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Nishant Shah

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Identity and Identification: The Individual in the Time of Networked Governance

Nishant Shah*

The rise of digital technologies has foregrounded the individual as the unit of network and database governance. The focus on the quantified self and data subjects has resulted in an increased attention on the rights, responsibilities, and safeguards to protect the individual at the centre of data mining and regulation practices. There is an increased anxiety about how the existing safeguards and policies are inadequate to both activate and to protect the individual in the face of ubiquitous and pervasive computational practices. This paper argues that attempts at trying to extend the fold of existing policies and frameworks are inadequate because they imagine that the individual negotiating with the digital networks is unchanged. Looking at the slippage between identification and identity in the discourse around India's biometric database governance scheme, Aadhaar, the paper shows how the very conception of the individual and the space for identity expression are changing within digital realms. It further looks at computational architecture and theory to conceptualise an indifferent digital network that is operationalised to create a self-referential system that not only excludes the individual but also creates new ways by which the individual can be controlled and regulated. In mapping the changing contexts and contours

* Nishant Shah is a Professor at the Institute for the Culture and Aesthetic of Digital Media, at Leuphana University, Germany, and the co-founder of the Centre for Internet & Society, Bangalore, India. He is the editor of the 4-volume book *Digital Alter Natives with a Cause?* And the author of the monograph *Whose Change is it Anyway?: Towards a Future of Digital Technologies and Citizen Action in Emerging Information Societies*. His work is at the intersections of computation, digital cultures, gender and sexuality, and change making practices. His forthcoming book is titled *Making Change* and explores the forms, formats and functions of the digital in contemporary change making practices in parts of Asia and Latin America.

of the individual, the paper calls for new research and analysis practices for understanding the diminishing space of expression, agency, and control for individuals in networked governance systems.

The Individual in Network Societies: Data Subject and Quantified Self

In network societies,[1] the individual has emerged simultaneously as a data subject,[2] and as a quantified self.[3] The quantified self is contingent upon big data harvesting mechanisms that embed the individual not only as willing subjects to technologies of measurement and computing, but also participating in processes of quantification, becoming agents to the regimes of technology that operate upon the body. The data subject is closely related to the quantified self but specifically refers to the ways in which the individual finds expression, identity, subjectivity, and modes of negotiation with the networked technologies that operationalise the domains of life, labour, and language.

Increasingly, as we find new information sets which can be harvested of an individual, committing it to the almost infinite storage that is the promise of the

1 While there are many different conceptions of network societies, I find Manuel Castell's understanding of it the most coherent for the sake of this argument. In an interview with Harry Kreisler, Castells said, "a network society is a society where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks. So it's not just about networks or social networks, because social networks have been very old forms of social organization. It's about social networks which process and manage information and are using micro-electronic based technologies." Manuel Castells, *Conversation with Manuel Castells*, GLOBETROTTER, http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Castells/castells-con4.html.

2 The data subject is generally defined as the individual whose data is stored in a database. There is ambivalence in this definition about whether the data subject is the individual whose identity becomes the basis of validating the data, or whether the data subject is the identity of the individual as it gets constructed through the data sets. This paper is interested in unpacking this ambivalence to look at the changing notions of identity in the age of identification.

3 Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly, the editors of *Wired* magazine, were one of the first to propose the notion of a quantified self, which imagined it as a self that is produced through 'a macroscope' – where data that is distributed across different systems is curated to form a comprehensive profile of an individual. The self in question is a self that knows itself 'by numbers' and participates in quantifying its various modes of existence through automatized measurement applications and devices. Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly, *Quantified Self*, AETHER (2007), http://www.webcitation.org/66TEHdz4d.

digital,[4] the individual comes into being through predictive and self-correcting algorithms that develop correlations, curations and connections between disparate individuated transactions to produce a new understanding of the individual. This simultaneity of the data subject and the quantified self produces two paradoxical imaginations of the individual: the quantified self posits the individual as atomic, deconstructing the individual not as an actor, but as produced through a series of actions, understood as a networked entity that can be mined for data and information, ranging from genetic blue-prints to socio-cultural profiles. The data subject imagines the individual as no longer confined to the biological discreteness of our existence, and as available through an extended relationality enabled by digital traffic flows of ideas, ideologies, and interactions, thus offering the individual as not only blurring the lines of the public and the private but also as a blurred entity.

