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Emerging Trends And Needs In Communications Research

By

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EMERGING TRENDS AND NEEDS IN COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

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EMERGING TRENDS AND NEEDS IN COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

1. Communications Research in the Regional Context:
   from development and communication to development and
   informatization

2. Assessing Needs in Communications Research Using the
   Lasswell Formula:

   Who — Who are doing the talking?

   Says What — In Which Channel— the changing face of channel

   To Whom — To Whom— a new perspective in looking at the audiences

   With What Effect — indeed what effect are we looking for?
EMERGING TRENDS AND NEEDS IN COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

Today communications research is entering the fifth decade since its birth. Progress in the field has been phenomenal; it not only won recognition from the academic community but has firmly established itself throughout the world. More significant perhaps is the changes in the focus of study. Long gone were the concerns over propaganda effect; even the fall of the dominant paradigm seemed to be in the distant past. Now communications researchers are faced with two major challenges in their studies: the ideological debate among different schools, and the emergence of information technologies (IT). While the first one is more of a challenge in research perspective and theoretical orientation, the latter touches on the fundamental interest of communications research: the uses of communication media and its relations with social development and human behavior.

It is almost trite to say that information technology has been an important contributing factor to changes in our communication environment. The emergence of new information systems featuring the merger of computer, telecommunications and mass media has brought drastic differences to the way we communicate. Contrary to the one-way, communicator-controlled mass communication we were used to, in this new era the audiences are allowed much greater autonomy in selecting when and what to listen, watch and read. The system, turning from one-way to interactive, also became intelligent and multi-functional. As Rice and his associates (1984, p. 34) pointed out, with the "new media," distinctions that were clear to
us have become blurred, including among others, the distinctions between time versus space, active versus passive control, and communication versus processing.

To communication researchers, such changes present both opportunities and challenges. As new information systems are capable of offering services and recording data in ways that were unthinkable for traditional mass media, they helped to open up new areas of research for social scientists. The changing nature of communication media as mentioned above also rendered the traditional theoretical framework and the ways of conducting research obsolete (Rogers, 1986, p. 7). What and how to study have become the primary concern to the academic community. In the Asia Pacific region the task is all the more challenging; in addition to the accumulation of theoretical knowledge, communications research is also closely related to the needs for development and growth.

In view of the technological challenges, several authors, including Rogers (1986), Chu (1987), and Jouet and Coudray (1990) have discussed the trends of communications research. This paper will try to build on the wisdom of these authors, and based on existing literature and the level of social development in the Asia Pacific region, attempt to assess the needs for future research. The ultimate purpose of the discussion is not to prescribe, but rather to stimulate, ideas toward a future research agenda.

Communications Research in a Changing World

From its very beginning communications research has been closely associated with societal needs. The early studies on
propaganda effect, for example, was driven by the urgent necessity to win the war against the Nazis. Looking from this perspective, it would not be surprising to find communications researchers in the region constantly searching for new directions since the fall of the dominant paradigm.

For much of the world the 1990s is expected to be another decade of fast change. Politically we witnessed the breaking down of the European socialist empire. In Asia even China, the last Communist giant, is putting economic growth ahead of political ideologies. Economic growth records of the 1980s has put Asia ahead in the developing world. The real GDP growth rate from 1983 to 1985 was nearly double that of Africa and Latin America (Asian Economic Handbook, 1987: 2). Led by rapid export growth in non-socialist nations in the region, Asia has stepped into the world scene as an increasingly important trade partner. Even with Japan taken out of the picture, the percentage of world trade value accounted by Asia has been steadily increasing (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 1989).

The road to prosperity with equality, however, is long and winding. According to a World Bank record (World Development Report, 1991), by the end of the 1980s, majority of the Asian nations were still among the poorest of nations (Table 1) with per capita GNP under US$500. The successful growth experience in a few newly industrialized nations obviously cannot speak for all, and the need for economic growth and development is still as pressing as ever.

