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Devcom, The Interest Of Third World Cultures And The Political Debate On The Demand For A New International Information Order - How Do They Relate?

By

Anura Goonasekera
Devcom, the interest of Third World Cultures and the Political Debate on the demand for a New International Information Order -

how do they relate

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Development Communication (DevCom), the interest of Third World cultures and the debate on the demand for a New International Information Order (NIICO) all relate to a broader sociological issue of the relationship between communication and modernization of Third World societies that has currently gained the attention of the leaders of developing countries. The relationship among these three subjects could therefore be best analyzed within the framework of social change of Third World societies. While this analysis is sociological, it is recognized that the three concepts of Devcom, Third World culture and NIICO by themselves have both normative and ethical implications. There is therefore value premises underlying these concepts that should be identified in this analysis. I think it is partly because of the value orientation underlying these three concepts that this debate seem to have polarized into two antagonistic groups. In addition to the normative and ethical premises, the three concepts also envisage a strategy of practical action to which communication can be put in the socio-economic development of Third World countries. Such strategies are again partly determined by the values underlying the concepts. In addition, such strategies have to operate within the socio-political realities of the Third World countries, and the realities of the geo-political relations among these countries. While communication scholars have popularised a large number of concepts such as DevCom, cultural domination, new information
order; right to communicate, etc., these scholars have rarely provided a conceptual framework to relate these issues into a systematic analysis of social events. This weakness in developing meaningful categories of social analysis by communication scholars may be partly due to the location of the discipline of communication within journalism schools instead of within the much richer disciplines of sociology, anthropology or social psychology. (Amunugama)

In the present analysis I propose to use two sociological paradigms of under development of Third World societies advanced by sociologists and social psychologists. These are:

A) The paradigm of modernization is enunciated by writers such as Lerner, (1958) Rogers (1962), Schramm (1976) and Inkelen and Smith (1974).


Such an analysis I think will help to place these three concepts within a wider framework of sociological knowledge on the subject of development and stagnation of Third World societies.

Let us begin with the concept of development communication. There is hardly a report on communication in Third world countries that does not devote a sizeable section to the advocacy of Development Communication as necessary for bringing about quick socio-economic development to these countries. Usually such advocacy is superficial, prescriptive and pays scant attention to the sociological and historical factors in the society in which DevCom is to take place.

The social scientific roots of the concept of Development Communication can be traced to certain early findings of sociologists and social psychologists working in the area of
communications. It was these findings that later formed the basis of the modernization paradigm. The following are the salient points in this paradigm.

A) Communication is a crucial element in the process of development of Third World societies (Schramm 1976).

B) Communication while spreading knowledge among the people can also help to create an attitude of mind and a type of personality which is necessary for traditional societies to become modern. This is the quality of empathy which persons in traditional societies acquire by viewing programmes in mass media which provides a vicarious universe for these persons to participate (Lerner, 1963). Further the mass media through its advertisements of consumer durables create new wants among the people which gives rise to "a revolution of rising expectation". The rulers cannot resist fulfilling these new expectations of the people.

C) Communication through the mass media does not reach the masses directly. It is filtered through a variety of social layers. The message usually is first received by opinion leaders who spread it among their followers. This concept was popularly referred to as the two-step flow of communication. (Lazarsfeld 1948, Katz 1960)

D) Communication is crucial to the adoption of innovation by a community. Such adoptions take a specific pattern. The first to adopt an innovation are the innovators who are usually the more educated and affluent members of the society. If such adoption is successful, a large group of followers (compromising early adopters, early majority and late majority) will follow. The last to adopt an innovation are the laggards who are generally the poorest of the poor in that community. (Rogers 1962)

E) The mass media is useful in spreading awareness but the final behavioural change will take place only after contact with persons with credibility at an interpersonal (face-to-face) level.
F) Individuals pay attention to a message on a selective basis. There is therefore selective exposure and selective perception which are based on the already existing cognitions of the individual. (Festinger 1957, Lippit and White 1959)

G) Effective communication occurs when the source and the receiver have similar characteristics and interests (homophily). The most effective change-agents are those that are most like the average client except for technical competence. Attention to feedback reaction from the audience is most important in the continued success of a communicator. (Rogers 1962)

H) People pay attention to a message on the basis of uses and gratification derived from the message. The message should therefore understand the needs of the audience and its desire for gratification.

