The Impact Of New Communication Technologies On Cultural Identity In Rural Asia

By

Juan Jamias

The Impact of New Communication Technologies on Cultural Identity in Rural Asia

By Juan F. Jamias *

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

The Tiger by William Blake

The fearful symmetry of new communication technologies haunts many thinkers who believe they would inevitably lead to the loss of local culture, or specifically, cultural identity. (1) Most peoples have a particular if not unique knowledge of themselves - who they are. Often this state of mind is violated only at great cost. A former professor of mine once told a good example. At the time, Dr Milton Rokeach was steeped in his studies on people's belief and disbelief systems. He said he had played a prank on his children by calling each by a name which was not the child's real name. In fine, he had changed their identities. As a result, the children underwent great and intolerable stress. So he had to revert quickly to calling them by their real names lest he inflicted irreversible harm to them.

The purpose of this paper is to review the knowledge on the above subject based on the literature accessed in the AMIC documentation centre and other readings. The subject headings consulted were: cultural identity and technology combined with the keywords culture and rural development Asia. Altogether these concepts defined the study problem in this review. For solution or resolution, two areas of concern were advanced, to wit (1) policy based on people's needs instead of the free play of market forces (Halloran 1983), and media education. In this connection, access by telephone to the AMIC database is now possible to subscribers of AMICnet, an on-line library service based in Singapore.

Positive As Well As Negative Effects

Empirical studies have indicated that new communication technologies have resulted in favourable changes in people and society. In a longitudinal study on the social impact of satellite television in rural Indonesia, Chu, Alfian and Schramm (1991) confirmed several positive effects there. They wrote:

> In the six-year period, rural Indonesians who were able to watch the Palapa television learned approximately three times as much about eight principal developmental

---

* Professor Emeritus of Development Communication, University of the Philippines Los Banos, College, Laguna. Paper delivered at the Seminar on The Impact of New Communication Technologies on Rural Society in Asia and the Pacific, Jakarta, Indonesia, 13 - 14 September 1993.

programmes as did non-viewers. Television helped narrow the knowledge gap between the lower and upper social and economic strata. It contributed to the learning of the national language, Bahasa Indonesia, especially among those with little or no schooling. This finding assumes enormous significance in a country where many different dialects are spoken.

Television promoted the adoption of family planning and modern health care, encouraged greater participation in village social organisations, and facilitated more active use of rural markets and public financial institutions. In the lower social and economic strata, television helped to raise the adoption of modern agricultural practices close to the level in the upper strata. Among viewers, television became the predominant source of information, surpassing in importance all other sources combined. Consumption of advertised products increased markedly among viewers. In the Muslim majority, the evening recitation of the Koran declined significantly among viewers.

Rural Indonesia has apparently become more closely integrated into the national scheme. It has definitely become a better informed society. It has become a more efficient society in managing its own resources and community affairs. It has become a more participatory society. It has also, we must admit, become more oriented to consumerism and somewhat leaning toward secularism. This social tranformation of rural Indonesia is rather fundamental and has come about at a pace and over an area made possible largely by the massive influx of information from Palapa telelvision. One highly significant finding is that, contrary to speculations among some scholars, information from television apparently narrows, rather than widens, the social and economic gaps that previously existed in the Indonesian rural structure.

On the other hand, Arifin Bey (1985) concluded that the spread of television sets in Indonesia had mostly negative impact. He cited the research findings of Professor Abdul Munis. More TV set ownership did not result in wider knowledge of remote Sulawesians. They lacked the ability to comprehend the programmes that were mostly produced in the centre that is Jakarta. But the same village people did easily learn from the televised scenes of the city. From these they copied lifestyles such as consuming cosmetics and alcohol.

Several Emerging Propositions

The two opposite results reflect a number of propositions found in the literature reviewed.

The uses of modern technology are ambivalent or two-pronged, asserted Biedenkopf (1984).

> Their effects on society are not determined by the technologies themselves but by the uses of technologies in society. Or, to put it in a different way; it is not technology as such that determines its effects on society. It is what we do with it.

Yet modern technology, particularly mass communication technologies, are here to stay. If they are not yet present, we will get them sooner or later, whether we like or not. Biedenkopf affirmed (ibid.), "Total isolation from modern technology is impossible." An executive of a radio broadcasting commission in the South Pacific which has computerised news production and dissemination said, "There's no turning back from the new technology."

Nevertheless, the communication technologies are not self-actualising instruments totally uncontrollable by persons and society. All technology is embedded in a nexus of social, economic and political factors. These factors determine in many ways the influence of a particular technology or technologies. Radio for example, is the most widespread medium in rural Asia because it is low cost and serves both the literate and illiterate citizens. Neither is the individual merely a passive receiver. Typically, she or he sees, hears, reads or watches, according to need or interest.

Moreover, the individual may already have a built-in characteristic or characteristics that have molded the way he responds to the communication technology. Pradip N Thomas (1990), an Indian intellectual, declared "The culture of chip technology with its accent on efficiency, speed and rational/Western logic, is bound to come up against the logic of traditional knowledge with its accent on relationships, flexibility, indigenous recreation and work schedules, participatory decision-making processes, community-based belief systems, etc."

It is to be noted also that the different communication technologies should not be lumped together for purposes of study. The media are not all equal. Each communication technology should be studied on its own terms. Some have more affinity to rural audiences than other media. The level of development of a country's communication system, furthermore, differs between countries. Television broadcasting had just been installed in Fiji and Western Samoa when I visited these South Pacific states last August 1993.

