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Mass Media Tradition And Change

By

Basudav Chandra Malla
Mass-Media Tradition and Change

BY

DR. BASUDAV CHANDRA MALLA, NEPAL

Mass Media is defined as "any means or agency or instrument which communicates ideas, attitudes, impressions or images to a large number of people". There are various forms of media: newspapers, magazines, radio, television, films, books, etc. Drama, comics, music, puppetry and graffiti are also included in mass-media. Television is by far the most powerful medium because it dramatizes the news and makes it possible to visually transmit events as and when they happen.

Nepal is not only a land-locked country but also virtually a closed one without outside links for a long period. In fact, the development of communication links at both national and international levels was initiated from the very base after the political change of 1951. The development that were achieved during the last three decades are not still adequate to meet the national requirements. However, the infrastructure of communication links—now available in the country—should be considered a matter of satisfaction, when viewed in terms of time duration of their development. Although no newspaper other than government publications was available prior to 1951, it was the first medium of mass communication developed in the country. The first newspaper known as Gorkhapatra was published in 1901. During its

The Gorkhapatra and Rising Nepal, an English daily (1964), were government-controlled dailies. They have wide coverages of both national and international news. The coverage of the latter being relatively extensive in Rising Nepal. The daily publication of the former is approximately 8,000 (eight thousand) copies, whereas the latter amounts to 3,000 (three thousand) copies.
In infancy it was basically a medium of dissemination of government notices and information. Its circulation was extremely limited and it was usually found in government offices. The political change of 1951 was immediately followed by the publication of a number of both Nepali and English dailies. Besides Gorkhapatra and Rising Nepal, some of the important dailies are: Motherland, Commoner, Samaj and Naya Samaj etc. There are papers which are published outside Kathmandu, but they are basically local in character in terms of circulation and news coverage. There are some weeklies like Samichhaya, Rastriya Fukar, Naya Sandesh etc. They are, however, mainly important for views, opinions, and comments.

An obvious constraint to the development of newspapers as mass media was the lack of news agency in the country. It was only in 1961 that the national news agency named as Rastriya Samachar Samiti was created. In 1971, it was renamed as Rastriya Samachar Samiti. The RSS has either exchange arrangements or some kind of link with major wire services of the world - AFP, Tass, Xinhua, Tanjug, A.P. and Kyodo. It has to pay about Rs. 80,000 royalty each to AFP and AP. News is obtained on an exchange basis and RSS publishes news bulletins five times a day in both Nepali and English. Nepal is a member of the non-aligned news pool and has participated in its several meetings. There is also genuine support for the New International Information Order which seeks to restructure the world media so that information from developing Third World Countries could be reported objectively.
Because of difficult terrain and inaccessibility and due to the lack of communication facilities, newspapers cannot be considered as quick media. In remote places, it takes several days to make newspapers available. Moreover, due to extremely limited number of literate people who can read newspapers, newspapers cannot be still claimed as effective mass media. There are two constraints to the development of newspapers in the country as mass media. One is inaccessibility, the other is illiteracy. Therefore, radio has great advantage over newspapers as it is very quick and effective, medium to reach any part of the country. "The radio - the transistor" is as much part of the milieu as the shamanistic rites of a tribal society. For a country like Nepal with a difficult mountain terrain and almost absence of other means of communications, radio is the principal communicator between the government and the people.

Radio Nepal came into existence with the political revolution of 1951. In the beginning it began its operations from Kathmandu with a 300 watt military type shortwave transmitter. Improvements were made in 1954, 1956 and in 1968. Few years back, with the installation of a powerful transmitter at Khumultar, Radio Nepal has become effective to cover all parts of the country and some parts of neighbouring countries.
It provides simultaneous transmissions of three frequencies: one medium wave and two short waves. Two transmitters are kept stand-by, ready to be on air in the event of the failure of the main transmitters.

