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Western Perspectives On Communication:
Relevance For Asia -
Elements Of Observations

by

Javed Jabbar
Elements of observations by
Mr Javed Jabbar, former Federal Minister of
State for Information and Broadcasting
Government of Pakistan &
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Western perspectives on communication: Relevance for Asia

I thank AMIC and the New Straits Times for inviting me to present these observations at this conference.

We meet at an interesting moment in this most turbulent and volatile decade, a period that represents a befitting climax to the most important century in human history. The sweeping and significant changes that have occurred across the world during the past five years are converging our attention and our energies to the formative role that communications has played in shaping and in reshaping a new world community of nations.

In the world’s largest and most diverse continent we presently witness spectacular contrasts. In China we have the world’s fastest growing economy registering a growth rate of 12 per cent, a speed of expansion unrivalled by any other and made poetically pertinent because this growth is taking place in the world’s only significant remaining Communist state at a time when Communism is supposed to have collapsed, in Europe.

On the other side of Asia a new cluster of nation states searches for stability in Central Asia even – as the value of their currency declines and just as prospects for growth are identified.

The continent is also the setting for swift advances in communication. A new Asian satellite in the form of Asiasat 2 is scheduled to offer in the near future a choice of 150 TV channels while optical fibers are speeding up telecommunications in countries such as Pakistan.

As Europe and North America stand on the threshold of an extraordinary and unprecedented era of interactivity between different modes and media, Asia needs to survey the variety and the vitality that characterise the communication context of the continent. Of particular meaning perhaps is the subject I am addressing: “Western perspectives on communication: relevance for Asia”.

There are four perspectives, A, B, C and D that I submit for your consideration.
Perspective A:

In the West, two-way communication has become a basic political right; in Asia, Communication is principally still a one-way process.

The individual right to engage in a two-way exchange of information and opinion which is a substantial part of communication has become an inherent part of the social system of the West. Thus communication has gone beyond being a process to become a fundamental political right that has a de facto validity even if, de jure, the Constitution of a country does not specifically embody the right to communication as a basic human right.

So deep and diffused is this perception that communication may be said to have become a value in itself, representing almost an end in itself.

Communication about an issue has become as important as the issue because it is said that an absence of communication gives rise to the problem.

Thus, if communication is initiated with reference to an issue, the issue itself may remain unresolved, may continue to fester but the intensity of the disaffection caused by the issue may be dissipated and reduced.

Communication in the West can also be sheer diversion through mere reportage! For over 14 months Western media have highlighted the massacre of Bosnia everyday in living and dying colour. Yet persistent media coverage has made virtually no difference to reducing or ending the massacre: political policy remains pulverized and transfixed as the blood flows red and thick.

The opposite is also true.

One of the major success stories of communication being used to articulate an issue and secure affirmative action is the building of awareness about environmental concerns that began to gain momentum in the early 1970's and was able to achieve translation into political strength. Eventually the issue became a world-wide issue, primarily through communication.

In contrast, the nuclear issue represented through the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain and Europe achieved only limited success by helping create a situation in which it was politically possible to ban atmospheric nuclear testing yet at the same time making no difference either to the continued stock piling of nuclear weapons or nuclear proliferation. Only in the past two years has there been some progress between the USA and Russia on a reduction of nuclear warheads. It is sobering to know that communication also has its limits!
Whether it is the call-in shows on radio and TV or home videos aired on a major TV network or a town hall meeting in which the Head of State may interact with a local community even as millions watch via satellite and the Head of State also handles the occasional phone-in question, participation in the communication process in the West has become a common and comprehensive phenomenon.

In Asia, communication remains principally a one-way process because the telecommunication as well as the information-dissemination infrastructure is still in the stage of being extended so as to cover the majority of the population.

Though radio is the one sole medium that has universal coverage, radio in Asia due to State control or other factors still remains a one-way medium instead of being a community-controlled medium.

Access to the communications network and the ability to make an input into the communications ocean for the overwhelming majority of Asians still remains either limited or entirely unavailable.

This difference is also related to the contrasts between the West and Asia in their respective political and democratic systems. The contrasts go back to an earlier stage of history. The prior industrialisation and urbanization that took place in the West changed forever the monolithic one-way authoritarian structures of Western, pre-industrial society. Whereas in many parts of Asia such authoritarian structures remain unchanged, or are changing at a slower rate that they did in the West.

Thus, initially the economy, and then the political forces change communication principles and processes.

