

The West, the “rest” and the internationalization of Media Studies – “Chindia”, BRICS and soft power*

O Ocidente, o “resto” do mundo e a internacionalização dos Estudos de Mídia – “Chíndia”, BRICS e soft power

■ Interview with DAYA KISHAN THUSSU**

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DAYA THUSSU'S CASE is relatively uncommon: having lived in the United Kingdom since 1988, he is one of the few international scholars based in the country who did not earn a degree there, something he is proud of. Having lived in one of the birthplaces of Western imperialism for 26 years, he has always looked for other horizons, directing his glance towards the East and India, the country where he is originally from, as well as towards countries of the so-called Global South. Whilst the globalization debates were taking place and we were witnessing a geopolitical reconfiguration of the world, his academic career evolved fairly quickly: 9 years after he got his first full-time academic job, he became a Professor¹ in International Communication at the Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI) of the University of Westminster in London. He is also the co-director of Westminster's China Media Centre.

His students often refer fondly to his gentle speech and attitude. However, this does not soften his insistent calls for a greater internationalization of Media and Communication Studies. In his own words, Thussu is constantly “hammering on” the field's need to break free from its ingrained ethnocentrism, paying more attention to what is happening in the “rest” of the world². With this need in mind and drawing from his background on International Relations, Politics and History, Thussu has chosen to focus on issues such as

* Interview conducted over Skype in September 2014. The interviewer earned a Ph.D. in Media Studies from the University of Westminster in 2010. She met Thussu during the course of her doctoral studies.

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1. In the UK the Professor Title indicates the highest level in the academic hierarchy. These levels are: Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader (or Associate Professor) and Professor.

2. Prior to the interview, Thussu and the interviewer joked about the fact that the passport control section at Heathrow airport in London has a sign that reads “rest of the world”. This is where the visitors from outside of the European Union should queue in order to have their passports inspected.

the cultural flows between China and India (or Chindia³) and South-to-South collaborations⁴.

In this interview, Thussu speaks about the ways in which Media and Communication Studies can become more internationalized, the importance of conducting comparative studies and his optimism towards the BRICS as they represent an alternative to Washington and the Western world. Lastly, he addresses the concept of “soft power”⁵ from a non-American perspective, which has informed his recent work. The author also speaks about Brazil and its significant “soft power” potential. He argues that although the country conveys a pleasant image in the international scenario, it has also started to be taken seriously. “Besides Brazil, which other big country doesn’t have a problem with any other country?”, he asks.

MATRIZes: I just wanted to start by asking you to tell me a bit more about your personal and professional journey. Where were you born? How long have you been in the UK?

Thussu: I’ve been in Britain since 1988. I was born in India in a very beautiful place, a beautiful city called Nainital⁶. I was educated entirely in India, from schooling all the way to Ph.D., which might be unusual for somebody who is a professor in the UK without having studied in the west. I’m very proud of that fact. I was not polluted by western education. And I suppose that has, in some ways, helped my thinking about the world because I was entirely educated in India. In India, the education system is very much influenced by the British system because the education was set up by the British. So, in India, we are very exposed to the western discourse, to what the main arguments are, we have a good cultural understanding and a historical understanding and that helps... so I did my Ph.D. at Jawaharlal University in Delhi, which is India’s top university and I did my Ph.D. in International Relations and I also have a master’s in History and another master’s in Politics.

MATRIZes: No Communication or Media Studies then...

Thussu: Exactly, so I’m coming to media studies from a slightly different background, from areas like Politics, History, International Relations, not from,

3. Please check the article “De-americanising Media Studies and the Rise of Chindia” (2013).

4. Processes of cultural, political e economic articulation between developing or emerging countries.

5. The concept of soft power is associated with the work of Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye. It has been defined as ‘the ability to attract people to our side without coercion’. However, Nye’s concept focuses mostly on the United States, having been adopted or adapted by countries around the world. Several debates revolve around the capacity and ability of nations to make themselves attractive in a globalizing marketplace for ideas and images (Thussu, 2013).

6. Located in the Uttarakhand state.

say, areas like Sociology, Anthropology, Communications, Media Studies. I think that also reflects on the kind of work I've done. I like to think that it's mostly political work and it relates to International Relations in some shape or form. I also have had experience working as a journalist in India and in London. In India I worked for the national news agency called Press Trust of India, which is a very big organisation and at that time, when I was in India in the 80s, it was the biggest media organisation. In London I worked for a very small media organisation called Gemini New Service Agency, which focused on the developing world... Africa, Latin America, Asia... and that also helped inform my research interests because I was exposed to journalistic work for developing countries. So, this combination of International Relations with International Journalism helped me a lot in my job.

