



## **Print Journalism in India: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Developments. An Introductory Note**

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The FOCUS section of the current issue of the *South Asia Chronicle* has its origins in a panel on 'Print Journalism in Modern South Asia' organised by myself and Prof. Dr. Michael Mann at the European Association of South Asian Studies Conference held in Warsaw in 2016. The idea behind that panel was to revisit the history of print journalism in the Indian subcontinent in order to expand its thematic repertoire by highlighting less explored topics or rethinking familiar ones from new angles. We were particularly interested to discuss issues pertaining to the historical development of different genres of journalism that have been relevant in the Indian context, such as advocacy, developmental or market journalism, the position of women reporters and the role of print media in empowering women as well as the manner in which science and technology have intersected with journalistic practice and processes of print media production and distribution more generally. By bringing together scholars and practitioners of journalism, we hoped to bridge the gap between the research and practice of journalism and add interdisciplinary flavour to a field of inquiry that often tends to examine historical and contemporary developments separately. One consequence of this state of affairs has been a notable lack of dialogue between historical studies of journalism and research that approaches this topic from the perspective of disciplines like media and communication studies. Furthermore, the usual compartmentalisation of press history into different 'phases'—colonial, post-independence, post-liberalisation—has also promoted the notion that these were distinct periods best examined separately, rather than along a continuum that could reveal instructive (dis)continuities between them. Our hope as panel conveners was that this exercise in bridging professional and disciplinary



boundaries would enable us to use historical insights as a springboard for pondering the present and future of print journalism at a time when it is undergoing significant transformations not only in India, but also globally.

Translating the original EASAS panel into the current collection of essays has proved to be a lengthy and convoluted process, not least because of the challenging circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. Only three of the papers published here—those by Ganesan, Thankappan and Komatsu—were presented in Warsaw. Nevertheless, the ideas outlined above continue to inform all the contributions, as demonstrated by the fact that they revolve around three interrelated themes:

### **Advocacy, identity and politics**

Featuring essays by Ganesan, Thankappan and Devika, this strand explores the role of print media in spearheading various social and political agendas in the Malayalam- and Tamil-speaking regions of south India, more precisely the social movements of the slave castes in Travancore and the Dravidian Self-Respect Movement.

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### **Women, gender and journalism**

The three contributions by Komatsu, Pain and Joseph discuss the intersections of journalism and gender from historical and contemporary perspectives, focusing in particular on early twentieth-century Hindi magazines as an avenue for advancing women's position in society as well as the challenges and opportunities encountered by women journalists in contemporary India as they navigate a professional setup that continues to be predominantly male.

### **Science, technology and print media**

The final strand contains essays by Singh, Das and Varughese, exploring global technological change in relation to processes of typographic design, news production and advertising, along with the role of print media in processes of science communication more generally.

It should be noted that the final essays in each of these three strands—namely, those by Devika, Joseph and Varughese—were written in response to the two contributions in their respective sub-sections. As such, they weave together some of the main threads of analysis developed in those papers and seek to complement them with insights into the past and present of print media derived from the authors' unique



experiences as researchers and practitioners of journalism. Since these contributions already summarise the main points raised in the essays to which they respond, my aim in this brief introductory note will be to highlight a few general themes that I believe connect all the contributions and are relevant to the study of print media in both historical and contemporary contexts.

As we pointed out in our initial call for papers, the printed press has been a popular area of investigation for historians of South Asia, a fact demonstrated by the impressive number of studies pertaining to this topic published in the post-independence period. While some of these works have focused on the history of journalism more generally (Natarajan 1954; Krishnamurthi 1966; Raghavan 1994), others have concentrated on specific aspects of this story, for example the development of the press in Indian languages and its significance as an instrument of social and political mobilisation, the twin issues of press censorship and imperial propaganda, the role of news agencies in reporting in and about the Indian subcontinent and Gandhi's experiments with 'slow' journalism (Raghavan 1987; Boyce 1988; Israel 1994; Wagle 1999; Bhatnagar 2003; Kaul 2003; Hofmeyr 2013).

