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Development Communication In 2000 - Future Trends And Directions

By

Godwin C Chu
DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN 2000
- Future Trends and Directions -

Godwin C. Chu

When I was given the assignment to write on this topic, my initial reactions were a mixture of both enthusiasm and frustration. This is a challenging topic, and one can paint a bright future of the Age of Communication. But reality usually does not match our hopes. Implicit in this topic is the assumption that development communication in 2000 will be very different from today, and more exciting. Will it indeed be different? Are there new excitements on the horizon for development communication 13 years from now? The answers to both questions are anything but clear.

It has been nearly three decades since the works of Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, Everett Rogers and others helped establish the notion that communication has a role to play in the process of social and economic development. Over the years we have accumulated a fair amount of empirical knowledge, and have also come to realize some of the shortcomings in the earlier conceptions. These have been discussed elsewhere. As far as Asia is concerned, two milestones stand out in the work on development communication.

Two Milestones in Asia

One was a conference in 1964 held at East West Center in Honolulu, organized by Schramm and Lerner. That was a time when many people, scholars and policy makers alike, had high hopes for development in the Third World. There were talks about the potential use of mass communication to break the
vicious circle of ignorance and poverty and lift up the standard of living in the underdeveloped world. This was shortly after Lerner (1958) had published his Passing of Traditional Society, which caught the imagination of many. Just before the conference, Schramm (1964) had published his much cited Mass Media and National Development.

Now that we can look back, we see that the high hopes of the 1960s were built more on faith than on hard empirical evidence. If we take a look at Communication and Change in the Developing Countries (Lerner and Schramm, 1967), which came out of the 1964 Honolulu conference, we find interesting theories, exciting arguments, a few case studies of rather limited nature, but not much empirical data of a broad scope. The 1964 conference was nevertheless a milestone because it brought together communication scholars and development policy makers, for the first time, to take a critical look at some of key issues.

A decade later, in 1975, Schramm and Lerner had another conference in Honolulu. The high hopes of the 1960s had faded considerably. More than ten years had gone by. The improvement of livelihood in Asia and elsewhere in the developing world was at best uneven. Encouraging statistics could be readily found on the more positive achievements (Schramm, 1976; Sathre, 1976):

* The gross national product (GNP) increased over 50 percent in all of the major developing regions.
* Exports from the developing countries were up 124 percent.
* Nonagricultural employment in the developing countries had risen 52 percent, agricultural employment 27 percent.
* Food production was up some 30 percent.
* The annual outlay of aid for developing countries had increased an average of about 9.5 percent a year, and in the previous ten years well over
100 billion dollars in assistance funds had been made available.

Yet those at the conference were troubled that the past decade did not produce the enhanced quality of life that they had hoped for ten years before. As Schramm remarked, even the impressive gains of GNP in many countries evaporated when restated in per capita terms, because of population increases. In some of the developing countries around the world, the quality of life had deteriorated, not improved.

How much communication had contributed to the development process seemed less clear in 1975 than a decade before. Voices of criticism were already being heard, coming mostly from European scholars who decried the lack of attention by American researchers to historical bondages and structural barriers that stood in the way of development. Some of these criticisms have been summarized recently by Hedebro (1982) and Servaes (1983) among others. In retrospect, the 1975 conference was a time of soul searching. Responding to S. N. Eisenstadt's (1976) incisive analysis of the old assumptions, Schramm (1976) called for a rethinking of development theory and strategy. He raised the pointed question whether we already saw the end of an old paradigm. Rogers (1976) went a step further and declared the passing of the dominant paradigm in diffusion research. Only Lerner (1976) seemed still optimistic as he spoke about continuities and regularities in mass communication research, and looked toward a paradigm of new vitality.