The individual is foregrounded by a range of techno-social developments that follow the digital turn. Predictive algorithms and big data mining protocols present a highly customisable template of the individual,[5] where everything can be contextually mapped but alienated from the actual phenomenon, reduced to machine logic and network logistics. Computing ontologies and computational geographies are wedded to the relentless action of the individual and its actions – the user is at the centre of the networked universe, rhizomatic and yet hierarchical, empty of signifiers, and yet so invested with micro-meanings that it implodes

4 Wendy Chun, in *Freedom and Control*, makes a persuasive argument about how the role of the digital is to convert memory into storage, thus creating an unforgiving profile of only that which can be archived. The memory of the quantified self, then, is restricted to only those aspects which can be measured by existing devices of measurement, and thus it is in the interest of the quantified self to subject itself to more invasive and penetrative personal forms of quantificatory technologies. Hui Kyong Wendy Chun, Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fibre Optic (2006).

5 Viktor Mayer-Schoeneberger and Kenneth Cukier, in their book *Big Data*, look at how the extreme customisation offered by analytics of big data is not only transforming our everyday practices but also influencing how we think about ourselves through our everyday practices. Viktor Mayer-Schoeneberger and Kenneth Cukier, Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work and Think (2013). Their argument bears resonance with Sherry Turkle's early work on cyberanthropology in *Life on the Screen*, where she found that the first users of immersive text-based virtual reality environments, like the MUD, were learning to think of themselves through metaphors that they used to explain their computational practices and interfaces. Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (1996).

under the weight. Legal theories and regulatory mechanisms have already started facing the crisis of post-human action,[6] trying to bridge the gap between the acting avatar and the culpable body,[7] unable to account for the hybrid realms of ethics and responsibilities, unable to pin down the individual as a finite category that can be discretely held responsible for its actions.

This simultaneity and paradox moves the individual in such contradictory vectors that it becomes almost impossible to reconcile the individual through human systems of computation and counting that have been used to account for the individual and its relationship with society.[8] Structures of law, governance, care, and control have all been facing challenges as the individual becomes greater than and lesser than the human that has always been at the centre of our discourse and practice.[9] Perhaps for the first time in our mediated lives, we are experiencing

6 Rosi Braidotti, in her landmark book *The Posthuman,* builds non-anthropocentric framework for understanding the crisis that the post-human posits to our understanding of human questions of rights, politics, identity, and justice. Braidotti's argument about shifting focus from the work that the posthuman performs to examining the work that is required to become posthuman is particularly worth mentioning to rethink the political and social landscape that this paper is interested in unpacking. Rosi Braidotti, The Posthuman (2013).

7 Elsewhere, I have argued that there is a mapping of our avatar practices on to our corporeal bodies, so that the actions of our avatars are often regulated to contain the perceived excesses of our real bodies. Nishant Shah, *Subject to Technology: Internet Pornography, Cyber-terrorism, and the Indian State*, 8(3) Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Journal 349, 366 (2007). This is an argument that also found place in Julian Dibbell's poetic essay that reconstructs "How a Rape Happened in Cyberspace" where he examines the symbolic and real materiality of actions in the Xerox Parc MUD called Lambda MOO. Julian Dibbell, *A Rape in Cyberspace, or How an Evil Clown, a Haitan Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society,* The Village Voice, (1994) http://www.juliandibbell.com/articles/a-rape-in-cyberspace/.

8 In *The Net Delusion,* Evgeny Morozov makes a compelling case for the inability of the individual user to see the spaces for manipulation and control in the emerging networked lives, and how this produces a distance between the mechanics of being connected and practices of being together. Evgeny Morozov, The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom (2011).

9 Mathias Klang and Andrew Murray, in *Human Rights in the Digital Age*, start a very interesting conversation about the challenges to both the realisation and suppression of human rights that are played out in the digital age. Particularly, they point out that the challenges are not only about how the human as we understand it shall exercise his/her rights using the digital, but also about how the very conceptions of what it means to be human are evolving as we continue to live with the digital. Mathias Klang & Andrew Murray, Human Rights in the Digital Age (2005).

a moment where the data that is being produced by the humans is no longer legible, intelligible or accessible by other human beings.[10] As our inter-personal connections get mediated by algorithms of connectedness, the protocol emerges as the new leveller, and in the absence of a centralised broadcast mediation structure, the protocol, invisible in its operations and definite in its verdicts, becomes the new way by which individual and collective connections and connectivity are being defined.[11]

