Recuperating Areas: Research on Media and Communication History and South Asian Studies

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In this short piece I argue, as provocation, that a recuperated area-focused approach to the history of research on media and communication can remedy the twin problems of theoretical universalization and methodological parochialism that continue to persist in the field despite decades of critique. The former, of course, implicates the modernist project of developing theories of communication that stretch to explain much of the complexity of human behavior, and the latter involves the problematic assumption that what works well by way of technique in one place ought to be reproducible in others.

The need to do this is particularly urgent for scholars who are invested both in historicizing communication as well as the history of communication research per se. This is precisely because social scientific disciplines that seek to produce general laws about the world tend to be ahistorical and produce a kind of amnesia about the specific historical and cultural origins of concepts themselves, whether those are attribution theories, hypotheses about behavioral change, or even the concept of behavior itself. In contrast, contemporary area studies are by definition and character interdisciplinary; have objects of study that, at least at first blush, are spatially and temporally bounded; and in the current moment, mitigate historical disciplinary impulses towards theoretical colonization as well as methodological blinkers.

It is crucial to note, however, that the history of area studies is itself steeped in problematic discourses of containment. Said's famous critique of area studies argued that it was a manifestly orientalist

practice, where western experts produce knowledge about others, based on geographical and epistemic categories that suited the administrative calculus of Cold War politics: hence the revolving door in the midcentury United States between directors of area studies programs and the Federal Administration, especially the Department of State.[1] Yet, the very critique of these political and ideological configurations opened up fresh directions for inquiry and resulted in the increased uptake of work on transnationalism, coloniality, feminism, race, ethnicity, and sexuality in those very areas, often by scholars whose demographic profiles, political commitments and epistemic sensibilities were very different from those that preceded them.[2] Because of this, these former Cold War monikers themselves now sometimes function as resistant categories. The term "South Asia" for example, unlike other areas such as "Indic Studies" or "Indology," ensures that accounts of subcontinental politics and social life pay more scrupulous attention to political hegemonies, historical divides, and religious strife.

So rather than dispense with the notion of an area itself, I adopt as my first investment a recuperated area approach that is suited to advance how we view the histories of research on media and communication studies. This view does not implicate any unified categories for knowledge production; rather, it embraces transnationalism and the provisionality of borders, presumes epistemic multiplicity, and privileges knowledge production that is attuned sharply to transnational epistemic inequities. Further, it tilts towards privileging local and Indigenous knowledge production; and critically, draws inspiration from Chandra Mohanty's cogent decolonizing gesture, and treats the US itself as an area.[3]

My second investment in this piece is to speculate about how, in telling the history of media and communication research, one might also usefully problematize this history itself. I realize this impulse is shared by virtually every scholar who historicizes the history of communication inquiry and practice, but it assumes particular significance if one is to step outside the largely American and European ambits in which such histories are narrated, internalized, and ultimately, reified. This is precisely what contemporary area studies approaches militate against. South Asia has a rich history of media and communication studies which, while available in English, is considerably under-cited by media historians in the west, except when references are made to communication or media research "outside" the west. This, in turn, results in anything outside Euro-American history being defined largely in terms of its difference. For instance, Robert Oliver's *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China*, while in many ways a scrupulous account of the place of rhetoric

[1] For cogent critiques of the history of area studies, see Hossein Khosrowjah, "A Brief History of Area Studies and International Studies," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 31, nos. 3–4 (2011); and Vicente Rafael, "The Cultures of Area Studies in the United States" *Social Text* 41 (Winter 1994).

[2] See, for example, Laurie Sears's assessment of contemporary Southeast Asian studies in the essay "Postcolonial Identities, Feminist Criticism and Southeast Asian Studies," in *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects*, ed. Laurie Sears (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

[3] See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 2 (2002).

in the old and complex history of these two irreducibly different parts of the world, compromises itself by explicitly defining "Eastern" rhetoric in terms of its difference with the western tradition.[4] The approach I describe pushes back on this sort of deep orientalism because it insists that western frameworks provincialize their own work.

South Asian Studies are an interesting staging ground upon which to rest an area-focused view of research on communication and media history. There are many ways to write the history of research on media and communication studies in South Asia, as there are multiple senses in which one can apprehend what counts as "communication history"—ranging from accounting for the trajectory of a predefined body of work, to looking at what is constituted as communication across a range of scholarship, to reviewing how media and communication scholarship itself recounts the history of media.[5] Four approaches appear to be particularly salient in South Asia, each of which inevitably involves different kinds of inclusions and exclusions: a history of process, of specific media, of institutions, and of events (as opposed to, say, a focus on theories, methods, levels of analysis, or schools of thought). Of particular note is the fact that scholarly engagement with a particular kind of communication or media history has inevitably been accompanied by a scholarly review of the history of that engagement.

