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Information Imbalance:
A Closer Look

By

Y V Lakshmana Rao
INFORMATION IMBALANCE: A CLOSER LOOK

Y. V. Lakshmana Rao

I can do worse in this necessarily brief paper than to summarize first of all some of the things I have already had the opportunities to say and to write about. After doing that, I wish to raise, what seem to me, to be some of the fundamental questions to which we need to find some answers. Obviously, it is this second part which is going to be difficult. I do not mean the finding of the answers; in such a group as this finding answers may be more than possible. I mean the very exercise of raising the so-called fundamental questions.

These questions seem to be fundamental to me, because I have not been able to live with them churning in my head ever since I first got involved in this whole question of information imbalance, fair communication policy, the right to communicate, communication policies, communication planning, etc. Under slightly different names and somewhat different focuses, I do believe that, even if they do not exactly mean the same thing, they do deal with highly related facets of the same broad concept.

INFORMATION IMBALANCE

I would contend that information imbalance is at the root of it. I say this because, whether it is at the international level or at the regional or even at the sub-national, it is such imbalances that have brought up all the other related questions. It is these imbalances that have gradually led us to question all over again the concept of freedom of information (which was heralded in 1948 as "the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is working") and its corollary, the free flow of information. And it is these questions that have caused UNESCO, which had successfully established agreements to facilitate the free flow of information around the world, today to go through the whole exercise again by initiating studies of of more or less the same issues under the concept of "The Right to Communicate."

The ebb and flow of the various questions and issues surrounding the notion of information imbalance have been noted at a number of international gatherings. One of the more recent of such efforts was the regional conference on Information Imbalance in Asia, which was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center and held in Kandy, Sri Lanka, in April 1975. For that occasion, I was able to articulate and discuss a number of major assumptions concerning information imbalance that seem worth repeating here. This list is
not meant to be exhaustive or definitive, but merely to indicate the importance and complexity of the issues involved.  

First, concern continues to be expressed in Asia (as well as other developing regions) that the concept of free flow of information has generally worked solely to the advantage of the industrially more advanced nations. But is this in fact the case? Isn't there a great deal of material (news and features rather than entertainment) now emanating from the developing countries? And, even if the assumption can be regarded as essentially true, does it not appear that the parties involved may be jointly concerned about this situation and are already considering what might be done to change it? For example, there seem to be indications that Americans (as well as other exporters) may be as concerned about the attendant international publicity as the leaders of the developing countries are about the implications for their own national plans and programs, values and beliefs. With regard to entertainment material, many exporting countries don't seem particularly happy with the types of programs that seem to attract the greatest popularity and thus the greatest demand from the developing countries.

And when one talks of "advantage," does that mean a primary emphasis on the economic factor? If it does, then it seems worthwhile to investigate the reasons why such an outflow of financial resources is permitted by the developing countries (either by government or by media units). Public demand may not be the only reason involved; there may also be a perceived need to fill the space and time that are available but which the developing countries are incapable of filling themselves. It seems most important to learn the basis on which decisions of this sort are made and at what levels in the communication hierarchies.

Or are worries about "advantage" based more on social and cultural considerations? Many of us seem worried that our publics will emulate the behavioral patterns and absorb the values and beliefs of the "alien invaders" of our cultures. But is it possible to come up with a clear and well-defined scale by which to measure this sort of "cultural invasion"? Is an "invader" anyone who comes from across a national boundary, or does it only apply to one who crosses a regional boundary? Or perhaps the boundary of concern is that great one around all developing countries?

Second, despite such concerns, there have been few serious attempts to look at the issues practically and realistically, and no basic data have been collected that would provide an accurate picture either quantitatively or qualitatively. This, of course, raises the question of whether it is possible to develop ways in which such a picture might be drawn in a realistic manner.

Third, it therefore seems apparent that the issue requires discussion, not only in greater depth, but from several separate but related points of view. It seems especially important that the discussion include those who are now directly involved in the practice of mass communication.
Fourth, the mass communication practitioner is generally aware both of the material available to him and of that desired by his present and potential audiences. He may not always be in a position that permits him to make formal decisions of the sort with which we are concerned here, but his function of transforming directives from higher authority into everyday action permits him some impact on the decision process. But is it within his capabilities and authority to generate material that can compete with products from abroad for the attention of his public? Is he in fact making any effort to progressively improve the quality of his products and, thereby, to reduce the quantity of products imported?

