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Software Production And Distribution Policy

By

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SOFTWARE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION POLICY

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In the Asian context, the increasing emphasis on the linkages between communication and rural development is to be welcomed on at least three accounts. First, only an adequate appreciation of this linkage will enlighten vast area of information darkness. Secondly, this focus is necessary if an obstacle to democratisation of the communication system is to be removed. And finally, it needs to be realised that any serious information imbalance within a country is as immoral and dangerous as in international situation. A basic fact shared by most of the countries in Asia is that vast majorities of their peoples live in rural areas and often remain outside the sphere of attention. In the rural areas the literacy level is low, media research is poor and the feedback system is weak. Under these conditions, how can this majority sector of society be involved in the processes of economic growth or social awakening? Any development of society that may take place with such handicaps for a large section of the people will obviously be unjust and may well lead to instability. Therefore, discussions on the integration of communication with the rural development plans, at various national and international forums, need to be encouraged a great deal.

Let us first examine the factors which are relevant to the formulation of communication policies. It bears
emphasis that no communication policy can be discussed in isolation nor as an activity by itself and also that communication policies are not limited to information or to mass media. They have to cover a much wider area. They should take into account social, economic and political realities and should reflect the needs as well as the aspirations of the people as a whole in the context of these realities. In other words unless the communication policies are integrated with policies in other fields, they will have no relevance and, therefore, no impact. They must answer perceived needs of the rural communities in credible terms and provide an insight into people's problems in the context of wider national realities. According to the International Commission for the Study of Communication Policies, more popularly known as the MacBride Commission, formulation of communication policies should:

a) Serve to marshall national resources;
b) Strengthen the coordination of existing or planned infrastructures;
c) Facilitate rational choices with regard to means;
d) Help to satisfy the needs of the most disadvantaged and to eliminate the most flagrant imbalances;
e) Emphasise universal and continuing education;
f) Help in strengthening cultural identity and national independence;
g) Enable all countries and all cultures to play a more prominent role on the international scene.
As the Commission report says both communication development and overall development are national problems, which every country has to solve by relying essentially on its own resources. However the report also recognises the inter-relationship between communications on the national plane and communications at the international and regional levels. In the Asian region and for the present discussion the most pertinent point is the information role in satisfying the needs of the most disadvantaged and eliminating the most flagrant imbalances.

At the very outset, it is necessary to mention that communication policy for rural development has shown excessive reliance on mass media and the mass media in most of the countries are largely urban based and urban biased. Invariably, the mass media have developed and expanded on imported models and, therefore, have remained unresponsive to the needs of the people as a whole as well as of the specific groups within the community. This is also ascribed to another important factor. The mass media personnel, in experience and in exposure, are influenced by the western values and priorities.

It is a common experience in most of the Asian countries that the interpersonal communication practices and the traditional media forms are not integrated with the mass media.
projections. For these and other reasons the expansion of mass media has either bypassed the rural community or severely damaged the community's own traditional information system without replacing it with more acceptable formats.

In the very nature of mass media functioning, the transmission of ideas is one way and vertical i.e. top-down or centre-to-periphery. A communication policy based exclusively on this mass media framework is alien to the eastern social systems. Evolution of communication policies, particularly in this part of the world, should be based on coordinated functioning of the mass media and the traditional media. The traditional media should not only exist in their original form but should be developed to give support to the communication policies. Under the onslaught from pervasive mass media their subversion or loss of identity is an immense loss to the communication policy. It has to be recognised that the traditional media can play an effective supportive role but only if their entity is maintained. Therefore in the expansion of mass media and selection of technology and formats by it we should be concerned with the influence exerted on the several prescriptive and admitted modes.

