

Book Review

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Radiant Infrastructures: Media, Environment, and Cultures of Uncertainty, edited by Rahul Mukherjee. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 288, \$26.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4780-0806-4

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The central theme in *Radiant Infrastructures* is the role of media and mediation in producing infrastructure as an affective and epistemological object. The book is set in contemporary India and follows the medial routes of cellular towers and nuclear reactors, two communication and energy infrastructures that are never treated together. Using the evocative notion of “radiance,” Mukherjee entangles them both conceptually and empirically, scrutinizing their similarities and differences, and the ways in which mediation brings up their radiating properties in ways that give traction to civic, scientific and political debates, environmental controversies and agency.

Situating the book in postcolonial India, Mukherjee demonstrates the dilemmas and uncertainty that large-scale infrastructural projects face when they simultaneously hold the hope for national identity building through modern techno-science while being a source of fear for their impact on human health and the environment. Taking this contradiction as a central point for his analysis, Mukherjee tracks the role that media plays in shaping vivid debates over the hazardous footprints of nuclear energy and wireless communication and the ways in which ordinary citizens, politicians, and experts encounter and make sense of them through various forms of mediation. Mukherjee shows convincingly that these are by no means simple processes. We learn that the complexity of civic encounters with controversial infrastructures is shaped by internal power and class struggles that perpetuate divides between the rural and urban, tradition and techno-science, elite and underclass, visibility and invisibility, knowledge and uncertainty, and modernity and fear for economic and cultural stagnation.

To navigate this complexity and the ways it plays out through the media, Mukherjee draws on participant observation and interviews; discourse analysis of media texts, such as films and talk shows; and serendipitous encounters with actors involved in environmental controversies in India. Working conceptually with the notions of “radiance,” “intermediality,” and “environmental publics,” he productively combines

perspectives from science and technology studies and communication and film studies to expand the understanding of mediation and its power to shape techno-scientific debates, material knowledge, and everyday life. This original approach offers a much-needed bridge between key theoretical debates within science and technology studies, and media and communication studies.

Radiance, for Mukherjee, designates both the physical properties of the infrastructures that he examines, emitting ionizing and non-ionizing radiation, and their discursive escalation through the media and the work of representation. Representation in turn is for him “intermedial,” in the sense that it operates across different media materialities ranging from traditional media coverage, documentary films and photographs, to microwave ovens, visualization techniques, bodily politics and affect. The author shows that it is in this entanglement of multiple human and nonhuman medial relations, as well as “interhuman social connections,” that “environmental publics” emerge as an arena of political interactions where the nature, affects and effects, and futures of cellular and nuclear infrastructures in India are negotiated. The result of these medial interactions is the production of uncertainty as an epistemological, political and cultural category, forming what Mukherjee calls “public cultures of uncertainty.”

Radiance, mediation, the formation of publics and the persistence of uncertainty are systematically traced through the five analytical chapters of the book which begin with cell towers and nuclear reactors as distinct objects of environmental and health controversies but are ultimately merged to emphasize the shared public concerns that transcend the materiality of infrastructures and boil down to the lack of trust in institutions and the regulation of radiation. For example, in chapters two and three, Mukherjee demonstrates how media representations can be strategically staged by various actors to compensate for gaps of knowledge about the hazardous effects of unregulated or understudied technology, leading to vernacular epistemologies as modes of resistance and ways of knowing. In chapter four, he elaborates on the mediation of affect and the remediation of different radiations through screens and bodies that form “energetic environments,” combining skilfully post-humanism, affect theories, and film studies. In chapter five, Mukherjee excellently articulates how the internal antagonisms within these shared public concerns produce fragmented publics that remain divided by technology, class, social status, and media politics.

The conclusion reads somewhat fragmented and restates many points that have been articulated multiple times earlier. It is also slightly disappointing that in it, Mukherjee puts a stronger emphasis on the remediation of discourse about infrastructures through media texts, but he almost completely drops the discussion about mediation through material devices and other materialities, even if he makes a strong point about keeping up with both in the beginning of the book through the notion of “intermediality.”

Written in a lively and polemic style, the book is a compelling read, even if at times the polemics and empirical detail may feel overwhelming and leave the reader wondering who the polemic is directed at: the Indian state, its struggling residents, the scientific communities, the readers themselves, or all of them. Nevertheless, *Radiant*

Infrastructures skilfully cuts across and contributes to key debates on infrastructure, global media, postcolonialism, materiality, and global publics within media and communication studies, as well as to science and technology studies by outlining the role of media—broadly defined—in shaping scientific controversies, and it will be a compelling reading for a broad range of readers.

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