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Approaches To Communication Planning: Sri Lanka

By

Naren J Chitty
"APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION PLANNING: SRI LANKA"

by

Naren J. Chitty

Consultant (Research), Dept. of Information of Ministry of State, Sri Lanka

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This paper traces the path through which planning in the area of Communication approached the situation where it became part of the development planning process, or recognized as such by the government agency empowered to plan in this area. It is seen that the political milieu, the economic policies of the time and the focus of planning power in a particular branch of the Executive have had bearing on attitudes to planning in the area of Communication. When planning activity was centralized in an economics-biased Ministry of Planning & Economic Affairs there was some recognition of the usefulness of applying development planning theory to the development planning process. But not till more recently did a climate arise where development planning theory could be applied to communication problems.

1.2 In this paper the word Communication is taken to have a limited meaning: The use of mass media which have a technological base (such as newspaper, radio, cinema and television) in communication between People and Government.

2.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Until successive colonial occupations, by Portugal, Holland and Britain (between 1505 and 1948) gradually drew Sri Lanka into what has developed into the contemporary International System, Sri Lanka had been a predominantly agricultural traditional feudal homeostatic society. Transformation of Sri Lankan society into one which was impelled by its collective perception of a need to modernize and develop within the framework of the International System was initiated during the colonial period. This was achieved through the creation of a Western-minded class which was dependant on its ties with the plantation/export economy (created by the colonial powers) for its new pre-eminence.

2.2 The post-Independence period could be dissected into three political sub-periods which functioned under different basic laws. Each of these sub-periods contained the seeds of the next. The three sub-periods are as follows:-

1/ meaningful exchange of information
1. The Dominion Period - 1948 to 1972
2. The First Republic - 1972 to 1978
3. The Second Republic - 1978 to......

As in the case of many post-colonial societies, there was an attempt in Sri Lanka during the early stages of the Dominion Period to emulate the West. This attitude was encouraged by a favourable exchange reserve which was a reflection of the buoyancy of the plantation economy as a consequence of the War of 1939/45. The early part of the Dominion Period was characterized by little or no exchange control. A welfarist policy was adopted from the inception. There was a consensus of opinion favouring the provision of free education and health services. It was also felt that agricultural output should be increased particularly in order to achieve staplefood self-sufficiency. Further, it was recognized that the basic infrastructure required for development of a modern society and economy had to be installed in the country. It was in these areas, then, that Government was active in the first part of the Dominion Period. A controversial rice subsidy was also introduced.

2.3 Toward the middle of the Dominion Period, as has been experienced in other Asian societies at various times, nationalist sentiment swelled and there surfaced a demand for the nationalization of foreign-controlled tracts of the economy, essential services such as public transport and for protection and development of indigenous language, culture and religion. During the latter half of the Dominion Period these currents were channeled into an ideology which found expression in the First Republic.

2.4 The First Republic perceived as its mission the remedying of inequitable conditions which had arisen during the colonial past, the nationalization of foreign-owned plantations, the redistribution of property, the development of industrial and agricultural self-reliance through protectionism and strict control. Toward the latter part of the First Republic the State controlled about 60% of the national economy. Whereas the promise or threat of nationalization had hung over the plantation sector for almost two decades, leading to neglect by owners, the bulk of nationalization and creation of new State-managed business enterprises was effected within the brief span of five years. There was a feeling at the end of the First Republic that the State had taken on too much management responsibility
in too brief a period. It was also felt that the large volume of control over the economy had resulted in its stagnation. It was felt that if the economy was to be revitalized and jobs found for 1.2 million unemployed there had to be a major redirection of thinking and effort.

2.5 The Second Republic, therefore, while not retreating from the positions of social gain achieved during previous periods, encouraged local and foreign private-sector participation in the development of the country's economy. Many of the controls which had grown in the previous period were clipped. The Second Republic also featured a Presidential system of government and decentralized administration at district level.

