The Strategic and Moral Imperatives of Local Engagement: Reflections on India

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US-based political scientists studying low-income countries make many demands of the communities that we study. Most of our projects would have been inconceivable without myriad forms of cooperation from local communities. Yet, in conceiving our projects and disseminating our findings, our attention is dominated by the imperatives provided by academic outlets written largely by and for other US-based academics. This focus is completely understandable given the incentives that scholars face, especially early in their career. However, this narrow window of engagement limits our reciprocal ability in at least two respects: (1) choosing research questions that are of importance to the communities we study, and (2) ensuring that the results of our studies are shared with these communities.

This article advocates broadening engagement through still relatively underutilized channels: writing for *local* news and scholarly outlets, and presenting at conferences and workshops for predominantly local audiences in the countries that we study.[1] It is heartening to witness the growth of valuable venues for political scientists to provide accessible summaries of their research, such as the *Washington Post*'s "Monkey Cage" blog, the "War on the Rocks" blog, and *Foreign Policy*. These sites significantly broaden scholars' exposure and help them connect their findings to relevant political developments of wider interest. Yet, despite the vibrancy and importance of these efforts, they remain oriented toward broadening a predominantly US readership. Similarly, scholars and students occasionally present their work to domestic audiences in the countries that they study. However, such efforts typically are not viewed as central to a project's development or a graduate student's professionalization, and they certainly are not regarded as on a par with presentations at US conferences and universities.

We present two principal arguments for scholars to increase their commitment to local forms of engagement. First, we argue that there are solid professional incentives to subject our work to local scrutiny at multiple stages of progress. This scrutiny can prove as central to ensuring the rigor of a project as critiques from US-based scholars. The second argument is a moral imperative to not simply inform and engage the communities that enable our careers but also to offer them a degree of agency in shaping our research agendas.

We anticipate that both arguments may face criticism from some of our colleagues. Some may read our arguments as an invitation to depart from their particular vision of objective social science research. For example, some scholars might reject the idea of a moral obligation to subject populations, using this criterion as an important way to distinguish academic research from policy work. Others may argue that research questions should be drawn from extant scholarly debates and amenability to preferred methodologies. Doing so ensures research agendas with the broadest possible appeal and deepest possible rigor. These perspectives may even view it as desirable to *minimize* the influence of the communities that we study over the questions we seek to answer. Whereas these are worthwhile debates, our comments make it clear that we find neither argument especially convincing.

We root our arguments in our own research experiences in India. We think India—and the broader region of South Asia—is an especially productive setting for illustrating our insights for at least two reasons. First, the vibrancy and multitude of local outlets provides ample opportunities for scholars to connect with local audiences. In India, a lack of such engagement certainly cannot be blamed on a paucity of opportunities to do so. Second, India is not merely the geographic subject of our own work; it also is a hub for a vibrant social science community in its own right. Yet, although many India-based academics have unfettered access to the political science journals in which US-based academics publish, this access is far from universal—especially across the length and breadth of India's diverse federal landscape. The presence of a robust social science community without all of the institutional privileges most US-based scholars enjoy makes the importance and value of local engagement especially clear. We are aware, of course, that India is a particularly propitious geography insofar as local engagement is concerned: the vibrancy of its social science research community and the widespread use of English differentiate it from many other countries where comparative scholars conduct research. In other settings, the obstacles to publishing in local academic journals or seeking out local media might well be higher. Our primary point is that local engagement, with its contextually specific costs and benefits, should be more frequently and explicitly considered than it currently is.

CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

Local engagement through conference presentations, writing for local news organizations, and even contributing to local

doi:10.1017/S1049096518000434
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518000434 Published online by Cambridge University Press

academic outlets should be recognized as an important step in the development of quality research. Such engagement forces scholars to subject themselves to local scrutiny that can improve their research along several dimensions.

First, "think pieces" that describe early-stage work and presentations of initial ideas can assess whether a research question or proposed argument is sufficiently credible to local audiences. This type of engagement provides a local "sniff test" that is valuable for US-based scholars who are not embedded in day-to-day political life in the countries that they study. For example, one of us (Thachil 2017) presented an early idea for a project based on how circular migrants in India vote in destination-city elections. Local audience members quickly noted that only a small proportion of migrants vote in the city and suggested expanding the outcomes of interest beyond formal electoral behavior. This suggestion proved crucial for the successful execution of the project.