The Case of China

The 1975 conference discussed several cases, including a macro analysis of development communication in China. For several years before the conference I had been working on communication for development in China. My manuscript (Chu, 1977) was in the final stage of revision, and I made a summary report to
the conference. Although I did not have the benefit of the critical views of the European scholars at the time I started my work around 1970, I had abandoned the quantitative methodology, partly out of necessity because no such data collection was feasible in China at that time. Instead I followed a functional/structural analysis. The questions I asked were not whether mass communication was effective in promoting family planning or agricultural innovations. I undertook two broad research tasks. First, to analyze the institutional, structural changes which the Communist Party had introduced in China following its takeover in 1949 for social and economic development, and second, to examine the roles which a complex mix of communication channels - mass media, Party organizations, and formal and informal groups at the grassroots level - played in the structural change processes. The structural changes I analyzed related to a number of functions important to development: capital formation, manpower training, task oriented cooperation and competition, conflict resolution, political socialization of Party cadres as change agents, and decision making. These functions were considered prerequisites to both social and economic development in any country. I wanted to document how major changes in social, economic and political structures were brought about in China, with the use of communication, to meet these functional prerequisites.

Perhaps because of the general interest in China - these were the days when the door to China was not open to most observers - and because I used a macro approach very much different from most empirical studies of development communication in the past, the China case was discussed at length at the 1975 conference. I was cautious about making any conclusions about general applicability of the Chinese approach, and my reservations were shared by Tillman Durdin (1976), a veteran China watcher. Oshima (1976), an economist
who has had much practical experience with development issues in Asia, expressed reservations. Yet we could not resist the temptation of asking ourselves whether the China experience might be transferable to other developing countries. Today, nearly twelve years later when we have the benefit of hindsight, we know China's experience is not transferable and probably should not be. Even back in 1975, when there was much enthusiasm about China among some American scholars, Schramm, Frederick Yu and I (1976) pointed out that China's experience in development was both a success story and a tale of woes. We knew tragic mistakes were made, but we did not know how serious they were. We knew of the human cost, but we had no idea about the enormity of catastrophic human sufferings the Chinese had to bear under Mao. Today, more than ten years after Mao, we can see China's experience in perspective. Compared to other countries in Asia, such as Taiwan, Korea and Singapore, or even Thailand and Malaysia, China is much less of a success story than it seemed at one time. Nonetheless, China has made a breakthrough in overcoming rural poverty despite its huge population burden. And communication, not in its limited and conventional sense of sending messages to the audience through mass media, has had a significant role to play in China's development process.

What we have learned from the study of China, despite the initially misplaced optimism by some observers, is that the macro, structural/functional approach can be fruitfully applied to research in development communication. The case study of China takes the views of the critical school as a point of departure. It fully recognizes the importance of historical inequities and structural barriers. But it does not merely advocate that the inequities be corrected and the barriers be done away with. It takes the necessary step of documenting a concrete case of how the world's largest nation tried to remove
these old barriers, and in the process, inadvertently created new obstacles which could be as worrisome as the old barriers. It shows that when one ceases to be an advocate and becomes a researcher, the world will begin to look quite a bit different and far more complex.

When one looks beyond to the year 2000 and tries to assess the future of development communication in the context of what little we have learned, it would be difficult not to have a sense of frustration. If few of our theories and findings of the past have stood the test of time, what assurance do we have that any of our projections today about the future will ever hold? Yet I also greet the prospect of looking into the future with a measure of cautious enthusiasm. I am enthusiastic because our shortcomings in the past should serve to free us from making the same mistakes again. We should not be looking at development communication in the narrow lens of direct causality. We should not be content with testing hypotheses about the specific effect of certain messages. We might do well by not confining ourselves within any particular ideologies, no matter how exciting they might seem. I am also tempted to think we should defer the ambitious task of building theories of development communication till a later time, when we have more data of both micro and macro perspectives, and instead direct our research attention to large-scale, practical issues that are likely to confront many developing countries during the next decade or so.

New Perspectives for Research

With these considerations in mind I would like to propose a few perspectives for discussion.

