

**Communication And Development  
In The Asian Context**

**by**

**Florangel Rosario Braid**

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## COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE NEW ASIAN CONTEXT\*

by Florangel Rosario Braid, Ph.D.\*\*

In 1983, I described the Asian environment in my book *Communication Strategies for Productivity Improvement* as one in ferment and beset with problems of disparities and dislocations. Famine, poverty and anarchy dominated Asia's image in the global media. Today, the Asian landscape has dramatically changed. From the plains of Ho Chi Minh to the high rise condos of Kuala Lumpur and Shanghai, many Asian capitals are now cashing in on the economic boom sweeping the Asia-Pacific Rim. Along with the emerging Asian consciousness is the "can do" attitude which has rekindled shared values of industriousness, cooperativism, persistence and thrift.

A review of the dynamic Asian environment is critical if we are to clearly define the role of the communication media in Asia and the Pacific in the 21st Century. For example, from the 60s to the 80s, our communication strategies primarily focused on breaking the poverty cycle. Today, the development agenda converges on economic equity, social justice, cultural harmony and sustainable development.

### The Asian Tiger Economy

The most visible change in Asia-Pacific is the economic progress achieved by China and most Southeast Asian countries particularly Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia in addition to countries which have earlier achieved economic progress -- Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. Many others have just taken off or are still on the launch pad -- the Philippines and Vietnam.

With over three billion people and a much improved per capita income (translated into purchasing power), Asia is the largest single market for goods and services. The forecasted growth ranges from 4 percent to a high of 10 percent.

The economic progress that has been achieved has prompted the Asian community to work closely to protect "common interests" and sustain growth against the protectionist tendencies already manifested by the West particularly the United States and the recently integrated European Community. The emergence of growth triangles among neighboring Asian countries and the formation of

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President and Executive Dean, Asian Institute of Journalism, Manila, Philippines.

free trade arrangements (such as the Asean Free Trade Area or AFTA and South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement) are some of the initial moves undertaken.

The great diversity among the countries in the Region and the wide gap between the haves and have-nots require a balancing act which communication should be able to fulfill. Also, within each country, economic disparity still exists between the urban centers and the countryside. The "fruits of development" have not "trickled down" to a significant portion of the population particularly the ethnic minorities, farmers, fisherfolks and women, many of whom live below the poverty line. Economic progress still has to be translated into "social dividends" in terms of greater access to basic social services -- education, health, nutrition, drinking water, electricity and shelter.

### The Socio-Political Scene

The most dramatic development in the political scene is that political leaders of the communist and socialist states are now more tolerant of free market ideas. Party leaders in China, Vietnam, Laos, among others, are gradually introducing market reforms including trade liberalization. However, the "closed" political structure in these societies remain. In countries which have been under military rule, there is a discernible "back to the barracks" trend although military officers (active or retired) still occupy key positions in the civilian government.

From the former Soviet Union has emerged the new republics in Central Asia which have adopted the free market orientation and are in transition towards a more open political environment. These political-economic transitions would undoubtedly result in some "dis-equilibrium." Clearly, the communication challenge is how to provide a "balance" between government centralization and regulation characteristic of the old system and the desired decentralization and deregulation in a free market system. Too, there is a need for a policy framework that will ensure broadened participation of as many sectors of society and prevent monopoly or control by a few vested interest groups.

Except for Cambodia, political stability now characterizes the once trouble-stricken Southeast Asian Region. While in the past Asian countries used to depend on their former colonials to help settle political issues, many Asian countries and regional organizations now assume an active role in helping neighbors reach political settlements. For example, Asean has played a crucial role in the ongoing peace efforts in Cambodia. Remaining flashpoints are the territorial disputes among neighboring countries such as the Philippines and Malaysia over the Spratley Islands, but which could be settled through open communication and dialogue among the parties.

The issue of human rights remains a sensitive issue among most Asian governments with many advocating for an "Asian" perspective in defining human rights. The issue has become not only part of political discussions but also an economic agenda as some western nations consider it as a pre-condition for continuous trade relations or official assistance.

The search for cultural harmony in multi-ethnic or multi-religious countries appears to be more difficult to achieve in the case of India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. The problem though is less serious as compared to ethnic cleansing in Somalia and in the former Yugoslavia.