Early engagement not only generates feedback on proposed research questions but also provides channels for constructive criticism on how best to answer them. In fact, local audiences often are *better* poised to provide particular criticism than our US peers. For example, we have found local Indian audiences to be the most exacting in evaluating our particular measurements of core concepts as well as the validity of particular datasets popular with US researchers. For example, one of us (Vaishnav et al. 2018) recently conducted an email audit experiment of Indian Members of Parliament to gauge their responsiveness to requests for constituency service. In presenting early findings to a New Delhi-based research institute that interacts on a daily basis with state and national lawmakers, it became clear that legislators vary widely in the degree to which they are conversant with information technology and social media platforms. The research institute provided data on parliamentarians' social media presence that proved to be a key determinant of legislator responsiveness. In this case, both the hypothesis and the underlying data were a result of engagement with local experts well versed in the legislative context of the study. Such measurement concerns are no less important than the theoretical and methodological critiques typically received from US-based colleagues.

Regarding more polished work, local engagement can take the form of publishing articles in local academic journals (in India, these include *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Studies in Indian Politics*, and *Contributions to Indian Sociology*) and writing accessible summaries for local media. Both are valuable for establishing local credibility with intellectual communities in the subject country. However, there is a clear trade-off that must be acknowledged regarding the former option: US-based academics have strong incentives to publish in the leading journals in the field, many of which are US- or European-based. Nevertheless, finding ways to publish in venues predominantly by and for local audiences—even at the expense of more "lucrative" publishing outlets—sends a clear signal that scholars want to engage in a dialogue with local audiences.

Local publications not only build a scholar's profile; they also can generate returns in terms of increasing willingness of local partners to help in future endeavors and inspiring new forms of collaboration. For example, many NGOs and community organizations read local newspapers (and some academic journals) far more often than US-based publications. Publishing in these local venues can therefore inform organizations about scholars with whom they may be interested in meeting or even discussing potential collaborative work. Local publications also are a good way for scholars to become known to talented local university students. These students might volunteer for research-assistant opportunities or consider applying for graduate school at the scholar's university. Of course, researchers can consider increased engagement of this form at later, more secure stages of their career. However, it is worth noting that many benefits of local collaborators may be especially valuable for graduate students and younger scholars, who often have more modest research budgets. For example, an effective local NGO partner often can be a crucial ally in implementing or scaling up a project, making such engagement especially valuable for early-career researchers.

Finally, local media can be especially important in raising the profile of a scholar's research agenda and bringing it to the attention of local policy makers. In India, given its incredibly vibrant news landscape, there are innumerable opportunities to disseminate findings and ignite local debate, including among critical policy audiences. Currently, leading policy makers in India are considering the merits of piloting a "universal basic income" scheme that would provide regular payments to nearly all Indians as a more efficient means of building a social safety net that potentially bypasses administrative shortcomings of preexisting, targeted social-welfare mechanisms. The key policy statement on the issue, authored by India's Chief Economic Advisor in the 2016 edition of the government's flagship *Economic Survey*, was informed by numerous short articles penned by leading political economists on a blog known as "Ideas for India" (Khosla 2018). This portal was established by the International Growth Centre to disseminate economists' work beyond academic audiences to a broader public.

Local engagement through conference presentations, writing for local news organizations, and even contributing to local academic outlets should be recognized as an important step in the development of quality research.

MORAL CONSIDERATIONS

These arguments are largely self-interested reasons for engaging local communities. In our view, at least part of the rationale for local engagement comes from a non-instrumental ethical obligation. Most political scientists working in low-income

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518000434 Published online by Cambridge University Press

countries demand much from the communities that they study—from research assistants to human subjects and key informants. In contexts like India, mediation is a requirement for nearly all fieldwork. From our own experience, interviews require personal contacts and telephone numbers; gaining access to key data repositories and navigating the bureaucracy necessitate a wealth of contextual information; and survey implementation requires logistical suggestions—all of which comes from knowledgeable interlocutors.

The significant assistance we seek and receive suggests a moral imperative to engage local communities not only during research but before and after as well. We are uncomfortable with the idea that scholars are free to avail themselves of this assistance without reciprocal obligations, especially when much of it is from unpaid interlocutors and informants in the field. In many of our research projects, there is an implicit (and sometimes explicit) expectation that the study's findings will provide useful information to the researched communities.[2]

Local engagement can help achieve these expectations. In the early stages of research, we believe that local engagement is beneficial because it increases the chances that scholars will engage in research questions that are of interest to the local community, not only professional US audiences. The very act of articulating scholarly ideas for local audiences can force authors to consider more seriously the contextual importance of their work.

