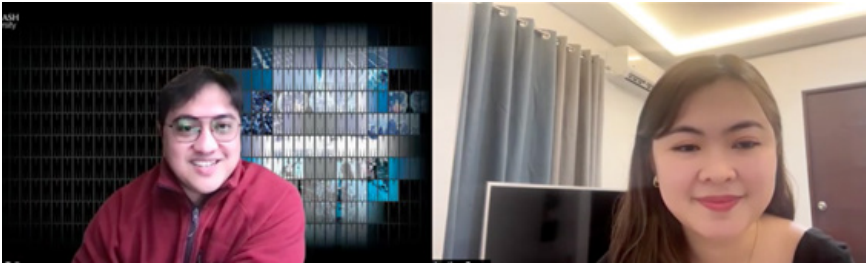


## Culture Mediation through Indigenous Media Studies: An Interview with Jason Paolo Telles of Monash University

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“Curiosity”, “respect, and, “commitment” – three familiar terms that hit me differently as I listened to Jason share his experiences in studying indigenous media in the Philippines.

There are approximately 17 million indigenous peoples (IPs) residing in the Philippines. While they continue to preserve and nurture their rich cultural heritage, their identities are often misunderstood and portrayed inaccurately, with their voices still marginalized. Despite efforts to represent IPs in mainstream media, their lived realities remain partially obscured and frequently misrepresented.

This interview highlights Jason Paolo Telles’ journey and insights as a scholar of indigenous media studies. Jason, an assistant lecturer and PhD candidate at Monash University, is the editor of the book entitled *Indigenous Media and Popular Culture in the Philippines* and the founder of the Southeast Asian Media Studies Association. His expertise spans indigenous media studies, popular culture, ecomedia, and communication in sports. In our conversation, he discussed how indigenous media can provide accurate representation and serve as a platform for the IPs to express their identities and showcase their culture through their own media content and production. Through indigenous media, IP communities have a powerful tool to reclaim their narratives, express their identities on their own terms, and share their culture authentically.

### Blazing his own trail:

#### Jason's first steps as an indigenous media studies scholar

The Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) in the Philippines is home to diverse indigenous ethnolinguistic groups. By staying in Baguio, which is part of CAR, Jason had the opportunity to begin learning about indigenous cultures in the Philippines.

**JASON:** I think this started when I was in college. I also studied at UP Baguio for college, which of course, you know, it's located in the Cordillera region. It's home to several indigenous groups. So, when I was still studying there, my interest in indigenous media and popular culture developed naturally, I guess, over time. So, being in the Cordilleras in Baguio City, I was constantly surrounded by indigenous communities—their rich cultural traditions. Sa mga lectures namin sa UP Baguio, sa history, media studies, and even in our communication subjects and other subjects as well, they always include discussions about indigenous peoples—their struggles, 'yung roles nila sa iba't-ibang fields na inaral ko that time, and also, sa pagbabago on how they were represented on the media or in different postcards, for example. And I was introduced there about the misrepresentation of IPs, Eastern media, yung marginalization nila of their views and perspectives in public discourse, including media discourse. And apart from that, of course, the cultural landscape na nakapaligid sa'kin, combined with academic discussions on IP rights and representation. So, they made me realize the importance of the promotion of indigenous voices.

Jason's interest in indigenous media developed even further when he took on BA Communication in UP Baguio and was mentored and inspired by distinguished scholars of indigenous media such as Dr. Jimmy Fong and Dr. Eli Guieb.

**JASON:** Since I was a BA communication student at that time, I was focused on the promotion of indigenous voices in media and popular culture. And this actually motivated me, eventually, to dive deeper into this field. When I became a part of the faculty of UP Baguio after some time working in the media in Metro Manila, this belief or this experience was carried through even when noong bumalik ako sa pagtuturo—broadcast communication and media studies at UP Baguio. I incorporated this advocacy into my teaching as well. So kung paano dapat i-represent ng IPs, kung ano yung problema currently, and kung paano na susolusyonan, ano yung ethics behind it, and so on and so forth. And it also extended, especially dun sa

research ko na rin. Also, in UP Baguio, since I was surrounded by a lot of scholars of indigenous descent as well, yung mentorship ko also helped in my development as a scholar of indigenous media, like for example, isa sa mga mentors ko ay si Dr. Jimmy Fong na marami na ring nasulat about indigenous media, specifically, music and even country music na pino-produce sa Cordillera, and other scholars like Dr. Eli Guieb sa UP Diliman.

