Introduction

This book aims to provide evidence of informational society and media development in contemporary Mongolia, a thirty-three-year-old democracy. Mongolia is known in the West for its nomadic culture on the plateau of the Central Asian steppes and Chinggis Khan's empire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Mongol Empire (1206–1338) created an effective pony express military communication system, which relied upon highly mobile messengers (*ulaach*) who galloped on horses from one node (*urtoo*) to another (Mayhew 2001). The nodes of the military intelligence system were *gers* (*yurt*), circular felt tents that are easily set up and dismantled. The *ger* remains home for nomadic Mongolian people even today, eight hundred years later, and the messaging system operated until the beginning of the twentieth century in Mongolia. After the collapse of Chinggis Khan's empire and its many subsequent kingdoms, Mongolia survived a three-century-long Manchu colonization (1691–1911), and a short period of independence under Bogd Khan (1911–21), after which it became the world's second socialist country (1921–90).

Since the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989, Mongolia has transitioned from a communist political system to a democracy and from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. Landlocked between China and Russia over its large 1.5 million square kilometer territory with a sparse population of 3.4 million, the country's contemporary information and media spheres have changed dramatically in the rapidly globalizing world. The geopolitical location, nomadic culture, recent communist history, and untapped natural resources are the contours and contexts that background this book, which examines the media and informational spheres of contemporary Mongolia in the twenty-first century.

In the years following the opening of the country from the Soviet bloc, media—from tweets to text messages, from television soap operas to advertisements in dramas—has grown rapidly in Mongolian and other languages. Mongolia's contemporary media environment is a mixed bag of old and new, foreign and traditional, and nostalgic and commercialized products. Entertainment products, from MTV to Korean soap operas and from American

NBA games to Japanese sumo wrestling championships, have become the staples of cable and satellite channels in most homes in the cities, as well as in provinces (*aimags*). Over the last couple of decades, Mongolia has also drastically increased access to information and communication technology (ICT) for its population of 3.4 million, indicated by the numbers of mobile phone users (3.8 million), internet users (2.91 million), and Facebook users (2.1 million) (See figure 1.1). The explosion of the production of computers, microchips, and communication equipment in Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea (known as Asian tiger economies), and recently China, spilled over to Mongolia, reducing the equipment prices of ICTs and increasing access to smartphones. Mongolia's 2.43 million smartphone users spend an average of seventy-seven minutes a day on Facebook (Munkhbaatar 2020). Owing to YouTube and social media campaigns, the Mongolian rock and metal band *Hu* reached seventy-three million views on YouTube as of April 2021, which is unprecedented in Mongolian cultural affairs (Farber 2019). This media flow undoubtedly shapes and influences the contemporary Mongolian identity. These dramatic changes in the informational sphere and the role of media and informational flow in contemporary Mongolian society and culture have yet to be studied in depth.

The term "media" for this book encompasses all types of traditional print and electronic media, as well as the internet and social media that are increasingly converged on digital platforms. Converged media is defined as "the coming together of all forms of mediated communications in an electronic, digital form driven by computers" (Pavlik 1996, 132). All forms of Mongolian media are created, produced, and distributed digitally, from text messages to tweets, from television shows on Netflix series to big- or small-screen advertisements. Boundaries between traditional media that were established during the socialist era and digital and social media that became prevalent in recent years have increasingly blurred within the context of dramatic economic and political changes in Mongolia. During the seventy years under socialism, the foundations of Mongolia's newspapers, radio, television, and journalism were molded, and the media served the purpose of propagandizing the population with the communist party's ideology and positively presenting socialism to mobilize the masses culturally.

The concepts of a free press and media operating in the marketplace of ideas and functioning as a watchdog institution are relatively new to Mongolia, and the continuity and disruption of the media in the last thirty-three years have occurred in radically different historical contexts, similar to other former socialist countries (Jakubowicz 2011; Richter 2011; Voltmer

2013). The path dependency of and nostalgia for the media systems that fostered communist political ideology continuously factor in the development of media in former socialist countries (Voltmer 2013). Former socialist countries in Central Asia and Russia reverted back to authoritarian regimes (Coleman and Kaposi 2006). Even though Mongolia did not revert back to an authoritarian regime, the corruption index is high, leading to ambiguous evaluations by Transparency International (2020). Mongolians' notion of free expression and independent media, and the media's role in society have been shaped mostly in the online media environment, in which the dynamics of interactions between political elites, the public, and media institutions are radically different from the socialist era.

The collapse of socialism placed Mongolia's untapped natural resources on new emerging markets for global capital. In the last decade, the country's natural resources have lured foreign capital and giant mining multinational corporations, including Rio Tinto and Ivanhoe Mines. Owing to mining development, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita tripled since 1991 (World Bank 2023), and erratic boom and bust cycles have become common. In 2011, the GDP of the country grew by 17 percent, but in 2017 the IMF bailed out the country for 5.5-billion US dollars (Edwards 2017). However, foreign investment inflows into the mines contribute to an economic dependency on extractive mines, leading to an irreversible degradation of the environment and a surge of elite corruption—the situation known as "the resource curse." I explore how the industrial and information society collide and merge in the Mongolian institutional settings by comparing the developments of ICTs and the mining sectors and by analyzing how profits from mining feed back into and shape media spheres.

Along with giant multinational corporations, other Asian investors from China, Korea, and Japan are increasingly tapping into the goods and services markets in Mongolia, especially into the telecommunications and media market. The Korean cultural wave *Hallyu* with its Asian tiger nation reputation, K-pop stars and bands like BTS, and television series have "invaded" the Mongolian culture and influenced beauty aesthetics, consumer tastes, and lifestyle values for years now. Mobile phone services and internet use have drastically increased following the liberalization of the economy thanks to the spillover effect of the Asian microelectronics economies from Korea, Taiwan, and China, and Mongolians increasingly take advantage of this technological availability and geographical proximity.

