Approaches to communication planning

Amunugama, Sarath

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Approaches To Communication Planning

By

Sarath Amunugama

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APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATION PLANNING

SARATH AMUNUGAMA
Secretary
Ministry of State
Government of Sri Lanka

"Information is a basic resource, fully as important as materials or energy. While materials and energy have not lacked for public scrutiny and policy attention, information resources have developed willy-nilly, their potency overshadowed by technical details, their pervasiveness so complete that they are taken for granted like the clear air we breath".

This statement of the Information Resources Policy Programme of Harvard University, referring to the lack of communications planning applies even more to the countries of the Asian region. It is only now that we are becoming aware of the role of communications and the need for a rational approach towards its use. Two major events of the recent past have forcefully drawn the attention of both policy makers and media practitioners to the area of communication planning. These events are the UNESCO meeting in Paris this year when the question of "free flow of Information" was hotly debated by member nations and the World Administrative Radio Conference deliberations which are even now going on in Geneva. Thus the present, and particularly the future, of communications planning has thrust itself on the agenda of Asian countries as never before in the past. Governments have been compelled to look at their communications systems as -

- (a) interdependent entities (for instance the allocation of radio frequencies for Radio, Post and Telecommunications, Meteorological, Civil Aviation and other users has to be co-ordinated at national level).
- (b) to be defended and secured by intervention at the highest policy making levels (eg. the role of UNESCO; WARC).
- (c) vital to national interests.

In this paper therefore I propose to examine the question of communications planning through the eyes of an Asian policymaker. No doubt this approach will vary somewhat from that of the academician and the media practitioner. But I think in communication planning we will have to take into account all these divergent approaches and work out a common platform.

...2/-

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- 2 -

What is planning?

We must begin this discussion with a working definition of planning. David Hussey defines planning as "the setting of objectives, organising the work, people and systems to enable those objectives to be attained, motivating through the planning process and through the plans, measuring performance and so controlling progress of the plan and developing people through better decision making, clearer objectives, more involvement and awareness of progress."²

From Hussey's definition, and definitions of other writers such as Peter Drueker, we can identify the following key areas in the planning process:-

- (1) Setting of objectives.
- (2) Assessing and forecasting the environment for future action.
- (3) Designing of alternative courses of action for achievement of objectives.
- (4) Evaluating alternatives in terms of present and future costs and benefits.
- (5) Selecting the course of action with the greatest benefit.
- (6) Training and motivating personnel to carry out those tasks.
- (7) Monitoring the actual results as action is carried out.

Planning and Action are interrelated

It is clear that planning and action must be interrelated. The time and effort invested in planning is meaningful only to the extent that our decisions are related to such plans. Planning without follow up action is a futile activity. This must be emphasised since a major problem in our region is that while we have plans we frequently do not implement them in a consistent way.

These definitions do not tell us the complete story. Depending on the objectives and the internal structure of an organisation, planning will take place at different levels. The bigger the organisation and the more complex its activities, the more differentiated will be its levels of planning. For convenience these levels will be summarised as follows:-

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SOLO, Indonesia, 4 - 8 November 1979

- 3 -

1. Strategic or policy planning: This deals with broad areas of concern such as the purposes and directions of the organisation; its mission and desired ends, its overall objectives and goals. Here an attempt is made to relate different policies to the broader objectives of the organisation. Critical choices regarding the areas of development and investment are made at this level.
2. Operational planning: Here the focus is on action programmes which are aimed at achieving particular goals within a relatively short period of time. Such planning would usually relate to a segment of the total organisation. It is more formal and more detailed than strategic planning. Such a plan may include marketing plans, facilities plans or plans to allocate the organisations capital among major divisions during that limited period of time.
3. Project planning: These are plans for specific operations such as capital investment projects or the development of an individual undertaking.

