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Keynote Address

By

Yogesh Atal
Ever since I received the kind invitation to deliver the Keynote Address at this highly professional seminar I began wondering about my credentials: neither do I have the right age, nor the right qualifications. The only justification that I could conjure up relates to my own noise-making role in regard to the need for injecting social science orientation to our thinking and research on communication. Usually, when we talk of mass communication, we think of either the hardware specialists, i.e. the communications engineers, or the men from the media -- the journalists, the radio and television programme producers and broadcasters, and the managers of the media. Social scientists have generally entered the communication field through the back door, and they mostly stand behind the scene. As a consequence, communication research in social sciences is still in its formative stage in Asia; there remains a vast territory to be covered, and what has been produced does not add up to much. I suspect that this must be the hidden intention of the organizers to call me here to beat my drum once again. Let me hope that my music will not be too deafening.

* * *

This seminar acknowledges the fact of a communication Revolution. I need not, therefore, pour statistics to prove the point.

Revolution is a word to signify a process of radical change. Usually it is distinguished from "more-and-more-of-the-same" which results from normal processes of growth and development; of course, when there is too much of the same, and that too in a short span of time, as if through a windfall, it also radically alters the situation...
by creating conditions of affluence. It may, for example, be an affluence of misery and poverty — an apparent contradiction in terms — which may prompt people to revolt; on the other, it may also be an affluence of riches — for a select coterie, or for the society as a whole — that may initiate a metamorphosis. In any case, a significantly different profile must emerge to warrant a revolution. The image that the word revolution evokes in our mind is that of a double face: destructive and constructive at the same time. Revolution overthrows the 'significant' of the existing or, at least, turns the things "upside down" — it engineers a process of "reversal"; but revolution also ushers in an era of "fundamental reconstruction", of a redefinition of structures, and initiation of a set of new processes. The impact of revolution, therefore, need not be seen only negatively, in terms of what is 'lost' or destroyed, but also positively as to what is 'gained' or 'created'.

Revolution thus defined is not a 'normal' process. It is indicative of a peak point of momentum. It connotes a situation of charisma. It is inherent in revolution to be short-lived; what is replaced, or freshly created, through revolution has to become normal; the charisma has to be routinized. No society can afford to live in a perpetual state of revolution; after all, there must be some target to revolt against. Once routinized, the new structures, in their normal run, may create conditions for yet another revolution at a later date. But there has to be a certain period of normalcy between the revolutions.

It is important that the organizers of the seminar have used the word communication without the prefix "mass". This is welcome for two reasons: (i) changes are taking place in the whole array of communication, and not just in mass communication, and (ii) in most societies of Asia the so-called mass media are still the virtual monopoly of the privileged few — the rich and the urban, and thus they may better be called class media as long as they do not reach out to the masses in rural and remote areas. Undoubtedly, they deserve the adjective 'mass' in the context of the developed world; perhaps in view of their potential to reach the masses in the developing countries upon the creation of necessary prerequisites, they may also qualify for this anticipatory appellation.

But, at present such prerequisites do not obtain in several cases. Thus, illiteracy continues to be a handicap for the promotion of print media even when geographical barriers of distance and topography are broken; prior to the arrival of the transistor, the reach of the radio was limited by the non-availability of electricity; Television is currently outdistanced by the same hurdle, added with poor transmitters and unaffordable cost of the receiving set; in the case of computers, the additional obstacle is non-computeracy — the newer form of illiteracy from which most of us, otherwise literate and urban and affluent, also suffer, not to talk of the poor villager who is not
even aware of the arrival of the memory miracle, the epitome of artificial intelligence.

No doubt, the world as a whole is in the grip of a communication revolution which is set to create an information society. Global statistics in this regard are indeed astounding. The world now possesses the technological capability to transport people from one continent to another with remarkable speed and relative ease. Millions of people around the globe can witness the landing of Man on the moon, or a wrestling bout in an American suburb, or the coronation of a "Miss World" simultaneously without moving out of their private chambers. Through satellites, telecommunication has reached new heights; signed copies of the letter can be on the desk of the addressee in no time through facsimile, bypassing the entire international postal system. Today, several countries have made the life easier for those who wish to make long distance calls; they can directly dial the number without suffering the agony caused by an indifferent and a non-cooperative operator at the telephone exchange. Not only people located at great distances from each other talk with a cordless phone, even computers talk to each other and do the work that humans do, and they do that without a grumble. A little silicon chip, smaller than the size of a credit card can carry as much information as the bulky telephone directory of a metropolitan city. All this is new, and truly revolutionary, as it has enlarged the range of possibilities and broadened the gamut of expectations. In some sense, the world of many voices has become one global village of Marshall Mac Luhan's conception.

