

## **MANAGEMENT AND FUTURE OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA**

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### **Summary**

Today, there is erosion of the authority of centralized, mass media sources in defining culture and popular opinion and, concomitantly, more access to the media of communication and information by lay people. The most significant change in the nature of media messages is the conversion of signals from analog to digital and the convergence of different media into one all-purpose data network. The new media technologies are opening up a diverse range of options for consumers and producers of informational materials and services. However, there are considerable concerns too.

This essay examines the issue of inequitable access to the new information and communication media, the policy initiatives relating to access, and the management and future of communications media in social change.

## **1. Introduction**

Today, the mass media look very different from what existed until about the 1970s. During their heyday, mass media sources were a few large corporate entities that hired professionals, who served as gatekeepers of what the national audiences would receive, hear or see. With the popularity of cable television that started in the early 1980s, the media scene has been one of audience fragmentation. Today, with the advances in information technology, we have desktop computers, the Internet, portable digital cameras and recorders that make it possible for multiple sources to cater to distinct types of listeners, viewers and readers. Thus, what we are seeing today is the erosion of the authority of centralized media sources in defining culture and popular opinion and, concomitantly, more access to the media of communication and information by lay people.

## **2. Where are the Mass Media Headed?**

In terms of media messages, earlier they tended to be homogenized, undifferentiated, one-way, and addressed to national audiences (at least on television). Today, there is a move toward narrowcasting and market segmentation into niche audience groups. Newer concepts such as "one to one communication" are moving toward an audience of one person. Therefore, a significant change in the nature of mass-mediated messages is a move from homogenization of tastes and cultures to targeting niche groups and individuals, with customized products that cater to specific tastes and values. The interactive media technologies provide rapid feedback, thus fundamentally altering the nature of the mass communication process from the patterns of the past.

In the past, mass media channels were a few, big national networks that were universal in their coverage. The signals were analog and the messages were impermanent. In the last 10-15 years, satellite transmission systems, for example, have created channels for specific audiences as well as specialized information to different locations such as airports, schools, doctors' offices, etc. Recording and transmission devices have made the process asynchronous. Media and information signals today are increasingly digitized and integrated into a single network. The hybrid media of today that combine sound, voice, text, graphics and video are erasing the earlier distinctions between radio, television, print and telephone.

### **2.2. Digitization of Media**

Probably, the most significant change in the nature of media messages is the conversion of signals from analog to digital and the convergence of different media into one all-purpose data network. The Internet, for example, is a combination of all the media we have known until now. Technical advances such as the increase in bandwidth, digital compression, high speed lines and modems, and fiber optic networks have greatly increased the number of channels, the speed of transmission, and the level of interactivity. On-demand entertainment, information and educational services will give the users a new measure of control. Also, the new technologies make it possible for individuals and groups to produce and distribute professional multimedia presentations and products from their desktop computers and workstations, giving rise to personal

electronic media as a new form of mass communications. These decentralized and interactive information sources are proving to be popular and increasingly taking the place of the traditional mass media.

### **3. Brief History of Communication and Development**

In general, in the early post-WWII years, the attention of the United Nations (UN), its multilateral agencies - especially the World Bank - and its most influential member, the United States (US), was consumed by relief and rehabilitation work in war-ravaged Europe. To this end, the US launched the European Recovery Program, also known as the Marshall Plan, the first and largest government-sponsored foreign assistance project. US President Truman's administration contributed 2.5 percent of its GNP, a proportion that has yet to be matched. Goals of the Marshall Plan included humanitarian assistance, rebuilding European markets for US goods, and enabling Europe to resist Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. The success of the Marshall Plan inspired similar projects in Third World countries. Starting in the 1950s and on into the 1960s, the attention of the UN turned increasingly to the Third World where two-thirds of the world's population resided. This population enjoyed, in 1955, only 15 percent of the world's income, and was made up predominantly of subsistence farmers.

Particularly significant among multilateral agencies has been the IBRD or the World Bank. The World Bank was established in 1944 when economists from Europe and the US met in Bretton Woods, USA, to consider Europe's need for reconstruction following World War II (WWII). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) were created at the same time. The World Bank, a lending agency, would provide credit, the IMF would regulate global monetary exchange, and the GATT would liberalize trade. Initially the World Bank's goal was to facilitate private capital transfers to help rebuild Europe, consistent with the global climate at the time.