Influenced by Asian economic growth and with support from funding organizations, the Mongolian Parliament adopted the "Information and Communication Technology Policy in Mongolia" ICT Vision—2010 in 2000

to move forward to build an information society and has been followed up since then in legislation and government services. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the country lacked the resources necessary to build the pillars of a "knowledge economy": communication networks, government digital services, funding for innovation, and human resources (Johnson et al. 2005). The government policy either did not get much attention from the public or received criticism or even mockery.[1] I document how, over the last three decades, government policy, businesses, and civil society made strides to increase the number of smartphone users and the number of media outlets, and helped to improve government digital services. Thanks to these developments, Mongolians increasingly participate in the digital public spheres, yet are still constrained by economic structures, geopolitics, an uncertain legal environment, and the political context in which the elite increasingly "capture" media. I strive to synthesize these developments of ICT and media in relation to global media governance, not in isolation and not in separate media spheres. Below, I relate varying theoretical perspectives of informational spheres in developing countries to the digital public spheres in Mongolia.

Theoretical Underpinning of Information Society and Media in Mongolia

In this book, I strive to provide an empirical account of the confluence of information society and globalization in Mongolia from the perspectives of information society and media studies. Positioning the developing country of Mongolia on the global information society map is challenging, considering the nomadic culture, sparse population, struggling economy following the collapse of communism, and the recent expansion of extractive mining. These characteristics of Mongolia might not pass muster for the characteristics of the information society that theorists Daniel Bell (1976) and Manual Castells (2000) canonically defined, emphasizing the roles of the service sector in the economy and the pervasiveness of information throughout all spheres of society. Castells (2000) defines the information society as "informational, global and networked" because of its "dependency on generating, processing and applying knowledge-based information" (77).

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1   A broadcast show lightly mocked the policy saying that a tiger economy became "a squirrel economy" (*herem uls*), and showed a vignette of everyone eating pinecone nuts, one of the fall scenes in the capital Ulaanbaatar.

The process-oriented characteristics of theoretical information and the networks that instantaneously transmit information are the characteristics of an "information society," in which technologies like the internet and mobile phones are seen as modernizing change agents. In this modernizing approach, a society or a developing country jumps on the bandwagon of adopting new technology in order to catch up over a certain period of time, depending on their resources, wealth, and education levels.

ICT is often at the center of globalization and antiglobalization debates. While no agreed-upon definitions exist for either globalization or information society, many agree that the world's culturally and economically different localities are more interdependent than before, partially due to the free and fast information flow and the internet. Scholars have written about how a new informational mode of development that originated in the United States and other developed countries has spread to East Asia and other developing countries concomitant with globalization. In the 1990s, a new global informational and networked economy emerged all around the world that is qualitatively different from the previous economies in its mode of production as well as in the mode of development. This socioeconomic development is centered around a set of informational technologies, including microelectronics, computers, the internet, and telecommunications (Castells 2000). Many of these technologies were created between the 1950s and 1980s in the United States, but they rapidly spread to the world in the 1990s, coupled with the deregulation policies in the US and other developed countries.

The East Asian countries of Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and recently China have rapidly industrialized, partially due to the production of computer and communication equipment and services and by exporting them to the US and other developed countries. Their developments are often exemplified in economic globalization studies, in which free trade, new technology, and foreign investment benefit both developed and developing countries (Stiglitz 1996; Summers and Vinod 1993). These informational economies are characterized by the production of technological products for networked enterprises like Cisco, Amazon, and Microsoft, as well as by complex informational financial services such as stock market derivatives, security software, and online shops. In other words, networked global enterprises started to produce, distribute, and circulate ICT services and products in real time at a global scale utilizing the decentralized networks. However, political economists studying East Asian developing countries highlight the role of institutions and government policies that skillfully bargained with transnational companies in retaining capital, technology, and

jobs in their countries. The ideological aspect of globalization, as well as the roles the nation-states play in bargaining with multinational corporations, is often underplayed in the analysis of Southeast Asian industrialization (Amsden 1985; Hveem 2002; Weiss 1997).

The proponents of the globalization thesis tend to emphasize this informational acceleration and the roles media play in disseminating ideas and services in the late twentieth century (Appadurai 1996; Lule 2012). Others argue that "globalization" is a euphemism for neoliberal economic policy, which enables multinational corporations to evade taxes, damage the environment, and stagnate labor wages. In the current era, the forces of neoliberal globalization or "globalization from above" encounter backlash from the left and the right all around the world (Flew 2020). The rise of populism around the world in recent years shows that a significant number of people, mostly bound to their localities, feel "left behind" and they tend to resist global elites (Flew 2020). Contrary to the forecasts of global information society proponents (Castell 2000; Bell 1976), service sector workers have increasingly been subjugated to the impatient or "footloose" capital all around the world (Flew 2018; Garnham 2000).

The trickle-down neoliberal economic policy led by the Bretton Woods institutions—the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB)—incentivized foreign direct investment and implemented brutal economic austerity measures in Latin America and Africa in the 1960s and 1970s and post-communist countries in the 1990s. These institutions saw in this networked economy paradigm new possibilities for restructuring the global economy and facilitated its spread to developing countries at an accelerated pace using various incentives such as loans, foreign direct investment, and trade contracts, as well as penalties for not liberalizing or privatizing the markets. When developing countries follow the patterns of consumption of developed nations in an effort to catch up, the only people who benefit are the corporations in the developed countries (Hamelink 2001). This economic adjustment concurred with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the financial crises in Asia, adding new impetus to the momentum of global capitalist restructuring. The policies of the Bretton Woods institutions, coupled with deregulation policies of the 1990s in developed countries, put an end to the international development paradigm and replaced it with economic liberalization programs with little effort into development. Development efforts of these institutions were mostly operated by aid, donors, and civil society organizations in order to offset the economic and societal consequences of the structural changes in developing countries. These economic austerities often hurt developing countries, affecting their

democratic processes, while small-scale development projects run by not-for-profit organizations funded by Western charity organizations do little to mitigate the problems of austerity measures (Young 2001, 55).

