this essay, I focus on twitter. A number of scholars like Sharma, Papacharissi and Tufecki who have studied political and social movements appear to focus on twitter as it affords a public way of collecting both individual expressions and collective data on particular political and social events or issues through its usage by those groups whose injustices are often underrepresented in mainstream media. This does not dismiss the importance of facebook or whatsapp for activist or militant communities as Safi has noted. In the context of the US, for example, Bonilla and Rosa discuss the ways in which Twitter offers a space for ‘collectively constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities’ (6). Papacharissi cites twitter as its ‘organizational logic is defined by hashtags, which combine conversationality and subjectivity in a manner that supports both individually felt affect and collectivity’ (27). Moreover, she argues, ‘tweets frequently link to other types of content posted on YouTube, blogs, and media’ which allow for a capture of the ‘virality of affect as it spreads through and beyond the Twitterverse’ (27). This platform, possibly like other social media platforms, transforms the representation and counter-representation account offered through the focus on photography or film to a sense of a collective counter-narrative. A collective counter-narrative may utilize the camera or film or other visual/aural technologies, but the technological form ensures a more collective set of commentaries rather than leaving this role solely to the expertise of the artist or the critic. Furthermore, this collective counter-narrative is conveyed, as Papacharissi has argued through ‘affective gestures’ which ‘contribute to spheres of political expression in ways that pluralize, organize, and disrupt conversations’ (28). And as Papacharissi suggests, ‘publics are discursively and affectively called into being via Twitter’ (28). This argument of affective publics and collective narratives is evident also in studies by Sharma on black twitter and the digital materiality of race, and by Papacharissi and Tufecki on the Arab revolutions and Occupy Wall Street.
In their study of digital protest and racial politics in the US, Bonilla and Rosa have focused on the ways in which hashtags are particularly amenable for digital ethnography. Or as they state, hashtags operate like ‘library call numbers;’ they ‘locate texts within a specific conversation, allowing for their quick retrieval while also marking texts as being “about” a specific topic’ (5). Bonilla and Rosa also remind us that working with hashtags means not just paying attention to hashtags. Hashtags are windows, and as they say, ‘it is only by stepping through that window and “following” (in both Twitter and non-Twitter terms) individual users that we can begin to place tweets in a broader context’ (7). This window method includes searching hashtags or following twitter handles that appear to lead opinion or intervene in ongoing discourses. While more systematized searches, codification of data, and analysis might reveal perhaps a scalar visualization of what one might call the overlapping twitter-worlds of India and Kashmir, I have used basic hashtag searches to offer a preliminary glimpse into the evolving discourses which reveal a contemporary media ecology of India and Kashmir. In terms of digital research ethics where the twitter handles belong to self-identified relevant or prominent news portals, journalists, celebrities or spokespersons for any organization, I have decided not to anonymize their names. Where the twitter handles belong to ordinary social media users, I have anonymized and made minor alterations to those tweets to ensure non-traceability in terms of ethical practice. This ethical practice has been emphasized by Beninger et al. and Ahmed.

Immediately after the extra-judicial killing of Burhan Wani on July 8, the news emerged on social media. One of the early tweets about Burhan Wani (found through a keyword search on twitter: #BurhanWani July) emerged from an online newsportal Kashmir Watch based in Brussels on 8 July (Figure 1). The tweet described Hurriyat leader, Syed Ali Shah Geelani calling for a shutdown of the Kashmir Valley on July 9 to protest the killing of ‘braveheart’ Burhan Wani. This tweet set the tone with which Kashmiris and their allies referred to Burhan Wani as a ‘braveheart’ and ‘martyr’ rather than the term terrorist, the Indian designation for the militant. The cluster of hashtags listed in the ‘top’ category of tweets linked to the #BurhanWani hashtag includes the following: #TheFreedomFighter #martyrdom #India #Kashmir #freedom #occupied #WeAreBurhanWani #FreeKashmir #KashmirCrisis. Of these hashtags, #martyr appeared to be most linked to #BurhanWani. While the Kashmirwatch.com tweet from Brussels paid tribute to Burhan Wani as a braveheart, a collective community of Kashmiris and their allies affectively paid their respects to Burhan Wani as a much-loved martyr (Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4).

