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Communication Research: New Challenges In A Changing Asia

By

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New Challenges in a Changing Asia

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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: NEW CHALLENGES IN A CHANGING ASIA

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Introduction

If we look back at major events in Asia in the decades since World War II, they can be summarized in one word. That word is change.

China emerged from the ruins of the war with its economy in shambles and its traditional social fabric torn apart. The Communist revolution broadened and accelerated the process of change by enforcing a series of radical social and economic transformations from which China is still barely recovering.

Japan, defeated and devastated by two atomic bombs, survived the bleak post-war years of hunger and poverty and, thanks to social and economic reforms encouraged by the U.S. occupation forces, has risen from the ashes of war to become one of the world's most vibrant economic powers.

Elsewhere in Asia, a wave of independence movements put an end to more than a century of Western colonization in this vast continent. Newly independent countries, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, have each gone through the growing pains that inevitably accompany the transition from colonial rule to indigenous sovereignty.

In some countries political independence has been followed by phenomenal
economic growth. Examples are South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and recently, in somewhat limited ways, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. In other countries, such as the Philippines, initial promises of prosperity ultimately ended in political discord and economic degeneration. In each of these countries dynamic forces of change have emerged. When these forces are positively cultivated and released, the results have been progress and prosperity. When these forces are suppressed and denied, the results have been chaos and stagnation.

Nowhere is the Asian drama of change being played out more poignantly and graphically than in mainland China. There, in front of the television cameras of the world, Chinese students and ordinary citizens staged their massive demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in the summer of 1989 to challenge the supremacy of the Communist rule, only to be silenced by guns and tanks. Behind the Tiananmen Square demonstrations were the changing values and beliefs of a disillusioned young generation that were not fully understood either by the young Chinese themselves or by the outside world.

Old Communication Paradigm

In the face of these macroscopic trends of social and cultural change, the old communication paradigm of "who says what to whom through what channels and with what effects" does not seem adequate for our research tasks.

This paradigm has several inherent limitations. The most serious limitation has to do with its built-in specificity and narrow focus. Ironically, this limitation is a direct result of the way we conduct research in the field of communication as we apply methods of physical science to the study of human behavior. We are concerned, for example, with the source
credibility of the communicator, the appeals and content characteristics of the message, the efficacy of the channels, the psychological predisposition of the audience, and the nature and extent of effects. The effects are usually cast in terms of specific attitudinal and behavioral change. This kind of approach would be ideally suited to the assessment of a single advertising message, for example. And yet most of our research efforts in communication in the 1950s, 1960s and even 1970s have been devoted to such enquiries, including what we call developmental communication. In other words, our research methodology has severely limited our fundamental problem conceptualization. We are not able to recognize research problems, whether important or not, unless they can be fitted into our conventional paradigm.

It should be obvious that such a paradigm of communication would be inadequate to an understanding of the broad trends of social, economic, political, and cultural changes that we are witnessing in Asia. It is inadequate because of two major drawbacks. First, it fails to take account of the historical contexts in which the changes are emerging. These historical contexts are complex antecedent conditions which we must understand if we want to study the roles of communication in the change processes. Other scholars have commented on this limitation, and I need not belabor the point here.

Second, and perhaps more important, it is inadequate because it fails to recognize the many other current forces with which communication must interact in the dynamic process of change. Sometimes communication can play a dominant role in the interactive change process. Other times, communication plays at best a supporting or minor role. Or even no role at all. These are empirical questions that can be answered only by concrete events in specific cases. The point I want to emphasize here is that typically communication researchers, mostly those in the West, have largely overlooked the social, economic and
political, and cultural forces and have concentrated their attention primarily on communication. If we want to shift our research attention to the more vital issues of dynamic change in Asian societies, we must break away from the conventional paradigm of communication.

New Paradigm of Communication

We want to build a new paradigm, not from scratch, but on the foundation of the old paradigm as a point of departure.

The new paradigm will follow a historical, rather than ahistorical, perspective.

It will examine cumulative, rather than discrete, effects of communication. We are interested not so much in the specific, persuasive effects of a particular message, but rather in the cumulative, general, perceptive effects of communication in defining our social situation and setting our agenda of priorities.

It will examine communication effects in an institutional and structural perspective, rather than an individual perspective. That is, we look for effects on institutions and social and economic structures, rather than merely on individuals.

It will examine interactive effects, rather than direct effects of communication. In other words, instead of asking what is the direct impact of communication, we ask: In what ways does communication play an interactive role, along with other forces of change, in either the maintenance or alteration of institutions and social and economic structures? Effects are not limited to change only. Maintaining the status quo within a broad context of change can be a powerful effect.
It will examine the process of communication as well as the effects of communication. In other words, we are interested in the process by which communication functions interactively with other forces of change to bring about the effects.

In a new paradigm following these perspectives, certain elements in the old paradigm will lose their prominence. "Who" as the communicator is relatively less important. We are more interested in the content of the message than in the source of the message. Similarly, the channels in which a message is communicated are relatively unimportant in a long-term perspective.