### **Media production practices and media products of indigenous peoples as a form of culture mediation: Jason on his expertise in indigenous media research**

As an indigenous media studies scholar, Jason centers his work on the mediation of cultures. He believes that indigenous peoples have the opportunity to share knowledge about their true identities and authentic cultures through their own practices and content creation, combating negative portrayals and misrepresentations in mainstream media.

**JASON:** When it comes to indigenous media, mas focused ko talaga ‘yung mediation of cultures. Kung paano nami-mediate o nae-express or nai-incorporate yung culture dun sa media production practices and media products ng indigenous peoples. So isa sa mga observations kasi natin as communication scholars even before, for a long time, ay yung mga negative portrayals about the IPs sa ibat-ibang forms ng media like television, films, news, documentaries, and even online. And isa sa mga latest papers ko nga ay yung about representation of IPs ay yung virality nila sa social media, right, and it actually is an indicator of their othering, isa sa mga sinulat ko yan. And ang isa sa mga usual theme ng research ko ay yun, yung media. It actually affords marginalized peoples, including indigenous peoples and groups, a platform to mediate or express their cultures and identities according to their understanding in their own terms. And it could be used as a mechanism to mediate their own voices, their own perspectives about different things. And it could also be used or pwede nilang magamit to construct their own images based on their own backgrounds and context and their own understanding, and it could also be a vehicle for them to be empowered. So, yun yung mga tinitignan ko. So, kung paano nila ginagamit ‘yung media to express.

When asked about the IPs’ access to media, Jason emphasized that the IPs also have the access to produce their own contents and that they also have the power to use media to gain visibility. He pointed out that it is a misconception to view IPs as isolated, as they are equally capable of producing their own content.

JASON: That's actually one of the misrepresentations or misrepresented or incorrect beliefs about indigenous peoples na wala silang access sa, for example, modern technologies, media technologies but nowadays they have access already and the Philippine context they have access, a lot of communities already have access to media production facilities or radio production facilities, film production facilities, so it's also incorrect if we say na wala silang access. They have it. So that's why yun yung ang inaaral ko ngayon, kung paano nila ginagamit, or kung paano nila, ayoko gamitin yung word exploit, kung paano nila ginagamit yung technologies na may access sila to produce their own images of themselves, to express who they are, and also to voice out their own perspectives on issues that are important to them. For example, Baguio City, they have a lot of platforms. May access sila sa radio stations, may access sila sa newspapers, to be writers, to be producers. But in other communities, of course, iba rin yung konteksto nila. Pero meron din silang mga ibat-ibang affordances doon. Like for example, in some communities, may ability sila to produce their own films. Sa ibang communities, meron silang platform like Radyo Sagada na binibigyan sila ng platform to speak and to have their own programs and to share their own songs there. Yung ibang communities naman, mas newspaper yung formula. So they are aware, pero magkakaiba lang talaga yung platforms na meron sila.

Jason recognizes the significance of indigenous media studies in the Philippines. He emphasizes that exploring indigenous media not only challenges mainstream media but also amplifies marginalized voices. Additionally, it offers a pathway toward developing a more comprehensive and inclusive framework for media studies.

JASON: So, 'yung indigenous media studies kasi, it holds a significant value, of course, sa konteksto ng media studies as a whole, so we include and focus on indigenous media as a subject of research, we can challenge the mainstream because often yung narratives nila ay centralized masyado. The mainstream have historically dominated the industry or even the analysis of the mainstream media that we have is dominant already. So if we focus on indigenous media, it also brings to light the unique stories, the languages, experiences of indigenous communities into the discourse. So, yung mga studies na ito, they provide a platform for marginalized voices to also be heard. It ensures indigenous perspectives. It ensures the recognition and appreciation as well. Also,

if we understand different forms of media in indigenous communities and even regional communities, since they have been mostly neglected in the past, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Philippine media landscape. So for example, you won't be able to create a comprehensive or inclusive framework or conceptualization of what a national cinema is if you don't include the cinemas that can be found in the regions, right? Even in indigenous communities. So, if we have this broad perspective, it can help us see the diversity or cultural diversity that shapes the Philippine media industry. And this actually allows us to develop and conceptualize a more inclusive and representative of media industries or understanding of that media industry.

