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Communications Research In Singapore:
An Overview And A Proposal

By

Eddie C Y Kuo
COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH IN SINGAPORE:
AN OVERVIEW AND A PROPOSAL

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Department of Sociology
National University of Singapore

Outline

1. Communications in Singapore: Some Characteristics
   1.1 Singapore as a densely populated urban nation-state.
   1.2 Intensive media exposure
       --newspaper circulation rate: 255 per 1,000
       --radio licences: 190 per 1,000
       --TV licence: 164 per 1,000
       --90 percent population in households with TV
       --65 percent population watch TV in average day
       --cinema seating capacity: 3.2 seats per 1,000
       --annual cinema attendance per person: 17
       --three telephones every 10 person
       --1.5 international telephone calls per person per year
       --3.1 telex calls per person per year
   1.3 Strong government guidance and control of media
       --guiding communication policies
--communication laws
--towards a responsible journalism

1.4 Dependence on foreign resources
--movies, TV programs, tapes and records, publications
--media personnel
--social and cultural implications

1.5 Multilingualism in communication
--multilingualism as a guiding principle
--language and media contents
--language diversity and communicative integration
--implications

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--Programme of Mass Communication, Nanyang University, 1976-80
--the role of Sociology Department, National University of Singapore
--the media industry

2. Review of Communications Studies in Singapore:

2.1 Absence of psychological studies of communication
2.2 Absence of cross-cultural studies of communication
2.3 Concentration on development communication
--communication and family planning

P. Chen, 1974
Managaratnam, 1969
Lee, 1976
Loh, 1974
Loh and Yoong, 1973
A. Ng, 1979/80

--communication policy and planning
Kuo, 1977
Kuo, 1978
Kuo, in press
Kuo and Chen, in press
Malolos, 1977
K. Tan, 1973

--communication and public campaigns
Kwah, 1978
Nah, 1981
Wee, 1977

2.4 Other researched areas

--audience studies
Chen and Kuo, 1978
Heng, 1982
Koh, 1979/80

--media studies
Goh, 1979/80
Ho, 1979/80

--historical studies
M. Chen, 1967
Kanayson, 1964
3. Priorities of Communications Research in Singapore

3.1 Constraints and limitations

3.2 Need to emphasize applied orientation

3.3 Need for cross-national comparative research

3.4 Some proposed research topics

   - inter-cultural communication in a multi-cultural society

   - (some aspects of) formation of mass culture in a mass society

   - mass media and cultural imperialism

   - social impact of electronic communication

   - information revolution and post-industrial society

3.5 The role of AMIC in communications research in Singapore

The press: 12 Dailies in 5 languages
   Circulation: 615,000
   255 per 1,000 population

Radio: 4 AM channels, 1 FM, 1 short-wave service
   513 transmission hours per week
   Licences: 459,067
   190 per 1,000 population

TV: 2 channels
   113 transmission hours per week
   Licences: 396,837
   164 per 1,000 population

90% population live in households with TV
persons per TV set: 6

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   Annual attendance per person: 17

Post: 70 post offices
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Telephone: 702,000 phones
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   International calls: 3,535,000 per year
Telex : 7,354,000 calls per year
Telegram : 701,000 per year
Satellite Communication Network: Intelsat
              Marisat
              Inmarsat
Appendix B

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Communication Research in Singapore
— an Overview and a Proposal

Eddie Kuo

I will start with a discussion of some characteristics of the communication system in Singapore. An understanding of that is important to know what is going on and what is to be expected. Firstly, Singapore is a densely populated, urban, nation state. Each of the adjectives I have used here is important and do make sense. A small island of slightly more than 600 sq km, it is densely populated. It has been difficult to pinpoint the exact land area of Singapore because of land reclamation going on. Every year some land is being reclaimed from the ocean to form the beach; so the figure actually changes from time to time. With a population of slightly more than two million, the density is very high. The latest figure I have here is a density of 4,000 to one sq km.

