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Communication Research For Policy-Makers And Planners: Some Preliminary Observations

By

M Alwi Dahlan
COMMUNICATION RESEARCH FOR POLICY-MAKERS AND PLANNERS:
SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

By: M. Alwi Dahlan

Perhaps no communication researcher, especially in our part of the world, would say that his product has no relevance to national policy and development plans. As we are fond of saying, communication is essential to all human activities; and this is also true for that of policy-makers and planners. A great deal of activities at all stages of the policy-making or planning process involve various aspects of communications.

Policy and plans are not made by only one or two officials sitting along behind their desks. They are usually formulated in a series of intensive collective deliberations, which are participated by many, from various agencies and organisations, who may have opposing views and interests. For certain types of policy or plan, a different level of communication activities — and problems — may occur before the final option or formulation is selected by the political decision-maker.

Communication does not stop after the decision is made. Any policy or plan can only be introduced and carried out with sufficient communication. It can gain wide acceptance and support — from those who implement as well as those who are affected by the policy or plan — if due considerations are paid to the constellation of communications in the society. Further in the policy-making and planning cycle, communication is also necessary to acquire feedback on the implementation, which provides information for modification or formulation of the next policy or development plan.

The relevance of communications to policy-making and planning thus is not limited to any particular aspect of communication or any single component in its process, e.g. the channel (whether mass media or social network). It is probable, safe to say that most of the knowledge of communication and hence its research — be it in interpersonal, organisational, political, development, mass communication or whatever — have some bearing on policy-making and planning.
This means also that the relevance of communications research is not limited only to any particular area of policy or sector of planning, e.g. information policy or development programmes for the mass media industry. Communications research is relevant to all sectors although, of course, to varying degrees.

The users and their research needs

The relevance of communications research to the various sectors of economic planning or government policy-making appears to be related to the respective goals and characteristics of each sector. For example, those which deal primarily with the physical aspects of national development — e.g. infrastructure construction — may be the least directly affected by communications research. The implications may be more direct and wideranging when it comes to the sectors and agencies which tackle the problems of social development and change. While the construction sector could see the significance in terms of development support communications for individual projects or only during crisis situations, the social sectors may want to apply communication research findings to change traditional values and instill modern attitudes or engineer structural change in the society at large.

In order to understand the potential impact of communication research on government policy-making and planning, it may be useful at this point to identify the users of research in somewhat more concrete terms. A tentative classification of this audience may be made according to the main functions or areas of responsibility like the following:

1. Management and dissemination of day-to-day information
2. Socialization of set national goals and values in general.
3. Engineering of change in basic social structures and related behaviour.
4. Management of physical communication and communications infrastructure.
5. Administration of the government and general services for the public.
6. Physical development.

Clearly, those with responsibilities which are more close to the field of communication, are more likely to become direct users of communication research. The closest is obviously the policy-makers in agencies which manage information, especially the Department or Ministry of Information, and to a somewhat lesser extent, extension agencies in various sectors. Presumably, they are the main and new potential users for various types of communication research at all levels, e.g. from simple audience surveys at the local level, effectiveness studies at the technical level, up to researches on communication policy at the national level or communication structure at the theoretical level.

Next to the information officials are those from agencies responsible with socialization of national goals and values, such as the departments of education,
culture, or religious affairs or other bodies in charge of social values (e.g. Indonesia's BP7 or South Korea's Social Purification Commission). Among their potential interests may be included researches in interpersonal and cultural communications, psychological aspects of communication (e.g. perception, barriers to communication), media effect on the younger generations, distant learning, new communication instructional technology — including projections on interactive technology, such as video games, personal computer, etc.

Policy-makers and planners in agencies responsible for engineering the change in basic social structures faced immense tasks which need multidisciplinary research on various aspects of social structures. Everyone, however, may be interested in a different type of communication research. For example, economic policy-makers would need findings on how communications could break through the gap between the rich and the poor. Financial planners would be interested in communication approaches to change traditional attitudes and beliefs on such matters as inflationary psychology, gold hoarding, savings and consumption. Officials and planners in mass transmigration programmes, for instance, would be looking for any findings on how to engineer social communications in newly opened locations among transmigrants from different subcultures and between them with the local population in the area. The same need for communication knowledge may also be felt by those responsible in agricultural change, family planning, social reforms, etc.

Those in the physical communication sector, e.g. telecommunication, work for the infrastructure of human communication, and logically would need various research in order to improve their performance in facilitating the flow of information. They may raise questions regarding: verbal communication characteristic and behaviour of the population, social demand for telecommunication, social-cultural impact of communication technology, and the like.

Those who take care of administrative and public services may not be interested in the findings of audience and effect studies. But they would find relevance in research on organizational communications, e.g. information flow in the bureaucracy, how communication could be improved within the government and the general public, communication process in coordinative situations, etc.

