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Communication Research And Rural Development
In Thailand: An Overall Review

By

Boonlert Supadhiloke
Communication Research and Rural Development in Thailand: An Overall Review

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It is generally agreed that communication research (e.g. feedback) is an essential arm of any development process. Communication research can provide both theoretical and practical inputs into the planning and implementation of rural development programmes. Findings from communication research provide a basis for formulation of rational development policy, goals and strategy as well as assessment of success or failure of such development programmes.

Insofar as communication research has been well planned and executed in Thailand, it should inevitably help boost up national development programmes in rural areas. Thailand has just embarked on the fifth five-year development plan with special emphasis on rural development. It has also been engaged in several communication projects relevant to rural development.

This paper seeks to (1) review what kinds of communication research had been done in Thailand, and (2) what implications they have for rural development. It is also intended to provoke discussion on the subject.

Review of Communication Research Tradition in Thailand

Given time limit, I will try to review all available communication research under the following categories based on some theoretical orientation of my own.

1. Study of Media Effect Tradition

In the communication research literature, special emphasis has been placed on the study of communication effects on individual’s behavioural change and societal development. This approach is based on an assumption that communication is a persuasive (and informative) instrument which can be effectively used to induce change in individuals and society. Usually, this research tradition would examine patterns of media use or media exposure among various groups of audiences and then, trace relationship between such media usage and individual’s attitudinal and behavioral change.
This type of communication research has been practised in Thailand for a long time, no matter whether or not researchers were conscious of a theoretical framework behind their studies. Examples of this research tradition are a study of mass media use habits among rural people in Thailand, by Somkuan Kaviya (1980); a case study of radio listening behaviour among villagers in a northeastern province by Bamroong Sukapant (1980); and baseline survey of media resources by the National Statistics Bureau (1981).

However, it is noteworthy that most communication studies in Thailand (including the studies mentioned above) tend to confine themselves only to investigation of media “exposure” among people without consideration of media “content” and going further to analyse “correlation” between communication media use and types of effects on people. Most studies were lacking in theoretical orientations and often had been carried out without hypothesis testing or specific purpose or clearcut problem definition in mind. It is not surprising that these studies have proved not very relevant and fruitful to rural development programmes in the country. To fill this gap, one large research project has been recently commissioned by the Thai government’s National Research Council to take a critical look at the impact of the mass media on cognitive growth among various segments of the population in the country (see Supadhiloke, 1982c).

2. Diffusion of Innovations Tradition

In parallel with the media effect study, the diffusion of innovations tradition has been widely adopted in the rural communication research literature. Several new concepts, hypotheses and models have been derived from the diffusion literature of other disciplines and tested in various cultures. Closely related to this research tradition is a much publicised concept of “two-step flow of information” which has sparked off a series of communication studies relevant to rural development during the last three decades. It is unfortunate that these research tradition and concepts have not been well explicated in Thailand and, consequently, several studies derived from the diffusion literature proved not very meaningful and practicable to development programmes.

3. Technology Transfer Orientation

It would seem that an emerging research area of communication technology transfer is in line with a traditional approach of diffusion of innovations which has dominated communication research in rural areas for a long time. There is, however, some significant difference between the two approaches. While the diffusion of innovations approach is concerned with “new” ideas, objects or practices, the “technology” transfer approach may encompass both new and old things or practices. Compared to the diffusion tradition, research on technology transfer has
proved more dynamic and beneficial to rural development projects. Two research projects deserve mention here: one deals with "traditional" technology and the other is concerned with "modern" technology.

The first project named "Sharing of Traditional Technology" was a joint international project undertaken by Marga Institute, Sri Lanka Centre for Development Studies, Thai Khadi Research Institute of Thammasat University and several other institutes in Asia; the project was funded by the United Nations University. Under this project, 12 villages from Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines and Thailand had been studied in depth so as to understand the environment in which traditional technologies had developed, to assess the suitability and potential of such technologies for future transfer and to generate technological awareness and capability in these villages.

Two aspects of the study have particular implication for a communication strategy for rural development: they are network analysis and communication or information system. (See Rabibhadana et al., 1978, and Thai Khadi Research Institute, 1978).