For those nations which have achieved some degrees of growth,
however, the consequence is not all positive. Already Asian cities such as Bangkok, Taipei and Seoul are plagued with traffic jam, over population and pollution. China, with a per capita income of no more than US$350 in 1989, is now the world's fourth biggest contributor to global warming for its high level of carbon dioxide emissions (Burton, 1991, p. 11). Whether to sacrifice their natural environment for economic growth is but one of the many serious questions now facing developing nations.

Such dilemmas have generated the urgent needs to redefine "development," a task which has been put before us since the fall of the dominant paradigm. As Beltran, Bordenave and Matta once pointed out (Jayaweera, 1986, p. xv), the traditional way of conceptualizing development as the maximizing of goods and services was inadequate:

"...Development was more than a quantitative or linear process. It also required a fair and just distribution of the economic product. It involved giving people access to political participation, to education, to civic amenities and to civil liberties."

Today the above statement still holds true, but in face of deteriorating natural habitat and worsening living conditions in cities as well as in rural areas, the need to stress "life quality" has begun to attract the attention of policy makers in many third world nations. With this added new dimension, developing nations can no longer see sacrifices in the name of growth as taken for granted, and more sophisticated approaches to development goals were called for.

In view of these concerns, we should not be surprised to see
informatization becoming one of the highest priorities in national development projects in the region. To development planners, two solid reasons help to justify their investment in this area: a) IT, with its tremendous market potential, is a rising star in international trade; and b) as an important instrument in promoting communication and efficient management, IT can help to reach the most remote corners of the nation in attaining balanced development, and also to improve the productivity of public and private institutions.

Besides Japan, the first to ride on the informatization bandwagon were the NIEs and near-NIEs in the region. As most of their economies were outward oriented with trade as the backbone for continual growth, ambitious plans were soon launched to upgrade telecommunications and computer systems and build an information industry.

Such policy drives right away touched off a series of studies. Under the support and coordination of major research institutions and associations such as the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), the East-West Center (EWC) and Tide 2000, several regional conferences have been held on IT and social changes since the early 1980s. By now informatization is firmly established as a primary emphasis on the region's communications research agenda.

But compared with what we saw in the West, informatization studies in the region clearly reflect the utmost concern for development that has persisted over the past several decades. If we take a closer look at the papers and publications that have been
produced in recent years, the dominant interest on policy strategies and their effects would surface. In India, for example, over 50 studies were carried out during the Satellite Instructional Television Experiments (SITE), resulting in a 19-volume report. The studies had a wide range of objectives, varied in the number of respondents, methodologies used, and the difficulties they encountered, sometimes with contradicting results. In the end, they all serve to answer but one question: is the experiment effective in reaching development goals, or not?

Studies of the same scale and scope as that of the SITE project is hard to come by, similar examples are none the less easy to find. In Taiwan, a six-volume research report on the feasibility of introducing cable television was submitted for policy considerations, and in Indonesia, longitudinal studies were conducted to evaluate the applications of satellite communications for development purposes. Like earlier studies on development communication, the results of these surveys were used as important references and guidelines for future policy decisions.

In addition to studies on IT applications for development purposes, the studies on informatization policy strategies have emerged as another important area of communications research. This groups of studies, which accounted for majority of the paper presentations in major regional research conferences, placed a close attention on communication systems: what government projects have been implemented to upgrade the quality and structure of communication systems, and how information technologies change the nature and the function of the channels which may have significant
implications to their uses in development programs and/or market values. These studies, mostly descriptive and analytical in nature, provide us with invaluable information regarding the fast-changing communications environment in the region.

If we take the formula proposed by Lasswell (1948), a model which often serves as a framework for the scope of communications research, the communication process can be presented in the following phrase:

Who

Says What

In Which Channel

To Whom

With What Effect?

According to this model, development communication and more recently, the studies on IT applications for development purposes, have clearly put their attention on "effect": with a well-defined purpose to find out to what extent can communications media help to achieve development goals. The focus on informatization policy strategies, on the other hand, sought to describe government efforts in expanding and upgrading the quality of communication channels.