Let me give some facts about the Indian mass media to illustrate the points. The sound broadcasting system under
the national organisation i.e. All India Radio, has built up an extensive network. All India Radio covers almost the entire country. In fact, with 84 broadcasting stations, 154 transmitters broadcasting nearly 700 hours a day in 25 languages and 136 dialects, AIR is one of the world's largest broadcasting networks. Already, 90 per cent of the population and 80 per cent of the area are covered by the broadcasting signal. But for over 650 million population, the number of broadcasting receivers in the country is only about 25 million. This works out to around 30 persons to a receiver. It is also a fact that only around one-fourth of this number is located in the rural areas where nearly 80 per cent of the population live. Thus, we have a situation where a high percentage of radio receivers are helping a small percentage of the people and the bulk of the rural population remains outside the access to broadcast messages. The effect of this imbalance is heightened further when you take into account the low literacy percentage in the villages and the very limited reach of the press, the printed word. Although, we have, in India, about 14 thousand journals of which over 900 are daily newspapers their circulation is largely confined to metropolitan cities and big towns. About 90 per cent of the total sale of daily newspapers is confined to areas which count for about 10 per cent of the population. Thus the daily newspaper has yet to penetrate into the rural areas. Take the other mass media i.e. films.
India is the largest producer of feature films. Well over 700 films are produced every year. Nearly 70 million people watch these films every day. But the exhibition facilities are concentrated in metropolitan cities and towns. Therefore here again the bulk of the audiences of these films come from urban classes.

Television was introduced in India, at the national capital Delhi, on an experimental basis in 1959 with a 500 watts transmitter and a very limited range of service. From 1959 to 1981 the progress has been considerable. Today there are 18 transmitting centres providing a total coverage of 2,00,100 Sq. Km. of area (over 6 per cent of the total area of the country) and 15.2 per cent of the total population. The total number of television receivers is about 1.2 million. But the receivers are mostly in the towns within the service area of the transmitters.

However, it has to be said that we in India have been conscious of this imbalance in the reach and penetration of mass media. Only last year the Government of India decided to exempt one and two band radio receivers from the licence fee. This decision was taken primarily to expand the radio ownership and reach and to enable people in the rural areas to buy the radio receivers without having to pay any licence
I would also like to mention that we have evolved a system of community listening and community viewing. There are nearly 47,000 radio receivers installed at community centres in the rural areas where people can assemble to listen to the broadcasts. Similarly, there are 6,000 TV receivers for community viewing. Community listening and community viewing in our situation has a specific relevance. Despite barriers of caste or economic disparities, in the overall we claim a well-knit social system in the village community. The Panchayat Ghar—a meeting place for the village community—is an integral part of the village life and has the support of the administration.

I would like to share with you two of the important experiments in broadcasting, sound as well as television, which have guided our policies for rural communication through the two media utilising customary and accepted practices. In 1956 we conducted a unique experiment in rural broadcasting through Farm Radio Forums in five contiguous districts of Maharashtra state. This was a Unesco sponsored experiment under which Pune station of All India Radio broadcast 20 well-knit and specifically designed programmes for about 150 radio rural forums organised in the same number of villages in these districts. The programmes which were broad-
cast twice a week were listened to by a group of farmers and others at a community centre. The topics selected concerned their day-to-day life. The listening was organised and so was the post-broadcast discussion. After each broadcast the members of the forum discussed the contents and gave their own views and experiences. The convenor of the forum maintained contact with the broadcasting station by regularly sending reports on these discussions. The broadcasting station with the help of experts answered queries from the forums. These listening-cum-discussion groups became an integral part of this special broadcast service. The results were revealing. The study conducted by an independent and professional organisation established that the forum members had not only accepted the message but were also motivated to action. May I quote from the evaluation report:

Radio farm forum has beyond any doubt proved itself a success as a medium for transmitting knowledge. The problems remaining of organization, proper guidance and the maintenance of sets are, of course, unavoidable at the start of such an institution with its many ramifications into all segments of village life.

But farm forum did, in fact, develop into an institution capable of unifying the village around common decisions and common actions. Where it
worked at its best, it served both to widen the influence of the gram panchayat and to broaden the scope of its action. In some places it took an intermediate position between that of a panchayat meeting and a town meeting - less binding in its decisions than the former but more flexible in its deliberations than the latter.