MATRIZes: What made you decide to go to the UK and to teach there then? You taught a masters course there, wasn't it?

Thussu: I got a postdoctoral fellowship from the British government – the Foreign Commonwealth Office Fellowship (FCO) – to come to Britain and to do some research. I was at the Open University in the UK and while I was there I met a woman who is now mother of my two children and that might be the reason why I am in the UK and not in India because I still have an India passport. Each time I am travelling I have to get a visa, all kinds of hassles. So, the British Government Postdoctoral fellowship was what brought me here. I was already working as a journalist at that time in India and I was not really thinking that I would work in academia. I was very happy in my journalistic position, it was very exciting and India is a very big country, very complex country. As a journalist in a national news agency in Delhi and also being part of a major university in Delhi, I had links both with the intellectual elite, but also with the journalistic elite. It was a great place, but then, as I said, for personal reasons, I decided to stay on in the UK and I got a job as an associate editor, working for this small news agency, Gemini news Service. I worked there for 4 years and while I was working there I also was doing some teaching at the Open University. They had a course on Development Studies and I was teaching there and that was extremely useful because the Open University have a very good system to teach you how to teach, there's a great emphasis on pedagogy, that kind of thing. That was a great experience for me, for somebody who had not done any teaching. By then I had finished my Ph.D. and then this academic job came up and I applied and I got it. I started in 1995 as a full time academic and by 2004 I had become a full professor in the top department in the UK, the University of Westminster. It was rather quick, I would say...

9 years and I became a Professor but I worked really hard for it because I didn't have a godfather... it was just by sheer hard work and contribution to the field. So, that's how I got into the system. I think the other thing worth mentioning is that my academic career trajectory had also something to do with the way the world has changed in those 20 years because, when I started, international media, global media, these were not very important issues in academic circles, especially in media communication. In the UK, it was very British-oriented, it was about Britain, British media and British culture and society. Then the world changed, cold war ended, new areas began to emerge and there was a need for people like me to be in a media and communication department, so my work actually fitted in with the changes in the world in terms of globalisation, and I like to think that in some ways contributed to those debates.

MATRIZes: Your case is really rare. Most international people who end up staying in Britain also did a degree there.

Thussu: Just to finish this topic, when I was a postdoc, a very distinguished colleague of mine said to me: have you considered doing a Ph.D. in Britain? And I said: excuse me, I have a Ph.D. in International Relations from a very good university, I have quite sophisticated education, so why should I do another Ph.D. in Media Studies? And he understood because he had the kind of academic background that I had. It was suggested to me that I should think about doing something in Britain and I said: “no, I don't need to” and I think that I proved right.

MATRIZes: What were the biggest challenges that you faced in the beginning of your academic career?

Thussu: Even before I became a full-time academic I used to teach this course on development studies and I'm from India, which is a big developing country, with huge problems, inequality, poverty etc. I had always found that the Western debates about what was development were very narrow in focus. It was all about Oxfam and what development is... so the first thing I said to my colleagues when I was teaching at the University of Westminster was: “why don't you have stuff about arms trade and conflict?”. That's how you get into the poverty. If you look at many countries in the developing world, they spend a huge amount of money on defense, on arms trade, there's a lot of conflict in many parts of the developing world. Look at Congo and Syria, for example. The main discourse then was not really talking about these issues. So, it started in 88, even then I said: you need to broaden your perspectives. Of course, initially there was a lot of resistance because people tend to work in their comfort zones, they don't really want to engage in

intellectual challenges. This was my main argument, based on proper research and they did start to take me seriously. I think initially that's what happened. I also have to say that I was lucky to have colleagues who had good understanding of those issues, so that might have helped. You see, Westminster has all these centres – China, India, Africa, Arab world. Which other department has that? So, it has to be more internationally-minded. We got some fantastic people in the department doing work in other parts of the world and that brings that international perspective. One area where we have a gap is Latin America though. We don't have an expert on that part of the world at all.

MATRIZes: You found that a lot of the Western viewpoints weren't really adequate to the “rest” of the world. For example, instead of focusing on the media imperialism debates, you choose to focus on other perspectives. Your argument is not so much that there isn't an imbalance in terms of cultural and media texts between the west and the “rest”, but that we should pay more attention to other parts of the world like China, India, or Chindia, and the south-to-south flows. When did you become interested in these issues?

