

Michael Wilmore. 2009. *Developing Alternative Media Traditions in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

Michael Wilmore's book has appeared amid Nepali academics' growing expectations of some native social scientists making empirical studies on the role of communication media in socio-economic development of their country. However, this weighty book by a western scholar has overtaken the expectations, and has thus broken a new ground in the field of cultural anthropology of Nepal.

True to the centuries-old traditions and spirit of European scholarship, and adventurous explorations and exploitations in the Himalayan region, the author, a British anthropologist, arrived in the hill town of Tansen in West Nepal. It happened at a time when a strong whiff of insurgency was threatening to develop into a violent storm to uproot radically the legitimacy of the post-*Jana Andolan* Nepali state. Despite that extraordinary political situation, the adventurous anthropologist made a courageous field study to develop a case study of a local cable television in the private sector.

In essence this book offers for the first time a very authoritative ethnographic research study of community cable television set up by "a group of entrepreneurs and activists living in Tansen" (p. 1). Another noteworthy feature of this book is that it contains a detailed study of the "whys" and "hows" of a small-scale television organization that claims to be the first not only of Nepal, but also of South Asia as a whole. So this publication has doubly outstanding significance; firstly, it sets out the pathway leading to the creation of a community cable television station in a South Asian locality; secondly, it enlightens the readers or media entrepreneurs about the positive and negative possibilities of local television in a developing country, facing "the electronic empires" of global media.

This publication is a by-product of the author's doctoral research field study conducted in Tansen between 1994 to 1996. Being a student of "indigenous media" the author, quite naturally, has inquired into the reasons for introduction of cable television in a remote town that lies as much within the life and history of indigenous community of Nepal as within the exogenous factors which "pushed" television into the fabric of that town's lifestyle. In pursuing his study the author has followed the spirit of Wilson's advice that in understanding the dynamic relationship between media and society "social scientists should start their investigations by reviewing deeply rooted indigenous practices and institutions" (p. 4).

It was natural and traditional practice for the British-born anthropologist, who possibly is schooled in Birmingham Cultural Studies, to descend on the indigenous locality of Nepal which was developed since the nineteenth century into a social and architectural copy of the cities of the Kathmandu Valley. In this setting the site of Ratna Cable Television/Communication for Development Palpa (RCTV/CDP) provided an ideal field to investigate the dynamics of media and society relationship based on participant observation method.

The author describes the history and significance of RCTV/CDP for common understanding of alternative media as a private family-owned business or rather as a hybrid media, having community and commercial content. He has examined RCTV in detail, remarkably combining qualitative studies with quantitative analysis.

However, he cautions the readers that though he has attempted detailed ethnographic research into the particularity of a place and the people that live there, and although he has also attempted to draw more general conclusions from what he has learnt, the purpose of his work is "not to identify any simplistic formula for success in small-scale media organization" (p. 2).

Pointedly, he has asserted that RCTV/CDP cannot be replicated elsewhere, because one cannot expect Tansen's social and cultural context elsewhere. All the same he has made it a point to add that non-mainstream media, in spite of friendly social and cultural environment, "cannot survive if they are not seen to be legitimate expressions of identity and action by those who work for them and by audiences or people they seek to serve" (pp. 59–60).

The most significant contributions of RCTV/CDP have been described in chapter six. While providing evidence of both adaptation and contestation of development programs in Tansen, the chapter examines

the ways in which development has manifested through the work of RCTV/CDP, along with various other international and national non-government organizations.

The author argues that media can be used to challenge the political and economic marginalization of local communities in the face of the domination of national and international agencies; but this is only one possibility. Local media productions may serve to reinforce the hegemony of those (elites) who produce and control local media with the agencies of the Nepali state and other non-state agencies. This can happen within the limits of its own marginality or within the nation-state of Nepal, or Nepal's own marginality within the South Asian Region, or within the reality of globalization.

The study is divided into eight chapters. Chapter one introduces the approaches to the subject matter, the author himself, and his experiences in the field. It also provides an overview of the physical and human geography of Nepal as well as a brief account of political history up to 1996. It also includes a discussion of the potential limitations of this research study.