Other globalization proponents imagine "globalization-from-below" or "neo-globalization," in which the rule of law is exercised, the entrenched power of the global elite is checked, and international civil society organizations and local institutions play more central roles (Kaldor 2008; Flew 2020). In a broader sense, civil society is defined as a heterogeneous form of organizations, ad hoc associations, and various information and value exchange systems that negotiate contracts and social relations between individuals and political and economic authority (Keane 2003; Kaldor 2008). However, in recent years, the world has seen a decline in global civil society and democratization (Damarad and Yeliseyeu 2018; "Rise of Digital Authoritarianism" 2018), and the solidification of power by transnational corporations and nation-states. Environmental, human rights based, or other interest/affinity groups at the global scale still do not have structures and institutional frameworks to challenge either nation-states or corporate power (Flew 2020).

The inclusion of developing countries like Mongolia into the global information society and the discourse about the inequalities between developed and developing countries was spotlighted during the UN-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) between 1998 and 2005 (Warschauer 2003). During these meetings, the governments of non-Western countries, including China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, invoked the cultural rights of those who do not have access to technology and do not speak English, and argued for the multilateral governance of the internet and media institutions. However "politicized" this discourse was, international organizations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), have developed inclusive policies and technological standards to ameliorate technological, linguistic, and economic inequalities in the increasingly globalized world. Otherwise, new technology like the internet in an already unequal society exacerbates existing disparity between developed and developing countries, also known as the global digital divide (James 2013; Norris 2001; Stevenson 2009; Qureshi 2012; Warschauer 2003). The term "digital divide" dichotomizes "haves," who have the knowledge and resources to use information technology, and "have-nots," who do not possess such knowledge and resources. According to this knowledge gap thesis, people with better socioeconomic status, better education, and greater resources tend to adopt earlier and faster

than the general public with less education and fewer resources, and the gap increases over time.

The abundance and low entrance threshold of digital media have increased the number of online media outlets, leading to a "hybrid" political media environment in which the ways political information is created and circulated have changed (Chadwick 2017; Voltmer et al. 2021). Political elites in quasidemocracies must accept some plurality of voices in the age of social media, but in praxis, they routinely instrumentalize media for their own political and economic purposes. When newspapers move online, and television stations and cable networks stream all day, they compete for purportedly infinite ads, thus lowering the cost of advertisement in local media. In Mongolia, the small media market and the scarcity of advertising money in local news media interact with the increasing takeover by big digital platforms, exacerbating their economic vulnerability. This situation makes them easy targets to be captured and weaponized by politicians and corporations as media scholar Schiffrin (2021) and others observed in different countries.

New global institutions such as ICANN have emerged centered around the "central organizing pillar" in global media and communication policies (McQuail in Mansell and Raboy 2011, 2), as the power of dominant multinational corporations (MNC) like Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple, and Microsoft (GAFAM) has been unbridled in implementing neoliberal economic agendas onto developing countries (Mueller 2010; Stevenson, 2009). Despite various criticisms of these institutions, in this book I argue for the usefulness of the international policies of media governance institutions. Mongolia recently made significant strides in increasing access to mobile phones and the internet and carried out government-led programs toward an information society. In the last decade, social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have become a major source of information for many Mongolians. Like in other countries, Mongolians revere these technology corporations and often overlook their profit-making motives. Most Mongolians believe in the inevitable benefits of technology and have little understanding of their embedded "algorithmic biases" (Woolley and Howard 2016) or the "shadow texts" (Zuboff 2019, 186) of social media.

In media studies globally, researchers apply the theories of deliberative democracy and posit that communicative and informational potentials afforded by the internet and new social media allow people to engage in online deliberation or the "public sphere" (Habermas 1989) by discussing common affairs rationally and freely (Dahlgren 2005; Halpern and Gibbs 2013; Lokot 2020). The internet and social media platforms are often

unproblematically associated with increased access to information, thus, robust dialogue and deliberation in emerging democracies. Social media platforms enable connectivity, networking, and dialogical interactions, yet they sometimes constrain certain actions following their inherent "hidden" algorithms of tracking and profiteering (Bucher and Helmond 2017; Poell and van Dijck 2015).

Shoshana Zuboff (2019) in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for Human Future at the Frontier of Power* provides convincing accounts of a new form of surveillance capitalism in which human experiences and private communication activities are inconspicuously dispossessed from people by surveillance capitalists entities like Google, Apple, Microsoft Amazon, and Facebook to create "predictability products" for advertisers and stockholders in addition to natural and capital resources. This new surveillance capitalism radically differs from previous capitalist relations in their relationship with the "masses." They are much more removed from the workers who would have produced and bought their products as in the case of General Motors, for instance, which needs the masses in both producing the cars and purchasing them. Big tech companies employ fewer employees and their products, like a parent vaccination Facebook group or Instagram photo, do not cost a thing for Facebook, for example, and are created by individuals who believe in choice and self-determination in constructing their "self" online. Omnisurveilling corporations that know everything about their users and that also master "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2003) and behavioral instrumentation techniques, constantly track, nudge, and surveil everyone (Zuboff 2019). The surveilled, on the other hand, know little about the corporations and are often full of angst and distrust in our hollowed out institutions.

