

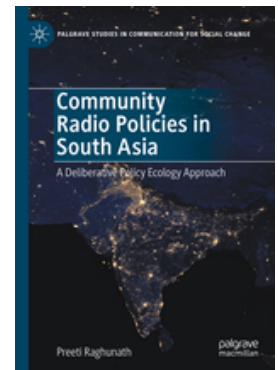
# Book Review: Community Radio Policies in South Asia: A Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach by Preeti Raghunath

*In **Community Radio Policies in South Asia: A Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach**, Preeti Raghunath presents a policy ethnography that studies community radio policymaking in four South Asian countries: India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. This rich work can help academics, researchers and those working in the public policy space to understand the importance of deliberation among policy actors, writes **Kamesh Shekar**, and shows how history has shaped the current media policy landscape in these four South Asian countries.*

**Community Radio Policies in South Asia: A Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach.** Preeti Raghunath. Palgrave. 2021.

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In [Community Radio Policies in South Asia: A Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach](#), Preeti Raghunath uses the emerging concept of policy ethnography to study community radio policymaking in four South Asian countries: India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. She adopts and introduces a bottom-up approach called the 'deliberative policy ecology approach'. Moving away from the state as a single policy actor, she explores other policy actors and factors that shape community radio policies in South Asian countries. She also draws out connections and comparisons between various policy actors within and beyond the borders of the four South Asian countries to highlight the unifying yet contested strands behind community radio policymaking. The book takes us on a historical journey showing paradigms of community radio policies in the four countries in pre- and post-colonial times, influenced by various deliberations among policy actors during different periods.



The first chapter of the book sets the stage by providing a contour to the study of media policy that has emerged as a stand-alone school of thought only recently. As we delve deeper into the first chapter, Raghunath highlights one of the myths among scholars and the general public when it comes to media policy: namely, 'myths of neutrality'. She elaborates on the views of various scholars who have demystified the idea of 'myths of neutrality' to show that policy and politics are not to be seen as separate, and that media policy is no different.

Further, by exploring the phenomenon of the 'resurgence' of normative principles for serving the public interest, Raghunath highlights that public interest obligations have constantly reoccurred as a rationale for media policy and paved the way for policymaking for community radio. For instance, Raghunath discusses the dispute between the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting v. the Cricket Association of Bengal on the exclusive telecasting rights of Doordarshan (a state-run telecast) in the liberalised economy, where the Supreme Court of India passed a landmark judgment in 1995, holding airwaves to be public property. This judgment opened up activism for community-driven broadcasting in India and also circles back to the notion of public interest within the media policy landscape.

The second chapter legitimises the terrain of the research undertaken for this book, South Asia, by showcasing the connectedness of geography, culture, political systems and media developments, and how comparison paved the way for community radio. For instance, by speaking with Kamrul Hasan Monju, Executive Director of Mass-Line Media Centre (an early advocate of community radio), the book documents how knowledge transfer from Nepal helped initiate the conversation on community radio in Bangladesh in its early days in the 2000s. In Bangladesh, the government was initially sceptical about licensing community radio because of the lack of policy. Presenting this problem at a seminar in Nepal, Monju received some pointers on how advocacy groups in Nepal went about advocating for community radio, which he, in turn, discussed with the Bangladesh Network of NGOs in Radio and Communication (BNNRC). BNNRC has since played an essential role in community media policymaking in Bangladesh. The transfer of policy ideas from India's then-emerging epistemic community also helped in forming BNNRC in 2000.



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Methodologically, Raghunath uses a multi-sited policy ethnography with the twist of keeping it fluid and unbounded to collect information from policy actors in both formal and informal settings. By doing this, the book offers a thick description of narratives and policy stories from various policy actors, including micro-histories that get excluded from historical studies and the emotions behind them. Providing a snippet from Dharma N. Adhikari's [A Nepali Quest for Journalistic Professionalism](#), Raghunath captures an interesting aspect of community radio policy from Nepal by highlighting the importance of informal settings. A very informal conversation between the Prime Minister of Nepal and Bharat Dutta Koirala of the Nepal Press Institute in 1991 during a tea party hosted at an annual meeting of the Asian Press Institute paved the way for the emergence of community radio in Nepal, where the Prime Minister provided a 'verbal assurance' to set up community radio.

When we talk about policymaking, we can underestimate the contribution made by other political and non-political policy actors. The crucial role of non-policy actors such as civil society groups is well captured in the book when discussing India opening up community radio licences to community organisations. Under the 2002 Community Radio policy, only educational institutions were allowed to establish a community radio. As this policy was limiting the potential of community radio, civil society organisations advocated opening it to other bodies and institutions; this effort saw the light in 2006 with the Indian government allowing NGOs and community organisations to set up community radio.

The book considers academic spaces, advocacy groups, activists and others as the policy actors who transfer knowledge (such as through seminars) to government authorities for favourable policy outlooks (in this case, community radio policy). For instance, Raghunath discusses the aforementioned case of BNNRC, an epistemic community pivotal to community radio policymaking in Bangladesh. BNNRC, until the formulation of community radio policy, advocated for the same through educating various policy actors such as government, media journalists and others at various events.

Moving forward, the book signals that the deliberative policymaking approach could help in formulating robust policies, especially in the case of media policies. Media itself is an instrument or an infrastructure that facilitates deliberation between policy actors; therefore, the state in a deliberative democracy would have a massive role in enabling media through formulating robust media policy. The importance of media as an enabler of deliberation is well captured in the book when discussing the cases of India and Bangladesh, where the notion of freedom of expression is advocated by community radio in the region. H el ene Landemore also puts forth a similar idea in her recent book chapter, '[Open Democracy and Digital Technologies](#)', as she conceptualises social media platforms as a digital public sphere for deliberation.

Theoretically, the book adopts constructivism as an approach for studying community radio policies in South Asia by moving the analysis of policymaking from the state to other policy actors. It also looks into activities undertaken by international institutions, such as UNESCO and the World Bank. For instance, the book addresses the support extended by UNESCO in the establishment of South Asia's first community radio and its constant buttress in terms of funding and collaboration with the Sri Lankan government. The Mahaweli Community Radio (MCR) project, in collaboration with UNESCO and the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), started in 1981 and continued until 1989.

While the deliberative ecology approach to studying media policymaking is a welcome move, it would be apt to further consider audiences' deliberations with the various policy actors studied in this book. This is crucial because when we talk about media, the audience is not just formed of passive consumers. Also, stitching together the book's anthropological inferences with economic analysis of policy and the idea of market failure when the state intervenes through policies would make the literature exhaustive. This book nonetheless adds value to the existing literature on ethnography by looking at it from a policymaking perspective. This rich text can help academics, researchers and those working in the public policy space to understand the importance of deliberation amongst policy actors. It also shows us how history has laid its impression on the current media policy landscape in four South Asian countries.

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