Radio Nepal now broadcasts three times a day with a total 13 hours broadcasting hours. The programme contents show that the commercial programmes have the maximum duration with about 25 percent of the total hours. It is followed by musical programmes with about 19 percent. The music content takes the longest duration as the major portion of the commercial service contains music, news and commentary. Programmes constitute about 12 percent of the total service hours of a day. Other important service contents include religion, rural and women’s programmes. Educational service occupies only 2.4 percent. Most of the programmes except news are pre-recorded on reel to reel tape or broadcast in the studios.

A study which has been made recently on the radio service in the country has revealed that the news content is the most popular service. The second popular content is the agricultural service which is operated as a part of the rural programme. The popularity of these programmes is quite obvious. Radio Nepal has become quite popular for news, then

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2 ibid, P. 165.
which is broadcast seven times a day, twice in English and five times in Nepali. In addition, the broadcast of district news is twice a day. Agricultural service broadcasts mainly information on techniques of cultivation of various crops as well as control of diseases. By virtue of being a very useful programme to farmers, the popularity of this service is not unnatural in an agricultural country like Nepal.

In developed countries, extension has been purely an educational program, but in a developing country like Nepal it is an educational as well as a service rendering agency.

The various extension teaching methods used in Nepal are as follows:

(a) Mass Contact - radio, booklets, pamphlets, and posters
(b) Group contact - group meetings, agricultural fairs and exhibits, result and method demonstration,
(c) personal contact - farm and home visits, office call.

Until very recently, there was no film industry in Nepal. The Information Department produced on an ad hoc basis news reels, documentaries and occasionally feature films all of which had strong political overtones. The National Communication Plan 1971 envisaged the establishment of a film industry initially through governmental assistance. The Royal Nepal Film Corporation, a public body, has thus far produced about half a dozen feature films, considering the craze which people have for films, the development of film industry in Nepal is pretty bright. The Royal Nepal Film Corporation has thus far received about Rs. 23 million from His Majesty's Government and it has a monopoly in regard to production of news reels and documentaries for Ministry of Communication. The Corporation has participated in international film festivals where some of its creations have been well appreciated.

The Ratna Recording Corporation was established in early sixties by Her Majesty Queen Mother in order to encourage, foster and popularise the varied and rich Nepalese folk culture which finds expression in songs, music and dance. Since its inception, the corporation has produced nearly 100 records which include folk songs and modern music. The corporation has plans to produce cassettes and set up a sophisticated recording system in its recently completed new building in the Panchayat Plaza.
The National Communication Plan 1971

The Communication Plan was initiated in 1971 was formulated under the gracious guidance of His Majesty King Birendra. It came into force on July 17, 1971 with the sublime motto "Communication for Development".

The Plan essentially sought to:

i. Strengthen the traditional unity of the country for its planned development;

ii. Strengthen the continuous and unbreakable bonds and belief towards the establishment;

iii. Enhance national prestige and dignity in the world;

iv. Create greater respect among non-aligned nations and neighbours towards the kingdom;

v. Create respect and confidence among countrymen for world peace.

The Plan provided the following policy guidelines for the fulfilment of these objectives:

i. The communication system should be as far as possible, comprehensive.

ii. Activities which are related to mass communication should be "people-oriented".
iii. As majority of the people live in rural areas, there should be awareness of the need to reorient people's thoughts towards development through a "judicious mixture of new and old ideas".

iv. The language which is to be used by the various communication media should as far as possible be simple and easily understandable.

v. The message which is sought to be transmitted to the people through the communication medium should have a local element.

vi. Through adoption of realistic and objective attitudes, confidence and respect should be created towards the communication service.

vii. The material to be used in communications should be topical.

