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Some Problems Of News Gathering And News Dissemination
In Countries In Asia

By

Ahmad Mustapha Hassan
The development of the information industry in countries in the
Asian region varies in stages from one to the other. This development is
dependent on the level and stage of progress of other sectors of the
economy.

2. Thus, if we are to compare the level of development in Japan and
Korea to that of Bangladesh and Nepal, naturally one finds a big chasm
between the former and the latter. Whereas in Japan the pace has rapidly
been towards evolving into an information society, the latter is still
faced with questions of infrastructure. Without the necessary
infrastructure and the very much needed resources in terms of personnel and
capital, the information industry faces with very slow growth.

3. Governments inevitably play a very important and decisive role in
determining the level of development of the industry. Most, however, lack
a comprehensive policy on this. Official media are tailored to meet the
needs of the governments only. They act more to disburse official
information rather than to do reporting. Hence, it is not uncommon for
viewers or listeners to just listen and see only protocol items -- speeches
of Ministers and official openings of events by government Ministers.
There is little balance in the presentation and content of the news. This
encourages the audience to focus their viewing and listening more on
entertainment rather than on news and information. The industry will be
heavily leaning towards producing entertainment and such light programmes.
It will be producing only a small fraction of what is totally required.

4. In a nutshell, one can say that the problems faced in the effort to
gather and distribute information and news fall within the following
categories:

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I. Infrastructure
II. Policies
III. Resources

5. This is not, of course, to say that there are no other factors involved. Other factors may either be minor in nature, subsidiary or contributory to what have been categorised.

6. It is without doubt that in most countries in Asia, the basic infrastructure for the growth of the information industry is far lacking than in the developed world. Little official attention is given to their needs. The basic outlay for such an infrastructure, which started during the colonial era, was to serve the needs of the colonial masters in the fields of politics and economics. What was needed then was just a simple communication system whereby official information can be channelled to the people. This was done mostly through the radio or the information mobile units. The service was more instruction-oriented rather than information-oriented. People were told how to maintain their social responsibilities and how to contribute towards the well being of the colonial economy.

7. Other infrastructural needs were to meet the requirement of the colonial economy. Telexes and telephones were developed for such purposes only -- how to boost the colonial economy and how that economy could sustain and stabilise the economy of the dominating country. The relationship between the colonial state and that of the colony was in the context of that of the centre and its periphery. The rate of development was the fastest as far as information is concerned.

8. Even after achieving political independence, the infrastructural development is still lopsided. The industrialised sector and the commercial sector are enjoying the very latest in technological development whereas in the other sectors, the development has been at a very slow pace. Correspondents outside the urban areas still, in some instances, depend on the mailer service in order to send in stories. This is true in most Asian countries. The modern way of transmission of news is yet to be introduced. It is no wonder that rural reporting has taken a backseat. It is not so much that there is lack of interest but more due to the non-availability of an efficient system of transmission.
9. Telephones which are badly needed in such an exercise are only available at certain centres, thus causing the reporters to waste time, money and energy in order to file any report. Even though they may be available, the lines are too poor and, as such, what could have been accomplished in ten minutes might take one hour or so. By the time the reports are in, they may already be too late for publication. These are some of the frustrations faced in the coverage of news in such infrastructural-lack situations.

10. Let me try to explain why I touched on the question of infrastructure first rather than on policies. The fact is: it is rather the lack of policy than there being one. And again, if there are policies they tend to change as times move on -- sometime with an aura of liberalism but most time towards curtailing the free dissemination of information. I shall come back to this at a later stage.

11. It has been acknowledged that in the Third World, capital cities have been portrayed as being the countries themselves. As such, Bangkok is Thailand and Jakarta is Indonesia and etc. etc. What happens in these cities and what develops from these are taken to be what happens in the whole country. The pace of development in the cities are phenomenal but that of the countryside slow or none at all.

12. Today, in the cities, information technology has reached the level whereby any individual can get access to information at an instance. One can even choose the type of information one requires and that, too, at the touch of a button. But not so in the rural areas, where such technology is still in the realm of fantasy. Rural people may not require instant information, but if we are to modernise their mode of production, then information is most essential. There is need to improve and update the infrastructure in these areas.

13. Again today, no business or profession can strive without the existence of a system of information which can be retrieved instantly. The collection of data and news can easily be done in the cities because there is the infrastructure and the availability of technology for such an exercise. But in the rural areas and in certain countries lagging behind
in information infrastructure, such data collection may take time to compile and by the time it is done, such data may be already out of date. It is therefore not possible for any policymaker to tailor a policy on production and to create a system whereby production can meet forecasts.

14. When one says infrastructure, one does not only mean the laying of cables and telephone lines. It means change in its totality whereby the requirement for information and data can be fulfilled without undue delay. The process will have to be multi-directional.

15. Today, whatever basic infrastructure that has been laid, it is still meant to be instructional in nature. It only provides for the primary needs of the governments. The flow is still single-directional.