In the face of this extraordinary emergence of digital and network societies which dislocate the individual from its established centrality in discourse around identity, subjectivity, rights, and governance, there is a rising anxiety about the fallibility of historical precedent and the unimaginability of the post-human futures that the individual embodies. This anxiety manifests itself as a fear for the loss of individual and human control and growing power of digital networks[12] or a call for accepting the emergent digital networks of life and love and working on building more transparent and accountable systems of governance and regulation.[13]

Underlined in these manifestations is an unquestioning aspect of what constitutes the individual in its interaction and mediation with digital technologies. The interventions are located in the human imagination of technologisation,

10 Kashmir Hill, in reporting on the sensational story of how the retail store Target 'read' consumption patterns and made correlations to predict the pregnancy of one of its teenage customers before she revealed it to her family, shows how the intended and imagined reader of our data is no longer necessarily human. Kashmir Hill, How Target figured out a Teen Girl was Pregnant before her Father did, Forbes.com, (2012), http://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2012/02/16/how-target-figured-out-a-teen-girl-was-pregnant-before-her-father-did/.

11 Alexander Galloway's pioneering work in Software Studies, especially in the book *Protocol,* tells a chilling tale of how the new mechanisms of control, containment, exclusion and manipulation are not in the interfaces or user choices but in the very architecture of the software that runs under our devices. Galloway makes a compelling argument that mediation is not at the level of that which is visible, but that mediation is being made invisible by the design of proprietary software and protocols of machine interaction that sustain the digital. Alexander Galloway, Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization (2004).

12 Frank George, Machine Takeover (1977); Everett James Katz, Machines that Become Us: The Social Context of Personal Communication Technology (2003).

13 Michael E. Milakovich, Digital Governance: New Technologies for Improving Public Service and Participation (2012); T. M. Vinod Kumar, E-governance for Smart Cities (2015).

almost producing a discreteness between the human and the technological that has been long since betrayed by the emergence of the cyborg. These approaches which seek to change the regimes of governance and conditions of regulation, asking for an overhaul of legal, regulatory, and governmental frameworks, still imagine the human as an unchanging category and the individual as the central actor that influences and controls the flows and disruptions of the technological systems.

In this paper, drawing from anecdotal material from ethnographies and operationalization of the Aadhaar project, as well as from philosophy of science and technology focusing on digital technologies and networks, I shall show that the individual as we know it has no space in the computational logic that informs our new structures of governance. In order to build this computational view of the individual in digital networks, I visit the concepts of circulation, identification, and identity in the face of database governance that is increasingly becoming the characteristic of postcolonial data societies. In the process, I argue that in reconceptualising the individual as a networked subject, constituted by processes of mediation between older categories of being and new logics of digital computation, we might move towards a more robust framework for governance.

Identity in the Age of the Database

The Aadhaar project, if it meets its visions, will become the largest biometric governance project in the world, ensuring that the population of India will have an identity.[14] There are many different narratives to be told about the Aadhaar project, which was initiated to grant a unique identity that can help individuals to navigate through disconnected and often hostile governmental database systems. Much insightful and necessary critique has already been deployed against Aadhaar's

14 Ashish Rajadhyaksha, in *In The Wake of Aadhaar,* produces one of the first narratives of the biometric database project which began as the Unique Identity Project (UID) and was later dubbed Aadhaar. Rajadhyaksha and his team from the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society present live ethnography of the pilot stages of the project and look at both the technosocial architecture and ambitions of such a project, and what it means for the future of e-governance in a country like India. Ashish Rajadhyaksha (ed.), *In the Wake of Aadhaar: The digital ecosystem of governance in India,* (2013), http://www.academia.edu/4668710/In_the_Wake_of_Aadhaar_The_Digital_Ecosystem_of_Governance_in_India.

self-description as a pro-poor, pro-development, anti-corruption mechanism that ensures the transfer and transaction of rights, transactions, values, and benefits between the state and the citizen through market based private technology registrars and service providers.[15] Historical and legal accounts that chart the history of database driven governance in India, and the parallels elsewhere, along with the novelty and the continuity of statecraft that Aadhaar embodies, have also emerged. Similarly, concerns around surveillance and control societies, and violation of privacy and anonymity have been voiced strongly ever since the inception and through the growth of the project. While these are all conversations and analyses that are needed, I am going to side-step them and focus instead on the new contours of identity that the biometric project is in the service of.

