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Some Thoughts On Communication Planning

By

K Kurian
Some thoughts on communication planning

K. Kurian

In India we have a planned economy. Our problems are many. We have a million needs. Our resources are not enough to meet them. So we have to set priorities. And we have to plan our development in such a way that the best use is made of our resources.

India has a Planning Commission. The Commission draws up five-year plans of development. At present we are implementing the Sixth Five-Year Plan - for the years 1978 to 1983. Before the draft of the Sixth Plan was published, the Minimum Needs Programme was revised. The minimum needs were identified as follows:

1. Elementary education for the young.
2. Adult literacy programmes.
3. Rural health.
4. Rural water supply.
5. Rural roads.
6. Rural electrification.
7. Help for housing landless rural labour.
8. Environmental improvement of urban slums.
9. Feeding programme for undernourished children, pregnant women and nursing mothers.

You will observe that the provision of communication facilities is not part of the minimum needs programme.

Perhaps this happens in other developing countries too. When there are major problems like overpopulation, insufficient food, poor health and sanitation, unemployment and underemployment, and overcrowding of towns by migrants from villages seeking jobs, economic planners find it difficult to accept communications facilities as a high-priority issue. There are some who would even argue that such facilities are a luxury, a need of the elitist sections of the population rather than of the poor.
Last year I met a planning official at a communications seminar. His portfolio was telephones. He told me that he was required to submit a cost-benefit analysis whenever he recommended the setting up of a telephone facility in a new area. Can we quantify in advance the benefits that are likely to accrue from communications? All of us are aware of the qualitative changes that communications bring about. How do we quantify them in economic terms? Could anyone have done this when the printing press was invented? Or photography? Or movies? Or the radio? Or television? Or space vehicles?

The official told me, however, that some quantification was in fact being attempted. In one village, for example, the sheep were infected by a disease, and very soon an entire herd was wiped out. With a telephone in the village the help of a veterinary doctor could have been quickly enlisted. But he told me, ruefully, that collecting such case histories was a time-consuming job. There was also the added frustration that such fragile hypotheses could be easily shot down by economic planners.

It seems to me that the primary job of a communications specialist is to convince our planners of the contribution that communications can make towards improving our economy. A friend of mine tried to do this early this year from a public platform. He identified several problems as arising from an information gap. Some of his examples were:

1. Seven different types of hybrid varieties of rice yield as much as 6400 kg per hectare - against 1000 kg from traditional varieties. Similarly a six-fold increase is possible in wheat, and varying proportions of two-fold to six-fold increases in respect of a variety of food and cash crops. But in India only 35 per cent of the cropped area is under high-yielding varieties. Even here we have not achieved optimum levels of production because technical know-how is not widespread.
2. Water is a scarce resource. But only 15 per cent of the irrigation potential created in India in the last 30 years, at a cost of Rs.45000 million, is being used for multiple cropping. The extent of the information gap may well be imagined. Experiments in drip or trickle irrigation - applying water in continuous drops to the root zone of the plant - conducted by the Central Arid Zone Research Institute in Jodhpur show that it is possible to increase the production of vegetables and fruits by almost 40 per cent, but this is yet to be widely adopted.

3. About 80 per cent of our farmers are unaware of fertiliser technology. Agriculture scientists have pointed out that 50 per cent of the fertilisers used in this country is wasted because the methods of application are unscientific.

The question needs to be rephrased in my opinion, from "What is the cost of communications?" to "What is the cost of not communicating?"

There is not much controversy in India over the utility of "one-to-one" communication facilities - like posts and telegraph, telephones and telex. Problems arise the moment we start discussing "one-to-many" communications - mass media like the press, radio, films, television and so on. Political, social and psychological fears come to the surface at once.

India has 13,320 newspapers (which term includes all periodicals like weeklies, fortnightlies, monthlies, etc.) published in 16 principal languages. They commanded a total circulation of 34 million in 1976. Continuous lobbying by groups is a feature of the press, which has been identified as a source of power. There is an English lobby and a non-English lobby. There is a Hindi lobby and a non-Hindi lobby. (Hindi and English are the official languages) There is a big newspaper lobby and a small newspaper lobby. There is even a rural press lobby.

Communication questions that come up are not easy to solve. We import newsprint, and so newsprint quotas become a live issue. We started with English teleprinter facilities for news agency services; in what other languages should teleprinter facilities be made available?
Printing machinery - monotype, linotype, photocomposition etc. - is another live issue. Advanced types of machinery with English characters are available abroad; we need to adapt them to our own languages. In what priority? News agency services are also a thorny question. Do we tag along, for foreign news, to news agencies in the west which have their own political bias or do we set up a news agency in association with non-aligned nations in order to avoid a western slant? Within the country how does one withstand the pressures sought to be exerted by chains of newspapers whose proprietors have vested interests of their own, which may clash with the overall developmental policy of the nation?

