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Keynote Address

By

Harald Von Gottberg
COMMUNICATION THEORY: THE ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

October 15-17, 1985
Bangkok

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
HARALD VON GOTTBERG

Before going into this short keynote address, I would like to express my gratitude to two persons, that is, Neville Jayaweera and Dr Victor Valbuena, whose thoughts I have been able to share and draw upon in my preparation.

Studies of the process of communication between human beings have been developed and undertaken predominantly in Western industrialised nations. It is the aim of this meeting to address the question of the extent to which new theories have to be developed or old ones adapted so that the communication process in an Asian environment can be more suitably studied and understood.

There are some forty definitions developed by Western theorists which try to describe the above mentioned process. One from the Cambridge literary critic, I A Richards, states that "communication takes place when one mind so acts upon its environment that another mind is influenced, and in that other mind, an experience occurs which is like the experience in the first mind and is caused in part by that experience". Harold Lasswell, in his effort to understand and describe the process of communication, raised the question: who says "what" to "whom" in "which medium" and with what "effect"?

Definitions of this sort are normally described as linear definitions and they are attributed to the classic mainstream of communication theory. Much later, a more complex defination was developed in which communication was seen as a complex interactive social process, whereby information, experience and culture are shared.
On the basis of these two types of definitions, Western theories have constructed two models of communication. The "linear" model, put together by two mathematicians, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, sees six elements: the source, an encoder, a message, a channel, a decoder, and a receiver. However, it was found that in reality, the situation was somewhat more complex and not so straightforward, so concepts of entropy, redundancy, and feedback were introduced. The other, the "dynamic" model, sees communication not as a linear process, but as a product of interaction that takes place within socio-cultural systems, and which is influenced by a range of factors beyond the sender, message, channel, receiver, relationship.

These two seemingly divergent approaches do, however, have a number of elements in common. They all see communication as an external event, something which takes place outside and between individuals and groups. The individuals who communicate are discrete and disparate individuals and the sender is different from the receiver, the message from the medium and all four from each other. Finally, it is assumed that the subject, which is seen to be separate from the object, can transcend its subjectivity and bridge its isolation. These common elements again share a number of philosophical assumptions such as the assumption that individuals exist as substantive entities, that they can in fact know anything outside their own minds, and that they can transmit experience, transcending the limitations of language and meaning.

The unquestioned acceptance of these Western conceptual models in efforts to understand, describe and study the communication process in an Asian environment have been cited as reasons for the failure of communication researchers in less developed countries. Many studies conducted in developing countries have been severely criticised for their indiscriminate use of theoretical and conceptual models which are not properly rooted in the social, political economic and cultural environment in which they are being applied. It has been complained that "communication theory is pulled further and further away from the realities confronting the major population groups in the Third World". The
failure to conduct analysis in social realities invites distortions in research and faults in planning.

In an Asian environment, there are certain communication behavioural patterns that may not easily be found in the West, and cannot therefore be explained through the usual theories and conceptual approaches. There is the whole question of face, seniority of age or station, different philosophical and religious backgrounds, which have a bearing on the communication process in countries of these region, and which are not suitably recognised in the established Western theory. As Floranzel Rosario Braid puts it "all over the developing world, there has been a growing dissatisfaction with the traditional communication theories, which are being used to guide the conduct of research and action programmes. Many of the traditional theories have been found to be inadequate in explaining the environmental realities of the developing world."

We at AMIC are, therefore, pleased to be associated with this effort to look at established communication theories and see how they can be applied or adapted to explain the process of communication in countries of Asia. We thank the speakers who have prepared papers for our discussions, we thank Thammasat University for the organisation and hope that the many participants will be able to duly benefit from our deliberations in the coming sessions.