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COMMUNICATION POLICIES AND PLANNING

by Brajesh Bhatia

Our discussions will be primarily based on a feasibility study of introducing training for communication planning in the Asian region which was undertaken by Amic at the request of Unesco.

First of all, let us look at some of the component words and phrases that we may use repeatedly. The term 'policy' has been defined in various dictionaries and encyclopaedias as political sagacity; state craft; prudent conduct; craftiness; course of action adopted by government, party, etc. An archaic definition is "the art or science of government and the conduct of public affairs".

If we accept the last two definitions of policy, we have to look into the genesis of a particular policy. A policy or a set of policies are derived basically from the Constitution of a particular country. The Constitution usually outlines the rights and duties of the citizens and defines the course of action -- political, economic, social welfare, etc. -- to be followed by the government within the framework provided in it. Let us look briefly at some of the relevant statutes of the constitutions of five Asean countries and how they treat different aspects of communication.

Plan, design, plot, scheme and project can mean, in common, a proposed method of doing or making something or of achieving an end. Plan implies mental formulation of a method, order, or form or a graphic representation of one, sometimes applying to an already achieved order.

Planning is thus to set down the features of a plan. Different institutions are engaged in planning. Among them, business enterprises and government planning are the foremost. Planning is a recent phenomenon. Overall planning was not applied, before World War II. Perhaps, the Economic Section of the Cabinet offices in the U.K. during World War II, prepared estimates of the national products and some of their components as a basis for the organisation of the war effort. Immediately after the war, a number of countries in Europe, each in its own way followed the British example for the purpose of post-war reconstruction.

Planning should be seen as a manifestation of the ever-growing conscious tendency to organise human activity. In this process there is a continuous search for efficiency in its broadest sense.

Rational planning in economic and other relevant sectors has become an accepted practice in most of the Asian countries which have worked out development plans with specific goals to achieve higher productivity, industrialisation, better education, health, etc.
A development plan is a document which sets out the main measures that the government intends to take in order to raise national output per person. These plans normally project several years ahead. Typical periods are three, four, five and six years. Longer plans are also sometimes made to provide for longer projections and include wider perspectives. The primary purpose of such a projection is to provide a consistent background for policy.

Some development plans are taken more seriously than the others. The hazards of drawing up a plan derive from three sources: (1) lack of realism and commitment; (2) differences between those who make the plan and those who make economic decisions; and (3) difficulties in forecasting.

Communication as a Component in Development

How can a communication system be designed to give maximum support to national objectives of integration and development?

Is it possible to forecast technological developments in the communication field in order to optimise national investments in production and transmission systems?

How can the mass media and the extension services of agriculture, health and other ministries work together to promote rural development?

Is it feasible to develop radio to satisfy local needs without jeopardising national integration?

Can private enterprise media be organised to support development?

Is the rural press a viable alternative or a complement to radio/or television?

Can the information required for technological development be collected and organised into a national information system?

A satisfactory answer to these and other inter-related questions can only be found as countries move towards the formulation of communication policies and the integrated planning of their communication systems.

At the present time, only in very few countries have communication systems and media achieved their potential or contributed fully to social or development objectives. It is equally true that they have rarely enjoyed that degree of rational planning which has become an accepted practice in other sectors of the economy.

Just as science policies and planning attempt to rationalise the research and development needs of the economy, and education planning becomes cross-sectional with the concept of life-long education, so too should communication policies and planning be an essential part of any modern approach to development.
The importance of development communication and development support communication has been recognised, emphasising the human dimension in the massive process of social and technological change required for economic progress. But even this crucial role of communication in development forms only a part of its total function. Its ramifications extend throughout the whole of society, calling for organised communication channels for administration and commerce, for information and entertainment, and for political, educational and cultural purposes.

We therefore argue for a broad approach reflecting the inter-disciplinary nature of communication, requiring not only a coordination between ministries at the national level, but also close links between government and private sectors.

Communication as a Sector

Although the importance of communication infrastructure is recognised by most governments, communication is rarely treated as a coherent sector subject to a common task analysis. Where a ministry or department of communication exists, it is usually confined to telecommunications, while media industries, broadcasting organisations, information systems, etc., are independently programmed.

No society exists without an adequate communication system to hold it together, and in many developing countries a primary role of the media is to foster national integration. Thus communication itself is a development objective. At the same time, the communication sector also derives sub-objectives from the communication needs of other ministries, agencies and subjects within any development plans. Thus communication planning may not necessarily fit into inherited sectoral planning structures but may be seen as one of those horizontal planning areas which need the establishment of infrastructures which can cross the sectoral boundaries and by so doing can assist in the establishment of a more effective development strategy.

