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To cite this article: Devina Sarwatay (2021): Alternative approaches to studying media policymaking in the Global South (review of *Community Radio Policies in South Asia* by Preeti Raghunath), *Media Asia*

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2021.1881288>



Published online: 04 Feb 2021.



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Alternative approaches to studying media policymaking in the Global South (review of *Community Radio Policies in South Asia* by Preeti Raghunath)

DEVINA SARWATAY 

The Global South in general and South Asia in particular are fertile grounds for studying media, policies, and policymaking. The demographic dividend, potential for growth, and rich histories and cultures of these regions make them ripe for media and policy upheavals. Studying the history and the making of these policies make for a compelling read. Besides, a fresh approach is long overdue, given that this region has grown beyond the legacy of its colonizers (Alhassan & Chakravartty, 2011). We also need alternative frameworks to study transnational public spheres (Crack, 2008) in the current geopolitical climate. This is evident in the book *Community Radio Policies in South Asia: A Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach* published by Springer Nature in 2020 as the author, Preeti Raghunath, conducts an expansive ethnography of nearly 100 community radio policy actors from four countries in the Global South (i.e., India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka).

Raghunath's massive undertaking to unpack the cultures of governance of community radio in the Indian sub-continent is based on her doctoral work and was supported by the UNESCO Chair on Community Media at the Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad, India; the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), specifically the Global Media Policy Working Group at IAMCR; and the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR). These institutions helped her with the resources needed for fieldwork to conduct this nuanced study of community radio policies from the bottom-up that led to the development of the author's "deliberative policy ecology approach". The latter sets the book apart, unearthing the background of media policymaking in postcolonial societies while intentionally moving beyond the confines of Eurocentric/Global North normative approaches. It also goes beyond mapping existing practices in community

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radio policymaking to the possibilities of this medium for, of, and by the people for positive social change at different levels and intersections from local to global. This monograph is, hence, part of the Palgrave Studies in Communication for Social Change Series (PSCSC) edited by Pradip Thomas and Elske van de Fliert of the University of Queensland.

The author divided the book into seven chapters, taking her readers through the different contexts and countries in each one based on the dominant theme identified. This approach lends discernability over a cut-and-dry country-wise chapterization which would not have had the same impact. These common threads through the chapters help readers see the evolution of policymaking in the four countries. The author's deliberative policy ecology approach and the policy ethnography method emerge as alternative approaches to studying media policies in the Global South. Raghunath chose to write in the first person, establishing a connection to the story behind the research and hooking readers from the get-go.

The first chapter, "Media Policy Studies and Community Media", sets the tone of the book. The author described how policy turns into praxis which feeds into policy as she recounted several experiences and narratives of policy actors from the four South Asian countries. Raghunath used the first chapter to familiarize readers with basics: media policies, critically studying those policies, and the history and evolution of community radio. She also gave a broad overview of policy documents and environments to reveal different strands of theories that helped focus the study. Readers go in four different tangents – even as each one displays its peculiarities and underpinnings – unified by the central point of activism in community radio policymaking.

Given that there is no "singular" media policy as stressed in *The Politics of Media Policy* (2008) by Des Freedman (as cited in Raghunath, 2020, p. 4), she settled the various definitions first to clarify how she framed the concepts in her study. The myths and stereotypes that plague the theorizing of media policymaking are also discussed. This framing gives us an understanding of what media policies and their making entail, and how a critical approach that

foregrounds praxis while theorizing addresses important gaps in this inquiry. This not just shines a light on roles of the oft downplayed policy actors, sometimes by choice while other times by circumstance. It also allows the larger media ecology and political economy of community media policymaking to become more apparent. This is done through a brief historiography of the three paradigmatic shifts in communication and media policies of the Global North. While giving the readers this background, Raghunath also highlights the normative and its resurgence while asking pertinent questions, alluding to the ever-evolving nature of this media. She discusses key policy documents and outlines her theoretical framework driving the inquiry as well as her objectives and design of the study.

The second chapter, "The Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach to Media Policy" is the detailed introduction of the author's new heuristic device. The chapter clearly maps out the countries, their locations, and characteristics and how common threads can be pulled out from the empirical work even when the process has its advantages and limitations. She used this setup to also clarify her methodology of policy ethnography and her contribution of the unique deliberative policy ecology approach to study media policymaking of community radio in the four South Asian countries.