Although the old paradigm mentions "to whom," in most of our empirical research we hardly pay attention to the specific segments of our audience. In social psychological studies of communication effects that follow experimental designs, our samples are usually drawn from students as an undifferentiated target audience. We then generalize our findings to the population at large. The question of "to whom," unless it is built into the experimental design, normally is not a concern. The focus of our research is usually on the content and structure of the message. In reality, "to whom" is an extremely important issue. Communication effects, whether discrete or cumulative, depend very much on age and gender differentiations as well as the social class backgrounds of the audience in a heterogeneous population.

Completely missing in the old paradigm are the processes of communication, and the interactions with other forces in society which by and large determine whether and how communication can have effects.

I propose a new paradigm of communication:

"Who"

Says what

To Whom
Through what channels
By what processes
In interaction with what societal forces
In what historical contexts
Resulting in what persuasive and perceptive effects
On individuals, institutions,
And the broad social, economic and political structures
As well as on culture."

While the new paradigm shares certain basic components with the old, the emphasis is very different. The focus is on the message content, the processes of communication, and particularly on the interaction with other societal forces of change or resistance. It recognizes the importance of historical contexts. Even though the new paradigm does not overlook persuasive effects, it calls for more attention to the cumulative, perceptive effects in defining our social situation and setting our agenda. Above all, it alerts us to the long-term effects on institutions, social structure and culture.

New Research Challenges and Strategies

This new paradigm presents us with untested research challenges and requires innovative research strategies. Communication research has by and large relied on (1) experimental studies of persuasive effects of communication, (2) survey research that examines use of mass media and other related issues, and (3) quantitative content analysis of communication messages, supplemented by studies of legal issues, history of journalism, and analysis of modern communication technologies. These methods have sometimes been used in combination for specific research tasks, largely in the
conventional framework.

Our new research challenges call for long-term studies of the processes of economic development, political liberalization, social structural transformation, and cultural change in Asian countries. We want to assess the interactive roles of communication in these processes. We ask the following research questions:

1. What are the processes by which an underdeveloped country effectively mobilizes its untapped manpower and resources to bring about a higher level of productivity and more equitable distribution?

2. What are the processes by which an authoritarian government is pressured to loosen its control and allow greater participation in decision making by its citizens?

3. What are the processes by which the social structure of a country is transformed to permit more equitable accesses to resources and opportunities, and a more egalitarian distribution of rewards?

4. What are the processes by which traditional social relations, cultural values, work ethic, and beliefs are modified or replaced by new ones?

5. What are the roles that mass media and other channels of communication play in these processes of economic development, political liberalization, social transformation and cultural change?

In raising these research questions, we do not assume communication necessarily plays a major role in the change processes. As we have suggested before, communication may play a minor role. It is possible, though not likely, that communication plays no role at all. This is an empirical question to be answered by our research.

These questions are extremely broad and basically macroscopic. To make them manageable, however, we need to translate them into operational terms.
Also, all five questions are closely interrelated. Economic development is contingent upon social structural transformation in some degree. Both economic development and social structural change will eventually lead to the weakening of authoritarian government, resulting in broader participation and political liberalization. Changes in the economic system, social structure, and political authority are inevitably accompanied by cultural change, that is, changes in social relations, cultural values, work ethic and beliefs. All these change processes may involve the use of mass media and other communication channels. Our research approach is holistic in nature. How to take a research issue that is holistically conceptualized and formulate it into a concrete, operational research problem is an enormous challenge. This is something that is rarely covered in research methodology textbooks.

I want to use my own research on communication and social structural transformation in China as an illustration (Chu, 1977).

First I conceptualized social structural transformation into six specific functional requisites for national development: capital formation, task-oriented cooperation and competition, manpower training, decision-making processes, conflict resolution, and political socialization. The premise was that within traditional Chinese social structure there were constraining components that impeded these functional requisites. The traditional social structure had to be transformed in order to facilitate the fulfillment of these functions. Then I proceeded to analyze the complex processes by which social structural transformation was brought about for each of these functional requisites. I identified and documented the roles played by mass media, organizational communication, and interpersonal communication in the settings of small groups in the processes of social transformation, primarily in a historical perspective.
This type of research differs from the conventional premises of communication research in a number of ways. The primary concern is to analyze the roles of communication in the processes of structural change, rather than to demonstrate discrete communication effects, as we usually do, in terms of changes of individual attitudes and behavior. Thus, this type of research does not seek to establish relational propositions involving communication behavior and other individual traits, for example, whether greater exposure to the official mass media is related to stronger ideological commitment. Rather, the primary interest is in the roles of communication in the structural change processes, and in their functional consequences for individuals, small groups and the social system as a whole.

The enquiry does not start with the mass media and ask under what conditions mass communication is effective. Rather, it takes the various communication processes, through mass media as well as other channels, and analyzes how they are structured in the overall framework of societal change. Nor does the topical division follow the usual way of conceptualizing mass communication research, that is, newspapers, television, radio, traditional media, and interpersonal communication. Instead, the pertinent channels and patterns of communication are examined for their contributions according to certain functional requisites of development.

Research of this kind does not have clearly formulated procedures and standard statistical tests to follow. Much depends on the creativity and ingenuity of the researchers. The work I did on communication and structural change in China is merely suggested here as an example for purpose of illustration. The collective wisdom of communication researchers, I am sure, will be adequate to the enormous challenges we face in the decades to come as we try to understand the rapid changes that are unfolding in Asia.
Reference:


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