Following the lines of critical scholars who position the "information society" within broader digital capitalism (Schiller 2000; Hassan 2004) and, lately, "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019), I intend to contribute evidence from the periphery. This way, the historically prominent "information society" thesis by theorists such Castells (2000) and Bell (1976) in the twentieth century will be contextualized in Mongolia. How do Mongolia's institutions, society, and culture encounter the global information society? How do media that went through radical political and technological changes shape Mongolian society and culture? How is this media shaped as well by Mongolian society and culture? These are the questions I strive to answer in this book. I examine Mongolia's information society and media development in a broader, globalized media context and in relation to international media governance policies and practices.

Historical Origins of Mongolian Communication Systems and Media

Chinggis Khan's empire and its efficient pony express military campaigns and communication system are documented in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, half epic and half historical work written in the thirteenth century by an unknown author, who was close to the inner circle of the Mongolian court ("The Secret History of the Mongols" 2001). The author historically documented the rise of the empire and its military sagas. Even though the text in printed form was lost for a long time, it has played a significant role in Mongolian oral history and in preserving national identity during the colonial period. *The Secret History of the Mongols* is studied in schools in Mongolia following the democratic revolution of 1990, and people often refer to excerpts of the text as unifying passages for the nation. During the socialist era, Chinggis Khan was portrayed in textbooks as a bloodthirsty tyrant and any attempt to reevaluate this position was prohibited by the communist party. He was loathed by the Russians because of the two-century colonization of Russia by the Mongols, but his historical role was reevaluated by the reformers. Mongols now see him as the founder of the Mongolian State.

The independent Mongolian monarchy led by the religious leader Bogd Khan, at the beginning the twentieth century was short-lived, from 1911 to 1919. Mongolia announced its independence from China in 1911, taking advantage of the Chinese Revolution. However, Chinese troops of the nationalistic government of China led by the Kuomintang party invaded Mongolia in 1919, and in 1920 the Russian anti-Bolshevik group called the White Guard entered Mongolia promising to restore the "Yellow Faith Lamaism" (Sanders 1987). In 1921, a small revolutionary group led by Sükhbaatar and Choibalsan with the military support of the Red Army and financial aid from the Comintern (Communist International) in Mongolia established the Mongolian People's Republic. Mongolia became the second socialist country in the world and remained so until the democratic revolution of 1990.

The socialist legacy in Mongolia was characterized by communist party rule under direct guidance from the communist party of the Soviet Union. People's individual freedoms were limited; people were isolated from the outside world, and they suffered from an inefficient, centrally planned economy. The communist party ideology was based on the principles of democratic centralization at all levels of society. Democratic centralization meant a chain of command from the top down, majority rule, unquestionable loyalty to party ideology, strict party discipline, and the superiority of higher party bodies over lower ones (Tumur-Ochir in Sanders 1987). Each economic and social unit in Mongolia had a body of the communist party overseeing

its activities. The communist party carefully appointed each government, political, and economic position based on loyalty and ideology. This system of personnel appointment was called the communist party "*nomenklatura* system" (Sparks and Reading 1998, 32). Ideologically, through democratic centralization, the *nomenklatura* system and various secret police institutions, the communist party built a state surveillance system. Socially and culturally, despite the repressive party state, the socialist legacy brought modernization and a social welfare system into Mongolia. Higher education was free, and the social welfare system was universal, yet there existed elite hospitals for high party members and special Russian schools for their children. It is not an easy task to evaluate the socialist legacy in Mongolia. Social welfare achievements of the socialist era are acknowledged even by such anti-Soviet democratic leaders as Baabar (1999). As I further discuss in chapter 2, the foundation of media systems in Mongolia, from the publishing house to radio and television networks, was laid out during the socialist era. Journalists and media practitioners, many of whom are women, gained education and worked as professionals, especially in the later stages of the socialist period. The socialist Mongolian state was repressive, especially during the earlier period. To maintain a regime that was so foreign to many Mongolians who were deeply religious, and tied to their ancestors' history and tradition, the communist party purged counterrevolutionaries, religious recalcitrants, feudal or capitalist elements, and critical intelligentsia. One of the earlier purges of the communist party was against Buddhist monasteries, the main ideological enemy of the communists. Confiscation of monastery property was followed by the demolition of monasteries and banishing of monks. Obviously, the economic policy of collectivization (*negdels*) of the pastoral nomadic economy and the expropriation of feudal properties by the state faced enormous resistance in the 1930s.

The somewhat egalitarian education and social welfare system in Mongolia created educated young people who were open to ideas of *perestroika* and *glasnost* taking place in the mid-1980s Gorbachev era in Russia and Eastern Europe. The Mongolian government led by the communist party was adopting similar policies for economic restructuring (*öörchlön baiguulalt*) and openness and freedom of expression (*olon urgalch uzel*) that paralleled perestroika and glasnost. Reevaluation of history, the relationship with Russia, and the questioning of the legitimacy of communist party rule all took place during these years of openness. However, slow changes and an economic downturn frustrated the raised expectations of people. Young intelligentsia and students wanted more radical changes in the political and social life of Mongolia. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and

the anticommunist revolutions in Eastern Europe favorably influenced the 1990 Democratic Revolution. Kaplonski (2004) and Rossabi (2005) point out the irony that many leaders of the democratic revolution of 1990 were the children of the politburo leaders of the communist party.

During the harsh winter of 1989–90, the Mongolian Democratic Coalition led by young intelligentsia and students organized a series of protests. This coalition demanded the resignation of the government, the establishment of a multiparty political system, and changes to constitution article 82 that legitimized the communist party as the only legal political party. To press the reigning communists, ten reformers went on a hunger strike between March 7 and 9, 1990 on Sükhbaatar Square. This hunger strike was supported throughout the country. The politburo resigned on March 9, and an interim government was established. In July 1990, the first parliamentary election with multiparty participation took place.