Even before Aadhaar became Aadhaar, when the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDIA) set out the working paper that became its foundational document, 'Creating a Unique Identity Number for every resident in India',[16] it introduced a curious conflation and interoperability between the notions of identity and identification. Both these terms were constantly used interchangeably: thus, the UIDIA authority, both in its name, and in its documents framing the technological infrastructure that would serve as the scaffolding for effective e-governance in India, centrally talked of identification. Identification, in its prevailing meaning, referred to the ability of a networked device to identify the different actors by looking at unique data sets ranging from personal information to the biometric details like finger prints and iris scans which were stored in a massive centralised database. Identification, as was often pointed out by those representing the UIDIA, especially when faced with concerns of privacy and safety, was merely a Yes/No mechanism,[17] which used the biometric data presented to the device, to query whether the person is indeed the person s/he claims to be. Or in other

15 Rajanish Dass, *Unique Identity Project in India: A Divine Dream or a Miscalculated Heroism?*, IIMA — Research and Publications (2011), http://eprints.cscsarchive.org/175/1/IIMA.PDF; Reetika Khare, *The UID Project and Welfare Schemes,* 16(9) Economic & Political Weekly 38, 44 (2011); Usha Ramanathan, *A Unique Identity Bill*, 15(30) Economic and Political Weekly 10, 14 (2010).

16 *Creating a Unique Identity Number for Every Resident in India*, UIDIA (2009), http://www.comp.polyu.edu.hk/conference/iceb/content/doc/UIDAI.pdf.

17 *Aadhaar Automated Biometric Identi fication Subsystem Interface,* UIDIA (2011), http://eprints.cscsarchive.org/187/1/Aadhaar_ABIS_API.pdf.

words, identification was about computer-human interaction, and the possibility of verifying the presence and hence the implied presence of the 'true' actor in the transactions that were to emerge following the presentation of the data.

The Unique Identity Number (UIN) was merely a query that allowed for various nodes within the network to ensure that the actor that is being transacted with is discrete, has integrity, is finite, and thus was avoiding questions of leakage, corruption, or misrepresentation that can often happen in human-human identification. The justification for the massive technological infrastructure and the need to think of the Aadhaar project as a 'cog that has to imagine the governance within which it will find meaning'[18] was that networked database governance systems perform processes of identification more efficiently than human intelligence, and thus provide clean systems without duplication, surplus, redundancy, or manipulation.

In the narratives of what the UIN is, what it can do, what its value is, why it becomes important, and what it guarantees and ensures, there is a shift from speaking of identification to identity. As Nandan Nilekani, the political architect and supervisor of the project repeatedly said, the Aadhaar was in the business of granting identities.[19] One of the key indicators of the need for Aadhaar is the lack of a national identity system that can work across state, language and database structures, facilitating the most vulnerable migrant labour and nomadic populations to access governmental services and basic facilities.[20] The fact that documentary identities are not easily accessible and not always incorruptible positioned Aadhaar as an answer to the multiple identity schemes that inform the everyday transactions of governmental and market services in India.

The Aadhaar, while technologically it was only to be a query of identification, was not only received as granting identity but also positioned itself as offering first

18 Rajadhyaksha, *supra* note 14.

19 *Report of the Task Force on an Aadhaar-Enabled Payment Infrastructure,* UIDIA & Nandan Nilekani (2010), http://eprints.cscsarchive.org/196/1/Report_Task_Force_Aadhaar_PaymentInfra.pdf.

20 *Aadhaar—Communicating to a Billion, an Awareness and Communication Report*, UIDIA (2010), http://eprints.cscsarchive.org/204/.

documentary identity to people who might have been on the other side of the last mile. The Aadhaar itself was always presented as a purposeless identification system, merely providing an authentication system to identify the person as a valid actor. However, this mechanism of identification quickly became popular for a range of governmental and private services that took it as an identity system. The very act of querying and validation took a metonymic significance of negotiation and identity.

This shift from identification to identity might be dismissed as just a confusion of words, and indeed, not much attention has been paid to what this indicates. This ambiguity and conflation cannot merely be attributed to a semantic slip of the keyboard, but to a much larger phenomenon which points to the construction of a new notion of the individual, through big data streams and measures of self-quantification. It offers us a techno-social framework where the machine function of identification is wedded to the human expression of identity, and thus offers an inroad into looking at what happens when our identities are mediated, mitigated, facilitated, and contained by the ways in which the networked technologies of authentication and verification operate. It is a crucial shift where the identity of a person is ontologically defined through the logics and logistics of networked computation that form the Aadhaar project. This is why the Aadhaar enrolment system, for instance, does not check the veracity of the information that the individual gives it. For the enrolment, the individual needs no proof to substantiate or validate the information provided. The name, the address, the description, etc. are empty signifiers and it is possible for anybody to assume any identity as long as they give the inviolable data of biometric recognition. Thus, the identity of the person being enrolled and registered is almost insignificant and has value only in how it would now always identify the individual through the credentials or information provided. The Aadhaar network governance system is concerned only with the identifiers rather than the narrative, iterative, forms of identity and expression, and this is where we begin examining the ways in which identity is shaped, understood, and used to construct the notion of an individual in computation systems.