Chapter two presents an account of the origins and early work of RCTV/CDP framed within a discussion of various concepts of alternative media. Chapter three describes the introduction of, and uses sought for, media by successive political regimes before and after 1950 down to the post-Panchayat era when local media had begun to emerge in Tansen. Chapter four briefly relates the history of Tansen and Palpa, how they—as the last independent kingdom to be absorbed into united modern Nepal—continued to play a strategic role for the next hundred years, and how the memory of that era continues to inform a sense of the local identity.

Chapter five analyzes the demographic composition of Tansen and describes how in recent years Tansen as an urban place has become a diverse community, diluting the domination of Newars and Parbatiyas. Chapter six extends the discussion of Tansen's development and influence of ideology in relation to the particular case of RCTV/CDP. It examines, by providing empirical material, development and empowerment as a concrete reality affecting the work of RCTV/CDP.

Chapter seven conceptualizes the coming into existence of new media in a community as the communication of ongoing processes of cultural innovation. It offers an analysis of how cultural identity is mediated in the public arena through both un-televised and televised forms (new technologies) of mediation.

Chapter eight concludes the thesis in the context of recent changes brought about by complex network of relations operating on a global scale over the past ten years. In doing so, the author argues that local networks of social relations are no less complex. But such local networks are simultaneously changed with great rapidity in the process of creating links between different positions in the global mediascape and the overlapping frames of ethnicity, technology, finance, and ideas that media comment upon and thereby help to construct. But again it is equally clear that such changes are predicated on what existed before, as well as a vision of what might come to be in the future. An understanding of these changes should be predicated on the concept of hybridization which (in the case of RCTV programming) is seen in the merging of the private, commercial concerns of RCTV with the public. "RCTV was a pioneer in the exploitation of hybridization possibilities but subsequently such possibilities were eagerly taken up by others;...more than fifty independent commercial and community radio stations had come to exist by 2005"(p. 210).

In terms of the possibilities of freedom that such hybrid spaces open up, the author points out that the "violence and repression meted out by all sides in the civil conflict of these years demonstrates...[that] freedom opportunities may be forcibly curtailed even as they come into being" (p. 210).

Wilmore states that such freedom can be protected not only from above, by INGOs or the state, but also from audience support. While the construction of legitimacy in the eyes of the communities in which media are located is crucial to their survival, the media can obtain that only when they are able to bring an audience into being. So, it is argued that the legitimacy of alternative media and their ability to contribute to the political aspirations of a community cannot be assumed prior to an analysis of the social and political articulation levels of which they are a constituent part.

Analyzing the national political scene, the author observes that many have become opposed to "traditional" forms of power and hegemony which represent in microcosm a particular state of being in Nepal and, indeed, a way of being in the nation-state. This work, however, cannot address the exact reason why this is so. Still, the author hopes that his study will contribute in understanding the present problems of Nepal and the role that media have played in constructing "the state of being in Nepal, which is now passing into history...[but] which will continue to

influence people's differing dreams of Nepal's future for many years to come" (p. 214).

Giving an understanding of various theories of alternative media, the author concludes that at the conceptual level the term "alternative media" is uncertain and complex, and so no perfect definition of the term can be offered. He adds that the theories of alternative media have "often been overlooked by media researchers on the grounds that these media are too small to be of consequences" (p. 41). The author has studied developing alternative media in Nepal as participant observer who—being a non-native scholar—had the advantage of cultural distance to see the forest for the trees. The book should be of interest to anthropologists, political scientists, communication scholars, media entrepreneurs/managers, media academics, and students.

While the study has inherent limitations as a cultural snap-shot of a small scale cable television organization in its local setting, I think one regrettable lapse in this study is the lack of analysis of media education in program production and content creation. Although the author has referred to education as one of the key components of development, he has missed the point to examine how the elites and other media graduates in Tansen viewed the pioneering innovative approach of RCTV/CDP. It is assumed that some media graduates of Tribhuvan University, and professionally trained journalists of Nepal Press Institute, both of which are active in the field of media education for more than three decades, were and are associated with the RCTV/CDP programs.

Overall, the book contains highly authoritative references and views of recent internationally known cultural anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, communication scholars, and practitioners. It also has numerous references to recent national scholars. This work should serve as a very reliable guide in conducting media research in conditions of a developing country like Nepal.

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