I've been interested in it for a long time. Primarily I think it's something to do with my education in India. India was a very strong exponent of non-alignment and south-to-south dialogue. One sort of grew up with that in terms of intellectual debates, which were always about “what part of x bloc or y bloc were independent or had autonomy?”. We have to be a spokesperson of the developing world. I think that's quite important to keep in mind. That comes with the historical and intellectual legacy. The first book I published was in 1992, when I was a journalist, I was not an academic. The book was called *Contra-Flow in Global News* and that was published in conjunction with the UNESCO. It was a UNESCO project I was involved in with Oliver Boyd Barrett. It was his project, but I was the co-author and that book was about south-to-south collaboration in news exchange, right? And that was part of a bigger UNESCO project I was also involved in. So, even before I became a full-time academic, I was looking at these issues in some seriousness. And also the job I was doing in London at that time at Gemini News Service was very much into south-to-south. It was really the whole idea that news has to encourage horizontal types of communication – Africans talking to Asians, Asians talking to Latin Americans, a conversation which is not controlled from the north. So, I think that also helped... and since then my work has been really successful. I'm now doing a third edition of my *International Communication* book, which has also been translated into Chinese. Again, if you look at that book, you could tell that this is written by somebody who comes from the southern hemisphere, not

necessarily India, but from the southern hemisphere because the focus is on the south. So those have been my interests from a very early age, from my graduate days. Of course, these media imperialism and cultural imperialism debates are very valuable but they are still very narrowly focused on economic kind of discussions. As we know, culture and media are actually much more complex. I did a book in 2007 called *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow* and that was the first book that I know which looks at this phenomena in a global context – the rise of the rest, from Japanese animation, Bollywood, to Al Jazeera, to Brazilian and Mexican soap operas, that kind of thing. So, this was, again, an early intervention in the field, suggesting that not everything is coming out of London or New York as there are also other areas. And then more recently I’ve been looking at the China-India discourse, Chindia, because I think that is very significant. I say that not because I am Indian but because these 2 countries are so huge, and they are growing so rapidly. I mean, China much faster than India certainly. And how these two countries relate to each other is going to be a very interesting topic in the coming decades because the scale and scope is so massive, we are talking about 1.3 billion people in China, 1.2 billion people in India. These are the two fastest growing economies in the world, they are also two very old civilisations, they are not just nation states, they have other attributes too, and I think that relates to very interesting possibilities. In fact, I have just come back from China about a week ago, I was there for 2 weeks, and it was very interesting to see how little the Chinese know about India or the Indians know about China. They all look at the West and are mostly inspired by the United States, but I also noticed during this trip that actually there was a lot of interest in the intellectual class about what’s happening in other parts of the world. I think it’s got something to do with this BRICS phenomenon, a new constellation of countries. Within that, of course, China is looking at other BRICS partners too. Of course Brazil has a huge Chinese investment and Russia and China have had a 400-billion-dollar deal, so something quite interesting is happening in that field. My latest book, which is coming out early next year, is about BRICS, it’s called *Mapping BRICS Media*. It fits into my research interests, looking at the rise of the non-western media.

MATRIZes: Along the lines of what you were saying earlier, in Brazil, we don’t really have that much exposure to Bollywood, for example. Obviously, there is a south-to- south dialogue but it’s still somewhat filtered, or it might be going through Western routes, even though there are examples of this being bypassed. Do you think that this could change and the “non-western” countries might start looking at each other more?

Thussu: The thing is we all look to the West, whether it's Brazil or India or China or even Russia because the West is still very important. Within the West there's a core group of countries – United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France etc and they are important because they're still very powerful countries. Despite the rise of other countries like China, it still should take some more years, maybe another decade or two decades for things to change a little bit. Part of the problem is that there is very little exchange. So, for example, you mentioned Bollywood, the world's largest film factory, but not visible in Latin America at all, right? Or Brazil being the largest producer of telenovelas in the world, not very much visible. These are huge markets. I think this is because the interaction is still in very early stages. I think that the BRICS offer an interesting platform because now they're saying "OK, we should have a BRICS academic forum, we should have a BRICS university, we should have cultural exchange". So if the economies are actually serious about it then they will put effort into it. Ok, let's have a quota system where you can show a few Chinese films in Brazil or Brazilian telenovelas in India, Indian films in South Africa, for example. So I think this will come but, as of now, as you say, it's been very limited. And, in fact, in this book I mentioned to you earlier, we have a whole chapter about intra-BRICS exchange and, to be honest, it's very limited. Chinese media is nowhere to be seen in India, Indian media is totally absent in Brazil, even in terms of entertainment or sport or whatever. I think it will take time because the system is still very much controlled by a few powerful countries but it's changing... I would say: give it some time, give it another decade or so and it will change.

MATRIZES: And then there's also the issue of language. I am Brazilian and you are Indian and we are using English as our means to communicate.

