

DOCTORAL THESIS

The Public face of the Indian Communication Regulator – A study of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India

KOSHY, Susan

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I study the dynamics of the two engagement practices- consultations and consumer outreach programs- of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). Regulatory bodies are created to separate efficiency from the 'messiness' of politics while making decisions for the market. Introduction of engagement practices, despite the lack of a statutory mandate to do so, is inconsistent with such principles of efficiency. Using regulatory studies, I explain this dichotomy by identifying the institutional location of the communication regulator within the field of communication policymaking in the Global South. This location further raises questions about legitimacy of the regulator within the structures of the state. Thus, I explore the interplay of these three pressures, of efficiency, redistributive politics and legitimacy within the engagement practices of the Indian communication regulator.

I depart from the institutionalist, positivist and structuralist foundations of theories that study regulatory bodies and policy-making to focus on the subjectivities of the actors involved in these engagement practices. Using Bourdieu's field theory, I define the field of communication regulation as a site of constant struggle between the various actors, including the regulator. I propose that the regulators and the elite industry actors use technoeconomic capital to maintain their positions within this field. This is countered by the marginalized actors at the edge of the regulatory state, who use mobilizing capital to establish space for themselves within these engagement practices.

I draw on qualitative data gleaned from in-depth interviews, observation of consultations and consumer outreach programs, and document analyses to explain the social and relational nature of engagement practices.

Keywords: regulation, engagement, regulatory mobilizations, TRAI, telecom, redistributive politics, Bourdieu, field, communication regulation