

BOOK REVIEW

Media Policymaking at the Core of Anthropological Concerns in South Asia: *Community Radio Policies in South Asia: A Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach* by Preeti Raghunath, (2020). Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan

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Preeti Raghunath's monograph *Community Radio Policies in South Asia* examines the Community Radio policymaking process in four South Asian countries – India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka – on Community Radios. This cross-disciplinary project draws from multiple traditions ranging from political economy and history to grounded theory and anthropology and proposes a new theoretical paradigm – the Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach – to study policy formulation in postcolonial societies with a ground-up, holistic perspective in South Asia. The book is published by Palgrave Macmillan as part of their series 'Palgrave Studies in Communication for Social Change'. This review of her book discusses her argument and treatment of ethnographic material in the context of scholarship on media anthropology.

Keywords: community radio; South Asia; media anthropology; media ethnography; policy studies; deliberative policy analysis

Introduction: Anthropology and Media Policymaking

In recent decades, the anthropology of media in South Asia has witnessed scholarship on audiences, media production, visual and material culture, and media use. Use of anthropology in media policymaking is an even more niche area within this body of scholarship, carrying with it an enormous potential to contribute to the understandings of participatory communication, administrative implementations, and decision-making among policy actors. Traditional studies of media policy have privileged the state actors or private players without giving much space to the non-state or the non-elite policy actors. Preeti Raghunath's monograph is a unique contribution to this subfield in several ways. It is a study of the policymaking of Community Radio in South Asia using a bottom-up approach that eventually contributes to the author's original theoretical contribution – the 'Deliberative Policy

Ecology Approach'. The book dispels the conventional notions of media anthropology studies in our minds to make space for a refreshing critical policy ethnography that allows for reflexive engagement with field data from four countries. This approach not only distinguishes 'media development' from 'media *and* development' but ties them both together in this book. This monograph is not a media anthropology project as we conventionally understand it but draws from, and contributes to, it in significant ways.

Raghunath's expansive cross-disciplinary research included nearly 100 Community Radio (henceforth CR) policy actors in four South Asian countries – India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Raghunath, 2020 [and subsequently]). The author's 'Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach' is meticulously designed to analyse participatory communication's deliberative nature of social change. It focuses on 'the making of policies for CR from the ground-up' (27) – showing how studies on media policymaking warrant, and would benefit from, an anthropological lens in understanding the 'various actors across the global-local spectrum, the norms and values they espouse, the rationalities and rhetoric that emerge, and the Connectedness, Contestation, and Comparativity, that is inherent to the process of media policymaking' (27).

In this review of Raghunath's book, based on her doctoral project, I discuss her treatment, and contribution, of ethnographic material through the lens of an 'anthropology of media'. As a researcher in the field, I found this book to be methodologically unique, wherein owing to her expansive ethnographic and archival data collection, her analyses allow for reflexivity that 'mirrors the practice of policymaking itself, which is a complex activity' (64).

The first three chapters are dedicated to building historical, political and cultural contexts in the four countries, with little engagement with any ethnographic evidence. The author particularly uses the second chapter to define and explain her new heuristic device, a 'Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach to Media Policy' and her methodology of deliberative policy analysis. The contextual history in the third chapter that sets the tone for the analytical chapters is meticulously detailed with data from every pertinent primary and secondary source – political histories, epistemic communities, government officials and locals, to name a few. The author accounts for factors at social, political and historical levels that govern media policies in the four countries.

The strength of this bottom-up approach is that the author uses the ethnographic evidence to foreground the political mediation in the policy-making process regarding community radio in the said countries (participatory communication approach) instead of studying upwards by analysing elite discourses. As the author states, studies like these:

... privilege the state actor, and the policy documents become the points of analyses of ethical and knowledge claims, thereby producing and reproducing structures of domination. Critical approaches to policy analysis, on the other hand, delve into post-positivist, value-laden policy analyses. Diverse viewpoints and knowledge claims become imperative to such an understanding of policy. (28)

This book also stresses the ethnographic method as a promising way to advance the concept in studying policy, especially in a constructivist study of media policy. For instance, the author observes that conventionally, 'the epistemic community loses its importance in the policy process once the transfer of knowledge occurs' (70) and that the 'paradigm of knowledge in question may become commonplace and hence not require the expertise of the community' (ibid.). This book, which studies 'the temporal, spatial factors emanating from the contextual setting in which these communities operate' (70), argues that the emergent knowledge will explain how the epistemic community transforms itself 'to continue to stay relevant in the

policy process, which itself could have been transformed by virtue of changes in the context in which it is located' (70).

While traditional policy analyses stress aiming for 'value-neutral theorising, critical approaches to the study of policy call for the dissolution of structures of domination' (29), using primary data from over 100 stakeholders at various levels, the author has argued for, and presented, a *value-laden* policy analysis, as she states that 'diverse viewpoints and knowledge claims become imperative to such an understanding of policy' (28).

Collating evidence from various media policy stakeholders across local, regional, national and international levels *along* with contextual and archival data on norms, values, rationalities and rhetoric was a tedious yet rewarding research-design effort that the author undertook. For instance, one of the study's research objectives was 'to explore how policies with respect to CR are crafted in said countries, with an effort towards understanding the various norms, values, and discourses associated by various policy actors with CR' (35). Another research question that could not have been addressed without an ethnographic detailing, asked: 'How do the contexts in which policies get made determine variance between policies?' (35). This critical policy ethnography not only draws from data across the four countries but is also replete with evidence from local venues within each of them, such as policy institutes, workshops, seminars, government ministries, and headquarters of international donor agencies and advocacy groups.