The National Communication Plan aimed at the rapid development of existing Mass Media as well as at the proper and maximum utilisation of the media to create a congenial climate for speedy development. The communication plan covered a wide range of subjects dealing with public relations and information and organisation of various agencies working in the field of Mass Communication. In the process the plan laid down the basic aims of a development oriented communication strategy and prepared ground for the maximum co-ordination among various mass communication media and agencies. The plan streamlined various mass media and laid a basis for their new organisational set up and mutual co-ordination. It provided for a separate ministry of communication headed by a full-time secretary for the first time. Under the Ministry
of Communications are four departments viz. (1) the Department of Information (ii) His Majesty's Government Press (iii) the Department of Postal Services (iv) the Dept. of Broadcasting (Radio Nepal), as well as six corporation namely: (1) the Gorkhapatra Corporation, (ii) The Royal Film Corporation, (iii) Ratna Recording Corporation, (iv) Sanskritik Sansthana (Cultural undertaking), (v) Rastriya Samachar Samiti (National News Agency) and (vi) Nepal Tele Communication Corporation.

The Communication Plan has become an integral part of the National Development Plan. The Government's policy for mass communication media is well spelt out in the Sixth Plan 1980-85. The specific programmes to be carried out are mentioned in this plan.

The policy measures of His Majesty's Government in the sector of the development of mass communication media include:

A. Arrangement will be made and effective mechanism will be developed for quick transmission and receipt of news both at national and international level.

B. Arrangement will be made to make development news of the country available as early as possible throughout the country as well as in the South-Asian countries.
To make mass communication more effective, the functioning of communication lines and concerned units will be well channelled.

The Corporations concerned with mass communications are so far run with government financial assistance. These corporations will now be developed along commercial lines by developing share capital.

To make these corporations organised on commercial basis self-sufficient, provisions for raising reasonable charges will be made in the various services provided by them.

The major programme to be undertaken in the development of mass communication are as follows:-

a. Typewriter services will be established between Kathmandu and Nepalgunj.

b. The central office of RSS office building will be expanded and branch offices will be constructed in Nepalgunj, Janakpur, Rajbiraj and Birgunj or Hetauda. There are provisions for the establishment of monitoring unit, mechanical workshop, documentation and training units, all of which will be attached to RSS.

c. New equipments will be added to Gorkhapatra Corporation with a view to timely publish newspapers. Delivery system will be made effective, and delivery man will be appointed, to make quick and timely delivery of 'Gorkhapatra' and 'The Rising Nepal', the two widely circulated semi-government-dailies.
d. Radio services will be improved. The standard of radio broadcasts will be upgraded so as to make it comprehensive all over the kingdom. Besides expansion and refinement of existing services, two new transmitters will be established, each being of 100 KW capacity. Of these one will be installed in Pokhara and the other in Kathmandu. One ultra modern studio will be developed in Kathmandu.

e. To undertake feasibility study for the establishment of television service in the country and to begin transmission service at selected places if found feasible from technical and economic standpoint.
Concluding Remarks and Some Recommendations

Communication media are the product of modern industrial society which is essentially urbanised and enjoys a high degree of literacy. Europe had a well-developed 'mass communication system' the proportion of which is still unmatched in this part of the world. "A modern communication system involves two stages or levels. The first is that of the highly organised, explicitly structured mass media, the second is that of the informal opinion leaders who communicate on a face-to-face basis, much as communicators did in traditional systems."……its critical feature is "that orderly relationships exist between the two levels so that the total process of communications has been aptly characterised as involving a "two-step flow" and "above all, the interactions between the two levels take the form of establishing "feedback" mechanisms which produce adjustment in the content and the flow of different forms of messages". In the arena of models of communication, Nepal can be termed as in a transitional phase. Lucian V. Pye's observations aptly apply in Nepal's case too. In a transitional system which combines features of both the modern and traditional system, among many other problems the "more serious problem is the lack of specialised messages of the mass media system and drawing attention to matters of special interest to particular audiences. Instead, those in key positions in the face-to-face system usually are more like the activists in the traditional system, and hence their special skills lie in expanding upon limited information rather than in selecting from a voluminous flow of communication."

Lucian V. Pye (edited), Communication and Political Development. Chapter 7 "Models of Traditional, Transitional and Modern Communications Systems", p. 24 to 29.
The concept of a dominant media network is conspicuous by its absence in societies where spoken or is preeminent as the main source of communication. The "all pervasive" media environment of the west contrasts very well with the extensive nature of the urban centres media catering to the tiny segment of the entire population. In the developing countries, "the pockets of urbanised, literate, aspiring and achieving population" which constitute the audience of communication media" seem like islands in a sea of apathy, ignorance and poverty. Hence the scope of communication media is confined to a few urban centres hardly constituting about 10 percent of total population of the country, with the result that the media environment is felt by the rest of the thin and tiny population.