In his landmark essay on the "database as a symbolic form" of our times, Lev Manovich[21] had argued that the role of the database is to deconstruct narrative reality into identifiable discrete components which can be stored separately and connected through algorithms which follow programmed patterns of rearrangement. The conflation of identification and identity, in the production of networked database governance, performs a similar function where the identity of the individual gets dismantled into data streams that require more harvesting of data through the protocols of quantification. As Malavika Jayaram[22] points out in her work on privacy and identity in the face of the Aadhaar project: identity is treated as property; as a resource which can be traded and transacted upon. The focus on identification reduces all identity politics and negotiations into value transactions and commodity which gets traded in order to give the individuals access to benefits and services. Identity, which had in its construction, the right not to be identified – a state that Jacques Ranciere[23] called 'information without signature' is now flipped so that identification through identifiers, and the data that accrues by making connections and relationships between these identifiers, becomes the only form of identity in the time of database governance. Identity, which has historically been seen as an inalienable personal right, embedded in the very biological makeup and socio-political inheritances of an individual, suddenly gets explained through the systems and processes of identification which are no longer interested in the individual's relational and affective states but in identifying the individual as an 'actor' in a network society.

It is this slippage between identification and identity that allows for the slew of strange Aadhaar registrations that have emerged in the massive unfolding of the project. When the first errors emerged in the new Aadhaar cards, there were several instances of teething trouble, which dealt with questions of deduplication, inter-language transcription, legibility of biometric data, false cross-references in the

21 Lev Manovich, *Database as Symbolic Form*, 5 Convergence 280, 299 (1999).

22 Malavika Jayaram, *India's Big Brother Project: the World's Largest Biometrics Identity Program*, Boston Review, (2014), http://bostonreview.net/world/malavika-jayaram-india-unique-identification-biometrics.

23 Jacques Ranciere, On the Shores of Politics (Liz Heron trans., 2007).

database, and human error in data input.[24] These errors were to do with questions of authentication, identification, and verification. Glitches in the system generated much hilarity but were quickly ironed out as the data input, storage, and transfer mechanisms were made robust, and safeguards were made to overcome identified points of error. In the midst of all these machine errors and corrections, there was one set of cards that are illustrative of the nature of identity in the network universe. These were cards that had for their profile picture, images of animals or plants and vegetables.[25]

Textual glitches and cross-referencing in the database can be attributed to human and machine error. The live-capture processes of faces in the Aadhaar enrolment centres makes this appearance of objects and animals as the face of an enrolee extraordinary. The immediate question that comes to mind is about how these images made their way into the system. The subsequent query would be why these were not identified as non-human pictures and thus removed from the database. Why is the face, which is the most humanly recognised biometric identifier and often at the heart of identity politics, insignificant in the database that is supposed to provide identity to those getting enrolled? To all these questions, these cards suggest that what is humanly important about identity and negotiation is not equally significant to the biometrics based database system of Aadhaar. Indeed, what is more important to the system is the different data streams that the Aadhaar number consolidates, and the biological biometrics which are machine readable and not human intelligible are foregrounded as crucial to the functioning of this system.

24 Deepa Kurup, writing for *The Hindu*, looks at how these problems of correction become tedious and almost unmanageable for the early days of Aadhaar enrolment. Deepa Kurup, *Bloopers Abound as Updating Proves Tedious for Aadhaar*, The Hindu (2013), http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-karnataka/bloopers-abound-as-updating-proves-tedious-for-aadhaar/article5238773.ece. Surabhi Agrawal, reporting in *The Mint*, quotes the UIDIA authorities that the duplicates within the system match up to the estimated error rates, and thus would be addressed soon as the process evolved. Surabhi Agarwal, *Duplicate Aadhaar Numbers within Estimate: UIDAI*, The Mint (2013), http://www.livemint.com/Politics/hTUpdA8tpufSHI6jfG27gP/Duplicate-Aadhaar-numbers-within-estimates-UIDAI.html.

