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Communications In A Shrinking World :
Reaching Out Across Cultures

By

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"Communications in a shrinking world:
reaching out across cultures"
As a centre for the storage of data and as a forum that conducts workshops and seminars in many countries of Asia, AMIC fulfills a crucial need in our continent. Its annual conferences such as the one presently being held in Bangkok represent a unique convergence of specialists and scholars from different disciplines who share a keen interest in communications. I felicitate AMIC and all those associated with it on their significant contribution towards the study of communications in contemporary times.

I have been invited to share views with you on the subject of: "Communications in a shrinking world: reaching out across cultures".

In my presentation I shall concentrate on 2 broad areas: while looking at the communications process from different perspectives, ranging from the certainties of the obvious to the shadows of scepticism.

The first part comprises summary reflections on alternative views of communication. The second part deals with culture.

Before one accepts the title of this presentation, let us question it and test it a bit.
One view: communication reduces distances
1. Communication by itself is a process of perceptible, tangible as well as imperceptible, intangible reduction of distance between points of communication.

Thus, communication has always shrunk distances.

Another view: communication makes no difference
2. Though air travel, media, computers and telecommunications have vastly accelerated communication and placed far-flung corners of the planet in instant touch with each other, the world remains composed of the same diverse, distant parts it has been for 3.5 billion years.

Our ability to communicate has speeded up: the world remains physically the same, it has not shrunk -- yet!

Due to its visualness, its immediacy and its transitoriness, TV gives the most powerful impression of all media that the world is "shrinking", that because we can all share in a single event simultaneously - the Olympic Games, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War - we are somehow "closer" to each other.

We are not so.
We certainly know more about each other and see more of each other -- but we remain where we have always been.

The homogenizing effect of media is a delusion: it is commerce and culture that homogenize -- as well as divide.

The simultaneous sharing of media experience has little or absolutely no effect on differing ideological, religious, national or ethnic perspectives and perceptions. Awareness of events and issues increases. When a tragedy is purely humanitarian as in the case of a famine in Ethiopia, the media help galvanize financial aid. Concern at political tragedies such as Bosnia deepens through media coverage. Yet political attitudes and apathy abide as before.

The viewing live on TV by Muslim nations of the savage bombardment of Iraq during the Gulf War made no difference whatsoever to the general condemnation of both actions: the original unjustified invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the excessive force used by the Allies to punish Iraq for becoming a threat to the oil reserves of America's allies and of America.
A third view: communication makes the world expand

3. The world is also actually growing larger as States fragment into nations, into ethnic groups, into new identities.

The sheer scale and size of the planet becomes more, not less, as new loyalties and configurations proliferate.

The more people know about the world, the more people know about each other, the more people are able to travel to different corners of the planet - the larger the earth becomes, the greater its size and diversity in the context of information.

The membership of the United Nations has been increasing steadily since its founding in 1945: from 51 nations about 50 years ago to 184 in 1994. Though liberation from colonialism is the principal reason, secession and re-emergence as independent new entities is a principal new reason. The community of nations is expanding, not shrinking.

Distances between classes have also grown.

Though people far away from each other may share some items of life-style and work-style ranging from jeans to Coca Cola to telephones to computers, economic disparities between rich and poor have actually increased significantly during the very period when media have spread across the world.
Does communication itself increase distances?

4. Communication may enable people to speak with each other but they may then turn away from each other as a result of communication.

Communication brings people together -- and separates places from each other.

Communication may merely reinforce distance, not shorten it, or reduce it.

A two-way exchange may be a two-way stand-off.
Stray questions

Has the massification of communications helped transmit / exchange more truth - or has it strengthened stereotypes?

Is communication stabilizing - or destabilizing?

Is communication neutral - or inherently biased?

Is there a direct co-relation between:

- the massification of media i.e. radio, TV cinema, print.

- the minoritization of media i.e. VCRs, audio & video cassettes, Walkmans, specialized magazines

and

- the fragmentation into ethnic groups, sub-nationalities and new States?
One definition of culture:
Culture has been defined as the sum total of man's products. This definition brings within the ambit of culture a painting as well as precision engineering, literature as well as leather products, the quality of television programmes and the quality of house construction.

Inter-dependence in commerce and for growth has always been a feature of the world's history, of human history. With industrialization, and with informization of the economy trading in US$ one trillion now takes place daily through electronic means long before any goods have actually moved across borders.

In the sense of inter-dependence and inter-action there is a distinct "reaching out" across cultures, there is a process of exchange that embraces different cultures.

A common culture?

The nature of technology developed during the 20th century has increased the commonalities between cultures, eroding some degree of particularities.