"The Postcolony and Its Radio" is the third chapter that discusses the history of radio and its governance in South Asia by drawing a timeline of significant events as impacted by the ever changing media policy ecology affected by the larger geopolitics of the area. This chapter is significant in its presentation of the state of affairs in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka as postcolonial nations sharing some similarities and differences. Raghunath also highlighted the importance of the critical approach she used in her study with the aim to decolonize communication and media studies. This decolonization, she stressed, can happen when we encourage the interweaving of praxis and research by taking a bottom-up, organic approach to studying media policymaking in the Global South through its own policy actors.

The next chapter, “A Glocal Public Sphere: Opening up of Radio to Communities in South Asia”, describes the specific countries and their experiences with community radio while highlighting the main theme that emerged from the author’s expansive fieldwork. But before this, she synthesized key milestones in the history of community radio in South Asia from 1977 to 2012 in a table that gives readers a snapshot of the evolution of this media in the four countries. She characterized the encounters with community radio of different countries as follows (Raghunath, 2020, p. 40):

The Sri Lankan experience of modernisation and community radio, the Nepalese experience of independent radio on air, understanding Legalese in the context of Sri Lanka, the Indian case of approaching airwaves as public property, and the Bangladeshi case of being the basket for development and its linkages with community radio are themes explored in this chapter.

The description helps evoke a clear picture as to the state of affairs of community radio in the four South Asian countries and sets the stage for the fifth chapter, “Plural Policy Actors and Narratives of Practice” which highlights experiences of policy actors from these countries. The liberal use of quotes from the participant interviews with the author, across the book and especially in Chapters 4 and 5, allows readers a closer look into their histories and cultures of community radio governance. These narratives and the author’s analysis juxtapose the State and these actors to foreground how media policymaking is not just a process of deliberation but also emancipation. It also demonstrates that policy documents have a life of their own. Their making and implementation impact the lives of people in general.

The sixth chapter, “Liminality, Sustainability, and the State”, showcases the role of conflict and the State in sustainability of community radio in South Asia. India negotiates with the State for a better deal, political upheavals problematize Nepal’s relationship with community media, Bangladesh deals with an ever mutating

community radio, and civil war ravages Sri Lanka. In this backdrop, Raghunath contextualized the evolution of community radio policymaking and raised questions of sustainability and the future of community radio in South Asia. She also analyzed the involvement of international organizations, donor agencies, and global entities interested in weighing in on these local/regional bodies within the milieu of communication for social change.

The final chapter, “A Critical Comparative Ecology: Connectedness, Contestation, Comparativity” shows a rhizomatic nature of community radio in the four countries as the author discussed the aforementioned themes. She exemplified how the deliberative policy ecology approach emerged and helped her conduct research with a sense of reflexivity. She wrote that this bottom-up approach “rooted in emancipatory politics” (Raghunath, 2020, p. 305) is an important step in decolonizing media and communication studies.

This book is useful to scholars of media policy studies and community media studies in particular and comparative media studies and global media studies in general. It may also appeal to audiences like me who study digital and social media, or even those interested in artificial intelligence, algorithmic systems, machine learning, and the internet of things, not to mention the allied fields in communication and media studies, public policy studies, governance and administration scholars. The deliberative policy ecology approach can be an interesting lens to view the ongoing debates in policymaking.

Raghunath’s overall bottom-up, contextual, culture-centered, and pluralistic approach is a step towards decolonizing media and communication studies as it foregrounds the participants’ voice through research. This is an important endeavor in making community radio truly democratic (Tacchi, 2005) for its active citizens (Rodriguez, 2004). While the author is not an activist, her work lets the activism of her policymakers and negotiators stand out.

Raghunath’s work is in great company with the recently published edited volume on *Community Radio in South Asia* (Malik & Pavarala, 2020)

which is much broader. This was published after their book *Other Voices: The Struggle for Community Radio in India* (Pavarala & Malik, 2007). The 2020 volume, of which Raghunath wrote a chapter, features practitioner perspectives and “NGOisation” of community radio, as well as issues of democratization, management, gender, conflicts, and sustainability.

Her weaving of narratives could come across as jolting at first. Readers should be reminded that this is a multi-sited, multi-situated, and complex narrative and analysis of a massive region within the Global South. However, the author should have found a way to graphically represent some aspects of her work for better understanding. Raghunath’s effort has led to the development of a novel heuristic device in the deliberative policy ecology approach to study the South Asian public sphere and unpack its narratives. The author should continue to develop it further.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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