The role of mass media in national development

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by Wan Firuz Mustafa, U.K.M.

Introduction

The role of mass media in national development stems from the idea that people can be influenced and persuaded by messages that come from the mass media. A lot of literature has been written spelling out the functions of mass media both in development or social and economic development. In the past two decades or so the mass media has been subjected to a lot of criticisms and it may be worth or while to look at some of these based on empirical evidence. However, there are always two sides to it. Some advocated that the mass media played dynamic roles in the modernisation of an individual. The most prominent view came about in the late 50's and until the middle 60's, one that lends support to the mass media system as the central force in the wake of the development process. This dramatic function is put forward by communications scholars like Rogers, Lerner and Deutschmann who togerther with McClelland and Hagen believe that the Mass Media is the intervening variable from the 'traditional' stage to the 'modern' continum.

Theoretical Considerations

To give an idea of this approach, I will try to explain briefly the theoretical considerations as put forward by Lerner and Rogers.
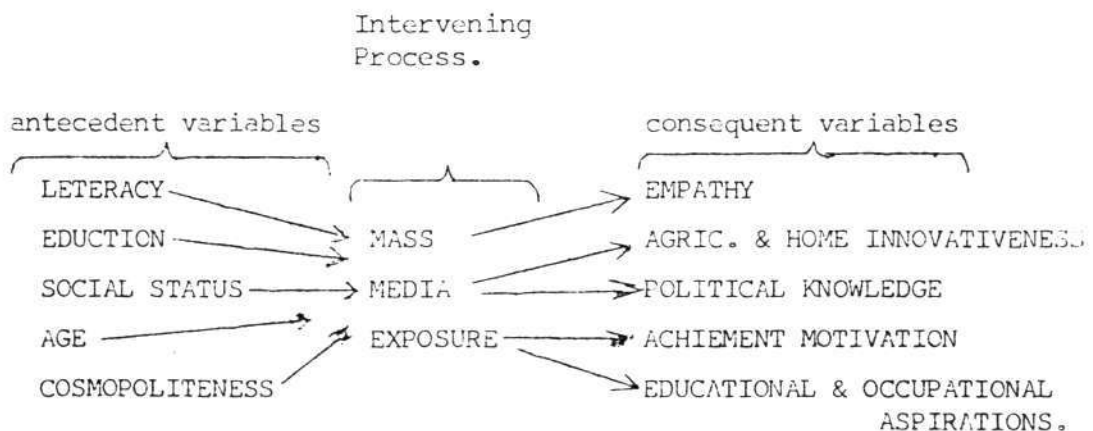
Lerner's model:

URBANISATION

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION   LITERACY

MEDIA GROWTH

&

PARTICIPATION

Lerner postulates four dependent variables existing one after the other in the society's growth towards modernisation. Even before mass media can materialise itself there must first of all be the urbanisation stage followed by the literacy stage. The impetus towards modern development will greatly be enhanced after there is mass media growth and participation, which in turn determines political participation. Thus, Lerner has glorified the communication role as the determinant of politics, when we know it may be otherwise.

Rogers too makes the statement in the same tone ascribing the role of 'magic' to mass media capabilities. Antecedent variables comprising literacy, education, social status, age and cosmopoliteness when exposed to mass media becomes consequent variables of empathy, agricultural and home innovativeness, political knowledge, achievement motivation and educational and occupational aspirations.

Roger's Model:

Intervening
Process.

antecedent variables   consequent variables

LETERACY   EMPATHY
EDUCTION   MASS   AGRIC. & HOME INNOVATIVENESS
SOCIAL STATUS   MEDIA   POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE
AGE   EXPOSURE   ACHIEMENT MOTIVATION
COSMOPOLITENESS   EDUCATIONAL & OCCUPATIONAL
                                                     ASPIRATIONS.

Political development is considered to be a dependent variable. It is also assumed that urbanisation is not dependent on any variable in the system; that other antecedent variables have no correlation with any other variable in the system. Also the models talks in a unidirectional causation.

