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New Information Technologies And Rural Media

By

Manich Sooksomchitra
NEW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES AND RURAL MEDIA

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Men have developed communication technologies, beginning with symbols, voice sounds and drawings which are simple technologies from nature.

All human beings were able to use these forms of communication. About 5,000 years ago men combined symbols and voice sounds into a written language which can be increased to store memories outside the brains.

The written language can also be transmitted to far-away receivers.

The written language is a step toward printing. In the 15th Century, Johann Gutenberg invented movable types which could be combined and arranged into words and sentences.

The types enabled production of printed media in a large quantity at a time to send information to others. This was the inception of a technology called “mass media” which helped solve communication problems and enabled political and economic activities in societies to proceed conveniently.

The year 2000, seven years from now, will be regarded by international organisations and countries, both openly and covertly, as the year to mark an important milestone of the inception of a complete information society. Therefore, all developed countries are moving toward the year 2000 with circumspection and enthusiasm.

They believe that: “Information is property. People with most information are most powerful.” Information is a product for trade. We can produce information and sell it to consumers who can choose to buy a kind that suits their needs.

Alvin Toffler, who is praised for his views on technologies and modern management to cope with them, wrote a book entitled “The Third Wave”.

According to Toffler, the First Wave represents the primitive society in which men had a simple way of life, made face-to-face contacts and communicated with each other only about daily life. Therefore, men’s world outlook during that period was narrow and concerned only matters around them. They had to keep moving from place to place and survived with animal meat, fruits and vegetables.

But when men knew about cultivation and could control the environment to an extent, they began to build houses and settled at their farms. They later formed communities which expanded to be cities. Toffler calls the First Wave “the wave of agriculture”.

The Second Wave began when men knew how to use machines for production in the places of manual and skilled labourers. This wave caused changes in the men’s way of life. For example, men regarded money as highly as God. Men were divided into different classes and strata including capitalists and petty bourgeois.

After the Industrial Revolution, new machines and technologies were invented. They included radio and television which originated the so-called “mass communications”. In 1956, the era of “information society” began.

According to Toffler, the “information society” does not mean only computers, but also a biological revolution, changes in the forms of energy, a new balance of geography, world politics, credit cards, video games, stereo players, walkman tape players, smart typewriters, information personnel and electronic banking. It is a force which conveys power from one end to another. The other end is self-searching. It is a work system in a flexible period of time. It is the era when robots are in use. It is a creation of armies of men of various races. It is the period of multiple changes.

Toffler's description of the Third Wave covers everything from self-searching to armies, economies, biology, energy, technologies, and most importantly, information and changes.

So, on the one hand, we may see the Third Wave as the wave of changes. On the other hand, it is the wave of information which leads us to the era and society of information.

Men need information at all the time. Farmers need information on what kinds of crops are supported by the government, whether the climate or irrigation will enable growing of second crops, will paddy prices go up or down and whether they should grow other crops when paddy prices are low. Information can help them decide. Fishermen have to listen to weather forecasts in order to make sure that they are safe when they take their boats out into the sea. Traders have to follow information on market trends. One country may have to closely monitor when economically-powerful countries will lift trade barricades. For those responsible for military and security affairs, information is most important to their work.
Since information is more important to decision-making and work, many agencies have begun to seriously take interest in it such as by setting up a special unit to compile, analyse and report information. There have been information services to enable executives to get fast accuracy information. Some countries even have a ministerial-level unit to work specifically on information.

Many kinds of services concerning data have been in existence. When we use a card to draw cash from an automatic teller machine (ATM), the computer of a bank with which we deposit money will check the account and record the withdrawal. An ATM card of some banks in Thailand can be used to withdraw cash from thousands of ATM machines in various countries at the limit of 1,600 US dollars per day. This is the work of data which can be compiled and collated into information.

When a tourist enters a country and details about him are recorded in a computer, the details will finally become information to tell us how many tourists have arrived, their countries of origin, duration of stay, and the increase and decrease in the number of tourists compared with other periods. Information compiled from these records are useful for planning and solving problems. The information may lead to a decision to allow tourists to enter the country visa-free for a certain duration of stay in order to draw in more tourists.

If a question is raised, “What are the characteristics of information society?”, the answers at this time may be as follows:

1. Economically, a higher revenue will be generated from information services. Income from other sectors such as agriculture and industry will drop.
2. Reliability on other resources such as gold, tin and ores will shift to information which will never be used up but can be used at all the time.
3. The information society is a society of knowledge. In this society, people must be literate.
4. Concerning property, at present gold and silver are regarded as valuables to be saved. In the future, information will be most valuable. People with most information will be most powerful.
5. Communications will consume less time because more technologies will be introduced, especially the information network system (INS).

