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### Recommended Citation

Crowder, L. Van (1991) "Is There a Communication Media Bias In Development Projects?," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 75: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1498>

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## Is There a Communication Media Bias In Development Projects?

### Abstract

It is important to recognize the biases that can influence media choices, applications, and social consequences.

# Is There A Communication Media Bias In Development Projects?

L. Van Crowder

It is important to recognize the biases that can influence media choices, applications, and social consequences. Drawing on the literature and case examples, this article looks at three issues that relate to media bias in development projects—the role of communication in development, the use of different media for information purposes, and the influence of donor agencies on choice of media. Telecommunications in the Philippines is used as an example of the potentially negative consequences of “big media.” The author discusses the need for pre-project research into the socio-economic context in which media operate and audience monitoring to understand media access and the influence of particular media and messages on behavior.

## Introduction

Most practitioners and scholars of development communication would answer “yes” to the question raised in the title of this article. Many would agree that “Communicators traditionally group their activities around their preferred medium ... Media strategists typically begin by asking ‘What can I do with radio?’ ‘How can I use TV to get my message across?’” (Academy for Educational Development, 1985, p.6). Affirming

the bias, however, does not address other questions such as “What are the sources of the bias?” and “How can the bias be overcome?” These questions relate to three fundamental issues of development communication. The first issue concerns the role of communication in development; the second involves the application of different media for achieving information and learning outcomes; and the third issue is the influence donors have on choice of

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The first issue has been debated for many years with the result that we now are more likely to recognize that communication takes place within a context of social, political, and economic forces that affect its role in development. The second issue has to do with the effects of different media on awareness, learning, and individual behavior change. Is there research evidence, as well as practical experience, to guide in the choice of media for different tasks? The third issue deals with how donors may promote certain media and how their interests may influence national development agendas as well as which groups benefit from communication investments.

This article examines these issues with the goal of providing some answers to the "media bias" questions poised above.

### Communication and Development

In the 1950s and '60s, mass media, and especially radio, were expected to play a major role in solving problems of poverty, hunger, and literacy in developing countries (Lerner, 1958; Pye, 1963; Schramm, 1964). Indeed, research seemed to show that mass media exposure was highly correlated with individual modernization variables (Rogers, 1965). By the 1970s, however, media optimism was tempered by recognition that rapid development was not forthcoming from the introduction of mass media. Rogers (1976) proclaimed the "passing of the dominant paradigm" of development, concluding that "the role of mass communication in facilitating development was often indirect and contributory, rather than direct and powerful" (p. 135). Looking at two

observed that we "need to consider communication not as a simple independent variable but as both a dependent and independent variable in a complex set of relationships with social, economic, and political structures and processes" (p. 21).

The idea that communication can be a complement to development under certain conditions, but is not independent of context, led to recognition of the need to accompany communication efforts with changes in environments and access to resources, especially by the rural poor (Hornick, 1980). The question remains, however, whether investment in agricultural communication technology is worthwhile? While evidence for such investment is "weak or missing," Hornick (1988) concludes that "If done well, information programs make a difference. The question is how to do them well" (p. 158). One of the prescriptions he offers is investment in program research and audience monitoring since "Media projects tend, powerfully, toward isolation from their audiences" (p. 162).

While there is often strong support for technical agricultural research, there is little support for communication research in development projects. Yet, as Scherer (1990) notes, "it is this social research which is essential in designing communication programs which have a high chance of success. This bias forces us to make assumptions about our target audiences—assumptions which we cannot afford if our goal is to design a strategy based on the accumulated knowledge about the role of communication programs in development" (p. 2).

### Media Choices

In his 1977 book *Big Media-Little*



Media, Schramm addressed the issue of effectiveness of different instructional media in development. He looked at numerous cases, including television and radio projects, and asked why there is so little research on the small media and why developing country governments are encouraged by their own planners and outside donors to invest in the expensive big media? He concluded from his analysis that:

- Learning depends as much on how the medium is used as what medium is used;
- The chief source of variance in learning is as much within as between media;
- Rational choice of media should consider the task, learning effectiveness of different media for the task, and cost comparisons of media;
- A media-mix often may be more effective and efficient than any single medium;
- And the bigger, more costly the media, the more difficult it is to localize a project.

Similar lessons were learned from the Basic Village Education (BVE) project in Guatemala. Writing about the project, Ray (1987) observes that "There is no single most effective media combination for all situations. The potential effectiveness varies with the level of development, the economic well-being, and the present and prior exposure to mass media and technical assistance" (p. 7). Research was carried out prior to implementing the BVE project to identify participants, their concerns, and media and messages that could effectively reach them. According to Mowlana and Wilson (1990), it was this extensive pre-project research that may have accounted for the success of the project.

Unfortunately, media choices in

development projects are seldom guided by research or even critical examination of previous projects to find out which media worked where, with whom, and why. Too often, media are applied without consideration of the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of intended users, the socio-political context, or the complex organizational and technical requirements of media-based projects. Instead, "in many instances we have subjugated the needs of the potential target audience to a particular technology or the wishes of key government officials and communications consultants" (Fedale, 1990, p. 3). This is further complicated by donor agency sponsorship of sophisticated, costly "big media" that may favor elites and have negative social consequences for national development.