The assumption that political development is a process of integration of social cohesion provided narratively by the existence of a communications network is very weak. McCrone and Cnudde point our that cannot say that underdeveloped nations in the post World War II period has a democratic regime socio-economically. Futhermore, some countries seem to be developed politically without having the right number of newspapers.

Also acting in a positive tone, Schramm put forward a
list of possible functions for the mass media: as a watchman or
check against unwanted elements or infringements of **right**; to
help in the decision making process; as a teacher; help to widen
horizons; focus attention; raise aspirations; alleviate people
from feudalism; establishing a propitous **climate** for change;
help indirectly and directly to change strongly held attitudes;
strengthen interpersonal channels; confer status; bring common
people into the process of decision-making; enforce social norms,
taste; help in the formation of national identity; attack phere-
phiral attitudes; can help in teaching through audio visual aids -
thus, theoretically speaking, a wide range of utilisation is poss-
ible. To top it up Lasswell quotes that the mass media can survey
the environment; correlate parts of society and transmit cultural
and social heritage from one generation to the next.

Needles to say, the above formulations has its share of
influence, and this manifests itself in communication strategies
and studies that have strong correlation between mass media and
modernisation. Mass media is classified as the omnipotent force,
as soon as its audience is exposed or is accessible to its con-
tents, the message will automatically change individual's attitude
or behaviour accordingly. That's when McLuhan talks about the
'medium is the message'.

Obviously, expositions of this kind has its severe limi-
tations because it is folly to think of the message as a powerful
force that can make the receives heed and follow every word the
information dictates. Audiences are regarded as passive, sitting
ducks clothed in social, psychological and structural mudity ever
ready to act the message's dictum. But we know that audiences are
active entities to be reckoned with, each member with his own mind
and individuality.

The above holds that there is an over perception re-
garding potential capacities of mass media. But even though the
above has a strong possibility of being true, it does not **mean**
that mass media has not a role in the development process. Al-
though there is nothing to indicate validity of casuality, it is
clear that the mass media has both cause and effect in the process
of modernising society.

At this point it is safer for us to say that the mass
media <u>can</u> desseminate information. But why are there so many

criticisms regarding the use of mass media as a development tool. Thus, we will now proceed to look into the sceptists' point of view on the inherent short comings of the mass media.

Weaknesses of Mass Media

Many scholars have studied the impact of media on modernization, with the hope that mass media can disseminate new ideas. **Because** these studies are assumed that they give relevant information, an impression is created that the mass media will make modernization available for the individual. But in a technologically underdeveloped country this is hardly the case, bacause there are more direct barriers and obstacles which a development message is likely to encounter. While these problems vary from county to country some general characteristics to tell the picture could be drawn out:

There is limitedness of coverage and supply of the mass media. While the mass media is to be found in almost every country in the world they have not reached the same level of development in all countries. A communicator cannot make full use of the mass media owing to the limitation of supply, coverage and validity, among other things. This problem is more critical in areas where population is predominantly rural. Studies show that the concentration of mass media is in countries where the per capita wealth on industrial development is high. While it is true that a particular country makes use of film, newspapers, radio and tv, it is also true that in a developing country, these media have ready access to only the minority group of an urban-based population.

There is limited funding to purchase broadcasting equipment or offset machines and to train and to pay media personnel. This results in a shortage of production and transmission facilities, which in turn results in a combined negative effect, where not only the information do not reach a major proportion of the audience, but the messages themselves are few and scarce.