Fifth, it may be true that the real ratio of imported to indigenous informational and entertainment material is not as awesome as generally assumed. What is needed here is not only hard data but data that show trends over time. There are some signs that, however bad one may deem the present situation, it may be an improvement over what has been before.

Sixth, even if the ratio is found to be quite significant, there may be a number of reasons why governments and media permit such imbalance to continue. The tendency is always to assume that they cannot help it when, in fact, they may see some advantages in it. For instance, they may regard some measure of international intercourse as inevitable, or they are hoping to encourage their citizens to compete and catch up with the "haves" by learning their ways. If this is the case, then one must confront the issue of how to define and separate the "bad" from the "good," and prevent the former from slipping in along with the latter.

Seventh, if decision-makers in government and the media could get together to discuss the various issues, they might be able to find ways to correct the imbalances without too much further delay; and, eighth, detailed discussions on these questions might lead to more coordinated and concerted efforts at research on the social and psychological impact of media exposure on the various audiences that are served. The thrust of these last two assumptions is that discussion of the various issues may lead to more concerted efforts at study and resolution of them. If nothing else, it may help achieve a consensus among the developing countries that will be of use in their dialogue with the rest of the world.

HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS

As a result of information imbalance and the issues it has generated, there has been a growing perception of the world as a dichotomy. On the one side are the "haves" in information—those who export their (primarily informational and entertainment) material—and on the other are the "have-nots"—those who are mainly on the receiving end. The perception of their relative disadvantages has tended to draw the have-nots closer together and to lead them more actively to seek joint solutions to the problems of their disadvantaged state.

For example, the Kandy Conference brought together participants from
sixteen Asian nations, territories, and institutions. While they naturally represented a wide divergence of views on the subject of information imbalance in Asia, it is perhaps noteworthy that the keynote speaker "urged the participants to take a fresh and critical look from a regional point of view and in a cooperative spirit" at the problem. It also seems noteworthy that these participants were able to reach a consensus on various assumptions and recommendations reflecting what must appear to be something resembling the "regional point of view" and the "cooperative spirit" that had been called for—especially in connection with their aspirations vis-à-vis the "haves." For example, there was agreement that:

- "For an Asian country, free flow of information still generally means that it has to be at the receiving end, with very little opportunity to explain its own position in any given situation."

- "As a result, the concept of free flow of information is not feasible in the Asian situation."

- In consequence, it "is important to take deliberate steps to regulate the flow of information in such a manner that will assist the development of information systems in Asian countries."

- Communication policy and planning must be developed primarily at the national level, with national objectives and goals in mind. However, at the same time, at "the sub-regional and regional levels cooperative and coordinated efforts should be made to create greater interest among the people in the affairs of the countries of Asia and Africa in general, and in neighboring countries in particular."

Thus, the have-nots are becoming more vocal and perhaps even growing in numbers and weight. Perhaps in consequence, both sides—the haves and the have-nots—are beginning to recognize and to feel intensely the need for dialogue and the need for compromise and working solutions between them. They have realized that perhaps they are in the same boat—and that it might easily tip over. And then where would everyone be?

This may sound quite cynical in some ways and even heartless in some. I cannot help it. I had, at one time, approached this question quite idealistically, believe it or not. I had this great belief in the innate goodness of Man, in his feelings for his fellow man, etc. I had even argued that the have-nots must learn from the haves (thank goodness, they exist)—learn from their successes and avoid their mistakes—and develop their own skills to match the excellence of their mentors.

In course of time, I had argued, the imbalance will right itself. We would have achieved Utopia. Now, as I progress increasingly rapidly toward that point where I had expected Utopia to be, I find that either Utopia has receded or
that I was perhaps walking the wrong road all the time. The gap between ideology and reality has, in fact, widened. My first "fundamental" question, therefore, is why? What happened?

I know I wasn't walking alone. My friends are lost too. And we are all asking the same question. We wonder if it is too late for some of us to seek the "right" road. Or make some "fundamental" compromises and look for shortcuts --if we still insist on reaching that goal we set out toward. We would, I think, be satisfied if we merely see a hazy outline of that goal somewhere on the horizon. Our children and theirs may eventually make it.

This whole idea of the "short-cuts" came to me only recently. Only partially has it been due to creeping old age, I would like to believe, and to the realization that if I want to see that outline on the horizon, I had better do something—fast. The more important factor, I think, has been the opening of my eyes to Reality. While I was single-mindedly following my chosen path, others have already found the short-cuts! What is worse (or is it better?), they are about to convince me that I should do the same—and pass on more peacefully.