## COMMUNICATION ISSUES AND AGENDA FOR THE ASIA-PACIFIC CENTURY

### 1. Sustaining Economic Growth

The priority agenda for the Region is to sustain economic growth and equity. Initially, this can be made possible by increased intra-regional trade and commerce. Communication could facilitate the strengthening of trade relations among Asian countries. Unfortunately, trade and market information at the global level remains in the hands of a few business elites, spread around the globe and linked together by instant satellite communication, computer hook-ups and data retrieval systems controlled by transnational communications. The same set up exist in national markets where market information such as supply, prices, credit, and market demands is controlled by unscrupulous traders.

Communication media to a large extent have facilitated technology transfer in the Region. The development of telecommunications infrastructure in the Asian region appears to be uneven especially in countries like the Philippines where deregulation and privatization has led to concentration of infrastructure in the urban areas.

### 2. Communication in Social Development

Since a significant portion of the Region's population is still underdeveloped, communication strategies should continue to address poverty and related social issues. In many less-developed Asian countries, however, the communication media remain a virtual "wasteland" partly due to poor media and telecommunications infrastructure. In this age of computer technology, many broadcast stations still depend on obsolete equipment and facilities (open reel analogs, etc.), have very low transmission capabilities, and un-trained personnel. The capital intensive nature of media and telecommunication makes investment difficult.

But even in countries where broadcast facilities seem to be adequate like in the Philippines, commercialism negates its development potential. Development-oriented programs are produced as "tokens" and used as "fillers" (i.e., aired during "unholy" hours).

For Asian mass media to become socially relevant, it must address the urgent needs of two important sectors -- education and public health .

In the Asian region, there is a need for policy intervention in communication technology planning to be able to transcend artificial barriers to basic education such as physical distance, lack of resources -- teachers, school buildings, facilities and equipment. Distance education through multi-media channels provide the best and sometimes, the only alternative delivery channel. The experiences of China, Thailand, India, among others in distance education should be shared with other countries.

In Central Luzon (in the Philippines) where schools have been buried under lahar (mudflow) and ashes from Mt. Pinatubo's eruption in 1991, efforts are being undertaken to bring education to schoolchildren in evacuation and resettlement centers through tent schools, mobile teachers and vans, self-learning modules, radio and other modes of distance education.

In developed societies such as Singapore and South Korea, distance education provides workers and professionals opportunity for continuing education.

The Education for All Movement which was launched in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 emphasizes the need for innovative, media-based delivery channels. Many governments (especially in developing Asian countries) now realize the failure of the formal school system to address societal problems for various reasons -- colonial curriculum, poorly trained and motivated teachers, lack of resources, etc.

Experiential learning in non-formal education settings is regarded as an effective strategy in sharing knowledge and skills. Strategies such as cross-visits, hands-on training, issue-oriented workshops, role playing, case studies, etc. seem to have greater impact as they make the learning process more participatory and interactive. Medium-cost technologies such as audio and video cassettes are also useful learning tools.

In the Maldives, non-formal education programs depend on audiotapes as many adults prefer to stay at home and listen to audiotapes than go to school or community learning center. The home is perceived to be the more appropriate venue because traditionally, it is recognized as the center of learning.

In functional literacy courses, "visual literacy" has been integrated. This has encouraged learners (adults especially) to express their views on topics not only through oral expression but also through images and symbols.

Meanwhile, in the health sector, despite advancement in technology, hundreds of children in rural Asia still die every month from preventable diseases because knowledge of even simple, low-cost technologies such as vaccines, oral rehydration therapy (ORT) and breastfeeding remain unknown to parents. This, despite the accessibility of radio sets in even the remotest villages.

Through the dissemination of available knowledge and affordable technologies, media can empower families to improve their own lives and ensure child survival. The mass media has immense power to draw the attention of the public, government, and all other sectors of society to the conditions affecting children and to translate such awareness into active and sustained participation in programs intended to improve the situation of children.

Two communication-related concepts have emerged during the past decades which focus on the use of communication strategies - *social marketing* and *social mobilization*. The former is defined as the application of commercial marketing principles to advance a social cause, issue, product, service.