Assuming there is an adequate supply of the mass media, the poverty of the rural people, their illiteracy and ignorance hamper full utilisation of messages. The printed word is limited in scope by the number of people in the audience who are able to read. While a lot of effort is given in trying to reduce or eliminate illiteracy, (in some countries it is a top priority program), the proportion of illiterates is still high in many of these countries. Thus, the printed word, instead of fos-

tering communication, represents an obstacle to it. Even if the majority of the rural folks are literate people, the extent to which the media conveys scientific & technical knowledge could still be a problem. For example, if some health information is covered, the chances are that it may be presented the form and style above the level and understanding of the masses. Content analysis of the mass media in less developed countries show that the softwares are "consumatory (that is, for entertainment perposes) rather than instrumental; and devoid of 'how-to' information about information in family planning, agriculture, health and nutrition and community development."* Content analysis studies also revealed again and again that the urban news items are significantly higher than rural information.

The radio is a popular media among the people. This however, gives rise to another shortcoming of the mass media - that the participation of the audience is being on the receiving end. To be effective, informal education should involve the learner . This is not possible when the mass media concentrate only on communicating information.

The Malaysian Mass Media

Two major types of media are available here, viz. the print and the electronic media. In the print system, there is the printing industry and the press, the former bent on issuing periodic but regular publications of 'palatable' materials, while the latter carved for itself a comfortable niche in the commercialised-cum-public service world. Newspapers sell news as their chief commodity, and the sales are defined according to the market economy. And since newspaper readership groups are urban based, this factor alone literally drags journalists to their problem, ie. in failing to reach a multitude of low-income, illiterate or semi-illiterate mass audience. The newspapers are usually private owned, and the printing industry usually involves government and private ownership.

In the electronic field there is the radio and tv. Radio is the early impact maker. Next to the spoken word, the radio is utilised more fully than the tv in the rural areas. Studies indicated that ⅓ of all the people in the developing countries do not receive any of the modern Mass Media, about ⅓ are reached only by radio, and approximately another ⅓ are audiences of electronics and print media.

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* John T. McNelly

Due to the low purchase price of transistors, radio reached the mukims and the kampungs easily. Lazarsfeld demonstrated that the actual daily life the radio is the most important for most people with less than high school education. Thus, radio has **availability** and acessibility for all. An audio-visual medium like T.V. eventhough under a centralised system promised far ture reaching potentials in message diffusion. Eventhough expensive and **unavailable** to many T.V. like filming represents the most interesting attention getting device in media technological innovation. But lack of electrication many render a potential community medium unless and acts of hooliganism or irresponsible behavior on the part of the villagers. Many will destroy a hard earn community set. Harvey Grenfell reports that in Malaysia radio listeners amount up to 2.9 million persons while only 1.6 million persons are T.V. watchers.

Common critism levied against our MM are that they are centralised and non-specialised. The media has its reason of catering to general needs. Perse, nothing is the matter with these characteristics, but the problem arises when one talks of functional and relevant role of information to suit audience local situations. Let us take the farming situation as an example. In the rural areas farmers can react according to their predispositions and have the capacity to either reject or accept the information/innovation. The importance of relevant information or knowledge for farmers shall not be ignored. Again, the normal assumption is that the source knows what message needed by the receiver. But this is not always so. "Coorientation research shows this to be a dubious assumption, i.e. that while people often think what the orientations are of others the accuracy of their perceptions is frequently less than perfect"*.

Due to the above fallacies, comunication scholars have proposed new ideas to improve the model. Brown had pointed out that technological information has to be concomitant with the situational changes before any good can come out of it..."he must operate within a narrow margin between what the farmers already know and use and what they are capable of using, given the situational restraints (physical, economic, institutional and technological". Brown and Kearl had also expressed their feelings on the limitations of communication in development:
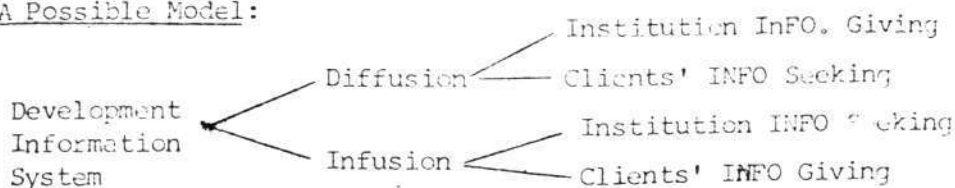
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* Hans Groot.