Thussu: But, you see, that also changes. If you think about French and how French was the language of high culture, high poetry, and diplomacy in Europe for 200 years. It went all the way down to Persia. In Iran the elites used to speak French, right? That is not the case today. Today, increasingly, French people are learning English because they want to be able to operate in a global sphere. It's possible that 30 years down the line we all might have to learn Mandarin because the Chinese have become so important and they will say: "well, if you want to trade with us you need to learn our language". It's interesting, as I said, I was in China and when I was looking at their television, there was nothing in any language other than Mandarin. Even the American programmes they had... and I think they had a Latin American, I couldn't say if it was a Brazilian or a Mexican soap opera, it was all dubbed in Mandarin. So, I think as their industry becomes more powerful, they will make sure that

their language becomes more worldly used. Again, it's a historical incident that Britain was the most global empire. And I think the internet has also something to do with it because increasingly people are using that medium for communication. English is a relatively easy language and a very flexible language. But I don't think we should worry too much about it. If you look at the internet in China, it's all in Mandarin, not English.

MATRIZes: Regarding the issue of internationalisation, how do you think the “rest” could make more contributions to a truly internationalised communication and media studies field?

Thussu: My book *Internationalizing Media Studies*, which I published in 2009, emerged from a conference I had organised. The book is a collection of essays and the main argument is that media studies emerged in the West, it's made a very valuable contribution to knowledge, but the media world has changed, particularly in big countries, in Asia, my focus was on China and India, and to understand what's happening there we need to broaden our tales of reference and come up with new ways of thinking about these audiences or industries or cultures. I also mentioned the need to historicise it more because I think there's an appalling lack of History in Media Studies. It starts with 19th century press in Europe or in the UK or in the United States but it doesn't really go back into history. I earned a history master's and I'm very interested in history because you simply cannot understand the present without having a historical context. So, I think my main argument for internationalizing is: we need to make it broader, go back in history, think of cultural specificities and encourage more empirical research, encourage more comparative research. I'm glad to see that more and more of that is happening because also the student profile is changing. If you look at our Ph.D. students, they come from many parts of the world and they are increasingly doing comparative research. They are thinking about “how can I use Habermas in China?” or “can I use cultural imperialism in the context of an African country?”. So I think that there is progress in that sense. I would like to think that in a very modest way I have also contributed to these debates by just hammering on this need to internationalise and broaden our perspectives and I think it appears to be happening in a small way. The thing is nobody wants to lose their privileged position. If I was a Western scholar, well established, I have a particular set of theories that I use, then why should I think of doing something when it is hard work? People stick with the tested formulas and to really think of alternative paradigms, to think of new theoretical frameworks, you need a lot of time, a lot of thinking. One person, or one conference or one book wouldn't do it. It will take time, it will take effort from a lot of people and

it has to come from the Global South because these countries are the ones who don't get enough care. They often feature as case studies, they are not providing the conceptual framework. Also, in most of these countries, media and communication studies are still at early stages as disciplines, so it will take time but I am sure that it's beginning to take shape already.

MATRIZes: Going back to the BRICS, some critics claim that the BRICS nations are the result of an artificial creation. Are you an enthusiast of the BRICS?

Thussu: I think it's early days to come to any kind of conclusive statement about it but the fact is that they've been meeting annually for the last 6 years, they have had summits, and during the most recent one, which took place in your country, they did agree to set up a development bank. Of course this is largely a Chinese project because the Chinese have got a lot of spare money and that creates problems for Russians, Brazilians and Indians. They are worried that the Chinese might start dominating the BRICS. South Africa is a relatively small player. It really is the Russians, Indians and Brazilians who are worried about China. But let's go back in history, let's think back of 1944, 1945, after the second world war, when they were setting up the Bretton Woods system. They were setting up the World Bank and IMF. Britain was this small place outside Washington and these guys set these institutions up and these institutions actually framed or shaped international trading structures, international banking, international economics. So, the BRICS bank is very small in comparison, it's only been announced this year, it will take another year for it to set up but I think there is some progress, there is something happening, which is potentially able to provide an alternative to what's called the Washington consensus. Also, within the BRICS there are interesting connections. For example, you might remember that earlier this year, in the spring, the Russians signed a major energy deal with China, it was worth 400 billion dollars, it was one of the biggest deals ever. Now, this is happening outside the western control. Washington has no control whatsoever, it's Moscow and Beijing. Similarly, the trade between China and India, which was negligible at the beginning of the 1990s, is now 70 billion dollars and they want to raise it to 100 billion by 2015. This is what I call the "other globalisation", it's outside the western radar but it's actually happening and I see BRICS in that context. This is of course an artificial creation, it's early days, these countries have their own problems and they are all very close to the US for various reasons. For example, there is a huge Indian diaspora in America. In fact, every middle class Indian family today has somebody in the US, whether they're studying or working, so there is a people to people connection that you don't have with, say, China, Russia

or Brazil. The same thing happens in China. I mean, the Chinese send their kids to Harvard or Princeton, they don't send their kids to Brazil or to India, right? So, I think it will take time, I feel optimistic about what it can offer and therefore I got involved in this project. We've got this book coming out next year.