To communication researchers in the region, studies of informatization policy and the effects of IT applications are likely to remain the main stream research as long as informatization is perceived as a way to effective development. However, two points must be taken into consideration when we set our future research agenda:
a) What we will study should be based on what we have already learned. The fall of the dominant paradigm, for example, is an important turning point for studies of development and communication. To avoid repeating mistakes made in earlier studies on modernization, lessons learned from the past will have to be reflected in subsequent research designs.

b) Policy strategies should be regarded as important areas of research, but not as the guiding principles of research. Research will stimulate insights and broaden our perspectives only when social scientists can see beyond policy issues.

Under these considerations, a closer attention is called for in the following areas of research within the general framework of informatization and social change.

Effect: Have We Learned All There Is To Be Learned?

To developing nations, informatization program means heavy investment, often accounting large shares of a limited government budget. Whether these programs are effective in reaching development goals is a logical concern for policy makers.

"Effect" as a concept goes back to the earliest of communication studies. Its meaning, however, has never been critically defined. In the classical test of propaganda effect, it is interpreted as the extent to which respondents change their cognition, attitude or behavior after exposure to certain messages. As the change of mentality and behavioral pattern was seen as a necessary condition for modernization of the peasant society, early studies on development and communication have largely adopted this
interpretation in determining the effect of development programs. A program is regarded as "effective" when it enhances respondents' level of knowledge, ability to empathize, cosmopolitanism or stimulate behavioral changes.

The fall of the dominant paradigm delivered the last blow to the myth of powerful media in manipulating audiences. Effect, however, remains to be the primary concern for development planners regardless how one explains the cause of underdevelopment. With the rise of communication technologies, new hopes were generated, and a new generation of media, including satellite and computer became the focus of attention. But despite calls for new theories and research methods in response to the interactive, multifunctional nature of the new media (Rogers, 1986), variables tested in many studies on IT applications show very little change in either the choice of variables in measuring effect, or the methodological treatment in arriving at conclusions.

So far we have seen contradicting results from reports on the effect of IT applications. Macro analyses have more than once provided evidence testifying the economic benefit reaped by investment in information and telecommunications (Jussawalla, 1986; Oniki, forthcoming; Naoe and Danno, 1990). But others, including Jayaweera (1987) and Lent (1986) openly voiced their disappointment at using high-tech information media in reaching development goals.

We can, of course, accept the compromising view that in an increasingly complex global community, there will no longer be simple answers to difficult questions, and the effect of IT application really depends on many other circumstantial factors,
including message design, coordination among institutions, and background of the respondents. What the research community cannot ignore, however, is a problem hampering the validity and value of "effect studies;" the criteria in determining the level of effectiveness.

As earlier mentioned, today our development goals, our expectation of what communications and information media may achieve, and the nature of media themselves are quite different from what they used to be. It is only logical if the research questions we ask, the variables we choose to measure and the ways at arriving at conclusions reflect such differences.

Past concerns over economic growth, for example, has in recent years been developed into concerns over the quality of life. With this broadened perspective, obviously the traditional awareness-adoption measures, or the classical modernization indicators on empathy and cosmopolitanism would no longer suffice. But what does "quality of life" stand for? What does it mean to people of different societies? How do we measure it, and what indicators should we choose to operationalize the concept? And if communication media are not as powerful in changing attitude and behavior, what roles do we expect it to play in development processes? When radio and television alone have failed to bring desired changes, should we place the same expectations on satellite television and personal computers? If not, what would be the proper expectation of information technologies? In short, what effect are we looking for?

Also worthy of our close attention is the time element in measuring effectiveness. In classical propaganda studies, changes
in attitude and behavior were measured right after respondents' one-time exposure to certain messages. In a few cases a panel design was adopted to trace variations over time, but even in these studies, the total length of time involved in testing effect was limited to weeks or months, not years. To ensure data comparability, respondents were asked to fill out the same set of questionnaire without much concern over events that have taken place since the treatment.

When the same approach is adopted for the study of development and communication, the time element did not receive due attention from researchers. Researchers were free to determine how long, or how frequently respondents were to be exposed to, or use a medium before the first measure is taken, and whether there will be one, or several measures to trace possible variations over time. In the Planning Commission Study of the SITF project, for example, no distinctions were made among frequent, occasional or infrequent viewers when "effect" of the satellite television programs were observed (The SITE Experience, 1983), and conclusions were drawn upon the aggregated response from all respondents, treated alike.