Policy-makers and planners who feel the least concerned about communications research may be those responsible in the physical aspects of economic development, e.g. the sectors of mining, energy, public works, industrial development and the like. Nevertheless, these are situations in which they would find the results of communications research relevant, for example, when faced by social resistance in the implementation of a big development project, labour crisis, or even the official opening or completion of a project. And in some countries, including Indonesia, plans and implementation of certain (and eventually most) types of physical projects have to be preceded by studies on environmental impact, which must include the impact to social environment, implicitly, including social communications research.
In addition to research requirements of each sector, there are areas which have
general pertinence to almost all sectors. To mention a few: development support
communication, model of extension services, surveys on public opinion and attitudes
toward current development programmes. Certainly, the quality and depth demanded
by each sector may be different. Some would be interested in the findings of
almost all aspects of communications in a continuous manner, whether they are
action-oriented studies or theoretical development research; some would be concerned
with periodic evaluation or monitoring of a particular step in implementation;
still others would have applied but occasional needs. Nevertheless, communications
are relevant to all economic sectors and policy areas and research questions at
various levels do touch on the interests of policy-makers and planners.

Research implementation: the Indonesian case

Questions may be raised at this juncture whether the previously discussed
requirements — admittedly assumptions of sectoral needs — are reflected in real
research activities. Do the policy-makers and planners actually search for the rele-
vant communication answers to their questions? Do they really commission research
or, at least, ask for research findings? Of course, similar questions can also be posed
to communication researchers: how much research have been done on areas relevant
to policy-making and planning? What are the efforts of communication specialists
in meeting the needs or, at least, in putting existing research findings in the context
of sectoral policies and plans?

To get some idea about actual research implementation, perhaps it is useful
to look at the case of Indonesia. While available data are limited to the information
sector, a quick check with the research and development units of several agencies
seems to indicate that a number of policy studies have touched on various commu-
nication aspects — implicit or explicitly. To mention a few examples, the Ministry
of Domestic Affairs have commissioned conceptual research on the democratic
process at the rural level which, among others, investigate village political commu-
nication and its institutions. In the agricultural sector, a series of research was
conducted on farm broadcast and rural listening groups, and others focused on
communication factors in agricultural innovation. In the education sector, research
have been done on distant-learning, instructional media, communication gaps
between generations, and other socialization problems. Research supported by the
Minister of Development Supervision and Environment have examined the problem
of communication barriers in the process of implementing programmes in addition
to that on environmental communication. And, of course, the family planning
agency has conducted and commissioned a large number of studies touching on
communications, including KAP surveys, channel studies and campaign experi-
ments.
Research conducted under the auspices of policy-makers and planners in the information sector are the most numerous as it should be. In the last seven years, a total of 139 research projects, in addition to a number of information development projects, have been commissioned by the Board of Information Research and Development of the Department (Ministry) of Information. The largest portion (74%) of these research are concentrated in what may be considered the five areas of priority in information policy-making, i.e. technology application, communication structure and strategy, government information, rural communication and impact or effects. (See Table I).

The main topics researched under each heading also reflect the serious efforts to solve problems at hand. For example, research on communication technology have focused primarily on extending the reach of existing mass media — especially the electronic media — to the majority of the population and those living in remote areas throughout the archipelago. Research in communication structure and strategy have attempted in some degree to question the existing national communications system. Attention to rural areas also pose basic questions on the two-step model and communication network, in addition to studies examining the possibilities for rural media, e.g. the koran masuk desa (literally newspaper enters the village). Research on government information covers a wide range of problems, including several on the problems of manpower development; this is geared toward finding solutions on the lack of software and skilled professionals. The social and cultural impact of satellite television is the main topic in the area of effect studies.

In terms of media and channels (Table II), priorities have been put particularly on television and radio — no doubt reflecting the need to answer problems which come with the satellite and the transistor. The next priority is the channel of government information and some of the research here take a hard look at the uses of linking the information bureaucracy with the interpersonal channels and informal social networks.

These research priorities are not the same from year to year but show a qualitative change toward more basic research. As illustration, research on the press have shifted from simple audience surveys to what can be called the whole process of journalistic communications, e.g. in the interaction between the press and decision-makers — with decision-makers being both the source and the audience.

Needless to say, the priorities set by the Department of Information as the biggest sponsor influence the trend of communication research in the country. Nevertheless, there are some research outside the mainstream, e.g. on the political economy of communication, the concept of information equitability, the impact of the satellite as technology, etc. These types of research are quite creative and opens up new areas. It remains to be seen, however, whether this type of research could inspire planners and policy-makers to rethink their priorities for future research.
Policy effects of research

In quantitative terms, therefore, communication research in Indonesia is not lacking the support of planners and policy-makers. But the picture may not be as clear in qualitative respects. Many of the research areas mentioned earlier as relevant to various sectors, have not received the attention of policy-makers and planners. There are more sectors which feel no need for communications research compared to those who do express interest and support research.