Concern for the plight of the people in the Third World countries moved US President Truman to propose the 1949 Point Four program, which was to be the Third World version of the Marshall Plan. The four points of the Point Four program were simple. First, the US would support the UN and help strengthen its ability to enforce its decisions. Second, the US would continue its work in revitalizing the world economy. Third, the US would strengthen freedom-loving peoples around the world against the evils of aggression. Fourth, the US would embark on a new program of modernization and capital investment.

The philosophical consistencies between the Marshall Plan and the Point Four program were very clear. Both aimed to alleviate suffering, and both aimed to do so via capital investment. Countries considered non-communist or "freedom-loving" qualified as beneficiaries of aid. Clearly, therefore, alleviating Third World suffering consisted of inserting the Western cornucopia of advances in agriculture, commerce, industry and health. The key to prosperity and peace, said Truman in his 1949 inaugural address, was greater production through a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge. The outcome of this proposal increasingly was equated with *development*.

In 1950, Truman created the United States' first bilateral aid organization, the Technical Cooperation Administration (TCA). Its replacement, the Mutual Security Administration (MSA) provided primarily military aid, and only secondarily economic support and food aid. Economic support went to those countries considered strategically aligned with the US. The 1961 Foreign Assistance Act established the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Peace Corps, a people-to-people overseas volunteer program. In the Foreign Assistance Act, US President Kennedy sought to shift the balance of international aid from strategic goals toward development goals, including the alleviation and prevention of social injustice and economic chaos. Of course, the two types of goals always have been closely linked by the assumption that US foreign assistance ultimately supports its national security and political-economic interests.

As has been evident in this overview, there has been much historical consistency between the development goals and priorities of the United Nations family of organizations, the World Bank, and the US; this is in part because the US has played such a powerful role in the UN. Additionally, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) coordinates all development assistance supplied by bilateral aid agencies of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The OECD is made up of 27 industrialized nations, and aims to coordinate and encourage global economic growth. The DAC was established in 1961, at the start of the First Development Decade, and has 22 members, with the World Bank, IMF and UNDP as permanent observers. It monitors and assesses the Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided by member countries. It also provides policy guidance in members' aid programs, carries out critical reviews, maintains statistics, and establishes a context for dialogue and consensus building.

As described above, in the post-WWII years, most aid attention was directed to Europe. In the 1950s and 1960s, economic development assistance focused on Third World countries and primarily took the form of infrastructure planning and development. In the 1970s, under World Bank President Robert McNamara's influence, the priorities were integrated rural development and basic needs; in the 1980s, the focus was "structural adjustment", or loan conditions including maintaining competitive exchange rates, reducing government spending, and privatizing government agencies; in the 1990s human development has become a major theme, including concerns of human rights, gender issues and environment.

Additionally, globalization and enormous increases in private capital flows to developing countries are forcing the World Bank, other United Nations agencies and bilateral agencies to adapt. Changes proposed include forgiving debts of the world's poorest countries, providing small loans (via local banks) to the poor to start their own businesses, and increased collaboration with NGOs.

All of the above changes have shaped development as it takes place today. Next, this essay will examine some of the values, or *biases*, more closely, as they constitute themes that reappear frequently in communication and development literature, and are relevant to the present discussion on the role of new communication technologies in

development. They include pro-innovation, pro-persuasion, pro-top-down, pro-mass media and pro-literacy biases.

### **3.8. Early Pro-Transfer of Innovations Period**

The United Nations named the 1960s the First Development Decade and set goals of economic growth in developing countries. These goals represented key UN donor agencies, primarily the World Bank, and were largely consistent with the goals of newly-forming, bilateral aid organizations. In the 1960s, the emphasis was on technological transfer from the North to the South. Although the traditional practices of the people of developing countries had enabled them to survive for millennia, the prevailing wisdom of the times dismissed them without any evaluation. It was after all *known* that Western agriculture, medicines, tools and techniques outstripped corresponding traditional practices. Therefore, it made unquestionable sense that the Third World people discard unconditionally their *primitive* ways and embrace the technologies that had wrought such extraordinary progress in the *advanced* countries of the North. This orientation eventually came to be known as a *pro-innovation bias*. It has held fast to this day, though the innovations obviously have changed over time, and new themes and biases have emerged as well.