![Figure 1. ‘Braveheart’ Burhan Wani.](image-url)
The above tweets exemplify the general tributes to Burhan Wani and the widespread support for him by Kashmiris and their allies. The last tweet, for example, makes explicit reference to a Kashmiri counter-narrative on twitter in opposition to Indian ‘mediabashing’ of Burhan Wani. The tweets interfaced with large-scale mourning and protests by ordinary Kashmiris on the ground (around 4 lakhs or crowds of 4–5000,000 at a conservative estimate). As Faisal Khan, a photojournalist who covered the funeral of Burhan Wani stated, ‘my ultra wide lens was not enough to fit the entire assembly in a single frame. It was a mammoth gathering by all standards’. This discourse of popular support through social media as well as on the ground for militancy against the Indian state suggests the interface of a Kashmiri media ecology, which demands attention to injustices of the Indian state against Kashmiris. Chakravarty and Naqash offered an analysis on scroll.in, an online news magazine, as to why such popular support was visible for Burhan Wani: ‘ask ordinary people in south Kashmir why they support
militancy and you promptly hear one word: “zulm”, oppression. “Azadi” comes later. These scroll.in journalists further contextualize the martyr hashtag and discourse in this Kashmiri resistance narrative: ‘Militants are never simply killed in the Valley’, they argue, ‘they become “shaheed” or martyrs’. Or as Suhail Masoodi, Director of Centre for Research and Policy Development in Srinagar, states, ‘the sense of historical wrong’ has been ‘overtaken by a narrative of sacrifice’ (qtd. in Chakravarty and Naqash). The sacrifice narrative appears to make sense in the context of contemporary Kashmir militancy, which has been widely regarded as doomed in the face of the sheer numbers of India’s security forces. However, the emphasis on popular support for the doomed militancy has also had the effect of disrupting the Indian state’s mask of democracy in Kashmir on twitter, and no doubt on other forms of social media.

The disruption of the Indian state’s hegemonic narrative did not go uncontested. However, contestations of Burhan Wani as terrorist rather than martyr revealed another discourse amongst India’s right-wing netizens, the discourse of support for the extra-judicial killing, even genocide, of Kashmiris. A former Army Major’s open letter to Burhan Wani in 2016, for example, became so popular in its circulation on social media that it was even published on the Indian channel Zee News with a ‘must read’ and ‘an amazing letter by an Indian army veteran to terrorist Burhan Wani’ tag (Figure 5). Major Gaurav Arya’s open letter to Commander Burhan Wani attempted to show his supporters the folly of joining Kashmiri militancy or supporting it. Arguing that Kashmir’s resistance leaders like Syed Ali Shah Geelani’s own children were not part of the militancy, Arya stated that ‘the Hurriyat knows too well that Kashmir has fallen off the map of the world’s attention’. ‘No one cares’ about Kashmir, Gaurav argues, and the ‘Kashmir dispute exists because it is an inexpensive way for Pakistan to keep Indian forces bogged down in the valley’. By the end of the letter, the ‘no one caring about Kashmir’ narrative turned menacing: ‘You were a terrorist. You chose to wage war against India’. Suggesting that Wani would meet the fate of other ‘such perpetrators in the past’, Arya states, ‘When you choose to fight against the Indian army, know this. THEY WILL KILL YOU. Your supporters now want blood. So be it’. The ‘must read’ tag that Zee News placed for this was echoed in other ways on twitter by Arya’s fans and self-declared Indian patriots.

Arya’s letter and its genocidal intent for Kashmiri supporters of Burhan Wani and militants more generally is symptomatic of the genocidal turn that some Indian netizens have taken in relation to the Kashmir issue (Figure 6). The well-known journalist Jagriti Shukla posted the following tweet on the 12 July 2016 under the hashtag #UnitedAgainstTerror (Figure 7).

Beyond labeling Kashmiri militancy as terrorism, an Indian state discourse of eliminating terrorists and their sympathizers, and netizen and journalist calls for
genocide are chilling. They are chilling as the calls for genocide appear to have become normative. Cricket celebrities like Gautam Gambhir have also tweeted provocative genocidal tweets against Kashmiri Muslims such as the one below on 13 April 2017 (Figure 8).