I) For better results, communication through the mass media should be combined with the interpersonal channels of communication. This is particularly so in rural areas of the developing countries where interpersonal channels are still powerful and can sometimes negate messages given by the mass media.

Development communication attempts to use these insights in one form or another in formulating communication campaigns for the development of Third World countries. There are several underlying assumptions in the concept of development communication that need to be examined.

First is the assumption that the reasons for development and stagnation of societies are immanent within the societies themselves. Therefore the rulers of these societies, by correctly identifying these immanent factors, can formulate policies that could bring about change in these societies.
Second is the assumption that communication, if used 'correctly' can set in motion, the engines of development. Communication in this model is therefore an independent variable. Further, it is assumed that what is lacking for development is communication.

Third is the assumption that men who live in developing countries have similar characteristics and will answer, in a predictable manner, to the call of the development communicator.

Empirically, one could find many instances that could invalidate these assumptions. The assumption of the immanent nature of the causes of stagnation has been challenged by the World Systems theorists and Dependency theorists. More of this later.

Nor can we consider communication as an independent variable. The media of communication in reality, has to operate within a social system with its values, stratification, dominant groups and political and economic conflicts. In such a situation, the media of communication can very well become the mouthpiece of dominant groups in society. Studies of the media in Latin American countries have observed that the mass media did not hold much use for the peasants as it met more the needs of the large farmers than those of the peasants. The media in certain Latin American countries appear to be deliberately oriented against social change in favour of the peasants. It is at the service of land owning elites whose families sometimes own the media organizations. (Sanches 1980, Roca 1980). In this situation, development communication alone will not help, for what is lacking may not be information but other resources - the mobilization of which may require structural changes in society.

The problems of development are not always of a technical nature to be resolved by experts. They are usually political ones. An important question is the extent to which a government is willing to make political choices to bring about change. This is crucial for a meaningful assessment of the role of communication in development.
Experience has also shown that development communication, when used without concomitant changes in the structure of society, could lead to the strengthening of the status quo or worse, the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor in developing countries. For instance, when new agricultural practices such as cash crops under irrigation were introduced to Third World villages, the first to adopt such practices were the more affluent and educated persons in the village. This is because such practices initially require the taking of risks and modest financial investments which are not within the reach of the poor. The result is that the new practices give an opportunity for the rich persons in the village to become richer, thereby widening and strengthening the existing social disparities. Scarlett Epstein, an Anthropologist reports that when irrigation was first introduced to the village of Wangala in South India, it raised the whole economy of the village to a higher level in one stroke. But the village remained wholly agricultural. It was unilinear development. The employment structure and traditional role relations remained unchanged because the labour requirements for cash cropping could be easily met under the traditional system. "The unilinear economic development in Wangala set up no compatibility between the new wants and the old ways in the indigenous employment structure.... The theoretical point is of interest .... Economic development may occur without any change in economic roles and relations, provided it does not result in re-allocation of resources or an increased range of economic relations." (Scarlett Epstein 1962, p.316)

While it is true that communication is a crucial element in the process of planned development in Third World societies, there are several other factors that one has to take into consideration in evaluating the role of communication in development. The development communicator, in giving primacy to communication in the process of development, I think has tended to overstate his case. The two other concepts considered in this essay, namely
the cultural implication of communication and the debate on a New International Information and Communication Order relate closely to the concept of development communication in that these two concepts bring attention to the national and international environment within which communication has to take place which has been virtually ignored by development communicators. This environment gives character and direction to what communication can actually do, and therefore is crucial in evaluating the claim for the central role of communication in the development advanced by the development communicators.