Initially, the pro-innovation transfer paradigm appeared alluringly simple and straightforward. It had been largely derived from the highly successful program under the Marshall Plan to resuscitate war-ravaged Europe. The essence of the plan consisted of making resources of finance and material available for pre-existing European expertise to apply to reconstruction. It was soon clear, however, that the post-colonial Third World problem was quite different. There was no adequate pre-existing base of expertise except within the erstwhile colonialists themselves. More significantly, masses of people had to have their traditional lifestyles changed radically. Development, therefore, involved not simply the transfer of capital and technology but also the communication of ideas, knowledge and skills to make possible the successful adoption of innovations.

Needed, then, was an expanded base of expertise to, *inter alia*, persuade and motivate the people of the Third World to cast aside their traditional ways in favor of the new. To the pro-innovation bias, consequently was added a *pro-persuasion bias* and, with it, the implicit acknowledgement that Third World people were not inclined to submit meekly to radical change. So, a burgeoning stream of Third World students flowed to the developed countries for training and education, reciprocated by a corresponding stream of *experts* representing multilateral (World Bank, UNESCO, FAO), bilateral (USAID), and voluntary (Catholic Relief Services, International Red Cross) aid agencies gradually flooding the Third World.

### **3.9. Pro-Persuasion and Pro-Top-Down Biases**

In the early days of development, before transistorization made possible the ubiquity of radio sets, the task of convincing people through persuasive communication to change their life ways fell to the *extension services*. Extension had long been, and continues to

be, regarded as a logical and systematic method for disseminating productive and useful knowledge and skills to receivers.

To elaborate briefly, in most developing countries the various government departments or ministries (health, education, agriculture, labor, transportation, etc.) include an extension or outreach function. The ministry of agriculture usually operates the largest extension system. Agricultural extension services globally have been modeled substantially after those in the US, as a result of post-World War II aid. For instance, researchers note that extension in the modern sense was not known in many African countries until the early 1960s, when the USAID sent extension experts to work with the ministries of agriculture. Prior to this time, agents were given only technical training and extension work consisted primarily of the provision of supplies, not education. The extension division in the ministry of agriculture was charged with the task of teaching the farmers such techniques and practices of modern agriculture that would change the country's agriculture from a predominantly subsistence type to a modern one.

Many observers have noted that, despite attempts, the US model of extension has not been fully replicated in developing countries. Scholars point out that the extension leg of the college/ research/extension triad has remained weak and that there is often little or no communication between extension workers and agricultural research universities. Field agents who work directly with farmers typically have one or two years of post-secondary school training. Also, the main emphasis in their training is on agricultural practices - versus communication theory and method. These agents are sometimes assisted by field workers who have no formal training in communication.

Despite the many criticisms raised in recent years by development communication theorists, most extension programs have been based on Everett Rogers' diffusion of innovations model. In the 1940s and 1950s, the diffusion of innovations research tradition gained momentum in the US. Starting with Bruce Ryan and Neil Gross' studies of the diffusion of hybrid seed corn in the 1940s, and Paul Lazarsfeld and colleagues' studies of voting behaviors, much research data was gathered showing that information about decision options was communicated by the mass media to key opinion leaders, and from them to others throughout the social system. The diffusion model assumes that a proper combination of mass-mediated and interpersonal communication strategies can move individuals from a process of awareness (usually of a new technology) through interest, evaluation, trial and finally the adoption of that technology. Criticisms of the model include its "pro-innovation", "pro-persuasion" and "top-down" nature - that is, its strong emphasis on adoption and underemphasis on recipient input into development decisions and processes.

Not only did extension-operating methodology embrace the pro-innovation bias but also it took it upon itself to decide what innovations were best for its clients, followed by campaigns to convince them of the wisdom of its choice. The original extension responsibility to collect, collate and convey *all* relevant research-generated information to potential clients was no longer adequate. The information-disseminating extension agent was now expected to evolve into a *change agent*: a professional person who attempts to influence adoption decisions in a direction that he feels is desirable. And so was set in motion a one-way flow of influence-oriented messages from change agencies

at the top to the rural peasantry at the bottom, a process of communication which eventually earned itself the derisive sobriquet, *top-down communication*. This approach held that peasants were rational enough to see the value of adopting innovations selected for them but incapable of making rational choices from among an array of alternatives put before them.