Social mobilization is defined by Unicef as "a planned process of enlisting the support and active involvement of all sectors within a society that can play a role in achieving an agreed social objective, converging the interest and actions of institutions, groups and communities towards the objective, thereby mobilizing the human and material resources to reach it, and rooting it in society's and the community's conscience to ensure its sustainability."

Lessons and experiences in both strategies are now being documented. A number of academic institutions are now offering courses in these innovative areas and there has been a discernible increase in the number of literature on these topics.

Social marketing and social mobilization strategies recognize the need to create awareness and support of all sectors of society particularly in addressing social problems such as health, education, nutrition, water and sanitation, among others.

### 3. Communication, Culture and Development

It is now recognized that Asian countries with a clear national vision or ideology based on their indigenous culture have gained a headstart in achieving economic progress. The national vision or ideology has served as the "unifying and mobilizing force" for the people.

In countries like Japan, South Korea and China, the unifying force is based on *Confucianism* which emphasizes work ethic and social harmony. In Thailand, whose primary institutions are built on the philosophy of "balance", it is the influence of *Buddhism*. Indonesia has its *Pancasila*, where the five principles include belief in God, love of country, social justice, humanitarianism and internationalism. *Pancasila* has its counterpart in Malaysia, *Rugun Negara*.

The role of the mass media in evolving a national philosophy is evident in the Indonesian and Malaysian experiences. An ideology must be expressed and shared by all to become a common value. Media has helped crystallize and popularize this ideology. In the case of Indonesia, *Pancasila* also provides the framework which guides media conduct.

Aside from helping shape a national ideology, media has played a critical role in integrating and fostering cultural harmony among Asia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. In some countries, the mass media have contributed to cultural dis-harmony by continually reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Often, cultural (ethnic) communities are the favorite victims

Cultural dualism is seen in the continuing dichotomy between the urban elites who are oriented to western modes and lifestyles and the (rural) masses who have remained traditional in outlook. Often, the mass media have been used as the "tool" of the dominant culture to influence workstyle, lifestyle and worldview of the majority. The result is cultural alienation or cultural conflict.

At the regional or global level, the advent of communication satellite has made "cultural invasion" no longer a threat but a reality. The Hong Kong-based STAR TV can reach as many as 35 countries. A recent study shows that more than 6.3 million Asian households receive STAR TV programs or more than 45 million viewers in India, Taiwan, Philippines, Israel, Pakistan Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, etc. It was reported that STAR TV was banned by South Korean authorities because its programming "threatens the cultural integrity of the country."

A recent UNESCO mission reported of a case of a Mekong Delta Country where the people prefer to tune in to the broadcast stations of the neighboring country as they had sophisticated programming and stronger power signal. As a result, more people in this country speak the other country's language rather than their own which is evolving. The same situation was observed in Tawi-Tawi, the Southernmost province of the Philippines. The local people listen to a Malaysian radio which has a much clearer signal than nearby local radio stations.

At this stage of advanced communication technology, imposing restrictive laws (such as regulating the setting up of satellite dish in one's backyard) cannot be a long-term solution to the threats of "cultural invasion." If programs from the outside can no longer be barred, one strategy is to multiply the choices from within the country using all broadcast transmission systems -- cable, terrestrial and satellite. But the most effective defense, of course, is to educate media users to be more disseminating and critical of the programs that they would choose.

However, veering away from the extreme of cultural invasion, "it is also important for Asians to have a deeper understanding of their peers in the region -- such as similarities or differences in terms of history, culture and arts, economic activities. If we are to build a stronger Asian community, media should have a more Asian outlook but without losing its global perspective.

#### 4. Communication and the Peace Process

Militarization has remained the main instrument in resolving civil strife and ethnic conflict in the Region. Governments now realize the importance of dialogue or open communication in conflict resolution. But these peace processes seem to be dominated by political and military personalities. Past peace efforts and dialogues (such as the historic North-South Cancun Conference) have failed because parties involved have taken a rigid stance on issues and have manifested strong biases against the other party. Negotiation is often equated to winning the other side over with skillful argumentation (win-lose). Dialogue is also harder to achieve if one side assumes a position of superiority.

