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Introductory Address To The Research Planning Meeting

By

Anura Goonasekera
When I was doing some background reading for my presentation today, I came across three interesting papers and I thought I should begin by presenting the views in these papers as these may help us to collect our thoughts on this subject. The first paper is by two Korean Professors, Hyeon Dew Kang and Sewon Kim. Their paper is on the impact of Japanese Direct Broadcasting by Satellite (DBS) on Korean culture. They put out the interesting hypothesis that the idea of cultural exchange, brought about by satellites, is part of a foreign relationships exercise and is an aid to economic relationship of the more affluent countries. It is part of total security that covers defense and economic collaboration. The authors analyze this in terms of the theory of Cultural Imperialism and World Systems Theory. I found quite interesting, one of the solutions suggested by the writers. They want "Japanese DBS (transmission) to cultivate quality programmes containing high cultural products to the extent that cultural intrusion itself can contribute to development of Korean culture". In other words, they are pointing out to a potentially useful side of cultural imperialism.

The second paper is by Japanese scholar Youichi Ito. His paper is on information technology and socio-cultural challenges in the Asia Pacific region. He comes out with the interesting hypothesis that where nations are competing with each other, any
knowledge of how to win or survive in the competition are immediately made use of by other nations irrespective of cultural objections or implications. It has been suggested that the essence of the world system is competition. Peripheral countries may rise to become central countries and central countries may drop to become peripheral countries as a result of competition. It is also asserted that in competitive areas, pressure for cultural homogenization is always strong. In some cases, the need to catch up or survive is so intense that people cannot afford to respect their own culture or tradition. When Japan tried to modernize in the mid-19th century, many intellectuals worried about the loss of Japanese traditional culture. However, the Japanese Government could not respect such claims at that time.

There are many cultural areas where competition is not involved, such as religion, language, customs, values, art, political and legal systems. In these areas, there are only differences and no criteria to determine the degree of advancement. It is however not easy to keep the competitive and non-competitive aspects of culture separately. The cry for "Japanese mind and Western knowledge" was not easily achieved. Foreign practices adapted in the competitive areas, such as military, economy and technology, will also influence cultural characteristics in non-competitive areas. Ito hypothesizes that culture consist of core part and peripheral part. People easily accept foreign influence in peripheral part but resist change in the core part. For instance,
in China's urgency for modernization, its leaders are on record as saying: "I do not care whether the cat is black or white. The cat that catches rats is a good cat" (Deng). In other words, economic culture cannot stand in the way of progress.

There are no cultural characteristics that specially suit a specific technology or technological development. If culture affects technological development, it is through the formation of economic organizations and competition among them. I think this is a very important observation we should keep in mind. It is a clue as to how cultures operate in everyday life.

The third paper is by Paul S N Lee of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His is an empirical study of absorption and indigenization of foreign media cultures in Hong Kong. He examines 3 forms of popular culture in Hong Kong and identifies four patterns of absorption and indigenization of foreign cultures. He calls these patterns 'Parrot', 'Amoeba', 'Coral' and 'Butterfly'.

'Parrot' refers to the whole sale adoption of foreign cultural forms and contents. 'Amoeba' pattern is one which keeps the content but changes the forms. 'Coral' pattern is one which keeps the form but change the content. 'Butterfly' pattern is one which absorb and indigenizes foreign cultures to an extent that one can hardly distinguish the foreign from the indigenous.
What do the position taken by these three papers imply for our study. Again, I want to go back to Ito. In another paper on "Balance and Imbalance of International flow of Information in non-Western countries", Ito refers to cultures as having twin but dissimilar characteristics. One could look at 'Universal' aspects of culture by which he refers to the economy, military, science, technology and internationally enjoyed sports. This can be 'evaluated' by applying universal criteria. One could rank countries on the bases of this universal aspect of culture. The other aspect of culture is what Ito calls ethnic culture ie. language, religion, value systems, way of life, way of thinking, way of doing things. This is what cultural anthropologists refer to as traditional culture. These cannot be ranked on the basis of any universal criteria. Some Western writers have argued that these two cultures are inseparable or that one flows from the other. It was thought that only countries with western type of ethnic culture could reach high ranks in the ladder of universal culture. Japan has shown that this assertion is not true.
What I wish to highlight is the fact that there are competing approaches to the issues of intercultural relations. First is the Dependency Model (Kang). Second is the Interactive/Competitive Model (Ito) and the third, is what I would call, an eclectic approach which points out to the possibility of different and sometimes quite opposite kinds of relationships brought about through intercultural communication (Lee).

I think, in our study, we may have to explore all these approaches, which means that we have to take quite an open view on the matter. This is a challenge for us because in designing our research methodology, research questions and research instruments, we will have a rather complex task of considering and incorporating divergent points of view.

We are using the case study method. Ours will be an exploratory study. Still we have to satisfy the methodological rigors required of scientific investigations, which to me basically means that it should be possible for our study to be replicated elsewhere and the results of such replications should be comparable.

Wilbur Schramm, in one of his earlier papers on the subject of intercultural communication, observes that:

a) We know more about international communication than about intercultural communication. That is, we have considerable data on the flow of information in the world among nation states.
b) We have rudimentary information on the content of the flow.

(c) We know very little of how a culture communicates its meaning, understand and gets understood by another and how it affects values and behaviors.