Whereas other authors in this symposium report a natural overlap between the subjects' US-based political scientists and local populations in their research region to be interesting, we do not think that such an overlap is automatic, particularly in our region of interest. Furthermore, this overlap may decrease if questions of local relevance are muted by the imperatives of design-based research. As one prominent think-tank director told one of us (Vaishnav): "[a]ll US academics seem to want to study about India are reservations (affirmative-action quotas), because they are randomized! But we Indians want to learn about other parts of our political system!" It is not our intent to deny the valuable research on affirmative action in India. Rather, this comment highlights how local engagement can alert us to the real limitations of constraining research to topics that are methodologically attractive, especially regarding the reciprocal potential of our scholarship.

After research has concluded, local engagement can ensure broad domestic access to a scholar's findings and conclusions. Indeed, we have found that our local interlocutors often demand such engagement. One of us (Vaishnav) recalls traveling to Bangalore to interview the secretary of the state-level Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for a project on how politicians interact with bureaucrats in providing basic social infrastructure (e.g., schools and health clinics). After a series of probing questions, the secretary was asked whether he could access data that the ministry had collected on health expenditures. He replied that he would provide introductions to the relevant bureaucrats but then asked: "If I helped you, how would this help my ministry?" Once he ascertained that his question did not have a quick and clear answer, he pressed on, noting, "I am happy for my people to work with you. But if they take time out of their regular work, at the very least you should come back and brief them on your findings so we can learn from what you found."

Publications in local outlets often provide tangible evidence that scholars want to help their study populations learn from their research findings. For example, one of us had a lengthy conversation with slum residents for a coauthored project on politics in poor urban settlements (Thachil and Auerbach 2016; 2018). One informant asked whether this work would be read only by Americans because the sponsoring employer was based in the United States. He said that he wanted other Indians to know about the difficult conditions under which some of their countrymen had to live in the city. Subsequently, two op-eds on this research were published in *India in Transition*, a newsletter of the University of Pennsylvania Center for the Advanced Study of India, which also published a Hindi version in a local newspaper (i.e., *Amar Ujaala*) (Thachil and Auerbach 2016). The informant was pleased with this write-up not only because it was written in the language in which he was educated but also because it was authored for a local publication that he valued. Indeed, we advocate that scholars seriously consider steps to make available in local languages shorter write-ups of their research, particularly those written for the popular press. Researchers (especially senior scholars with adequate research budgets) can hire affordable translation services to produce their work. The translations can be placed with local-language news sources, websites, and blogs or even disseminated via social media to ensure broad access among studied communities.

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Finally, local publications and presentations provide a means through which our scholarly research contributes to local intellectual discussions among professors, students, and everyday readers. The content of these forms of engagement not only inspire discussion; but the engagement itself also signals a willingness to interact with local readers and their queries. Most of the requests that we receive from Indians to share our academic articles, data, and research strategies result from a local publication or presentation. We are especially pleased when our contributions motivate university students to reach out to us regarding their interest in applying to graduate school in political science. Many of them are extremely talented but lack the access, confidence, and context-specific jargon to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518000434 Published online by Cambridge University Press

successfully apply to US doctoral programs. Helping these students is a form of reciprocity that we feel both responsible for and especially well equipped to provide.

CONCLUSION

Engaging with local communities often is framed as an afterthought to scholars' core preoccupation with academic research. This article argues that local engagement can and should be a part of a comparative scholar's *modus operandi* and, indeed, encouraged as part of graduate training and beyond. We outline obvious existing professional incentives to engaging locally at nearly every juncture of the research process—from inspiration in developing questions and hypotheses, to criticism on how to refine concepts and measurement, opportunities for collaboration in data collection, and publicity for finished work. However, we hope that our discipline, as well as individual departments, will strengthen professional incentives to engage this way. There is no shortage of creative mechanisms through which these incentives might be increased, including departmental and professional awards that recognize excellence in specific forms of local engagement. However, we believe that the most important shift will be more subtle: how we are willing to incorporate indicators of engagement in our evaluations of students, job candidates, and colleagues. In particular, it will require our discipline to reconsider the higher privileges and status that we automatically confer on US-based forms of engagement over these more local forms. We hope that conversations inspired by articles in this symposium will ignite such reconsideration. It is our firm belief that engaging with local citizens, media, policy makers, and fellow academics makes for better social science and bridges the gap between research and policy. Moreover, there also is a moral case for more engagement: that is, helping those who have helped us carry out the research in the first place. ■

NOTES

1. We draw a distinction between these presentations and those organized in local countries of study by international funding agencies, multinational organizations, and US research universities for largely Western expatriate audiences.
2. We are not discussing basic human-subjects requirements (e.g., informed consent) evaluated by a university's institutional review board (IRB). These requirements are about ensuring basic guidelines for obtaining permission and informed consent, not establishing channels of reciprocity. Debates about the efficacy and sufficiency of IRB protocols are important and ongoing but beyond the scope of this article.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518000434 Published online by Cambridge University Press