Singapore is an urban society and it is a nation state in the sense that it has an independent government, which finds it easy to impose or exert control over the whole nation. It has a 100 percent urban population for whatever purpose we can talk about sociologically. It has an urban mentality, urban development and urban media behaviour.

Media Exposure

The population of Singapore has a rather intense media exposure. I want to make a subtle difference between media exposure of the population and the media system of the country, because I cannot say very much about the media system here being well developed. There are constraints and limitations, but I could quite safely say that, as far as the extent of media exposure is concerned, Singapore’s population is amongst the most intense in the world. But to that extent it is probably not different from other urban centres like Hongkong, Manila, Bangkok, Jakarta. It is quite typical of an urban centre.

All the figures I am citing below are indications of the extent of media exposure, and by any kind of standard, it has to be seen as pretty high.

The newspaper circulation rate is 255 per thousand (I have more details of Singapore’s media profile as Annex A). The careful reader will notice that the figure is different from that in the paper presented by Dr Feliciano (Cf Page 17; Eds); it is lower. The discrepancy here is because I have included only the daily newspaper circulation, not including the Sunday papers which have a higher circulation. Over the years, we can see a continuous increase in the circulation rate.

It is actually more complicated than this because, as I will point out later, there are daily newspapers in the four official languages in Singapore. The major ones are, of course, in the English and Chinese languages. So, when we talk about the circulation rate, the rates are different in the different languages.

English language papers have shown consistent growth over the years. The Chinese press, on the other hand, has been growing until two years ago, when it began to show signs of decline, and there is a real danger and concern in the future of the Chinese press. In fact, there has been some reorganisation and restructuring of newspaper companies here, and it may even lead to a merger of the two major Chinese newspapers.

Radio and Television

In terms of radio and television, there are 190 radio licences per 1000 population. For each licence there can be more than one radio set. Official
Structurally and in terms of the press laws, the government again has indirect but very sure control over the newspapers' operations. The Censorship Board has been quite effective as far as the movies are concerned. But video tapes are becoming more difficult to bring under control. Because of the small geographical area of Singapore, it is not too difficult for an effective government to exert its control over the operation of media.

The guiding communication policies in Singapore can be simplified in two points. One is that the media must not be abused, to mislead the population against the public interest. And because of that censorship control seems to be necessary. In one of my studies I have shown consistently over the ten-fifteen years of parliamentary debate, from different legal cases, that this has been a consistent guiding communication policy. But more than that, under the assumption that the mass media are effective, media must be utilised to support government policies. So, not only in a passive way must media not be abused, but in a very positive way it must be used to show a direction. The government has been able to draw almost full support from the press, and certainly from the television and radio, for all kinds of campaigns, all kinds of government policies. That is the background and another characteristic of strong government guidance and control of mass media.

Over the years, this has actually led to a dilemma in terms of development of communication systems, or development towards responsible journalism, resulting from the government showing a very strong hand all the time in guidance on its development. On the other hand, from time to time, the government expresses regret that the population has become too conformist and too submissive and even politically apathetic; indifferent to what is going on in the government. To use the terms of a political scientist, it is the process of depoliticisation over the years that has been showing its effects now.

The political leadership now realises that there is a danger here and something has to be done. There have been some signs, perhaps I should say contradictory signs, showing the encouragement of responsible journalism. The press has been asked to show more responsibility and to be more critical on certain policies. The signs, as I have said, have been...
Publications like Time, Newsweek or the Far Eastern Economic Review are popular news magazines, so is Readers Digest. Even as far as news resources are concerned, there is no national news agency in Singapore. So for practically all the foreign news, we have to depend on foreign sources, except, of course, in the case of the Straits Times which stations some correspondents in several major cities in the world. For news analysis or interpretative reporting, we are totally dependent on foreign news services.