I think, it is this third aspect that is of special relevance to us. Sometimes, we confound the issue by drawing conclusions regarding (c), solely on the basis of (a). We should go deeper than this and examine the nodes or points through which cultures interact, say the economic groups to which Ito referred. The interpretation and understanding of meaning is very important in this respect. I want to take an example from an interesting case that happened in the early 1950s between India and Sri Lanka to illustrate the complexities involved.

As we all know, India is a prolific producer of movies which have very popular songs and music. In the early fifties, the Minister in charge of Culture and Information in India was a graduate of one of the leading classical schools of music in India. These scholars considered popular film songs as a corruption of the best classical traditions of Indian music. So this Minister in charge of Culture and Information banned the playing of popular film music on All India Radio. Now, most Indian films are marketed by playing their songs on radio. This is what make people see the films not once but several times. When India banned its own popular music from its radio, Sri Lanka saw a great commercial opportunity. The British had donated to Sri Lanka a powerful radio transmitter which was used by the allies for war propaganda. After Singapore fell to the Japanese, Sri
Lanka became the headquarters of the allied command in Asia. The powerful transmitter used by the allies during the war was donated to Sri Lanka. Now, the Sri Lankan radio station used this transmitter to play popular Indian music for Indian audiences. It was not a spill-over but deliberate programming. One of the most popular programmes in India at that time was Sianka Geeth Mala, transmitted by Radio Ceylon. It was a hit-parade of popular Indian songs. The man behind this commercial coup was not a Sri Lankan but an Australian by the name of Dodd. He was the Commercial Manager of Radio Ceylon at that time. Through this anecdote, I want to highlight the operation of several communication processes. One is a reverse flow of cultural imperialism. A small country transmitting programmes to a big and powerful country against the wishes of that country. Second is the peculiar nature of the content of these programmes. These are not foreign music for Indians - but India's own music that has been banned by a Minister who was a 'cultural purist'. Therefore in the same culture, one could find 'out-castes' and 'in-castes'. My question is, are we, in our study, looking at a similar phenomena, but on an international plane? Do we see the hand of cultural purists at work here?

I would like to digress a little bit at this point to raise another issue which perhaps is relevant to our discussion. We all know that messages are encoded in the artifact itself, irrespective of the direct textual message conveyed through the medium. Human beings have the unique capacity to decode the messages in the artifacts around them. Marshall Meluhan referred
to this when he said that the 'medium is the message'. However, what I want to draw your attention today is not to the notion of the extension of the senses through mass media that Meluhan, the Philosopher, popularized. I want to refer to another aspect, empirically verifiable, and in fact known to many of the participants of a culture. I can do this best by taking some examples. Some of you might recall that we published a special issue of the Asian Journal of Communication on the theme "Communication and the Metropolis". In this issue of the Journal, we discussed the flow of communication in big cities. Now, the architecture of the city itself encodes messages. Therefore, cities can be read as texts and interpreted in the way the original city builders intended the city to represent.

Ancient cities, all over the world, were built to represent and convey to the populace certain ideologies which were important to the rulers.

In Sri Lanka for instance, the architecture of ancient cities may be interpreted in terms of two models based on two distinct notion of Kingship. One is called the Chakrawarthy Model - or the world ruler model; The other called the Asoka Modal or the ruler as a public servant. In the Chakrawarthy model, you will find the ruler using architectural symbols to cast him as a God-King. The city of Sigiriya or Lion Rock, built by the patricidal King of Sri Lanka in the 6th Century AD, I think is as good an example as any, of the Chakrawarthy concept embodied in the
architectural designs of a city. The King designed it as Megha Kuta or the heavenly rock abode of the Gods, surrounded by heavenly beauties, and all the pomp, grandeur and pleasures of the Gods. The cities built on the Asoka Model, on the other hand, are marvels of public service work—such as roads, irrigation schemes, universities etc. The King does not project himself as a God or world ruler through the architecture of his city.

Now the question I want to raise in connection with our discussions on intercultural communication is, how do the recipient countries of satellite broadcasts perceive the technology or artifact itself? Do they read the artifact itself as a text, like the ancients use to read a city’s architecture? If so, do they see in it a Chakrawarthy, or in today’s terms, an imperialist model? If this is so, then the messages put across through satellite TV may not be the important consideration, but the technology itself which is seen as an invader of a Chakrawarthy. On the other hand, is it seen as an Asoka Model or one capable of doing service to the people. The basic question I want to raise here is: shouldn’t we consider the medium or the technology itself as a text in addition to other issues such as programme content, its values, ownership etc.

In this connection, we should also consider the notion of cosmopolitan cultures or cultures free of national limitations. The cosmopolitan culture is peculiar to modern cities. I think we find a form of cosmopolitaneness in most cities in Asia—be it
Colombo, Bombay or Singapore. The leading characteristics are that people speak an international language - although they have their own local languages. Trade and commerce is an important occupation. The people are mobile and more open and tolerant of diverse conduct as they have been exposed to different cultural habits. In the spread of intercultural communication through broadcasting, do we see a growth of cosmopolitan cultures? If so, how are we to identify this and study it?

Finally, I want to draw your attention to another area which is of importance to our study. This is, laws, rules and regulations governing the flow of broadcast material - both internationally through satellites and locally through terrestrial transmission. How does advances in technology affect the existing laws. How can one reconcile the concept of sovereignty of the state with its inability to control its own national airspace? What is the legal position of satellite broadcasting in the countries under study.

With these thoughts, let me end my presentation. I am sure all of us have our own ideas of how best to plan this study. Let us therefore get moving with the rest of the days' programme, and listen to some more ideas.