16. It is pointless to apportion blame on the media for not doing adequate coverage if facilities for doing a good job is so much lacking. Communication lines and other related facilities should be fully developed if coverage is to be balanced and efficient. Governments may not be able to get back full financial returns on these outlay, but gains and benefits should not be measured in terms of financial returns only.

17. But financial benefits and the boost to government image have become the main motives of such policies. To date, not many countries in the developing world have developed a comprehensive national information policy. There seems to be some fear and doubt in formulating such policies. Media have placed not to seek the truth. Truth has been considered to be sensitive and anti-national. The role of the media therefore had been greatly curtailed, with all these constraints.

18. The history of the media in all developing countries has not been one that we can be proud of. The media have been subjected to all sorts of harassment and persecution that coverage in some of these countries poses a lot of risks and uncertainty. Any news or report that may threaten the political leadership will only receive bitter and unfavourable reception by the governments. Reports should only consist of good happenings and the media should keep silent on any wastage or failures that may take place. In other words, governments tend to be sensitive to the media in whatever reports they make.
19. This relationship between the government and the media is abound in almost all developing countries. The media usually find that information is difficult to come by. And whatever information the media can get access to, the material will have to be treated in a pro-government perspective. The difficulty in a situation of this nature, information is sometime not complete as the tendency is to overclarify information.

20. It is most difficult to present a fair and true picture to the general public in such circumstances. This only brings about speculation and suspicion on the part of the readers. The media themselves may lose their credibility in such situations.

21. This will also give rise to rumours and other unnecessary stories whereby people tend to believe these rather than the information given in the media. Politically, economically and socially, this will mar the future wellbeing of the country concerned. It is possible to restrict or regulate the flow of information but that does not mean this will bring about the realisation of whatever objectives the political leadership may have.

22. It is because of this restriction in the gathering of news and information by the local media that make the international media more acceptable by the people. The international media have gained the reputation of being the dispenser of the truth, while the local media instead have been accused of doing cover-ups and telling only half-truths.

23. Laws and regulations abound to restrict the coverage and gatherings of news. The media have to work within these confines. The various cases of journalists being detained without trial is testimony to this. And restrictions on the freedom of information had been mounting in most cases. This feature is the main obstacle to the gathering of information in the developing world. The political leadership's perception of what the media should be would affect the media's role and the style and operation of the media themselves.

24. The political leadership tend to treat the media as a dangerous object but necessary. The media should be moulded just to serve official needs only and therefore the news and information flow will have to be single-directional.
25. The media in the Third World also encounter high operational costs. This restricts the growth of the media. It usually develops into a monopoly and those who wish to work as journalists will have to adhere to the policies of these monopolists.

26. Most media depend on their growth on advertisements. Those media that are too vocal and are against the state will naturally find it difficult to sell their space to the advertisers. To depend on circulation alone will be most impossible to survive. Thus, it is not uncommon to find that the media in the Third World are very restricted in number. In some countries, the governments own some of the big newspaper companies.

27. Governments who are sympathetic to the press have lowered communication tariff rates. But normally this aspect tends to be neglected.

28. Business information and data, however, have been made available readily due to the fact that these are necessary for the growth of the country's corporate sector. The technology in that sector is forever abreast with the latest available in other developed countries, and that sector can pay for what it wants. The policy, the infrastructure, the technology are all for the development of that sector. There is a big chasm between the development in that sector and that sector of gathering and distribution of information and news by the media.

29. The mass media sector is known to be poor and that is why calls have been made to governments to lower tariff rates for the press so that this may reduce the cost of operation. This also may add as a further booth to the development of the mass media in the country.

30. The media in the Third World suffered not only in terms of high cost but also in terms of personnel. Most journalists are not trained and if ever training is given, it is just to acquaint them with certain basic tenets of journalism. Training is still lacking and there is very few institutions catering for the overall training of journalists. Singapore Straits Times has established one and other centres too should look into
the possibility of setting up such establishments. The Second ASEAN Editors' Conference in Penang in September did focus its attention on this subject and recommended that training be made a priority.

31. The coverage country-wide is still very much dependent in most cases on stringers and retainers. Some of them do full-time work but cannot be placed as permanent staff due to lack of necessary qualification. Some have other work to do and journalism is only a pastime. It is, therefore, difficult to rely on this group of part-timers to do proper coverage. Their perception of what is news sometimes is not to the level of what is required. Most stories sent by them do not find space in the media.

32. It can be summarised that coverage and distribution of information and news in the Third World countries are still inadequate in nature due to the various constraints faced by the media especially the lack of basic infrastructure, the uncertain policies by the political leadership and the inadequate human resources available.

33. As to when the media will properly be able to carry out their functions as needed by society, a rapport will have to be worked out between the media practitioners and the political leadership. Each will have to understand and appreciate the role that each is doing.

AMH/rza

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