Even in the field of media personnel, there is insufficient training and supply of local personnel. For Singapore Broadcasting Corporation TV many of the personnel hired or appointed are from outside Singapore—from Hongkong, Taiwan and for English language programmes, from UK.

In the field of journalism the Straits Times and the new English newspaper coming out—the New Nation—quite a number (I do not have the exact statistics here) of important positions are filled by people from overseas, the expatriates.

In the implications of this situation, there is an interesting contrast I referred to earlier; the government is trying to have a very sure guidance on the direction and content of media made available to the public. And yet at the same time, as far as media contents are concerned, Singapore (and I have not included the interpersonal contacts Singapore population has through their overseas travelling or through their contacts with tourists coming to Singapore) is a rather open society, meaning open to the ideas from outside, its norms, values, ideas are open in the sense that there are different kinds of people and events in their daily contact, either interpersonally or through media. So it is an interesting contrast in that on the one hand there is control, on the other hand there is a rather open situation. In fact, the government justifies its control by saying that Singapore is so vulnerable to outside influences that controls should be tightened.

At the same time, because of the highly popular programmes from TV, movies and even from printed sources, the problems of the imbalance of information flow, or the question of cultural imperialism, is a serious one in Singapore.

The five most popular programmes in Singapore on television are from Hongkong and Taiwan. These programmes are very popular because Singapore is 77 percent Chinese; so it is very much a Chinese community.
This kind of cultural influence is something that would have very important repercussions on the population here, as far as its social development, impact on cultural development and on the social psychology of the population are concerned. It is therefore something which deserves very careful study.

Another characteristic is the multilingual factor in communication. Multilingualism as a guiding policy in Singapore means that four official languages are given due recognition. Major mass media contents in all four languages are available. There are daily newspapers in four official languages. On radio, there are four channels for the four official languages. TV programme time is not equal, but programmes in the four official languages are given certain airtimes.

Movies, again, are available in different languages. This has some influence on the contents as I have indicated already, and certainly also has a lot of influence on the planning of media programmes, on television, in newspapers and others. Multilingualism should be seen as something more than mass media coverages; it is something Singaporeans live with. The majority of Singaporeans are multilingual and can speak more than one language. In fact, from Primary One in school, every child must learn two languages and it goes on through high school and beyond.

Communicative Integration

The question of the extent to which information can easily flow from one part of the population to the other within Singapore society is something often brought up for discussion. Any policy statement from the government should have to be communicated in more than one language. And this has often been done. For instance, when the Prime Minister has a very important message to convey, he often does it in three of the four languages, that is English, Malay and Mandarin.

For mass meetings such as Labour Day meetings or National Day meetings often either the Prime Minister will speak in more than one official language, or there will be different ministers speaking in different languages, so that the idea can really reach all segments of the population. This kind of multilingualism is something we live with. What is interesting here is that multilingualism should not hinder the extent of communicative integration maintained in the society. But in Singapore, there seems to be sufficient mechanisms developed to compensate for the difficulty in communication, as a result of multilingualism.

Finally, I want to point to the lack of formal training and research centres in the field of communication, and this has most direct bearing to our discussion today. There is no formal training and research centre of communication in Singapore; not since the short-lived programme of communication in Nanyang University was discontinued in 1980.

For four years the programme of mass communication at Nanyang University was trying very hard to get things moving. In fact it had its first two batches of graduates. As far as I know they have been doing quite well in getting into the media industry and making their contribution to media development in Singapore. But for reasons yet to be established, the decision was made in 1980 that, with the merger of Nanyang University and the University of Singapore, this particular programme of mass communication would not be continued and as a result there is no longer a communication programme of any kind at the formal education level in Singapore.

