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Administrative And Critical Research:
Notes On The Satellite Instructional Television Experiment

By

K E Eapen
Critical research and SITE are comparatively new to the communication research and application arena. They belong to the 1970’s. Their echoes are only beginning to be heard in the Less Developed Countries (LDCs). It might be of help to recapitulate their origins as we discuss their significance. This paper, therefore, would attempt to briefly touch upon administrative and critical research before going into the circumstances that led to India’s television. From there we would proceed to SITE and some of the research it spewed.

Communication research was a response to the industrialising society of the West, shaping up, as other social science studies, from early 20th century. It may not be too wrong to assert that much of such research was what we call today administrative or service research, research intended to serve and stabilise rather than to challenge and change. Scholars have come to term it “conventional” research. Credit for this is given to mainly American scholars and for “critical” research, primarily to European social scientists. One distinction sometimes attempted between the two is in terms of “policy-oriented” research and “policy” research. Policy-oriented research is intended to question and criticise and, possibly, suggest alternatives whereas policy research seeks to help the existing system perform better.

Prof. James D. Halloran in “The Context of Mass Communication Research” (Unesco monograph No. 78 of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems) has dealt at some length about the genesis and philosophy of critical research, the shift in thinking from conventional research to policy-oriented research getting highlighted at the UNESCO conference of communication researchers held in Montreal in 1969. Since then we have been cautioned by the UNESCO itself that intelligent communication policies depended on the availability of information that only good research could provide. More than a decade has passed by since then. Despite SITE and despite the launching of INSAT-I/A, India is short of critical research findings which would offer some reliable base for communication policy formulation and decision making.

As for general approaches, the Scientific Policy Resolution of the Government of India is clear: “It is an inherent obligation of a great country like India, with its
traditions of scholarship and independent thinking and its cultural heritage, to participate fully in the march of science, which is probably mankind's greatest enterprise today". However, one does not find anywhere specificity in communication policies. It is not implied thereby that the launchings of Indian satellites using Russian, French or American facilities are haphazard efforts or the decisions in terms of taming communication satellites for national purposes are accidental. Many a committee and commission have preceded such tasks and the government in power have been guided by them, though albeit selectively. As and when media technology bursted in Europe — the press, photography, film and radio — it got quickly transferred to India, in colonial interests. The exception is television because, by 1947, India had metamorphosed from the colonial status to one of independence.

The overt thrust of expansion of electronic media in India has been its potential use for instruction, formal and non-formal. The much drummed about Radio Rural Forums of the 1950s are reflective of this. A peep into the story of the advent of Indian television would underline the point. The first formal telecast was from Delhi, on September 15, 1959, for the main purpose of social education. It was supported by UNESCO and the Ford Foundation. As we get a later glimpse of SITE, the international co-operation nature of introduction of TV into India will become obvious.

The Delhi TV, initially, was telecast twice a week to cater to teleclubs in Delhi and surrounding rural belts supplied with sets of community viewing purposes. Interestingly, the research accompanying was of the impact survey type by the Indian Institute of Adult Education. Results were of the self-fulfilling prophesy kind.

The first educational programme for schools was introduced in October 1961. Here, again, effect studies were done to highlight TV's instructional role in science teaching. Daily services in Delhi, apart from the ongoing formal and non-formal educational efforts, got started as late as 1966.

It was on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday, October 2, 1972, that the second major telecast was attempted. This was from Bombay and right from its inception rural programmes were introduced. Sporadic evaluations both in Bombay and Delhi seemed to support the potential of the new medium in disseminating educational information to primarily illiterate rural masses. Thus, right from the beginning, programmes for children, for adults and ETV formed part of programme planning for Indian TV (Doordarshan). Special interest groups such as industrial workers, for example in Bombay, were taken into account for this purpose.
The Bom City Social Education Committee, with its nearly 35 years of experience in conducting functional literacy classes, was involved with a micro project in 1974 to test the feasibility of using the new medium for adult education purposes. Co-operating with the Committee was the St. Xaviers Institute of Mass Communications, Bombay, for evolving tele-lessons. Regular classes were for six days a week, and portable video equipment was used twice a week to supplement on-going teaching. Findings sought, needless to add, were in terms of effects of television for educational purposes.

The Indo-US agreement for SITE, using ATS-F (6), was signed in 1969. It became operational on August 1, 1975. The original purpose was to bring about behavioural changes in some 2,400 villages in selected backward clusters: in agricultural modernisation, family planning, public health, etc. Co-operating with the Space Applications Centre (SAC, Ahmedabad) of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) were NASA and many international agencies such as UNDP, ITU, Unesco and others. Nationally, SITE was involved with a wide range of governmental and non-government agencies, both at the Central and State levels. Coordination of these disparate organisations was a stupendous task on SAC’s part. All these deserved critical research of one kind or another, as SITE was to help make policies for satellite communication in India.

