

## MASS MEDIA IN SUPPORT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### Summary

A discourse of modernization has evolved since World War II that has guided intellectual thinking and practice in development activities. This article examines the role of communication media in fostering development, especially in the Third World. In the 1970s, the earlier premise of an open and unlimited global space available to explore and exploit for development turned out to be empirically untenable. The discourse of development then moved on to incorporate sustainable development. Sustainable development describes practices and theory that incorporate an efficient management of the environment to serve the needs of development. The article discusses the debate on sustainable development and describes ways in which the media have been used (or may be used in the future) to support sustainable development.

### 1. Introduction

In order to understand the concept of *sustainable development*, this essay first examines the corresponding idea of *development*, looking at how it has been described in both theory and practice since World War II. As most of the work in development in the post-World War II period has been articulated in the context of developing countries, this essay will look at important concepts and practices relating to Third World development. Another key objective of this essay is to examine the role of

communication media in fostering development. Of particular importance is the role of the media in Third World development activities. Later, the essay will address issues dealing with sustainable development and articulate some roles for the media in this process. Case studies will be examined whenever possible.

## **2. Dominant Paradigm of Modernization**

Among the most powerful paradigms to originate after World War II, with enormous social, cultural and economic consequences, was that of modernization. Modernization is based on liberal political theory and is grounded in the grand project of Enlightenment that has its roots in the West - namely reasoning, rationality, objectivity and other philosophical principles. In modernization approaches, including more recent neo-classical economic theories, the following are prioritized: scientific rationality and individualism; economic growth, using the Western model of adopting a capitalist economic system; building up of formal infrastructure; and acquisition of technologies. Implicit in the discourse of modernization is a certain philosophy of what development in the Third World should be, and how it should be brought about.

Thus, a *dominant paradigm* of modernization guided intellectual thinking and practice, especially for the newly independent Asian and African countries in the early post-WWII years, i.e. from the 1940s through the 1960s, and was influential in development communication theory and practice. This concept of development grew out of certain historical events, such as the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the United States, the colonial experience in Latin America, Africa and Asia, the quantitative empiricism of North American social science, and capitalistic economic/political philosophy. Economic growth and scientific values constituted key themes in "development" as the solution to "underdevelopment". Most problems plaguing the Third World nations were diagnosed as economic in nature. Economists were ultimately in charge of development plans. Five-year plans were launched in several countries to dovetail development activities and help bring about orderly economic progress. Bilateral and multilateral aid organizations were involved in these plans. This approach was at the macro level. Problems were identified and solutions offered at the higher levels of the government. Information and other inputs were then channeled down to local communities. Participatory or autonomous development by local communities was considered slow, inefficient and, more often than not, unlikely.

In the dominant paradigm, *industrialization* was considered the main route to successful economic growth. That was the way by which North America and West Europe had developed in the late 19th century. So, Third World countries were encouraged to invest in a program of industrialization such as hydroelectric projects, steel industries and a diversity of manufacturing units. Development performance was measured by *quantitative indicators* such as: gross national product (GNP) and per capita income. These indicators were considered objective and straightforward to measure, especially when compared with alternative concepts such as freedom, justice, and human rights. They were also related to the quantitative and empirical bias of North American social sciences.

As a corollary to prioritizing economic growth, quantitative empirical science, a product of Enlightenment, was uncritically accepted as the dominant scientific methodology. The aim

of this science was to produce knowledge, and to understand, categorize, explain and predict aspects of the external reality. Science had played a major role in the articulation of the colonial discourse and was then recommended for the development of the ex-colonies in the Third World. Science was the backbone of technology that was ushered in after the Industrial Revolution. In the developing countries of the South, the science-based technology was to increase dramatically the per capita production of material goods. It constituted the core of the industrialization that was prescribed for developing countries. More often than not, the capital and machine-intensive technology substituted for labor that was abundantly available in the Third World nations. The badly needed capital for the new technology was provided by national governments and often supplemented by loans from bilateral and multilateral agencies and transnational corporations.

The dominant paradigm outlined above prescribed a unique model for the modernization of the developing nations - a model that was tested in the Western nations and found to be successful. This model of development underlined the importance of economic growth through industrialization, capital-intensive and machine-intensive technology, a top-down structure of authority with economists in charge, and a certain attitude and mind-set among individuals. It was natural that questions would be raised about the role of mass media in speeding up the modernization process. (See *Modernization*; See *International Development*.)

#### **2.4. Mass Media and the Modernization Approach**

Most communication practice and scholarship in the Third World development literature were consistent with modernization theory. At both the macro and micro levels, communication was viewed as a product and reinforcer of economic growth and development. At the macro level, communication scholars aligned with this perspective supported global and national policies that facilitated "free flows" of media and information technology content (news, advertising, entertainment, data) and hardware, as they viewed these products as crucial for Third World development and participation in the global economy. At the micro level, they supported persuasive marketing campaigns (in areas such as agriculture, population and health) as the most efficient means to transform traditional individuals and societies.