"Skillful communication can change a peasant's
perception of his situation, but it cannot, acting alone, change
that situation very much. It can help a backward farmer see
opportunity he ignores, but if opportunities do not exist,
information will not create them".

Essentially then, the farmer should have information
that is relevant to their needs and problems if communication
is to have any effect at all. Rogers said that this lack of
relevant information is due in part to the lack of upward
communication from farmers.

It therefore becomes necessary to have farmers communicate
their needs and problems upwards to the development agencies.
This suggests that at the very least there is a need to under-
stand the two-way flow of information. Rogers added that there
should be an element of "feedback" to the model, thus
recognising that the transaction is a dialogue in which
receiver power may be important. Feedback is a response
by the receiver to the source's message, which the source
may subsequently use to modify his further messages. Emphasis
on feedback assumes greater equality of the participants in
a communication event.

Recently the feedback element has been developed
further. Groot for example, has stressed that it is
insufficient to merely talk of feedback which in most cases is
taken to mean response or reaction. Because of importance
given to farmer's needs, a more appropriate measurement would
be to study "infusion" or an expression of elicited needs
of farmers.

A Possible Model:

Development
Information
System

Diffusion —— Institution InFO. Giving
Diffusion —— Clients' INFO Seeking

Infusion — Institution INFO Seeking
Infusion — Clients' INFO Giving

This implies that knowledge has to really begin at the
receiver end, i.e. the farmer to demand knowledge and
"infuse" it upwards before any information can be diffused
back to them. Childers and Vajrathon made a statement
in the same vein:

"The need is not merely to get farmers and their
families to feel "involved" in a project, though such sense
of involvement is vital, nor merely to "participate" as if
this were optional. The need is to help farmers to act as
implementors to adopt (usually) quite specific innovations
in their life patterns and/or production techniques which
are whole purpose of the projects".

Kearl argued that among other things information
delivered should be time, useful, adequate and appropriate
to the local screenerio. It is obvious that a central
media system will be able to effectively cater only the
general needs of listeners and viewers. But the natural
goal of changing attitudes and behaviour in the modernising
process demands more than just catering towards general
majority taste. Surely the hardware and software would
have to be correct to suit those conditions, thus this
implies that detached contents and more special media
institutions or items may be necessary, both in the light
of extending the central organ's normative values as well
as furnishing the functional and relevant materials for
specific areas of consumption.

What The Mass Media Can Do

What can the MM do? Developing nations have background
similarities. Almost all were once before under colonial rule
and had been endowed with the social fabric of the colonial
masters. All were left with the task of nation-building
after the "patron" pullout, a complex and diverse undertaking
of social, economic, political and cultural development of the
population to a level that can be better for all of us.

Tun Abdul Razak, our late Prime Minister clearly stated the
3rd Malaysia Plan objective. in the Malaysia Media that its role is
to create social and economic awareness among the Malaysian
people and, especially among those who live in the villages.
The previous Minister of Information, Datuk Amar Hj. Taib
Mahmud fully supported Tun Razak's postulation when outlining
a policy speech in January, 1977:

" In other words, while forms of messages can be as
varied as the imagination can conjure the use of various media,
the purpose of the message must be persistently similar to the
cause of development".

Dol Ramli, Head of BERNAMA, brings out the cognitive
angle:

"In the process of mobilising all national and even
international resources none appears to be more important than
the development of that which resides in the human and will.
The basic tools needed to bring out the best in people
appear to lie in the real of effective mass media use".
And he added,

"Newly - independent nations and developing countries
need all the resources of mass media to hasten the process of
bhange and democratic assimilation, to promote a better life
for their people. Not merely to provide daily entertainment
and knowledge and information, and to bridge the gaps in human
understanding. A primary duty is to bring the government to
the people and vice-versa, to stimulate their interest in
better agricultural methods, in health improvement, in the
practice of democratic processes, and to exite their imagination
in the arts and cultures and in new skills to be acquired for
developing commerce and industry" And may I add, to hasten the
process of cultural integration and the planned restruction
of Malaysian Society.