I would like to share with you some of the implications which strike me as being crucial to any intellectual decisions I might make for myself. This trip to the East-West Center is therefore a pilgrimage. By taking a closer look I hope to salve my own conscience. Or, perhaps I am destined to continue to grope. I do not know.

Spelling out the dilemmas and paradoxes is perhaps unnecessary in a group like this. In any case, the two articles cited in this paper do that fairly adequately. Let me here confine myself to the real questions.

THE SHORT-CUTS

I would call the great call for Free Flow of Information the straight road. So also the efforts at the national level to increase literacy, to use communication (technology and all) for social change, for modernization, for development, etc. Combine the International with the national. What has happened? Not a great deal.

Of course some progress has been made. More people know a little more about more things now than they might have without all the free flow and without all the communication inputs. Even that, we cannot actually prove. There are skeptics at the highest levels of decision-making. I recently had the dubious honor of meeting many of them in the course of a regional study I was involved in for UNESCO. It is them we have to reach and to convince of whatever decisions we may reach among ourselves. We are the converted. Or should it be were? Let us see.

The decision-makers have already taken some short-cuts, free flow or no free flow. They seem to be far more capable of living with conflicting ideas


and norms than some of us are. They can sign a covenant with one hand and a whole set of controls with the other. Is such ambidextrous capacity what we need to develop if we are to comfortably live with ourselves? That is my next "fundamental" question. Or should we just drop the one and live with the other alone—to be "realistic," "pragmatic" and "functional"?

What is fair? (That's the most fundamental question of all—but it may be quite unfair in itself.) It is fair, one can argue, to have high goals and aspirations. It is also fair, meanwhile, to resort to short-cuts and to controls and whatever may become necessary to speed the process leading to that goal. Only, the "meanwhile" doesn't seem to have any end. If anything, the controls are becoming greater—partly because the "gaps" of which people speak seem to be widening all the time instead of narrowing, which was the initial hope.

If the free flow concept is now slowly, and with a great deal of respect and dignity, being led unbeknown to itself toward a grave which took a large number of people to dig (including its own progenitors), is it because we have all accepted that it is untenable? The recent regional conference in Kandy on this subject frankly called it that. If that is so, what is forcing us to more or less resurrect it (before a final verdict of death has been passed, let alone death actually having taken place!) under a new phrase, The Right to Communicate? My own feeling is that we all have this insatiable thirst for ideology. I am all for it. I raise it only because my first "why?" has not been answered yet.

Can we agree that a "Preamble" or a "Statement of Objectives" should not be taken literally no matter what the circumstances are or no matter what the state of development is in any given country? Can we also agree that some controls on freedom of speech, freedom of expression, etc., are perhaps necessary and fair? If we do that, are we diluting the kind of "absolutes" on which we have been brought up. If this has happened in so many other areas (I can think of economics and sex as two of the most clearly visible) why not in information? After all, it has taken unto itself many of the characteristics of the other two fields I just mentioned. Information is an industry and some Journalists have practiced the Oldest Profession for a long time (their numbers are increasing). I am not saying anything about "Intellectuals." Except perhaps this: some of my brightest friends have gone into the "private sector!"

I am sorry that this brief paper has been perhaps overly provocative and even cynical. Let me say simply that it is cynical only because it is based on an ideology I find it increasingly hard to adhere to. I am trying, but I need your help.

It may be useful for me to summarize the main points raised at several recent conferences in Asia, together with some "solutions" the participants see as being "fair"—"under the circumstances":

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1. Developing countries should impose controls on flow of informational and entertainment materials:

   a. to protect their own language, culture, behavioral patterns, values, beliefs, etc. (The highest degree of nationalism is apparent, with some concession made for regionalism);

   b. to increase their own capabilities in production of materials (continued importation tends to make them complacent and lethargic);

   c. to protect them from being "brainwashed" into looking at world events the way the major news networks see them;

   d. to be forced to train the needed personnel for their own networks.

2. To insist on "exporting" countries imposing restrictions on the quantity and quality of their own producers (public and private), especially with regards to what they sell or distribute freely abroad.

3. To reach agreements (bilateral) with exporting countries which are equitable, that is, send some, take some.

4. Work toward "regional" agreements within Asia for exchange of informational and entertainment material, so as to exclude "foreign" material and "influence."

5. Research needed, both quantitative and qualitative, to gauge the impact of imported materials (trend studies may show that the imbalance is, in fact, already on the way down).

   There were voices raised against "throwing the baby out with the bathwater" by restricting "good" programs—but there seemed to be more concern for the bathwater than for the baby. "That is a price we may have to pay."