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CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
WITH  
CENTRE FOR ASIAN COMMUNICATION,  
MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES

DISCUSSION PAPER  
NO 5.

***What is  
Development  
Communication?***

by  
Anura Goonasekera



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**WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT  
COMMUNICATION?**

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Asian Mass Communication Research  
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*The Centre for Development Studies at Edith Cowan University (ECU) currently hosts the Inter-University Consortium for Development Studies of Western Australia (ICDS/WA) which is a collaborative venture between Curtin University of Technology, Murdoch University, University of Western Australia and ECU.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Development communication is often looked upon, by writers on the subject, as a tool to bring about development in less developed countries. In this sense, what is emphasised is the use of communication media for development. In a recently published Orientation and Resource Kit on Development Communication by UNESCO, Mayo and Servaes (1994) begin with the observation, that communication media are often called upon to support development programmes. They go on to state that, whereas development strategies could vary within and across countries, the communication activities associated with them are often quite similar. These activities are informing people about specific initiatives and urging their support for them. What I am going to discuss in this paper, however, are the much broader aspects of the intellectual discourse that underlie the concept of development communication. The practicalities of the use of communication for development will be mentioned, only in so far, as it is necessary to illustrate this intellectual tradition.

Development communication as a field of academic enquiry has links with sociology, social psychology, economics and political theory. However, its immediate and direct links are with studies of modernisation of traditional societies conducted in the United States of America (USA) in the early 1950s. Daniel Lerner, Everett Rogers, Wilbur Schramm are among the most quoted authors in the Guru Gallery of Development Communication. The origins of the development communication concept in the USA are not without controversy. Samarajiva (1987), who examined the origin of this concept, with special emphasis on the seminal work, The Passing of Traditional Society, by Daniel Lerner (1958), observes that the beginnings of this field of enquiry are rather murky.



Relying in part upon original documents, he constructs the case that Lerner's Traditional Society was a spin off from a large and clandestine, audience research project conducted for the Voice of America by the Bureau of Applied Social Research. He notes the strong influence exerted by the demands of psychological warfare, in the context of the Cold War, on the early studies of development communication in the USA. According to Samarajiva:

Exploratory work on the early period suggests the following pattern of net influence flows: marketing research to communication research; marketing and communication research to psychological warfare; from psychological warfare to communication and development (1987: 17).

In the present analysis, I propose to first critically discuss two sociological paradigms of underdevelopment, of Third World societies as advanced by sociologists and social psychologists and then analyse implications of a new information order. In order to illustrate the current intellectual discourses on communication and development, the following two paradigms of underdevelopment discussed are:

The **paradigm of modernisation** as enunciated by writers such as Lerner (1958), Rogers (1962), Schramm (1964), and Inkeles and Smith (1976); and the

The **dependency paradigm** as advanced by Frank (1967), Wallerstein (1982), Portes (1982), Delacroix and Ragin (1978).

## THE PARADIGM OF MODERNISATION

The social scientific roots of the concept of development communication can be traced to certain early findings of sociologists and social psychologists working in the area of communication. It was these findings that later formed the basis of the modernisation paradigm. The following are the salient points of this paradigm:

1. Communication is a crucial element in the process of development of Third World societies (Schramm, 1964);
2. Communication, while spreading knowledge among the people, can also help create an attitude of mind and a type of personality which are necessary for traditional societies to become modern. This is the quality of empathy which persons in traditional societies acquire by viewing mass media programmes that provide a vicarious universe for these persons to participate in (Lerner, 1958). Furthermore, the mass media, through advertisements of consumer durables creates new wants among the people which gives rise to 'a revolution of rising expectations'. The rulers cannot resist fulfilling these new expectations of the people;
3. Communication through the mass media does not reach the masses directly. It is filtered through a variety of social layers. The message usually is first received by opinion leaders who spread it among their followers. This concept was popularly referred to as the 'two- step' flow of communication (Lazarsfeld, 1948; Katz, 1960);

4. Communication is crucial to the adoption of innovation by a community. The process of adoption takes a specific pattern. The first to adopt new practices are the innovators who are usually the more educated and affluent members of society. If the innovation is successfully adopted, a large group of followers (comprising early adopters, early majority and late majority) will follow. The last to adopt a new practice are the laggards, who are generally the poorest of the poor in that community (Rogers, 1962);