New Perspective No. 1. Our research attention should go beyond rural development, which has been the main focus of development communication for the
last 30 years. I am not suggesting that rural development is unimportant. On the contrary, rural development will remain one of the crucial issues because in most developing countries between 60 and 80 percent of the population live in rural areas. And for this reason, both policy attention and allocation of funding resources must continue to be directed to the vast rural areas for many years to come. As rural development programs continue to expand, there will be a need for ongoing efforts to assess the results as a form of project evaluation.

However, as far as research is concerned, we generally know what are the major research questions in rural development communication. We want to know how we can effectively communicate with the rural poor, to teach them the necessary skills of production, to teach them family planning and improved health and hygiene, to show them how to protect their natural environment, to demonstrate feasible ways of marketing their products in order to get fair market prices, and to provide them with general information about the world outside. We know the general ways of using the mass media effectively for these purposes. The six-year longitudinal study of the social and economic impact of Palapa satellite television in Indonesia has provided conclusive data on some of these issues. The research findings have been summarized by Alfian, Schramm and myself.

My concern is whether by focusing our research attention on rural development we might not be inadvertently creating the impression that this is the major problem, if not the only one, that must be addressed. Anyone who has visited the slums in some of the capital cities in Asia will readily see a serious problem of urban poverty and neglect. Living quarters are extremely crowded. In many cases there is no hygiene to speak of, as running water supply is unavailable. Some people live literally next to garbage dumps. Many take
their baths in highly polluted streams that meander through the outskirts of these teeming cities. Children are under nourished. Compared to the urban poor, the rural people in many places would appear to be much better off. Yet we have the puzzling phenomenon of rural migrants crowding into the cities. They come looking for work and generally end up presenting serious problems to the city governments. Unemployment, welfare, need for housing and health care, prostitution, and crime, to mention but a few.

Demographers are projecting a continuous inflow of migrants into the cities in the next decade such that no immediate relief is in sight. In Asia, China is the one country we know that seeks to minimize the problems of an expanding urban population by prohibiting rural migration. Even in a tightly regulated country like China this policy is not completely effective. In any way this solution is neither feasible nor recommendable in any other countries. The problems of the urban poor are so complex that no simple solutions are feasible. But I have the feeling that the potentials of communication as an integral part of the solutions have not yet been fully explored.

One potential use is to minimize the inflow of rural migrants by correcting their misperceptions of the opportunities in urban centers. Many rural young people have no ideas of what to expect before they make their move to the cities. They are poorly prepared, both occupationally and emotionally. They tend to have totally unrealistic expectations. If the major sources of rural migrants can be identified, the government can use the various media of communication to show them the real situation and make them aware of the limited opportunities in the cities. In this way, it may be possible to slow down the inflow of rural migrants, or at least to reduce the frustration due to high expectations. If we could show through empirical research that this approach is indeed effective, this would be no small contribution.
For those who are still migrating to the urban centers any way, a different approach is needed. Mass media and other channels can be used to tell the new migrants where and how to look for the limited opportunities. It might even be possible to offer them vocational training through radio or television, or at least to let them know where to get vocational training. The least the city government can do is to keep open lines of communication with the migrant population. In most large cities in Asia, the current practice by the municipal government is to leave them alone until there is trouble. This policy should be corrected. Instead, the government should make a genuine effort to absorb the migrants into a life of productivity.

There are encouraging signs that the urban poor can be turned into a productive force. One needs only to look at Hong Kong, where five and a half million people are crowded into a small island and a not much larger peninsula. There is enormous inequity between the rich and the poor. The British colonial officials and the elite Chinese business class live a life of luxury while the Hakka boat people in the New Territories eke out a living from their sampans moored in mud. Yet on the whole, the people of Hong Kong maintain a standard of living far above what one finds in most other Asian countries. What the Hong Kong experience shows is that it is possible to turn the urban poor into an asset without overthrowing the ruling elite by revolutionary means. The Hong Kong experience also shows that one can go a long way with urban productivity, while there are generally severe limitations in rural productivity.