These hate tweets suggest that the popularity of Kashmiri militancy amongst its civilian populations and a general popular support for resistance against the Indian state’s militarized rule in Kashmir has had the effect of normalizing or mainstreaming a genocidal discourse against Kashmiris generally considered ‘anti-nationals’. Here, it’s
not so much that an idea of democracy must be upheld, the discourse is that of intense hatred and the directive to kill anyone who might dissent or dispute India’s territorial nationalism. While liberal Indian journalists like Barkha Dutt decried this genocidal discourse, they too named Burhan Wani and Kashmiri militancy as terrorism. They were also virulently attacked by Hindutva trolls for allegedly supporting terrorists (Figure 9, Figure 10). In this polarized media ecology between Kashmir and India, while liberal journalist opinion still remained pro-Indian, Kashmiri social media largely embraced and supported Burhan Wani and other militants as martyrs while self-proclaimed right-wing Indian patriots aggressively incited genocide in Kashmir.

While the martyr or terrorist binary reveals a deeply polarized set of affective publics on twitter, Kashmiri academics contextualised and explicated the popularity of the rebel commander as support for freedom against India. Writing in Kashmir Ink in 2017, Sheikh Showkat, Professor of Law at the University of Kashmir, commented on the significance of the popularity of Burhan Wani. ‘In the wake of the hero’s funeral that was given to Burhan Wani,’ he argues, ‘there has been a huge drift in favour of militancy’. In an opinion piece attentive to the visual framing of Burhan Wani, Mohamad Junaid emphasized the visceral, embodied evocations of Burhan Wani’s images for Kashmiri aspirations for freedom. Junaid argues that the image of Burhan Wani’s dead body ‘arrived on his phone’ and he didn’t expect Burhan’s killers to show respect for his body. Yet, ‘Burhan had created his own countervisual culture’, Junaid argues, social media images see him enjoying life among his comrades or playing cricket. In contrast to the Indian state’s circulations of ‘dishevelled’, ‘bloodied’ and ‘gruesome’ images of Burhan Wani the terrorist, Junaid argues that for Kashmiris Burhan Wani evoked a tender affection (Figure 11, Figure 12).

In the images found on twitter through the hashtag #BurhanWani – Figures 11 & 12 confirm Junaid’s analysis. The first image is possibly the kind that arrived on Junaid’s phone. The second collage is one that places Wani’s body amongst his mourners. The collage also contains iconic social media images of Burhan Wani alive. Seeing images of Burhan Wani standing with weapons ‘against the backdrop of Kashmir’s snowy

Figure 9 & 10. Trolling Anti-India liberal journalists.
mountains and verdant hills’, Junaid states that Kashmiris would say, “Khuday karnei raechh (May Khuda protect you)”. Here paradise cannot be rendered clean of its politico-militarized context or of Kashmiri militancy. Paradise becomes an integral part of the fight for Kashmiri freedom. Junaid further argues that it is not the ‘logic of “recruitment” that undergirds these images’; the images reclaim ‘the humanity’ of the ‘Kashmiri militant’, and reconnect the ‘idea of the rebel with his people at the visceral level’. The tweet below archived under hashtags #BurhanWani as #martyr confirms Junaid’s analysis (Figure 13).

Connecting Burhan’s image to #Kashmir #Freedom, the social media user’s framing of the image with these hashtags is indeed a tender tribute to the Kashmiri martyr who will never be dead precisely because of the manner of his death. Here the camera and its technologies of framing, referencing Kabir’s Territory of Desire, are crucial in thinking

Figure 11 & 12. #BurhanWani, the martyred commander.

Figure 13. ‘Martyrs never die’.

124 G. OSURI
through the technological medium through which Wani becomes iconic; he places himself as a militant fighting for paradise through social media. The placing of this image within a Kashmiri landscape is also crucial in thinking about Kashmir modes of self-representation in the current era. For Junaid, Wani is an index of his times. ‘Through his images’, Junaid argues, ‘he brought the rebellion out of the shadows to which the occupation had successfully driven it’. Burhan Wani ‘represents the restored humanity of the Kashmiri rebel, the decriminalization of the idea of Azadi in Kashmir, and, foremost, the idea of joyous rebellion against the repressive domination’. Social media support for Wani was expressed through the changing of profile pics. But twitter users reported that facebook closed their accounts as they changed their profile pictures (Figure 14).

A ‘referendum in blood’: A new militancy in tweets

The circulation of iconic and poetic messages of support on twitter continued, often interfacing with the graffitied messages on the streets and shutters of curfewed shops in the Kashmir Valley. Images of the graffitied shutters have made their way online as icons of support for Burhan Wani and Kashmiri freedom through visual print media. Ather Zia described the events of 2016 in the immediate aftermath of the extra-judicial killing of Burhan Wani as ‘a referendum in blood’ (Figure 15).

