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Print Media And Rural Communication

By

Abdul Rahmin
PRINT MEDIA AND RURAL COMMUNICATION

-- A working paper by

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Communication is at the root of all human activities. As Everett Klingleman stressed "... it is so much a potential part of living, like breathing, that we are unconscious that we are communicating". But Schramm gave a new dimension to communication when he termed it as a tool to "raise people's aspirations, guide and control a dynamic process, teach new skills and socialize citizens to a new and different society that is still in the process of becoming". He gave a development-orientation to communication.

Robert McNamara in his "Dimensions of Development", says "... if development has to succeed it must move beyond growth to distribution and its benefits must touch the lives of the masses. To do so, the participation of the people is vital, which can be effectively ensured through communication, by informing them and influencing their attitudes".

Today we have made tremendous breakthroughs in communication technology which have broken the barriers of physical and situational differences. It now provides an easy forum for interaction and exchange of information and opinion among people of similar cultures and languages. This revolution is particularly evident in Asia.

Asian Media coming of age

Asian mass media is slowly coming of age. Of the 10,000 dailies published in the world, 4200 come from Asian countries with a circulation of 120 million among its total population of 2400 million. Out of the 1000 million radios and 400 million TV sets in the whole world, Asia claims 240 million radios and 60 million TV sets. Also, the total number of books published every year in the world is 600,000, out of which Asia's share is 90,000.

However, there are barriers to the complete utilisation of this massive communication technology at the disposal of Asian countries. Asia's illiteracy is an appalling 48.8 as compared to Europe's 1.6 per cent and America's 1.5 per cent. Of Asia's 51.2 per cent literates perhaps less than half could be exposed to the print media in a meaningful way. This leaves nearly 75 per cent of people beyond the reach of print media which can play a pivotal role in the communication network in rural areas.

Primacy of printed word.

To assess the role, first, it is necessary to find out the strength and limitations of this particular medium. Over centuries the printed word has acquired credibility and authority coupled with an aura of permanence which the new media will be hard put to erode. People may get their information on radio and TV but they would want to see it confirmed in the newspaper, as a recent survey by UNESCO has shown. Unlike radio, TV and film, which present their material at a fast pace, print media, which include newspapers, magazines, books, all newspapers, folders, leaflets, etc., allow the reader to set his own pace based on his abilities and interests. Also, unlike the content of other media, printed matter is not necessarily limited to a single 'showing' or 'listening'. The reader can go back to it again and again. Another important strength we know is the treatment given to any subject. Through print media, one can develop a topic to whatever degree and length desirable. Complex discussions are therefore generally more fit for presentation in the print media.
Coming back to the first advantage, researchers stoutly maintain that print media has the highest prestige. But other scholars who have delved deeper into this problem of 'prestige' of the print media have come up with startling facts. If print does possess this prestige, then it should be able to exercise greater influence and pressure and persuade its readers. There is no conclusive evidence to support such a view. However, it has shown that at least certain sections of the public, usually at the higher socio-economic, age and educational levels, tend to attach more importance to what they read than what they hear or see. On the contrary, a much bigger public which is less educated and lower in the socio-economic scale rates non-print media higher. This may be only because at each of these levels the exposure to a given media is higher. The question arises: is this an inherent weakness of the print media vis-à-vis our efforts to communicate with rural people?

Persuasive task

However, if it is found that the opposite is true and that the print media does possess a greater persuasive effect due to its bigger potential of acceptability, then at least in India, it seems a shame that the brunt of the persuasive task in rural areas is being carried by media other than the print. Or perhaps, is there a compromise where the effort of print media is dovetailed by a dash of audio-visual material, leading to greater retention and acceptability?

One assumption is that in the adoption process print media is the most useful during "awareness" and "interest" stages. If it is so, how far has this information been utilised by people using the print media in disseminating information for adoption of innovations to bring about change? However, media practitioners are usually reminded that no single communication media is equally effective at all stages in the adoption process. Does this indicate that interdependence among the various communication media is a vital ingredient in achieving the goals of desirable change and development?

