The empire of the digital. Views from South Asia and East Africa
Call for Proposals

This conference will discuss social issues raised by the spread of digital technologies in the Global South, focusing especially upon East Africa, South Asia and their inter-regional links. It aims at gathering a community of researchers from the social sciences (sociology, history, political science, information and communication studies, anthropology, geography and social studies of science and technology) who would be willing to address collectively the issue of digital change in an intercontinental perspective (both comparative and multi-sited), based on research upon South-Asia, East-Africa and their relations.

Location and Date
The event will be held at Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique, Nairobi (Kenya) on the **21st of May 2018**

Deadline for abstract submission
300 words abstracts with theoretical framework, methodology and fieldwork sent at dsgnairobi@googlegroups.com before the 1st of March, 2018.

Argument
Digital technologies have raised interest from the social sciences in the last decades (Castells 2010; Ling 2008). However, digital technologies have more rarely been studied in developing contexts (Al Dahdah *et al*. 2015; Taylor et Schroeder 2015). And yet, those technologies are agents of profound changes and instruments of distinctive policies in those developing contexts (De Bruijn et al. 2009; Jeffrey et Doron 2013); as massive socio-technical artefacts, they result from and structure specific power configurations (Ong et Collier 2005; Jasanoff et Kim 2015). In a postcolonial context, digital technologies are inscribed in a long history of powerful relationships between science, technologies, states and empires (Petitjean, Jami, et Moulin 1992; Raina 1996; Cohn 1996; Arnold 2000), they revive old debates on technological development and unequal transmission of knowledge in the developing world (Frank 1966; Amin 1973; Said 1978; Escobar 1995; Mbembe 2006) and at the same time they contribute to the spreading of a radically different image of less well-off regions that use, own and create innovative digital tools.

For instance, India is repeatedly pointed as one of the most unequal country in the world[1] and seen as a land of starvation, illnesses and poverty for huge masses in the second most populous state of the world. At the same time India is just undergoing the world's biggest and fastest demonetisation operation[2] to move towards a cashless economy and is home to the world's largest biometric database called "Aadhaar" (Abraham et Rajadhyaksha 2015; Cohen 2016; Rao et Greenleaf 2013). Those digital projects are transforming Indian society, reshaping the State, citizenship and the rights of Indian residents (Ramanathan 2016; Rao 2013). Outside India, they constitute instruments of India's "soft power" (Jaffrelot 2008) and contribute to a glorifying image of the "Shining India" conveyed by information technologies (Varrel 2009).

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[1] « India second most unequal country in the world ». *Hindustan Times*, 24 novembre 2016.
[2] See the special issues on Demonetisation in *Economic and Political Weekly* n° 49, 50 and 51, November and December 2016

Another example would be that of Sub-Saharan Africa whose population is approx. that of India in the 2010s. Sub-Saharan Africa shows the lowest life expectancy at birth in the world, the highest child mortality rate and health indicators very far from developing goals (USAID 2011; WHO 2013). It is also the place in which the growth of mobile phone and of mobile internet connection is the highest in the world (twice as much as in the rest of the world). Sub-Saharan Africa is positioning itself as a "new digital actor" today thanks to the mobile revolution (De Bruijn et al. 2009) and the Kenyan mobile banking service mPesa is only one example of this new trend which characterizes digital Africa today (Park et Donovan 2016).

Today India and Sub-Saharan Africa are therefore major sites of technological change. They constitute huge markets for digital investments in the South in spite of huge socio-economic inequalities. For these reasons both these sub-continents bring an interesting light upon the political role of digital technology. Furthermore, studied altogether, they give important insights upon technological collaborations between India and Africa and South-South circulations of technology, people and goods. These zones are not only permeable one to the other, but also would bring into light interesting aspects of the current shaping of a digital world.

For this conference, we propose to challenge the North-focused approach, dominant in the study of digital technologies; and to insist instead upon geopolitical power relations and inequalities, as well as techno-cultural hybridization processes and actors that are normally invisibilized by dominant discourses. Building from science and technology studies as well as post-colonial studies, the main goal of the workshop is to revisit the notion of imperialism when applied to digital technologies. The conference intends to describe some of the central aspects of contemporary imperialism, not only as a nation-to-nation process of domination, but also involving development, market and technology actors, and as a more general process of intensification of technological and capitalist reasons. Case studies from diverse areas are expected, such as (but not limited to) digital health, financial inclusion policies, digital citizenship, web-based social movements or media consumption.

Possible topics
voting technology; payment technology; digital health; digital economy; Public distribution system through digital tools; digital social networks; interoperability and interlinked devices; data politics; citizenship and digital technologies; digital political participation; data collection and data-driven management in the global south; governance, funding and organization of technological projects

Expected outcome
The conference aims at gathering people willing to work together in a inter-continental perspective. Beyond individual presentations, the conference will encourage collective discussions regarding the setting of a research platform dedicated to digital issues in the Global South.

Organisation
Marine Al Dahdah (Cermès3, Paris), Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle (IFRA, Nairobi), Mathieu Quet (CEPED, Paris & CSSP, JNU, New Delhi)

Partners
CEPED (UPD / IRD, France), Cermès3 (CNRS / Inserm / EHESS / UPD, France), Centre for Internet and Society (India), CSSP (Jawaharlal Nehru University, India), Institut Français de

Recherche en Afrique (Kenya), IFRIS (France), Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (France), Martin Chautari (Nepal)

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