5. The mass media are useful in spreading awareness but the final behavioural change will take place only after contact with persons of credibility at an interpersonal (face-to-face) level;

6. Individuals pay attention to a message on a selective basis. There is, therefore, selective exposure and selective perception which are based on the already existing cognitions of the individual (Festinger, 1957; Lippit and White, 1959);

7. Effective communication occurs when the source and the receiver have similar characteristics and interests (described as homophily). The most effective change agents are those that are most like the average client, except for this level of technical competence. Attention to feedback reaction from the audience is most important in the continued success of a communicator (Rogers, 1962);

8. People pay attention to a message on the basis of uses and gratification derived from the message. The message should, therefore, be based on an understanding of the needs of the audience and its desires for gratification;

9. For better results, communication through the mass media should be combined with interpersonal channels of communication. This is particularly crucial in rural areas of developing countries where interpersonal channels are still powerful and can sometimes negate messages given by the mass media.

Development communication attempts to use these insights in one form or another in formulating communication campaigns in Third World countries.

### **Underlying Assumptions**

There are several underlying assumptions in the concept of development communication that need to be examined. First, is the assumption that the reasons for development and stagnation of societies are immanent, within or internal, to the societies themselves. Therefore, the rulers of these societies, by correctly identifying these immanent factors, can formulate policies that could bring about change in these societies. Second, is the assumption that communication, if used 'correctly' can set in motion the engines of development. Communication in this model is therefore, an independent variable. Further, it is assumed that what is lacking for development is communication. Third, is the assumption that people who live in developing countries have similar characteristics and will answer, in a predictable manner, to the call of the development communicator. Empirically, one could find many instances that could invalidate these assumptions. The

assumption of the immanent nature of the causes of stagnation has been challenged by the world systems theorists and dependency theorists. In addition, we cannot consider communication as an independent variable. The media of communication, in reality, has to operate within a social system with its values, stratification and political and economic conflicts. In such a situation, the media of communication can very well become the mouthpiece of dominant groups in society. Studies of the media in Latin American countries have observed that the mass media had little use for the peasants, as it met more the needs of the large farm owners. The media in certain Latin American countries appear to be deliberately oriented against aspects of social change which would be in favour of the peasants. The media is at the service of landowning elites whose families sometimes own media organisations. In this situation, development communication alone will not help, for what is lacking may not be information but other resources, the mobilisation of which may require structural changes in society.

The problems of development are not always of a technical nature to be resolved by experts. They are usually political ones. An important question is the extent to which governments are willing to make political choices to bring about change. This is crucial for a meaningful assessment of the role of communication in development. Experience has also shown that development communication, when used without concomitant changes to the structure of society, could lead to the strengthening of the status quo or increasing the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor in developing countries. For instance, when new agricultural practices such as cash crops under irrigation were introduced into Third World villages, the first to adopt such practices were the more affluent and educated persons in the village. This is because such practices initially require the taking of risks and modest financial investments which are not within the reach of the poor. The result is that the new practices give an opportunity for the rich

persons in the village to become richer, thereby widening and strengthening the existing social disparities. Scarlett Epstein (1962), an anthropologist, reports that when irrigation was first introduced into the village of Wangala in South India, it raised the whole economy of the village to a higher level in one stroke. But the village remained wholly agricultural. It was unilinear development. The employment structure and traditional role relations remained unchanged because the labour requirements for cash cropping could be easily met under the traditional system:

The unilinear economic development in Wangala set up no incompatibility between the new wants and the old ways in the indigenous employment structure. The theoretical point is of interest here. Economic development may occur without any change in economic roles and relations, provided it does not result in re-allocation of resources or an increased range of economic relations (Epstein, 1962, p316).

While it is true that communication is a crucial element in the process of planned development in Third World societies, there are several other factors that one has to take into consideration in evaluating the role of communication in development. The development communicator, in giving primacy to communication in the process of development has tended, I think, to overstate his or her case.