There are many ways of setting up an information network system including by telephone lines which have been much developed from dialing to digital system which can be conveniently used for home banking. We have mobile telephone to speak from anywhere to someone in other countries. We have a kind of telephone with which speakers at both ends can see each other on a monitor screen. In some countries, telephone lines are used to transmit pictures of a wedding in one town for friends and relatives in another town to see and feel like being at the wedding.

Communications can also be transmitted through surface and underground cables, an infrared radiation wavelengths, optical fibres and satellites. There are now many satellites in orbit. A Thai satellite, named Thai-Com 1, will be launched on December 5, 1993, to mark His Majesty the King’s birthday.

Thai-Com 1 — an HS 376 Hughes 12 Transponder Satellite — will lift off from a launching pad in South America’s French Guinea to usher in a new era of telecommunications in Thailand.

The 6.6-metre-high geostationary spacecraft, 2.16 metres in diameter, will stay approximately 33,000 kilometres over Thailand and its neighbours providing a formidable mode of distance communication within its footprint regardless of geographical terrain. Basic services are conventional TV distribution, telephone links, information transmission, cable TV, etc.

Now I would like you to consider information society in relation with humanity. When one mechanism in society changes, others will also change to cope with new phenomena. That is to say, in the age of information society there will be many changes.

1. Economically, with the information network system in effect around the clock the self-reliant economy will turn to be an economy in which members of the world community must be more reciprocal. No country will be a sole economic power.

Industries that produce machines and engines will turn to produce electronic parts for use in communications.

2. In politics, since information is the most important resource, those with most information will be most powerful.

3. When people can choose to receive information through many channels, the mass media will have a reduced role as it will not be able to produce information to suit everyone’s need. Men will seek to get information for themselves from information processing centres. The mass media will be overlooked and its influence reduced.

But, before reaching that stage, many people believe that in the near future there would be new developments in the mass media. Newspapers, with news printed on newsprint, would disappear from newsstands. Instead, news, articles and advertisements would be presented through an electronic system or on computer screens which are installed at home and offices.
Readers would choose to read news and articles just by using the keyboard, page after page, the same way as using a remote control to switch TV channels. A reader could read what is on the screen by himself or let the machine read it out loud for him. He would be able to choose the voice he wants — be it of a young woman, an old woman or a man with different tones. Computers would give you everything.

While reading news, you would also see pictures. Reading news in the future would not be much different from now, but better.

If you want to read news in brief to save time, the computer would respond to your command. If you want to keep a news item in your personal record, you would be required to only touch a record button. You can also order a printout.

If you want to look for a good Thai food restaurant in Jakarta, you could just choose to see the classified section, the same way as doing with an ordinary newspaper.

With those technological advances, computer experts believe that people would not have to bring with them newspapers from home to office. There would not be a problem about newspaper deliveries in the future. Journalists who at present are said to have ink in their blood would be all gone, leaving only newsmen with computers in blood. This, if true, would be regarded as major cultural change in world society.

Currently a number of computer firms have already provided information services on computers. Some of them have been in business while others are at a stage of persuading people to turn to get more news from computers than from newspapers. But those in newspaper industry still believe that news on computer screens would not be able to replace newspapers in the next 30-40 years. Reading newspapers is a habit which is difficult to change. Moreover, the newsprint industry still has a huge interest from publishing industry.

In my country, two newspapers — The Nation and Krungthep Thurakij — have sent pages of news via telephone lines and satellite from Bangkok to be printed in Chiang Mai and sold in the northern part of the country. The Manager daily has also sent signals from Bangkok to Hat Yai to be printed and distributed in the South. At the same time, Yomiuri Shimbun, which is said to have the world’s largest circulation of 15 million, has sent signals to be printed at the Nation Publishing Group in Bangkok for distribution to Japanese living in Thailand and nearby countries.

Although printing via satellite in Thailand is still in a limited scale, producers of newspapers in the provinces other than Bangkok have begun to worry that their career would certainly be affected in the future because news items from Bangkok are more up-to-date and interesting than local news which are printed in local newspapers which are issued only every 10 or 15 days.

