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<th>Developments and trends in the rural mass media in Asia: the Sri Lankan experience</th>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Goonasekera, Anura; Weerackody, Irvin</td>
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Developments And Trends In The Rural Mass Media In Asia:
The Sri Lankan Experience

By

Anura Goonasekera
&
Irwin Weerackody
A. Introductory:

The keen concern for the rural masses in the Third World, as an element that mattered vitally in the process of Development, is a relatively new phenomenon. When Doctors of Development diagnosed the state of underdevelopment in a vast area of the Third World, they came upon the inescapable fact, that the rural poor who are in an overwhelming majority in the Underdeveloped World, are both the authors and the consumers of Development.

To counter the sluggish growth in the rural sector and to give an impetus to the Development of the totality of a nation, the upgrading of the skills and performance of these rural masses was found to be of the essence. Mass illiteracy, their proneness to disease, the runaway growth of Population were all seen as impediments that prevented the greater participation of the rural poor in their own development. The rural communities had to be taught ways to overcome these limitations to development. Here, information is invariably the means that would bring about this transformation. The rural masses had to be made receptive to new ideas, to ways of improving their skills and to knowledge that would extend their vision beyond a narrow horizon that circumscribed their outlook and life.

In the slipstream of this global urge to keep the rural masses informed, experts in communication discovered afresh the vitality of rural media. In most of the traditional societies in Asia, mass media in the rural sector were largely folk systems of communication. The messages passed on by rural mass media in ancient times remained relatively unchanged far into modern times.
The use of such technologies as the print, the television, the radio and the film as media of mass communication in the rural sector, increased the reach of the message and advanced the sophistication of its packaging.

A development that can be described as universal in rural mass media of our time, is the attempt at integrating modern media of communication with folk-forms of communication. Modern mass media, for instance, attempt to transmit to rural folk, messages aimed at improving agricultural output. In this effort the radio and the television seek to replace the inter-personal communication modes, that in ancient times were the most effective means of passing along agricultural information.

In the traditional societies, rural mass media sent out messages for the exclusive consumption of the communities at village level. But the developments and trends in rural Mass Media in Asia today, tend to follow a slightly different path.

Today, the formal Mass Media in Asia, issue, generally from an urban centre. These mass media, do not tend to consider the rural masses as their exclusive target audience. In consequence, their content is not particularized for the rural masses. These, urban-centered Mass Media, may have, special segments for the rural masses at the periphery. But these segments are not likely to possess the immediacy and the intimacy of the folk-messages that form the content of rural mass media based in the rural sector itself.

An inevitable outcome of this situation is the attempt by urban-centered Mass Media, to establish branches located in the rural sector. During the last decade this has been an increasingly evident trend in rural mass media.
B. The Sri Lankan Perspective:

In Sri Lanka, over a long period of time, the rural 'mass' media consisted primarily of non-mediated inter-personal communications.

Royal decrees meant for the masses at grassroots level travelled down a hierarchical ladder. The village officials who transmitted these Royal Decrees to the rural folk, used the word of mouth as the means of communicating the message.

If the villagers had to be kept informed at group level, the community was assembled by the beating of the drum or the pealing of the temple bell.

Rites, rituals and pageantry, served as rural mass media. These were utilized for mass entertainment, for purposes of therapy or to achieve religious aims.

The seasonally held folk-performances in the traditional villages were meant both as mass cult practices and mass entertainment.

The traditional system of communication with the masses in rural Sri Lanka was closely tied to the system of social organisation of the villages. In fact communication was a process that flowed from the social fabric, affirming the power and status hierarchy, the religio-magical beliefs and practices and a host of other cultural values and practices. In such a situation the Lasswellian definition of communication as "who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom with what results" (1) takes a different and subdued meaning. To understand the process of mass communication in this traditional set up it should be looked upon as part of a system or a sub-system having exchange relationships with other parts of the social system such as the economy, polity and religion.

(1) B.L. Smith, H.D. Lasswell and R.D. Casey - Propaganda, Communication and Public opinion - Princeton University Press 1946 - P 121
"Sokari" - a form of stylized folk drama, "Gam-maduwa", "Kohamba Kankariya", are among ritual performances that served also as mass entertainment for the rural communities.

A given rural community would collaborate from time to time to stage a puppetry performance in the village. Through a collective effort, they at times had a Nadagama (a form of folk-play) performed in their village for mass entertainment.

Almost each traditional village will have its seasonal "Perahera", - a processional pageant - associated with a Buddhist temple or a temple dedicated to a deity. Two of the most outstanding of these Pageants are the Perahera associated with the temple of the Sacred Tooth in Kandy and the Pageant at Kataragama, held in honour of God Kataragama. They have an Island-wide impact.

The 'Pola' or the periodic trade fair held in various villages in Sri Lanka, takes on a mass-media significance. These are means of exchanging economic information vital to rural folk. The scarcity or the plentiful supply of essential commodities, the price-structures of various consumer items are among the bits of economic information exchanged at these fairs.

It is important to note that the basis of all these forms of rural mass media, was the spoken word. A line occurring in "Lo wada Sangarawa" a 15th Century Religious Poem, reads this way: "At the word, that foreign enemies are coming". The news even of a foreign invasion is passed on by word of mouth.

