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Priorities In Communications Research In Bangladesh

By

Abdus Sobhan
PRIORITIES IN COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH IN BANGLADESH

Abdus Sobhan
Introduction

As I understand, the chief objective of any communication research is to take stock of the available communication resources and test and assess their usefulness and potentials. Communication research also means an effort to make a critical study of the existing system of media. Its essential purpose is to acquire fresh knowledge which will enable the planners and policy-makers to make the communication process more penetrating and meaningful in achieving desired objectives. In any development process the planners and policy-makers must know the needs, consciousness and absorbing capacity of the people and the only way to determine these factors is constant research.

The necessity of Communication research can hardly be over-emphasised. The MacBride Commission for the Study of Communication Problems has rightly observed: 'There are serious requirements in all societies for broad-based research in order to have solid evidence on which to formulate conclusions and well-founded decisions on communication policies and practices. Given the pivotal role of communication in the modern world, this is not academically a question but a practical necessity'.

Bangladesh has a long tradition of mass communication. In coping with the spectacular development in the media field during the seventies, the main feature of communication research was moulded in an in-built institutionalised system.
The last decade has seen the setting up and growth of more than half a dozen national institutes/agencies, such as, Press Institute of Bangladesh, National Broadcasting Academy, Film Institute and Archive, National Institute of Population Research and Training, External Evaluation Unit of the Planning Commission, Agricultural Information Services and Central Extension and Resource Development Institute. All these institutions and organisations along with the in-built mechanisms of Radio Bangladesh and Bangladesh Television such as Listeners' Research Unit of Radio Bangladesh and Evaluation Cell of Bangladesh Television are actively involved in constant monitoring and evaluation of performance of these media.

The first ever study in this field was made in 1965 when a mini-survey of radio listeners was conducted by the then Radio Pakistan, Dacca to measure the listening habits of the people around Dacca. Another listeners' survey was carried out by the then East Pakistan Research and Evaluation Centre, Dacca, on the implications of family planning in the rural areas within 20-mile radius of Dacca City in 1966.

In this connection I would like to mention the recent setting up of the Bangladesh Press Commission. The Commission under its terms of reference has been mandated to make a comprehensive study of the problems of the print media, especially the problems relating to the industry itself, its present condition, modernization and future expansion and to suggest ways and means to raise the standard of journalism and improve the working condition of those who are engaged in this industry. Commission's findings may help us to get an overall picture of the print media so far as its functioning and development are concerned.

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But for other media, for instance radio, TV, film, post, telegraph and telephone, advertising and public relations we are to devise some other mechanism to study them in their totality.

After a long gap of about 10 years a significant study in this field was made by the Radio Bangladesh in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 1976 on the Radio listening habits in the rural areas of Bangladesh.

A bigger study entitled Comprehensive Population Communication Strategy in Bangladesh was conducted by the Ministry of Information, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, in 1977. Its purpose was to assess the effect of media programming on population control and family planning.

In 1976 another study was conducted on the reading habits in Dacca City with regard to newspapers, journals and books. The project was sponsored by the National Book Centre, Bangladesh, prepared by the Centre for Urban Studies, Department of Geography, University of Dacca. The chief objective of this survey was to form a guideline for a comprehensive national reading habit survey. These individual pieces of research work could not make a complete picture of communication pattern in the country. A major attempt in this direction has been made by the Press Institute of Bangladesh. Under its Mass Media Survey Programme, an attempt has been made to give an overall picture of the different communication media in the country. The survey has tried to focus on issues concerning the media which were thought to be relevant to the community they served. In the process, the weaknesses and strengths of the various facets of the mass
media were probed. By tracing the roots of political, social and commercial forces operating in the mass media sector, the study has tried to examine the extraneous factors that often impinge on the growth of mass media.

**Media Survey**

The survey includes the following media: (1) Newspaper, (2) News Agencies, (3) Television, (4) Radio, (5) Film, (6) Advertising Agencies, (7) Public Relations set-up, (8) Post, Telegraph and Telephones. Under a subtitle the Programme also includes a survey of media impact on a stratified sample population, both urban and rural.

