

AMIC-Thammasat University Symposium on Mass
Communication Theory : the Asian Perspective,
Bangkok, Oct 15-17, 1985 : [summary of
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Summary Of Proceedings

By

Victor T Valbuena

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

By Dr Victor T Valbuena

After the solemn rites of lighting the alter candles and paying homage to the Buddha and the King, led by Professor Prapasna Auychai, President of the Thammasat University Council, Professor Khun Ying Nongyao Chaiseri, Rector of Thammasat University gave a brief overview of the symposium. She expressed the hope that the results of the symposium would benefit the study of communication in colleges and universities, and that the symposium would create a better environment for cooperation among academicians, experts from different countries and among universities and related government offices in Thailand.

Thereafter, she proceeded to ask the President of the University Council to declare the symposium open.

In his opening address, Professor Prapasna Auychai stressed the importance of mass communication and public relations in society. He expressed the hope that knowledge gained from the symposium would benefit not only the participants but also the National Public Relations Policy and Planning approved by the Thai Cabinet. Likewise, he expressed the hope that the meeting would yield some new, useful insights into the study and operationalization of communication theory in Asian countries.

Professor Chawalit Panyaluk, Dean of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Thammasat University, followed up with welcome remarks on behalf of the faculty and its teachers and staff.

Dr Harald von Gottberg, Deputy Secretary-General of the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), in his keynote speech cited the criticisms levelled against communication studies in developing countries, for indiscriminate

use of theoretical and conceptual models originating from more advanced western countries, and for being far removed from the social realities obtaining in Third World countries. He pointed out that Western communication theories have been inadequate in explaining the environmental realities of the developing worlds. Likewise, he pointed out current efforts of Asian communication scholars to re-assess the relevance and validity of some of the Western theories in the context of their own cultural milieu; and to re-examine some of the philosophical/conceptual/scientific theories and models in their societies and cultures, and how these can enrich the application of the more Western-oriented theories and models in Asian societies, precisely the objectives of the AMIC-Thammasat University Symposium.

Dr Godwin Chu of the East West Center, Institute of Culture and Communication, in his paper "In Search of an Asian Perspective in Communication Theory" posed two questions:

1. What is it about Asian communication behaviour that we want to explain?
2. What is wrong with the western perspective of communication theory that it is not able to explain Asian communication behaviour fully?

Dr Chu acknowledged the achievements and contributions of Western communication theory but enumerated its weaknesses, including the following: its quantitative methodological orientation; its repetitiveness and lack of focus; its minimal study of structure and function of communication in societal context; and its non-consideration of culture as a critical factor in communication.

He suggested that an Asian perspective may be drawn from communication theory as it relates to three specific areas, namely: development communication; impact of communication from the West; and inter-cultural communication. Further, Dr Chu suggested that an

Asian perspective in communication theory must consider the following criteria:

1. it must be relevant, addressing issues in their socio-cultural context;
2. it must be concrete, not obscure;
3. it must be observable; and
4. it must be backed by research using adequate, appropriate methods.

The ensuing open discussion echoed the need for providing social and cultural (problem-, audience-, and location- specific) contexts to communication theory; for situating Asian perspectives in relation to modernization and social change, and for using more appropriate research methods, like observation, in generating an Asian perspective in communication theory and research.

Rev Fr Nick Cruz, S.J. of the Ateneo de Manila University, in his paper "Communication Theory and Catholic Liberation Theology", discussed the operationalization of Western-oriented development theory and dependency theory in Philippine society, citing as example among others, the role of multi-national business and media operations in the country in perpetuating the existing socio-political situation in the Philippines. Fr Cruz also cited the role of the Catholic Church and the influence of Catholic Liberation Theology in the process of conscientization and social change among Filipinos.

The discussion that followed Fr Cruz's presentation centered mainly on the role and position of political power in communication process.

In his paper "Communication Theory: The Chinese Perspective", Dr Leonard L Chu of the Chinese University of Hong Kong highlighted specific areas of Chinese communication processes and behaviours,

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In his paper "Communication Theory: The Chinese Perspective", Dr Leonard L Chu of the Chinese University of Hong Kong highlighted specific areas of Chinese communication processes and behaviours, namely: interpersonal communication, including such values as respect for elders, desire for harmony, and losing face; communication and social change, specifically in relation the pre- and post-Mao experience in social change in mainland China; persuasive communication; and the Chinese ideographic system of language.

