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Speech

By

Seri Adib Adam
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Mr. Vijay Menon, Secretary-General, Asian Mass Communications and Information Centre.

Datuk Musa Mohamad, Vice-Chancellor, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Professor Abdullah Hassan, Chairman of the Organising Committee.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am very happy to be here with you all today. Especially when I know some of you have come from the far corners of Asia to meet here in Penang. As you know, and you may say, I have a passing interest - even a personal interest in the subject of your discussion - communications.

Given my interest it is only natural that I should have looked at your program of activities. Several features of your seminar attract my attention. One feature is your orientation towards policy questions. This is particularly relevant to us here in this country. As the Chairman of the Organising Committee, Professor Abdullah mentioned a minute or so ago, we in Malaysia are embarked on the formulation of a national comprehensive
communications policy. I am told there is no precedent of any country in the world trying to do this, as yet. There are as yet no firm guidelines, no precedents to go by. For this reason alone, your discussions will have an interested audience among those many people in this country who have been and are still involved in this endeavour.

Secondly, your emphasis on research is to be congratulated. As in other Third World countries, research on communications has not kept up with the demands and uses for it. Research should be done and encouraged on local situations, local conditions, national needs for information, expectations and demands on the communications infrastructure and content.

Thirdly, you have very wisely chosen to round off your discussion with a focus on training needs in support of communications. Training support is necessary to provide the pool of skilled manpower on which the communication media depends so much on. Communication content is only as creative as the personnel engaged in such activities. Manpower constitute a limiting constraint on how far the communications media can improve. For all these three reasons, your choice of topics and venue, if I may be allowed to say so, are both well-timed and fortunate.
Since you already propose to discuss all these topics in detail, I would be foolhardly to tread on the same ground. I would not dare to go in where angels even do not dare to go in, and that is the arena of communications discussions by communicators. Instead if you will permit me I propose to skirt around your familiar area, and talk instead from a layman's point of view. From this view, and the view of someone who uses research, who looks to research for guidance in not only day-to-day but long term decisions, I propose to share with you some of my own thoughts, feelings and ideas about research. In other words, what do I as a user expect of research and researchers? And why should research on communications be important?

The first and obvious answer is that communications is both a rapidly changing and expanding field. It is an area with both a high degree of certainty as well as uncertainty. For instance, we already know what are some of the new communication technologies introduced in the eighties. We also know that innovations abound in the information industry at a phenomenal rate. It is a field fraught with uncertainty. While there is a lot of speculation about the effects of such technologies, some of it sound and well-based, no one is absolutely certain what these effects can or should be. If I may borrow a phrase to describe the field, it is that the only thing constant about it is
"change" itself. So change there will be. The general direction of such change is also clear. We are moving towards what is often referred to variously as "the information age", or "wired societies", or "informatised societies". Such societies begin by adopting and using a wide range of communication technologies, available since the 1980's, technology such as:

- satellites,
- optical fibres,
- computerised switching,
- intelligent television receivers,
- word processors,
- cable television,
- data networking etc.

To different degrees some if not all of these technologies will be adopted by developing countries such as ours. Eventually however, all these technologies are of a piece, i.e. they all come in a large information processing package. The full adoption of all these technologies in any society, I am told, will result in a ISDN or Integrated Services Digitilised Network, where an entire country and in fact the entire world becomes a truly WIRED CITY.

I cannot help but marvel and be amazed at the way in which scientific discoveries in many different and varied fields have been brought
together so inventively to produce cheap, economically viable ways of handling, storing, and processing information. For the policy maker, this technological abundance poses several dilemmas. I shall briefly make passing mention of some of these.

One is the problem of overchoice. The array of technologies to be chosen is wide. Equipment and services are complex. What would be an appropriate investment strategy for these new technologies for developing societies such as ours? What is the appropriate rate and speed of such adoption? Are there alternatives to adoption, such as adaptation, local production.

Two, is the rate and rapidity with which we have to make decisions. These innovations are occurring so rapidly, that instead of us meeting the future, the future is being thrust on us. No previous technological innovation can match the speed with which today's communication technology is being invented and innovated.

Third, no previous technologies have such potential for threat as well as promise. While third world countries typically look at them for salvation and solution of their problems, the possibility is inherent in these technologies to aggravate not solve their problems, such as creating more inequality, a greater gap between the have and the have-nots, and perpetuating a larger gap between...
them and the rich nations. Instead of divisions between the poor and the rich countries, there will be a worse division between the information rich and the information poor countries.

Four, what is the potential for such technologies to take away from us our cultural, political and social autonomy, to have development patterns imposed on us from outside, when we will have our national priorities and development patterns determined for us by outside parties. Is it possible that these technologies will unleash new imperialistic and commercial tendencies, so powerful that not even governments can countervail their power? To take one example, digitilisation of information will make invalid the traditionally different means of communications. News flows will be indistinguishable from data flows, which in turn will be indistinguishable from money flows, or electronic funds transfer. Unless countervailing forces are set into motion, concepts like "sovereignty", "countries" and "national borders" will become as dead as extinct animals.

In the face of all these far-reaching and rapid changes, there is a crying need for the formulation of policies which can guide decisions in communications: In support of such policy formulation efforts, there is an even greater need for research. Such research should be oriented towards questions searching for answers in the
minds of policy makers. Structures should be established to undertake such kinds of research on a sustained, continuous and long-term basis. Frameworks should be built and established to ensure cooperation, trust and good working relationships between researchers and policy makers. Such linkages are important and should be institutionalised. Researchers must recognise the needs, requirements, goals and constraints of policy makers, be they administrators or politicians. Policy makers need usable research, easily understood research, and research where policy implications are spelt out and made explicit. Such research must generate options, compare options according to different criteria, point out to different strategies to achieve different sets of goals.

We in government have felt the need for such research. Any publicly accountable government needs good advice so they can carry out their mandate to rule and govern justly and wisely. As I have argued, this need is acute in the field of communications, where decision making is especially heavy with responsibility and implications. There is a need to "humanise" communications, to make it more people-oriented, to make it less manipulative and more responsive to peoples' autonomous needs and aspirations. No matter whether one agrees or disagrees with either individual policies or entire programs of Government, when all is said and done, it cannot be denied that responsible government is in the business of ruling with justice,
balancing different interests harmoniously, compensating imbalances, providing equity where there is inequity, and moderating efficiency with more humane welfare considerations. Responsible government has a human and humane face. Democratic government has to withstand the crucible test of elections, of being judged on their performance and programs - making them, although not completely altruistic, for the most part, responding to peoples' aspirations. Third World governments need not only public support, but much more so, sound policy advice. In the face of imperialistic and commercial pressures internationally, governments are the best safeguarders of the peoples' interests. In situations where countries are at the receiving end, rather than initiators, of technological change, governments have the additional and necessary duty of making their country truly autonomous to choose, adopt and adapt whatever development or communication model their people wish for themselves.

I find it most gratifying to note the lead taken by all three co-host institutions in forging the way towards research oriented towards policy questions, in initiating discussions and rapport between policy makers and researchers, and in providing training support for our ventures in improving, enhancing and upgrading communications in Asia. With both UNESCO and AMIC, I note with gratitude their catalytic role in the encouraging of research, policy formulation and training in communications. Such work as you do, and you do them well, should
be encouraged sustained and expanded. I find it particularly encouraging that in this venture you have chosen a pioneering Malaysian institution of higher learning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, in the field of communications, to collaborate with you. To all these host institutions, my sincerest wishes for their continuing work in this field. I wish this meeting success in every way that you intend. I now have the great pleasure of declaring this seminar open.