MATRIZes: Let's now talk about soft power a bit. In Brazil, we had the FIFA World Cup this year and the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro are coming up. What are your views on Brazil's image-making in the international scenario through mega sports events? How do you think this is coming along?

Thussu: Brazil has a very good image anyway. It's the kind of country which doesn't have problems with any other country. If you think about it... besides Brazil, which other big country doesn't have a problem with any other country? So, you don't need to worry about promoting your soft power. I mean, of course, the World Cup was a big event and it attracted a lot people, but I think there's a particular perception of Brazil as a fun place, as a nice place, not as a threatening place in any way. But Brazil is also a serious country in a sense that it's a growing economy, it's got a fantastic pharmaceutical industry, it's got great computing possibilities, it's got a growing middle class, it's got a fantastic entertainment industry, I mean, it's got a lot of things happening which could encourage it's soft power. So, just looking at one event ... I think that's a narrow view of soft power, Brazil has a much more interesting and more sophisticated contribution to make about soft power. In fact, as you probably know, in my book about Indian soft power, we had a chapter on what I call de-americanizing soft power. The argument I make there is that the American version of soft power is so narrowly focused on America and it's too media centric. Actually, if you look at other countries, like India or China, there is a more complicated story that we need to tell. And I was really struck by the presence of Indian influence in China when I went there for the first time, ten years ago, and I saw all these Buddhist sites and I was saying to my Chinese friends: “Where did it come from? How did it come? What was the communicative aspect? How were those texts translated?”. They were not brought there by invading armies, they were brought by scholars and traders, it's a very different kind of communication. So, that prompted me to think about this as a kind of soft power attribute. My book's subtitle is “From Buddha to Bollywood”, so Buddhism is part of soft power because it's been there for 2,000 years and it's very prominent. It's not like MTV or telenovela, it's much more enduring power. And that's kind of a modest intervention, but, actually, it makes people notice that of course there is something else about the soft power discourse, it's not just about what the Americans think, and I have to say that since this book has been out I have been

to about a dozen countries giving talks and lectures because there is something in it that people find slightly different. I was talking to Joseph Straubhaar at a conference in Seattle, we were in a BRICS “soft power” panel together, and I was saying to him “you do so much work on Brazil... there’s a book you could write about soft power...”

MATRIZes: Have you been inspired by any Latin American scholars? I know that sometimes there isn’t as much exchange or communication as we would like, but is there one or are there a few areas which have inspired you?

Thussu: There are a couple of areas which I find very interesting and Latin America has made a huge contribution. One is the debate about dependency theory in which Latin American scholars have done fantastic work, although it’s a bit old fashioned today. Actually, if you think about your own country, and Lula, you know, there’s been a move towards a social democracy, a much more egalitarian kind of argument and trying to go beyond the dependent model which Latin America was really based on with the European or American domination. I find that inspirational. The other thing is that there’s fantastic work on the Liberation Theology in Latin America... about using church-based groups to improve people’s lives. Again, this is an area which has not been adequately appreciated in Media and Communication scholarship. I would say that these two areas attract me as coming from that part of the world. Perhaps we should use them more in our teaching and scholarship. It used to be very important, as you know, in the 70s and 80s.


MATRIZes: And this idea that religiosity can be political in nature...

Thussu: Yes, absolutely, look at Islam, look at what’s happening in Syria today and that’s also politicised Islam.

MATRIZes: Just wanted to finish the interview by asking you a question about your plans for future. Where is your research heading?

Thussu: I’m actually doing a couple of things. I’m doing the third edition of my “International Communication” book, which is due early next year. I’m also doing a comparative thing on China-India soft power because the Chinese discourse is very much state-led, state-controlled. In India, the state is there but it’s not doing very much: it’s private, it’s Bollywood, it’s the IT industry, it’s diaspora, so I’m thinking about doing a comparative project and it’s an edited book. That’s the next thing I’m working on and it will be out some time next year.

MATRIZes: It was nice to catch up. Thank you!

Thussu: My pleasure. 

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