From hypodermic needle to cultivation theory, communication researchers have come to realize the importance of cumulative effect of media exposure, and it is time for the same awareness to be reflected in the research design of studies on informatization and development. This awareness is especially important when program effect is considered because as a concept, "quality of life" involves long term goals which progress, unlike financial gains and economic growth, cannot be observed in monthly statistical reports.
Policy Planning and Information Systems: The Changing Face of Channels

In communications research, government policies have seldom been the focus of attention because in North America or Western Europe where the discipline made its debut, media have traditionally disassociated themselves from government influences. For developing nations, however, the situation is different; government not only holds majority of the nation's resources, it is responsible for planning and implementing development programs, including informatization projects. In the absence of powerful private corporations, government informatization policies and programs often become the single most important factor in determining the structure and quality of communication and information systems. The recent move toward privatization and liberalization of telecommunications and information services are at two notable examples.

These policies decisions and others, including the choice between protecting indigenous industry and free trade, and sovereign control and free flow of information will leave lasting impact on the communications ecology in nations in the region. They determine whether the information system will serve commercial or public interest, whether local industries are sacrificed for speedy growth, and whether proper balances are maintained among different sectors of the information industry. The direction of all these developments and their social consequences are something which researchers and policy makers will ultimately face.
We have no doubt of the value of policy analyses when informatization is in concern. But as previously pointed out, policy should not limit the scope of our research.

A quick look at the informatization strategies adopted by Asian nations showed two areas of emphasis: development of an information industry for trade purposes, and modernization of the information system. While the former may be the privilege of export-led economies, even in low income nations telecommunications has been treated as a high priority item in long range development plans. With a handsome size of budget allocated for the purpose, programs were launched to promote the distribution of telephone in urban and rural areas and improvement of the quality of services.

Computerization projects, though mostly at a limited scale, are also found in developed as well as developing nations in the region. In China, for example, a total of 300 million RMB were allocated to support a program on computer education, accounting for approximately 0.02% of its annual budget for education (UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1987).

We doubt telecommunications and computers are both important elements for informatization, yet few decision makers have come to realize that in the future age of integrated services digital network (ISDN), the key to success is "integration." The integration of telecommunication, computer and mass media not only gives technological know-how, its proper development also requires institutional coordination and intelligent policy making which takes such feature into consideration. Singapore, for example,
began informatization with an eye on the computer industry, as did other NICs. But not long after the initial phase of computerization, the government realized that the goals cannot be accomplished without the participation of its telecommunications authority. Therefore the term "IT," instead of "computerization," "office automation," or "telecommunications" was later used when a long-range planning committee was formed (Kuo, 1989).

The Singapore case is a successful example of how integration was achieved at the policy level. The same task, however, may prove to be difficult and painstaking when regulating agencies have to be restructured and laws revised to keep in pace with technological changes which blurred the distinctions between common carriers and information providers. In many developing nations in the Asia Pacific region, the problem has probably not yet surfaced since the need for integration does not appear to be pressing at the moment. But one can almost predict with certainty that the later government actions are taken to pave the way for an integrated system, the more difficult the task will become. For researchers who keep an interest in informatization policy analyses, this is a good example of how government inaction, rather than action, can make an important area of study.

Information Flow: Who Are Doing the Talking?

The size of the budget allocated to informatization programs serves as an indicator of its importance in the nation's development plans. As many informatization programs in the region showed, often majority of the resources were allocated for purchasing
hardware, less for software, and minimal for developing information content such as data bases and television programs.

True that without an information system, the public would not be able to access nor distribute information. Yet it is also true that an information system offers no guarantee to either the quantity or the quality of the information it provides. Also of essential importance is who are sending messages through the large-capacity, high-speed information channels, and with what purposes. Are they being used, as charged by critical scholars, to satisfy the needs of the dominant class to perpetuate hegemony? What have been, or have not been done to safeguard the public's right in making its voices heard through these high-tech channels? In addition there is the persistent concern over an overflow of imported information content.

