

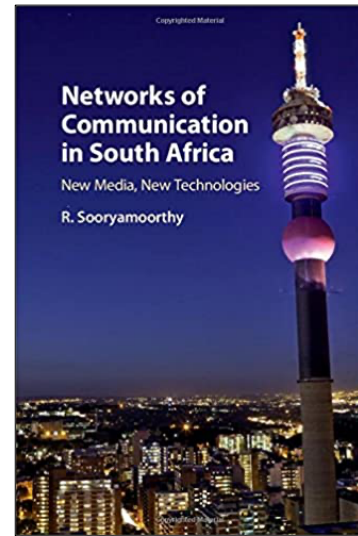
R. Sooryamoorthy, **Networks of Communication in South Africa: New Media, New Technologies**, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 298 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover).

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Author R. Sooryamoorthy, who is based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, breaks new ground in media research with the publication of this book, **Networks of Communication in South Africa: New Media, New Technologies**, under review. First, in selecting South Africa as the empirical site, he addresses the lacuna in research on media and communications in Africa. Second, his focus is not only on the use of traditional (face-to-face, telephone, postal mail) and new media (cell phone and email) but more important in how they are used to accomplish the communications needs and purposes of the users. Third, he considers how the extent and diversity of personal and social networks articulate with multiple media at hand. Taken together the author's object of knowledge is to arrive at how a cross section of South Africans use media for their communications needs and establish, re-establish, or maintain their social relationships and social networks.



The author is both explicit and reflexive in the way he sets up and develops the problem driving this study: the use of old and new media by a cross section of South Africans based in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in 2008 and 2011. Having established that the cell phone has been widely adopted and is widespread in its use, the author draws on the critique of Donner (2008) that media studies have not focused on "the patterns of use and the impacts" of cell phones (p. 25). Moreover, Sooryamoorthy draws on Dimmick, Ramirez, Wang, and Lin (2007), who recommend that research ought to focus on the effects of the technology on "network characteristics" and "gratification utilities" (p. 203). It is particularly the latter research lacuna that Sooryamoorthy seizes upon and defines the basis of this research study. He makes it clear that he prefers multifactorial analysis of data, as this is more "revealing" of the complexity of communications practices. Toward this end, his research design engages five independent variables (year of data, age, gender, race, occupation), encompassing the social composition of the survey and in-depth interviewed respondents. This is, in turn, superimposed on four modes of communication (face-to-face, landline telephone, cell phone, electronic/Internet) and its equivalent in designating four types of social networks (face-to-face, landline, cell phone, email), related to four types of personal networks (family, friends, workmates, other), and finally intersecting with six types of locations (city, hometown, KZN-rural, KZN-rest of, other provinces, other countries). While we accept that one may never exhaust the complexity entailed in lived reality, it is not for lack of trying that Sooryamoorthy comes close to its approximation as the operationalization of his empiricist methodology obtains. The primary questions that are put to work in the operational grid of independent and dependent variables and their correctives (chi-square, ANOVA test, eigenvalue) have the following stated objectives. They are designed with the purpose of revealing, so to speak, the use, patterns, variances and trends of old and new media as they interface with each other in

relation to their effects on the communications practices enmeshed in forging and maintaining personal and social relationships and networks and their mediated sociological outcomes.

Sooryamoorthy provides sufficient qualifications of the evidentiary basis to support his findings, of which given the analytical grid detailed above makes for too rich and dense a trove of descriptions of the multiplicity of relations and their interrelationships to do justice to it, suffice it to point to some notable findings and analytics. In determining the distribution of cell phone ownership and frequency and duration of use, the surveys' research findings are somewhat counterintuitive when considered in relation to the racialized political economy of the erstwhile apartheid state of South Africa and its legacy of social and economic inequalities. However, since the author contextualizes and juxtaposes the political economy of telecommunications during the two eras of apartheid and constitutional democracy in South Africa, he provides the necessary perspective. Thus, he points out that the higher proportion of cell phone use by those categorized as African versus those classified as White, Indian, and Coloured/Asian has to be understood in their proportionate access to landline telephony. What is similarly significant is that the greater proportion of cell phone use is by those under 24 years of age, in the occupational category of "student," and the racial category of "African," with no significant gender differentiation noted. This bodes well for the increasing migration to online modalities of communication and the virtualization of work, education, and in short for conducting social life in the time of the COVID-19 global pandemic, in South Africa and indeed the whole world.