Though the 1990 Democratic Revolution occurred without violence, many reformers' lives were at stake. Western scholars have given little attention to the 1990 revolution in Mongolia (Kaplonski 2004; Rossabi 2005). The literature on the revolutions that took place in former socialist countries during 1989–90 argues that these revolutions were largely "melancholic" or "negotiated" (Holmes 1997; Sparks and Reading 1998). However, as Holmes (1997) notes in her book *Post-Communism* the events in these former socialist countries were unquestionably revolutionary in terms of their outcomes and the way they happened. She calls the democratic revolutions between 1989 and 1991 "double-rejective revolutions" (14). That is, they threw off both external domination by the former Soviet Union and the repressive communist party control. Indeed, the democratic revolution, as well as the aftermath developments in Mongolia, showed the rise of nationalism and the rebirth of religion that had been outlawed during the socialist period. Mongolian traditions, Mongol traditional script, and images of Chinggis Khan suppressed during the socialist era were reintroduced by reformers.

Since the democratic revolution of 1990, Mongolia has been transitioning away from the communist political system and a centrally planned economy toward democracy and a market economy. The direct result of the democratic revolution of 1990 was the ratification and adoption of the new Constitution of Mongolia in 1992. According to the new constitution, Mongolia established a mixed, parliamentary/presidential government system with independent legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The legislative branch represents the unicameral State Great Khural with seventy-six seats elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms. The executive branch is headed by the president, elected by popular vote for the period of four

years. The president has the power to veto bills, but can be overruled by a two-thirds majority of the parliament. The parliament appoints the prime minister and the cabinet in consultation with the president. The new political system has faced several challenges in the fifteen years since independence that triggered constitutional crises and led to frequent resignations in the government (Ginsburg, 2005).

Postcommunism in economic terms means replacing a centrally planned economy with liberalized economic systems and replacing state and collective ownership of enterprises with private ownership. Liberalization tends to mean a liberal price system that is coordinated by market competition rather than a centrally planned distribution of resources and wealth. In postcommunist countries, massive privatization programs took place using the different methods of a voucher scheme, an employee share scheme, a joint venture with foreign ownership, and direct foreign investment. Radical economic changes have led to the noticeable deterioration of the social welfare system which has become a source of nostalgia for the socialist era.

Media and Mongolian Identity

All sorts of media, from text messages to music, have become a part of who we are, what our identity is, and what we aspire to become. We fuse media into our lives to such a great extent that media construction has become essential to our everyday lives (Deuze 2011). The internet and media coming from outside of the country bring unknown, distant imaginaries and differing values, and tend to undermine national identity (Poster 2001).

Communication scholars Albert Bandura (1986) and George Gerbner et al. (1980) explain how young people learn socially from media and how television shows "cultivate" values in the long term. Media's cultivating effects can be seen by examining the influences of Korean television dramas on Mongolians over the last twenty years. The recent inroads of the Korean cultural wave, from the boy band BTS to a myriad of television dramas on Mongolian television channels, have persistently influenced the value systems and national identity of Mongolians. Korea is the fourth-largest trading partner of Mongolia after China, Russia, and Japan, but the Korean cultural influence on Mongolians has spread widely and persistently. In 2004–5, for example, the television drama *Dae Jang Geum*, about royal chef *Dae Jang Geum*, "taught" about Korean cuisine, history, and business ethos and swept the city streets empty when the show was broadcast on television. Over the years, many Mongolians learned from Korean dramas

how to keep a house, wash clothes, or conduct business. Supermarkets like Emart, restaurants like *The Bull,* and convenience store GS25 in Ulaanbaatar all emulate Korean stores and products. Savvy Korean businesses effectively leverage their sales with product placement and advertisements in television shows and other media and then stock the shelves.

The role of media in constructing Mongolian identity is one of the foci of this book. The relationship between the concepts of national identity and nationhood is often fraught. In media studies, the media's role has been double-sided, helping to construct and deconstruct national identities. While the printing press contributed to the formation of nation-states, new digital media contributed to the undermining of nation-states. The printing press and written scripts have factored into the uniformity and standardization of national languages and, thus, of national identity. One might argue that *The Secret History of the Mongols*, a sacred text depicting Chinggis Khan's reign in the thirteenth century could have played a similar role for Mongolians as the Bible did for European nations. Mongol scholars and anthropologists argue that the nomadic aristocracy depicted in the text formed the Mongolian national identity till the twentieth century (Munkh-Erdene 2006; Sneath, 2010). Even many contemporary Mongolians who live in the city identify with their nomadic roots and traditional identity (Empson 2020).

Historically, Mongolians have used a variety of written scripts, of which the longest-lasting script was Uighur of Arabic origin. From the thirteenth century until 1941, the Uighur script was an official written language. However, after the socialist revolution under the influence of the Soviet Union, the Mongolian State in 1941 switched to the Cyrillic alphabet used in the Soviet Union. Some Mongolian researchers argue that the switch to the Cyrillic script helped the government to eradicate illiteracy in the 1940s more than the earlier efforts between 1921 and 1940 using the Uighur script because of the close correspondences of the written and spoken words in Cyrillic (Batchuluun and Khulan 2005). Like other former socialist countries, the literacy program during the socialist era succeeded, reaching 97 percent of the population.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991 the Mongolian Parliament attempted to revert back to the Uighur script from the Cyrillic alphabet; however, this effort was abandoned due to the economic infeasibility. Uighur script is written vertically and has twenty four letters, each letter having three different forms in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of a word. Since the democratic revolution of 1990, the Uighur script has been taught in schools, but Cyrillic has remained the official written script in Mongolia. The Mongolian state has put further efforts into reviving the

traditional Uighur scripts gradually, as documented in the Mongolian Language Law of 2015, which mandates that official state documents and correspondences be conducted in both Cyrillic and Uighur scripts by 2025 (Enkhmaa 2015).

