

# Technical Territories: Data, Subjects, and Spaces in Infrastructural Asia – review

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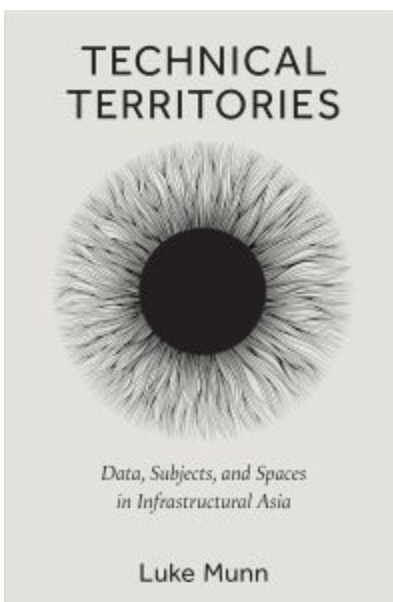
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*In **Technical Territories: Data, Subjects, and Spaces in Infrastructural Asia**, Luke Munn explores how today’s territories are defined through data infrastructures, from undersea cables to cloud storage. Examining several cases studies in Asia, **Anshul Rai Sharma** finds this a groundbreaking interdisciplinary study of how these infrastructures underpin new forms of governance, shaping subjects and their everyday lives.*

***Technical Territories: Data, Subjects, and Spaces in Infrastructural Asia*. Luke Munn. University of Michigan Press. 2023.**

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Luke Munn’s *Technical Territories* dissects the idea of territory with a new sensibility of the digital world. Munn suggests that territories are being reworked in light of digital infrastructure – sea (undersea cables), cloud (data centres), and fog (technical standards) which together enable “tides” of surprising new territorial formations. As historically produced, “territory”

means a “bounded space under control of a group”, typically a state (7). In contrast, technical territories consist of “contemporary information technologies” where “activities and identities are mediated through software, platform, and services” (14). Munn’s account thus on the one hand highlights the strategic and political aspects of such infrastructure, and on the other hand emphasises that territorial dynamics transcend continental land masses and borders of nation states. In this sense, Munn’s work is an attempt at an ethnography of power through the unique lens of cables and clouds-systems.

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Digital infrastructures are conceptualised as “nodes” that are “*situated and siteless, embedded and extended, within and beyond*” (28). One feels compelled to ask: Where are the boundaries? Instead of treating this ambiguity as a constraint, the author invites us to make this the object of the study, an exercise in making sense of these dense networks and what they imply for citizenship and territory. This is a complicated exercise, as a host of issues are at play simultaneously – jurisdiction, political authority, and economic ties. The book traverses technical as well as human geographies, reminding one of Doreen Massey’s concept of *place as perpetual intersections*.

The power tussle over digital infrastructure between nation states, companies, governments, and civil society is felt in the everyday lives of individuals.

Munn recognises that the power tussle over digital infrastructure between nation states, companies, governments, and civil society is felt in the everyday lives of individuals. He thus makes a key methodological choice to centre on individual data subjects in his analysis, including a case study of Hong Kong narratives. These accounts reflect the unease with networked technologies, with new geographic knowledge productions through three-fold issue of transmission, capture and processing of personal data. Visceral democratic protests are pitted against the “digitization of bodies” (43) which underscores the precarious nature of individual identity, autonomy, and privacy.

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A central point in the book is that infrastructure works for those who build it – it is a source of power. Munn is thus not only concerned with connections but with the ownership of these connections. The emphasis is merely on spatialised power, but also on how this power is made operational. In a deeply political account of cable construction across the globe, Munn identifies the imperial use of telegraph cables to convey critical information, hinting at the history of technological use for colonial purposes. To understand where such tendencies are headed now, we must move through sea (cables), cloud (computing) and fog (technical

standards). The reader is encouraged to see how “the imperial and terrestrial coexists with the technical” (102). The current fierce competition between global firms to lay claim to such territories is described vividly, bringing forth the central concern: even though the firms are competing in the global market, like any other geopolitical tool, this market is deeply embedded in government subsidies, intelligence, and national interests.

In light of this frame to global competition in digital infrastructure, a considerable portion of the text is dedicated to unpacking “Sinicization” (30). A comprehensive analysis of the emerging Chinese influence on digital technologies. Channelling Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Munn makes the cables of communication visible, showing how vulnerable they are to disruption. A key realisation in the case study of Huawei is the disproportionate impact of China (the boundaries between state-owned companies and private firms fade here) on cable construction project. This is important as digital infrastructures are seen as “ontological in shaping our wider political environment” (60). Munn places such infrastructure in the centre of a meta-struggle between X actors on one side trying to make technology align with registers of rule of law, national sovereignty, and individual rights inherent in democracy, and Y actors on the other side relying on technology for surveillance and national security.

[Christmas I]sland’s isolation is employed for a dual purpose: restricting the movement of detained individuals while also acting as a hub for undersea cable projects that enhance communication networks.

The concept of territories as a “framing device” (7) is constantly invoked to probe the relationship between technologies and power. The author eventually argues that territories, in their myriad forms, “imping[e] on lives of the marginal while enhancing the agencies of those deemed central” (79). This is illustrated through the detailed analysis of Christmas Island in Australia. The island’s isolation is employed for a dual purpose: restricting the movement of detained individuals while also acting as a hub for undersea cable projects that enhance communication networks. This dichotomy highlights the tension between hindering human mobility and promoting the flow of information. A parallel tension, between the “appropriation of land, the exploitation of the environment, and the violence done to bodies” and the unequal ways in which “technologies mediate information and facilitate extraction” (99) is presented by using Singapore as a case study.

The book touches upon national laws governing data collection and circulation, such as China’s Cybersecurity law, the US CLOUD Act, and Hong Kong’s Personal Data Ordinance. While Munn suggests these laws may not offer sufficient protection against data flow, he doesn’t delve deep into evidence-based analysis of the legislation. However, he adeptly discusses the intricacies of cloud architecture for readers. The penultimate chapter shows how cloud-based computing and edge-computing (processing data locally) operate differently yet come together as a system of control. The chapter echoes Foucault’s

genealogy of power to understand how the old and more explicit forms of governance are replaced by the new models such as “cloud-edge formation of power” (125) demanding a complete revision of concepts like Decentralisation.

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┆ infrastructural operations, flow of capital, and flow of information

Munn’s work challenges readers to intertwine infrastructural and political theory with contemporary geopolitics. Its uniqueness stems from its narrative on the transformative impact of modern infrastructure on territorial boundaries. Technical territories are deeply political; they amplify state power and undermine the agency of individuals. Instead of being neutral models, these are infrastructures that “push and pull, ordering the world and jostling with others in a bid for primacy and position” (9). Munn’s work provides a new, imaginative framework to unpack relationalities between infrastructural operations, flow of capital, and flow of information – a triad that becomes increasingly important as digital governance becomes a dominant idea across democracies.

*The author is grateful for inputs from Tekla Marie Emborg at the University of Groningen.*

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