While communication theorists have devoted considerable time in trying to understand communication in technology transfer, advertising, corporate communication, etc., little attention has been given to examining the communication requirements involved in the peace process such as negotiation and dialogue.

Peace and harmony are inherent Asian values as manifested in non-adversarial or non-confrontational approaches in settling disputes. But how these innate values can be translated into appropriate communication strategies in conflict resolution still remains a priority in our communication agenda.

Finally, how can we operationalize the win-win concept (or non-zero sum game) in conflict resolution through communication? The traditional thinking is that whenever one wins, another loses. In a non-zero sum scenario, both sides gain in the process.

## 5. Disaster Communication

The frequency of natural and man-made disasters in Asian countries underscores the need for an effective disaster preparedness and management system. Again, the communication sector plays an important role as it can provide adequate and timely information for planning, decision-making, monitoring and surveillance.

A major inadequacy which is repeatedly brought to fore during calamities is the lack of media and telecommunication infrastructures in the countryside. Many communities have become isolated from the mainstream because of lack of access to these infrastructures. In the case of media reportage, the most common criticisms are sensationalism, inaccurate reporting, irresponsible reporting thereby endangering national security, graphic presentation of death and suffering, and invasion of privacy.

Among the more promising training and research areas in disaster communications are: legal and ethical framework in crisis reporting; protection and safeguard of journalists; government information system, and available communication technology for disaster preparedness.

## 6. People Empowerment, Media Pluralism and Alternative Media

The emergence of non-government organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) as the "third sector" of society necessitates a review of Media-NGO/PO relationship. Media can no longer ignore issues popular among NGOs and POs -- environment, consumerism, women's rights, peace and human rights, among others.

Oftentimes, the perceived parochial concerns of some NGOs discourage or turn off media from taking up their causes. Media's penchant for sensationalism and controversy attracts them to institutions where these qualities abound -- government, business, and military. Many NGOs/POs also lack media relations and communication skills such as writing and packaging news.

Media organizations, especially those with limited resource base are likely to avoid addressing social issues that are seen as threats to economic viability.

The global thrust towards recognition of NGOs/POs and decentralization challenges the media to contribute to democratic pluralism which is providing as many sectors of society access or opportunity to express views on local and national issues and participate in planning and decision-making.

Technology need not be expensive to elicit public involvement. The element that makes for participation is public perception that media is willing to air public concerns. If this is not present, these sectors would turn to alternative media or develop their own media that reflect their special interests. Several Philippine experiences can be cited.

In a small town in Mountain Province, local residents have been publishing the *Kadaclan News Organ* for the past 17 years using an old fashioned mimeo machine. Members of the local community serve as reporters and distributors and contribute material requirements.

In Infanta, Quezon Province, the local residents were trained by the local Catholic priest to manage and produce the programs of the local radio station, DZJO.

The advent of new communication technology did not result in the demise of traditional and low-cost technologies. Comic books, folk media and literature (street theatre, puppetry, songs and dances, plays) blackboard or wall newspapers, community art, etc. are still very popular in local communities. Recent "people power" revolutions in the Philippines and China have demonstrated the popularity and effectiveness of the "underground" media. The street theater as medium of advocacy in support of current causes is also often utilized.

With local government autonomy, media is expected to become more demassified. Computers linked to telephones in villages will be effective for community mobilization. Even small, outdated technologies like electric mimeographing, offset presses, and IBM electric compositors can boost the ability of existing grassroots media.

In some countries, media is used to "legitimize" and sustain authoritarian rule. NGOs and media can work together to serve as "countervailing forces" to oppressive and abusive structures. Both can mobilize popular sentiments and advocate for authentic reforms. A classic example is the *1986 People Power Revolution* in the Philippines whose media images around the world have inspired similar movements in Eastern Europe and China.

## 7. Community Organizations as Communication Channels

Community organizations are effective communication conduits. In the Philippines, cooperatives, Basic Christian Communities, local development councils and sectoral organizations have demonstrated diverse roles in local development efforts. They serve as alternative source of information (on social services, productivity, civic rights, etc.) especially in areas where the media is not accessible or available. They are effective advocates and mobilizers with respect to local issues and needs. Indigenous community groups (formal or informal) are also effective in hastening the transfer and utilization of appropriate technologies.