‘The level of defiance in Kashmir is at an all-time high’, she argues, Kashmiris ‘have a clear agreement that their fight is for Azadi and nothing less’. The civilian uprising in the aftermath of the killing of Burhan Wani, she suggests ‘drives a nail into the coffin of those Indian narratives that undermine Kashmir’s resolution by the ahistoric, nationalist and myopic analytics such as “underdevelopment”, “mismanagement”, “unemployment”, “alienation”, and “failure to integrate”’. The significance of the killing of Burhan Wani and the 2016 events, Zia argues, is its disruption of Indian liberal nationalist narratives (perhaps more entrenched than right-wing discourses of genocidal imperatives), which continue to explain the alienation of Kashmiris through the

Figure 14. Burhan Wani as profile pic.
above-mentioned frames. Chitralekha Damija concurs with Zia’s analysis. For Damija, Burhan Wani’s ‘persona of openly articulated rebellion – mostly over digital platforms – resonated not only for the few on the brink of armed violence, but also for thousands of educated, alienated, angry young people who wanted to express themselves, and also be heard. ‘Their perspectives’, Damija argues, ‘must be acknowledged as the more powerful “new militancy” in Kashmir today – dealing as they do in words not guns, resisting without violence’. Damija’s words are apt particularly for a media ecology framework where a critical mass of status updates, tweets, images, blogs, and articles holds the promise of changing the status quo.

Tufecki has argued that digitally networked social movements abilities can be read as capacities. The repertoire of protests, Tufecki suggests, ‘like marches, rallies, and occupations function as “signals” of those capacities’ (ix). These signals derive their power, she argues, from ‘threats or promises of what else their participants could do’ – holding a march or changing the narrative or threatening disruption or even electoral and institutional change are named as threats or promises (ix). It is this capacity to disrupt the hegemonic narrative of Kashmiri militancy as freedom fighting rather than terrorist that characterizes the contemporary Kashmiri social media ecology. Here the interface between events on the ground and popular protests are immediately placed online. Furthermore, the cycles of death, martyrdom, mourning, protests, above all their recurring dailiness, do not only constitute a disruption of hegemonic narratives, they become a living remediating archive as Grusin might argue. Remediation here, as Grusin states, would involve not only the recirculation of old media forms and content through ‘new’ media but also a remediation or exponentially sharing news or opinions through social media (5). In this sense, the India/Kashmir relationship has become a digital archive in Gane and Beer’s terms. A digital archive is kept alive through its shares and retweets; these are affective forms of virality as Jasbir Puar and Patricia Clough have argued. Puar and Clough theorize virality in terms of the porous relationship between body and technology. The affective capacities of this relationship between body and technology parallel the porous interface between Kashmir the place, Kashmiris, and a media ecology of India and its relationship to Kashmir. We must remember here, with Papacharissi that the term affect also signals ‘the potential for emergence’ (14). Here the affective co-occurrence of hashtags – #Kashmir #BurhanWani #Martyr #Freedom #occupation – signal the capacity of the threat of the disruption of official Indian state narratives, which makes no secret of its genocidal practices while

Figure 15. ‘Long Live Burhan’. Image found on twitter – photographer, Danish Ismail for Reuters.
threatening subjugation through a development discourse. These hashtags signal the promise of azaadi or freedom.

The notion of affective intensities through social media platforms also allows for, in theoretical terms, a critical capacity to change public opinion and create international solidarities to lobby against human rights violations and a just political solution.\textsuperscript{15} It is in this sense that Papacharissi has emphasized the importance of paying attention to the ‘affective processes that drive politically infused expression’ on Twitter (27). In the Kashmir context, the social media calendrical observation of massacres, rapes, the extra-judicial killing of militants and civilians, interfacing with these observations on the ground, is an affective drive which is ‘connective and contains the potentiality of the not-yet-formed affect’ of a critical mass of international solidarity. It is this solidarity that may be part of propelling the absolute necessity for a just political solution that would address, in the first instance, Kashmiri self-determination regarding their future.