### **Thorns along the road: Jason on the challenges he faced in studying indigenous cultures**

As a non-indigenous researcher, Jason became candid about the challenges he has faced and continues to face in navigating cultural barriers and gaining trust. While he may have had moments of doubt, being accountable and having support and mentorship have helped him overcome these challenges.

**JASON:** Una, as you know I'm from La Union so I'm not an indigenous person. As a non-indigenous researcher, I think trying to become knowledgeable about culture in the Philippines is one of the biggest challenges na kailangan mong i-overcome. So because there are limitations when you are an outsider in a culture. And that's also an issue pagdating sa indigenous studies as well. Gaining a deeper understanding of their traditions, languages, worldviews, media practices even, it requires extensive time, trust, and immersion. And that could be difficult to achieve fully, of course. Ang dami nating cultural barriers dyan, physical barriers even. May tayo limit sa access to certain knowledges also, particularly when it comes to those that are considered sacred, and yung mga deeply personal practices na madaling i-share sa mga outsiders. Hindi maiiwasan na talaga maki-criticize ka as a non-indigenous scholar researching indigenous peoples and their practices. So may mga criticisms dahil nga I'm a non-indigenous person. We had this criticism before dun sa libro na kaka-release lang this year na nako, yung editor hindi indigenous person. Tapos most of the writers, hindi sila indigenous themselves. Syempre na-rattle ako dun and I was a bit discouraged. I second-guessed myself and so on. Kung tama ba talaga yung ginagawa ko or kung may mali ba akong nasabi o ginwa sa libro, o may mga kulang ba. So of course, I consulted Dr. Fong and Dr. Eli Guieb, and ibang other scholars na kilala ko.

Aside from the criticisms he receives from other people, Jason also acknowledges the internal struggles of learning about a culture that is not his own. Remaining accountable, sensitive, and humble as a researcher helps him to mitigate risks of misinterpretation and misrepresentations that may cause harm to the IP communities.

**JASON:** Meron din tayong risk in misinterpreting cultural nuances, especially as non-indigenous researchers. Sometimes we impose external perspectives in analyzing their practices, can lead to misrepresentation, misportrayals, and unintentional harm sa mga communities. So we should maintain cultural sensitivity and humility throughout the research process. And this is essential to overcome these challenges. I always make it a point to make the gathering, analysis, and writing phases of my research to be consultative. So I always involve my respondents. For example, yung mga ininterview ko na mga producers ng mga music videos na mga inaral ko, I always ask them back kung tama itong mga sinabi ko, tama ba yung interpretation ko dun sa sinulat ko na lyrics and so on. So I usually involve my respondents and sometimes more senior indigenous scholars like for example nga si Dr. Jimmy Fong ng UP Baguio and even kahit non-indigenous pero mga seasoned anthropologists na ng media like for example Dr. Eli Guieb dyan sa UP Diliman, para maiwasan yung misrepresentation and ang maling interpretation pagdating sa mga analysis ko. So for example nga, when I was translating some contemporary songs na nakasulat in Kankanaey, humingi ako sa mga tao na parte ng kultura na iyun ng tulong. So sometimes, sila yung nagta-translate para sa akin, literally, and sila din yung nage-explain sa mga meanings behind the lyrics. Like for example, ano yung meaning ng mga metaphor na ito, ano yung meaning ng mga figurative languages na ito, and so on. Also, during the peer review process or peer review phase sa mga publication ko, IP and Media, lagi kong mini-make sure na magsuggest ako sa editor kung sino yung reviewer. So as much as possible, sana yung expert din sa indigenous media sa Philippines or indigenous scholar talaga sa Philippines.