The hundreds of decisions taken, the wells dug, the pure-bred bulls and Leghorns bought, the marketing societies and balwadis established, all bear witness to this new function of the forum. But equally so do the changes, great or small, in habits and attitudes that have been brought about, the greater determination, too, to treat certain problems as a common concern of the village and as something that the villagers themselves can help solve through action.

But perhaps even more important is the fact that the forum, as a decision-making body, allowed numerous villagers to participate in the decision-making process. That the sarpanch and the patil and several other panchayat members were usually also in the forum served to lend more force to its decisions.

Radio farm forum, as a voluntary organisation whose members are neither appointed by any authority nor elected to represent specific group interests, can mobilize a larger voluntary effort, be it in labour, materials or contributions, than even an elected panchayat.

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Balwadi: A creche like centre where children are looked after.
Sarpanch or Patil: Headman of a village panchayat (council)
Another experiment of world-wide interest was in television. My reference is to the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE).

SITE brought the modern medium of television to serve widespread rural areas during 1975-76. The experiment was conducted in 2330 villages of six states in India. Direct reception receivers were installed in the clusters through which the viewers received programmes directly via the Satellite. The transmission for these clusters lasted 2 hours and 30 minutes including half-an-hour national programme that consisted of news as well as programmes of development and national integration. The general objectives of the experiment were to:

1. Gain experience in the development, testing and management of a satellite-based-instructional television system, particularly in rural areas and to determine system parameters.
2. Demonstrate the potential value of satellite technology in the rapid development of effective mass communication in developing countries.
3. Demonstrate the potential value of satellite broadcast TV in the practical instruction of village inhabitants.
4. Stimulate national development in India, with important managerial, economic, technological and social implications.

I would like to mention two points about this experiment. First, apart from programmes of national interest, the
software for the various clusters were need-based and therefore of direct interest to the viewers. Secondly, the organisation of the entire viewing system was undertaken on a familiar and accepted pattern. The TV set was, for example, kept in the verandah of the building in front of the open space where viewers sat on the ground. Except on a few cold and rainy evenings, the TV receiver was brought outside the room by the custodian with the help of the viewers and placed back in the room after the programme was over. The open space available in front of the TV room was large enough to provide sitting space on the ground for a few hundred persons. The evening TV viewing could well be matched with traditional Ram Lila performances where audiences come and sit in front of the stage to watch the performance. In this case, it was the TV receiver instead of actors performing the "act". The women among the viewers, in several places, sat together in groups as they do in situations with which they are familiar.

The various facets of SITE have been discussed with equal interest by communicators and social scientists everywhere. But the purpose with which I mentioned the experiment of radio rural forum or of Satellite Instructional Television was to suggest that the mass media like radio and television can also be integrated with the social system prevalent in a country and become important instruments of
communication policies. The two experiments had a follow-up. On the lines of the radio rural forum in Pune several forums were organised in other parts of the country. The SIT has led to a specific thrust in favour of rural television. Next year the country will have its own Indian National Satellite System (INSAT) which will provide hybrid system of coverage of the country, partly by conventional terrestrial transmitters and partly by a direct reception satellite service. The INSAT system has been conceived as a multipurpose satellite service for telecommunication, television and meteorology. For television service, two TV transponders have been envisaged in the Satellite providing direct satellite reception to special community television receivers to be deployed in villages.

In either of the two experiments of media participation in rural development the policy of software production was need-based and area specific. But before we discuss the software production a brief mention may be made of the information policy for people living in rural areas. What are the essentials of an information policy for rural development? It is obvious that development in this context does not relate only to economic growth or increase in the per capita income. The policy should cover social and cultural realities. While food, health, living conditions and employment opportunities are a part of development efforts towards enhancing quality of life
for people as a whole it is necessary that an individual or a group should be aware of its legal and social rights and be able to exercise them. Viewed in this context the policy goes beyond imparting information in a vertical model. It is obviously necessary to identify chasms in human as well as physical areas of awareness. In 1952 when India’s Five-Year Plans were launched it was recognised that a widespread understanding of the plan was "an essential stage in its fulfilment". The plan document underlines the point that the plan was to be carried into every home in the language and symbol of the people and spread in terms of their common needs. It was also recommended that all available methods of communication be developed and the people approached through the written and spoken word and no less than through radio, film, song and drama and that steps be taken to provide literature and information for the people in simple language on a scale equal to the needs of the people. The plan document also said, "If obstacles are encountered and the things go wrong anywhere it would be helpful in every sense if information is imparted candidly and the people are acquainted with the steps being taken to set things right."

