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Communications In A Changing Asia

By

Martin Hadlow
COMMUNICATIONS IN A CHANGING ASIA*

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In Central Asia, the Kazakh people have a saying. They talk of the "birds way", or "path of the birds", this being a reference to the annual migration of many species of birds which travel north and south across the vast tracts of Kazakhstan each year. For countless generations, flocks of breeding birds have passed this way, unhindered by the lines on the map we know as national borders. North to south, south to north. A timeless ritual which the Kazakh people have monitored and which has now become a part of their own culture and traditions. They talk affectionately of these annual visitors who, unencumbered by geographical limitations or humanity's intrusion on nature, unerringly follow the pattern of their own cycles and rhythms.

And now, into this picture enters a new type of bird. A bird which, while also not being hampered by geography and borders, does not, unlike the feathered variety, follow a migratory pattern. It's always there. Hovering in orbit above the planet, this 20th century bird, the satellite, relays a constant stream of information into Central Asia. In Kazakhstan, the "birds way" or "path of the birds" is taking on a new meaning. Now it can almost be used to refer to the streams of information which are pouring into that part of Asia. Information flows which owe as much to changing political circumstances as they do to the advent of new communication technologies.

But, unlike the "path of the birds", the information flow streaming across borders into, not just Central Asia, but the whole vast continent itself, often doesn't follow a two-way pattern—north to south, south to north. Now, it's much more likely that the bird in the sky relays information from the "north" to the "south", from the developed world to the developing world, but not the other way about.

Where once those early communicators, the merchants, scholars and warriors of ancient times took their caravans to the Silk Route through Central Asia in search of trade, enlightenment and conquest; where now the migratory streams of birds still faithfully follow their natural instincts; here, in this remote corner of the continent, the 20th century is now making its entrance.

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This intrusion has already brought about great social change. With the modern communication media at the forefront, change can be expected to intensify and grow. Where once those who trod the Silk Route could settle their camels at night, then rest beneath the great black skies and watch the stars of the Milky Way, now modern travelers following in their footsteps can rest from their daily labours and also watch the stars of "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous", "Dallas", "Neighbours" and "LA Law".

But it is not just in Central Asia that the new communication technologies have brought about change. And, it is not only geo-stationary earth satellites which have assisted in that change, although there is no doubt that "global television" has been a key element in the tumultuous social and political upheavals which have been such a prominent part of this decade. A whole variety of new communication technologies - cable radio and television, desk-top publishing, interactive computers, cellular telephones, the fax machine, to name a few - have all played their part in the revolution which is today's standard in international affairs.

However, even if this technology is technically available to the caravans on the Silk Route of today's Asia, or to the dwellers of slums on the fringes of our major cities, or to the hills-tribe people in remote, mountainous regions, or to impoverished rural families across the continent, has it really brought about a change in living standards, basic health care and education. Do those who really need the information which the new technology can provide, have access to it? If not, why not? When access is possible, how do the communicators use the technology to transfer messages? And, is the message getting through effectively? These are themes which will, no doubt, continue to be addressed by communication professionals and researchers alike.

New social and political realities, coupled with modern media technologies and the escalating flow of information on a global basis, have brought about major change in the framework of existing mass media structures. In doing so, they have shaken the roots of organisations and caused a review of values, policies and the very existence of institutions themselves. Take, for example, the electronic media. The "traditional" pattern in the majority of countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific has been that radio and/or television broadcasting was established during a period when colonial domination was the order of the day. Often, based on the structure existing within the country of the colonial power itself, radio and television was usually the public service model and, in most cases, was controlled by the Government. Private and independent broadcasting stations, if they existed at all, were very much seen as second players to the "national broadcaster". Then came the era of corporatisation and, with it, an element of independence and self-responsibility. The national institution, with all its
advantages, disadvantages and, of course, bureaucratic shortcomings, continued to exist, often in only slightly modified form.