These systems of rural mass media continued intact until very recent times. With the passage of time, modern media of mass communication began to be integrated gradually with these forms of rural mass media.
The earliest mass medium to reach the villages of Sri Lanka was the Print medium. First introduced by the Dutch in 1739, the printed word penetrated into Sri Lankan villages in a gradual process. The printed hand-bill and the Poster appeared in villages, replacing the traditional word of mouth, the drum-beat and the temple-bell. Information about religious performances in the village temple, would be passed on through the printed word.

A variety of activities conducted in the village at inter-personal level was taken over by the print medium. Wedding invitation, notices of such economic activities as Sales are among some of the areas into which the print medium penetrated in the early days.

The film, the radio and television followed in the wake of the print medium, as these new technologies of mass communication came to be introduced at National level.

C. Current Trends in Rural Mass Media in Sri Lanka

Appendix 1 - gives some relevant socio-economic indications which help to place the communication sector in relation to other sectors of the economy in Sri Lanka.

The accelerated developmental effort of the country in the post-independence era, rendered the traditional systems of rural mass media grossly inadequate to meet the new needs.

The massive hydro-electricity schemes, housing and re-settling projects, extensive cultivation projects, and re-forestation plans, to name some of the new development activities, generated a whole series of fresh messages that had to be communicated to people at village level.
The extension official, instructing the rural masses in innovative agricultural practices; the health service volunteers, taking the messages of public health care, nutrition, and child care to the village are among some of the means utilized to communicate the new messages to the rural masses. Although their message is new, they make use of the inter-personal mode of communication familiar to rural folk as an age-old means of village level communication.

D. Radio as Rural Mass Medium in Sri Lanka

Almost from the time Sound Broadcasting was officially inaugurated in Sri Lanka on the 16th of December 1925, the need to serve the rural masses had been actively recognized. Special programmes, crafted to meet the requirements of rural listeners, were aired regularly.

With the specific intention of concentrating on particular rural audiences, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation inaugurated a series of Regional Broadcasting Stations. Rajarata Sevaya, with its headquarters at Anuradhapura, Ruhunu Sevaya, located in the deep south of Sri Lanka and the Mahanuwara Sevaya based in Kandy, form the three main Regional Services. Their programmes are planned with the rural listeners in mind and the majority of the programmes are in Sinhala - the language of the majority of rural masses.

Table I shows the languages and hours of Regional Radio Transmissions in 1988.

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<th>Station</th>
<th>Sinhala</th>
<th>Tamil</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Matara (Ruhunu)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kandy</td>
<td>33.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahaweli *</td>
<td>01.30</td>
<td>-</td>
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</table>

* The Mahaweli Community Radio has been stopped now.
A survey done by Mahaweli Radio in 1987 indicated that while the entertainment programmes were popular, the impact of Mahaweli radio in uplifting the agricultural practices were minimal. The main source of information and motivation for agricultural practices were instruction from agricultural field officers - (See Appendix II and III)

An experience of the present writer, brings into sharp focus, the practical effectiveness of the Regional Services of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. Once, while on a visit to Anamaduwa, within the purview of , the present writer met a cultivator who was a little more affluent than the average cultivator of the Region. This cultivator stated that, he would have been still better off had there been a guaranteed price for cow-pea.

On his return to Colombo, the present writer was assured by the relevant Minister that the price of cow-pea is already guaranteed. But the cultivator was not aware of this. Later the initiative was taken to keep the cultivators informed that a guaranteed price for cow-pea was already in force.

The Mahaweli Community Radio, inaugurated in March 1981, with the assistance of UNESCO and DANIDA, is aimed exclusively at the improvement of the socio-economic status of these villagers settled under the Mahaweli Project.

The National Service of the SLBC, supplements these Regional Services, with rural programmes of its own.

E. Newspapers:

With the exception of Jaffna, no other regional area in Sri Lanka has attempted to inaugurate regional newspapers. In consequence, the rural sector is served by the nationally circulated newspapers, by and large. These print, in some instances, provincial sections and special material for rural communities.
F. Television:

National Television, inaugurated in 1982 has no Regional Services, similar to those of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. The rural sector utilizes Television primarily as a means of entertainment. Advertising about agricultural material is extensively done on Television.

G. Access

Access is generally interpreted as essential physical potential for exposure to a medium. This implies the availability of a mass medium - a newspaper, a radio or television set - within a reasonable range of the potential audience.

In the rural areas of Sri Lanka, access mostly implies the availability of a community radio - sharing of a newspaper - or the availability of a TV set - within a reasonable range.

Access to one's own privately owned radio set, also happens in the rural sector in Sri Lanka - especially in the Mahaweli settlements - where the new affluence enables a villager to purchase a transistor radio which is moderately priced. More and more people in the rural sector are beginning to invest in a radio set as the general affluence of this sector continues to escalate.

In the instance of Television, the rural folk in some areas tend to gather around the TV set in an affluent household in the village, when such favourite entertainment programmes as teledramas and Sinhala films are aired.