Thus, in the 1950s, while rural sociologists were busy studying the modernizing role of communication in rural communities, political scientists, economists and social psychologists were laying out the functions of mass media and measuring their influence in the modernization of developing countries. In the research and writings on modernization, communication was more than just interplay between the source and receiver. It served as a social system fulfilling certain social functions. Thus, the mass media came to serve as agents and indices of modernization in the Third World countries. Besides this macro-level analysis of the role of mass media, researchers also drew on communication effects research and on models describing social-psychological characteristics of individuals that were considered necessary for a successful transition from a traditional to a modern society.

Daniel Lerner's book, *The Passing of the Traditional Society* illustrates the major ideas under the early mass media and modernization approach. Lerner's model, in a nutshell,

recapitulated the development of Western Europe and North America from a feudal or traditional stage to modern, military-industrial societies. His social development model consisted of the following components: (i) a core of mobile individuals whose psychological orientation made it easier to accept rapid changes in their personal lives and the overall social system, (ii) an omnipotent mass media system that reinforced and accelerated societal and individual change by disseminating the new ideas and attitudes conducive to modernization, and (iii) the correlations between the important indices of urbanization, literacy, media exposure, and economic and political participation to establish a modern Western-type society.

Traditional society was considered non-participant. People were deployed by kinship into communities, isolated from one another and from the center, without an urban-rural division of labor. Thus people developed few needs that required economic interdependence. Therefore, individuals' worldviews were limited to their physical horizons and their decisions involved other known people in familiar situations. On the other hand, the modern society was participant and functioned by consensus. Here, people went through formal schooling, read newspapers, were paid in cash for jobs they could legally change, used cash to consume goods in a free and open market, and were free to vote in elections and express opinions on matters external to their personal lives. Scholars identified and explained a psychological pattern in individuals that was both required and reinforced by the modern society: a mobile personality. This person was equipped with a high capacity for identification with new aspects of his/her environment and internalized the new demands made by the larger society.

In other words, this person had a high degree of empathy. Empathy was essentially the capacity to see oneself in the other fellow's situation. Lerner stated that empathy fulfilled two important tasks. First, it enabled the person to operate efficiently in the modern society, which was constantly changing. Second, it was an indispensable skill for individuals wanting to move out of their traditional settings characterized by a feudal system with regard to ownership of land, hierarchy based on kinship and a barter economy. Empathy allowed the individual to internalize the process of modernization by not only being able to cope with change, but also expecting and demanding it. It was the psychological anchor of all the attitudes and behaviors necessary in a modern society.

The second element in Lerner's model was the mass media. They performed a special function - by exposing individuals to new people, ideas and attitudes, they accelerated the process of modernization. In the West, particularly in the United States, psychic mobility began with the expansion of physical travel. The expansion of physical or geographical mobility meant that more people commanded greater skill in imagining themselves as strange persons, living in strange situations and times than did people in any previous historical period. The development of mass media accelerated this process even more. The earlier increase of psychic experience through transportation was multiplied by the exposure to mediated experience through the mass media. Thus, the mass media were important agents of modernization. People in the Third World could expand their empathy by exposure to the mass media, which showed them new places, behavior and cultures. In short, the mass media had the potential of blowing the winds of modernization into isolated traditional communities and replacing the structure of life, values and behavior there with ones seen in the modern Western society.

Thus, the mass media functioned as both an index and agent of modernization in the dominant discourse on development. The social change occurred in three phases. First and most crucial was urbanization. After about 10 percent urbanization was reached, the take-off occurred. In the second phase, literacy rates began to rise dramatically. With increasing rates of urbanization, literacy and industrial development in the third phase, there was a great spurt in the growth of the modern mass media. Lerner stated that the mass media systems flourished only in societies that were modern by other standards. Thus, the mass media functioned as important indices of modernization. There was a close reciprocal relationship between literacy and mass media exposure. The literate developed the media, which in turn accelerated the spread of literacy.

All of these developments triggered a rise in political participation (such as voting) found in all advanced Western societies. While all of these generalizations came out of the data collected in the Middle East, Lerner suggested that the historical sequence of these changes was natural, as exemplified in the development of the Western societies. (See *Traditional and Modern Media*.)

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**Srinivas R. Melkote** has been a teacher in the field of journalism, communication and media studies for about 25 years. He has taught at universities in the United States and India. In 2001-02 he will be teaching in Manipal University in India as a Fulbright Fellow.

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