An apparent change in the mass media has come from use of mobile telephones to report live from scenes of events to radio stations and use of mobile television units to broadcast events live from anywhere to main stations via satellite. Listeners and viewers feel like being part of the events. But there are also unfavourable consequences from this technological advance, which will be mentioned later.

4. There will be changes in ways of life. In the future, we would not have to go shopping at department stores as we could make a decision what to buy from computer screens. After making a decision, what we have to do is order the merchandise with its code number and the payment is made through a bank. Some company employees may work at home, send their work through computers and receive their salary through bank accounts.

Students may not have to attend classes because they can learn as much as possible from computers.

When we are sick we can seek advice from computers which are linked up with major hospitals. Computers will tell you what medicine should be taken. The computers will also help patients to get advice from doctors specialised in various fields through a computer link-up.

We will also see changes outside our homes. In business, there will be a system called office automation (OA) in which different technologies are applied to facilitate communication. There will be more tele-conferences or video-conferences. It will not be necessary to call for a meeting of representatives of branch offices at the head office. While discussing matters with a tele-conference system, speakers will appear on TV screens. Documents concerned can be printed out as ordered. To conclude there will be more use of satellites for communications between countries. Businessmen will not have to travel by air tens of hours from continent to continent only to attend a one-hour meeting. Communications via satellites can help save time.

However, according to a belief of Thai people, things of great use can also be destructive. Similarly communications technologies can be damaging.
There will be unequality in communications between the rich and the poor and technologies will concentrate only in capital cities and major towns. While people in a capital city are excited about the integrated services digital network (ISDN) or tele-conferences, the majority of people in the rural areas may even have no telephone which is a basic necessity.

There will be unnecessary expenses of foreign currencies as some equipment are acquired without being used at all or used very little. The government may not control such expenses and, at the same time, has no plan to produce such equipment for own use in the country. Not being able to produce its own equipment, a government will have to buy technologies from other countries at a high cost. A foreign loan may have to be sought to buy equipment for a large project.

There will be a surplus of information because of new technologies. Information from various sources may cause confusion and require time for verification. Sometimes many pieces of information on the same issue cannot be fully used.

There will be a lack of proper information for people in the rural areas because only entertainment is emphasised. People will not know their rights and duties and could be victims of corrupt practices. Moreover, they will not get information on what they know such as occupations, markets for agricultural produce and prices of farm products.

There will be a cultural shock as a result of the flow of western culture because all satellites now in orbit belong to developed countries. Some countries launch their satellites to position over another country which has very little chance to have a satellite of its own or even to rent a satellite transponder. Therefore, there will be a flow of undesirable culture from the West to the East and from large to small cities.

In my country, a matter being subject to wide criticism is a move by a major investment group who, with higher financial influence, managed to rent air time of radio stations in other provinces and send the so-called "canned programmes" produced in Bangkok to be aired in the provinces. This has deprived local show organisers to lose their jobs. Local people have no chance to listen to local news. At the same time conservation of local culture and traditions have been overlooked because there are no programmes produced locally on the air.

Youths in the rural areas are now ready to accept culture from bigger cities while city youths are ready to accept western culture. A clear example of this was a recent concert of Michael Jackson in Bangkok on August 24 and 27. A large number of youths, who rely on their parents financially, turned up to see the concert despite the fact that the ticket prices are equal to or bigger than a month's earning of a labourer. On the contrary, most of the youths would not waste even a minute to see a Thai musical or Thai art performance.

While new technologies enable the electronic media to be more efficient in its broadcasting techniques, many people raise an observation that this kind of media is mostly used to widen differences between people in society and create a false social value. It has caused an incorrect attitude and put people in frustration. The electronic media has caused inability in thinking and brains because of its emphasis on entertainment and commercials. People have become less logical.

Academics in mass communications believe that the more state-run radio and television stations are open to commercials, the less will be people's ability to read, write and think. Apart from the higher rate of illiteracy, the people's standard of thinking would be lower. This is because information given to them through the electronic media is ready-made and emphasises only on entertainment. Therefore, it is time for authorities concerned to control use of the electronic media. They should not leave it to the printing media alone to tell people how to use their brains because the printing media itself must also be business-minded.

In my point of view, the electronic media should be used more to conserve and spread local culture and traditions which are regarded by westerners as valuable heritage which should not be overlooked. I believe local culture and traditions can be used to forge unity among people in the same group.

It would be wise if culture and traditions are used to help in the development of a country as they can narrow gaps in society and forge closer relationship. New technologies should be used as a media to spread information, attitude and living conditions of people of various groups so as to bring about better understanding of each other.