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The Concept of Power in the Context of Development and Communication in Third World Societies: The Social Scientists Perspective

By

Joseph Man Chan
The Concept of Power in the Context of
Development and Communication in Third World Societies:
The Social Scientist’s Perspective

(Extended Summary)**

by

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Introduction

The downfall of President Ferdinand Marcos provides a dramatic illustration of the affinity of mass communication and power. At 9:30 a.m., February 24, 1986, Manila time, the Marcoses emerged on the state-owned Channel 4 television to refute the rumour that the first family had deserted the palace. Twenty minutes later the live broadcast was curtailed as the Pro-Aquino forces were gaining control of the broadcasting complex. The station resumed broadcasting several hours afterwards, with a greeting from the anchor: "Channel 4 is on the air again to serve the people." By then, Marcos had been replaced by Aquino. ¹

Equally revealing examples are also found in South Korea, Taiwan, China, Poland, Rumania, South Africa and other parts of the world. They all speak to the inseparable relation between mass communication and power change.
Conceptualizing Power

What is power? Power is a relation between persons and groups; it is the ability to get what one wants and the ability to influence the behaviour of others, whether they wish to cooperate or not. The sources of power include personality of leadership, property, social status, and organization. Power may be exercised through force, manipulation, persuasion or conditioned belief. Not all power is institutionalized. Power that is legitimized is termed authority. Subordinates within an authority system accept the control of their superiors as justified and proper.

I have been defining power in the most general way. On a more specific level, power is observed to have varied from culture to culture. As Lucian Pye has convincingly illustrated, political power, for instance, in Asia is paternalistic, with the leaders being more concerned about dignity and upholding collective pride, whereas the people are respectful of and dependent on the authorities for psychological security. To contrast, power in western nations is often viewed in utilitarian terms, as a means to problem solving. Being individualistic, the people are more suspicious of authorities. What a people expects of power is significant in that it determines to a large extent what one gets from the political power structure which, as I shall argue, has tremendous implications for development and communication.

Discovering Power in Development and Communication

The linkage between power and the media may not be as theatrical as the Philippine case mentioned earlier, but it is nonetheless accurate to say that mass media reflect the
perspectives of the power structure. They react to changes in the power relations of society.5

Broadly speaking, if social power is unequally concentrated on the hands of a few, as is the case in most third world nations, then the press is subjected to direct, centralized control. The press is a tamed instrument of the dominant ruling body, be it the military or the party, in most authoritarian or totalitarian states.6 The power centre obtains press compliance with the use of coercive suppression, incorporation, or threats of deprivations.7

In societies such as South Korea and Taiwan that are witnessing a dispersal of power to a wider elite circle, press control has been considerably less direct and less intrusive.8 The media have gained grounds in autonomy vis-a-vis the state, whereas journalistic perspectives have been diversified to reflect the interests of the newly incorporated groups. Press obedience is brought about less by suppression and more by positive sanctions such as incorporation and cooptation.9

Mass communication, as a component of Western modernization theory, was hailed as the panacea for development in the third world countries before the sixties. The modernization theorists viewed mass media basically as key "multipliers" which would be instrumental for social mobilization, educational and other developmental purposes.10 They were expecting that urbanization, rise in literacy and the introduction of mass media would lead to an economic "take-off" and a political democratization.11 As implied by this linear path of development, the change in power relations came last, as a consequence to urbanization, educational improvement, media and economic growth.
Nowhere in the causal chain is power emphasized as an independent variable. Power relations were taken as given or simply ignored.

The ignorance of power in developmental communication was exposed when practice in the sixties and early seventies failed most of the optimistic prophecies of modernization theorists. While the majority of the developing nations have only inched along the road to modernization, social problems like unemployment, starvation, poverty, illiteracy, pollution and urban congestion linger on and grow. This bleak picture has forced some of the once optimistic developmentalists to come to terms with their critics, admitting that socio-structural constraints are the primary inhibiting factors of the modernization in general, and the effectiveness of the developmental role of mass communication in particular. Power was gradually recognised as a determinant of the audience's ability to gain access to the media and to make use of media messages. While the liberal assumptions of the traditional development model were being questioned, alternate development models began to view a more equitable redistribution of power, incrementally or holistically, as the pre-condition to any development.

The awareness of the problem of power was heightened by the dependency school and other Marxist scholars. They attributed underdevelopment to the domination of the developing periphery nations by the advanced centre nations and the social disintegration within the developing nations as a consequence of the transnationalization of capital. To render development possible, according to the dependency theorists, not only is domestic restructuring necessary but also reordering at the international level, hence the widespread calls for a new international order in the realms of politics, economics and culture in the eighties.
Discussion

Social scientists, often disagreeing on many subjects, seem to share the view that mass communication is not the very "key" to development as it was once envisioned. Social structure and exogenous factors carry more weight. This shift in development paradigms calls for more studies on how mass communication interacts with the process of social transformation or reproduction. But few significant efforts have been made to study how mass media are related to socio-structural change in developing nations. Power continues to be ignored in most of audience studies in development communication even after the dominant development model had been criticized in the mid-seventies. Social scientists should make this up in the future by more often incorporating the socio-structural variables in communication research. Given enough research done in this direction, we should be better equipped to maximize the use of communication in development.

An important question that follows from this discussion is: What kind of power structure is most effective in handling the task of modernization? The rapid economic development of some Asian nations appears to lend support to the idea that a strong state is a necessary condition for successful development, at least for the initial period. However, the strong state does not work by itself. Its effectiveness depends on the choice of appropriate development strategies such as the relatively free operation of the market and heavy investment in education. The rapid political pluralization in Taiwan and South Korea in recent years confirms that the strong state is not an end in itself. A challenge for the third world nations is to periodically review and to reform its power
As previously emphasized, communication is dependent on the social framework under which it functions. It cannot take the place of social restructuring. But I hope that scholars will not go so far, in the manner some power reductionists do, as to slight the importance of communication in development. Being potentially influential conveyors of messages, mass media do maintain a "relative autonomy," from the interference of the power structure. It is absurd either to proclaim total autonomy of the media or to gloss over the genuine and at times substantial distinction of this "relative autonomy" allowed in various systems. The task for social scientists is to identify the conditions and limits of this relative autonomy." Being a necessary condition for development, mass communication deserves an important place in social planning and development research.

Knowledge is power. This was true in the past and is particularly true in the 1990s -- when information constitutes the very fabric of the world. As a result of the rapid development of new communication technology, human societies, third world or otherwise, are faced with more information issues than ever before. How to ensure access to information, on both the national and international levels, has become a strategic question? To what extent should information be treated as a resource and to what extent as a commodity? How is it possible to fully exploit the technical feasibilities of the new communication technology for the developing world and the underprivileged classes?

The answer to all these burning questions involve power one way or the other.
In fact, the relevancy of the concept of power is enhanced in this information age. The information issues are more than ever subject to public choices which, in the last analysis, will be determined by the configuration of social forces and the rules governing their interactions. If we are to learn from the past, the socially beneficial utilization of the new communication technologies requires some sort of restructuring on the national and international level to ensure people's access to information and their ability to act on such information.
Notes