Thus the plan document had clearly envisaged utilisation of the various channels of communication and their expansion with a view to stimulating peoples' participation in the development process. It also recognised the fact that the people, as such, should be taken into confidence on successes
as well as failures in the implementation of the plan.

The launching of the national extension service for an intensive and coordinated development of rural life as a whole was undertaken in order to create an institutional arrangement of interpersonal communication within a village community. A new department of field publicity was created to strengthen the information system at the field level utilising some modern but more of the traditional modes.

So much for the communication policy and its relationship with rural development. Let me briefly discuss the software production and distribution. If the message is to help development in the broader sense, it has to be direct, its contents have to be need-based and it has to be in the language or dialect and in an idiom-prevalent in the rural community. Unless the software programmes are truly relevant and transmitted, through whatever forms, in the language and the idiom accepted by the people, for information and motivational purposes the message is likely to suffer a substantial loss. It has been observed, however, that only in a situation of emergency involving safety and security of life, the dialect and the idiom may not be as important. Similarly, during election campaigns, even the rural population can be energised without complete reliance on local culture and dialect. But
then there situations have a time-frame during which interest and intellect are stimulated in an entirely different context and are exploited for specific purposes. In the development programmes, however, participation and involvement of the people is designed to be a part of a process of education and awareness. This process needs a sustained support to individual interests as well as towards harnessing of environmental factors. There is need to start from perceptions of the rural community of the key issues of development. It is also necessary to bear in mind that the software production, to be effective, has to be related to small audiences in terms of agro-climatic and socio-cultural variables. Programmes produced and distributed should be of interest to the target community as also to the specific groups within it. Extension and social education programmes will make an impact only when the recipient is able to identify himself with the persons and situations portrayed in the programmes. This demands that the message delivered is not only at the receiver's pace or comprehension but also caters to his interest and designed in familiar formats.

Therefore, production of programmes for rural communication has to be decentralised. Besides, it is only a decentralised set-up that can provide for free play of individual initiative and local creativity. Both these factors are important for the suitability and acceptance of the message.
While the Funo experiment of Radio Rural Forum depended entirely on local and localised productions, in the SITs there was an element of centrally produced material but this material had to be integrated into and supplemented by programmes produced at the district or the village levels. We also found that the concept of one district or a combination of two or three districts but with a distinct socio-cultural homogeneity was an important factor in software production.

I have already suggested that utilisation of traditional and folk forms should be an important consideration in communicating development messages. They should be integrated into the potential and capability of the mass media. On the ground, they should be made to supplement the reach and impact of the message through the mass media. It has been our experience that small groups of traditional entertainers whether as participants in the mass media programme productions or utilised to give a support to the mass media projections can play a very important role at the village level because they traditional forms and the performers are rooted in a compact area.

There can be an extension of mass media listening or viewing through a cassette service. If the districts and villages can be supplied with battery-operated cassette tape-recorders and pre-recorded programmes on a community-sharing basis, they can render a useful service and support
to the mass media projection. In large countries like India with several languages and dialects and distinct cultural patterns, there is a need to explore the use of small-scale equipment which can be carried on two-wheel vehicles and can function independent of the availability of electricity or generators. An important format in which software can be produced for rural communication is a slide and sound presentation in which a series of slides are shown with a synchronized commentary played on a cassette tape-recorder. Of course the slides are shot in the locality, possibly with the participation of the people, the commentary could preferably be by a local leader. We at the Indian Institute of Mass Communication tried one such experiment in the two States of Assam and Meghalaya in the eastern region. We were asked by the State Government to initiate a feasibility study of a decentralised plan of communication for community education using low-cost audio-visual aids and appropriate research and evaluation procedures. The objectives of this exercise were to produce prototype communication material that are low-cost and can be locally produced, to test it and to train the local personnel in the process of communication with the use of such equipment and materials. The overall objective was to strengthen local facilities and expertise in the community education. Besides the training of the local personnel and undertaking evaluation in the effective-
ness of communication materials, the Institute produced prototype material by photography in various important agricultural activities and tested and modified simple indigenous audiovisual equipment for use in the villages.