The study has revealed that towards the end of 1978, there were thirty regularly published daily newspapers in the country and about 102 weeklies, the largest concentration being in the metropolitan areas. The number of newspapers and weeklies considered in preparing a region-wise distribution of the publications was restricted to those which appeared to have impact on public opinion and dealt with contemporary issues and problems. With respect to circulation, these newspapers averaged one copy for every 220 persons, the largest portion of sales taking place in the urban areas.

It was found that newsprint claimed the biggest share of expenditure in newspaper production while the revenue earned from advertisements became the life line of the publications. Calculation of costs and profits has demonstrated that a newspaper with fewer pages and a lower circulation figure having to spend less on newsprint but succeeding in obtaining a fair volume of advertisement has greater chance of profitability.
The television network in the country is also disseminating national news apart from providing other useful information and entertaining the viewers with music, dances and film shows.

The survey report has disclosed that although more than 85 per cent of the population of the country live in the rural areas, television programmes are mostly urban-oriented. A reason, the report says, is that the vast majority of the television set-owners live in the cities and the big towns. Only 3 to 5 per cent of the present TV programmes can be called rural-biased and these are mostly programmes with an accent on government's agricultural development plans.

The ratio of imported or canned to home-produced programmes in the television is nearly 1:3 which shows that the national television, like in many other developing countries, is heavily dependent on imports in its programming.

About the spread of the network, there are seven TV stations out of which one in the capital is the originating station and the remaining six are relay stations. Programmes are all centrally produced at the station in Dacca and with the help of the relay stations the television is expected to cover 90 per cent of the population. More relay stations are on the anvil to improve the quality of transmission and to increase the effective coverage by television programme. In the Second Five-Year Plan of the country, television has been allocated six per cent of the total budget of the country's communication sector.

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The promise for further growth notwithstanding, doubts have been expressed by many respondents to survey questionnaires about the scope for qualitative improvement of TV programmes. They assign such fears to lack of competition and absence of programme evaluation.

Radio & Film

Among 30 developing countries of the world Bangladesh ranks 27th in respect of number of radio sets per 1000 population, according to a Socio-Economic Data Bank, University of New South Wales Libraries.

The Survey reveals that Radio Bangladesh has 17 transmitters with a capacity of 1488.5 kilowatts till 1980. Transmission hours of Dacca station have increased from 5 hours 30 minutes in 1939 to 16 hours in 1979. The total daily broadcasting hours of Rangpur, Sylhet and Khulna stations is 10 hours 30 minutes and that of Chittagong and Rajshahi is 14 hours (figures valid through 1981). Starting initially with only 2 studios at Dacca station, Radio Bangladesh has at present 39 studios throughout its various units. Radio Bangladesh broadcasts a great variety of programmes. Almost 100% of the programmes are locally produced, although there are some foreign inserts in a number of programmes.

The survey on film has disclosed a general belief among viewers about the medium's inherent capacity to motivate an individual or group towards a desired goal, but at the same time these people feel that the actual performance of Bangladesh films has not come up to expectations. Most of the directors, about 84 per cent, said that
the purpose of producing films is making profit while only a minority said that social concerns and a creative urge for self-expression led them to film making.

The survey reveals that there are 36 registered Advertising Agencies but when the survey was made in 1980 only 26 firms were found in active business. Most of the agencies are relatively new and are small in size employing between 4 to 25 persons. The agencies have been found to be poor in policy planning and creative activities.

The report on Public Relations units says that not very many organisations undertook much public relations activity. Most of the public relation departments in large organisations were set up after Independence in 1972. This was due to the government’s emphasis on keeping the people informed of the activities of its various departments at public corporations.

The report on Posts, Telegraph and Telephones says that there are 7,269 post offices serving an estimated 88.7 million people which means that one post office caters to about 12,500 people. Underscoring that the country suffers from an inadequate coverage by postal services, the report notes that the rural population are getting less services from the postal department than their urban counterparts. The study has revealed that unsatisfactory means of transport, lack of modern postal equipment and excessive load of work on the existing postal machinery were factors in irregularities in mail services. Many post offices have been found to extend their services beyond routine work like renewal of driving licences, collection of motor vehicle tax, sale of school text books and family planning devices.