Communications Planning

We can relate each of the levels of planning identified above to the field of communications planning as well. Any major decision regarding the media, be it taken by the State or private organisations, will entail planning at all these three levels. During the last year, for instance, Sri Lanka has decided to introduce nationwide colour TV. This entails complex decision making by a whole host of persons associated with media at all levels. To give another example, an analysis of communications planning in the Peoples' Republic of China will not be meaningful unless we take into account these different levels of decision-making. In this paper, however, I will focus attention primarily on the policy planning aspect.

Ithiel de Sola Pool in his paper The Rise of Communications Policy Research, refers to a new emphasis in communications. "We are now at the point, on the exponential acceleration of change, where major innovations in our communications system are coming every decade, and there is no reason to expect that acceleration to stop. We are entering a period in which the whole communications system will be in a process of constant flux. That makes the communications system itself an object of research. The important issues for scholars looking at the next decade are not only how people behave in the existing communications system, but what the communications system itself will be".

The nature of the 'communications system itself' can be conveniently analysed in terms of (a) technology (b) ideology. In reality however, these two dimensions tend to influence each other.

...4/-

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- 4 -

A concern regarding Communications policy planning has become manifest at this juncture in the technologically advanced countries for several reasons. Firstly, communications technology or "hardware" is being improved at a phenomenal pace. Some of the most advanced research in the world is being undertaken in the field of communications, as for instance in the case of space research. The following table gives some idea of the increased capacity of various communication channels and likely developments in the future:-

Channel	Channel Bandwidth (Hertz)	Channel capacity (Bits per second)
1. Telephone wire (speech)	3,000	60,000
2. A.M. Radio	10,000	80,000
3. F.M. Radio	200,000	250,000
4. High Fidelity phonograph or Tape	15,000	250,000
5. Commercial TV	6 million	90 million
6. Microwave relay system (1200 telephone channels)	20 million	72 million
7. L-5 Loaxial cable system (10,800 telephone channels)	57 million	648 million
8. Proposed millimeter wave- guide system (250,000 tele- phone channels)	70 billion	15 billion
9. Hypothetical laser system	10 trillion	100 billion

The communications specialist and the people who finance improvements of communications system are constantly called upon to keep in touch with these developments in the field of technology and modernise their "hardware" in a way which will yield the best possible returns. The communications planner is confronted with the need to make a series of critical choices. This can be done

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- 5 -

effectively only if he is able to take into consideration the present, and especially future, policy objectives of the organisation he serves. Ad hoc decision making becomes a luxury which no modern mass-media organisation could afford in the context of the high costs of the technology involved.

Secondly, large mass media organisations have begun to examine the social costs of their activities. While the economies of print media, film, radio and TV are still, no doubt, primary considerations these organisations have been compelled by regulatory agencies, voluntary groups, social science research findings and the needs of better internal management to examine their own policies and strategies in terms of their social consequences. For instance, questions of types of advertising, subliminal message systems, attitudes to violence and pornography, the impact of TV on children - to mention a few issues - have been made subjects to public controversy, leading to the need to identify and critically examine policies relating to these areas.

Thirdly, since these organisations are very large, it has become necessary to identify the planning and policy implementation processes within such organisations. How are policy decisions made and at what levels? What are the checks and balances within the organisations? How well are the objectives of the organisations achieved? How does it fit the requirements of the community at large as represented by regulatory agencies? How can waste and redundancy be eliminated in the internal policymaking process? Yehezkel Dror, using systems theory, suggests four major areas in which the policymaking process can be studied;

- (1) Policy analysis.
- (2) Policy making system redesign and novadesign.
- (3) Evaluation and learning feedback.
- (4) Behavioural study of policymaking.

The objective of such studies is, naturally, the optimisation of the returns both financial and prestigewise to the organisation.

Fourthly, by bringing policymaking within the ambit of action-oriented research they are able to identify the real decision makers within the executive structure of communication organisations. Frequently the corporate facade of communication organisations hide the real structure and personnel involved in policymaking.