The networks at regional and national level have been identified in the five countries already mentioned. In some countries preliminary contacts have already been made and in others, exhaustive lists of possible networks have been identified so as to make the necessary contacts when the occasion demands.

The technical panels for screening, pretesting, evaluating and dissemination had been drawn out of the networks identified at village, regional and national levels.

The communication/information system for Sharing of Traditional Technology is as follows:

Communication/Information System for Sharing Traditional Technology

| (1) GOALS:          | RURAL POVERTY |
|                     | RURAL UNEMPLOYMENT |
|                     | MINIMUM NEEDS |
|                     | VALUES |
|                     | INSTITUTIONS |
|                     | PROFESSIONALS |
|                     | TRADITIONAL TEXTS |
|                     | UNIVERSITIES |
|                     | THINKERS |

(2) TRADITIONAL TECHNOLOGY COMPILATION
(3) DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF EACH REGION

(4) INFORMATION SYSTEM

(5) SEGMENTATION MATRIX

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<th>CULTURAL</th>
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<td>PRACTICES</td>
<td>NEEDS</td>
<td>EFFECTS</td>
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(6) AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION

MARKET RESEARCH
SURVEY RESULT
INDEPTH

(7) OBSTACLES RECEIVERS

BUREAUCRACY
PROFESSIONALS
UNIVERSITY
MULTINATIONALS
TRANSNATIONALS

(8) CHANNELS

EXTENSION
TRADITIONAL CHANNELS
PERFORMING ARTS
MEDIA
SATELLITE SYSTEM

(9) COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

INFORMATIONAL
ATTITUDINAL
BEHAVIOURAL

(10) COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

THIRD WORLD
LOCAL SOFTWARE
SOFTWARE EXCHANGE
Another technology transfer study is in connection with the establishment of the new second radio network in Thailand, formally known as the National Education Radio Network (NERN). The project involved construction of 11 radio stations throughout the country, at Bangkok, Khon Khaen, Ubon, Lampang, Surat, Songkhla, Nakorn Sawan Chantaburi, Mae Hongson, Krabi and Ranong. It involved a large amount of funding totalling US$34 million, shared by World Bank (IDA) loans and the government budget.

The project, under the responsibility of the Public Relations Department and the Center for Educational Technology, required technical assistance by external experts and involved international firms in the installation of radio transmitters, development of software production and evaluation of the project. Under these circumstances, some patterns of communication technology transfer take place and render an interesting study. (See Supadhiloke, forthcoming, 1982).

4. Flow of Information Approach

A well-publicised notion of "free flow of information" has also attracted many Thai scholars and quite a few studies employing different methods such as content analysis and sample survey had been undertaken mainly to test patterns of information flow within the country. Interestingly, some studies have gone far enough to examine communication and development problems and consequences arising from the imbalance of information between urban and rural areas. For example, one study has been launched by Thammasat University's Thai Khadi Research Institute to examine the "information gap" issue between people of different socio-economic groups and its connection with social conflicts in local communities. (Supadhiloke, 1982b).
Another study has been commissioned by Ford Foundation to examine the development and status of people's right to communicate in Thailand; the study has now been completed. (Supadhiloke, 1982a).

5. Communication System Approach

This approach seeks to examine communication from a system perspective; communication is viewed as one sub-system within a larger total social system. Some research projects took a critical look at the development of communication system as part of the development of socio-economic systems. One interesting study was the Mae Klong Integrated Rural Development Programme jointly undertaken by Thammasat University, Mahidol University and Kasetsart University (1978).

The general objectives of this programme put an emphasis on integration at various levels. Implementation and integration was from policy-makers to field workers which included researcher, local government officials and rural population. Integration and development had been induced in education agriculture, social security and public health as part of a comprehensive system. Communication system has also been developed to facilitate the overall integration and development scheme. The first phase of the project concerning survey of general living conditions of the rural population in the Mae Klong area has already been completed and the remaining phases have been underway.

Apart from this Mae Klong Integrated Rural Development project, some other communication projects are concerned with development of communication systems such as planning of radio correspondence education and communication policy for socio-cultural development in Thailand. (Supadhiloke, in press).