While criticisms are natural in the academe, Jason believes that non-Indigenous researchers should not be dismissed for their ability to study indigenous peoples (IPs). However, he emphasizes that researchers must also continually examine their motives, ensuring that their work centers on the authentic experiences of IPs rather than their own interpretations. He advises approaching studies on indigenous communities with “a critical mindset, respect, and ethical care.”

JASON: Sabi nila na parte talaga ng academic life ang criticism, so hindi talaga maiiwasan. The important thing is we consider their valid points, meditate on it, and learn from them of course. And regarding the specific issue na yun na binato sa amin, so indeed, tama naman na yung authorship ng indigenous peoples of research about their cultures, histories, and experiences ay essential to guarantee accuracy, to promote their empowerment and self-determination and to uphold ethical engagement, pero it is also not right to discount not indigenous researches. Sabi nga ng isa pang indigenous author na si Linda Smith 2021, kasi may libro sya na *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. So ang main point lang naman nya dun ay non-indigenous individuals can actually research and write about IPs as well. Pero of course, they have to approach it with a critical mindset, with respect, and ethical care. And dapat yung primary purpose mo is to contribute to, of course, their well-being, justice, dignity, and empowerment of their communities, especially those who you are researching about. So you have to make sure that we are careful to acquire informed consent if kailangan to engage with them in meaningful collaboration. And of course, you have to use or foreground indigenous perspectives instead of you overshadowing them with western perspectives, for example. And isa pa, it's also important that non-indigenous scholars like myself to advocate for the recognition and advancement and even use of indigenous methodologies and approaches that are, of course, based on indigenous knowledge systems and viewpoints rather than imposing western or my own or colonial frameworks and standpoints

### **Exploring uncharted roads: Jason on founding SEAMSA as part of his advocacy for representation, and his ongoing studies and plans as a media studies scholar**

In his continued advocacy for culture representation, Jason founded the Southeast Asian Media Studies Association (SEAMSA). He envisions it as a platform for scholars, particularly those from Southeast Asian countries like Timor-Leste, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Brunei, to publish and share their research.

JASON: I founded Southeast Asian Media Studies Association or SEAMSA in 2017. So I came up with this idea during one of the conferences na inatendan ko. I think it was in Thailand. And at the time, medyo na-realize ko na medyo kakaunti 'yung representation. So napapansin ko lagi na when it comes to conferences, media and communication conferences,

parang in Asia, parang nandyan lagi ‘yung Pilipinas. Ang dami galing sa Philippines, from Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, even Vietnam. Pero pagdating sa ibang countries like Cambodia, Myanmar, Timor-Leste especially, and Laos, and sometimes Brunei, parang walang masyadong nag-aaral tungkol sa media nila. Although, syempre meron, some of them are from Western countries, meron din nag-aaral locally, pero hindi sila gaanong napo-popularize and even nadi-disseminate in journals and also during conferences. So to help in, perhaps, developing media studies in our region, at para rin ma-popularize yung field in our region, the ASEAN region, I founded this organization and invited some of my contacts na nakilala ko through those conferences as well. I think we were eight at that time. Our aim was to develop and also popularize media studies as a field in Southeast Asia. Although thriving naman na sya, especially sa mga countries na na-mention ko kanina, pero it’s important for us to also put other members of the ASEAN community into the discussion or into the discourse. So to help them to add to our knowledge about the media practices, for example, in Timor-Leste, in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and even in Brunei.

Jason continues to expand his perspective as a media studies scholar. He remains dedicated to cultural mediation, now focusing on how Filipinos use Southeast Asian games to share and express Filipino culture.

**JASON:** My focus right now is Southeast Asian games. Kung paano ginamit ng Filipinos ang Southeast Asian games as a platform to mediate our cultures and identities. Although may parts dun na na-discuss ko yung displacement ng mga Aeta during the 30th Sea Games, it’s not the focus. Pero meron akong criticism about Southeast Asian games in that regard. Pero mostly kung paano ginagamit yung iba’t-ibang parts of Southeast Asian Games. Like nung nag-host tayo nung panahon ni Duterte, and during the participation of athletes in the 2019, 2021, and 2023 Southeast Asian Games, kung paano na-express yung culture natin, yung values, and so on. That’s my focus.