I can go on reciting the several novelties in the infosphere for which we can rightly feel proud. It someone had heard me speak all this in the 1930s he would have called it incredibilia, or at best a science fiction. In that sense, these changes are dramatic. They have set at rest the theory of unilinear evolution and change, and have introduced a new concept of leap-frogging. Arrival of the printed page made literacy a prerequisite for learning. Illiteracy became, and continues to be regarded as, synonym of ignorance and lack of knowledge. But the radio, and now the television, have questioned that assumption. As long as you know the language spoken on the radio you can learn things without requiring to read. In case of a T.V., the visuals make even the language somewhat redundant — I may not follow the complicated characters of the Chinese language to be able to read a document in the Chinese, and I may be unable to understand a single word spoken on the Chinese radio, but certainly I would be able to grasp the key features of a story enacted on the Television. In fact, I learnt how to repair a damaged cassette through a Chinese T.V. programme that I watched while in Beijing!!
Not only that the illiterates are learning through the radio and the T.V. sidetracking the stringencies of reading and writing, even the literates are losing the habits of reading. We are told that the circulation of dailies, in terms of their proportion to the population is somewhat declining, and the number of dailies is more or less constant even in the developed world; the editors have begun to realize that people turn to radio or T.V. for the news and therefore the newspapers have to shift their focus from presentation of news to in-depth analyses and detailed commentaries. It will not be wrong to say that the reading public is transforming itself into a viewing audience. Rather than turning the pages of a book, and memorizing its key points and arguments, people are developing skills in switching on and off the buttons of a T.V. set, and that, too, through a remote control. Our nostrils are losing the olfactory power of appreciating the distinctive smell of a book, our eyes are moving away from the printed word to pictorial presentations on a tube, and our memory faculties are hibernating because memorizing can easily and efficiently be done by the idiot of a computer, who is at our call with the press of a button.

While the book industry is growing as is evident from the increase in the consumption of paper and burgeoning list of new titles of published material, there is a justifiable fear that readership is declining. It is the libraries to which the publishers turn for the sale of their merchandise. The neo-literates, in many instances, lapse into illiteracy. The legendary 3 R's have no longer remained indicators of literacy; the traditionally defined "illiterates" are learning through the visual media. One wonders whether the new communication revolution is making literacy redundant; whether the pen and ink are destined to become museum specimens.

Some thing similar is happening to the cinema, after the arrival, first of television, and now of the video. Not that the interest in watching movies has declined, only the venue has been changed, from cosy big halls accommodating large audiences to the comfort of a drawing room. The invasion of video — which first arrived in the homes of the rich, transformed the drawing rooms into miniature cinema halls, minus the atmosphere, with audiences drawn from the neighbourhood and from the video-owner's kingroup. Some small entrepreneurs have converted their tiny stalls and shops as functional equivalents of a cinema theatre to run regular three shows a day, and sometimes even more, to facilitate public viewing of pirated video cassettes of good and blue movies. Cinema took the people out for entertainment and offered opportunities to them not only to watch their favourite stars on the silver screen but also to gaze at other well-dressed people and attractive faces in the audience. The complex of cinema compound had its own culture: queues at the ticket window, the mighty of the street prying on the innocent victims, blackmarketing of tickets, hawkers in the theatre during intervals, string of restaurants, snack bars and souvenir shops, and the car parks and taxi
stands. All this may become a thing of the past as the television and the video have brought people back to home. Of course, it is likely that people may still visit the cinema to perpetuate the nostalgia, or that the demography of the cinema-viewers may change. It is understandable that the young feel suffocated by being in the drawing room all the time, and in the company of the old; cinema provides them a pretext to go out, and enjoy the company of the peers while watching a movie of their choice. The darkness of the theatre still provides an ideal setting to the young lovers. Cinema may also continue to attract the poor who cannot afford a video; this may even lead to the relocation of these theatres in small towns and big villages. Similarly, the T.V. serials are challenging the monopoly of the national hollywoods; they have given birth to new starlings — adorable and alluring new faces, talented, and yet not that expensive as big film stars.

Communication revolution has not spared even the office culture. With the installation of electronic gadgets, the offices do not look the same; files are now stored on a diskette, new furniture decorates the old room, and secretaries register and read on the video screen rather than handle the dusty and messy files of papers with illegible notings. The 20 page per day limit for the typist can no longer be a pretext for the lazy secretary who now operates an electronic typewriter. He does not have to type several copies in original of the same letter — a drudgery that the machine performs efficiently, speedily, and without contributing new errors.