Interest and financial support alone, however, are not enough. In the final analysis, the overall relevance of research to national policies and plans is reflected in the follow-up — not in the quantity — of research. What happens to completed research and its findings? Here we are talking about how policy-makers and planners use research in their actual work; how far the findings are considered in reviewing old policies and plans or in formulating new ones, or to what extent do they influence the thinking of the users.

The follow-up of research can take various forms. Some research add new knowledge and understanding of what have been done before, why certain things in policy implementation went wrong and why certain others happened the way they did. Some research are followed up by further discussions (seminars, workshops) and nothing more. Others spawn new research projects which very often raise more questions for newer research projects, ad infinitum. But from the researcher's point of view, the ultimate indication of success in the context of this paper is probably the total application of his findings and recommendations into policy or plan.

Researchers' wishes aside, it appears that a great many — if not most — of the research in communications, have not been followed by policy actions. To take the case of Indonesia, some of the most policy-oriented researches mentioned earlier, have not been translated to policy actions, e.g. the researches on press–decision-maker interaction, on the effectiveness of community information center, or on policies concerning the film industry. Follow-up actions seem to be limited to certain areas, particularly on communication technology, manpower development, and television. Interests in using research findings are lacking even in some priority areas such as on rural communication.

Why is this lack of interest? Since most of the research are funded by the government and approved by themselves, what are the policy-maker's and planner's reasons for not making use of the research?

Various factors seem to contribute to this situation, not all of them related to decision-makers and planners. The lack of research impact on policy can also be attributable to researchers themselves. Of course, perception may differ between the two sides — policy/planning official vs. researcher — as to which side is the most
to blame. The following is an attempt to list some of the reasons on both sides; grouped into those related to the research, the researcher, and the policy and planning process:

1. Research related reasons, e.g.

   (a) Relevance in terms of the time-frame. Research is conducted on past developments and do not look ahead far enough in order to be relevant for future policies and plans;
   
   (b) Direct relevance. Research may only be policy-oriented in name but not in substance; not operational;
   
   (c) Context. Research very often starts along academic tradition, e.g. based on Western concepts. Relationship with real life not clear;
   
   (d) Analysis. Data not interpreted in terms of user's needs; recommendations and implications very often not clearly stated, often only "for further research";
   
   (e) Presentation. Not directed to the users in policy-making and planning, lengthy and language not adapted to the audience.

2. Policy-making related reasons, e.g.

   (a) Vested interest in existing system; research findings unfavourable to users, e.g. contradictory to programmes being implemented;
   
   (b) Attitude toward research. Not all users are open-minded about research; research findings are often viewed as evaluation of user's performance.
   
   (c) Vague terms of reference. Users cannot always clarify their problems for research; users do not talk in research language; gap between felt needs and expressed needs;
   
   (d) Understanding of research capabilities. Users want to get clear solution on complex problems;
   
   (e) Political considerations; users deal directly with actual day-to-day social and political development;
   
   (f) Conflicting opinions and goals among factions in the government;
   
   (g) Motivation. Users sometimes want research to justify existing policy and plans.

Duplications for research priorities

Obviously, there must be mutual understanding between users and researchers on what kind of research are needed with what kind of priority. To be sure, policymakers and planners should view research in its proper context. Likewise, researchers need to consider the policy-making and planning environment and requirements — if they want to be relevant and contribute to national policies and development plans.
A priority list of communications research for policy-making and planning should consider, among others: higher policy goals of the country, actual and current conditions as well as projected developments, problems of implementation at the executive level, and the problem-solving potential of the research. Yet, policy priorities should not override academic and theoretical priorities at all costs. Opportunities need to be open for new and creative ideas to look into areas which may become priority in the future.
## Table I

Areas of communication research in projects supported by Ministry of Information
FY 1976/75 – 1981/82 (n = 139)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Problem areas</th>
<th>Number of studies</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Communication technology</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Communication system, structure and strategy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rural communication</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Government information incl. manpower development, organisation, etc.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Effects and impact</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Content, incl. content patterns</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Audience</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Political communication, incl. public opinion</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Information and media history</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Special target areas</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Advertising &amp; public relations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>158</strong></td>
<td><strong>113.6</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Various internal reports, Board for Information Research & Development, Ministry of Information

* Total exceeds 100% due to overlapping areas in some studies
Table II

Communication channel/media investigated in communication research projects supported by Ministry of Information
FY 1976/77 - 1981/82 (n = 139)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel/Media</th>
<th>Number of studies</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mass media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Press</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Television</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Radio</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Film</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Mixed mass media</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td><strong>99</strong></td>
<td><strong>71.2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Government information system</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Interpersonal communications &amp; networks</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Total national system (all channels)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Traditional communication media</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Others (incl. personal media e.g. audio cassette, VCR)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>151</strong></td>
<td><strong>108.7</strong>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* Total exceeds 100% due to overlapping between studies