And once installed, television's impact may not necessarily be the same across audiences. Bey (op.cit.) deplored the differential results of television in enhancing enlightenment between viewers in Japan and Indonesia.

While the new communication technologies are tangible enough in the form of the satellite, computers, television, and fiber optics - not to mention the small media like audio-cassettes, video-cassettes and radio - the mode of communication in the rural areas that vies as the most influential is transportation or travel. It would not do right to forget this technology of mobility both in the physical and psychological sense. Mobility through faster and more efficient means of transportation may well be the communication technology with the greatest impact in the rural setting.

De Sola Pool (1990) mentioned other sources of information that spur the progress of people in developing countries, namely, education abroad, colonial and missionary work, technical assistance programmes, business and trading liaisons, the mass media like books, government information and educational efforts. All these differential sources of information potentially influence what the rural as well as urban people will acquire to change what they know, their attitude and behaviour. Said another way, the new communication technologies do not solely account for the influences impinging on rural society.

The stark reality in the rural areas in Asia is that the communication facilities and infrastructure are still mostly inexistent even at this rapidly modernising period of history. The Information Age has not yet reached the villages of Asia. Indeed, the plow and the bullock still reign supreme as in ancestral times.

What we articulate now in the professional and academic conferences may be pre-empting the changes **still to come** in the rural sector. On the other hand, the matters that we fear with respect to the mass media or new communication technologies are already real in the urban areas. We deplore rightly the invasion to our sensibilities of violence, sex, consumerism, cultural "imperialism", and the other blights of today's foreign-dominated media landscape.

High-Touch to High-Tech

The futurist and critic, John Naisbitt, has hailed the efficacy of high-touch as an antidote to the failings of high-tech. The critical theorist-researcher, James Halloran (1985), urges us to explore the full potential of the new communication technologies for socially constructive purposes. To him, this implies "thinking in terms of social and communication needs and being willing to define these, rather than that needs (normally ill-defined) will be met by the unimpeded operation of free market forces."

How may the citizenry respond to the challenge to bring better quality media fare to the audience? Pre-censorship is not a desired option. Freedom is imperative. This pertains to the right to send as well as to receive information or to be informed. Discerning exposure to media fare should be developed at all audience levels. This ability to make responsible choices among media alternatives, to put, what one sees, hears or reads in proper perspective in fine, to be critical, may be developed through media education variably known as audio-visual literacy instruction. There is a plethora of literature on this subject but this is a topic for another conference paper.

Summary

Fear burns rife over the negative impact potential of the new communication technologies on cultural identity in rural Asia. Yet technology is not neutral. Technology is good or bad depending on the use to which it is put. Research results have shown both positive and negative aspects of mass media. In counteracting the ambivalent nature of new communication technology, research, in fine, should inform media policy; it should inform the choices that people make in their media usage. The appropriate research approach builds on the primacy of social needs, not merely the play of market forces. And individual citizens should be intellectually prepared to be discerning, if not critical, users of communication media and products.

ENDNOTE

(1). Ithiel de Sola Pool (1990) emphasised this common fear of the negative potential of the new communication technologies in rural societies. He explained why few underdeveloped countries have not yet taken full advantage of the powerful communication media for their development. He wrote:

> Most fear mass media as a Pandora's box they cannot control. They fear the revolution of rising expectations that may come from watching video pictures of people riding in cars or eating in fancy restaurants. They fear the consumerism that people may learn from ads for canned goods or refrigerators. They fear the loss of traditional values if people read the news in Time magazine, or the words of Chairman Mao. And so fearing a genie that they may not be able to control, most governments of developing countries have not devoted resources to communication comparable to what they invest in transportation, education, or health.
>
> Today, new means of communication are becoming available that make it easier to bring mass media to villages. Satellites can deliver television to rural Indians and Eskimos. They also provide telephone communication and establish consultation between the village nurse and the doctor at the district hospital. Villagers can tune their transistor radios to get the national news reports, or market reports from the local town, or world news or propaganda from abroad. They can even be put on line to a data retrieval system.

In this connection, de Sola Pool defined the term **new communication technologies** as "shorthand for about 25 main devices, which include cable television, video recorders, and discs, satellites, facsimile machines, computer networks, computer information processing, digital switches, optical fibers, lasers, electrostatic reproduction, large screen and high definition television, mobile telephone, and new methods of printing.

****

SELECTED REFERENCES

1. Bey, Arifin. 1985. Communication technology's impact on traditional culture. Jakarta: Centre for Japanese Studies, Universitas Nasional. **In** International Institute of Communications. Annual Conference, Tokyo, 1985: a collection of background papers. London: IIC, 1986: 49-54.

2. Biedenkopf, Kurt H. 1984. The cultural dimension of modern technology. Intermedia, 12(6): 18 - 22. (November 1984).

3. Chu, Godwin C., Alfian and Wilbur Schramm. 1991. Social impact of satellite television in rural Indonesia. Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre.

4. De Sola Pool, Ithiel. 1990. Technologies without boundaries: On telecommunications in a Global Age. Edited by Eli M Noam. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

5. Halloran, James D. 1983. Research on the impact of communication technology. Paper presented at the symposium on the Cultural, Social, and Economic Impact of Communication Technology, organised by UNESCO and the Institut Della Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome, 12 - 16 December 1983.

6. Thomas, Pradip N. 1990. New Communication Technologies and Third World cultures. **In** Media Development 37 (1): 51 - 52.

7. AMIC Documentation Unit (compiler). Media education: A select bibliography. Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre. n.d.

8. Various authors. Media education: An overview. Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre. In progress.

****