A focus on *process* entails examinations of the role that modernist logics of development, rationalization, and governmentality have played in the highly uneven and split growth of media and communication systems. A case in point is Bella Mody's analysis of the development of telecommunications in India, particularly its (neo)liberalization and privatization in the 1980s and 1990s, which she argues paradoxically reinscribed the power of the state.[6] Pradip Thomas's programmatic work on participatory development communication also documents the impact of modernist processes of rationalization and commodification upon community-based organizing efforts, focusing particularly upon research that illuminates how radical change can be domesticated by institutionalized NGO structures that rationalize, bureaucratize, and ultimately depoliticize potentially transformative movements.[7]

Another approach to writing a South Asian history of media and communication research is *medium-focused.* Some scholars have focused on the emergence of print media in the region, the first ever newspaper being *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*, published in 1780 by a renegade Irishman, which vigorously criticized Warren Hastings for two years before the East India Company seized control of it two years later.[8] Akhtar and his colleagues have analyzed how nineteenth

[4] Robert Oliver, *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1971).

[5] Peter Simonson et al., "The History of Communication History," in *The Handbook of Communication History*, eds. Peter Simonson et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[6] Bella Mody, "State Consolidation through Liberalization of Telecommunications Services in India," *Journal of Communication* 45, no 4 (1995): 115.

[7] Pradip Thomas, *Participatory Development Communication: Philosophical Premises*. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994). Also, Pradip Thomas, "Development Communication and Social Change in Historical Context," in *The Handbook of Development Communication and Social Change*, eds. Karin Wilkins, Thomas Tufte, and Rafael Obregon (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2014).

[8] Andrew Otis, *Hicky's Bengal Gazette: The Untold Story of India's First Newspaper* (New Delhi: Westland Publications, 2018).

century vernacular press in the subcontinent both supported and critiqued the British Raj[9] and, like others, have discussed its pivotal role in developing and creating community and public consciousness that often crossed caste and religious lines.[10] A myriad of other scholars have discussed the emergence of television in India and its central role in modern politics.[11] And there has been considerable attention paid in the last two decades to digital media; quite possibly the first book on the subject, *India's Information Revolution*, was authored by Arvind Singhal and Everett Rogers in 1988.[12] Histories of communication studies in South Asia are implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, built around the history of the study of any (or all) of these media.

A third approach to scholarship on media and communication history is *institutional.* Commentary in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly*, for example, has vigorously analyzed the role of the Press Council of India since its establishment in 1966, alternately bemoaning its power in the 1970s and critiquing its impotence in the current era. Other scholars have written about the establishment of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication in 1965 by the Ministry of Broadcasting and Information.[13] While these accounts often focus upon the history of specific media and research institutions, they implicitly and sometimes explicitly attend to the intellectual history that lies behind those institutions. In a 1989 special issue of *Media, Culture & Society* on Indian media and mass communication research, for instance, Vasudeva and Chakravarty analyze the epistemology produced by the Institute, examining the lasting influence of Nehruvian "scientific temper" upon the production of research.[14]

A final approach to the history of media and communication research is event-based. Creating event-histories provides a glimpse into the unfolding temporal impact of specific kinds of media. Rajagopal's analysis of the rise of right-wing Hindu politics, for example, was based on a deft analysis of the impact that highly watched, multi-year serializations of the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* had on publics across the country during a period when the state-funded broadcaster, Doordarshan, was moving away from its avowed emphasis on information and education, and towards entertainment.[15] Contemporary studies of the impact of *Ramayana* (including a recent re-telecast during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown) almost always recount the multiple strands of commentary and scholarship that have accompanied the broadcast of the series over the last four decades.[16]

One pivotal and highly studied event in the history of media and communication research in the subcontinent occurred during the 1970s, and recounting it provides a window not only into how media and communication research unfolded in the subcontinent, but also

[9] M. Javaid Akhtar, Azra Asghar Ali, and Shahnaz Akhtar. "The Role of Vernacular Press in the Subcontinent During the British Rule: A Study of Perceptions," *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 30, no. 1 (2010).

[10] Nazakat Hussain, "Role of Vernacular Press During British Rule in India," *International Education and Research Journal* 3, no. 5 (2017); and John Vilanilam, *Communication in India: A Sociological Perspective* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005).

[11] Nalin Mehta, ed., *Television in India: Satellites, Politics and Cultural Change* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[12] Arvind Singhal and Everett Rogers, *India's Information Revolution* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989).

[13] Keval Kumar, *Mass Communication in India,* 5th ed. (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 2020).

[14] Sunita Vasudeva and Pradip Chakravarty, "The Epistemology of Indian Mass Communication Research," *Media, Culture & Society* 11, no. 3 (1989).