Additionally, extension programs based on diffusion have relied extensively on agent-to-client, face-to-face communication, augmented here and there by certain demonstration multiplier effects involving "master farmers", called the "training and visit" (T&V) system. Scholars point out that hundreds of diffusion studies around the world have questioned farmers about their information sources at different stages of adoption, and appear to indicate that, while mass media are useful in increasing awareness, face-to-face communication is most important for trial and ultimate adoption. As mass media were not widely available in developing countries in the early years of development, it became a precedent to allocate most extension resources to field staff at the expense of exploring other kinds of methods. Additionally, scholars note that most research and extension programs relying on diffusion assumptions often overlook the "quality and fit" of communications materials.

Simple numerical and logistic obstacles have exacerbated the overemphasis on interpersonal communication. The available pool of extension personnel, grossly outnumbered by the thousands of people spread over huge geographic areas difficult to navigate, was woefully unequal to the task. Besides, extension agents were primarily subject-matter specialists (agriculture, health, and so on) to whom was added a patina of communication skills that may have been useful in the interpersonal or the small group interaction situation. This certainly came nowhere near addressing the main problem, which was one of mass communication. So, extension tended to focus its attention mainly on the closest and most accessible, most receptive, and thus, easiest to convince, farmers who, as diffusion studies were to show later, as a class had more education and income than the rest. They were also disproportionately male, even in places such as sub-Saharan Africa where women constitute the vast majority of subsistence farmers.

Aside from these biases, the individuals reached by extension workers were very few. Needed was a great multiplier. Diffusion and two-step flow studies in the US highlighted the power of radio, especially in early stages of the diffusion-adoption process. The advent of transistorized radio in the late 1950s, cheap, portable and independent of electrification, offered great promise of satisfying this need.

### **3.10. Pro-Mass Media and Pro-Literacy Biases**

Lerner examined the correlations between the expansion of economic activity being equated with *development* and a set of *modernizing* variables, chief among which were urbanization, literacy, mass media use and democratic participation. His findings suggested that the spread of literacy in an urban milieu, and the emergence of a *mobile personality* highly *empathetic* to modernizing influences, provided the means to create within Third World societies a *climate of acceptance* of change. Implicit in his formulations, and in those of Wilbur Schramm who followed him, was the belief that the interaction of literacy and mass media was the means by which the masses would

eventually break free of their stupefying bonds of traditionalism, heralding, as it were, the *passing of traditional society*.

Thus were born two new biases: the *pro-mass media bias* and its concomitant, the *pro-literacy bias*, to help multiply the effects of change-agency interpersonal communication. In this model, the mass media would be responsible for creating widespread awareness of, and interest in, the innovations espoused by aid agencies. Contained in their messages would be the persuasive components which, by some alchemy of the *bullet theory* of communication, would produce a *climate of acceptance*. Change agents would then furnish targeted segments of adopters with the details of information and the skills necessary to make adoption of the innovations feasible. Early adopters would then presumably constitute role models for others in their social system to emulate. By these *demonstration effects*, the innovations would *trickle down* to the rest of the community. Over time, therefore, the innovations would diffuse across whole social systems.

There were strong precedents for this expectation in diffusion research in the US, as previously noted. However, even with the addition of the mass media and literacy, the expected diffusion of innovations in the Third World did not eventuate as it had done in Western countries. In the industrialized West, when the rate with which an innovation diffused throughout a social system, from the earliest adopter to the last *laggard*, was cumulatively plotted over time, an S-shaped curve resulted. But when these studies were replicated in the Third World, the curves which resulted were considerably less than the total "S", signifying adoption by very few people. In the few instances where completed S-shaped curves were indeed struck, they occurred only in those Third World social systems which somehow had already developed a climate of acceptance.

How were these findings to be explained? Was there something wrong, something intrinsically unattractive about the innovations selected for diffusion? Were the channel linkages between source and receiver sufficient to the task of reaching all potential adopters adequately? Or was there something perversely recalcitrant about the Third World farmers? Of these questions, communication researchers of the 1960s apparently chose to focus mainly on the last.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**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 spring 2002, he taught at Manipal University as a Fulbright Fellow.

Professor Melkote has published extensively on issues such as international communication, communication and development, health communication and media theory. His teaching interests include media theory, media research, media effects, international communication and development communication. His research interests include media effects, communication strategies for HIV and AIDS prevention, and the impact of satellite television in the developing world.