Two decades ago communications researchers were alarmed by the impact of media imperialism. Today concentration of information resources does not seem to be much different from what was observed. On the international film market, an estimate of 80% of the films purchased by non-socialist countries were produced by U.S., or Western European companies. Asian films, despite a large number, are seldom seen in other parts of the world (Jouet and Coudray, 1990: 34). On top of the existing imbalances in the flow of video materials, the development of information technologies has brought the added imbalances of software and data base distribution. A 1987 survey of the world software market showed the U.S. leading all others by a share of over half (52.8%) of the total. A similar pattern was found with data base distribution. According to
Williams (1980), in 1979 there were 528 data bases worldwide, with 148 million records. Of this total, U.S. accounted for 49% of the data bases and 63.5% of the records.

Information technologies have brought global village one step closer to our daily lives, and foreign cultural or information products seemed to have become part of it. Direct broadcast satellites send television signals daily across national borders, and international computer networks allow for massive information transmission in seconds, both bypassing government controls. In this age of disappearing borders, do we need to be concerned about media, cultural, or information imperialism still, or should we simply take it as a way of life?

Past studies on media and cultural imperialism have led us to focus our attention on the impact of imported programs on local cultures. While counting the percentage of imported television program content has failed to provide evidence to any real effect of Western programs on other cultures (Jouet and Coudray, 1990: 35), one aspect of the issue was consistently overlooked: the influence of importing programs on indigenous cultural industry. Although the culture of developing nations may not be put in jeopardy as a result of importing television programs, the survival and welfare of local cultural industry are directly affected. We need to ask in what way is such influence felt, and what is its significance to the continuity and development of artistic and cultural expressions of the receiving nations.

In addition to the international flow of television programs, IT has opened new channels for information exchange. The pattern of
information flow through these systems, however, will not likely differ from that of television programs as governments in the region seldom regard information resources as an important area of development. Under the circumstances, what would be the significance to the future of informatization in the national and regional context? How is it going to affect institutional, as well as individual users in trade, industry and education, and what options are there for developing nations? When we have the answer to these questions, the socio-economic and cultural implications of imbalanced information flow will come through more clearly.

The Audiences: Active Information Seekers, or Couch Potatoes?

When the dominant paradigm fell, gone with it was the stereotypic image of the audience as ignorant, passive beings to be "reprogrammed" by mass media. How should we then treat the audience when studying informatization: active information seekers, couch potatoes, or individuals who, like us, have weaknesses in some areas but also strengths in others? There would have been very little differences in our approaches from that used in the early modernization research should our concerns be limited to attitude or behavioral change as a result of exposing to satellite television programs or computer uses.

From studies on automation, teleworking, computer-aided instruction and uses of new information media we have learned that the key to changes is, after all, people (Dordick and Wang, forthcoming). Study results have repeatedly shown that without taking into consideration audience needs, information skills and the
institutional and social setting in which technologies are applied, IT stands very little chance in achieving goals, either developmental or commercial.

What we need, therefore, is a new perspective in conceptualizing audiences in our research in which the respondents will no longer be treated as isolated individuals in a social vacuum. Instead their background, network of social relations, needs and aspiration will be given proper weight in research designs. In-depth analyses of the informatization process will be possible only when these factors are seriously considered.

Conclusion

Obviously a great deal has been learned in the field of communication in the past few decades. Undoubtedly a great deal more is yet to be learned. The real challenge that lies ahead of us is to take what is already known into account when drawing up our research design. As earlier pointed out, very few of the research areas suggested in this paper are brand new. What we need to do is to put the research questions in proper contexts. If we have come to realize that societies are dynamic entities, then there could be no linear process of informatization or development in which individuals, institutions and IT are but unidimensional, static elements. Information revolution brought opportunities not just to develop new areas of research, but to review what we have learned, refocus our attention and sharpen our tools before setting out afresh.
Using the Lasswell model, this paper calls for closer attention in studying effect, channels, information sources and the audience in the process of informatization and development. New perspectives are also suggested in defining development goals, and based on what was learned from the fall of the dominant paradigm, in conceptualizing effect and audiences.
REFERENCES


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*In US dollars.