The open forum that followed generated discussion on the directions of communication lines in Chinese communication systems; and definitions of communication behaviour in relation to power politics.

Dr Mohd Yusof Hussain of Universiti Pertanian Malaysia presented the last paper for the day: "Islamization of Communication Theory: View from Malaysia". Dr Hussain stressed that Islam, as a missionary religion, places great importance on communication. He said that Muslims must know Western communication theories for them to have a better understanding of how to use modern media and how to predict, explain, and possibly control communication effects. He argued, however, that there is a need to Islamize western communication theories because these theories are culture-bound, may not apply to other settings, and many only satisfy the aspirations of western life, thought and hope.

Dr Hussain enumerated the reasons for Malaysia's attempts at Islamization of Western communication theories:

1. to ensure that Western knowledge does not undermine the Islamic religion and culture;
2. to ensure that students do not become un-Islamic in their thinking;
3. to enable students to view in the proper Islamic perspective the Western knowledge they may have learned.

Finally, Dr Hussain described a work plan geared towards eventual Islamization of some 26 Western originated communication theories.

The discussion following the paper focused on how to realize the objectives set forth in Dr Hussain's work plan.

On the second day of the symposium, another attempt at arriving at an Islamic perspective of communication theory was made by Dr Djajusman Tanudikusumah of the University of Indonesia, in his paper "Communication Theory: The Islamic Perspective". The paper touched on the issues of communication and social change, the role of cultural values and religious orientation in communication, and the role of religion in communicating the ideals of the Indonesian State - the Panca Sila.

Dr Djajusman argued for selective use and adaptation, not total discarding of Western communication theories in the study of communication processes in Asia. He cited Gerbner's general model of communication and its explanation by Stappers and said that the methodology of Gerbner is relevant to and applicable in Indonesian communication studies. He also stated that Gerbner's model is closer to the Asian and therefore more relevant in Islamic Indonesia.

Similarly, Dr R D K Jayawardena of Sri Lanka, in his paper on "Communication Theory: The Buddhist Perspective", touched on the influence of religious tradition on communication behaviour, e.g., careful listening and liberal interpretation of messages. Dr Jayawardena's paper also maintained that Western communication theories remained valid in such religious cultures as that of Sri Lanka, but that application of these theories must take into account the cultural contexts in which they are made to operate.

A specific application of a Western communication theory - the uses and gratification hypothesis was presented by Dr Seri Wongmonta of Thammasat University in his study of Thammasat University students' exposure to political news on campus boards. The findings indicated that the uses and gratification hypothesis did not hold in the study. It was more the agenda - setting theory that did.

In her paper on the Indian perspective to communication theory, Dr Usha Vyasulu Reddi of Osmania University, said that the applications and or testing of Western communication theories in an Indian, or for that matter Asian, context are limited by differing assumptions in the social systems of the West and the East. There is a need, therefore, for adjustment to the structural and sociological factors present in such a multi-cultural country like India. She maintained that for Western theories to be relevant to India, or Asia, they need major modifications, they necessitate adjustments in the application of research methodologies to be more in keeping with the socio-cultural realities in the field.

The paper presentations during the first two days of the symposium as well as the discussions that followed each of them pointed out that Western communication theories need not necessarily be discarded, that they can be relevant to the Asia communication situation, and that they can provide a framework for research on communication process and behaviour in Asia, provided, that they are modified and taken into account the unique socio-cultural realities obtaining in the multi-cultural societies of Asia.

On the final day of the symposium, three workshops were held, one each on the following topics:

1. "The Relevance and Validity of Western Communication Theories to Media Practice in Asia";
2. "Integrating the Asian Perspective in Communication Theory Course in Asian Communication Schools"; and

3. "How to Adapt and Develop Communication Theory in Thailand Context".

The first two workshops, conducted in English, were participated in by the resource speakers and academics mainly from Chiangmai, Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities. The third, conducted in Thai, was participated in by delegates from other Thai schools and government as well as private agencies.

The paper presentations as well as workshop discussions indicated that an Asian perspective can be derived in terms of the adaptation of Western communication theories into the specific national cultures of Asia where they are applied, and the infusion of Asian - whether Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, or Catholic - communication processes and behaviour patterns into the theoretical and methodological approaches to communication research and practice in Asia.