The tendency towards restricting the private ownership of TV sets is determined not primarily by lack of means. It is the non-availability of electricity that limits the number of persons owning private TV sets in the rural areas. Eighty-one percent of the Sri Lankan land-mass is not electrified still.
The private acquisition of newspapers is not possible in some parts of rural Sri Lanka firstly because there are pockets into which newspaper distribution systems do not still reach. Secondly, due to the inflationary escalation of the price of newsprint etc, newspapers are likely to soar out of reach of these villagers with limited means.

**H. Economic Viability**

No worthwhile practical attempt has so far been made to launch regional newspapers to serve the rural masses. But if the logistics are worked out, it is quite likely that regional newspapers would prove an economically viable proposition.

But, some traditional forms of rural media may prove eminently cost-effective, when they are adapted to communicate a modern message relevant to rural folk. Puppetry for instance could very well be adapted to project a family-planning message to rural acceptors. In terms of the deep rural penetration possible for such a rural medium, the adaptation is quite likely to prove admirably cost-effective.

The "Perahera" mode too could be utilized in an economically viable manner, for the communication of ideas conducive to rural upliftment.

**I. Professionalism**

The quality of media professionalism needed for the effective use of rural media, is entirely different from that necessary for urban-centered media utilisation. The media professional in the rural sector should, over and above his craft skills, possess an intimate knowledge of the ways of the rural communities. The language usages, the traditions and taboos of the rural sector matter very much in effective rural communication.
The villager is generally less verbally skilled than the city-dweller. In rural communication, proverbs, aphorisms, tales and special verbal idioms figure prominently. The professionalism of the rural level communicator includes an adequate grasp of these rural ways.

J. New Communication Technologies

It has been proved both in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in Rural Asia, that for practical purposes of result-oriented communication, some new technologies of communication may prove far more effective than such formal media as the Newspaper, the film, the radio and television.

The video cassette, is a case in point. A cassetted programme can demonstrate, for instance, innovative agricultural practices, far more effectively than a formal TV programme or a film-strip.

SITE (Satellite Instruction Television Experiment) in India has established that before a new technology of communication is introduced in the rural sector, a process of "alphabetization" may be necessary to enable rural sector users to familiarize themselves with the matter of the new medium. Stories are many, about rural recipients of cinematic performances misunderstanding the significance of such techniques as the close-up.

SITE also proved that the rural sector recipients could make better use of a formally communicated message, if there is a period of preliminary preparation during which the audience could be oriented to what they are going to receive. This preparatory work could be done by community leaders.
Rural Media and Provincial Councils

The Devolution of Power in Sri Lanka, through the introduction of the Provincial Council System, presages a new era of mass media decentralisation as well. As things are at present, eight Provincial Councils have been constituted devolving administrative power to these sub units. The regional government, ensured by the Provincial Councils will enable practical and viable rural media systems to be eventually set up, somewhat on the lines of Regional Broadcasting Units which are currently operational.

Each Provincial Council will need special messages to be broadcast to people within its jurisdiction. The personnel who will man these rural media set-ups will have to acquire a professionalism in keeping with the special characteristics of their provincial recipients.

The Provincial Council System will give a marked impetus to rural mass media, making it essential to train a new breed of communicators with specialised proficiency in the techniques of rural mass communication.

As this Provincial Administration system gathers momentum, there will invariably be rural newspapers, Provincial Broadcasting Stations and Provincial Television systems.
APPENDIX I

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF SRI LANKA

1. Population: 16.4 million
2. Density per sq. km: 230 persons per sq. km.
3. Percentage of Rural Population: 77.7%
4. Annual rate of Population Growth: 1.7
5. Per capita GNP
   a) at current market prices: 10598 (US $ 360)
6. Agricultural sector contribution GNP: 24.2%
7. Industrial sector contribution to GNP: 19.3%
8. Literacy: 86.5 (mining, quarrying, manufacturing)
9. Total College and University enrolments:
   a) Elementary: 7786
   b) High School: 1824
       schools: 291
   c) College and University enrolment: 17,308
10. Number of Colleges
    Teacher Training Colleges: 25
    Technical Colleges: 21
    University Campuses: 08
    Law Colleges: 01
11. Language spoken
    Sinhala: 74%
    Tamil: 25%
    English: 2%
12. Number of Newspapers
    Sinhala: 8
    Tamil: 5 Leading Newspapers
    English: 5

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Circulation :

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<th>Circulation</th>
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<td>Sinhala</td>
<td>284,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
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13. Number of radio stations : 04
14. Number of TV stations : 02
15. Number of movie theatres : 360
16. Number of movie goers : 51,957,491
17. Number of telephones per 1000 pop. 26 (total 406,250)
18. Number of post and telegraph offices : 1,766
19. Number of books published : 2,102

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### INFORMATION & MOTIVATION ON AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Listening to MCR</th>
<th>Heard from other</th>
<th>Neighbouring farmers</th>
<th>Traditionally</th>
<th>Instruction from a field Officer</th>
<th>Reading Newspapers</th>
<th>Reading Leaflets</th>
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### APPENDIX III

**INFORMATION & MOTIVATION ON ANIMAL HUSBANDRY**

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