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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
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Approaches To Mass Communication Research In Asia

By

Thanavadee Boonlue
Evaluation of Mass Communication Education & Research

Around the last quarter of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the printing press and newspapers were first among various mass media introduced in Asia. The introduction and the evolution of journalism in Asia created the need of professionalizing the newspaper personnel. After struggling to do the job without any training, courses in journalism were offered as a formal education in the academic institutions in the Philippines in 1919 (according to Lent - 1920), in China in 1930, in Thailand in 1939, in Singapore in 1960.

Also, in this century, radio and television broadcasting began to attract a broad interest in Asian countries. The study of journalism was expanded to cover a broader scope of other mass media of communication. It is likely that mass communication studies evolved from journalism orientation.

In 1946, UNESCO conducted a mass media survey in many countries and found a need to establish mass media system in the third world countries. Hence, in the late 50s and early 60s, UNESCO under major support from the USA expanded their assistance to the third world countries to promote and motivate the establishment of mass communication systems. UNESCO reported the need of establishing mass systems in order to encourage the free flow of information, and considered the development of mass communication as a component of social and economic development of the nation.

As a consequence of this encouragement and assistance, mass communication were established to serve the purpose of national politics on the one hand and on the other hand, produce professionals, technicians in the mass communication arena to implement mass communication as a tool to accelerate national development. Therefore, all aspects of mass
communication study and research were formally undertaken. To cite a few examples: the formal education in the Faculty of Communication Arts (formerly - Department of Mass Communications and Public Relations) of Chulalongkorn University, Thailand was founded in 1965, the faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication of Thammasat University, Thailand was born shortly afterwards. At the University of the Philippines, the Institute of Mass Communication (UPIMC) was established on June 19, 1965. Other mass communication institutions in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore were established in 1953 (according to Lent - 1950), 1969 (Lent - 1971) and 1970 (Lent - 1960) respectively.

As for the regional level, the Asia Pacific Institute of Broadcasting Development located at the Malaysian National Broadcasting Training Centre and the Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union were set up according to the recommendation of UNESCO.

Since communication technology developed fast in the 70s, and has been considered very important in development, it is imperative to keep pace with new technologies and improve efficiency and proficiency in the profession. Mass communication research institutes at the international level such as the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, the Press Foundation of Asia, AIBD and the East-West Communication Institute (now Communication and Culture Learning, East West Centre) have established training, teaching and research centres, sponsored, conducted research projects, and provided the outlets for dissemination of research findings through seminars, workshops, conferences, books and periodicals.

It is worth noticing that the history of the development of communication studies and research pointed out the causal relationship between the growth of communication technologies and the establishment of mass communication education and research. The relationship is two fold: Firstly, the influence of mass communication technologies ranging from printing to electronic broadcasting from the west, created a need of professionalization in the field. Secondly, the need for assistance from the more advanced societies to accelerate social and economic
development of the nations led the third world countries to accept without or with little appreciation the new idea of free flow information and mass media systems as tools facilitating the development goal. According to the 1981 AMIC Directory of mass communication institutes, there are now 143 mass communication institutions in 16 asian countries, of which 115 are engaged in research.

Communication Research Content and Approaches

According to the evolution of communication study already mentioned, communication education evolved in most instances, from journalism study, as journalism was imported from the western world in early 20th century. It was not until the late 50s and early 60s, that all aspects of mass communication research were studied. Before that time, there were some studies in the journalism sphere such as studies on the literacy level, inventories of newspapers and other media, such as radio, television and periodicals, library research on histories of the press and radio, profiles of journalists, consumer studies by advertising agencies and evaluation of agricultural information materials.

For this period, research approaches were primarily more historical, critical approaches and descriptive surveys. In the late 50s and early 60s, students from Asia went to American universities and eagerly absorbed what they had learned from their professors in the field of communication theory and research. Returning home to teach in asian communication institutes, these professors introduced the western approach such as readability studies, content analysis, readership and listenership survey, etc. Therefore, Asian communication research was described as journalism oriented, western-influenced and multi-directional.

In the 70s, asian communication research was summed up by the Philippines communication scholar - Feliciano as focused on three areas:
1. Media infrastructure studies - i.e. dealing with the history and development of the media;
2. Studies of communicators and receivers of messages;
3. Developmental - type studies - i.e. those dealing with the communication aspects of the various component of development such as agriculture, health, family planning, education, etc.

There is more research in printed media than electronic broadcasting media and other types of media such as folk or traditional media, group media and interpersonal media.

Media studies especially message studies is the most popular area of Asian communication research. By message studies : they are content analyses, readability studies etc. As for research methodology, the most common in Asia now seems to be the case study in small areas, followed by the survey method. Quantitative as well as qualitative methods are used. However, the method quantitative is believed to be more popular. Audience research and qualitative research methods have been offered as courses in many American universities. Until the 80s, Asian students in western countries had the opportunity to learn and discuss more on the use of qualitative methods with their professors and brought back the knowledge to apply more.