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More recently, Bonea and Mann have also made a case for a more consistent engagement with the role of technologies of communication like steamers and telegraphs in shaping the development of journalism in colonial South Asia and the manner in which different groups of social actors employed such early information technologies in ways that did not align with the familiar narrative of technologies as 'tools of empire' (Bonea 2016; Mann 2017; see also Headrick 1981). Drawing on such important precedents as well as recent research in the twin field of book history (e.g. Chakravorty & Gupta 2004; Ghosh 2006; Stark 2007; Orsini 2009; Venkatachalapathy 2012), the essays presented here seek to examine print media in the form of newspapers and periodicals—in Hindi, English, Malayalam and Tamil—not only as repositories of information and public opinion, but also as printed forms that emerged out of complex processes of production and communication, involving a wide range of practitioners, institutional frameworks and technologies.

Our decision to focus on print journalism might seem intriguing at this particular historical juncture, when the very existence of print media seems to be hanging in the balance. Indeed, predictions about the demise of print newspapers—like predictions about the future of the printed book—have proliferated in recent years. In the United Kingdom, for example, the decision to cease the print edition of the *Independent* on 26 March 2016 seemed to confirm this prognosis, amid declining



circulation figures for broadsheets more generally and a steady increase in the readership of online editions. However, as a report commissioned by the World Newsmedia Research Group suggests, although the print industry is undergoing significant transformations, in particular with regard to 'attempts to monetize online content' and identify 'alternative sources of revenue to replace falling advertising revenues from print', the demise of the newspaper industry itself is 'overstated' (Barthelemy et al. 2011).

Furthermore, as Karin Wahl-Jorgensen pertinently points out in a recent study, the problem is also aggravated by the fact that researchers have tended to focus more on the successes rather than the failures of digital journalism (a conclusion that could be extended to the study of journalism more generally). As she points out,

The field of journalism studies has frequently focused on new technology over old; on success to the detriment of failure; on innovation over resistance to change, and on the cutting edge over the conservative. Yet such an emphasis may not be consistent with understanding the plethora of actual practices, and may therefore constitute an epistemological blind spot. (Wahl-Jorgensen 2017)

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Thus, as some of the essays in this section also demonstrate—e.g. Joseph's, Das's, Singh's and Varughese's—it is perhaps more accurate and productive to describe contemporary political, economic and technological developments as both challenging the 'traditional' foundations of print journalism **and** providing it with opportunities for experimentation and innovation. The same is true, as Varughese reminds us, of media research.

Technological innovation has often been identified as the driving engine behind processes of social change and the field of journalism is certainly no exception. It is here, perhaps, that the value of pondering studies of the contemporary press alongside those of its historical counterpart becomes particularly evident, for it reminds us that concerns about the manner in which technologies, especially technologies of communication, intersect with the practice of journalism are far from novel. Indeed, although the technologies themselves are different—the electric telegraph in the nineteenth century, as opposed to the Internet in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries—narratives about their transformational power have remained equally topical and influential. At its heart, this is a question of how we, as scholars, practitioners or consumers of journalism, understand and interpret change in this field, but also how we incorporate it into our daily lives and respond to it in our engagement with various forms of media. We



share with our predecessors many of the feelings of being overwhelmed by the onslaught of information and new technology, whose intricate workings we are not always able to pinpoint, regulate or control, but are our responses to such challenges also similar? Is technology single-handedly responsible for transforming the face of journalism or does it operate in conjunction with a host of other factors, among them processes of professionalisation, economic policies or political and social agendas shaped by myriad collective and individual agencies, as the essays presented here suggest (see, for example, Thankappan, Devika, Ganesan, Komatsu and Das)? What social and ethical dilemmas emerge in these processes of transformation from print to online journalism and how do practitioners, audiences, the state and media institutions engage with them (e.g. Pain, Joseph, Das, Singh and Varughese)?