6. New Emerging Front

In recent years, there seems to emerge a new trend in communication research relevant to rural development in Thailand. This new trend took shape in response to immediate social needs and communication problems in society. Following are some communication research issues:

— How communication process takes place in the context of rural development programmes?
— How communication media affect the development programmes and how far development goals have been achieved?
— What kinds of constraints and factors have a bearing on communication and rural development programmes and how to cope with them?
What kinds of communication policy and planning are suitable and relevant to rural development programmes?

How to design communication messages to be relevant to the needs of local audiences?

Some research projects had already been taken to answer these problems. For example, Rabibhadana et al. (1980) have ventured to tackle the issue of “How to work with farmers?” One serious problem which they faced is interaction between farmers and advisor or development workers. They conclude:

(1) It is hard for the adviser to contact farmers due to the poor infrastructure, and the farm work time table.

(2) Participation is usually low due to the wrong approach to gather the farmers as well as the personal attitudes of the farmers whose pragmatic outlook sees no utility in participating.

(3) There exists a communication gap between the farmers and the adviser (or development worker). In general, they came from different social and educational backgrounds. The present scientific oriented educational system which the adviser has gone through does not prepare him for field work situation. The adviser tends to use abstract language which the farmers with their practical mind cannot comprehend. He uses general problems and examples instead of analogies or specific examples which are close to the farmers’ experiences. Furthermore, as the structure of Thai society places much emphasis on status differentiation, the adviser, with his higher status and educational achievement, is not willing “to learn from the farmers.” He tends to take his way of thinking for granted, and instead of trying to understand the farmers’ situation and take it into consideration, he tends rather to give out order and think that they are the best for the farmers. Such communication gap is often made worse by the fact that the nature of the Thai language, although beautiful, is the language of “diplomats”. That is, it has certain inherent vagueness which gives room for differing interpretation. Differing interpretation of the same statement, owing to different past experiences of the two sides, can help to create much misunderstanding, and enlarge the gap between the adviser and the farmers.
7. Implications of Communication Research for Rural Development

Given a short list of communication research studies described earlier, we can see how far they have implications for rural development in Thailand and other countries. These communication research studies have both strength and weakness. On the minus side, one serious shortcoming of these studies, in my view, is that most studies had been conducted without clear conceptualization of the problem and theoretical orientation framework. What is rural development, how it should be properly defined and what kinds of roles communication can play in the development process, remain unresolved issues to many researchers. Obviously, some researchers did not have any communication and development theories in mind when they ventured to conduct research on the subject; they just went out to a field, collected and analysed data as they appeared. Whatever communication theories might have been used, they were borrowed from Western society and were not appropriate in Thailand. These kinds of studies might be helpful but not appropriate for rural development programmes in Thailand at the present stage.

Another major shortcoming, I think, lies in research methodology itself, particularly research designs and interpretation. It seems that most research methods (or techniques) used in previous studies have not yet been well developed and tested to suit local conditions and theoretical framework. Despite their shortcomings, these communication research studies had proved practicable and useful to rural development programmes at all levels. Of particular value are those applied and action-oriented research studies carried out as part of the rural development programmes, e.g. Mae Klong Integrated Development Project, the National Education Radio Network (the second radio network), the sharing of Traditional Technology and Radio Correspondence Education Planning. These research studies have often been cited by Thai officials as basis for their making decisions about the planning and implementation of rural communication programmes. They have also been used as a reference by official policy-makers for formulation of communication policy at various levels — national, ministerial and sectoral.

Some theoretical oriented research studies have also proved relevant and beneficial to development programmes in Thailand. Such communication studies as “information gaps and conflict resolution” and “media effect and cognitive development” have been cited as guidelines for drawing public information policy for development of youths in rural areas.

In short, there exists some meaningful linkage between communication research studies, both applied and theoretical, and practice of rural development programmes in Thailand. There is a great possibility of increasing the utility of communication studies to rural development projects in future if the quality of such communication
research can be improved, theoretically and methodologically, and research be made relevant to local conditions. Cooperation among institutions and nations in the Asia and Pacific region is needed to find ways and means to generate and utilize communication research more effectively for rural development process.

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