In Asia it is only now in the late 1980's and the early 1990's that the right to information is being accepted. We in Asia are still a considerable distance from accepting the right to communicate as a basic political right.

The rapid advances in telecommunications and the advent of satellite TV are speeding up the process in Asia. For example by the mere use of a fax machine, all barriers and obstacles erected by a State or a social system to prevent access to printed information across frontiers is removed within seconds a thousand times a day.

In this central and important respect, Asia must espouse the right to communicate as a fundamental right and seek to enshrine this in the constitutions of Asian countries.
Perspective B:

In the West, freedom means freedom without frontiers. In Asia, freedom remains encased within frameworks.

The West perceives the freedom to communicate as a freedom without restrictions, without obstacles: physical, intellectual, cultural, political, moral.

The freedom of communication being perceived as a fundamental human right and the human mind being described as a seamless and limitless reality equivalent to the infinity of the universe, the West defines freedom within a country as a condition in which people are free to choose with convenience whatever they wish to receive as information and whenever they wish to participate in communication.

On the intellectual level, such an approach to the concept of freedom had the benevolent manifestation in the generous support extended by the State to the establishment of public libraries in the West in the second half of the of 19th century and the first half of 20th century; in the active role played by private philanthropy in library and museum development, thereby facilitating peoples' access to information so as to improve the basis for communication.

On the political level, the freedom to communicate without frontiers resulted in the triumph of the West over European and Russian communism initially using radio and subsequently using the combined impact of all media to create a framework of information within which it became more and more difficult for communism to maintain some of its myths and all of its structures.

It is notable that it is an Asian country i.e. China whose political system of communism has shown the resilience and flexibility to defy the onslaught of aggressive communication across frontiers.

On the moral level in the West freedom without frontiers has come to mean that traditional restraints about propriety in sensitive subjects such as sex should also be dismantled.

Thus whether it is soft pornography that is transmitted by video into a hotel room or hard pornography that is easily rentable from a video store in any Western city or whether it is the freedom to pick up a phone and dial a "telephone-sex" number for the viewer to be titillated by explicit words and sounds, freedom without frontiers in the West is an open license to communicate.

But such open license also leads to unique opportunities for self expression. On TV shows convicted murderers and rapists communicate from inside their prisons live via satellite with audiences in TV studios!

The disregard for barriers of any kind has led to the invasion of privacy at virtually all levels: from the politician, whose private life is forever open to expose by the press to the citizen who is flooded with direct mail literature by companies hawking products and services. Neither queens nor convicts are safe from the freedom of communication!

One adverse fall-out from such freedom without frontiers, particularly on the commercial and cultural levels is the advent of the Hollywood cinema and the steady decline of the British cinema, this perhaps being an example of how, within the West itself, indiscriminate exercise of freedom can debilitate and set back a
sector of communications that once promised considerable potential.

However even in this apparent excess of liberalism in the West there is also some consensual restraint. The large mass of material that is transmitted by media, print or electronic, stays within certain defined as well as unwritten but accepted parameters which respect conventional sensibilities.

In Asia, the Western perspective of freedom without frontiers helps stimulate political reform and democratic evolution. This can also be a mixed blessing: Communication imbues Western models and systems with an allure that is alien to the temperament and the realities of many parts of Asia.

Whole systems and political institutions are transplanted or adopted without amendment on the premise that what is good for Westminster is also good for Islamabad, even though objective conditions are diametrically different.

Communication plays a genuinely emancipatory and heroic role when, in the spirit of Western liberalism, violations of human rights are highlighted and calls for human dignity and justice are raised.

Yet this slice of the communications cake has to be pre-tested for arsenic content before Asia takes a blind bite at it. For the Western approach to human rights has historically been selective and capricious, often self-serving and sometimes disregardful of blatant violations when this suits Western interests.

The unbridled freedom without frontiers emanating from the West comes into conflict with cultural codes and taboos of Asia that have not eroded and changed as rapidly as the codes and taboos of the West.

It is also a moot point whether such codes and taboos should change, only because Western values, policy and media want them to change.

Asia has to work out the conundrum as to whether the power of Western communication technology must necessarily lead to a surrender of Asia's moral technology which may be conservative and introspective but not necessarily sterile and inferior to all that is contemporary.

For Asia, the freedom of communication without frontiers has to be interpreted with reference to regional and national frameworks. Whereas, the free flow of information in the West was, sequentially, a consequence of industrialization, urbanization and mass education, in Asia these phases of change are taking place in an approximate simultaneity, staggered, erratic and uneven.