Communication Inputs in Planning

Evidently, communication in its broader sense encroaches upon all fields of human activity related to the acquisition, retrieval, distribution and productive use of information and experience. Thus within any integrated communication plan the following components must be taken into account:

- Telecommunication infrastructures and industries;
- Information, documentation and data systems;
- Mass media such as broadcasting organisations, newspapers, book publishing companies, film producers, etc.;
- Industries and agencies supporting, or dependent upon, the communication chain (e.g. manufacturers of production equipment, news agencies, survey research organisations, advertisers, writers, performers, etc.);
- Agencies concerned with special applications of communication (e.g. education, agriculture, health, family planning, rural development) and the extension services associated with them;
Training and research institutions engaged in the various aspects of communication;
Professional organisations of communication specialists (journalists, broadcasters, etc.), and self-regulatory bodies which they might establish to control professional practice;
The consumers of information and the participants in the communication process: the users and the audiences both institutional and individual.

A fair amount of wastage also stems from uncoordinated planning for communication systems. If an expensive medium such as television is introduced mainly for prestige, it will certainly not contribute to achieving priorities, but may result in delaying or inhibiting the rational development of more appropriate media (e.g. radio and newspapers). Furthermore, even when a communication medium has real potential to assist in such areas as education and development, rigid sectoral planning, accompanied by professional rivalries could easily negate its economic and development potential.

Many different agencies and ministries have responsibilities for communication activities. At the same time, there are numerous non-governmental communication enterprises (newspapers, motion picture companies, broadcasting organisations) which have their own policies and planning although they might be operating within the framework of official policies.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Discussion leaders:  Brajesh Bhatia
                     Lui-Tan Kwan Siu

In order to prepare a framework for discussion, participants were given seven questions which were answered by them after consultation among themselves. The questions and answers:

1. How can a communication system be designed to give maximum support to national objectives of integration and development?

   Answer: Communication systems should focus greater attention on development projects and programmes; spotlight problems of national minorities; promote racial harmony and understanding of cultures; provide meaningful information on the nation's overall problems and prospects; help people realise their respective roles in development and nation-building; allow greater freedom for communication systems to devise their own ways of development support; and formulate guidelines for media to provide communication support for developmental goals.
2. **Is it possible to forecast technological developments in the communication field in order to optimise national investments in production and transmission systems?**

**Answer:** Future developments in Asia are likely to be more in terms of extension of the existing facilities rather than in terms of adoption of increasingly sophisticated communication technology. The extension of radio networks to reach the deep rural areas, more efficient newspaper production and distribution, strengthening of the national news agencies are probable developments in the near future. While some governments could adopt more sophisticated communication technology, others may settle for low-cost technology that could be widely used.

3. **How can the mass media and the extension services of agriculture, health and other ministries, work together to promote rural development?**

**Answer:** There has been a great deal of cooperation between the mass media and the extension services on this score. However, there is a great need to establish a system of coordination between the two and streamline their activities. Often, media's cooperation is sought on an ad hoc basis, on time-bound communication programmes.

4. **Is it feasible to develop radio to satisfy local needs without jeopardising national integration?**

**Answer:** It is not only feasible to develop radio, but necessary as well as on account of the high rate of illiteracy in rural areas. Care should be taken, however, when broadcasts are aimed at an audience speaking different dialects. Often the broadcasters' understandable inability to find a language acceptable to a people speaking different dialects has been a drawback defying a convenient solution.

5. **Can private enterprise media be organised in support of development?**

**Answer:** There is no doubt they can be organised, but the degree of support would depend on two major factors: one is the private media's appreciation of national plans and projects and other, the willingness of media owners to invest manpower and material to provide information support for development.

6. **Is the rural press a viable alternative or complement to radio and/or television?**

**Answer:** It is an excellent complement and an effective alternative, because it is cheap, can be read at ease, can be passed on from one person to another and the range and scope of discussion in a newspaper is always
wider. However, the rural press has its drawbacks. Unless supported by
governments or other bodies, rural press is often economically non-viable
as it attracts little or no advertising. There are also problems of distri-
bution in areas where transportation facilities are poor.

7. Can the information required for technological development be collected
and organised into a national information system?

Answer: It is possible and it has to be a joint effort of both government
information networks and the private media. Furthermore, it is necessary
to carry out research to determine the specific information requirements
of a particular community, district or nation before any decision is reached
on the nature of communication technology to be adopted.

It was also noted that communication policy and planning should not be a
government monopoly. There needs to be a fuller understanding by governments of the
role of the private media and any policy formulation and planning should be a combined
effort.