25 Sunitha Rao reports in *The Times of India* of these hilarious glitches with strange names, spelling, and errors in the Aadhaar enrolment system. R. Sunitha Rao, *Dogs, Trees and Chairs have Aadhaar Cards*, The Times of India (2013), http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Dogs-trees-and-chairs-have-Aadhaar-cards/articleshow/20359001.cms.

The shift from identity as a human process of negotiation, connection and empathy, to identification as a machine verification through identifiers, and data streams, is the most telling evidence of why the individual is being reconceptualised as the technosocial regimes of network governance become the dominant mode of operation, and why the network is indifferent to information and interpretation processes of human interaction and identity expression.

The Networked Individual and the Digital

In order to understand the individual in the Aadhaar network, we might begin by looking at the form and materiality of the Aadhaar enrolment credentials itself. It has been emphasised repeatedly that Aadhaar is not a card,[26] and that it is not a representation of a person, and that in fact, it has nothing to do with any persons at all. The Aadhaar number is a simulation, and it simulates data stored in a database. Alexander Galloway,[27] in his work on protocols, shows us that digital objects are essentially networked objects. That does not mean that they are always online, but that they come into being because of how networking occurs between particular data sets. Or rather, the ontology of a digital object is in the networking that happens between different databases. The dog on the Aadhaar card, then, is not a stand-in for a person, but a stand-in for the data scattered across databases

26 The Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, in response to the critique about the potential abuses of a centralised identity card system had said, "The Aadhaar is actually a number, linked to that number is a biometric record which is centrally stored. The (Aadhaar) number comes in a form of card. But that card is not an identity card." He further said, "There is no such thing as UIDAI (Aadhaar) card. You need it only because you want to remember your number. If you stick your number in the wallet. That is fine." *See, Aadhar Is a Number, Not an ID Card says Montek Singh Ahluwalia*, Press Trust of India (February 2, 2013), http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/aadhaar-is-a-number-not-an-id-card-montek-singh-ahluwalia-512202. The non-card nature of Aadhaar was in fact a point of contention between the two national citizen database systems like the National Population Register and the Aadhaar, both competing for resources from the same governmental budgets. In 2013, there was a heated debate between the then Finance Minister P Chidambaram and Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde against the Aadhaar, insisting that Aadhaar should bear the NPR number whereas the UIDAI authority was arguing that Aadhaar had a different purpose than the NPR and that adding the number to the Aadhaar identity did not mean anything because Aadhaar is not a card. *See,* Yatish Yadav, *NPR vs. AADHAR Game Gets Tougher,* The New Indian Express, (10 February, 2013, http://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/article1457196.ece).

27 Galloway, *supra* note 11.

which, because of their correlation now identify this dog as a resident of India, and probably even feed it into the National Population Register which was linked with Aadhaar in the last census.

The production of the dog on the Aadhaar card, and its insignificance to the actual mechanics and workings of the Aadhaar system is symptomatic of what I call the emergence of networked data subject – a data subject that does not pre-exist outside of the system but is merely brought into being by the correlations between networked databases in this informatics system. They refer to the physical individual being enrolled and write the information back on the body of the individual, but the data subject itself has no direct relationship with the individual who now bears the image of the dog.

The network in computation theory is not quite the same as we understand it in popular parlance. When we invoke the network, we think about trajectories of relationships and transactions between existing nodes. We imagine the network as a representation of modes of connection and action, and think of it as a composite whole that helps explain the system that it maps. In physical computation, however, a network is not a predefined thing. It is something that comes into being temporarily, as traffic moves from one point to the other, thus creating an edge. A series of edges, when repeatedly used for delivery of traffic, constitutes a network. The network has no form, no morphology, no fixed structure, and it grows and shrinks, existing more in potential than in reality. In fact, the network is essentially a map of itself, and what it circulates is not information which is human, but signals which are technological, and in the service of keeping itself alive and functioning.[28]

Duncan Watts,[29] a theorist of modern computational networks, in his work on the ways in which networks perform the labour of connecting, tells us that networks are in fact inward looking systems and that the cartographies that we

28 Bella Bollobas et al. provide a more substantial understanding of computational networks with technical specifications and explainations. Handbook of Large-Scale Random Networks (Bolyai Societ Mathematics Studies), (Bela Bollobas, Robert Kozma and Dezso Miklos eds., Budapest: Springer) (2009).