In the present analysis, I propose to use the second sociological paradigm mentioned earlier, viz., the World Systems paradigm or the Dependency paradigm which emphasise the international economic relation within which any development of Third World societies has to take place. The World Systems/Dependency paradigm has been advanced by sociologists of Third World countries, particularly from Latin America. There are several variants of the World Systems paradigm, but the more significant features are as follows —

A) Development and underdevelopment can be understood only in terms of the international system of economic relations, which in its present capitalist phase has divided the world into a group of core countries which are industrialized and rich (e.g., US, Japan) and a large number of peripheral countries which are poor and exploited (e.g., Sri Lanka and Bangladesh). Bridging the core and the peripheral countries are the semi-peripheral countries which have developed a modicum of wealth and are crucial to keep the system in balance. (Wallerstein 1979)

B) Development and underdevelopment are therefore not two stages in the socio-economic progress of societies, but two concomitant parts of the same system. The under-developed periphery is the necessary corollary of the developed core countries. One cannot exist without the other.
C) State or Government intervention is one way in which this situation can be changed in a significant way. Therefore, while this participation in the world economy impedes the economic development of poorer countries, this does not by itself shut off the possibilities of individual national development. A strong state can counter the deleterious effects of dependency. (Delacroix and Ragin are advocates of the strong state theory. Some writers, for e.g., Wallerstein do not agree)

D) Effect of dependency is initially salutary to the peripheral countries because this brings in the much needed technology and resources to these countries. (Delacroix and Ragin 1978)

It is clear that the two topics being discussed here, namely the cultural implication of communication and the debate on the New Information Order address issues that have been raised at a theoretical level by the World Systems paradigm. Therefore it is useful to analyse the relationship between these two concepts and the concept of DevCom within this paradigm.

The early concern for the cultural implications of international communication stemmed from the large influx of media material from the developed countries (core) to the developing countries (peripheral countries). A UNESCO report observes that in a global perspective, the average imported TV programmes in developing countries is one-third or more of the total time of programming in 1983. In certain countries such as Argentina, Brunei and Malaysia, it was over 50% of the total programming time. (Tapio Varis, 1985) This heavy bias is even more pronounced in the distribution of international news where five giant international press agencies, all of them in the developed world, dominate the flow of international news. The result is that news from the West dominate the foreign news of Third World countries. To quote a recent report -
"Less than 20% of the news space in South American dailies for example, is given over to Latin America and the Senegalese press shows greater interest in a minor ministerial re-shuffle in France or the Federal Republic of Germany than in an election taking place in the Gambia or the Ivory Coast." (da Costa et al, 1980, p.5)

Technological advances in communication appear to be worsening this imbalance of communication resources in favour of developed countries. Let us consider two of these technological advances.

One is in the field of satellite communication, which has opened up vast potentialities for easy flow of information across national borders. With the development of Direct Broadcast Satellites (DBS) it is quite possible for a country that owns or controls a satellite to beam messages to a large number of countries in the world with or without the consent of such countries. The programmes may be considered wholly unsuitable for a variety of reasons - cultural, linguistic, political or moral. There is nothing that the recipient countries can do to prevent such an invasion of their cultures. (T J S George, 1986)

Just as developments in Direct Broadcast Satellite Communication will result in the "unrestricted" flow of programmes and information over cultural and international boundaries, advances in computer technology and telecommunication industry have made it possible for the transfer of vast amounts of data electronically across national borders. This phenomena is referred to as Transborder Data Flow (T D F). The central control of data which is made possible through T D F has far reaching implications for the economies of the countries that are caught within the system. It can lead to fundamental changes in the ways in which goods and services are produced and distributed in these countries.

Transnational Corporations are the prime users of T D F. It is both a commercial product and a management tool for these Corporations. The developing countries participate in this
international data market either as data suppliers or as buyers of processed data through experts or through parent multinational companies. In addition, the developing countries will also acquire the technology and equipment that is necessary for their own telematic sector.