The Nepalese communication media suffer from stifling concentrations within the confines of Kathmandu valley. Due to inaccessibility because of surrounding mountains and stupendous illiteracy of about 75 percent in the villages, effectively separate the media environment of Kathmandu valley from the rest of the country. Now the numbers have increased, but their size and coverage, apart from Government-owned dailies is as meagre as the corresponding reading public. They do not reach out to the people for they are competition-shy. "The media as a class has been more concerned to secure benefits, government handouts and subsides rather than help develop the reading public and sell itself through improved coverage reporting."


Very little difference can be observed in the case of broadcasting media of the South Asian region. In view of the direct reach of broadcasting to the masses transcending literacy and natural barriers of distance and topography, broadcasting has remained a solid instrument of the government in power. The broadcasting media carry the news from national news agencies and overseas channels as in the case with the printed media. The following observation has been aptly made:

"The emphasis on preserving the heritage of the past particularly affects the government-owned media. Hence the content analysis of any broadcasting channel gives the unmistakable impression that retaining the status quo is an overwhelming bias of such networks. Features like talks, discussion, dramas and even songs carry very little that is stimulating to rouse the people to thought and action. The government-owned broadcasting media not only emphasise personalities over the news values but also de-emphasise the representation of alternative ideas."

For the developing countries the problem of reconstruction is the overriding concern. Successive development plans have well emphasised the lack of wider and comprehensive commitment towards the plan objective. It calls for increased socio-political and economic activities of the part of rural masses. The significance of communication media to enlist

increased participation in the socio-economic transformation has been increasingly realised. The media are involved in generating social awareness amongst the far flung rural people. In the developing countries, the media have to cater to the taste of urbanites who form the dominant audience as well as reorient their coverage to reach the villages and create sustained readership there.

Some Recommendations

a. Mass media should be geared to arouse development consciousness.

In the process of national development, it is the responsibility of planners and media men to chalk out a course of action and form strategy in order to make the best use of existing media as well as to develop the infrastructure of communications for creating development consciousness among the masses.

b. The feedback process is very essential particularly in broadcasting services. The survey can be utilized for the betterment of programmes by correcting the current defects and flaws. The feedback information of the entire communication operation can be collected by various methods viz sample readership and audience surveys, complaint boxes and suggestion boxes, etc.
c. Keeping in view the potentiality of the various folk forms, the folk media should be integrated with all mass communication services in order to achieve optimum impact. An integrated use of traditional media can achieve greater success in development campaigns as well as in the cultural development of masses. Dr. Everett M. Rogers, Professor of Journalism at the University of Michigan, U.S.A. has aptly pointed out, "The traditional media have a great potential in achieving development goals because they have a wide audience and high credibility in the eyes of villagers". In a way that makes them credible and

d. The establishment of a permanent "Training Unit" to impart training courses for specific groups of journalists, reporters, broadcasters, information officers etc. under the information department should be considered.

e. The status of the profession of journalism should be raised through more systematic, regular training, better facilities and greater assistance to the journalists in the performance of their work, and

In a traditional society, the urge to change for better is very much essential in the unfolding of development process. Mass media is very much helpful in eradicating worn-out biases, pre-conceived notions and superstitions that impede the pace of progress. In fact mass media helps create the desire to change for good and brings about new conditions in the society by "planting the seed of change" in the minds of men.
In a developing society, an essential service like communications must be fully utilized for the prime purpose of development activities. And in developing countries, what is termed as "development journalism" is also taking shape. A Filipino journalist, Eduardo Lachica, thus defined "development journalism":

"Development journalism at its best is a rational, independent thorough enquiry into the problems and conditions of a developing country written in a way that makes them readily understandable to the citizens of that country."

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