SITE’s dichotomous functioning involved both hardware and software testing. ISRO, representing some of the best of Indian brains in science and technology, had little problem interacting with counterparts within India and abroad. SITE hardware achievements were near perfect. Scientists and engineers were engaged from the very beginning of the project. They were slow, however, in appreciating the significance of software personnel, bewildered and bewitched as many were only about the technological wonder of satellite communication. The net result was poor programme performance and evaluation. Costwise, programme production (9%) and research (3%) meant only 12% of SITE’s total outlay.

Transfer of communication technology to the LDCs normally implies the satellite, ground segments, programme input and the methodology of software evaluation. As far as SITE’s software was concerned, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, under whose protective umbrella Doordarshan functions, was mainly responsible. Programme personnel had graduated from radio to television since 1959 and over 25 years’ of “experience” were behind TV top brass when ATS-6 was positioned over the Indian Ocean. This was not true of the social scientists who were hurriedly recruited by SAC during 1973-74. In fact, apart from in-house or government-sponsored researchers, SITE did not excite the regular
mill of Indian social scientists. Many who were working for SAC’s Research and Evaluation Cell (REC), in the initial stages, felt they were a kind of low caste among the Brahmins of science and technology. Their late recruitment in inadequate numbers and the limited resources left at their disposal were an index of the belief anyway of technocrats in SITE’s curative properties in meeting the socio-economic illness at the rural level, research or no research.

As the paper is about administrative and critical research, in the context of SITE, it is necessary to caution about the western heritage of mass communication research in India. It was hinted earlier that, usually, communication technology on its way from North to South has been accompanied by communication research approaches as well. When we look for origins of research in this area, the pointer is by and large to the USA. The Office of War Information, public opinion polls for election purposes and marketing surveys, appear as three major streams of the United States studies. Research tools, methodologies and theories had grown around them during the past many decades. This is not the occasion to discuss their relevance for SITE because hindsight tells how obvious the pitfalls were.

We need to be reminded here that the faith in Indian educational broadcasts was born and sustained when American influence on the role of communication in development was kind of overwhelming globally. UNESCO, for example, was captivated by rather simplistic U.S. approaches. It looked as if the missing link in social change was information. The introduction of television in India and its later expansion were usually explained as a poor country going for an expensive medium for improving the quality of life of the masses. SITE’s rationale was no different. It needed only the research stamp. The mainstream of US research has been supportive of the existing social order whereas the instrumental use of satellite communication in India is overtly intended as a teacher in the sky and as a change agent. Some conceptual contradictions are embedded in this.

Communication research in India has stayed a stunted effort. Most of what have been attempted have been in the areas of agricultural extension or family planning campaigns, with consumer studies thrown in by city-based ad agencies. Quantitatively, all these may look impressive, but qualitatively, they are more or less the same, i.e., much of the same kind without adding significantly to the knowledge about the processes of communication in an extremely complicated social milieu. Administrative research was there but critical research hardly existed. This was the scenario in which SAC social scientists had to function. The choice was to stay with so-called “value free, positivistic, empiricist, behaviouristic, etc.” conventional goal-oriented research rather than on refining concepts or developing theories. As
Hallowell tells in another context, "There were few, if any, questions about power, organisation and control, little reference to structural considerations and rarely were attempts made to study the social meaning of the media in historical or contemporary contexts".

SITE, as mentioned earlier, did not enthuse the community of Indian social scientists so much so that the bulk of its evaluation was an in-house endeavour. There were sporadic efforts on the part of the Planning Commission and educational institutions such as the Bangalore University. But these were not significantly different in approach from the REC studies. We might want to look at some of the SAC research to be reminded about the vast literature that is available about such work.

It was in November 1973, almost a decade after SITE was being initiated, that REC was set up. This was as if it was an after thought and, of course, to fulfill one of the clauses of the ISRO-NASA memorandum of understanding. Dr. Binod Agrawal, REC Manager, says: "No clear cut-policy was made as to what was expected from the social scientists in terms of their role and function . . . it was left to the social scientists to evolve their own role . . . although the research policy decisions were taken by non-social scientists . . . Above all, the operational details of research were separated from researchers' purview . . . Engineers' standards of precision were used in social research. Administrative and financial priorities were given to engineering activity over social research activity". He goes on to add that "if cost of the satellite and the cost of programme production by All India Radio and the state governments' expenditure are taken into consideration, the research cost would be less than 0.1 per cent".