Although his dissertation does not directly address indigenous media, Jason remains determined to pursue research, seek mentorship, and engage in discussions about indigenous media. Being in Australia—a country renowned for its preservation of indigenous cultures—offers him a unique opportunity to deepen his understanding. Another promising avenue for him is studying Filipino indigenous immigrants in Australia. Indeed, Jason has much more to contribute to this field.



JASON: I will still research and talk about indigenous media because first I am in Australia which is and in this country is very sensitive when it comes to their indigenous peoples and their rights and their representation, so maraming nag-aaral sa aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders here and how they use media as well. And I think I'll be able to seek mentorship about it here. And also, maraming indigenous peoples dito na nag-migrate. And it's also interesting kung paano na ginagamit ang media, social media for example, in negotiating in reaching out to their families and in also negotiating their experiences as indigenous peoples here in Australia.

### Leaving a trail of footprints: Jason Shares Personal Advice for Young Scholars Pursuing Research in Indigenous Media Studies

Studying and researching indigenous media demands a dedicated scholar, much like Jason. He shared that those beginning their journey in indigenous media studies should approach their work with openness and humility, willing to learn from indigenous perspectives. Engaging with indigenous communities and considering collaboration with indigenous scholars can deepen understanding and ensure authentic representation. Their commitment should be grounded in advocating for the elevation of indigenous peoples' status in the Philippines. Finally, they must remain mindful of their ethical responsibilities to respect and accurately convey the voices and narratives of these communities.

JASON: 'Yung mga young scholars and even media practitioners sa Pilipinas, they can get involved in indigenous media studies first by being open to study and understanding the perspectives of indigenous communities. So we have to be humble enough because madalas or minsan may idea tayo na, ay nako, from Manila ako, from sentro, so yung perspectives, yung frameworks na iniisip ko, I don't want to say better than sa mga pupuntahan ko para pag-aralan. Pero we have to be open in studying and understanding their perspectives as indigenous communities as well because they are equally valid, and this requires genuine curiosity and respect for their culture history and world views as well as I would like to point out that of course we have to have that commitment as well to amplifying their voices instead of our own, our own perspectives, rather than imposing external narratives that we may have or our own biases that we may have, and it's also important that we seek mentorship from scholars or practitioners who have experience or who are more knowledgeable than us when it comes to indigenous media, yeah and so as much as possible sana indigenous scholar then para alam

mo yung pinanggagalingan nila. It's also essential. And it also provides us with valuable insights and guidance on ethical approaches to this work. And in addition, we can also consider engaging directly with indigenous communities and participating in their events sometimes, like participant observation, that kind of methodology, and learning from their elders that can deepen understanding if the research warrants it. So for example, ako nga diba, yung media, inaal ko radio broadcasting practices and hindi naman talaga part ng methodology na makakatulong sa akin yung pagpunta sa communities. Rather, mag-stay ka lang sa radio stations, for example, na wala naman talaga sa communities pero nasa sentro minsan or nasa isang location lang. So it depends on the context. And ang mga scholars, young scholars should consider collaborating within indigenous media creators and support their initiatives to promote other media platforms as well. And young scholars should also consider advocating for policies that will ensure indigenous representation and ownership in the media industry as well. If we are going to take, for example, a critical approach in studying media, of course, part of the critical approach is for us to advocate for change. So you have to also advocate for policies that would help drive that change. And finally, we have to be mindful of the ethical considerations such as informed consent, intellectual property rights, and they are crucial when contributing to Indigenous media studies.

The transformative power of media empowers people, communities, societies, and the world. It offers indigenous peoples the chance to break free from the very tool that often disadvantages them. By harnessing media's potential and supporting indigenous-produced content, we can work together to elevate their status and amplify their voices.

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### **About the Interviewer**

Justine Sanoy-Alcantara is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts, University of the Philippines Diliman, where she earned MA degree in Speech Communication. She handles courses in public speaking and persuasion and rhetorical criticism. Her research interests are rhetoric and intercultural communication. Her most recent work was published in the Philippine Communication Society Review.