In an information age, it may happen that the developing countries are reduced to the export of data for processing to developed countries. The value added benefit will result at the processing stage and will accrue to the developed countries. Skilled jobs in data processing and systems management will be retained by the affluent countries, while the developing countries will probably have armies of data entry personnel sending computer data via satellite for processing to the industrialized countries. This situation is similar to the export of raw material for processing in the colonial times — except that in the modern information age, the export is raw data instead of raw materials. The result however is the same — stagnation.

The third issue that we are dealing in this paper, viz., the demand for a New Information Order stems directly from this imbalance in the distribution of communication resources among the developing countries and the developed countries. The new International Information and Communication Order is seen as a way of balancing the distribution of information and connected resources in the world. At least this is how the advocates of NIICO in the Third World see it.

The debate on NIICO started in the early sixties, primarily on an ideological key as a denunciation of imperialism and colonialism. (Savio, 1980) The developed countries of the West rejected it as rhetoric designed to apply political pressure and not as a genuine demand. But by the end of 1970s, communication researchers advanced incontrovertable findings which indicated a profound imbalance between North and South in the field of
information and the Southern dependence on communication structures of the developed western nations for gaining access to information. The world systems theorists argued that such a dependency of Third World countries was inherent in the present economic structure of the world. Poverty and stagnation was a creation of the world economic system.

While the debate on NIICO began as a North-South issue and continues to proceed on these lines, it is in fact much more than this. It is a question of developing a communication and information system which should ideally allow every person to express themselves freely and choose the information that a person wishes to have. Viewed in this light, NIICO address a basic question of the human right to communicate — a question for everyone and not only for the South. The recognition of the concept of the right to communicate, it is believed, will create at the international level, a universal conscience necessary to convert freedom of information and the free and balanced flow of communication, which are basic to NIICO, into a principle of international law. (Aldo Cocca 1982) At the national level it will impose on the state the obligation of creating the conditions under which the practical freedoms and entitlements which derive from the right itself can be implemented.

The opposition to the concept of the right to communicate and the demand for NIICO stems from two main ideological standpoints. The western nations distrust the concept of right to communicate because they see it as part of the to New International Information and Communication Order of which they are suspicious. They fear that NIICO will be used as a lever to impose restrictions on western news agencies, on the marketing of western films and TV films in Third World countries and on exploitation of data transfer and other recent technologies.

In the Socialist and Third World, the opposition to the right to communicate stems from the fear that it could be used to justify
the continuation of the present massive imbalance in information flows and unrestricted importation of western technology and information and consequently western values.

The concept of right to communicate should form an important principle NIICO. Unfortunately the debate upto now has gone in other directions. While all sides to the debate accept the concept of the human right to communicate as a valid one, there is disagreement on the locus of the right. Some see it on a right pertaining primarily to the individual and only subsequently and secondarily to society; others see society or state as the primary locus, with the state having powers to restrict the right in public interest. There is also disagreement as to the content of the right. Some want the definition to include all the rights associated with communications while others prefer a simple statement as a human right. The other aspects of communication freedom such as fairer, sharing of resources, it is argued, should be left to a different forum.

A major problem identified by many is that the right is likely to remain a philosophical idea incapable of implementation because of the economic incapacity of many societies to put it into practice.

The debate on the New International Information and Communication Order has taken the question of greater participation in the international exchange of information more as a quantitative problem — the problem of a quantitative transfer of information capacity from North to South. Underlying this is the unrealistic idea of sooner or later taking over the transnational information system. The emphasis has been on production and distribution structures. Accordingly, priority was given to the creation of national news agencies and the creation of regional agencies such as PANA in Africa, OANA in Asia, FANA in Arab countries and A'SIN in Latin America. The limited financial assistance that was
available has been used in the creation of this infrastructure. These structures have shown little or no ability to compete with transnational systems. They will only give the impression of this to regimes which are often authoritarian and which will be often tempted to use new structures for controlling information instead of stimulating new and creative flows. (Savio, 1982)

