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Ursula Rao. *News As Culture: Journalistic Practices and the Remaking of Indian Leadership Tradition.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2010. xii + 224 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-669-6.

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The Politics of News Reporting in India

Ursula Rao's book is an important addition to an increasing body of anthropological studies of journalism and news media. As a discipline, anthropology has been a latecomer to the study of media and news. However, during the last two decades, more and more anthropologists have turned their attention to this field of inquiry, examining news as a cultural phenomenon and thus attempting to depart from the previous approaches of sociology, journalism studies, or communication studies. Using ethnography as a methodological tool, many media anthropologists aim to liberate news research from its newsroom and audience bias, identifying and documenting multiple sites of news production, circulation, and consumption and often rejecting textual approaches for their failure to acknowledge that communication is far from being a linear process of transmission.

To be fair, the origins of these attempts to conceptualize news and journalism as culture and to challenge the transmission view of communication are more complex and interdisciplinary than some anthropologists (Rao included) are ready to admit. It was, after all, James Carey, the famous media and communication scientist who, influenced by the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz, proclaimed in 1989 that "news is a form of culture." He advocated a ritual view of communication which, in his opinion, would reconceptualize the study of news and newspapers. For Carey, "News writing, and reading, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world."[1]

It is these "contending forces" which shape the making of political news in contemporary India that Rao examines in her book. Her observations are based on fieldwork conducted between 1999 and 2002 in the northern part of India, with a main focus on the city of Lucknow, capital of the country's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh. Through an in-depth examination of journalistic practices at two Hindi and two English-language newspapers, occasionally complemented with insights from other news outlets, Rao discusses the changing contours of political news reporting in the aftermath of India's move towards economic liberalization in the early 1990s. Like other authors dealing with this topic (see, for example, Sevanti Ninan's *Headlines from the Heartland*), Rao's analysis draws on Robin Jeffrey's pioneering work on the Indian-language press. According to Jeffrey, the Indian newspaper industry underwent "revolutionary" changes since the late 1970s due to increasing literacy, improved technologies of printing and communication, and gradual commercialization through advertising, which enlarged participation in the public sphere.[2]

Building on this line of argumentation, *News as Culture* identifies commercialization and regionalization as the prevailing trends of the contemporary newspaper industry in India and documents these developments in three informative chapters which discuss local news-making, political reporting, and infotainment. Faithful to her pledge to analyze news "as a cultural practice" (p. 10), Rao does a wonderful job of following her journalist protagonists into the field. She succeeds in producing an account which demonstrates what she calls the "trans-institutional" character of journalism, as an enterprise which cannot be divorced from political institutions and practices.

The analysis begins with an outline of the changing relationship between the English and the vernacular press that draws attention to the impressive growth of the latter since 1979, when its circulation figures first overtook those of the English newspapers. While highlighting the distinct roles of the vernacular and English-language press in promoting regionalization and commercialization, respectively, Rao nevertheless insists that such a clear-cut differentiation "understates the com-

plexity of media practices" (p. 7). In chapter 2, however, the contrasts between the two sections of the Indian press resurface, as Rao describes the organizational structures and work routines at the four news outlets examined. Unlike English-language newspapers, where independence and "flat hierarchies" appear to be the norm, the working culture of the Hindi newspapers emphasizes hierarchy, seniority, and guidance. Furthermore, news coverage in Hindi newspapers tends to focus on local experiences and reflects a multiplicity of voices, as opposed to the elitist outlook of English-language coverage. Yet, Rao argues, in recent years the boundaries between the vernacular and the English press have become increasingly blurred as market liberalization, especially in the form of infotainment, has forced English-language newspapers to reconsider their conceptualization of news as a form of rational discourse.

Chapter 3 continues with a discussion of how various social actors are empowered through local news-making. Based on the examination of three case studies, Rao argues that not only aspiring local leaders, but also resource-poor citizens such as members of low caste groups use local news in order to promote their own interests and agendas. These findings support her argument that cultivating relations is an essential aspect of news-making, a point that is reiterated throughout the book and that becomes the basis for her conceptualization of the public as a network. One of the main merits of Rao's analysis is that it complicates the relationship between producers and consumers of news, demonstrating how the two categories overlap: news, in her account, appears less as the product of exclusive journalistic efforts and more as a co-production of various social actors. Journalists, local leaders, and resource-poor citizens are all empowered through these processes of news-making.

The importance of networks for news-making is further developed in chapter 4, in which Rao turns her attention to state reporters and their coverage of political leaders and institutions. News emerges as a commodity that journalists and their elite informants exchange. According to Rao, journalists invest more time in cultivating relations with top politicians than in collecting actual information and they create the illusion of professional independence through carefully enacted "performances of distance." In this way journalists reconcile a professional code which insists on objectivity and impartiality with a cultural code that places leaders at the center of Indian politics and political news reporting.

But, as chapter 5 demonstrates, economic liberalization challenges India's "tradition of leader centrism," forcing journalists to find novel ways of presenting news in a format that is both informative and entertaining. Increased independence from the state and political support in general has made politicians more vulnerable to media criticism and ridicule. However, dependence on private money has also promoted a type of news reporting which fails to engage critically with economic neoliberalism. Rao's description of the complex attitudes towards infotainment, both as a "new form of social criticism" and as "sensationalism" (p. 148), is particularly interesting and reminiscent of early twentieth-century lamentations about the "evil" effects of commercialization on Indian journalism.[3] In this respect, many of the developments she describes, such as commercialization, the so-called tabloidization of the press, and the coexistence of various visions of journalism would have certainly benefited from more historical insight. This would have also shown that relations and contestations have always been at the heart of news-making and journalism in India. During the colonial period as well, newspapers in India fulfilled a wider range of functions than usually acknowledged, a situation which defied neat correspondences between the language of publication of a newspaper and a particular vision of journalism.

The book is written in an accessible style marred only by occasional typographical mistakes. The author skilfully navigated a particularly challenging ethnographic field and has produced a work demonstrating thorough, firsthand knowledge of the complex and often hidden mechanisms of news production in contemporary India. Extensive engagement with secondary literature in English and German renders the book particularly useful to students and specialists of the media from various disciplinary backgrounds. The book might also appeal to readers with a general interest in Indian politics and the media.

Notes

[1]. James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009 [1989]), 16.

[2]. Sevanti Ninan, *Headlines from the Heartland: Reinventing the Hindi Public Sphere* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007); Robin Jeffrey, *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian-Language Press, 1977-99* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2000).

[3]. See, for example, Pat Lovett, *Journalism in India* (Calcutta: The Banna Publishing Company, [1926?]), in particular p. 24: "Commercialization again! It has entered every department of life. Journalism in India could

no more resist the invasion than journalism in England or elsewhere in the British Empire, for it had to be recognized that the modern newspaper depended for its financial success primarily upon its receipts from advertisements; and blatant puffing, however crude in expression, is dearer to the advertiser's heart than grace of style."

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