In terms of research, the Sociology Department of the Nanyang University of Singapore, the one I represent, remains an important institution doing research in relation to communication. So far we have tried and have made our humble contribution to the area. But it is obvious that although we are a big department (23 staff), mass communication is not seen to be a core area in sociology. So far we can have only one course relating to communication — and I teach that only course. Studies in this area have been unsystematic, lacking clear guidelines and lacking a team to work together for a fuller understanding of more systematic research in this area.

For the media industry, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) has its own training scheme. It also has some plans to set up a training programme for its own staff. The Straits Times has its own training programme for journalists; the Chinese press from time to time also has its own training classes. All this has been basically short-term on-the-job training and the effectiveness or usefulness of such training programmes has yet to be seen. As far as research is concerned, the media industry has been able to do only preliminary work.
Survey Research Singapore (SRS) has been providing some basic statistics in terms of media behaviour. However, while its data gathering techniques are reliable, in terms of research and interpretation of data, it is certainly not adequate from an academic point of view. The press and SBC have their own little surveys and studies to serve their own purposes. Most of these are not available to the public. This is the situation in terms of training and research in Singapore. I think the last point explains well the lack of quality research done in the communications in Singapore.

Let me review what has been done here. I have attached, as Annex B, a short bibliography on the relevant publications available in Singapore. In fact half of the items I have included are unpublished student theses of varying quality — some are reasonably good, others may not be that good. If we exclude these unpublished theses, the number of items will be down to less than half of what I have included.

A review of the communication studies in Singapore shows some characteristics: one is that there is a total absence of psychological studies on communication. We all know that in communication studies, we do borrow or draw from social psychology.

In the University of Singapore there is no psychology department; there is only a department of psychological medicine doing basic studies on mental health and related areas. Partly because of that, there has not been many psychological studies. This is surprisingly so because the advertising industry is quite active although Singapore is a limited market. Nevertheless, the industry is quite well developed. Reasonably, there should be some studies on the readability of mass media content or design or on development of communication.

Some respectable publications are available. One area is communication and family planning. Communication and family planning is among the better researched areas, insofar as we can relate to communication studies.

Another area is Communication Policies and Planning, an area in which I have been more involved. Again the applied orientation, the relevance to policy-orientation is obvious. In other words, there is the lack of a systematic approach to communication studies. So whatever guidance we have very often is dictated by the policy-orientation or by the applied-value of the study involved. The study in communication and planning is another example.

There have been some studies done on Communication and Public Campaigns. In fact, all these cases are my students'. I personally have some interest in them, and in a way give the direction to public campaigns. There is a very important communication phenomenon in Singapore — the use of mass campaign or a public campaign, for many purposes. These days when you walk around, read the newspapers or watch television programmes, you will notice that the Save Energy Campaign is going on. If you dial the public phone number "1711" and with the time given, you will also receive a free message on save energy.

Other areas of study include audience studies, media studies and historical studies. Most of these are rather basic studies — fact findings providing the base benchmark information, that is something at least we should have if we are going to have any additive or cumulative undertaking in the future.

Lastly, I want to bring all these to the theme of our seminar here, on priorities of communication research. In the Singapore case, there is something I think I can suggest. In doing so I invite your comments on this research topic suggested and, if possible, some kind of joint project of a comparative nature should be developed for both the applied values of such studies and for the accumulation of research findings and theoretical development.

I have mentioned the constraints and limitations we are under here, and unless some of these are changed, the limitations will remain. One obvious constraint is that if communication studies continue to depend on Sociology Department at the National University of Singapore, there is not much we can do, because of our limitation in resources and manpower and because of the competing and conflicting demands on other areas that I and other staff members have to be involved in.

Other constraints include the fact that the research expenses in Singapore are generally quite high, much higher than in the neighbouring countries. Trained researchers and assistants are getting very difficult to appoint. But at the same time I should also add that there are some advantages we have here that I must mention. One is that although
It is important to compare what we are doing here with other countries. I can easily name the similarities of comparative studies being done between say, Singapore and Malaysia. Or in terms of the Malay population, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia; in terms of the Chinese population, Singapore, Hongkong, Taiwan. So, many of such comparative projects can be developed and encouraged.

