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New Technologies For Communication Research And Documentation
In Malaysia With Special Emphasis On Institut Teknologi Mara
And The Socio Economic Research Unit, Malaysia

By

Sharifah Mariam Ghazali
New Technologies for Communication Research and Documentation in Malaysia with special emphasis on Institut Teknologi MARA and the Socio Economic Research Unit, Malaysia.

by

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Submitted to the AMIC-UNESCO-USM Workshop on "New Technologies in Communication Research And Documentation" Universiti Sains Malaysia Penang, Malaysia 22 June - 3 July 1987
I. INTRODUCTION

Although a great number of conferences and seminars have been held to discuss various aspects of the new communication technologies and their impact on developing societies, very little has been said or done on the utilization of new technologies for communication research and documentation.

Several reasons might account for this phenomenon:

1. In most research work conducted, there is a clear division of labour with the researcher concerned primarily with the planning of the research issues and the programmer/analyst responsible mainly for the downstream activities — data entry, manipulation, analysis and testing. There is therefore little need for the researcher to understand, let alone learn, the processes involved in the utilization of computers for research.

2. Related to (1) is the question of resistance on the part of researchers to use the new technologies. For those who have been pampered by the computer services available in their own institutions, the need simply does not exist. For others, lack of time, patience, or sheer fear have caused them to shy away.

3. In many institutions, there is a real problem of technology lag. Due to budgetary constraints, different priorities, or administrative red tape, there is often an unwillingness to invest in the new technologies particularly for teaching, research and documentation.

Today, there is a convergence of views that if communication research is to be more effective, meaningful and useful for decision-making, testing of theories or both, then the researcher has no option but to familiarise himself with all the tools of the business, no matter how intricate and mind-boggling.

This workshop which is aimed at the introduction and the testing of various computer packages relevant to communication teachers and researchers is therefore timely.
II. COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN MALAYSIA

Communication research is mainly conducted in the following types of organizations:

a. universities and other institutions of higher learning

b. media organizations such as Radio Television Malaysia, TV3, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the New Straits Times and the like.

c. private research organizations such as Survey Research Malaysia.

d. government research organizations such as the Socio Economic Research Unit in the Prime Minister’s Department.

The types of research and research areas can perhaps be discerned from the list above. The universities and other institutions of higher learning conduct a variety of research—content analysis, media effects, gatekeeper studies, diffusion of information or innovations and similar types of audience studies, and so on.

The media organizations such as RTM and TV3 which do have a department solely responsible for audience research carry out research related to the monitoring of daily audience trends, top 20 programmes for particular time segments, and generate audience profiles for pilot programmes such as new imported drama series or new local programmes.

However, most media organizations utilise the services of commercial research organizations to conduct audience research for them, either to supplement or to complement the research efforts done in-house. Survey Research Malaysia, for instance carries out periodic audience for the various media organizations. The findings then disseminated to the potential advertisers specific programmes and time segments for the station.

As far as the government research organizations are concerned, most central agencies and ministries carry out research activities relevant to their own organizations. Some of the research do touch on communication issues and problems— for instance, the Ministry of Agriculture carries out various studies related to attitudes in innovation adoption. Similarly, the Ministry of Culture is interested on the impact of
radio and TV on youth. In the Prime Minister's Department, the Socio-Economic Research Unit is responsible for a wide range of studies, some of which is concerned with communication. For instance, the current project which I am working on is titled "The Impact of Development Programmes on Radio and Television on the Rural Poor of Malaysia." Much of the emphasis of research carried out by SERU is on impact assessment.

III. LEVEL OF TECHNOLOGY FOR RESEARCH IN ITM AND SERU

Computerization of information has been introduced in ITM since 1975 with the NOVA 1220. In 1978, the ICL 2904 system was installed. Recently, the system was upgraded with the installation of the new ICL Series 39 Level 30 having greater capabilities such as on-line updating of personnel records, student records, hostel records, and paysheet records. Thus, much of its use has been directed at the streamlining and updating of administrative data. Its use for research and documentation is rather limited and peripheral in nature.

The system has a main memory of 8MB; Five fixed discs with a total of 1.5 GB storage; Twin (two) tape decks providing 780 kb/sec operation at 1600/6250 bpi mode; one line printer with 132 print positions; 36 terminals; and 30 matrix printers. Five microcomputers, using mainly SuperCalc 2, DBASE II, Wordstar and Logistic 1234 (with graphic facilities) are connected to the system.

For teaching purposes, the institute uses NEC and IBM microcomputers. Subjects like Newswriting, Editing, Newspaper Management and Magazine Production utilise the microcomputers for wordprocessing. Thus students are better prepared for immediate employment with newspaper organizations (which have been computerised for many years.)

The Socio-Economic Research Unit at the Prime Minister's Department uses an IBM mainframe with a main memory of 16MB, which is located at the Implementation and Coordinating Unit. SERU is one of 60 remote users of the system and is connected to it by a telephone line. Thus, one of the problems with using the mainframe, especially as a remote user is that the response time is slower. SERU also uses a number of microcomputers for report writing. The statistical package used by the mainframe for research is the SAS which has replaced the SPSS. The SAS is less tedious and has many more features.
than the SPSS and is also good for generating graphs and maps. The software packages for the microcomputers used are mainly Dbase and Lotus 1-2-3.

IV. CONCLUSION

The use of computers for research and documentation in communication in Malaysia is not widespread among communication scholars. Part of the reason for this is the fact that researchers are pampered by the availability of statisticians and computer programmers and analysts to carry out downstream data generation activities for them. The resources for research in terms of hardware are however not limited. What is required is for communication researchers to overcome their mental blocks with regard to computer use, understand the relevant packages for better selection of software and utilize them for their teaching and research purposes.