

Interview with Professor Robin Jeffrey

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Professor Robin Jeffrey, historian and political theorist of Modern India has extensively worked on Media and Social change in India. His two books on the transformations in newspaper industry in India are accounts of a rapidly transforming modern media that takes on new forms in conjunction with technology and industrial contexts. His recent work on the life of mobile phones in India maps the wider social, political, business and cultural networks that are vitally re-energised and reworked through new communication technologies. Together, these enquiries explore the specific relationship between mass media, democracy and technological modernity in India. Having served as Professor at various universities in Canada, Australia and Singapore, Prof. Jeffrey is currently Professor Emeritus at University of Melbourne, Australia



Professor Robin Jeffrey

1. From your work on the post 1990s Newspaper Revolution in a liberalizing India to the latest work on Cell Phone Technologies, you have provided us with a concise account of major developments in Indian media history. Along with changes in economy, you have accorded an important role for new technologies of printing and distribution networks, as key in bringing about these changes. How would you reflect on the digitalization of print in general and newspapers in particular in the 21st century?

I think the big challenge lies in the survival not of newspapers but news organizations – that is, organizations that have the sense of purpose and the resources to live up to the old maxims about journalism: telling stories that powerful people don't want to be told and comforting

* The interview is a personal correspondence with Bindu Menon over email.

the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. We shouldn't, of course, get too dewy-eyed about "great newspapers of the past". There has been plenty of prurience and incitement – there's plenty today, as the Murdoch tabloids regularly remind us. Successful papers had to run at a profit, and the profit usually came from advertising. Daily newspapers and magazines covered a wide range of topics to ensure a wide range of readers and advertisers. Today, however, the challenge is to find ways of making money out of reporting "news". Once a story is released, it can be repackaged in minutes

and distributed to non-paying consumers through scores of different portals. People don't want a general package of news – they single out particular themes on their smartphones and take feeds only of such material.

If local news organizations die, where does diligently researched information about local events come from? I think a few great global news organizations will survive and find ways of paying their bills – say, the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, the major public broadcasters of the democracies (if governments continue to fund them). But who will cover triumph, disaster and corruption in medium-sized cities and smaller centres? News organizations give experienced reporters time, legal support and security, which no blogger or small group can provide.

2. In one of your earlier essays you present a schema to understand the relationship between media and democratization. The schema defines and describes Gandhi as a communicator, effectively communicating with a vast non-literate mass through oral and print medium, the emergence of an elite public sphere followed by a subsequent Janus faced mass media and democratization. In a context of ever expanding media in all forms and an ever expanding public, how would you present the schema now?

I was trying to think about different stages in people's encounters with media – rare, scarce and mass. "Rare" was when reading, writing and books were almost magical things. "Scarce" was a world of newspapers from the late 17th century until the late 19th century and the arrival of railways, telegraph, mechanical typesetting and rotary presses, which enabled "mass" media. Today, we seem to be in a time of individually-produced, mass-distributed media – that is, anyone with a smartphone can broadcast to the world. At one level, that seems very democratic. At another, anyone with an opinion, no matter how vicious, factually wrong or downright wacky can trumpet it to the world. Marshall McLuhan, 60 years ago, wrote about "the global village" that humanity was entering with new media like broadcast television. If we are now living in a global village, the "village idiot" is part of the package and village idiots can go global as well.

3. The fundamental questions that both "India's Newspaper Revolution", "Making News" and "Cell Phone Nation" pose hinges on the assumption that media technology can be assessed on its ability to function as social equalizer. Without making broad generalizations, you have effectively emphasized the ability to enable political participation and redefine citizenship. What kind of theoretical conversations can be initiated between sociology, political theory and media studies around these questions?

I think one of the crucial questions for the next twenty years relates to how the internet comes to be governed. It is a wonderful means by which any citizen can talk to the world and learn from the world. At the same time, it gives any citizen the ability to unload viciousness, lunacy and lies. It is difficult to imagine any regime saying, "We're not going to have these mobile devices. No networks. Punishment Death if you are caught with one." That's not going to happen. But – and I suppose here is where practical sociology intervenes – are there ways in which to identify and contain the crazy and the nasty without running the sort of censorship that follows the path of the Chinese Communist Party? A columnist in the *Economist* (28 August 2017) argues that "the best way to guard against pernicious ideas is with well-aimed ridicule and tough counter-argument". That's not very comforting if the wacky stuff, by its very nature, has a lot more advocates with free time and easy internet access? A hundred jack-hammers drown out a sitar and a violin. And where does "counter-argument" go if states, such as China or Iran, shut down portals and providers that carry outlawed content?

4. "Cell Phone Nation" has tried to bring under analysis the vast geographical spread of cell phone, its

imaginative uses in forming community, commercial, social, familial and love relations and brings a formidable span of reference from governance, trade and mobile waste. In the many instances of riots and lynching in the recent past, the centrality of mobile phone images and their circulation, before and after such violence has been noted. How would you analyse these mobile images and the cell phones as generative as such affects?

Mass media have a history of being used to incite "the masses". The "Ems despatch" – a doctored diplomatic cable released to an eager French and German press – helped kick off the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. The blowing up of the warship *Maine* in Havana in 1898 gave the *New York Journal* and the *New York World* jingoistic copy that whipped up American enthusiasm for the Spanish-American War. And the 20th century overflows with uses of media to serve bloody ends. Bhindranwale's messages spread through Punjab and overseas on audio cassettes, and video cassettes were used to spur on the rioting after Mrs Gandhi's assassination. The difference now is that just about anyone can produce, edit and disseminate inciting audio and video.

5. Cell Phones are also central to the creative industry, in which games, interactive apps and music play an important part. How do you reflect on this ever-thickening web of technologies whose workings are increasingly wound up with market and often opaque to us?

Quick research using Professor Google says there are 2.2 million apps in the Apple app-store and 2.8 million available for androids. That's a lot of software being written for every conceivable purpose. 3D printing is already making body-parts for medical purposes, and robots are driving cars. These technologies, however, depend on some fragile links – access to things like electricity, radio frequency spectrum and great internet exchanges. "What were these big Internet exchanges like?" Andrew Blum asks in *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet* (2012). "These big exchanges made me nervous. Wasn't it dangerous for things to be concentrated?" (p. 113). With things we can see, touch and understand – mechanical things – it's possible to do *jugaad* – to tie things together, make on-the-spot repairs. It's harder when what you need to make something work comes from a long way off and over which you have almost no control. You don't have to be a science-fiction writer to imagine a world in which a lot of this comes apart, where the electricity grid collapses, where banks can't find your money and where all your keypad can do is make clicking noises. The digital world may be much more fragile than most of us realize.