In addition to the Mongolian language, another important construct of modern "Mongolness" is geopolitical. The modern Mongol identity is often articulated as being different from the Chinese and Russians (Kaplonski 2004). The contemptuous distancing from the Chinese and Russian identities has an ironic twist to it, considering Mongolia's economic and trade dependency on its neighbors and the large ethnic Mongol groups living in both countries. Yet, Mongolia has adopted a national, not ethnic, identity construct. Castells (2009) discusses the emergence of the post-Soviet nation-states as an emergence "to assert their suppressed identity" (44). Even though Mongolia was an independent state during the Soviet era, the ideological and economic influences of the Soviet Union were very strong as in other post-socialist countries. As the proverb goes, "familiarity breeds contempt." Historically, after three centuries of colonization by the Qing dynasty (1691–1911), and seventy years of Soviet domination (1921–91), the independent "Outer Mongolian" identity has largely been geopolitically formed. One could say that this identity is built in "in-betweenness" and in contrast to Russian/European and Chinese/Asian identities. Ideologically, during the socialist era, Asian values, customs, and knowledge were associated with being backward and uneducated, while Russian and European education and values were seen as progressive and scientific. During the Soviet era, media mirrored Soviet media and propagandized the population with the superiority of Soviet cultural, social, and technological advancement, and "cultivated" socialist citizens as I will discuss in chapter 2 in detail.

Technologically, the Soviet *Intersputnik* satellite system relayed broadcast radio and television throughout Mongolia. Politically, the radio played the national anthem every morning, while Mongol TV's news programs reached all households with television sets, and helped instill socialist Mongolian identity during the socialist years. I argue that this oscillation between the Soviet past and nostalgia for the Soviet era, on the one hand, and an increasing aspiration for a technologically savvy Asian identity, on the other hand, is a part of contemporary Mongolian identity, at least in the cities.

Toward the end of the Soviet era in the 1980s and 1990s, almost ten thousand Mongolians studied in Russia yearly, and many spoke Russian fluently.[2] Russian authors have described how Russian identity is also split

2   I was one of those students studying in Russia to become an engineer.

between European and Asian identities, where the Asian part of Russia is seen as underdeveloped, and the European part of Russia is acknowledged as more progressive and advanced.[3] During the troubled Sino-Russian period of the socialist era in the 1960s–90s, Mongols allied with the Soviets. The anxiety and guilt also play into the psychic and symbolic inferiority and superiority of "Outer" Mongolians in relation to ethnic Mongols in its two neighbors. Billé (2015), in his book *Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence and Making of the Mongolian Identity,* argues that the historical Sinophobia of Mongolians toward Chinese is rooted in the internalization of Russian "orientalism." Even though Russia's influence was strong, Mongols held strongly to their ethnic Mongol identities because of the socialist-era restrictions on people's movement, and the marginalized status of Asian ethnic groups like Buryats, Tuvans, and Kalmyks within Russia. It is not surprising, then, that following the democratic revolution of 1990, which overthrew both Soviet domination and the communist party's rules (Holmes, 1997), Mongols turned to nationalism, the Buddhist religion, and the ancestral history of Chinggis Khan's empire that had been suppressed during the socialist period. During the Soviet era, any attempt to reevaluate Chinggis Khan's historical position was prohibited by the communist party, partly because of the occupation of Russia by Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

On the other hand, language distinction has always been a strong identity marker despite somewhat similar ethnic and racial identities between Mongols and Chinese. The state media cultivated propaganda against the Chinese, including locals of Chinese ethnic origins. The state propaganda was effective because only a few Mongolians spoke Mandarin and understood the Hanzi written system, and Mongols did not intermingle with the Chinese because of the language barriers. This propaganda was also ironically based on othering Inner Mongolians—ethnic Mongolian groups in China—who kept the traditional Mongolian script and ethnic traditions. The Uighur script has remained in use by ethnic Mongolians in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region along with Mandarin Chinese.[4] The patriarchal ideology in socialist Mongolia stigmatized hybridity, ostracized ethnic minorities, and devalued women in social and political spheres. For many Mongolians, the sovereign Mongolian identity meant the exclusion

3   See, for example, Dostoevsky's description of Kalmyks in *Brother Karamazov* and Alexander Kuprin's comparisons of two sisters: Vera, resembling a beautiful Englishwoman, and Anna, a Tatar Mongol princess, in *The Garnet Bracelet.*

4   Around five million ethnic Mongolians live in Inner Mongolia of China as of 2019 according to Chinese Census Data. https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/InternationalTraining/202405/P020201012524513990305.pdf

of hybridity and marginalization of ethnic groups in China and Russia. The nationalistic turn after the collapse of the Soviet system continued othering Inner Mongolians as Chinese, therefore not Mongolians, according to Bulag (1998), who identifies as an Inner Mongolian and researched nationalism and hybridity in Mongolia from 1990 to 1993 after the fall of communism. Bulag (1998) argues that this discourse was the continuation of socialist propaganda that splits national identity from ethnic identity. It appears that this political ideology is still dominating in social and cultural spheres, and Mongols continue to project onto Asians the othering discourse constructed during the socialist era, a process by which Russians themselves sought to demarcate from their "Asianness" as Billé (2015) argues. Here, you see the symbolic impact of texts from the thirteenth century and the socialist state propaganda of the 1970s–80s.