All this is in the realm of the possible, and has been actualized in some part of the world or the other. In others, several factors have prevented a full scale penetration of the new communication culture. We can safely assume that even in them, revolution is round the corner, although one is not sure of exactly when.

In terms of communication, the vast continent of Asia presents a highly differentiated profile. It is a continent where jumbo jets have not been able to replace the bullock carts, where electricity has not fully replaced the kerosene lamp, where television is still stationed in the cities, where the empress of poverty continues to occupy its enormous citadel.

In a situation like this, how does one assess the impact of a communication revolution? Where the revolution has not yet occurred, one can only gauge the indirect impact of the revolution experienced by other societies, or by certain segments of one's own society. Such an indirect impact may either pave the way for welcoming the winds of revolution, or lead to the closure of doors and windows to prevent the onslaught. An awareness of the impact of the revolution in other societal contexts can prepare the people to receive the impact if it is inevitable, or to take prophylactic measures to prevent unwanted consequences.
Success of the revolution depends upon the cumulation and articulation of the frustration with the existing, and upon the adequate mobilization of internal resources — both human and material. In the case of communication revolution, one will have to assess the prevailing technological base, in terms of hardware infra-structure and technical manpower, and relate it with the national resource capabilities to afford a new technological breakthrough that would help in attaining the goal of a desirable future.

It is important to emphasize that when we talk of a communication revolution, we talk of a global phenomenon, of the tremendous leap forward taken by the technology in the field of informatics. With its emphasis on *miniaturization* the technology is attempting to overcome several hurdles that prevented its spread in the past. If radio was an answer to illiteracy and inaccessibility which the postal and telegraphic services failed to adequately combat; transistors removed the need of mains-power and improved the portability of the receiving set. The new generation micro-computers are several hundred times smaller than the original giant of the 1940s which occupied more space, possessed limited memory, took so long to compute what would today be regarded as simple calculation, and involved a high investment; by comparison, the PCs of today — appropriately called 'apples' and 'peanuts' — are much more efficient and much less costly. Information that used to be lost in previous times can now easily be stored and retrieved. International link ups have been made possible through the satellites, reducing great distances and miniaturizing the world.

One way to look at the impact is to see how the new communication profile of the world has affected the different societies around the globe. Obviously, this must have initiated some process of homogenization, as did the industrial revolution of some 300 years ago; but it may also have evoked different responses in different societies. To gauge this, the first requirement is to map the changing contours of communication in each society. This will give us an insight into the process of selectivity and cultural screening on the one hand, and into the processes of cultural definition or redefinition of alien innovations, on the other. Such an exercise will provide an inventory of impacts that are universally felt and that are culturally specific. I am sure, such a profile will be different for the United States and Japan — which have nearly 100 per cent reach of the mass media — and Bhutan or the Maldives, where the communication profile is just the opposite. What is implicit in my proposal is the argument that the stage is not yet ripe for attempting universally applicable generalizations as regards the impact of communication revolution. Societies in Asia are at different stages of communication development; as such, all may not be prepared to intake the total package that the new communication revolution offers. There are instances where governments yielded to outside overtures and installed...
television transmitters, but soon realized that they had very little to show other than the imported canned stuff of vintage. The same may happen to computers in the absence of trained manpower and lack of infra-structure for data collection. With the restricted use of media, the generalizations regarding their impact will have a limited validity. The problem in these societies is not so much of assessing the impact as that of bringing in the communication revolution -- to break insulation and create adequate apertures so that the remotely located people can feel integrated with the national community in the first instance, and ultimately begin feeling one with the international community. Whether that would reduce the cultural distance between the countries and create a real global village is a matter of surmise. With the growing incidence of religious revivalism, fanatic assertion of cultural identities, resurgence of linguistic and ethnic loyalties, alongside of the processes of modernization in the communities of the developing third world, one cannot be so sure of this happening. The communication revolution that we are talking about refers to a technology that, as I said elsewhere, "will reintroduce and reinforce diversity and heterogeneity, create newer distances, and establish different destinations" for the individual societies. We are forced to think of the future in plural.

Communication cannot be viewed in isolation. We may join the chorus in heralding the arrival of a new technology with all its revolutionary potential, but we must not close our eyes from the stark realities of the developing countries that make its entry and fuller penetration difficult, if not impossible. We must address ourselves first to the question of taking the media from classes to the masses. That would be a revolutionary leap forward indeed, and we can imagine the impact it would have on the polity, economy, and the culture of the countries of Asia. But that situation still seems to be far.