3.0 PLANNING IN COMMUNICATION UNDER THE FIRST TWO PERIODS

3.1 Management of some spheres of communication has been in the hands of Government for a considerable period of time. Radio broadcasting has been a governmental activity from its initiation in 1923. At first it was handled by a department under the Ministry of Posts & Telecommunication. Subsequently in 1966 it was placed under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, as a public corporation. The Department of Information is the other mass media agency under the Ministry which handles Information and Broadcasting. The Department, for historical reasons, is largely concerned with liaising between Ministries and the Press. It also has a film unit which produces newsfilm and documentary.

3.2 In the past planning in Communication has been largely at the institutional level. Often discontent in a particular area has led to political support which resulted in a Commission of Enquiry appointed by the State. The Report of the Commission of Enquiry gives rise to legislation which creates a new institution, takes over an existing one or introduces some new regulatory mechanism. Existing institutions plan out their own development often with assistance of insights provided by specialist reports.

Dominion Period

3.3 For instance in the First Republic the desire to encourage local industry and culture by protecting it from aggressive foreign competition found expression in the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Film Industry (1965) and the State Film Corporation which was created in 1971.
The film industry in Sri Lanka had previously been a private sector activity. The State Film Corporation was able to work toward regulating and developing the film industry in Sri Lanka and planning for its development. However, the long road to a situation where the needs of the whole mass media sector are examined as an inter-related whole is nowhere more clearly seen as in relation to the removal of the State Film Corporation from the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, under the First Republic, and attaching of it to the Ministry of Planning & Economic Affairs.

3.4 During the First Republic there was a feeling that there had to be a high degree of consonance between media and Government in approaches to problems in the context of a development effort which had been thrown off-gear by the civil disturbances which occurred at the beginning of the regnum. This hastened the nationalization or closure of what were considered to be deviant elements in the Press. The desire for stability, a stability in which development activity could proceed at an appropriate pace, resulted in emergency rule which gave the Secretary of the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting wide powers of censorship over the Press. The Secretary also held the key posts in the State radio toward the end of the period. The emphasis in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting came to be placed increasingly on news management and it was hardly surprising that the Ministry, despite its wide-ranging influence over the media, did not demonstrate an interest in planning for the development of the communication sector.

3.5 However, as a consequence of the Report of the Press Commission (1964) a Press Council was established and this new agency was meant to adjudicate in disputes between Press, public and Government, ensure the freedom of the Press and publication of factual news in addition to conducting research, encouraging professionalism, training journalists and looking after their welfare. It was also meant to advise the Government on matters related to the Press.
The new institution had in it the potentiality of a Research and Planning facility for the Press but it had neither the interest or capacity to evolve into such a facility focusing as it did on issues related to the management of news.

3.6 Also of interest is that communication problems received some recognition at cabinet level through their inclusion as part of the area to be reviewed by the Mass-media, Information and Culture Sub-committee of the Cabinet Sectoral Committee on Social Overheads. But this recognition was modal rather than substantial. The links between the subordinate institutions which were theoretically in charge of planning in their own areas were too tenuous. There was no institution which provided for inter-institutional examination of needs at expert level. Nor did the individual institutions have well-developed research and planning facilities which could feed experts who could after analysis and plan formulation feed the Cabinet Sectoral Sub-Committee. The focus of planning activity was in the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs.

3.7 While the First Republic placed a heavy reliance on planning, that activity was centralized in an economist-dominated Ministry. Communication did not appear as a separate sector in the National Accounts and therefore did not invite the attention of planners. New intersectoral disciplines have been afforded a place but only after an intense struggle by those officials who are personally interested in the subject and aware of its importance. Thus during the latter stages of the First Republic a Food & Nutrition Research and Policy Planning Unit was set up. However the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, preoccupied as it was with news management, did not demonstrate an interest in obtaining appropriate recognition for centralized planning in Communication. The Development Planning Programme (a UNDP technical assistance project within the Economic Affairs Division of the Ministry of Planning & Economic Affairs) could only permit a token role for communication in its perspective planning programme on account of a heavy economics orientation.

3.8 In a real sense it may have been fortunate that planning for the Communication "Sector" was not centralized under the Ministry of Planning & Economic Affairs in the First Republic. Toward the end of the First Republic there was a tendency for the role of the planner to be afforded too much importance and
planning became almost an end in itself. A more healthy if diminished role has emerged for planners in Sri Lanka as a consequence under the Second Republic.