New Perspective No. 2. In development communication research we should shift our attention from the end-users to the decision-making process. Under the old paradigm, whether we are talking about diffusion of agricultural innovation or the promotion of family planning, we take the policy decision as
given. The research question we ask is: How can communication be used as an effective instrument to implement the decision? We can again cite the case of China to illustrate the fallacy of this approach. What if the original decision is plainly wrong? Back in the mid 1950s, some economists in China, notably Ma Yin-chu, were saying that unless China adopted effective family planning immediately, China would be faced with a disastrous population explosion in the next twenty years. They used projections of population growth to back up their warnings. Their arguments, however, were rejected because Chairman Mao Zedong said with more people it is easier to get work done. China needed more people to carry out its development tasks, Mao said. Family planning was rejected. Couples that had many children were actually praised in the Party controlled media as examples for others to follow. In this case, the communication campaigns worked too well. China did not realize the serious implications of this population policy until 1969, and by that time it was already too late (see Leonard Chu, 1977). Now China has gone to the other extreme by limiting each couple to only one child.

Another example of faulty decision that was equally disastrous also came from China. This was the People's Commune movement of 1958. Mao himself made the decision to reorganize the small agricultural cooperatives into huge people's communes. He did so without a careful evaluation of the alternatives and consequences, and apparently against the advice of the more pragmatic group within the Party leadership. All the communication channels available to the Party were effectively mobilized to implement his decision, and the entire rural countryside was converted into people's communes within a few months. The use of communication was a total, unprecedented success. The net outcome in terms of rural productivity was a calamity. The country suffered from three years of hunger until the commune system was fundamentally modified to give the
peasants more flexibility in production planning and income distribution.

These two examples may be extreme cases. But they do show that what is important is often not the use of communication as an instrument of implementation, but the decision making process itself. Or rather, how can communication play a part to make sure that the decision making process is not faulty, or at least contains some internal mechanisms that can avoid or minimize the chance of disaster? We should study how communication can be effectively used to make grassroots input into the decision making process. Or, to look at the problem from the other side, what systemic constraints exist that can make this kind of grassroots input difficult, and what can we do to reduce these constraints. This is a specific issue of the much broader problem of political socialization, but it has far more importance to development than some of us recognize.

New Perspective No. 3. We should shift our research attention from individual effects to institutional effects. In development communication research we must continue to study the effects of communication. This is indeed the bottom line. All research should one way or another lead to a better understanding of effects. Otherwise we must face the question of so what. Much of the research in development communication, and in fact in communication research in general, deals with primarily effects on individuals. There are very few studies that look into the effects upon institutions, or upon social structure as a whole. This is partly a result of our research methodology. Quantitative statistical analysis based on random sampling makes it necessary to use the individuals as the unit of analysis. But I think there is another reason which is even more fundamental. Our preoccupation with individual effects, rather than institutional effects, is due to the way we conceptually approach a problem. Although we talk about communication
research, the major concepts we use are either psychological attributes, such as predispositions toward innovation, or behavioral indicators, such as adoption of family planning practices. Even what we call communication variables measure mostly exposure to mass media, and occasionally include some general index of interpersonal contact. The very fact that we use a random sample guarantees that we will not be able to study communication because the probability that any two respondents will know each other is close to zero. It may not be terribly far fetched to say that in development communication research, and in fact in communication research in general, we study everything but communication. Because of the graduate training most of us have received, we tend to think largely in terms of psychological attributes and behavioral indicators, but hardly the process of communication itself.