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Summary of First Day's Proceeding

by Dr. Victor Valbuena

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1. What is it about Asian communication behavior that we want to explain?
2. What is wrong with the western perspective of communication theory that it is not able to explain Asian communication behavior fully?

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Dr. Chu acknowledged the achievements and contributions of Western communication theory but enumerated its weaknesses, including the following : its quantitative methodological orientation; its repetitiveness and lack of focus; its minimal study of structure and function of communication in societal context; and its non-consideration of culture as a critical factor in communication.

He suggested that an Asian perspective may be drawn from communication theory as it relates to three specific areas, namely : development communication; impact of communication from the West; and intercultural communication. Further, Dr. Chu suggested that an Asian perspective in communication theory must consider the following criteria;

1. it must be relevant, addressing issues in their socio-cultural context;
2. it must be concrete, not abstract;
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4. it must be backed by research using adequate, appropriate methods.

The ensuing open discussion echoed the need for providing social and cultural (problem-audience-, location- specific) contexts to communication theory; for situating Asian perspectives in relation to modernization and social change, and for using more appropriate research methods, like observation, in generating an Asian perspective in communication theory and research

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society, citing as example among others; the role of multi-rational business and media operations in the country in perpetuating the existing socio-political situation in the Philippines. Fr. Cruz also cited the role of the Catholic church and the influence of Catholic Liberation Theology in the process of conscientization and social change among Filipinas.

The discussion that followed Fr. Cruz presentation centered mainly on the role and position of political power in communication process.

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The open forum that followed generated discussion on the directions of communication lines in Chinese communication systems; and definitions of communication behavior in relation to power politics.

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of how to use modern media and how to predict, explain, and possibly control communication effects. He argued, however, that there is a need to Islamize western communication theories because these theories are culture-bound, may not apply to other settings, and may only satisfy the aspirations of western life, thought and hope.

Dr. Hussain enumerated the reasons for Malaysia's attempts at Islamization of Western communication theories:

1. to ensure that Western knowledge does not undermine the Islamic religion and culture;
2. to ensure that students do not become un-Islamic in their thinking.
3. to enable students to view in the proper Islamic perspective the Western knowledge they may have learned.

Finally, Dr. Hussain described a work plan geared towards eventual Islamization of ~~some~~ 26 Western originated communication theories.

The discussion following the paper focused on how to realize the objectives set forth in Dr. Hussain's work plan.

Synthesis of Second Day's Proceedings

12/14

by Dr. Victor Valbuena

At yesterday's (October 16) proceedings, four speakers assessed the relevance and validity of Western Communication in the light of their specific societies and cultures.

A second attempt at arriving at an Islamic perspective of Communication theory was made by Dr. Djajusman Tanudikusumah of the University of Indonesia, in his paper "Communication theory : The Islamic Perspective" The paper touched on the issues of communication and social change, the role of cultural values and religions orientation in communication, and the role of religion in communicating the ideals of the Indonesian State - the Panca Sila.

Dr. Djajusman agreed for selective use and adaptation, not total discarding of western communication theories in the study of communication processes in Asia. He cited Gerbuer's general model of communication and its explanation by stages and said that the methodology of Gerbuer is relevant to and applicable in Indonesian Communication Studies. He also stated that Gerbuer's model is closer to the Asian and therefore more relevant in Islamic Indonesia.

Similarly, Dr. R.D.K. Jayawardena of Colombo Sri Lanka, in his paper on "Communication theory : The Buddhist Perspective" touched on the influence of religions tradition on Communication behavior, e.g., careful listening and liberal interpretation of messages. Dr. Jayawardena's paper also maintains that western communication theories receive valid in such religions cultures

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as that of Sri Lanka, but that application of these theories must take into account the cultural contexts in which they are made to operate.

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The paper presentations as well as the discussions that followed each of them pointed out that western communication theories need not necessarily be discarded, that they can be relevant to the Asia communication situation, and that they can provide a framework for research on communication process and behavior in Asia,

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provided, that they are modified and take into account the unique socio - cultural realities obtaining in the multicultural societies of Asia.

The papers and presentations indicates that an Asian perspective can be derived in terms of the adaptation of western communication theories into the specific national cultures of Asia where they are applied, and the infusion of Asian - whether Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist - Communication processes and behavior patterns into the theoretical and methodological approaches to communication research in Asia.

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