Some Suggestions

With that in mind, I would like to suggest some research topics and I want to briefly explain what I mean by this. One is intercultural communication in multicultural societies. This is more on the cultural anthropology type of study than the quantitative media, traditional type of media research.

This is important in Singapore because of the multicultural composition in Singapore: three major ethnic groups, four language groups, four religious groups and so on. In terms of culture, to what extent would communication messages or information be distorted? And that would actually include verbal and non-verbal communication. I think Singapore provides an ideal situation for a very thorough study of this type. People of different cultural backgrounds, for example, were brought up to behave non-verbally, and yet the social or urban situation in Singapore is such that we are in face-to-face contact all the time.

So, to what extent would such different cultural backgrounds lead to misunderstanding or understanding; to what extent would this interaction lead to a modified form of communication, cross-culturally. This is something perhaps more peculiar to Singapore and yet at the same time we can compare different cultural groups and ethnic groups in Singapore with those ethnic groups in other societies: Indians in Singapore with Indians in India, for example. Certainly a lot of Indians in Singapore are Sri Lankans, actually. So too with Ceylonese in Sri Lanka; Chinese in Singapore with Chinese in China, Taiwan, Hongkong; and Malays in Singapore with Malays in Malaysia: whether or not such different environments are leading to some changes.

Another area or topic to be studied will be the formation of mass culture in the mass society. You also find that I am really looking into the future rather than looking back in the past. And I see Singapore is very much
may appear to be a bit future-oriented, and especially so in the case of some societies in South Asia where Singapore may represent the other extreme. But I still maintain the importance of doing that because this is a trend, and what you see in Singapore as an urban society is at least something you will be able to see very soon in many urban centres in Asia.

The relationship between Amic and studies in Singapore is slightly different because after all Amic is located in Singapore, and there is a lot more and in a more direct way than Amic’s assistance or contribution to other societies that it can make to communication research in Singapore. For example, there is a library here and certainly the collection here is better than the university library, which researchers can make use of, as well as other kinds of resources we can draw upon.

I am hoping that the deficiency in terms of the research institution or the university can be compensated or made up for with the presence of Amic in Singapore.

Developing into mass culture. Whether or not it is true can be tested: whether or not we are all atomised in such an urban setting, and to what extent mass media play a role in the formation of mass culture in the Singapore setting.

This, of course, relates to the next topic I suggested here, the extent of cultural imperialism: to what extent would these imported media contents from all over the world have impact on Singapore. Singapore is unique, and because of that this topic is important in the sense that there is no deep traditional roots indigenous to Singapore.

It is basically a population of immigrants. So, although people are looking back to their homeland for roots, either to India, China, Malaysia or the Malay Muslim world, and trying to establish something here, these ties are relatively weak and makes the population more vulnerable or receptive to new ideas from other modern societies. This is a rather major issue that needs to be studied.

Impact of Electronic Communication

In terms of the new communication technologies, Singapore, in comparison with other Asian societies (except perhaps Japan), will be, has already been and will be the one to adopt faster than others to many new technologies in communication, not only those used in the information industry but in daily life.

We all believe that there will be important social impacts with the introduction of such communication technologies. To what extent will these change our lifestyles, our values, interpersonal relationship, or in a more tangible sense, to what extent would it change the traffic pattern, for example? I think there is an urgent need to study this and what is more urgent and important is that the experiences of Singapore, the findings here in the very near future, will become relevant to other countries in Asia.

Information revolution in a post-industrial society is related in fact to an earlier phenomenon: the information explosion or revolution we are experiencing now. I have a feeling that Singapore as an industrial society is moving quickly into post-industrial society. The implications of such a process of development will be something we can study. Some of these
Annex A

The Communication System in Singapore (1980)

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  - Circulation: 615,000
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