Radio has emerged as a powerful medium in India. According to the report of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for 1978-79 All India Radio has a network of 84 broadcasting centres which can reach 89 per cent of the population. The number of broadcast receivers in 1977 was 20 million, which is significant when compared with the circulation of under 10 million of daily newspapers in the country. Radio is controlled entirely by the government. There are complaints every now and then about the medium being misused by the political party in power, and a move is afoot to delink radio from the government and bring it under an autonomous corporation. This corporation is to look after television as well. TV is yet to take off in India. In 1978-79 there were just 14 centres with 17 transmitters, capable of reaching, in theory, 82 million people, but the number of TV sets is under a million. We have black and white TV, and the telecasts are only for a few hours a day, mostly in the evening.

Software problems are quite genuine. It is not quite well known that radio as a medium failed in India in the early years, and it was kept going by a government unshackled by cost-benefit analysts. The reasons for radio's failure were probed by Lionel Fielden, who was Controller of Broadcasting in 1939, and summarized by him thus:

"Indian conditions and traditions were by no means as favourable to the rapid growth of broadcasting as those of the west. In the west, broadcasting was a convenient channel for an already established tradition of concerts, theatres, lectures and news; whereas in India, public interest in all these activities was apathetic and severely limited."
What we see on television is very similar. Television's hunger for programmes is almost insatiable, but the reservoir of the entertainment industry in India is so small as to be pitiful. Whether on television or radio, the most popular programmes are based on films or film music. The popularity of film music has been traced to its great adaptability, and its heavy borrowings from, and blending of, three basic traditions - classical music, light music and folk songs.

In this kind of situation the temptation to borrow programmes from the West is difficult to resist and this is where psychological fears of some kind of "cultural imperialism" begin to surface. To a westernised viewer a girl in a bikini is perfectly acceptable, but in a conservative family she will be seen as a symbol of the permissive society on the verge of decadence. Caught between the perils of programme-borrowing and the dangers of dull indigenous programmes, TV men have a tough time indeed, and it will be many years before the medium commands some degree of acceptance among the people who are affluent enough to command the price of a TV set.

There is a social aspect of communications which I think is common to communities which have newly emerged from colonialism. The leaders of the political movement which masterminded the liberation of the country from an imperialist power are usually idealists, fired with missionary zeal. There is usually great enthusiasm to improve the standard of living of the people and introduce new and higher values to them. "Hitch your wagon to a star" is their motto. Education is on the high-priority list. Reform is in the air. And reformation is usually associated with puritanism.

This can lead to some bizarre situations on media. There was a Minister of Information and Broadcasting in India who was insistent that the common people should be introduced to the joys of classical music via the radio. It was pointed out to him that classical music was not everybody's cup of tea. "Play classical music to them long enough and they'll love it" was his reaction. It never occurred to him that they would switch off the radio set. And switching off was what they did. The reformers eventually saw their mistake and reintroduced film music.
This brings me to the question of providing an entertainment "surround" in any medium to make it popular. Educational communications in mass media can be introduced only in small doses. This became evident when India launched its SITBest project - satellite instructional television experiment - meant for 2400 villages. Even earlier there was the grim determination that TV would not be allowed to deteriorate into a "rich man's toy" and so educational programmes were given priority. The results were quite predictable. Research reports that I have seen do suggest that there has been some information gain, but in my view this could have been achieved at much less cost, and without TV. The right approach would be to make the medium popular first, and then to attempt education.

I have outlined some of the problems that communication planning involves in India. It has often occurred to me that if we have a "communications lobby" - of experts in the discipline, with a professional status of their own - the stances taken would be different. But communications people are scattered - in the press, in radio and TV, in telecommunications, in advertising and so on. They don't speak with one voice, nor do they have a common platform. In this connection I'd like to place before you some of the recommendations of the Workshop on Communications which I referred to earlier.

1. Communications must be professionalised. (This means developing its own body of knowledge, courses of study, apprenticeship arrangements, code of ethics and supervisory council).

2. A comprehensive national communication policy should be evolved. A Communication Plan should be recognised as an important development input.

3. Resources for communications must be drawn from the funds earmarked for each development sector, after carefully considering the "cost of not communicating".
To summarise, communications planners do not have an easy job in developing countries. Economic and political slogans or social and psychological fears, are the main obstacles. Communicators need to build up their case and present it convincingly to the powers that be.