These signals, which threaten or promise the potential and capacity of affective solidarity, motivate the Indian government to ban the internet in Kashmir or press charges against journalists and ordinary netizens.\textsuperscript{16} The net bans have been fragile. In 2017, Michael Safi reported that when 22 social media platforms and sites were banned, many Kashmiris turned to VPNs and rendered the ban somewhat ineffective. Or as one teenager put it, Safi notes, ‘they banned one VPN’, but ‘there are about 50 others’. In other words, while net bans are extremely disruptive for Kashmiris (from the delivery of health services to the running of businesses), it doesn’t quite help in controlling the narrative on Kashmir. A media ecology analysis of the India and Kashmir relationship reveals that the genie of the narrative of Kashmiri aspiration for freedom from India has escaped the bottled narrative of Kashmiri anti-nationalism and terrorism. #Kashmir 2016 is an intermedial interface and a digital archive, which allows us as scholars to pay attention to the terrain of these digital battles against the cognates of terra, territorial nationalism and the terrorism of state violence.

Notes

1. I use the phrase Indian-occupied Kashmir as opposed to Indian-administered Kashmir. I also use the term Kashmir as a shorthand for the Kashmir Valley region. For arguments regarding the manner in which Kashmir may be termed occupied, see Duschinski et. al. and Osuri.
2. See Hafsa Kanjwal.
3. See, for example, Annie Gowen, Nazir Ahmed, Rifat Fareed, and The New York Times. Al Jazeera appears to have more coverage than other international news outlets.
4. Kashmiri digital and print newspapers and magazines include Rising Kashmir, Greater Kashmir, Kashmir Reader, Kashmir Life, Kashmir Dispatch, to name a few. But they too struggle with internet bans. Kashmir Reader was banned from operating for nearly three months between October and December 2016 by the Jammu & Kashmir State Government. The government stated that the magazine was a threat to ‘public tranquility’ (Masood).
5. See also Idrees Kanth’s review of Snedden book which disputes some of elements of this thesis.
6. See Muzamil Jaleel.
7. The Software Freedom Law Centre states that the longest continuous Indian internet ban for postpaid numbers has been in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, between 8 July and 19 November 2016. The ban on prepaid services was even longer. For current statistics on internet bans in Kashmir, see: <https://internetshutdowns.in>.

8. See also historians Mridu Rai (287) and Chitralekha Zutshi on this collaborative Orientalist textual and cultural production of Kashmir.

9. See Sorav Jain’s Social and Digital Marketing Blog for a sense of statistics regarding Facebook and Twitter <http://www.soravjain.com/social-media-facts-and-stats-india-2016/>. Facebook had a worldwide launch in 2004 and Twitter created its microblogging platform in 2006. The 2016 statistics on Sorav Jain’s websites show that India has over a 195 million Facebook users. India is Facebook’s largest market, exceeding that of the US. One hundred and fifty-five million are MAUs or monthly active users. Twitter has 23.2 million active monthly users. Pinterest and Instagram follow Facebook and Twitter in terms of number of subscribers. According to Michael Sai, leaked police intelligence reports reveal that 70% of Kashmiris have access to social media.

10. See Shahla Hussein for a historized account of the meanings of azaadi or freedom in the context of politics in the Kashmir Valley. See also, a 2010 Chatham House polling study conducted by Robert Bradnock across Pakistan-administered as well as Indian-administered Kashmir, Kashmir: Paths to Peace. The study found that between 75% and 95% of the Kashmir Valley division would vote for the whole of Kashmir to be independent (Bradnock 15).

11. In the Australian context, Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson has used the term ‘postcolonising’ to describe the relationship between postcolonial theory and Indigenous scholarship.

12. KashmirWatch is a Twitter handle for a Brussels-based news portal for the Kashmir Foundation.

13. See Hilal Mir.

14. Barkha Dutt’s report on Burhan Wani for NDTV named him as a terrorist, and attempted to explore why young Kashmiris were becoming militants. This liberal narrative attributes Kashmiri youth turn to militancy to a number of factors including alienation from the Indian state and the Indian army’s excesses. This liberal discourse, however, has also been islamophobic, suggesting that the fight for Kashmiri nationalism through the idioms of Islam can only be detrimental for ‘Kashmiriyat’, and appears to hope for a ‘solution’ to the Kashmir problem through Indian nationalism. On Twitter, right-wing Indians trolled Barkha Dutt for giving a causal explanation for Burhan Wani’s turn to militancy, thus attempting to destroy any kind of liberal discourse in relation to Kashmir.


16. The photojournalist Kamran Yusuf had been charged with stone-pelting and ‘waging war against India’ on 5 September 2017 (Fareed). He was released on bail from Tihar jail on 12 March 2018 (Suresh). Tauseef Ahmad Bhat was charged with sedition for a Facebook post which was ‘allegedly anti-Indian’ (Kashmir Reader).

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