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Rural-Urban ratio

The rural-urban distribution of telegraphic facilities is uneven which is evident from the fact that although 90 per cent of the people live in villages only 368 villages out of an estimated 64,000 have telegraph offices. In the rural areas there is one telegraph office for every 217,000 people while in the urban areas every 25,000 people has a telegraph office.

Bangladesh's telegraph and telephone connections with the rest of the world have vastly improved with the introduction of satellite services.

The annual rate of growth of the telephone network in the country during the last eight years is 4.64 per cent. There is one telephone for 885 people. The bigger urban areas like Dacca, Chittagong, Khulna, Bogra are better off in terms of telephone facilities.

As I have told you earlier this is not all. There remain still many things to be explored and examined to take a critical study of the media and to present a complete picture of the communication pattern in the country. Nevertheless, this is an humble beginning.

Today, we are lagging far behind in comparison with other developed Asian countries where successes of national development plans create increasing interest in research in communication as well as in other social sciences, both at the universities and other non-university institutions.

In this connection may I point out certain field in which research is immediately necessary.
1. To determine the overall impact of the print media, especially the newspapers, the magazines, the periodicals, the leaflets, the pamphlets and the bill boards, a comprehensive readership survey throughout the country is essential.

2. The country has the infrastructure of all the media including the mass media such as newspaper, radio and television but there is no appropriate system of feedback. Thus we require a thorough research on feedback of these media for devising an appropriate mechanism. We have already sought UNESCO's assistance in this regard.

3. To make social and economic development effective, we need reliable data on the impact of media in respect of agriculture, family planning and mass literacy campaigns. Comprehensive research on the efficacy of the media in all these fields is essential at this moment.

4. A survey on the utilization of folk arts such as songs, drama and theatres may be planned.

5. Press Institute of Bangladesh is the only organization for the development of mass communication in the country which is engaged in communication research. Research Wing of this Institute is to be developed with regard to both trained manpower and funding. One way to solve the shortage of manpower is to train the existing staff according to instability. In this special field ANIC and FMA can help us in providing trainer or granting fellowships or training in special research.

There are factors of varying degrees of importance which have hindered research work in developing countries like ours. One is the shortage of manpower and funding but the most important factor is the somewhat sceptical attitude of the media practitioners and policy-makers towards research. If policy formulation and planning are to be carried out effectively, this attitude needs to be changed.
To overcome shortage of trained researchers and funding there may be bilateral or multilateral collaboration among the developing countries whose problems and interests are similar by undertaking common research programmes or offering fellowships for research training. In this regard I may mention the names of the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), Singapore and the Press Foundation of Asia (PFA), Manila which can play a vital role in jointly organising and planning research programmes. The East-West Communication Institute of East-West Centre, Honolulu, may provide communication experts and training facilities for researchers and organise research programmes suitable to the countries of this Asian region.

According to suggestions by an expert group of communication researchers, the fundamental and essential tasks in which policy-makers, planners and researchers need to collaborate would be:

(1) The production of an inventory of present communication resources including modern and traditional media and analyses of the variety of present communication structures. Such an inventory could also include data on audiences and their communication consumption pattern.

(2) Critical analysis of communication needs of a society, specially in relationship with the existing social and communication structures.

(3) The analysis of the communication components in all aspects of national development plans and programmes, in order to ascertain the communication requirements of the programmes. These needs must be reconciled with means and capacities available.

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In conclusion, I would like to state that despite the fact that both national and international institutions/organisations have already achieved considerable success in the field of Communication Research, we are yet to go a long way in mutual sharing of experience and expertise. In this field one will certainly agree with me that the international and national institutions have not yet been able to develop a common mechanism wherefrom the media research can adopt a permanent and constant operation befitting to the research objectives. Bangladesh media research today is very much in conformity with the desired priority objectives of the present Govt. i.e. to put a new thrust on five fundamental areas such as (i) increasing the growth rate up to 7%, (ii) reduction of wastage in the Govt. Sector, (iii) encouragement to private investment, (iv) attainment of self-sufficiency in food production, (v) checking the alarming population growth rate etc.

All social science research including communication research attained a new dimension to achieve all these objectives, for which the knowledge and experience gained in other countries in this particular areas are very much desired to streamline and strengthen the communication research in Bangladesh.

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