Analyses of the news content of Third World news agencies show that it is concerned with events that stem from political and economic spheres from the urban centres and relate to the activities of the powers that be. In this, there is much similarity with the transnational news agencies of the West except that the professional level is much lower. In both systems the spot news dominate. The western news agencies treat them efficiently because the market pays for it. The Third world agencies treat news in a bureaucratic and protocollary manner because either it cannot do better or because this is what the governments want. Development communication within the present structures become officialized and the high philosophical objectives of right to communicate, free and balanced flow of communication, concern for the identity of Third World cultures, all recede further and further to the background.

What can be done to correct this situation? The first is to recognize the trends that DevCom and NIICO have taken in their practical applications. The emphasis on structures for a fairer distribution of news resulted in a number of regional and national organizations coming into existence. The model that has been followed in the western model of news/film agencies. This has until now not worked well. From the emphasis on structures, it is necessary I think to look at the content of information. What is it that the western news agencies do not provide which development communicators can provide? Can development communication create a means of communication for small communities in the rural areas, in the cities, in the universities, in the plantations? Can it provide a forum for
alternative content which are by-passed by the mass media? Shouldn't development communication emphasise the participation of small communities through their own media of communication such as news letters, small radio stations and TV stations?

The emphasis on cultural identity of Third World societies, while being a counterpoise against the cultural 'invasion' by the media programmes of the developed countries, has had its own deleterious effects on the sub-cultures of the Third World. Most developing countries are plural societies with a dominant cultural group and a number of minority cultural groups. The concern on the preservation of cultural identity against the 'invasion' by western values has often resulted in an emphasis on the cultural values of the dominant groups in such societies. The minority cultures within such societies did not receive the same emphasis partly because of the lack of financial and other resources. The latent effect of such a policy however, was to divide the communities further, particularly since the minority communities perceived the emphasis given through the mass media as an imposition of the dominant values of societies on them. The mass media, under such a policy of cultural identity, instead of unifying the plural societies of the Third World tended to divide them further. (Goonasekera 1986) In such a context, the answer may be to de-massify the mass media by having smaller newspapers, TV and radio stations that can cater to the interest of specific cultural and interest groups. This is a role for DevCom. Cultural policies should be aimed at providing wider participation of people in the process of communication rather than emphasise, through a centralised mass media, the cultural identity and values of a dominant group.

In creating the new International Information and Communication Order, we should start from home. This means that the national communication policies and planning in Third World countries must take much greater priority. Such planning must take into account the import of technologies from developed countries, setting up
of structures for both local and foreign dissemination of information, higher standard of training of media personnel (who are the gate keepers), and the introduction of 'laws' to facilitate the workings of the communication sector in keeping with the principles and spirit of NIICO. One cannot outwardly demand a regulation of international flow of news from North to South unless inwardly the prerequisites for a fairer utilization of such facilities exist.

At the transborder level, the media organization of the Third World countries that have called for a new information order should initially create methods and possibilities for communicating among themselves without bringing in the transnational agencies of the North. For instance, the recently launched Asiavision is a step in the right direction. But much more remains to be done in this area. The communication links among Third World countries are still poor. Laws governing visas, foreign exchange, accreditation of journalists - militate against the quick deployment of persons among these countries.

No doubt, the North-South dimension of the debate will remain the main challenge to the Third World countries. Many professionals and policy makers in the West now accept the argument of the Third World for adequate representation in the world information order and for self depiction in the media of the North. But this has remained mostly a theoretical gesture. All attempts at interstate regulation of the flow of media from North to South has failed. In this situation, the Third World will have to fall back more on their own resources and ingenuity to set in motion the conditions necessary for the New International Information and Communication Order which they have demanded. Hopefully, the Third World will receive a modicum of unselfish media support from the developed countries of the North to create for them equal competitive chances in the international market for information.
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