I am not suggesting that we abandon what we have been doing in measuring individual effects. I am only suggesting that we begin to look for ways to study the effects on institutions which are complex networks of communication processes. There are at least two difficulties involved in the study of institutional effects. First the term "institutional effects" may not be quite appropriate, because in most cases it would not be possible to establish direct cause-effect relations. When we consider the relations between communication and institutional changes, it may be difficult even to think in cause-effect terms, because changes of institutional structure are in and by themselves changes of communication patterns. Secondly, the line of demarcation between individual effects and institutional effects is not easily drawn in operational research even though conceptually they are distinctive. An institution consists of networks of relations among individuals as status occupants and role players. One cannot collect data from an institution. One must collect data from individuals in that institution. When we study individual effects,
we collect data about the individual respondents themselves - their psychological attributes, behavioral indicators, and relational tendencies (but not the actual relational interactions). When we study institutional effects, we collect data from the individual respondents not about themselves, but about the patterns of role interactions they engage in within the context of that institution.

One way to look at the problem is observe how an institution undergoes changes as new communication technologies are introduced and as new economic activities are developed. One example is labor-management relations as an institution. As productivity goes up and the level of income arises, as closer communication develops among laborers, what kinds of pressure will be put on existing labor-management relations, what new conflicts will arise, and how do both sides react to the new situation and reach a new set of relations? The data will be collected from individuals from both management and labor groups, but about the various types of interactions and confrontations between the two groups. What we need to do is to document the process of change from the old institution of labor-management relations as it existed before, to a new institution of labor-management relations as a consequence of better communication and economic development. I have used labor-management relations as an example of institutional change. Other examples include changes in the family as an institution, in the school system, in the occupational structure, or in the political process.

There is the other side of the coin when we analyze institutional change as related to development communication. Institutional change can be analyzed not only as a consequence, but also as an antecedent of development communication. The broad question is: What institutional changes must take place in order to facilitate the use of development communication? The
adoption of modern technologies of production is an example. The use of
communication to disseminate the new technologies may be totally of no avail if
certain institutional barriers are not removed. The adoption of high yielding
rice is a well known example. Without a land reform program, the farmers are
generally so impoverished that they do not have the funds to buy new needs and
chemical fertilizers, even if they know how to use them. Unless there is an
adequate rural credit system, such as the cooperative, the farmers will be
turning to money lenders for loans and will have very little left after they
pay the high interests. Unless there are adequate supplies of seeds and
chemical fertilizers, convincing the farmers to use the new technology will
merely create frustration. And unless there is an equitable and efficient
marketing system, the persons who are more likely to benefit will be the
middlemen, rather than the farmers themselves. By and large, once these
institutional supports are in place, getting the farmers to adopt the new seeds
is much less of a problem, relatively speaking.

New Perspective No. 4. Our discussion will be incomplete if we do not
touch on the new communication technologies. Indeed the trend is such that we
must shift our research attention to include what is known as the high
technology, such as computer, Videotex, and other means of data communication.
We have discussed the necessity of looking at institutional barriers to the
adoption of agricultural technology. In comparison these obstacles are nowhere
near in complexity and scope to the institutional barriers that stand in the
way of adoption of modern technologies of both communication and production.
Much has been written about the potential impact of new communication
technologies on society. Exciting as they may seem, these projected effects
are usually so broad that they become almost unresearchable. I think what is
perhaps more important, and by all means more pressing in a time framework, is
the issue of a society's absorbing capacity in order to adopt these new technologies. How can a society expand its absorbing capacity? This is a highly complex issue, and we are literally looking at the transformation of an entire social structure. So many institutions may be involved that it will be difficult to mention only a few without creating a sense of incompleteness. They involve manpower quality, work ethics, wages and incentives, management style, transportation, marketing, consumption, capital accumulation, credit and banking, among others. Unless effective institutions develop to take care of these and other important functions, the country will not be able to absorb the modern technologies of either communication or production. Productivity will be low. The commodities it produces will not be competitive in the world market. The level of development will suffer. In research on modern communication technology, I think it will be more productive if we concentrate our efforts not on speculating about the impact of the New Age of Communication — for a developing country the New Age of Communication will not arrive unless these problems are taken care of — but rather, on analyzing the institutional bottlenecks and looking into ways whereby improving some of the existing communication channels may minimize or remove these bottlenecks. This kind of research will be enormously difficult, but extremely challenging.
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