## **THE DEPENDENCY PARADIGM**

The dependency paradigm directs examination of international economic relations, within which any development of Third World societies has to take place. According to this theory, underdevelopment is the result of world economic relations which have created a centre and a periphery, with central economies establishing exploitative economic relations with the peripheral states. This paradigm was advanced by sociologists of Third

World countries, particularly Latin America. There are several variants of the dependency paradigm, but the more significant features are as follows.

1. Development of Third World countries is inimical to the dominant interests in advanced capitalist countries. Within the framework of imperial and capitalistic exploitation, the possibilities for development are limited. The only way out of this stranglehold is through political means (Frank, 1967).

2. Development and underdevelopment can be understood only in terms of the international system of economic relations, which in its present capitalist phase has divided the world into a group of core countries which are industrialised and rich (for example, USA and Japan) and a large number of peripheral countries which are poor and exploited (for example, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh). Bridging the core and the peripheral countries are the semi-peripheral countries which have developed a modicum of wealth and are crucial to keep the system in balance (Wallerstein and Hopkins, 1982).

3. Development and underdevelopment are, according to this theory, not two stages in the socio-economic progress of societies, but two concomitant parts of the same system. The underdeveloped periphery is the necessary corollary of the developed core countries. One cannot exist without the other.

4. State or government intervention is one way in which this situation can be changed in a significant way. Therefore, while this participation in the world economy impedes the economic development of poorer countries, this does not by itself shut off the possibilities of individual national development. A strong state can counter the deleterious effects of dependency. Delacroix and Ragin (1978) are advocates of the strong state theory. Some writers, for example, Wallerstein and Hopkins (1982), do not agree.

5. The situation of contemporary dependency is different from the situation of foreign colonialism, where the entire administration was done by colonial instituted cadres. Dependency is not imposed by an occupying army. In the beginning, it is instituted by the willing participation of indigenous bourgeoisie and its effects are initially salutary to the peripheral countries because it brings in much needed technology and resources. The end result of dependency, however, is very similar to that of colonialism. It leads to exploitation, breeds social inequalities and leads to the 'miserization' of the dependent nations as a whole. The multinational enterprises are blamed for the bulk of this dismal outcome. Through the use of imported technology, these enterprises tie the dependent economy close to the centre. The cost of capital intensive technology and profit remittances abroad becomes a constant drain on the foreign exchange resources of the peripheral countries. Finally, the activities of the multinational companies lead to the growth of a new privileged and exploitative group and the acceleration of social inequality.



The intellectual discourse on development communication has also highlighted issues relating to cultural implications of international communication particularly satellite broadcasting of television programmes. The early concern for the cultural implications of international communication stemmed from the large influx of media material from the developed countries (core) to the developing countries (peripheral). Varis (1993) in a UNESCO report observes that in a global perspective, imported television programmes in developing countries, took up an average of one-third or more of the total time of programming in 1983. In certain countries such as Argentina, Brunei and Malaysia, it was over fifty per cent of the total programming time. This heavy bias in favour of developed countries is even more pronounced in the distribution of international news, where five giant international press agencies, all of them from the developed world, dominate the flow of international news. The result is that the dominant interests of the Western countries such as USA and Britain dominate the foreign news coverage by media of Third World countries. da Costa in another UNESCO research report, states that:

Less than 20 per cent of the news space in South American dailies for example, is given over to Latin America and the Senegalese press shows greater interest in a minor ministerial re-shuffle in France or the Federal Republic of Germany than in an election taking place in Gambia or the Ivory Coast (da Costa, et.al., 1980, p.5).

However, a recent study by Preben Sepstrup and Goonasekera (1994) has shown that the actual consumption of international television programmes are a minuscule part of what is made available by satellite broadcasters. While this finding is sobering, the implications of satellite broadcasting by Western nations on indigenous cultures is a serious one. Technological advances in communication appear to be worsening this imbalance of communication resources in favour of developed countries.

