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INTRODUCTION

The dramatic leap in communication technology has brought greater dimensions to social communications than what was possible twenty years ago. Communication satellites in geo-stationary orbit at outer space some 36,000 kilometers from the earth, the application of computer technology to telecommunications, sound and picture transmission by electro-magnetic waves, optical fibres, and laser technology are mind-boggling developments.

There is a widening gap between what communication technology can offer and what communicators can do with them. And if we should take the futurologists seriously, by the year 2000, we may all well be 'trapped' in a network of communication between villages and towns and between nations.

Developing countries cannot choose to opt out of this network. The changes that have already taken place and are yet to come in the hardware technology will be all encompassing. In this context, communicators have begun to ask some valid questions whose answers will finally determine, to a large extent, whether mass media in developing countries are relevant to the needs of the times and whether they will be relevant in the years ahead.

The issue of mass media relevance is in fact a new debate. And interestingly enough, it takes place mostly in countries of the Third World which are trying to combat problems of food shortage, malnutrition, illiteracy, population explosion, wealth distribution and scores of other problems.

The debate itself is interesting and crucial. The basic question is whether the communication systems -- especially the mass media -- should play a positive and as far as possible, a planned role in all spheres of activities that contribute towards national and regional development.

To what extent do the theory and practice of communication help the communicator vis-a-vis those involved in development? Especially in the context of the developing countries, should the communicator be called upon to do more than what has traditionally been assigned to him? What are the constraints, say, a newspaper or broadcast journalist has to face in gearing communication to development? What are their potential?
Can the communicator evolve a sound theoretical base for an effective practice of DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION? How should he go about evolving one? What should be the components of such a module? What are the potentials of a development communicator? Can he, in future, afford to work in isolation and what should be the new inputs to his profession as communicator? What kinds of research and training should go into development communication?

During the last few years, these and many more questions have begun to engage the attention of communicators on the one hand and policy makers, planners and administrators on the other. There have been several attempts to go deeper into the analysis of the problems and prospects of development communication. There were discussions at many levels, but even before there could be any consensus about any theoretical base, organisations with a practical approach have already begun not only to discuss the bolts and nuts of development communication but are in fact already involved in development communication. DEPTHNEWS - news and features highlighting development, the running of a degree course in development communication at the University of the Philippines, Los Banos and the News Editor’s seminar in Goa, India on Development Coverage this February are some of the attempts made in these directions.

It is possible to deal with development communication at micro-levels: supporting a village extension scheme, providing information support to a particular development programme or campaign and attempting to influence the attitudes of a particular group or community. At macro-levels, there are programmes of such magnitude as Massagana 99 in the Philippines, India’s ‘stop-at-two’ family planning campaign, Indonesia’s programme of Transmigration, Malaysia’s Federal Land Development Authority (FLDA) scheme, Sri Lanka’s Grow More Food and Singapore’s search for national identity which demand astute planning and full-fledged mass media coordination.

Yet there are larger issues in the gamut of development communication both at national and regional levels: the questions of agreement between policy makers and media practitioners concerning matters of development policies and priorities as well as interaction and coordination among them; the nature of communication support or involvement; coordination between various communication systems; and the media practitioners’ individual or collective ability to conform to national directives on development goals.

There is still a great need for full and frank discussions on these questions as well as a need for detached analysis of the current Asian situation which together could spell out guidelines for media practitioners and policy makers to follow. In the Asian context, any combined effort requires an understanding between government agencies and private communication systems.

It is against this backdrop that Amic decided to launch the six-day seminar on Development Communication in cooperation with the Confederation of Asean Journalists (CAJ). Participants and observers from the Asean countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand were senior newspaper and broadcast journalists who
had a full understanding of their media and were intensely aware of the needs and problems of their own countries and of the region.

What the seminar, in effect, attempted was not to give them a set of definitions or even a modus operandi of development communication but to throw up concepts and issues for thinking aloud so that certain operational guidelines could emerge. The participants, however, brought their own varied experiences to bear on the discussion of some critical issues, the ones that actually have motor-effects on development.

What in fact is the nature of development's dependence on communication, or are development and communication independent of each other? Is there a meaningful connection between information flow and the pace of development? Can mass media practitioners adopt the role of change agents? Is such a role valid and viable? What are the factors that change the attitudes of people? Is political consciousness and the morale of a people important in nation-building?

Such questions no doubt brought forth a rewarding exchange of views - often contributory and sometimes contradictory - and it steadily emerged from the seminar that media's prime task, especially in the developing countries, is to channel their resources towards the welfare of the people and that development communication is no more a matter of choice but a necessity both for the survival of the people and the media themselves.

The seminar has been an interesting experiment and a great experience. It was an experiment to the extent that it set out to deal with the larger issues without any established moorings; it was an experience because of the ultimate consensus and points of accord coming from participants who were from different socio-economic, political and cultural systems. And it proved once again that in Asia, viable communication theory modules can and should be formulated and applied with modifications so that the benefits of advanced communication technology and human expertise could filter down to the vast masses of people.

We hope this seminar report would serve as a document of reference and at the same time give an idea of what happened at the seminar. A serious attempt has been made to bring together all relevant points of discussion but it must be stated that it is not a full report of everything that transpired during the seminar.

We owe this report to every single participant and observer, to the discussion leaders and panelists whose involvement in the seminar had the touch of professional dedication and to P.R.R. Sinha, Senior Research Specialist who, with Foo Chay Hong and Chang Hin Chong (CAJ) planned and ran the seminar, as well as to Cristina Espejo for the documentation support. The report owes its final shape to Sonny Francis and George Tan for their assistance in its production.

Guy de Fontgalland
Editor

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