The four major reasons identified above are relevant to communications planning in Asia. Though generally Communications is not given much importance in policy or budgetary terms in our region, a detailed analysis of the investment on hardware and personnel in both the private and public sectors in this field adds up to a considerably large segment of the national investment. For instance, the activities of the Ministries

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- 6 -

of Information and Broadcasting and Post and Telecommunications, Press, Film and Radio, the extension personnel or field staff of Departments, Corporations and Private Sector undertakings, para-medical services and the information and public relations units of all these organisations comprise a substantial investment in terms of both men and material. Also, they "service" the other sectors of the economy like Agriculture, Industry and Trade. What is the policy of Governments towards the best utilisation of these services and resources? There is a great need to first inventorise these assets and to see whether there can be a more rational utilisation of these resources.

A very important question in third world countries is whether mass media and inter-group and interpersonal communications can be co-ordinated for developmental (extension) purposes. Today, the communication resources of the country are fragmented. As recent studies have clearly shown unless the mass media message is reinforced at the intergroup and interpersonal level the message may not be effective. Thus a co-ordination of the activities of those engaged in developmental information becomes necessary. Just to take one example there are several institutions that handle 'message systems' regarding rural development. Not only the Ministries of Information and Broadcasting and the Press but the field staff of several organisations are constantly directing messages at villagers. While the need to have an "integrated" approach to Rural Development planning has now been recognised, no attempt has been made to co-ordinate the information activities of all these diverse sources. The result is that frequently contradictory messages are directed at the villagers. This tends to disorient them. Another example is the unco-ordinated use of technical facilities. A large number of organisations give film shows, usually in remote areas where there are no cinema halls. There is the need to co-ordinate these activities so that a common film "package" can be set up and a better coverage of rural areas through film undertaken. To take another example, the news and features obtained through international news agencies are inefficiently shared among media organisations. It is clear therefore that the co-ordination and rational utilisation of whatever technology is available at present for furthering development should be a major policy consideration.

Media technology

Another important policy consideration is in respect of media technology. Poor countries are presented with a dazzling array of new equipment. The electronics industry for instance is developing in leaps and bounds. There is a constant demand to buy more sophisticated equipment for our institutions, but the financial resources at our command are meagre. If there is no coherent policy regarding the purchase of this equipment there can be large losses to the country. Since quick obsolescence of media equipment

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- 7 -

is a common feature, many advanced countries tend to 'dump' their old equipment on the poorer countries. Coming late into the field Asia has the advantage of getting the latest, and the best, equipment. The spread of the transistor radio, colour TV as against black and white and the possibilities of new minaturised transistor TV sets are some of the instances of later developed products being adopted by third world countries without going through the expenses of the trial stage. The policy formulator must be aware of all these changes. He must have the best possible technical advice and a willingness to look at the whole communications system in a "futuristic" sense.

Communicators and ideology

So far, I have dealt with the relationship between communications policy and technology. But the use of such technology takes place within a particular ideological climate. Thus the ideology of the State and the owners of communications organisations impinge on communications policy. In the case of large western communications organisations such as Bell Telephones, ITT, NBC, CBS, AP etc., policies are framed basically in terms of the long range interests of their investors. These are large scale business organisations which market news like any other commodity. Nationally, they operate in a general climate of "laissez faire". They respond to the demands of their investors and their consumers and are supervised only by national regulatory agencies. In the case of the National Executive perceiving a conflict between national interest and those of the owners, regulatory bodies such as the Federal Communications Commission, and Anti-Trust Authorities could be induced to exercise vigilance. But the constitution itself gives them a large degree of immunity from interference. The general pattern is one of an 'ideological fit' between the national goals and those of large media organisations. Indeed Time, Newsweek, and Hollywood are the best propagandists of the "American way of life".

In the case of third world countries, such a community of interests is not so clearly visible. Often it is the reverse. Examples of conflict between the State and the media could be given from the recent history of the region. Governments have actively intervened in the field of mass media and imposed its own policies on press, film, radio and TV. The recent White Paper on the Misuses of Mass Media published by the Government of India (August 1977) documents in great detail the manner in which the then Government of India used its political powers to control mass media policy.

