

The News of Empire: Telegraphy, Journalism, and the Politics of Reporting in Colonial India c. 1830-1900. Amelia Bonea. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780199467129

Amelia Bonea's *The News of Empire* stands at the intersection of several important strands of recent historical inquiry: empire, technology, information, and journalism. Within the context of British India, each of these topics has been covered, some more extensively than others, and several foundational scholars such as CA Bayly made their mark working somewhere within this nexus of ideas. Bonea's work, however, stakes out a different type of intervention. While scholarly predecessors tended to focus on one or the other of these concepts, Bonea seeks to instead find meaning where they intersect, and indeed argues that the narratives created about each one must necessarily be influenced by the rest. Indeed, they are part of a mutually constitutive narrative in which the imperial versions of the telegraph, journalism, and colonial knowledge systems are indispensable to each other. The work itself is largely organized around these thematic lines, focusing specifically on the history of communication in India, the practice of telegraphy, and the development and practice of journalism and reporting practices.

Bonea sets out to complicate several large historical processes that have in large part become subject to simple dichotomies and overdetermined meta-narratives. First, in terms of technology, the work questions the idea that the spread of the telegraph immediately and simply allowed for an expansion in the free and easy exchange of information. Here, one of the strengths of *News of Empire* above previous work in the field truly becomes apparent. Much of the previous work, gone over in some detail by Bonea in a helpful literature review, focuses either entirely on the twentieth century, or a period beginning around the 1880s. In contrast, Bonea extends the narrative to 1830, and explores the ways in which communication practices between metropolitan Britain and India (as well as within India) were never simply a matter of technological ability and efficiency. Particularly, Bonea explores the mail system that developed before and along-side the telegraph. This helps underscore the ways in which both capital competition and the interference and needs of political entities often ensured that the new and better technological solutions were often (albeit temporarily) rejected in favor of existing solutions such as runners, not least because of questions of local knowledge and vernacular problems (58). Importantly, the considerations of cost and language also affected the popularity of telegraph messages after India was wired for telegraph communications. The expense of sending relatively short messages only in English seems to have limited the amount and content of what was sent via the new method. Even after Indian languages were allowed after 1873, much non-British communication remained exclusively by post (75).

Further, while the practices of communication in general were more complicated than a simple move to new technological methods over time, Bonea also demonstrates how even within the telegraphy system, the practices and problems of communication were far more complex than a simply every-expanding system of instant communication. There are some remarkable statistics here, including that over the course of 1860-1861, only one in four messages sent over the Indian telegraphy system was transmitted without error, and that in 1897, there were 1,473 "hours of interruption," an *increase* from the previous year (97). Obviously the telegraph was not simply a technological marvel, an electrical Puck, a metaphor that occurs again and again in triumphalist contemporary accounts of telegraphy. In this respect, Bonea provides a much-needed antidote to technological progressivism, both at the time and in historical review. As much as the telegraph

clearly was an important "tool of empire," its importance in the historical understanding of British domination over India should not come at the expense of alternative modes of communication, or of forgetting that the telegraph, even after being opened to the public, was very much part of the colonial administration and hierarchy. As Bonea notes, the "telegraphic imaginary" was as contested and problematic as any other imaginary might be, promising speed and progress to some, disruption and confusion to others, and remaining completely inaccessible to a not-insignificant part of the general Indian population.

From the technological angle, Bonea then moves on to examine the development of journalism in the Raj, as well as its entanglement with the telegraph and other "social networks" (149). In addition to multiple lines of demarcation including race and language, lack of journalistic talent available, and the problem of a relatively personal social world, the Indian press was also far more highly regulated by the colonial information regime than the press in the metropole. In India, "legal interventions in the press world were exercises in defining, ordering, and controlling" (207). As well as explicit interventions, the manner in which Indian journalists were able to obtain and disseminate information was structured along lines set out by the colonial regime. Telegraphic and postal communication were controlled and monitored by the authorities, and the Indian government showed a particular willingness, especially after the Mutiny, to repeatedly try various legal means to suppress "seditious" press actions. Per the government, largely with agreement from the nineteenth-century Indian press, dispersion of news was a public good, in which information, in an objective sense, was the only true goal of journalism. Bonea includes the involvement of the Reuters news agency as a means of complicating this picture, and describing how the understanding of colonial reporting changed along with understandings of the purpose and ideal control of the telegraph and other communications systems. Rather than simply information, with no true conception of authorship, Reuters, which established itself as a source of telegraphic news for the largest Indian newspapers, sought to commodify news as something that was a literary creation, subject to copyright and citation. The struggle between the Indian government and larger market understandings of news is succinctly demonstrated by the reporting of a murder of two British officers in 1897. The India Office in London was able to find out about the course of confessions and investigations from Reuters before any official communication had even been sent, suggesting that rather than the free exchange of information, what truly motivated telegraphic speed was commercial interest (313).

In many ways, *The News of Empire* is an invaluable source of information on both the technological and journalistic development of British India. Further, Bonea's careful arguments and insistence on placing narratives alongside and within each other ensures that this information is presented and contextualized in ways that significantly complicates and adds to narratives that have perhaps been allowed to stand for too long. The sheer amount of information, as well as the exhaustive indicating of scholarly lineage, and complexity of intertwining multiple narratives in all likelihood makes Bonea's work not entirely useful for beginning students or general readers. Even for more specialized readers, while theoretical debates and the existing historiography is often discussed in helpful detail, knowledge of imperial historiography, communication theory, and the history of modern technology and journalism would be helpful to get the most out of a reading of this book. With this caveat of the possibility of being overwhelmed, *The News of Empire*, especially for the specialized academic reader, is both an incredibly useful

documentation of sources and historical debates over issues central to understanding British India, and an important intervention in the way that the tools and culture of empire are to be understood by scholars.

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