Let us consider two of these technological advances. One is in the field of satellite communication, which has opened up vast potentialities for easy flow of information across national borders. With the development of Direct Broadcast Satellites (DBS), it is quite possible for a country that owns or controls a satellite to beam messages to a large number of countries in the world with or without the consent of such countries. The programmes may be considered wholly unsuitable for a variety of reasons - cultural, linguistic, political or moral by dominant groups in these countries. For example, in a recent programme on Hong Kong based Star Television (Nikki Tonight), which is beamed to India, Mahatma Gandhi was referred to as a bastard bania (trader). This created an uproar in India where Gandhi is revered by a section of the population. A criminal defamation case was filed by a grandson of Gandhi and a warrant for the arrest of Rupert Murdoch, among others was issued in India. Such instances while rare, help to confirm the worst fears of critics of transborder television broadcasts as being deleterious, irresponsible and subversive (*International Herald Tribune*, July 6, 1995).

Just as developments in DBS communication will result in the 'unrestricted' flow of programmes and information over cultural and international boundaries, advances in computer technology and telecommunication industries have made it possible for the transfer of vast amounts of data electronically across national borders. This phenomenon is referred to as Transborder Data Flow (TDF). The central control of data which is made possible through TDF has far reaching implications for the economies of the countries that are caught within the system. It can lead to fundamental changes in the ways in which goods and services are produced and distributed in these countries.

Transnational corporations are the prime users of TDF. It is both a commercial product and a management tool for these corporations. Developing countries participate in this

international data market either as data suppliers or as buyers of processed data through experts or through parent multinational companies. In addition, the developing countries will also acquire the technology and equipment that is necessary for their own telematic sector.

In an information age, it may happen that the developing countries are reduced to the export of data for processing to developed countries. The value added benefit will result at the processing stage and will accrue to the developed countries. Skilled jobs in data processing and systems management will be retained by the affluent countries, while the developing countries will probably have armies of data entry personnel sending computer data via satellite for processing to the industrialised countries. This situation is similar to the export of raw material for processing in colonial times - except that, in the modern information age, the export is raw data instead of raw materials. The result, however, is the same - exploitation, economic stagnation, and dependency.

## **A NEW INFORMATION ORDER**

An issue basic to the discourse on development communication is the demand for a new information order which stems directly from this imbalance in the distribution of communication resources among developing and developed countries. The New International Information and Communication Order (NIICO) is seen as a way of balancing the distribution of information and connected resources in the world. At least, this is how the advocates of NIICO in the Third World see it. The debate on a NIICO started in the early 1960s, primarily as an ideological denunciation of imperialism and colonialism (Savio, 1982). The developed countries of the West rejected it as rhetoric designed to apply political pressure and not as a genuine demand. But, by the end of the

1970s, communication researchers advanced incontrovertible findings which indicated a profound imbalance between North and South in the field of information, and the southern dependence on communication structures of the developed Western nations for gaining access to information.

The world systems theorists argued that such a dependency of Third World countries was inherent in the present economic structure of the world. Poverty and stagnation were creations of the world economic system. While the debate on a NIICO began as a North-South issue and continues to proceed on these lines, it is in fact much more than this. It is a question of developing a communication and information system which should ideally allow all persons to express themselves freely and choose the information that they wish to have. Viewed in this light, a NIICO addresses a basic question of the human right to communicate - a question for everyone and not only for the South. The recognition of the concept of the right to communicate, it is believed, will create at the international level, a universal conscience necessary to convert freedom of information and the free and balanced flow of communication, which are basic to a NIICO, into a principle of international law (Cocca, 1982). At the national level, it will impose on the state, the obligation of creating the conditions under which the practical freedom and entitlements which derive from the right itself can be implemented. The opposition to the concept of the right to communicate and the demand for a NIICO stems from two main ideological standpoints. The Western nations distrust the concept of right to communicate because they see it as part of the New International Information and Communication Order of which they are suspicious. They fear that a NIICO will be used as a lever to impose restrictions on Western news agencies, on the marketing of Western films and television programmes in Third World countries and on exploitation of data transfer and other recent technology.

The opposition to the right to communicate stems from the fears, particularly among Third World countries, that it would be used to justify the continuation of the present massive imbalance in information flows and unrestricted importation of Western technology and information and consequently, of Western values. The concept of the right to communicate should be an important principle of a NIICO. Unfortunately, the debate to date has gone in other directions. While all sides involved in the debate accept the concept of the human right to communicate as a valid one, there is disagreement on the locus of this right. Some see it as a right pertaining primarily to the individual and only subsequently and secondarily to society; others see society or state as the primary locus, with the state having powers to restrict the right in the public interest. There is also disagreement as to the content of the right. Some want the definition to include all the rights associated with communication, while others prefer a simple statement of the human right to communicate. The other aspects of communication freedom such as fairer sharing of resources, it is argued, should be left to a different forum.