### Donor Support for Development Communication

Since the 1960s, the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) has supported development communication activities throughout the world. In a 1984 policy paper, AID urged increased field-level emphasis on the use of communication in country projects. Reflecting this policy, the head of AID told participants at an international conference that agricultural Extension services in developing countries need to "place a great deal of reliance on mass media" to be more effective (McPherson, 1985, p. 55). Another AID official argued that increased importance of communication to AID's efforts over the past two decades was supported by research "which has demonstrated, compellingly, the power of communications in achieving development tasks" (Block, 1985, p. 27).

In 1988, AID supported 50 development projects with communi-

cation components of AID's total budget was devoted to development communication (Mowlana & Wilson, 1990). In 1982, according to Block (1985), AID communication-related funding was 91 million dollars, distributed across sectors as follows:

Population	35%
Education	6%
Health & Nutrition	5%
Agriculture	1%
Multisectoral	6%
Telecommunications	47%

As the above figures show, almost half of AID's support in 1982 was for telecommunications and much of this investment was in a single project — 42 million dollars for a satellite-based telephone project in Egypt. One criticism of such "big media" projects is that they primarily benefit urban elites and do not promote "indigenous local development."

Telecommunications provides a good example of the controversy over the benefits of communication technology compared to their potentially negative influences on development. According to Stevenson (1988), telecommunications (e.g. satellite-based communications) can produce "significant and wide ranging payoffs" for development. He says that compared to the one-way nature of conventional mass media (e.g. radio and television), telecommunications is a type of "horizontal communication." He reports estimates of a return on investment in rural telecommunications of 20 to 1 or as much as 40 to 1 if social benefits are included. Benefits of this magnitude are undoubtedly possible and might be representative of such efforts as the AID Rural Satellite Program which supports community development projects in health care, agriculture, and literacy. But it

is not always rural areas or residents who benefit from telecommunications investments (p. 119).

According to Sussman (1987), the World Bank has been the principal multilateral source of financing for telecommunications in developing countries. He reports that with Bank lending, the Philippines has become the major international telecommunications center in East and Southeast Asia. Claiming to look beyond the "neutral-sounding semantics of Bank technocratic literature," Sussman addressed the issue of who has benefited from World Bank investment in telecommunications in the Philippines. He concludes that investments have concentrated in urban areas and on transnational corporations and their local partner enterprises. He writes: "The elitist pattern of communication investment and usage has brought deteriorating quality of local telecommunications services and telephone rates that effectively disconnect most Filipinos from information lines and social mobility, while transnational subsidiaries have never had better channels of information" (p. 102-103).

### Concluding Comments

Development communicators need to remember that information programs, media-based or otherwise, are only part of the complex interaction of processes involved in development. Communication researchers need to look beyond how individuals respond to media and messages to the social and economic systems in which media function and how those systems influence media access, exposure, and impact. Project planners and donors need to use research findings to design projects that take into account the cultural environments in which



participants operate and how socio-economic factors can influence communication outcomes.

While communication may improve knowledge and receptivity to new ideas (information potential), in the absence of needed services and supporting infrastructure the ability of recipients to put these ideas into practice (action potential) may be greatly limited (Hodgdon, 1974). Research findings show that mass media communication is most successful in changing behaviors when it tells the audience what is required and how to do it and is coordinated with locally available services and supplies (Development Communication Report, 1990).

As noted above, communication projects may be isolated from the very audiences they want to reach. Without audience monitoring as a continuous process, it is impossible to know the influence of particular media and messages and the constraints to action that people may face. This concern is evident in a radio project in the Himalayan nation of Bhutan. According to an official of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, it is necessary "to go out often and find out ourselves what is happening with our programmes, how new ideas are accepted and how they work" (Agricultural Information Bulletin, 1990, p. 5).

In general, there seems to be a tendency in communication projects to overestimate the importance of communication media or hardware and underestimate the importance of media adaptation to local conditions and the relevancy of message content to project recipients. To be most successful, communication projects should be designed on the needs of specific audiences and the communication media with which they are familiar instead of the media

needs and interests of project designers and donors. In this respect, more attention should be paid to participatory strategies of communication. Such approaches utilize indigenous groups, folk media, and "barefoot" radio and video in which messages are developed with villagers who are themselves the "performers, advisors, participants and audience" (Wanigasundara, 1988, p. 5).

Finally, as the example of telecommunications in the Philippines shows, the question of communication and equity cannot be ignored. Despite the expansion of communication media in development projects, the rural poor in many regions of the world continue to live in a state of "undercommunication." Communication projects are as subject to the "effects gap" as any other development efforts that provide services and infrastructure. While people with the least resources at the beginning of a project may benefit some, those with the most resources usually benefit more, thus increasing the gap between the few at the top and the many at the bottom. To avoid this, it is important to recognize the biases that can influence the choices, applications, and social consequences of communication media in development projects.

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