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Model Rural Newspaper : Resource & Problem Analysis

By

Abdur Rahim
In many Asian countries, the organism of the village is such that they are established communities by themselves, with little social mobility. However, many of them are blessed with certain basic communication infrastructures such as railroad, transport, electricity, post and telegraph as well as centres of activity such as fairs, bazaars, village festivals and community centres.

In India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, The Philippines, Bangladesh and Pakistan, there exist vast areas which are in the process of development and modernisation. With the concomitant spread of literacy, progress in agriculture and industry and the steady pace of development, the rural sector in Asia has come into its own. The general level of income is increasing and there is potential purchasing power in the community.

In many Asian countries, certain basic requirements for running a rural press are already available, at the level of provincial centres and townships such as printing presses, paper and technical know-how.

There are however, certain problems and constraints which inhibit the emergence and continuity of rural newspapers. They are:

1. Shortage of capital investment
2. Heavy cost of printing equipment
3. Heavy cost of production
4. Problems of distribution
5. Shy and reluctant rural press entrepreneurship
6. Slow rate of return on investment
7. Lack of advertising interest
8. Fear of competition from urban newspapers
9. Lack of trained personnel
10. Problems of news collection in and from the outside world.

**PLAN OF ACTION TO SET UP RURAL PRESS**

**Location:** The rural newspaper should be based in a provincial centre or township, preferably at its administrative headquarters. It should be able to extend to the point farthest within the reach of the administration.

**Periodicity:** It should be made to play a complementary to other media such as broadcasting and films. It will therefore have to present something more than newsbulletins broadcast over the radio. However, due to constraints of news collection, printing and distribution, to begin with it will be better if the rural newspaper is a bi-weekly. It will not be able to sustain the people interest in news for a long time. Later, as the process of news collection, printing and distribution improve, it can be made into a daily.

**Readership Profile:** A comprehensive readership profile should be made to determine the needs of the community. Resources for setting up a rural newspaper need to be mobilised.
Resource mobilisation: On the basis of the findings of the profile, there should be resource mobilisation for the setting up of the rural press. This can be done with the assistance of the government machinery, various institutions within the community, service organisations, local traders, or even commercial firms or a combination of all these agencies.

Advertising: To have a regular flow of income for the rural newspaper, it is vital that all potential sources of advertisements should be marshalled. These will include a) farm equipment manufacturers, b) fertiliser and pesticide producers, c) poultry and farm produce marketers, and other allied interests. This is an occasion for governments to have programmes for rural development to rise to the aid of small newspapers in the villages seeking advertising help and support.

The government advertising in various countries today emphasise such upliftment programmes as family planning, improved agricultural inputs, better cattle rearing and other expansion programmes which are constantly in need of publicity. Indeed, many governments today use the vehicle of urban newspapers to tell the public – of rural achievements, often neglecting to provide the much needed support to rural newspapers.

Subscription: Due to the constraints on the medium, the rural newspapers will necessarily depend heavily on paid up subscription along with advertising revenue. Therefore, a wide subscription will be a vital necessity. Toward this end, promotional drives should be launched much before the inaugural issue. All areas should be tapped within the community and in this the government’s role in promoting the rural newspaper in all its district offices, district offices, public libraries and reading rooms become heightened.

Production: A viable printing unit is a vital prerequisite for a rural newspaper. As in most Third World countries, the letter press is most suited. It will be better to have a composing section, a tower-run letter press printing machine, preferable of the flat-bed cylindrical variety, a paper cutting machine and other accessories. Studies have revealed that a skeleton printing unit of this kind would be within the range of any dynamic community with imperative need for a rural newspaper. Moreover, a welcome trend is discernible in most Asian countries with the governments and even private banks looking forward with credit facilities for starting printing units. In doubt, fast type setting machines like lino-type and mono-type letter are more suitable to the requirements of the regional language paper – would certainly be of much greater utility, but they are not needed immediately by small rural papers which will in the beginning be in for a print order of around 2000 to 3000 or depending on the economic viability and other factors.