[15] Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[16] See, for example, Ahutosh Kumar Pandey and Amitabh Srivastava, "Effects of Retelecast of TV Serial Ramayana on Indian Audience During Lockdown: A Survey-Based Study," *Journal of Critical Reviews* 7, no. 19 (2020).

illustrates the insight that an area-oriented approach can bring to research on communication and media history. In 1975, after nearly a decade of negotiation and preparation under the leadership of Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, popularly considered the founder of India's Space Program, and the signing of a 1969 agreement between the United States and India, NASA used its ATS-6 technology satellite to beam television programs about agriculture, family planning, and national integration from ground stations in Ahmedabad and Delhi to over 2,400 villages in six different parts of India.[17] These areas were specially selected because they were largely rural, impoverished, and home to Dalit and Adivasi communities. M.S. Gore, the Director of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences was commissioned to lead field studies of the impact that the broadcasts were having on communities. The experiment was called Satellite Instructional Television Experiment—more popularly, SITE.

[17] Noshir Contractor, Arvind Singhal, and Everett M. Rogers. "Metatheoretical Perspectives on Satellite Television and Development in India," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 31, no. 2 (1988).

The experiment continued for a full year and was discontinued by NASA in 1976 despite protests from a number of groups across South Asia, including Arthur C. Clarke in Sri Lanka.[18] As many as nine hundred people per television set watched SITE programming (although that number dwindled to about ninety people per television set in 1976). SITE is fascinating not only because it launched an entire generation of studies of television impacts in India, but also because it began the development of television and research on it across every country in South Asia. SITE sparked an intense amount of academic study of the relationship between television and social change. Scholars have heralded it as the largest television experiment in the world, and others have referred to it as the most heavily studied communication event in history.[19]

[18] Raman Srinivasan, "No Free Launch: Designing the Indian National Satellite," in *Beyond the Ionosphere: Fifty Years of Satellite Communication*, ed. Andrew J Butrica (NASA: NASA History Series, 1997).

[19] John Vilanilam, *Communication in India: A Sociological Perspective* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005): 147.

SITE has, of course, come in for considerable criticism. Many scholars have critiqued the impoverished view of television and its impact embedded in the study, as well as the unabashed elitism, itself a product of Cold War politics, that led to the creation of the experiment in the first place. As Siddiqi has recently argued, the experiment, a collaboration between elite groups in two different parts of the world, inevitably positioned rural communities in different parts of the country, often Dalit and Adivasi, as inactive recipients of knowledge, and in this sense, served to reinforce two starkly different images of India—one tech savvy, and the other deeply impoverished—that persist to this day.[20] More deeply, perhaps, SITE also makes visible the fact that much communication and media research in the country continues to be generated by Savarna upper-caste scholars, with Dalits either reduced to passive objects of research, and caste, more often than not, elided altogether as a subject of inquiry.

[20] Asif A. Siddiqi, "Whose India? SITE and the Origins of Satellite Television in India," *History and Technology* 36, nos. 3-4 (2020).

SITE can also be understood as helping reinscribe Indian hegemony in South Asia. This is not only because its scholarly research attracts greater international visibility in media and communication studies than does research from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, or Bhutan, but also because SITE is an integral part of a larger technology transfer project embedded in Cold War relationships and a rivalry with Pakistan that helped India accrue scientific and technological expertise at the expense of its neighbors.

And finally, a lesson from the SITE experiment that underscores an argument for developing and promoting an area-based approach to communication and media studies: SITE demonstrates that, from the get-go, research and scholarship about media and communication, even when it focuses upon one area, is almost inevitably transnational in some form. SITE was not an experiment that was internal to India, nor even between the US and India; it was caught up in a set of geopolitical relationships between state (and subsequently corporate) actors, and it carries a lesson for media historians: namely, that areas are always constituted by externals. In this sense, all aspects of media and communication history are always already international. And while bifurcating "US" from "international" (i.e. non-US) media and communication history may have been a useful staging ground upon which to expand how one tells such history,[21] it is time to move beyond that. For instance, rather than think about what impact "US" research has had on the world, it might behoove us to think more deeply about how US research itself has been constituted by externals, not only in terms of the tired relationship with ancient Greece in the speech communication wing of the discipline, but also in terms of the bodies of immigrants who have performed that research—the number of departments across the US which have relied upon graduate students who then became immigrants and then highly successful, US-based communication researchers in their own right. The history of communication studies is not static; it is composed of "the flows of people, the intersecting trajectories of individuals and social networks, and the peopling of institutions."[22] Acknowledging this means that we have to invert how we study areas—and that is exactly what the study of areas themselves helps us accomplish.

[21] See, for example, Peter Simonson and David W. Park, eds., *The International History of Communication Study* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[22] David Park and Meghan Grosse, "International Vectors in U.S. Graduate Education in Communication," in *The International History of Communication Study*, eds. Peter Simonson and David W. Park (New York: Routledge, 2015), 303.

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