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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Jayaweera, Neville</td>
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Keynote Address

By

Neville Jayaweera
The Communication Challenge in Asia*

— NEVILLE JAYAWEERA

The concept of a “communication challenge” emerged only in the 50s and early 60s when, in the aftermath of the war, the concept of “development” and along with it the concept of “communication” were first formulated. The world became development conscious and simultaneously discovered communication — particularly radio. At that time the challenge from communication consisted of the opportunities that radio and mass media in general, seemed to offer for advancing the goals of development.

Four elements of the Contemporary Challenge

By the 70s however the challenge from communication had developed into something more complex. We may identify four different strands in the contemporary situation.

1. The political debate focussing on the demand for a “new world information and communication order.”
2. The debate concerning the application of the new technologies and their consequences for development as a whole, and for the integrity and survival of local cultures.
3. The need to look afresh at the whole question of communication education; and
4. The need to rethink the relationship of communication to development.

The Political Debate

Unhappily the political debate, articulated particularly through Unesco, has become so contentious and partisan that the issues central to the debate have either been distorted and misrepresented beyond recognition or have been totally aborted.

The central issues of the political debate are profoundly humanistic and entail values fundamental to all civilised societies. As set out in the resolution adopted unanimously by all member nations of Unesco at its Belgrade sessions, these issues are:

- The need for plurality both in respect of sources of information and outlets. The underlying thesis is that no single source or outlet can claim to present the whole truth concerning reality. Therefore monopoly is unacceptable.
- But plurality has to be also characterised by diversity. There can be a multiplicity of both sources and outlets that say the same thing over and over again. That does not constitute democracy. In fact it effectively conceals the lack of it.
- The flow of information should be free yet balanced. Where information is not allowed to flow freely, freedom and liberty tend to wither. Yet, when societies, cultures and nations enjoy unequal power, free flow can be only from the powerful to the powerless. Free flow is then not free-flow but one-way flow. And that makes for monopoly, dominance and oppression. The concept of free-flow therefore needs to be married to the concept of balance. The challenge before us is to fashion instruments that will ensure a balanced flow, without at the same time setting up machinery that will control and permit only one-way flow. And that makes for monopoly, dominance and oppression. The concept of free-flow therefore needs to be married to the concept of balance. The challenge before us is to fashion instruments that will ensure a balanced flow, without at the same time setting up machinery that will control and
- People must have access to information, they must be able to exercise a voice in the way information and communication are handled within a given society and have opportunities to participate in the whole communication process. The underlying thesis is that human beings are not to be treated as passive objects to be bombarded with information but as responsible and active participants in the social process.
- While communication must inevitably transform cultures in the long run, there must be a concern and respect for the integrity of local cultures. Today there is a tendency towards homogenising or synchronising all cultures under the aegis of one or two dominant cultures. And those dominant cultures are also the dominant economic and political systems of the world. Societies that are deficient in political and economic power therefore need to develop policies for protecting their cultures from rapid erosion.

* Summary of key note address delivered at Bernama-WACC-AMIC Seminar in Kuala Lumpur.

Neville Jayaweera is Director of Research and Planning of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).
• Autonomy for journalists is a necessary condition of democracy. When journalists are denied access to information, or are coerced in any way, the flow of information, and its veracity, are impaired.

• But autonomy for journalists has to be accompanied by a sense of responsibility and empathy on their part. Much of the problem of communication imbalance and unjust communication systems has to do with the cultural biases, ethnic prejudices and the lack of empathy on the part of journalists. There is no conceivable machinery that can correct this situation. Only a change in the consciousness of journalists can guarantee it.

• The need to look afresh at “news” values. There is a tendency to accept as universally valid news values that have been developed to meet the needs of individualistic industrial societies. The sensational, the spectacular, the tragic, the sordid and the deviant, tend to get prominence over the orderly, the integrated, the normal and the constructive. These values seem to have evolved as an attempt to gratify the subjective needs of fast paced, individualistic societies than out of a desire to represent accurately an objective reality. As much as the latter is never attainable there is a need constantly to strive towards it. This again is not something that can be enforced but is a matter of consciousness.

The aforementioned issues have been debated primarily as problems effecting communication between nations and as if they were only valid internationally. The Third World countries have articulated these issues strongly as a part of their drive for equity and fairplay on the international scene. However, the challenge confronting the Third World is how to focus these issues on their own societies. We have to ask ourselves whether we practice plurality and diversity within our own countries, do we ensure a balanced and free flow of information between the urban and rural sectors, do people have free access to information and can they participate actively in the communication process, do we guarantee autonomy and protection for our journalists, are our journalists free of cultural or class biases and are they consistently impartial? Except in a very few countries within the Third World, and certainly within Asia, nearly all of these questions have to be answered in the negative. Can we apply these principles to ourselves before we seek to admonish the international community? That is the challenge.

The Technology Question

Developments in new communication technologies, principally satellite delivered television, video equipment, and transborder data delivered through computers and satellites, present Third World societies with a challenge that is even more compelling than the political debate. Indeed, developments in communication technologies have further sharpened the issues defined in that debate.

The challenge posed by these technologies resolves itself into three questions. What consequences do these technologies entail for economic development? On the one hand if any society chooses not to link itself to the international satellite-computer-data system, thereby it effectively opts out of modern commerce, trade and exchange. It will cease to be competitive, it will lose markets and will slide steadily back to a primitive domestic barter economy. On the other hand, establishing links to the international data flow will only serve to further integrate Third World economies into the dominant world system and deepen their dependent client status. Likewise, an open door policy in respect of television and video is bound to stimulate domestic demand and encourage consumerism to a degree that they will automatically determine for the government what economic and development policies it may choose.