4.0 THE APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION PLANNING UNDER THE SECOND REPUBLIC

4.1 The Second Republic brought with it a major departure from the course Sri Lanka had been taking in the post-Independence period. This included the easing of controls and decentralization of administrative power. The old Ministry of Planning & Economic affairs disappeared into the new Ministry of Finance and Planning and the Ministry of Plan Implementation. The latter, which had been the neglected sister of Planning and Economic Affairs under the First Republic, assumed a new glamorous and more dynamic role under direct control of the President. The onus for planning passed on to individual Ministries, Project Ministries and District Ministries.

4.2 The subjects of Information and Broadcasting were given a new lustre through their being latched onto a new Ministry of State which during its previous incarnation in the Dominion Period had been headed by the present President of the Republic. The personal element is also of importance here and I might say here that the new Minister of State was a distinguished media professional who had earlier served as Secretary to the Ministry of State and Speaker of the House of Representatives. His Secretary was an eminent communicationist, a senior administrator and a man of letters. It became apparent rather rapidly that major improvements were to be effected in the communication "sector".

4.3 The pattern adopted by the Ministry of State has not been unlike other branches of Government under the Second Republic. The first action was to review the state of mass media and introduce a series of obviously necessary improvements immediately so that work could proceed in these areas before the internal planning process was streamlined and formalized. The alternative would have been to spend two years researching and formulating a master plan before acting. The first decisions made by the Ministry were as follows:-
1. To upgrade media hardware  
2. To train media personnel  
3. To decentralize mass communication systems  
4. To introduce new communication technology

The Government's liberal import policy permitted the satiation of a pent-up demand for new printing hardware. A Government decision to advertise in all newspapers including the opposition press has revitalized newspapers. The favourable climate has encouraged the emergence of scores of new publications.

4.4 Radio hardware is being upgraded and extended under foreign assistance programmes. Radio broadcasting is being decentralized with the setting up of regional broadcasting/production units. It is intended that mobile studios will encourage farmer participation in programme production. A more creative role has been adopted by the Ministry of State using advertising techniques in the communication of information to the people, through mass media. Newspaper surveys have been introduced in order to ascertain public opinion. Urban television has been introduced in the capital and National Television, a gift from the Japanese, should become operational in 1981/82. Perceiving the hunger for useful information in a large monolingual group of youth, the Department of Information has begun publishing a popular magazine (in the Time-Newsweek mould) in Sinhala.

4.5 Decentralization of administrative responsibility, decentralization of planning activity, the personal interest of the key executives in the Ministry of State and the enormous task of introducing television technology into Sri Lanka have created the right climate for the development of perspective communication planning at national level. The introduction of new mass media technology (television) with its demands in relation to technical training, production training, programme planning and procurement vis-a-vis the information and development needs of the population has made it increasingly clear that a research and planning facility for the Communication "sector" is required. A National Television Planning Centre has been set up to prepare for National television, which will be provided by the Japanese on a turn-key basis.
4.6 UNESCO, as part of a broad package of assistance in Communication Research & Policy Formulation is to arrange for a longitudinal study on the social effects of the introduction of television in Sri Lanka. It is felt that the various technical assistance inputs in this area could help in the creation of a local Communication Research & Planning facility. Such a facility has been introduced in an embryonic form into the Department of Information and an effort is now being made to consider a new role for the Department of Information which would include Research and Planning in this area.

4.7 There is also an increased perception of a need to know more about what people want and think and to provide them with the information they require. This perception together with the other needs mentioned above has lead to the consideration of the following activities as part of the function of the Department of Information:-

1. Research into users, uses, effects of media and into information and development needs of various population groups.

2. Planning in Communication.

This would provide the Ministry of State, the policy-making agency, the middle ground the absence of which made the old Cabinet Sub-Committee on Mass Media, Information and Culture ineffective.

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 It would appear that all conditions for Communication Planning to be part of the continuum between research and policy by a specialist group now exist in Sri Lanka: The right officials with the right interest and comprehension in the right Ministry at the right time.
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(adapted from Hancock, April 1978)