The electronic media had always been an expensive business. Cameras, tape recorders and all the other paraphernalia were often outside the financial grasp of any but the wealthy. Professional broadcasting organisations had complete control of access to the electronic media. Then came the era of media de-mystification, led in part by the appearance of the ubiquitous video camera, the high quality cassette recorder and the portable console or studio desk. For the first time, the general public had access to the means of programme production and often discovered that they could do nearly as well as the professionals in filming and recording. Pressure from this new-found competitor, not to mention changing social and political values, brought about more diversity in programming and, often, an increase in available viewing or listening channels. New technologies, such as the home video tape recorder, further clouded the picture.

Faced with major competition from a variety of privately owned media outlets and alternative media forms and a declining share of the available audience, not to mention a resulting cut in revenue, national broadcasting institutions were shaken from within, with even their "reason for being" under question. Programming values, the needs of minority audiences, administrative structures, all came under intense scrutiny. Often, the national institution underwent radical internal restructuring in an attempt to re-position itself more clearly in the new marketplace.

In Asia, the process of change within the electronic media is evident in several countries and, inevitably, it will be seen in many more in the future. But, do these changes help in empowering the socially disadvantaged, the poor, the illiterate? Do all of these new media sources give ordinary people greater access to the electronic media through which they can express their thoughts, their needs, their aspirations and their culture? Are we getting more diversity or less in programming options? Are imported programmes swamping local cultural values? Do broadcasters tend to shy away from presenting educational and development programmes in favour of commercially marketable fare which mainly appeals to a middle-class, urban-based population?

Against this background, there would seem to be a case now, more than ever before, for an increase in the number of small-scale media operations addressing specific communities. Rural newspapers, which could assist with the drive for literacy and development, community radio stations, which could bring vitally needed health and agricultural information- these are just two which immediately come to mind. Despite the introduction of trans-national television and international radio broadcasting, the requirement to address the real needs of local people in a relevant and appropriate form exists as strongly as ever before.
It is clear to us all that the world is moving into a period of almost constant change. Nowhere is this more evident than in Asia where many economies are booming. Often, however, this success brings attendant problems such as urban drift, environmental despoilation, drug abuse, homelessness and so on. Now, more than ever before, access to information which can be utilised by decision-makers and the public at large in addressing these issues is urgently required. In a changing Asia, communicators will have to use every tool at their disposal in ensuring that the messages get through. The challenge is enormous, but the needs are great.

The new technological tools available to communication professionals are just that, tools. To use those tools effectively requires skill, creativity and commitment. With these tools, communicators should be able to unleash a torrent of information which can help to nourish minds and souls, while, at the same time, providing the vital life-skills knowledge-health awareness, literacy, social welfare, women's issues, agriculture and so on - which is so much needed. This use of communication tools creates, in itself, several further demands. A demand for media education - not just for communicators, but also for recipients - so that communication processes are understood and the role and influence of the mass media is put in perspective. There is also a demand for more research to address questions, such as those I've raised today, about who has access to information and whether that information is being transferred effectively and appropriately. The role of communication in the whole development process is another area which could continue to be addressed. A further task of some enormity concerns craft skills training for print journalists, radio and television producers and so on. This is an ever-increasing need and one that, even now, can hardly be satisfied by the small numbers of national and regional agencies involved in this field. There simply must be a greater commitment by mass media organisations in providing training for their own personnel, for it is only through the effective development of these invaluable human resources that goals can be met and targets achieved. Already, the amount of funding provided for in-service and specialist training in Asia and the Pacific is, with few exceptions, lamentably low when compared with many countries of the developed world.

Earlier, I spoke of the birds which criss-cross Central Asia, travelling from north to south and south to north every year on their migratory paths. I also mentioned the streams of information which tend, throughout the world, to flow from "north" to "south" from the developed world to the developing world. New "migration patterns", in other words having some of that information flow back from south to north, are, with few exceptions, still not clearly put in place. Information sharing within the region itself is also, unfortunately, not yet as extensive as many would have hoped. This then, is another challenge for communicators as we enter the last decade of the 20th
May the advent of the 21st century see this imbalance, at last, adequately addressed.

May the traditional "path of the birds" be symbolic of a new era in the sharing of information and knowledge for the advancement of all on our planet.