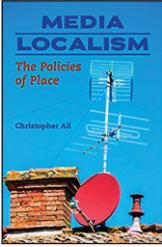


Reviews



Media Localism: The Policies of Place. By Christopher Ali. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017. 272 pp. ISBN: 9780252082238. doi: 10.22230/cjc.2020v45n1a3703

What does Winnipeg sound like? Does Winnipeg have the right to sound like itself? Or should it, must it, sound like every other city in the world, playing the same pop music, commenting on the same films and TV shows, and reporting the same news about Brexit, Trump, or whatever else gets CNN and Fox News hyperventilating? More importantly, is the local a matter of geography or social ties? Markets or communities of interest?

These are some of the many intrigues raised in *Media Localism: The Policies of Place*, by Christopher Ali, a recent installment in the series *The History of Communication* edited by Robert W. McChesney and John C. Nerone and published by University of Illinois Press. Ali, an associate professor in the department of media studies at the University of Virginia, pursues the question of what constitutes the local in a globalized world where digital media increasingly dominate. Ali succeeds to a large degree in clarifying “the tangled mess that is the current discourse of localism in media regulation and policy” (p. 5). The issues he raises matter in themselves, but Ali’s treatment shows the impact of public policy, in this case media policy, on people. Ali is one of those scholars who speaks deeply to the specialist audience while still delivering ideas, provocation, and fluent, easy prose to the informed outsider.

My interest as a scholar relates less to the particulars of policy than to the concepts that ground *Media Localism*. The concept of place (and what constitutes “local”) is something of a sleeper issue in current political discourse. Debates on a range of topics, from Brexit, to climate change, to Trump’s wall, hinge on how communities define concepts like home, nationality, and place. While Ali largely refrains from discussions outside local media policy, his enlightening discussion adds needed data to research into media localism. Notably, Ali’s book is the first study of Canadian media localism, and for that reason deserves scholarly attention. He details the history of Canadian local media policy, offers a comparative analysis between policy regimes in Canada,

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Britain, and the United States, and offers fuel for debates about policy, the nature of place, and local civics. *Media Localism* converses with conservative concerns about place found in *Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Civic Life in Modern America* (McClay & McAllister, 2014) as fluently as it does with new media scholarship about the differences between local and global, as found in *Locating Emerging Media* (Halegoua & Aslinger, 2015).

Ali arrives at particularly intriguing conclusions. One is Ali's point that local media is a merit good rather than a mere public good. A merit good is a boon to a community whether the community consciously uses it or not. Vaccinations are a classic merit good. We each benefit from vaccinations other people get even if we do not get our shots. Local media, Ali argues, is the same. We may not watch local news, but somebody we know does, and what they learn from local reporting will come to us through them, a two-step flow of communication to use a term from Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz.

In principle, this argument is sound, even commonsensical. But whether government-funded local media can learn to draw larger audiences without succumbing to the diseases of bias and sensationalism affecting national media remains to be seen. Certainly, local media will require massive influxes of public funding to build local infrastructure across the U.S., Britain, and Canada—infrastructure that private media have largely shed.

This notion that media is a merit good is playing out in Canada right now. The Federal government, under Justin Trudeau's leadership, has decided to "bail out" private media. Critics worry that the Liberals will fund liberal media outlets. The same concerns exist for Ali's proposal. We should want media that educate—rather than re-educate—local populations. Any proposals that see government, either directly or indirectly, dispense public dollars are ripe for abuse, patronage, and politicization.

One of the book's most contentious moments arrives when Ali argues that the definition of local has changed. He objects to "default localism" (p. 28), arguing that in the digital world "local" must be construed in new ways. The local can, in fact, detach from local geography to include communities of interest gathered by digital technologies from around the world. At one point, Ali even says there is no longer any shared definition of local: "everyone's local is different" (p. 201). I find it hard to see how denuding the word by expanding its definition to include aspects that are not explicitly local, or by removing the geographical as the defining feature of what is local, will lead to clarity in theory or practice. Definitions need a sense of priority, an overriding quality that pins an understanding to a word so that we can each understand one another. Ali writes: "Critical regionalism reminds us that the local is more than just our feet on the ground. Rather, it is constructed through history, actions, viewpoints, context, discourses, and, of course, places" (p. 24). I reply: the local includes all these things, and they happen where we put our feet on the ground.

This expansion of the language is a misstep in an otherwise profitable book. Ali assures readers that he is a reformer, not a revolutionary, but it amounts to the same thing and leads him at the end of his book to argue that residents and citizens need "to take back" their cities from "capital"—as if residents and citizens can be, or want to be, separated from capital. This turn in Ali's argument proves educational, since it

teaches us the problem of believing that our common language is inessential. Ali is critical about capital. But if he can expand the meaning of “local” to include aspects of life that are not geographically local, can we each redefine “capital” to mean whatever we need it to mean in our policy and intellectual work? Whose “capital” should take priority?

Notwithstanding these criticisms, *Media Localism* is a fruitful contribution to the literature. The book’s broad scope and deep dives are made possible by Ali’s study of 18,000 pages of policy produced by broadcast regulators and a range of media and governmental and non-governmental documents, complemented by interviews with industry experts in three countries. (Readers interested in communication research methods—Ali’s study relies on critical discourse analysis—will find an essay on method in the appendix.) This book develops disciplinary knowledge about local media and can help scholars understand why place matters, how people become alienated from their neighbourhoods, and why local media may be the mortar we need to rebuild local communities.

References

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