29 Duncan Watts, Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age (2003).

produce are merely graphical reduction of the true nature of things – filtering, sorting, exclusion and destruction of data. Watts argues that the network is in a state of degeneration, decay and disorder, comprised of predictive possibilities too large for the human to compute. Similarly, the human is too large a data set to travel as a consolidated entity upon the network and hence the network constantly deconstructs the individual into multiple data streams which can be transferred and circulated across different routes, to keep the edges alive and the nodes activated.

As Philip Agre,[30] another computational network theorist points out, the network does not share our ontological dilemma of which comes first, the individual or the data. The network comes into being because data travels. The individual gets constructed, first as a data source, and next as a virtual profile that is constructed because of the mobility of data. The individual and the data are both together in a state of probable existence. Data might have markers of separation, but it makes sense only in its complex relationships with all the other data sets. Like all digital objects, the networked data subject comes into being because various databases connect with each other, and learning algorithms form simulation narratives between the different data sets, to create new conditions and forms of identity. It is a mobile and simulated entity that has almost no relationships with the quotidian, affective, and subjective life and practices of the user. The individual is important to the network only as a quantified self, which can be mined for data and information, and once that data has been harvested, it creates, through conditions of mobility and correlation, a data subject that becomes more important and has more currency and valence than the individual. Which is why, the dog, if it could claim its identity through the Aadhaar card, would actually have more rights and access to governmental services than the individual who has not enrolled into the system, and has no identity because s/he cannot be identified.

What I am arguing for is to recognise that networks do not have an exteriority but are self-referential systems. Similarly, the individual, as conceived in these networked societies, is not a representation of the human subject but merely a

30 Philip Agre, *Networking on the Network: A Guide to Professional Skills for Phd Students* (2002), http://vlsicad.ucsd.edu/Research/Advice/network.html.

simulation of the data sets that belong to the network. Wendy Chun,[31] in her analysis of the protocols and conditions of technological governance, calls this phenomenon an 'opaque metaphor'. Chun argues, using software as an example that the data subject is a networked entity created out of the quantified data, and that the cartography of the network is about the network itself, with no representational relationships with either the individual or the contexts outside the network. The network might pretend to be a metaphor of our external reality, but it actually only serves to explain itself.

Thus, when it comes to the appearance of the dog on the Aadhaar card, it leads to some very expected responses. The first is to identify the error in our tools of quantifying the self, and rectifying the process, so that certain kinds of data is marked as noise and removed from the system. The second response is to suggest that our tools of data mining and algorithms of data correlation are not sophisticated enough, and hence we need to build better tools, better mechanisms, and more penetrative forms of measurement by which the quantified self can be efficiently stored in databases. The third response is to argue that the errors are caused due to deficient infrastructure, and a demand is to be made for more robust infrastructure and hardware that allows for cleaner data and more efficient regulation of the network. In all these responses, there is a hope that these networked phenomena have an implicit relationship with the exterior and with the human subject, but this hope is never unpacked or questioned. When the question is posed about the relationship between networks and reality, instead of looking at how networks fail to represent and map the exterior, the problem is posed as the exterior not measuring up to the parameters and models that the network produces.

The question of the human in these quantified networks is even more perplexing. Because, the general presumption is that there is a direct correlation and even causality, between data realities, and lived realities. Indeed, at various levels of abstraction this is true. There is a certain way in which data informs policies

31 Hui Kyong Wendy Chun, *The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory*, Critical Inquiry 35 Autumn, (2008), http://www.ucl.ac.uk/art-history/events/past-imperfect/chun-reading).

which shapes life practices and so on, but there is a digital relation between the data as a network form has with the human in its quantified presence. Data in the network paradigm is a strange thing because it is both the object of inquiry and the tool of analysis. If we look at the Aadhaar project, for instance, it is a project that is about the gathering of identification data through biometric devices. This means that it takes an exteriority that is messy – like the human subject – and seeks to translate it into abstractions which stand in for the human identification.

What we have, in this process, is circularity where the reference of understanding data is data. The object of analysis is the network and the framework through which it is analysed is also the network. The beginning point of data is the human, but what gets regulated is the relationship between data, and the human has to be shaped, contained, regulated, and trained to fit the data subjectivities that are thus produced. In what can only be described as an ontological flip-flop, the network as the dominant aesthetic of our time begins by quantifying and measuring an exterior system and individual, creates simulated models that predict ideal conditions, and then demands that the system and the individual be shaped based on these predictions.