Editorial set up: In organising the editorial desk, the requirements should ideally include an editor, a subeditor, a reporter, a circulation man and a person who either arranges for the printing or manages the press full time. It is possible that in certain circumstances, the rural newspaper may be run by an editor who combines the functions of editor, reporter and advertising manager. Ideally, there should be a professional editor responsible for the writing/rewriting of material. The editor, among other things, will select personnel for reporting from points outside the purview of circulation areas of the paper to ensure the flow of news from neighbouring communities. The personnel thus selected would serve as legmen and stringers. It is essential that the editor himself is a local man whose interests are totally identified with his community he serves. He does not have to be a university graduate because an essential qualification of the school leaving certificate plus ability in writing in the local language should suffice. However, a basic grounding in journalism subsequently becomes essential.
News Collection: The news collection apparatus - the reporters and
provincial correspondents - should have the readership in mind alway:
it is the rural newspaper reader, already an elite in his own
environment who will read the newspaper with the help of his newly
acquired functional literacy. This reader-type is common to all Asian
countries, and it is he who will guide public opinion in his
community resulting in the multiple effect, social, economic, and
political events have already assumed greater importance for the
rural people in Asia and they long to see a pleasing reflection of
themselves, preferably in print. Keeping this in view, sufficient
market research should be done and care should be taken that rural
communication becomes a part of the package deal with other inputs.
The felt information needs of the community should be satisfied
through rural newspapers. A regular flow of information upon which
base stories will be available from strategic groups within the
community itself with whom the editor will have to continuously
liaise. The people who have the fingers on the pulse are, among
them, the school master, the school principal, the postmaster,
divisional head, the block development officer, the correspondents of
urban newspapers and newspaper agents.

Radio monitoring is a way of obtaining news in case a teleprinter
is not readily available.

Distribution: Depending on the economic and other related factors the
print order may begin at a modest 1000 copies, gradually moving to
about 3000 copies within a year and eventually stabilising itself
at 5000. The newspaper should be as priced as to be within the reach
of the majority of the people in the community. The price of a single
issue will tend to change from place to place and country to country.
For proper distribution and sale, it is essential that local talent
be used to the maximum. Subscribers should get their copies on the
day of the issue and other copies should be returned to all sale poi
the same day. Delay results in establishing the performance gap which
is inexorable in a rural setting.

TRAINING

Training should be a continuous process. While learning will occur
over a period of time, a concerted effort would be made by sponsors to
the rural press to organise training programmes at the provincial
level. The rural setting is an essential factor in any training
programmes for the rural press and steps should be taken to find out
ways and means to give workshop-oriented training. The Government
information and publicity set ups should be able to render adequate
assistance in this if only because the main thrust of Governmental
planning efforts in most Asian countries is towards rural development.

Existing newspapers should extend maximum support to the rural
press through a) Internships and b) Personal/Technical know how.

The matter of internships, nearby urban newspapers should give a
helping hand by providing prospective rural editors a chance to work
on their news desk and also fulfill reporting assignments. The skills
learnt will equip for the rural editor sufficiently.

More desirable perhaps is for the urban-oriented established press
to offer the services of their staff for about durations to the
rural press to help out with the production of the newspaper. In turn
the on-the-job exposure provided by this exchange would greatly enhance
the knowledge of the editorial staff of the urban press about the
problems of the rural editor and will lead to a greater appreciation of
rural problems. This two-way information flow achieved particularly
at no cost is a vital ingredient in the training as envisaged.
In course of time no doubt the rural editors could themselves group together to form associations to attain greater professionalism through organising and initiating integrated programmes of training both at the national and local level.

This low-cost training is not beyond the realms of immediate practicality because experience has proved that the arrangements/techniques have worked successfully in many Asian Countries where proprietors and editors of small newspapers have got off to a good start by adopting the principal of "skill-interchange".

The necessity of a trained hand for every rural newspaper would in its turn place additional responsibility on the schools of journalism to plan suitable educational programmes to meet this need. Short term journalism courses could also be provided by professional bodies and Government agencies from time to time.

The rural newspaper could undoubtedly be an effective means of informal education, which would depend on the manner in which news stories and features are treated, in terms of simplicity of style and presentation to make it attractive to the rural people. It promises an assignment of absorbing and abiding interest and great challenge, not entirely without an assurance of adequate return in the long run.