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Communications Research In Singapore:
An Overview And A Proposal

By

Eddie C Y Kuo
Prepared for AMIC Seminar on "Priorities in Communications Research in Asia", Singapore 17-21 May 1982

COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH IN SINGAPORE:
AN OVERVIEW AND A PROPOSAL

Eddie C Y Kuo
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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
2

--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

1.6 Lack of formal training and research centers of communications
--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
--others
Byrd, 1970
Cheok, 1981
Francis, 1982
Kuo, forthcoming
Neo, 1978
G. Ng, 1979/80

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
Appendix A: *The Communication System in Singapore (1980)*

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

Cinema: 80 cinemas

- Seating capacity: 77,000
- 32 seats per 1,000 population
- Annual attendance: 40,531,000
- Annual attendance per person: 17

Post: 70 post offices

- 58 postal agencies
- 1.5 million postal items handled per day

Telephone: 702,000 phones

- 298 per 1,000 population
- 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

Communications Studies in Singapore:
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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 very 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.
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 Nanyang University. But for reasons yet to be established, the development is moving fast. In fact it has set quite well

For four years the programme of mass communication at Nanyang University was very hard to get things moving. As far as I know they have been doing quite well in getting into the media industry and making some contribution to media communication in Nanyang University. This is a big step towards forming a proper programme of mass communication. It has been started in 1980, 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 research and teaching institution doing research in relation to communication. So far we have not been able to establish a similar programme in the area. But it is obvious that although we are a big department, mass communication is not seen to be a core area in sociology. So far we have only one course relating to communication and that is the communication studies programme. We have been doing quite well in getting into the media industry and making our 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.

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There have been some studies done on communication and public campaigns. In fact, all these cases are my own students' research projects. These cases are very valuable for the understanding of communication phenomena in Singapore. The study in communication and planning is another example.

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Singapore is a republic, geographically it is limited in its area. So it is quite easy for us to do something and claim it to be a national study, or even to conduct a national survey. Personally, I have done three national surveys in Singapore although not in communication. So it is not that difficult when I can imagine the difficulties involved when you have a national survey done in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Indonesia and all these countries except Hongkong which may be comparable. So, geographically, we are of a confined area and easier to reach and to have a good sample to implement.

Official statistics, or the gathering of such official statistics, is usually quite complete, although not necessarily accessible. If there is a need for government statistics, with the support of the government departments, for example, usually we can easily get up-to-date statistics. Much easier relatively than in some other countries, mainly because the government is a very efficient one. The population size and geography of the republic are limited.

In addition there seems to be a new and recent concern among the political leadership that there should be better public relations between the government departments and the public in general. And this means the government departments should make themselves more accessible to the press, to the media and to the public. Presumably this should mean, as far as the researchers are concerned, more access to government data or government cooperation in communication research.

The suggestion is also made here emphasising the need for applied studies, with policy-orientation. I put this fully aware of the importance of pure research, and in fact, if anything, often the people of the university are guilty of putting too much emphasis on pure research.

In Singapore, especially because of the limitation of resources, and because of the need to make our research and research findings relevant, I think the kind of research to be put on top priorities would be those with immediate and clear-cut policy-orientation. I like also to emphasise the need for cross-national comparative research because without this Singapore, even though we can claim to be a national sample or a national study, represents a rather typical Asian case. It is very much like a laboratory study perhaps and we all know that under such circumstances, the general reliability of such findings is often questionable.
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.

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)

The press: 12 Dailies in 5 languages
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Annual attendance: 40,531,000
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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

Annex B

Communications Studies in Singapore: A Bibliography

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