The relationship between a Central Government which is elected by the people of a country and mass media organisation is crucial in formulating a communications policy. During the last decade Asian Governments have increasingly resorted to the control of media as a pre-condition of ensuring uniformity in the 'message systems' directed

...8/-

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SOLO, Indonesia, 4 - 8 November 1979

- 8 -

at the population at large. The justification for this approach which was in legal terms, unconstitutional and carried on under the cover of a State of Emergency was that such a uniformity in the message was necessary for the development effort. Mass Media was looked upon as means by which the attitudes of people could be influenced, their values changed and their cooperation obtained for larger social and economic purposes.

This theory was predicted on the belief that mass media could 'buy time' for the Government till its development efforts began to bear fruit. In reality however, the efforts of the media were grossly exaggerated when compared with achievements in the economic field. The claims of the media did not 'fit' the real life experiences of the people. On the other hand, such blanket endorsements often tended to gloss over errors in planning in particularly implementation. In the long run this led to a loss of belief in the message. Hence the basic assumptions of this 'media strategy' were themselves in question. Thus in an ideological sense, Third World countries are entering the end of this decade by re-assessing the value of its earlier policies regarding the roles of communication in development. Certainly in the latest research we see the growing disenchantment with mass media and a re-assessment of the value of intergroup and interpersonal relationships. The recent experiences of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka suggest that a more liberal and critical communications policy would perhaps be more helpful to the national development effort. By highlighting defects in planning and particularly in the implementation of national programmes the media should set more as the voice of the people. Given the heavy bureaucratization of administrative structures in Asia the media could play a more positive role by focussing on defects in administration and implementation. In theoretical terms the media should act as an 'evaluation and feedback agency'.

Finally we must examine the methodology of communication policy analysis. It is possible to collect a lot of good impressionist data regarding communication policies and planning at national and institutional level. But we must also be ready to utilise modern techniques of scientific policy analysis. This does not of course mean that the analysis of communication policies should not be the concern of mass media practitioners and interested members of the public. But today research scientists have been able to devise a more rigorous methodology which helps us to discuss policy analysis in a more objective and scientifically variable way.

The most interesting work in this area, which Harold Lasswell called the policy sciences, comes from the systems analysis. Systems analysis is an attempt 'to apply structured rationality to problems of choice'. The essence of this approach to Communication Policy analysis could be summarized in the following way -

...9/-

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SOLO, Indonesia, 4 - 8 November 1979

- 9 -

- (a) Looking at problems and alternatives in the Communications field in a systematic fashion taking into account a large number of relevant variables and probable results.
- (b) Searching for an 'optimal' or clearly preferable solution among such variables alternatives.
- (c) Identification of the preferable alternative or alternatives through comparison of expected results in terms of organizational goals. For such prediction of results well known techniques such as simulation exercises, model building, canvassing of experts opinion may be undertaken.
- (d) An analysis of the underlying value assumption and strategies involved in the chosen alternative or alternatives.
- (e) Consideration of political variables which includes political feasibility analysis; evaluation of alternative political pathways for policy approval and implementation; examination of social power implications.
- (f) Recognition of latent consequences of the preferred alternative choice or choices. Thus changes cannot be made without a full analysis of manifest and hidden complications.
- (g) Emphasis of policy alternative innovation involving sequential decision making based on feedback and experimentation. Once an alternative is acted upon sequential problems follow leading, if necessary, to systems re-design.
- (h) Behavioral science 'inputs' making allowances for contingencies such as recognition of irrationality, ideologies, mass phenomena and depth variables.
- (i) Institutional self awareness in respect of limits of analysis as a means of cognizing human reality and aspirations.

It is quite possible that we recognise these indicators in our day to day decision making. The advantage of policy analysis however is that we are compelled to break down problems before us in terms of such categories of analysis.

Thus a major consideration in future communication policy analysis in Asia would be the need to build up a core of researchers and media practitioners who will be able to utilize scientific methods analysis to the study of communication policy and planning.