At the same time, there has been a backlash against this commonality-tendency, a conscious attempt to re-assert historic identities to preserve traditions. Whether this is mis-labelled and misunderstood as fundamentalism in Islam or as family values in the USA, culture is exploring its capacity to reject precipitative and indiscriminate changes.
Monopolies within mainstream media:
The communication process, despite the minoritization of media through the VCR, desk top publishing, FM radio, video cameras, etc. is still pre-dominated by the mainstream media and by mainstream communications.

High capital outlays required to enter the mainstream process mean that many minority groups, non-conventional groups and those with talent, with ideas and with statements to make are denied access to large-scale audiences because either the State or the private sector within countries or across frontiers exerts decisive control over what is permitted to appear on national media or international media.

Thus, mainstream media are, in essence, rigidly controlled and fairly exclusivist, manufacturing the consent that Noam Chomsky refers to so ably.

It has also been said by Boyd-Barrett, albeit 14 years ago, in his study titled: “the international news agencies” that “there are possibly less than 2 dozen newspapers around the world which could make a reasonable claim to independence in their international news coverage”.

Communication can be merely populist, not truly participative and democratic.
Communication and conflict:

Has media communication helped reduce conflict - or increase it?

In the very period when we are witnessing rapid expansion and deepening of communications via satellites and the super highways of information we are informed by the UN Human Development Report of 1994 that between 1989 and 1992, there were 82 major armed conflicts of which only 3 were between States, and 79 were internal armed conflicts inside the boundaries of States.

Communications have helped accentuate regional disparities and imbalances, have highlighted internal injustices, have also - crucially - deliberately or inadvertently purveyed disinformation and misinformation. These distortions in communication have injected suspicion and mistrust between communities and regions, have generated tension, have facilitated conflict.

Arms and the media:
Communication continues to treat the military/arms dimension of global and national cultures as no-go areas.

There is only sporadic, uneven and relatively negligible investigative reporting on arms manufacture, arms trade, subsidies for arms manufacture, arms aid, etc. This continued and contrived ignorance and silence by the communication sector have helped brutalize global culture.
The crisis of communication and culture:
Communication within countries can also undermine culture, create new uncertainties, lead to a decline of coherence and cohesion, subvert traditional bonds and strengths.

Even in industrialized countries with high levels of material development, intellectual vigour and freedom, scientific endeavour, social enlightenment, one finds that culture and values are in profound crisis.

Whether it is the USA in which a Newsweek June 1994 public opinion poll which finds that over 70 per cent of the people are convinced that America is in a condition of acute moral crisis or whether it is the Governor of Sindh province in Pakistan on 14 June who speaks of moral pollution and the moral crisis, in the age of intensive and extensive communication, cultures are in varying conditions of chaos and turbulence.
Change defines culture:
Culture may alternatively be defined as the capacity of a people to tolerate, absorb, adapt, initiate and inspire change.

Culture is a composite of inanimate, synthetic products as well as moving, vibrant music. Parts of culture may continue intact and unchanged, unaffected by volatile trends and events swirling around them. Other parts of culture may change gradually, over years and decades. Yet other parts may change swiftly a la pop music styles and soft drink preferences.

There is a need to study in depth the relationship of interdependence between technology, communications, commerce and culture and their cumulative impact on the substance and speed of change as a process and phenomenon - and vice versa.

Some facets of culture are able to absorb change through communication without at the same time, enabling change in other facets.

The VCR machine and presently the satellite TV dish antenna are found in remotely located tribal communities wherein people view on the screen, cultural mores totally alien to their own: (yet) this has no immediate change-inducing impact on their own mores.
The tribal communities living far away from a modern city may drink the same Coca Cola or Pepsi that an urban community does but their substantive cultural norms remain unaltered.

We may be witnessing an unarticulated, unorganized, informal yet unmistakable process of 'controlled cultural change', a charter for adjustment such as between two powers that recognize natural / respective might and establish an equilibrium between dissonant and dissimilar factors.

On the one hand, the irresistible impact of technological innovation and on the other the immutable power of faith and irreducible identities of race, language, place.
A new "mediatmosphere":

Communications clutter - sheer proliferation and profusion of magazines, newspapers, TV channels, radio stations, cinema movies, movies on video tapes, music on audio tapes, Walkmans, satellite-linked communications by telephone, fax, telex, advertising in various forms, etc. - has created an unprecedented condition of excessive volumes of print, motion, sound, shades and voices.

Through this extraordinary profusion of communication material we may be presently cooking and preparing a unique new brew, a new 'mediatmosphere', a new "communivironment", a new "mediair" in which people will see, hear, exchange, inhale, exhale a communications 'gas' analogous to the way in which people inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide which is then inhaled by plants that in turn exhale carbon dioxide: making for a cycle of continuity and almost incessant interdependence.

In such a new 'mediatmosphere', elements such as precision and accuracy of observation by recipients of media messages may well decline due to the distraction caused by media profusion with a general, but not too well-informed awareness in place.
Six layers of culture in a world of culture:

There are different layers of culture.