An example of a successful (rural) organization is the *Grameen Bank* which aside from providing credit and educating women-members in managing small enterprises, also enables borrowers to learn to work with others and provide mutual support in times of adversity. This concept which originated in Bangladesh is now replicated in more than 10 countries including Malaysia (described as *Projek Ikhtiar*), the Philippines and the United States.

In many parts of the Philippines, small fishermen's organizations have organized the *bantay dagats* which patrols the seashores against illegal fishing. They also protect the coral reefs, mangroves and other nearshore resources. Farmers' organizations are the most enthusiastic in the use and promotion of organic fertilizers and sustainable farming methods.

Community organizations, through their bottom-up approach to development are effective mediators in establishing consensus. Past experiences have indicated that where government played the dominant role in development, there was little "trickle down" of benefits to the people and limited participation on the part of the latter. However, despite a strong sense of commitment and dedication, leaders of many of these indigenous organizations often lack communication skills such as advocacy, negotiation and bargaining.

## 8. Telecommunications Planning

Funding for telecommunication highways in the Region often depend on outside bilateral or multilateral loans or through direct investments from multinational companies. In the foreign "development assistance" area, there has been a significant increase in telecommunication investments to the detriment of the social sector. The Asian Development Bank and the World Bank are the principal sources of financing for telecommunications in the Region.

In most cases, foreign experts are hired to provide technical assistance in the formulation of national policies and the drafting of the master plan. The direct involvement of foreign entities in an area such as telecommunication raises serious questions such as: Are the policies of these foreign groups consistent with the recipient country's own development policies and goals? Can the telecommunication infrastructure lead countries out of their grinding poverty? Do international communicative linkages foreclose options for national sovereignty?

One of the serious problems facing the Philippines today is how to untangle the telephone monopoly which has resulted in extremely unsatisfactory service. This monopoly can be traced to a World Bank dictated policy during the Marcos regime which imposed as pre-condition for the Bank's loan the maintenance of a local telephone monopoly.

It is a fact that advancements in telecommunication are now a pre-condition for development in an emerging *information society*, technology planning and transfer should not however be the exclusive domain of "big business", "big government" and "big donor agency" but should be a result of a multisectoral consultative process.

### Concluding Note

Several key concepts have been highlighted to emphasize certain key concepts in the changing Asian context.

The need for "alternatives" arise because of the inability of existing or traditional systems to adequately respond to the needs of the times. Alternatives do not have to supplant the old set up but complement or expand it.

In education, alternative learning refers to any non-school based delivery system which goes beyond the "structures and strictures" of formal schooling. Delivery channels include communication media such as radio and television, printed modules, computers. In mass media, urban-based national media often represent the interests of the dominant culture. Alternative media is necessary to address the needs of specific interest groups especially the marginalized sectors. Alternative media include community media (newspaper, radio, television), low-cost channels and traditional or folk media.

Trade-offs are inevitable if choices are to be made. For example, a decision to invest in telecommunication already involves trade offs (especially in countries where resources are inadequate). Questions which may be raised include: do we build school buildings or install more telephone lines or build more transport highways? Choices are also to be made in terms of technology (analog vs digital, satellite vs. terrestrial microwave) and application (business, education, health).

As most Asian societies are undergoing political and economic transition, some conflicts may be expected. The "win-win" approach provides a framework within which contending parties could agree to work to reach a solution acceptable to all.

Planning communication systems require balancing the requirements of government and big business with the interests of the majority population. It is satisfying the needs of private entrepreneurs for profit and the demands of society that require equitable growth and access of all sectors of society to the benefits of development.

Finally, communication planning should be done within the context of the country's culture and history. Culture is often a neglected component of development but yet, it is the understanding of culture that determines the failure or success of development programs.

The paper has documented communication processes, technologies, institutions, and organizations which have successfully responded to culture and values of society. The most important challenge in the next decade will be that of developing culturally appropriate communication strategies, utilizing communication to mobilize all sectors of the population and finally establishing structures that will enable more access and participation of all people towards a more pluralistic societies.

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