What is notable is that in opening up the "new dimension of location of social networks" and its bearing on the type of media and diversity of media employed, Sooryamoorthy uncovers some interesting correlations. What was somewhat paradoxical was the finding that cell phone use was tied to locality in as much as it facilitated and enhanced localized relationships, which intersected with face-to-face interaction (p. 184). This is shown with regard to the distribution of different modes of communication and their efficacy in maintaining and sustaining sociability of the type referred to as "networked individualism" and "personalised communities" by Wellman (2001), as cited in Castells (2001, p.128) and taken up by the latter as "me-centred networks" (p.128). In the study's survey, as reported by the author, the respondents indicated that the cell phone featured in facilitating communication across four of the five locations, barring contact outside of South Africa, and was predominant in four of the five network types, least favoring contact that was work related. The study also pointed to the high prevalence of face-to-face networks, though simultaneously to its diminution as a mode of communication and to the increasing prominence of email as a medium and site for expanding social networks, leaning on professional and work-related relationships. All told, the research has opened up, through its empirical descriptions, "a pointer to understanding the interrelationships between the means of communication and age, gender, race, education and occupation in social networks of family, friends, work and other types" (p. 235).

Sooryamoorthy closes his well-researched *Networks of Communication in South Africa* by drawing out the implications of his research and the kinds of research it may precipitate. The author concretizes the fundamental precept that communication is the "foundation of all human social organization" (p.2) in drawing out the connectives to the new media and its effects on the quotidian order of social life. What emerges from the multifactorial analysis of multiple social variables, and their bearing on the use of multiple forms of media, in diverse social networks from diverse locations, enabling different forms of communication

practices, is for Sooryamoorthy expressed in how "individuals have become more organised and structured, in their personal and professional life activities, . . . [thus] enjoying more control over such activities" (p. 247). This certainly has great import for questions of human agency and autonomy that may be enabled by new media technologies and also that which may be disabled and rendered redundant or peripheral. The author as such opens up the implications of new media use and gratification in making explicit the positive effect of the sociality engendered in the new social forms of emergent cell phone and electronic networks.

On the question of the contribution to knowledge of *Networks of Communication in South Africa*, the author indicates many paths of enquiry that may take their cue from the interrogatives arising from probing the relationship between communication practices, new media, and social networks in situ. Of those, bearing felicity, but too numerous to mention, the following caught my attention and I trust would similarly catch those would-be interested readers. In this regard, Sooryamoorthy draws on Yzer and Southwell (2008), who identify the twin effects of either enabling "interconnectedness" or disabling it in "isolation" (p. 249), and thus points to taking up such research in Africa in respect of cell phone use as far as it is focused on the relationship between traditional and new media since it is able to shed light on networks of individuals and social networks. Studies of such a nature the author continues would "contribute to an understanding of the needs, purposes, and the means of communicating, and more importantly the driving forces beneath it" (p. 250). By extension such studies will also "reveal the complexities involved in communicating for different objectives including personal, work, family and other foci of communication" (p. 250). The author similarly draws out the relevance of his study on new media and social networks for the realms of politics, health (HIV-AIDS, pre-COVID-19), economics (especially the informal sector in Africa), and sociocultural formations. And finally, he encourages longitudinal studies that are able to track changes and patterns of new media use over time.

In closing, the author shows sensitivity for the structural and sociocultural contexts of media use and gratification and social networks as evidenced in his reference to Lonkila and Gladarev (2008) to firm up that "studies . . . should pay close attention to cellphone users' social networks in their cultural and local context" (p. 27). However, in this regard, while he provides some contextual features, he does not do sufficient justice to embedding his analysis in its sociocultural milieu in virtue of his methodological commitments. Instead, the author has preferred to engage in making a large number of global comparisons across a range of countries, which allows for a sense of dimensionality and perspective to emerge, though did not provide sufficient contextual information to demarcate the specificities of the social categories' representative of the South African conditionality. Where references are made as to the political economy of telecommunications in Apartheid South Africa and its distribution across the racial categories employed, it provided a perspective that could take account of the seeming emergent paradoxes. Similarly, the modalities of family and kinship in the Zulu ethnic formation taken up in this study issue forth some of the cultural nuances at work and how they articulate in respect to media use and its bearing on particular social networks, which as such enhanced the analysis. The point being made is that perhaps the balance of the text might have favored more local (i.e., South African) comparative examples drawn from the sample and slightly fewer global references, though I accept that the latter is necessary. There are however widespread references to African and sub-Saharan African modalities of media use, which as such contributes immeasurably to the dearth of research on the African continent and points to the nature and future direction of such research.

It is thus without reservation that I highly recommend Sooryamoorthy's well-researched text for all those interested in old and new media studies, communication practices, social network analyses, development studies, sociology and anthropology geared toward probing the new "networked society" and its distinctive modalities of social relationships, forms of association, and new forms of sociality and sociability.

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