Crusade journalism

Another aspect of print media is its potential for "advocacy" or "crusade" journalism in rural areas. There are numerous projects, programmes and problems that bedevil our poor villagers. More often than not he fails to identify himself with them. Can the print media act as a catalytic agent to gear official machinery to the cause of the rural people?

Studies made in Jogipet-Anbole in Medak district and Jammikunta in Karimnagar district have clearly indicated that print media does play an important role in forming people's attitudes to problems facing them and jolting the authorities into action.

The tyrannical behaviour of the Sarpanch of a village in Andole was brought to light in a small Telugu weekly. Immediately, the bureaucracy woke up to the problem and within no time the sarpanch who had been ruling the roost for 12 years was removed and justice was restored in the village.

In another incident, the local degree college in Jammikunta had fallen on bad days and the staff had not received their pay for six months. The management and government were evading responsibility at the expense of the poor teachers. One small rural newspaper from Arangal, 56 km. away, took up the cause and pretty soon everybody seemed to have come to senses. The teachers are now due only a month's salary!
It is timely to recall what the veteran editor of a language daily that has one of the largest circulations in India, said about the power of the press in development and in bringing about change in rural areas. Mr. Mammon Mathew, editor of Malayala Manorama, a paper which has readership in every nook and corner of Kerala, says: "A few items that have been found to be of great significance for rural readers are: news of deaths; reports of panchayat meetings; school anniversaries; activities and festivities connected with the temples, churches and mosques; health and hospitals; working of important local political parties, etc. Further, investigative reporting has been a strong point of Malayala Manorama, increasing its readership and prestige. It is what makes Manorama the paper that is read not only by the masses but also by those who take the decisions. When thousands of settlers cleared the jungles and colonised the forests on the slopes of the eastern ghats, a roving correspondent went round and gave a studied report that helped the country to decide its policy towards them".

Communicators' problems

Moreover, in the Asian context, no single communication strategy, however effectively designed and employed, can ever reach the 800 million living in thousands of far-flung villages. The communicator therefore has to fall back on the good old tried communication channels which depend upon the printed word. There his troubles begin. With a low literacy rate, the communicator has to use suitable vocabulary to put his message across in a simple yet effective style, and leave the printed message in the heads of his target audience, overcoming the vast stretches of both time and distance. The communicator must realise that in the final analysis, print media can will be judged not by their ability to communicate with their peers, but with less fortunate groups whose interests may be different, whose levels of understanding may be lower, but whose needs are far greater.

However, many of us might feel that mass media managers have concentrated much of their efforts on the wrong audience. This is especially true for the print media. Instead of villagers, may be our audience for development messages should be political leaders, development decision-makers, and the researchers who are developing new technology. How many of our reporters have attempted to educate these audiences on what life is like in the village?

In a diverse society like ours, the cross-cultural affinities of the people play a major role. This is particularly true in village India. Has it been possible for the print media to overcome the social susceptibilities and barriers that thwart the smooth flow of communication to the rural people? Perhaps this seminar needs to go a little deeper into this problem of social norms that has become an obstacle in effective communication.

Impact of printed material

The print media, be they newspapers, magazines, books, periodicals, all-posters, leaflets, or folders, have tended to either overplay or underplay the all-important theme of agriculture which is the very life-blood of our poor villagers. At times, they have failed to register in the minds of the farmers, as they tended to be idealistic and sometimes unrealistic. The various units allied to the Department of Agriculture distribute over 10 million copies of publications containing technical knowhow every year, among extension workers, user-departments, and other institutions, in addition to all taluqs or sub-district headquarters. A week back an All India workshop on farm information has been held in Delhi, to find out reasons for lack of impact of this massive printed material on rural audiences.
Perhaps, our rural folk have developed anathema to farm information. As normal social beings, their needs might not always be agricultural. Social, educational, cultural, recreational aspects might be some of the areas they wish to be informed about. Some sort of an enquiry has to be made on this aspect too.

These are some of the assumptions on different aspects of print media and its role in rural communication that I thought appropriate to underline for the purpose of discussion in this seminar. Immediate solutions are certainly not handy, particularly when the problem is of putting across information to the rural people. However, certain directions have to be set to facilitate the role of this all-important media of the printed word in rural communication.