Moreover, whereas the West had the luxury of gradually adjusting to media technology and growing up with it for some time with relatively higher levels of education and affluence, Asia is absorbing communication technology even as it remains ill-fed and illiterate.
Perspective C:

For the West, the world has become a global village; for Asia, the world is a global city.

From a Western perspective both because of the universality of human values and interests and due to the world-wide coverage of media, the planet is a homogeneous, integrated village sharing a wide range of characteristics. But in practice this is true only up to a point: the illusion of sharing created by mass media coverage that stretches across the globe.

In real terms, communication advances have only served to underline the truth that the more the countries of the world know each other the more their sense of individuality is strengthened and reinforced.

Thus, the world becomes like a large city, a megalopolis, occupying a contiguous area on the map of information but comprising separate and distinct neighbourhoods within the same city. Such neighbourhoods include the affluent, well-to-do parts, the business areas, the manufacturing and industrial belts, the slums, and the ghettos.

This is the way the world appears to Asia. As labour and refugees attempt to migrate from one part of the global city to another, from China to the USA, from Vietnam to Hong Kong, from Turkey to Germany.

While the city as a whole is part of the same communications network, there are localities which are communications-rich and there are communities which are communications-poor. Tokyo may have more telephones than the entire continent of Africa.

In certain parts of this global city, the Western part of the city, there is total freedom of expression, complete freedom of personal information such as at a seminar in a five-star hotel.

Yet in some parts of the same city—global as well as local—gripped by ethnic tension speaking the truth or even merely stating the facts at a public meeting is to incite a riot.

One part of the city reads only English newspapers. Another part reads only the vernacular language: both see the same subject from opposing viewpoints.

Asia has to respect and even sustain this heterogeneity even as the West promotes the illusion of homogeneity through the metaphor of the global village.

In a global city economic disparities and imbalances become more visible through the communication process which accelerates mass awareness and articulation.

For Asia, communication becomes a palliative as well as a provocation.

The speed and ease with which the political system responds to the need to correct imbalances will determine the peace, the stability and the future of the global city.
Perspective D:

Commerce rules communication

From a Western perspective, communication is a fundamental human right - as long as you are willing and able to pay for it! In recent years more than ever, a self-supporting financial feasibility albeit based on loans, is the sine qua non to ensure free communication, particularly with regard to the mass media.

Any subsidy by the State is viewed with suspicion. Yet for Asia there has to be a subliminal political influence over the content and objectives of the BBC when it is known that there is a funding connection between the British Foreign Office and the BBC's External Services.

There is at the same time a partnership between the communication sector and the State in the West when governments will explicitly as well as covertly promote the interests of Western media and Western commerce through political action with overseas countries in the name of freedom of expression.

Western domination of Asia, both in commerce and communication is reflected in the fact that it is US based magazines such as Time and Newsweek that travel across all Asian frontiers rather an Asian-based or Asian-originated magazine that is able to do this with equal felicity. And it is a London-based TV service such as the BBC TV World Service that offers the only 24 hour TV news service across Asia, coming after CNN which has already become a world-wide name for TV news.

It also needs to be acknowledged that the West has set some fine examples of non-commercial communication processes sustained exclusively in the public interest with significant subsidies from the State such as the public broadcasting radio and TV networks in North America whose equivalents in Asia are almost exclusively used for political propaganda rather than to reflect political and social pluralism.

The synonymity between commerce and communication in the West is reflected by the fact that in a recent survey by Forbes magazine of top billionaires, 7 out of 10 made their billions in the information and communication sector.

In the pursuit of financial viability alone the range of choice in the West is often reduced instead of being sustained or expanded.

One example is the reduction in the number of newspapers in the USA over the past 5 decades. Another example is the fact that in what is described as the most dynamic city of the West, i.e. New York, there is only one serious newspaper, i.e. the New York Times. Fortunately, London offers a choice between more than two.
On the advertising level, media in Asia require more carefully thought-out legislation and operational rules to ensure that there is balance and restraint in quantitative terms in the dissemination of advertising through media.

Communications has now become a part of big business. To that extent, the ability of the communication process to report objectively with integrity and balance is affected. There are new implications of conflict of interest that have not been fully explored or identified.

Conclusion:

There shall always be a critical relevance for Asia of Western perspectives on communication because the West remains for the time being the technological engine of our world civilization — and we must make sure the engine does not derail itself - or us. So, keep a sharp eye on that bullet train!