In the software production an important point is that the message should not try to provide pre-conceived solutions to pre-conceived problems, but provoke discussions to identify problems in depth and seek solutions on basis of relevant information provided. Ideally the receivers should be participants and be involved in decision-making regarding formats, contents and presentation of software.

Since software for rural communication will have to be location-specific and culture-specific, these programmes should invariably be made within the country itself and as I have said with the participation of those for whom they are intended. The question of import of programmes does not therefore, normally, arise. It is true that in many developing countries, most of the audio-visual programmes are imported from advanced and developed countries. Such imported programmes are not only ineffective but may constitute a source of cultural imperialism and alienation. This is a danger from which developing countries should carefully guard against. Where the purpose is to inform and then to motivate the people, imported programmes
as such can be of little use for the simple reason that they cannot create the sense of identification so necessary for motivational communication.

But there is an area of sharing of experience in a broad educational sense. Imported films can be of some use in educational communication. Animation films explaining basic scientific principles and processes belong to this area. Radio and TV programmes can be exchanged to promote a favourable climate for development within countries in a region. At the second consultation on follow-up to ASIOCOM (Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Asia and Oceania) which was held in New Delhi from 15 to 19 December 1980, the working group on TV and Film Bank underlined the need for exchanging TV, radio and film programmes between the countries of the region. While recommending a resource centre which makes available the programmes for exchange, the working group recommended a small multinational committee which would select outstanding programmes and would recommend them for exchange. Once one of these programmes is picked up by an organisation the lending organisation should be able to prepare an international sound track to which could be added a commentary track in the language of the borrowing organisation. This technique of adding a commentary track in a language of a particular region could be adopted even within a country if there are several languages.
as is the case with India. Despite differences in climatic conditions, languages and environments, there are similarities in social and cultural behaviour. Our own experience in India is that on television particularly, documentaries when they relate to economic development or social behaviour in another country have succeeded in creating a sense of curiosity among the viewers. There is a desire on their part to know how other peoples are tackling problems provided the problems are similar even though methods of solving them are different. A new sense of awareness thus created may well be a source of inspiration and lead to better decisions. Therefore, if the objective is limited to creating a sense of curiosity and through that wider experience the objective can be achieved through an exchange of specifically designed programmes. But the themes selected have to be such as would evoke direct interest. Their treatment and style should aim at stimulating this interest. This is obviously not an easy task unless the people planning and producing the programmes have a direct understanding of the similarities of the people's needs and of social and economic factors affecting their lives. To achieve this, the planners and producers from concerned countries need to interact and to work together for this specific purpose.

Several of the countries in the region have cultural exchange agreements which should provide for an opportunity
and the infrastructure for co-productions of software. Hitherto the cultural exchange programmes have been confined only to an exchange of programmes between one country and another. This concept needs to be extended to joint ventures in software production. Only under a co-production, the planners and producers will share knowledge and understanding of people's needs. In fact, working together they will be producing programmes of an entirely new concept, a concept of mutual interest and relevance. The same principle when applied within a country can be a source of inspiration and competition towards achieving excellence. This process besides contributing towards communication education for development in the broad sense would also enrich cultural heritage and promote national integration.

The communication policy of any nation should aim at strengthening the independence and self-reliance of its communication capabilities. The exchange of experience and software need not in any way detract from it. On the other hand, under mutually accepted objectives it should strengthen the national media capabilities for rural development.

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