The Mass Media must exercise conetant public airings in order to understand public problems, needs and aspirations. The use of vertical and horizontal communication in a two-way interactive process can greatly tone down tensions and simultaneously enhanced perception and understanding of one or the other systems/institutions in society. But care must be taken, however, to exercise this in the most diligent, responsible and non-emotional manner, as otherwise a negative picture might result. For communication has the potentiality not only to create understanding but to break it as well. Thus, the strive towards a mutual convergence of understanding for all involved must be executed in s purposeful and sincere manner.

Communication Concert

Because of the inherent weaknesses of the mass media mentioned ealier, it may wise to interplay other communication channels when beaming down messages to target groups. Mass Media for instance, are more effective when combined with interpersonal channels. Many communications strategies currently utilising mass media channels have the tendency to adopt a "favourite" hardware that is perceived as proper for a all purposes. This is a folly. No channel is suitable for all intentions. Inevitably, the single channel approach fails because it does not take into consideration a "toal-systems" approach, where various channels, be it mass media interpersonal or traditional media, act together towards a given goal, can out do any given channel. Thus communication channels acting inter-depently can be orchestrated in an intergrated manner by means of a communication strategy. And this is what we call the multi-media approach.

The effectiveness of the message can also increase manifold when supported by visual demostration.

Mobile kombi vans can show films, slide tapes presentations,
filmstrips, video-cassattes players. Exhibitions and fairs can
attract people but it has to be both entertaining and instructive.
Audio-Visual aids have to be used in any possible situation
to support interpersonal communication campaign, because the oral
message maybe inadequate to promote new **practices** and technologies.

Some After Thoughts In Research Areas

If one agrees that the socio-economic development of
a country should be considered the expansion of the freedom and
capacity of every individual to make decisions oriented to
satisfy his needs and externally improve his situation [*], then
one should think that a large proportion of the population has
a very narrow range of possible decisions. "ithin this frame of
reference, communication serves a crucial factor to allow the
individual to obtain information that in turn brings motivation
that allow him to broaden **his** field of possible decisions. Since
the farmer is limited by family, social, cultural, economic,
political and institutional frameworks, we ought to have
communication research dealing with factors that impede or
help the freedom of choice for farmers so as to get from him
his true needs and problems. Once we how these factors,
communication campaigns can be design to either break
barriers or promote message flow.

Those aspects which are not economic, that is, those
cultural, social and institutional factors, are powerful factors
which aid, hinder or impede development. An exaggerated emphasis
has been given to variables that resist change, but not enough
on factors giving receptivity to change.

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* Amardo Samper

We can be sure that even the **small** peasant has the desire to produce more efficiently and are interested on information on how this can be done.

Two further studies that is relevant for our purpose here is the need to study how the government get to know about the population needs, its related problems and aspirations (the **feed**back, infusion problem) and the role of societal instituions (urban or rural) in the flow of communication studies have devoted themselves to the ways in which new ideas are diffused to the rural areas, but very little or none in known about how, for example, farmers reach (or how they should reach) the formal developmental system. In Malaysia the presence of village institutions like rural farmer organisations, coffee shops and stalls, men/women groups, religious congregations, cooperatives, and other social centres have the potential to relay both horizontal as well as downward and upward flow of messages. Steps could be taken to make them more effective for a two-way communication channel.

To my mind the role of the mass media in development must be viewed according to local needs and problems and proper understanding of media capabilities and **f**unctions. Concomitant to this must be carried out research efforts to bring out ideas to overcome **problems**. And also to be able to execute development campaigns with sufficient understanding and confidence so as to overcome the costly and inefficient method of improvisation.

WF/hal.