The Indifferent Network: Next Steps for Being Human

This paper has tried to argue that the ways in which we understand what an individual is has changed with the emergence of the data subject and the quantified-self phenomena. It has tried to show how the individual is being dislocated from a human-eye-view of the world into becoming a digital object. I have proposed that the slippage and conflation between identification and identity is a way of unpacking this reconceptualised individual. I have further suggested that if we take the morphology, logic, and construction of the computational network seriously, we can also see the elision of the human subject as it gets constructed in digital network systems. The close scrutiny of a computational network allows for a revisiting of the impact of the network as the default metaphor of our times and its relationship with the presumed but absent exteriority that it seeks to explain but ends up regulating. Similarly, it shows how the data subject and the quantified

subject supersede the individual and the subject and our ability to negotiate with narratives of identity expression which get replaced by processes of identification and authentication driven by database logics of governance.

Following this shift to identification from identity through network societies, I want to forward the idea of an indifferent network. The presumption in network governance debates is that the network cares and is committed to mapping the individual in all its difference through the constantly expanding databases of quantified measurement. However, the network is actually indifferent to the individual and its expressions. A network governance database system like the Aadhaar does not treat the appearance of the dog as a glitch, but yet another data set which helps make new correlations and predictions possible. Linguistically speaking, the network is actually closer to the etymological understanding of identity than how we recognise it in common utterance. We think of identity as difference – it is a form of individuation, customisation, uniqueness, and something that is both private and personal. However, the Latin Root for the word Identity – Idem, means the same, and not the different. Identity was originally supposed to be a template by which the individual can be counted, accounted for, and made accountable, not as a subjective self, but as the representative of a collective. As networks continue to grow through intelligent database sharing, they reinforce this inherent paradox of the individual as unique – having a unique identifier – but also the individual as the same – as an actor that can be mined for data, queried, and stored in mobile data sets. For the network governance that the Aadhaar imagines around itself, the dog is as much an actor or an individual or the bearer of an identifier/identity as any other human being enrolled into the system.

The network is contingent upon processes of legibility, intelligibility and accessibility. It needs the quantified self to be legible, so that it can be written clearly, through clean information sets, and stored and remembered in multiple databases. It needs the data to be intelligible across various platforms and querying mechanisms so that it can be verified, authenticated, and identified. In the process, it creates data subjects which are then posited as the idealised and normative templates against whom the quantified self will be measured, and when it falls short, will be punished or rehabilitated to become more accessible to the systems

of governance. The individual who shall be marked by other systems of rights and entitlements, responsibility and culpability, will have to be reconceptualised to fit this process of enrolment that begins by treating the subject as a networked data subject. The networked data subject as the new unit of governance replaces the fiction of a 'reasonable man', which has been at the heart of legal regulation and justice, with a new set of reason and rationality that is designed by self-learning and iterative algorithms, which can process correlations and make connections at a speed over data that is unfathomable by mere human faculties.

What I am arguing for is, to think of identity not as something that is being amplified, augmented, or remixed by the emergence of digital networks and database governance regimes, but as being replaced and reconstructed through the logics of action, transaction, legibility, and intelligibility that the new data societies are organised through.

This framework that looks at new relationships between identity and the digital networks offers us new imperatives for research and interventions in our politics of network societies and database governance. It emphasises that we need to take the form, function, role, and intention of digital technologies more seriously in our analysis of technosocial regimes and systems of governance. More often than not, the architecture, protocols, algorithms, and the aesthetics and logic of data are not addressed in the growing discourse around study of technology driven social and political organisation. However, understanding concepts like identity, not as discrete and human, but as technosocial artefacts and processes necessitates that we factor the logic and intentionality of the technological into its conception. There is also a clear need to bring computational and network theory to closely speak with the discourse that is emerging in social and political sciences.

We need to be more cautious in using ideas like network or data as natural conditions of describing the emerging worlds because they carry with them technological and mathematical impulses, designs and architectures that are hidden under the seductive interfaces of network mapping and big data visualisations. Questioning these mechanisms of decision making and control is necessary in order to understand the larger domain of technosocial governance that we are

transitioning to with the emergence of projects like Aadhaar. The conflation between identity and identification is only one of the instances where the informational and representational human agency of negotiation, interpretation, contestation, and resistance is being reduced as we give in more to new technologies that often embody new structures of neo-liberal capital and governance. Using metaphors like networks or big data, data subject or quantified self, at face value in order to explain these phenomena restricts our own analytic frames in approaching the knotted set of issues that accompany them. There is a severe need to produce alternative metaphors, explanatory frameworks and indeed, even new concepts which do not just extend our established understanding of the human and the technological, but also help shape the debates and policies to accommodate for life with, within, through, and of the digital.