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At the very least, it is clear that historical perspectives have the potential to enrich contemporary debates about the 'glocalisation' of Indian journalism, pertinently described by Shakuntala Rao as a 'reciprocity between the global and the local' and to temper gloomy predictions about globalization's homogenising effects (Rao 2009: 474; see also Das's contribution). Although the historical roots of these processes of glocalisation are not always recognised in analyses of contemporary journalism, recent research has demonstrated that similar negotiations between the local, the national, the imperial and an emerging global were at work in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the introduction of new technologies of communication in the form of steamers and electric telegraphs helped to transform the ways in which news was collected and disseminated both in colonial India and the rest of the world (Bonea 2016; Mann 2017). Journalism has always been an enterprise predicated upon 'circulation'—the circulation of intelligence, opinion, and, for a long time, of print matter itself. Before the advent of the electric telegraph in the mid-nineteenth century, the movement of news and views depended on the movement of people, animals or technologies like sailing ships, steamers and railways. The electric telegraph was the first technology to make possible a dematerialised mobility (Wenzhuemer 2012), in which information no longer moved physically through space together with its material carriers, but was transmitted as electric signals along wires that spanned the world. Equally importantly, this interconnected development of journalism depended not only on the circulation of news and views between different parts of the world, but also on the circulation of ideas about how journalism should be conducted.

That the changed contemporary socio-economic and technological scenario does not only offer cause for concern and lamentation, but also



opportunities for the reinvigoration of the press is further demonstrated by the situation of print journalism in contemporary India. As Pain also discusses in her contribution, unlike in other parts of the world, in India the current prognosis for the future of print newspapers is optimistic ("Why India's newspaper business is booming"; Tharoor 2017). The economic liberalisation of the 1990s had a significant impact on the Indian media, making it one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy. This is reflected in increased circulation figures for newspapers, expanding TV coverage and the extraordinary diversification of media forms and content in English and especially in Indian languages, as Das' essay also illuminates (Jeffrey 2000; Ninan 2007).

The Indian situation is different from that in other parts of the world on account of three main factors: expanding literacy rates, especially in the Hindi-speaking belt, combined with the possibility of tapping into a plurality of linguistic markets mean that there is further potential for a significant expansion of newspaper readership. Secondly, access to the internet via computers continues to be restricted or unreliable—e.g. on account of frequent power blackouts or lack of access to electricity—while the more ubiquitous mobile phone seems to represent a less attractive option for the dissemination of newspapers, despite the efforts of media companies to provide access to online editions. Last but not least, attempts to cut the costs of publication for print newspapers are coupled with an increase in advertising revenues generated by such media. As analysts suggest, unlike in the United States, where print accounts for a mere 15 per cent of corporate advertising, in India this figure stands at an impressive 43 per cent, with advertising revenues from newspapers increasing by 40 per cent between 2010 and 2014 ("Why India's newspaper business is booming").

Many of the essays presented here highlight the agency and resourcefulness of journalists and publics in using the printed press to advance various socio-political agendas, incorporate new technologies into the production, publication and dissemination of the printed press and generally deal with the challenging circumstances of this profession. In her contribution on the Dravidian Self-Respect Movement, Uma Ganesan shows how the Tamil weekly *Kudi Arasu* 'articulated a radical politics of caste and gender,' enabling the supporters of the Movement to 'intervene in the crowded journalistic space of early twentieth-century South India that was dominated by Brahmins and other upper-caste elites.' Along with Thankappan's essay on the printing politics of the social movement of Travancore's slave castes, this contribution highlights the role of print journalism in providing a platform for the articulation of non-elite, anti-caste voices that challenge the usual 'colonial' vs.



'nationalist' dichotomy characteristic of so many histories of the press. Equally important here is Thankappan's reminder that the slave caste's engagement with print journalism was part of a broader nineteenth-century 'media ecosystem' that also included community gatherings, prayer meetings, song and dance. This is proof of the manner in which the domains of print media and orality not only intersected, but continued to co-exist and feed on each other. Indeed, as Arvind Rajagopal (2009: 3) has also argued in his discussion of old and new media (in his case print), 'print does not, in fact, eclipse older media [...] "Old" media could, in this way, experience a reinvigoration with the entry of print media, especially where literates were in a minority, and mass movements occurred.'