Chapters four, five and six are primarily where the author engages with the understanding of deliberative spaces as 'fora integral to deliberative systems and democracy' (59). The author discusses the processes by which policies pertinent to CR get made and goes on to engage with ethnographic data on 'key formal and informal (policy) actors across levels; venues where they interact; processes, mechanisms, and trajectories that policy negotiations take' (35). The analyses also benefit from a rich pool of participants ranging from community radio enthusiasts, activists and academics to international donor agencies, government representatives and media practitioners. The author critically examines the discussions and deliberations held across various levels of decision-making related to community radio policies and makes a case for grassroots voices claiming their legitimate space in policy decision-making.

The author claims that 'the chapters lay out thick description (Geertz 1973) of experiential narratives constructed from the vantage points of various policy actors' (61) and chapters five and six certainly substantiate this. To solidify her argument, Raghunath uses multiple sources of ethnographic data such as field notes, participant observations and interview (audio) recordings. The author's efforts seem painstakingly detailed owing to inclusion of 'diverse historical narratives of CR policymaking, wherever they existed' (61). She also uses ethnographic methods to *identify* and *establish* spaces for studying deliberative systems. For instance, in chapter four, the author shows how an 'informal venue of the tea party hosted after the regional convention ended emerges, over the next two decades, as a prime feature of community radio policymaking in Nepal and the region broadly' (158) and how these informal everyday locations are, in fact, deliberative spaces that provide for interaction amongst diverse policy actors. The policy research on community radio, thus, is studied as a dynamic process of anthropological interest in South Asia, rather than an archival project of only historical significance.

In chapter four, from where the ethnographic analyses primarily begin, the author has devoted a section to 'Advocating for Community Radio: The Early Days' which is a strong example of descriptive analysis and Raghunath weaves this narrative on Bangladesh community radio seamlessly, drawing from interviews as well as overt participant observation.

The fifth chapter showcases the 'plural articulations by diversified policy actors related to community radio in South Asia, presented as policy narratives' (192) and heavily draws from

anthropology and cultural studies. Here, the author engages with ethnographic material on the identity of policy actors and shows 'how ideas, norms, and adherence to certain epistemic values associated with CR come to colour the identity of policy actors for CR' (194). The interviewees – the policy actors in Sri Lanka – narrated their 'own understanding of this form of making media' (195) and the author used their ideas and articulations of CR and participatory communication to construct the notion of radio's *community* (198) in Sri Lanka.

It is the analyses in this chapter that are expected to particularly benefit the scholarship on media anthropology. Using primary data collected in Sri Lanka, this critical policy ethnography allows for an understanding of 'the epistemic forms and manifestations that the community broadcasting took' (195). This is a significant contribution that paves way for future ethnographies of the policymaking process, since it helps understand the conduct of broadcasting and its policies on ground in their various manifestations of practice, including interactions with each other as well as negotiations with the state broadcaster.

However, the abundance of variables in terms of sites, policy actors, issues, temporality, and methods make this a tedious project, one that would benefit from dividing this book into separate comparative ethnographies, so that each of them can be explored in greater anthropological depth. There are descriptions of the interview settings in several places throughout the study that are used for analyses later on. For instance, the author mentions that the 'interviews were mostly conducted in the natural settings of the policy actors, which allowed me to grasp the spatial settings that allowed for policy work for community radio' (63) and how the interviews with government officials in their respective Ministries allowed her to observe aspects like 'filing system for policies, the layout of different Ministries and official spaces, and bureaucratic hierarchies' (ibid.). The thick descriptions of the physical setting and its effect on stakeholders' power dynamics are teased out in chapters five and six, but the arguments rely heavily on data that largely keep the rich ethnographic description in the background. In other words, the arguments presented in the book evidently emerge from rich primary data, and yet they lack the ethnographic analysis that thick descriptions could have supplemented that with.

Community Radio Policies in South Asia provides fruitful material to remodel policymaking research for three key reasons. First, the book collates evidence from four different countries that bolsters her primary claim that policymaking is not a politically neutral enterprise and that a grassroots medium, like Community Radio, is even more vulnerable to currents from the activist, political and bureaucratic spaces than the mainstream media. Second, it takes into account the voices of the stakeholders at the bottom of the policy food chain, rooting her approach in emancipatory politics. It places immense power in the hands of grassroots policy actors in South Asia and shows how they can contour not only Community Radio programming but also the polity of its policymaking. Third, the Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach goes beyond Western philosophies in studying policy, since it goes beyond the experiences of liberal democracies and can be applied to most political systems.

The primary methodology as well as the analytical tool is deliberative policy analysis and not ethnography, and therefore, the contribution of this book to media anthropology lies in its engagement with ethnographic data in parts, rather than as an overarching theoretical framework. This book defines deliberative policy analysis as recognising 'the humans involved in a policy space, their practice of policy, their conversations, conflicts, reasoning, values, and norms, as well as their narratives and stories' (38). The focus of the book's Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach, the author's primary contribution to Policy Studies, is on 'uncovering shifts in terms of social status, the evolution of newer elites, shifting dynamics of power in terms of overthrows, shake-ups and subsequent consolidation, and subversive efforts' (74).

Overall, the book certainly draws from the author's immersive methods for data collection and compilation but lacks the rich descriptive analysis that an anthropological project demands. The analyses in the book are complete and significant on their own, but if this study were to seek its position in the area of media anthropology, it might need to focus more on drawing out the textures of ethnographic evidence that the author surely uncovered during her field trips.

The book takes the reader on an unusual epistemological journey – the process of CR policymaking – through various phases in four South Asian countries. From the rise of CR to their advocacy and participation, from politics of radio licensing to organisations working closely, Preeti Raghunath's monograph uses deliberative policy analysis not only as a methodology or an analytic tool but also for masterful academic storytelling.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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