Opening the information and media spheres to the international inflow was one side of the transition from a socialist political state to a democracy. New Mongol identity is also constructed through the dismantling of the state media, which was an ideological mechanism for the socialist state, and by replacing it with new and independent media outlets and cultural organizations. The free agency of Mongolians and their free world citizen identity is even more pronounced on social media platforms. In the last thirty years or more, formerly state-owned media, from communist party newspapers to film studios, publishing houses, radio and television, and telephone and postal services, have mostly been privatized and transferred to public service entities in a short period of time, as I discuss in chapter 2. Ideologically and economically, the liberal media of the 1990s has become an outlet for ostensibly liberated individuals to speak freely and practice agency. Television and broadcasting transitioned to digital television and broadcasting, and the internet and mobile phones have saturated the urban markets and are rapidly flowing to the rural markets. The numbers of media outlets and accessible platforms indicate that people, in general, take advantage of free speech.

However, the institutions' routines and people's perception change gradually and in a continuum, as Caroline Humphrey (2002) explains in her book *The Unmaking of Soviet Life*. Following Humphrey and other postsocialist media scholars (Voltmer 2013; Voltmer et al. 2021), I discuss the "path-dependent" continuity of the institutional routines of the socialist era in modern Mongolia. Opening of the information sphere to international media was a major aspect of the transition from a socialist political state to a democracy. I argue that claiming one's agency and gaining one's voice in open and pluralistic media spheres has become a part of the Mongolian

identity projects of post-socialist subjects in the twenty-first century. I examine this part of "unmaking" of the Soviet past and the deconstruction of the socialist identity as a part of the Mongolian identity by examining the concept of "the public interest." I discuss how the term "public interest" gets conflated with the socialist-era term "*нам, олон нийтийн эрх ашиг*" (the interest of the party and the public) that sacrificed the interests of the people in the name of the interests of the communist party. Even after the Law on Public Service Radio and Television was ratified and MNB (Mongolian National Broadcaster) was transferred to public service media in 2005, academic and journalistic circles are not sure which voices the public broadcasters should amplify, or how journalists avoid following the officials in their routines.

The Debates and Arguments about Information Society and Media in Mongolia

Throughout this book, I document how Mongolians, to an unprecedented extent, use ICT and digital media for getting news, learning, entertaining, and participating in politics. Mongolians have joined the global information society by creating Mongolian language content on YouTube and using media to express and participate in their culture and politics using Twitter (now X) and Facebook. The country's relatively young and networked population is responsive to news and information on platforms like Facebook, which accounts for 65–70 percent of online activities, according to Statcounter GlobalStats (2019).

In contemporary Mongolian public spheres, East Asian cultural influences collide with the socialist era's informational and media systems. This book starts with a chapter discussing the production of Mongolian computers Monel and how this initiative was eclipsed by imports of chips and computers from Taiwan, Korea, and China. Datacom's launch of the internet, supported by international aid organizations, also replaced the relatively new informational networks at the statistical office supported by the Soviets. In these processes, Mongolians started to leave behind the socialist identity aligned with the Soviets and move toward a more international and cosmopolitan identity. Unknown to many Mongolians, global governance institutions WSIS, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), UNESCO, and ICANN have created technological standards and culturally inclusive policies that were helpful in accommodating both Mongolian Cyrillic and traditional scripts on the internet. In this sense, I argue that international

organizations fit into the symbolic "third neighbor" Mongolians long for beyond their two powerful neighbors.

Mongolians are eager to express themselves on social media, but they are encumbered by structural deficiencies and the political grip of media by the elite in the context of an unclear legal framework. Contrary to the normative expectations of media, an increase in connectivity and outlets in the digital media environment does not automatically translate into a plurality of viewpoints. A critical and historical examination of the media environment reveals opaque ownership structures, unclear legal frameworks, political capture of media, and financial dependency. As I argue in chapter 2, liberal "yellow" newspapers of the 1990s, new commercial television stations of the 2000s, and online news sites of the 2010s, all struggled to establish themselves with sufficient subscriptions, audiences, and financial independence because of the structural deficiencies of a small media market and limited advertising money along with the uncertain legal environment. In these reoccurring media development cycles, the historical and institutional path dependency of socialist-era media persists, as the media operates on shoestring budgets and only a few media outlets establish themselves financially. The elites exploit the financial dependency of local media, which are competing for a small amount of advertising money and government support, and instrumentalize them for their political and economic goals. The seamless mediatization of politics and culture in relatively open digital media spheres develops at an even pace with the declining trust in media.

The constitution of 1992 promotes a free press and the freedom of speech in the zeitgeist of the 1990s by prioritizing the eradication of socialist-era political censorship and communist party ideational control. When encountering new and unprecedented informational society challenges related to free speech, defamation, and privacy, Mongolian laws fall short in protecting investigative journalists and alternative voices. In 2022, the parliament passed a new batch of laws relating to online media activities, but the "state secrecy clause" unduly burdens journalists in defamation cases and creates chilling effects. Media is frequently instrumentalized by politicians, who exploit the flaws in the implementation process or are protected under the "state secrets" clause and libel laws. Uncertainties in the legal system and new criminalization of false information and defamation excessively burden journalists who investigate politicians and mining deals. Journalistic standards for watching the powerful and exposing corruption are in jeopardy in the current legal system.