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A similar situation of what could be described as resourceful adaptation, innovation and negotiation can be documented if we zoom further into the work cultures of journalism. In a pertinent reminder that technology is never an 'autonomous force' and that 'the impetus for technological change' cannot be understood 'outside ... social and political contexts,' Singh's essay demonstrates that much of the criticism that surrounded the adaptation of the Devanagari script for Linotype composition in the 1930s revolved around the fact that the necessary technology had been developed in the United States, without the cooptation of local 'technological entrepreneurship.' This, it was argued, impacted both the suitability of the weight of the face and the position of the superscript vowel signs, hindering legibility as well as the aesthetic appearance of the text. Das' essay takes the story of how technological innovation intersected with the production of the press a step further, showing how the introduction of new information technologies in the 1980s and 1990s helped transform Hindi newspapers. As he puts it, 'The hot metal technology and letterpress printing was replaced with offset printing. Desktop Publishing made page designing—composing, the use of graphics and photographs—relatively easy. By the end of the 1980s, software programs too were developed in the Devanagari script.' The changes were visible at other levels of newspaper production and distribution as well, for example in the significant proliferation of advertising matter and the actual reach of newspapers into many, hitherto inaccessible corners of the country as well as abroad.

Such opportunities for innovation and experimentation should not, however, detract attention from the fact that Indian journalism is also beset by serious problems, some of which have been aggravated by the current political and economic scenario. Among them are the practice of swapping advertising space in newspapers for equity in companies,



instances of journalists blackmailing businessmen and politicians or the lack of legal redress in cases of abuse (Narayan 2015). Indeed, many of the contributions presented here point exactly to the need to paint a nuanced picture of past and present developments in the field of Indian journalism, be it in relation to the introduction of new technologies, the position of women practitioners or online journalism's ability to reflect a variety of voices and opinions. Das's essay, for example, highlights the problematic aspects of commercialisation, which has led to a 'shift away from political and investigative news to film, sports, crime and "feel good" news.' Similarly, Joseph's and Pain's contributions, while trying to be optimistic about the presence of women on political beats and the manner in which they have tackled misogyny and proliferating online abuse, are nevertheless clear that much needs to be done for journalism to become a profession women can safely and freely exercise. In fact, as Pain points out, 'the incorporation of women journalists into a traditionally male profession often has the effect of normalizing what are essentially male-identified concerns and a male-directed agenda.' In this respect, it is clear that digital journalism has failed to deliver on its promise of democratisation—in fact, as is often the case beyond India as well, it hasn't necessarily translated into a diversification and multiplication voices, especially of minority and non-elite voices.

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Overall, it can be argued that one important concern that has driven the writing of these essays was to avoid the uncritical repetition of more or less familiar 'grand narratives' of media and communication and capture instead the myriad 'small' stories that make up the bigger picture of print journalism's past and present in India. We are reminded here of Nissim Mannathukkaren's ominously titled piece "The Grand Delusion of Digital India," a pertinent critique of prevalent perceptions of technology and its role in various imaginations of modernity:

A glib modernity has perpetrated the belief that technology can bring about the liberation of human beings. Therefore, it is not surprising that the post-colonial history of colonised nations is also largely a history of this unrealisable fantasy. Digital India is the latest enchantment. The irony is that what goes missing in the search of a 'technological fix' is human beings themselves. What should worry us is not the digital divide, but the fundamental divide between a rapidly growing technological capability and a snail-like growth in eliminating human deprivation. (Mannathukkaren 2015)

The importance of prioritising human beings has been even more painfully brought to the fore by the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. Statistics compiled by the Network of Women in Media, India, show that to date 603 journalists and media workers have lost their lives to this disease.





For many journalists who have spent their professional lives on the frontline, danger is not a novelty. Yet, the current pandemic has turned journalists into largely unrecognised and unsung essential workers, threatening not only their livelihoods, but also their very existence. The question of the survival of print journalism has suddenly acquired much more sinister connotations: it has become a question of the survival of journalists themselves.

To be sure, this is only the latest in a series of life-changing and often life-threatening developments that have already significantly undermined the foundations of journalism in India as an enterprise that aspires, in theory at least, to speak truth to power and promote freedom of thinking and expression. It is precisely for this reason that divorcing the technological from the social and the political is a risky enterprise, both for scholars and practitioners of journalism. As Bel et al. (2005: 23) pertinently remarked, subscribing to the 'ideological euphoria' of media revolutions and other such grand narratives is 'essentially a mirage, if not a complete denial, of the political'. It might be that some of the media technologies and the content disseminated by contemporary media outlets are similar across geographical and political divides—as they used to be in the past—but our uses and abuses of them also continue to be shaped by the specific socio-economic and political environments in which our lives unfold.

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