The reasons for using western empirical approaches are clearly seen. More than 70% of Asian communication scholars were educated in the West, especially the USA. The university professors got their master's and Ph.D degrees from the USA and bring back western concepts and methodology. They tended to teach and use western texts without modification and adaptation into their own language and social context. The western communication theories and methodology put heavy emphasis on sociological and psychological orientation. To cite as an example: a major focus of communication research in Thailand has been on communication effect on the individual. Usually this research tradition would examine patterns of mass media used or mass media exposure among
various groups of rural audience and then relate such media usage with behavioral or attitudinal change. Examples of research topics done in this areas are as follows:

1. Media utilization, strategies in establishing nutrition education concept in the rural women;
2. Communication patterns affecting the achievement of agricultural tie-interrelated - economic-factors, loan project among peasant village scouts;
3. A content analysis of population information broadcasting by Radio Thailand;
4. An analysis of moral concepts in three to ten baht (low cost) comic books, adapted from foreign stories;
5. Rates of newspapers as introducers of innovation : an issue of abortion legalization;
6. The role of media and factors affecting the adoption of facsimile - telecommunication : a study of international public facsimile utilizers.
7. The role of media and factors affecting decision to become members in women is agriculturer groups: a case study of women agriculture groups in Nakhon Pathom province;
8. Desirable characteristics of agricultural extension agents as viewed by farmers in Chom Mong agricultural project;
9. Survey of mass media receptivity in rural areas;
10. A study of radio as an agricultural extension media;
11. Media utilization of the personnel for agriculture and rural development;
12. Use of mass media in diffusion of innovations and its effect on the mentality and community development.

Problems of adopting western approaches

1. Even though 89.85% of Thai professors and more than 70% of asian professors got their masters and doctorate degrees in the west, particularly in the USA, not this total number could conduct communication research. The problem is due either to the
lack of time to devote to research as they are over burdened with teaching and administrative work or they cannot implement fully the theories and methodologies from the west. The cause of little implementation may also be attributed to the language barrier while they were studying in the foreign countries. Most Asian students come from countries where English is not spoken. Therefore, these students could not fully understand and take back all of what they were given/taught by their professors in the west, thus, this creates problems with applicability and capability of implementation. The researchers were not designed and conducted under solid theoretical and methodological bases leading to the question of validity and reliability.

2. In the late 50s, western scholars viewed that media could encourage and help to diffuse a personal value system, which is favourable to innovation, mobility, achievement and consumption. Leaner (in 1958) and other such as Schramm and Rogers for example held that western media could help to break down the traditionalism, which is an obstacles to modernity by raising expectation and aspiration, widening the horizons enabling people to imagine and work a better alternative for themselves and their families. These scholars from the west had tested their theory empirically. The Asian scholars also followed up to test this theory following the western perspective of communication theory and research methodology. Hence, over the years, there is an accumulative body of knowledge and research finding. However, because we have not invented the new perspectives but tended to refine and build upon the original insight by the more creative pioneers. Though Asian empirical research is cumulative, they have not produced fresh knowledge and creativities. The research product is duplicative and repetitive and lacks of clear focus.

3. Because Asian scholars adopted western approaches, used western texts without any refinement, their teachings seemed to be irrelevant with the Asian context. To cite as an example, while western mass media were considered useful and contributive to the process of change by serving as initiator, legitimiser and facilitator, the Asian saw that the traditional ways of visiting, conversing and exchanging ideas and
and knowledge remained more effective. There are few researchers able to prove this. The nature of mass media itself is one-way communication. When Asian scholars tended to apply Western mass media in Asian society, the uniqueness of two-way communication in Asian society tended to be faded away. However, they are not very successful in doing that unless they integrate other media of communication.

4. There is also criticism on the inappropriateness of the Western quantitative approach.

The relevance on quantitative methodology and statistical analysis is said to set a limit on what one can do. This is because we tend to tackle only those research problems that can be handled by quantitative measures and statistical tests. We often let methodology determine our choice of research topics.

There is another problem in using quantitative methods as stated by Dr. Godwin Chu of the East-West Communication and Culture Institute that there is another unintended and perhaps unforeseen consequence of relying on quantitative methods, especially the use of random sampling in survey research. Dr. Chu explained that communication is a process. But in a random sample, the likelihood of interaction among the respondents included in the sample is almost nil. Thus we have done many studies of attitudes and opinions as well as their changes, but few studies on communication as a social process.

Regarding culture, it is also criticised that in the Western perspective of communication theory, culture is rarely explicitly taken into consideration in the research conceptualisation, because culture is usually not regarded as a variable. Therefore, in the survey, readability study or questionnaire adopted from the West are inappropriate in Asian cultures, and must be modified to suit local conditions. Additional frames of reference taken from artistic, literary, dramatic, tradition and aesthetic practices might probably provide more significant insights into the ways Asian people perceive and receive
mass media messages.

5. The last problem I want to point out here is the problem of lacking research resources and facilities. To use western quantitative methods requires large scale unit of analysis leading to expensive practice. Hence, though the research design and methodology are rigorous, the policy makers could not allocate budget to activate the projects. One way to get out of this problem is to use an alternative method like qualitative small scale and case study type of methods.

Given these criticisms of and the problems derived from using the western perspective, there is yet no clear evidence to prove their weaknesses or to find other alternatives to suit Asian perspectives. Each approach, theory and methodology has its advantages and disadvantages. What research approaches Asian communication research should apply is still in the researching stage. Asian scholars mastered the theories and methodology for communication research as taught in the West, they may not know the alternative approach. However, they have come to notice the limitation and feel confident enough to begin searching for an Asian approach of communication research of their own.

To achieve this, knowledge of other alternatives is required in order for them to test and compare various approaches. The search of approaches that can correct the deficiency of the western approaches needs constructive discussions of both Asian and Western communication scholars.

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