In recent years, earlier informational society projects have been directly influenced by big mining projects, extractive endeavors that bring foreign

investment along with national debt incomparable to the informational economy. I compare the economic factors of invisible digital capitalism and brute mining capitalism within the debates of foreign investment and debt. I argue that the informational sector experts have created a network of epistemic and knowledge-based communities, which was influential in dealing with multinational companies, whereas the mining experts lacked the epistemic community. Mining influences, as the biggest economic sector in the country, spill over into politics and media, resulting in, for example, an unsustainable number of politically affiliated television stations and favorable media coverage of mining and government contracts. The national public sphere is intensely focused on the contracts between the Mongolian state and the multinational Rio Tinto corporation, and the economy has become lopsided and dependent on mining extraction. Civil society institutions and media organizations push the elite to legislate and develop transparent informational and media laws and practices for citizens; however, the elites manage to create practices that benefit their clientelist policies and these policies constrain media's societal roles and citizen's expressions.

To a limited extent, young reporters and investigative journalists in Mongolia carved out some spaces for their work by taking advantage of the immediate and viral affordances of online and social media, as I discuss of journalism and online websites later in chapter 5. While Facebook's features afford some civic discourse and online deliberation, at the same time the dependency on Facebook as the foremost news source leads to an increase in unsubstantiated, emotionally charged, and sensationalized news as Pickard's (2022) analysis of the American media suggests. For better or worse, news and information on social media challenge the role of legacy media as gatekeepers in Mongolia. At the same time, social media platforms also siphon off advertising money from local legacy media. The promises of "free" platforms and the opaqueness of ownership of the news websites that allow the channeling of political money into Facebook and other online sites need to be critically examined.

Furthermore, politicians and businesspeople sign contracts for nondisclosure agreements with media organizations and conduct pseudopolls without telling how these polls factor into their decision-making. I examine these new forms of political communication by looking into the opinion polls conducted by former Prime Minister Saikhanbileg and current Ulaanbaatar Mayor Sumiyabazar. This veneer of online participation without analysis and policy outcomes does not increase public discussion but tends to simply encourage citizens to vent. *Попох* or political populism, has become popular

in Mongolia as well as in the world, and politicians increasingly utilize new forms of technopopulism in order to garner the support of the public and to legitimize their actions. Populism is common in a liberal democracy and can be compared to the direct democracy approach in the earlier years of the internet. Both the elite and the public have their own dominating and subverting communication strategies that are discussed in chapter 5 in more detail.

Notes on Methodology and Sources

My method and approach in this project combine both social scientific and qualitative humanistic approaches. As a person who was involved in information society projects in Mongolia, and is currently an academic in the communication field in the US, I am interested in globalization, international communication regimes, postcommunism, and development theories that relate Mongolia to the current information society worldwide. Data and excerpts in this book come from primary and secondary sources collected using desk studies, online and in person surveys, and in-depth interviews. During my early career, I studied as an engineer, interned at Monel and managed the internet program of the Open Society Foundation of Mongolia. I include my reflections on significant events, such as the first National ICT Summit in 1999. I also conducted numerous interviews with young people and media professionals over the years, especially during the summers of 2015 and 2019 and a half-year field trip in 2022. The interviews were conducted with flexible schedules in Mongolian, and excerpts were translated into English.

Overviews of the Chapters

The book is organized into seven chapters, including this introduction and a conclusion. The introduction provides the origin and context of media and information society development in Mongolia, and discusses identity projects in the information society as well as major debates and arguments.

In the chapter 1, I trace the historical development of ICT initiatives during the socialist and postcommunist eras. Spotlighted are the first production of personal Monel computers in the late 1980s under the influence of Asian industrialization, the adoption of the internet between 1996 and 97 with the support of international organizations that replaced the socialist

cybernetics network, and the ICT Summit and formation of an epistemic community which created ICT Vision in 1999 under the auspices of the UN and the Open Society Institutions. Two cases of Mongolian Cyrillic letter issues in the international standards and the development of country code top-level Latin and international domain names highlight the influences of international media governance organizations.

In the chapter 2, I trace the convergence between traditional media of the socialist era and new liberal media amidst dramatic political and economic changes. The chapter starts with the establishment of the first newspaper and ends with the burgeoning social media platforms used for civic and everyday life. To examine how people's understanding of media concepts such as the public interest and the roles of the press in democracy has been constructed, I examine the transition to digital television in Mongolia between 2014 and 2016 and the rise of commercial televisions in the 2010s. Broadcasting and digital transformation cases show how the elites instrumentalized the media for their political benefits in the blatant way they controlled media during the socialist era and undermined the possibilities for investigative journalism. Media literacy among the public who have lived under the propagandistic media to some extent dovetail with "the hive mentality" or group dynamics of social media.

Chapter 3 examines how foreign investment and new mining wealth influence media and informational spheres in Mongolia. The mining boom in the country from 2008 to 13 tripled the economy, lured an influx of foreign investment, and increased living standards and access to technology for Mongolians. The influence of foreign investment, along with vicious debt cycles are discussed by comparing the mining and the information technology sectors. The mining money cycles back to the public spheres by the increased number of politically aligned television stations and websites, exploiting the unclear legal structures.

Chapter 4 describes the legal environment in relation to the media and informational spheres. Libel and defamation cases in legacy media, misinformation, and commercial speech on social media all test Mongolia's new constitution of 1992. The poor implementation of existing media laws and new provisions on the "state secrecy clause" and defamation cases creates chilling effects for journalists.

In the chapter 5, I provide the cases where new media, gender, and environmental organizations utilize the internet and social media affordances for civic purposes. The civic discourse expands, yet the civil discourse often gets sidetracked or "instrumentalized" by the elite and politicians who also pander to technopopulism.

The concluding chapter summarizes the confluences of media, geopolitics, and platform politics globally and locally in Mongolia. It draws conclusions about what could be learned from the Mongolian case in terms of the media's roles in local politics, culture, and society in the globalized world. It also summarizes how media affect national identity, and the global challenges of social media platforms in local politics.

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