One of the early kinds of SITE studies was about audience profiles of the various clusters concerned. These were to help the production system to come up with programmes that would "fit". But the time findings began to trickle in, ATS-6 was upon the Indian Ocean and many films were already in cans. Also, producers who often have a tendency to consider themselves "creative" people, were not all that appreciative of audience profiles and were not sure how to handle them.

Talking about "Pre-testing Programmes in SITE," Bella Mody, one of REC's social scientists, had this to say: "It is possible to cover the globe with satellites but not that easy to word the right messages for the right people . . . pay special attention to specification of software objectives, software organisation, time, manpower and budget planning . . . the social or educational or developmental problems you want to solve must determine your solution, not the availability of satellite technology or the primacy of cinematic art and technical polish". Formative research was
of recent origin and for its effective functioning team spirit was indispensable among subject matter specialist, producer and evaluator. This was, understandably, not readily forthcoming during SITE’s early months.

“Summative Evaluation of SITE Impact on Rural Adults” took a major chunk of the evaluation energy. Between 1969 and 1975 — from the ISRO-NASA agreement to the beginning of the Experiment — there was a shift in social objectives: from bringing about behavioural change to one of generally creating the climate of change. Thus, the SITE programme areas remained broad and vague and their evaluation mechanism was circumscribed for first things having not come first.

“Summative Evaluation of SITE Impact on Primary School Children” was yet another SAC study. Recruitment in a hurry of the right kind of research personnel was quite a problem here, as elsewhere. Ms Mody comments: “The social evaluator must be involved from the very beginning with the hardware men, the TV producers and the policy planners to advise on what specific role the technology can play in the area of application . . . Adequate time and money to design good reliable valid tools is essential, early involvement and an adequate information base to design evaluation, and early searches for competent evaluation experts when hardware personnel are being sought and trained . . . do you want to really know if you have succeeded in doing what you set out to do in development, education or social change or was your objective to introduce a new technology through the back door for whatever reason, under the façade of national development?”

The holistic studies in seven villages, one in each cluster, were of a different kind. Their aim was to understand the role of television as a medium of communication, trying to look the man in his totality. It searched for the process of existing rural communication. Researchers had lived in the concerned villages three months before telecasts and 15 months after SITE was turned on. Thus carbon copy surveys were not indulged in. Some effort at looking into language, local culture, etc., was made as the approach generally was anthropological. What resulted was more of qualitative information than quantitative, unlike most other REC studies.

One need not proceed further in this vein. It is apparent that what was generally intended of the REC was administrative research, findings from which would have helped the system function better. There was little innovative about social research of the most innovative of communication technology of the time. The sporadic and protracted nature of REC efforts were not related to any appropriate social theory, nor was there a systematic accumulation of knowledge which...
could be considered as some kind of policy-oriented research results.

The social scientists involved were either trained in the USA or influenced by Western conventional approaches so much so that what was a ready-made year-long experiment, offering golden opportunities for critical research, slipped away from the Indian social science community.

Usually, researchers discussed and debate about basic research and action research. In India, where the government also is in the business of information dissemination in a big way, both private and public media are interested mainly in action research — to find out how effective a particular communication strategy is in selling deodorants or in family planning. The research expectations are in the nature of instant solutions for quick application. Studies are done in isolation, ignoring the relationship of communication to structures, policies or production culture. Therefore, the question of critical research expectations on the part of media owners, commercial users, political controllers or bureaucrats does not get raised. National communication scholars, inspired by anything else, are sadly lacking. All that is expected of everybody often is to seek out means whereby the existing system functions better. There appears to be an aversion at all levels to alternative ways of thinking and doing because of some naïve acceptance of the position that all one needs to know about media, their functioning and their effects are known. Research patently is to support, to reinforce, to legitimise, and not to discover.

Prof. Halloran, in the Unesco paper cited earlier, makes the point that “on the whole critical research, although stemming from a wide range of positions and reflecting different values, is less likely than conventional research to be encumbered by historical and institutional relationships with journalism and broadcasting. Moreover, it is not as closely linked with markets, audiences and publics and is less inclined to have service, administrative and commercial character. Needless to say, it is not without its value implications, but it is definitely more independent of the institutions it is studying”.

From this perspective, an in-house set up such as the REC could not have attempted much of critical research. All the more the regret that the comity of Indian social scientists did not rise to the occasion. Perhaps, like the rest of the LDCs, India does not have properly sensitised sociologists and communication experts to conceptualise about policy-oriented research. Here, Amic as well as other regional and international agencies may have a useful role that still remains to be explored, explicated and experimented.