What implications do these technologies have for local cultures, their integrity and survival? There can be little doubt that television and video must inevitably, and rapidly, erode and transform the cultures of economically backward societies. There is no lack of evidence from Third World societies to support this claim. The issue is not whether the new technologies do in fact bring about these results or even whether they can or should be stopped from doing so. The issue is really whether Third World societies can stand aside from the global modernisation process which is in effect a process of integration into the dominant cultures. The stoppage of television and the exclusion of video are not realistic options. However, development of a local television and video production capacity is a real option.

How do Third World societies react to the presence of these technologies? Reject them outright? Accept them wholeheartedly? Or develop rational and comprehensive policies for coping with them, for maximising their benefits and for minimising their disadvantages?

The first of these alternatives is the least practicable, however well intended it may be. Nowhere in history has the organised extension of any technology that has a popular demand been held back for long, through a deliberate decision to reject them. Even China which had the most comprehensive policy to hold back technology had to abandon its position when confronted by evidence which showed up its shortsightedness. Post-independence India had earlier abandoned Gandhi’s anti-technology policies. The issue of whether or not technology should be held back or rejected is purely academic. The question is whether it can be. Theoretical considerations and empirical evidence suggest that it cannot.

The second alternative is certainly practicable, and is in fact the one that is most ubiquitous. But it is also perhaps the most dangerous. The temptation to buy into the communication revolution are very strong. There is the promise of being able to leapfrog into the twenty-first century. There is the promise of an opportunity for agrarian and even pre-agrarian societies to bypass both the agrarian and industrial revolutions.
and arrive directly on the post-industrial scene. There are the promises of rapid development, widespread education, better health delivery, more effective family planning, agricultural extension and even better weather forecasting. All these promises are in some measure true. But the capacity of any particular society to translate these potentials into reality depend crucially on the infrastructure already in place — i.e. human, technological and economic infrastructure. And Third World societies are notoriously lacking in all these areas. So an uncritical and full-blooded involvement in the technological revolution can, in fact, cause serious set-backs to most Third World countries.

The third alternative, namely that of developing rational policies based on a critical awareness of both the potentials and perils of the new technologies seems to be the one that is most desirable, and yet the one that is least practised. The vast majority of countries outside the Socialist bloc have either adopted a laissez-faire attitude or have opted for an all out and uncritical involvement in the new technologies. The adoption of rational policies assume that policy research has already been carried or has, at least, been put in place. We know that this is not so.

The communication challenge before us is therefore to avoid making uncritical choices in respect of the new technologies and to develop a set of rational policies on the basis of adequate research.

The need to look afresh at the whole question of communication education

Both the political debate and the emergence of the new technologies make it necessary for us to look at the content of communication training. Communication training has for many decades been treated as an undifferentiated concept. It has been assumed that training should consist solely of the imparting of skills, and that skills are value-free and culturally and politically neutral. It has been assumed that if skills are imparted in the BBC or even in the New Guinea, the contextual ecology of training curricula has never been a policy consideration in developing communication education policies.

But the consciousness of the need to look afresh at news values in the light of the political debate and the emergence of new technologies render old training curricula irrelevant and even dis-functional. We have therefore to take a critical look at what is going on in our communication training institutions and come up with new value frames and new curricula.

The need to rethink the relationship of communication to development

In the 60s and 70s the relationship of communication to development was formulated as a question that asked whether or not communication helped to achieve development goals. The question was simplistic and the answers were equally so. Communication practitioners had no doubt in their minds that their efforts could contribute massively towards development. Many communication theorists thought likewise. But developmentists and economists did not take these claims too seriously. If they did, they did not reflect it in their national development planning or in their investment priorities. Today, the intrusion of the new technologies call for a completely new formulation. The important ingredients in this reformulation are:

- The new technologies, particularly television and video, which are able to stimulate demand and exert consumption pressure on resources in a way that renders national planning irrelevant. The ordering of investment priorities and the national allocation of resources are almost impossible to attain.
- The capacity to stimulate and influence demand, transform lifestyles and overhaul values is no longer vested primarily within the country. It is now rooted in foreign based corporations and conglomerates.
- Communication technologies are no longer a component of the relations of production. They constitute an important element of the means of production.
- On the other hand the concept of development has itself undergone a considerable metamorphosis. It is no longer expressed in quantitative terms, or in terms of the volume of goods and services. It is now conceptualised in terms of alterations to social structures, redistribution of the social product, and in terms of the quality of life.

In the 50s and 60s most traditional societies were considered to lack entrepreneurial drive and achievement motivation. Communication was invoked in order to correct that condition and to motivate people to produce for surplus rather than for subsistence. But during the 70s and 80s, under the combined assault of electronic communication, tourism, and modernisation, the traditional habits of inertia and lack of motivation have given way to a frenzied pursuit of the good life, at least, the symbols of the good life, as displayed on the shelves of supermarkets. There is a temptation to read this transformation as evidence of the beneficial and liberating effects of communication. On the contrary, the truth is the reverse. It is consumption that has been stimulated and not production. There is a heightened motivation to consume conspicuously, even at the risk of incurring debts, but little evidence of people wanting to work harder or to produce more. The development communication paradigm seems to have done a volte-face.

I have tried to identify the central elements in the contemporary communication challenge. The challenge has to be seen as a gestalt, as a complex whole, comprising political, technological, cultural and development issues. Our approach has to be multi-disciplinary and must resist the temptation to yield to fragmentation along disciplinary or professional lines. But the thinking among politicians, practitioners and even academics and theoreticians continues to be dominated by the values and categories of the 60s.