"Minding the Gap":
## Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

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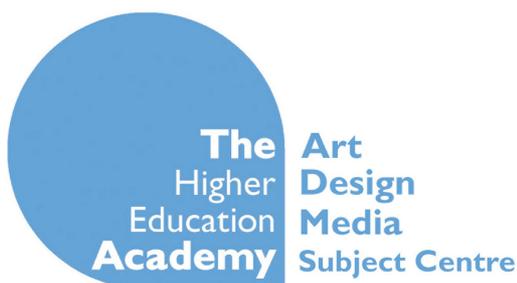
Perspectives from the Developing World

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Can western media theories and journalism practices apply to the whole world? If not, why not? An answer to this question will fill the biggest gap in researching journalism. Western understanding of a western media phenomenon in western political, economic, social and cultural conditions cannot be simply exported to the non-west.

News has its own culture and as Allan (2005) argues, news discourse exhibits features shaped by cultural conventions. And, conventions change as peoples change. That the western approach is not a universal approach is best understood by examining how journalism practices have evolved in the non-western, developing world. To describe what remains outside the west as the 'developing world' is again a gap-forming habit. The evolution of media in China is different from say, Singapore or India or Brazil or countries in the Middle-East or South or East Africa.

As early as the mid-1990s western academics (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1996) portended the growing challenges to western theories of globalisation, media imperialism and cultural imperialism and their uncontested applicability to the whole world. The emergence of non-western media models and markets, the level playing field provided by rapidly developing communication technologies and reverse flows of communication are questioning the orthodox media theories. Scholars like Ang (1990) and Giddens (1999) acknowledge that 'globalisation today is only partly westernisation' and that 'globalisation is opening up new lines of communication between different groups, and constructing new spaces for the building of mutuality, without suggesting that the world is shrinking into a single, harmonious village'.

There is growing irreverence to the geo-political view of the world's media systems advanced in a book titled *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert et al, 1956), which was viewed as a landmark study for the next four decades (Curran and Park, 2000). In fact Curran offers a cold observation that 'there are growing signs that US- and UK-based media academics are beginning to feel embarrassed about viewing the rest of the world as a forgotten understudy' (Curran and Park, 2000:3).

Academics from the developing world like Abu-Lughod (1989), Kottak (1990), Rajgopal (2000), Sonwalkar (2001) and Kang (2004) argue, at the minimum, for a re-orientation of the political-economic, sociological and cultural approaches to the examining of news processes and the language of news in the developing world to better understand the current dynamics of the global versus local problematic in media and journalism studies. In the specific context of news production in the developing world, particularly Asia, some of these academics draw western attention to three crucial issues. One, as Kang (2004) says, while western modernity continues to be the reference point for the developing world, there is a postmodernist perspective proposing that cultural products imported into Asia get hybridised with local cultural elements, thereby generating new meanings. Two, Sonwalkar (2001) observes that the growth of media has been so fast that cultural industries in countries like India have reach and appeal beyond its political borders and within South Asia, Indian cultural content is perceived in 'imperialistic terms'. Three, Rajagopal (2000; 294) underlines the need to understand how in India, in contrast to the liberal bourgeois public sphere, 'one is forcefully confronted with deeply embedded pre-modern narratives of community, narratives whose relevance continues to be felt in a modernising society'.

Schudson (1996), Downing (1996) and Sparks (1998) endorse what Curran and Park (2000) call the 'unease about Western parochialism'. This is not to say that the western approaches to media studies need dispensing with altogether. Rather, as Sreberny-Mohammadi (1996: 200) says there has to be a realisation that the 'creativity, energy and indeed entrepreneurship of the south is at least equal to that of the north'.

The need to understand the evolution of the media in various parts of the non-western world has already been recognized. As a step in this direction the *Minding the Gap Conference* has constituted a panel on *Perspectives from the Developing World*. The papers broadly examine the media situations in as diverse geographical locations as Brazil, the Middle-East, Afghanistan and China. As a journalism practitioner from India, and in the absence of a paper on India, I have summarized above the main issues related to the situation in the Asian sub-continent.

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