At the core of this circle or "world of culture" is the culture of basic universal human values, of fundamental mores of conduct and social behaviour, of minimal norms of decency, of compassion and kindness to those in distress, of the willingness to offer hospitality whether it be a cup of tea or a plate of food to a traveller.

Within this primary core of culture, in the context of products and processes also being part of culture, there are the basic items, artefacts, tools and equipment that facilitate daily life across the world, items so basic as to be universal: ranging from a kitchen knife to a shoe, from soap to clothes, from clocks to cooking utensils.

This primary core of culture consists of both values and functional utilities with only tiny, microscopic, even inconsequential variations shaped by differences of geography.

There is then the culture shaped by geography, ethnicity and language. Attitudes, behaviour, sometimes dress, songs, dances, performing arts and literature reflecting a certain exclusive set of characteristics, whether they be alphabets or legends, costumes or rituals, memories or aspirations.
The same degree of commonality may not apply to the functional or economical dimension of this layer of culture in which geography, ethnicity and/or language pre-dominate. People may share the same race and dialect or language yet their professional trades & occupations may be different to a significant degree.

A third layer of culture is the culture of region and/or of ideology. A geographical area comprising nations and States with dissimilar attributes of ethnicity and language may nevertheless share a broader identity shaped by the sharing of the same land, resources and history for thousands or hundreds of years. South Asia and South East Asia are apt examples of this culture of regionalism though other regions are also relevant.
Within this layer also is the culture of ideology, in which certain traits, norms, conduct are determined by a commonality of faith in a particular religion or in a political ideology.

This culture of region or of ideology is distinct from the previous layer of the culture of geography, ethnicity or language.

Muslims live by the dictum that their religion is a complete code of life yet, from country to country, nation to nation, their race differs as does their language, creating changes in how the "way of life" is actually lived from country to country apart from the common pillars and rituals of faith. Such variations of culture are also found in the religions of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism.

The fourth layer of culture is the culture of commerce, of trade, of purely economic self-interest, at an individual, group or national level.

In this sphere of inter-action, the commodities grown by people, the products made in small cottages as well as in huge factories, the innovations of technology, the plethora of products that keep the wheels of civilizations turning—all of these impact upon contacts between people, in some respects shaping employment, survival, growth and material progress, in others stimulating changes in life-style.
Whether in a free market or in a controlled market, the imperatives of investment, of demand and supply, of production, of trade, of consumption have a specific impact on society and its economic culture.

The small, compact Suzuki carriers/pick-ups that have been whizzing up and down the mountain highways of Pakistan and the fact that a town called Sialkot in Pakistan helps make the country the largest exporter of hand-made footballs in the world have changed the rhythm of the communities and set the economic pace in ways that no other elements have.

The culture of commerce has come to increasingly transcend political differences: the USA continued to give the Most Favoured Nation status to China in 1994 despite abiding differences on issues including human rights because the layer of the culture of commerce outweighed all other considerations.
The fifth layer of culture is the culture of conflict, an unavoidable consequence of layers 2, 3 and 4. The culture of conflict is as inherent to the nature of humanity as the primary culture of basic values. This process exists because of a variety of reasons. It may start with an individual’s need for space and property or a community’s dependence on a particular area or resources. It may grow because of historic, deep-rooted prejudices or systematic exploitation whether based on race discrimination or division by castes.

Conflict may arise from competition for power, for place, for markets, for weapons. In its non-violent and non-militaristic manifestations, conflict is sublimated and managed by being accepted as competition. In its violent and militaristic dimensions, the culture of conflict harnesses aggression, militancy, suspicion et al to street crime as well as to clashes between demonstrators and police, to inter-provincial or inter-community tension & violence as also to inter-State war. Conflict is also born out of disparities, inherited or engineered.
Over all these layers of culture which make up a circle or "world of culture" has come to hover a new amorphous atmospheric layer, the culture of communication and media, a layer that has grown and intensified and become more dense in the second half of the 20th century.

Through radio, through satellite TV, through cinema, through legally purchased or rented videos or through pirated and smuggled video tapes, through print media, through fax, through computers and telecoms we now have a global culture of communication that cuts across all barriers, natural as well as man-made, that demolishes censorship and decimates check-posts.
Respective national or ideological or religious differences may continue to simmer or even explode but this culture of communication transcends all.

Is this our hope of salvation -- or a mere mirage?

The answer may lie in the strength and the sustenance of the linkage between the most primary layer of culture, the core of basic human values and the most outward layer, the sixth, the layer of the culture of communication. Too often, the intervening layers of the cultures of geography, ethnicity, language, region, ideology, commerce and conflict are permitted to weaken this linkage.

Perhaps our future will be shaped by the relationship between the culture of values and the character of communication.