A major problem identified by many is that the right to communicate is likely to remain a philosophical idea, unlikely to be implemented, because many societies do not have the economic capacity to put it into practice. Furthermore, the debate on the New International Information and Communication Order has taken the question of greater participation in the international exchange of information, more as a quantitative problem - the problem of a quantitative transfer of information capacity from North to South. Underlying this is the unrealistic idea of, the developing countries, sooner or later, taking over the transnational information system. The emphasis has been on production and distribution structures. Accordingly, priority was given to the creation of national news agencies and the creation of regional agencies such as the Pan African News Agency, the

Organisation of Asian News Agencies, the Federation of Arab News Agencies and the Accion Sistemas Informativos Nacionales in Latin America. The limited financial assistance that was available has been used in the creation of this infrastructure.

These structures have shown little or no ability to compete with transnational systems. However, they have been able to give the appearance of competitiveness to regimes which are usually authoritarian and which will be often tempted to use new structures for controlling information instead of stimulating new and creative flows (Savio, 1982). Analyses of the news content of Third World news agencies show that it is concerned with events that stem from political and economic spheres of the urban centres and relate to the activities of the powers that be. In this, there is much similarity to the transnational news agencies of the West, except that the professional level is much lower. In both systems, the spot news dominates. The Western news agencies treat them professionally because the market pays for it. The Third World agencies treat news in a bureaucratic manner, probably because of government policies. Development communication within the present structures becomes subject to official control, and the high philosophical objectives of the right to communicate, free and balanced flow of information and concern for the identity of Third World countries, all recede further and further into the background.

#### **WHAT CAN BE DONE TO CORRECT THE AFOREMENTIONED SITUATION?**

The first step is to recognise the trends that development communication and the NIICO have taken in their practical applications. The emphasis on structures for a fairer distribution of news resulted in a number of regional and national organisations coming into existence. The model that has been followed is the Western model of news/film

agencies. This has, until now, not worked well in developing countries. From the emphasis on structures, it is necessary I think, to look at the content of information.

- ◆ What is it, that the Western news agencies do not provide, which development communicators can provide?
- ◆ Can development communication create a means of communication for small communities in the rural areas, in the cities, in the universities, in the plantations?
- ◆ Can it provide a forum for alternative content which is bypassed by the mass media?
- ◆ Should not development communication emphasise the participation of small communities through their own media of communication such as newsletters, small radio stations and television stations?

The emphasis on cultural identity of Third World societies, while being a counterpoint against the cultural 'invasion' by the media programmes of the developed countries, has had its own deleterious effects on the sub-cultures of the Third World. Most developing countries are plural societies with a dominant cultural group and a number of minority cultural groups. The concern for the preservation of cultural identity in the face of the 'invasion' by Western values has often resulted in an emphasis on the cultural values of the dominant groups in such societies. The minority cultures within such societies did not receive the same emphasis, partly because of the lack of financial and other resources. The latent effect of such a policy however, was to divide the communities further, particularly since the minority communities perceived the emphasis given through the mass media as an imposition of the dominant values of societies on them - cultural imperialism of a domestic nature. The mass media, under such a policy of cultural

identity, instead of unifying the plural societies of the Third World tended to divide them further (Goonasekera, 1987). In such a context, the answer may be to decentralise the mass media by having smaller newspapers, television and radio stations that can cater to the interests of specific cultural and interest groups. This is a role for development communication. Cultural policies should aim at providing wider participation of people in the process of communication rather than emphasising, through a centralised mass media, the cultural identity and values of a dominant group.

In creating the New International Information and Communication Order, we should start from home. This means that the national communication policies and planning in Third World countries must take much greater priority. Such planning must take into account the following aspects:

The import of technology from developed countries;

Setting up of structures for both local and foreign dissemination of information;

Higher standard of training for media personnel (who are the gatekeepers); and

The introduction of 'laws' to facilitate the workings of the communication sector in keeping with the principles and spirit of NIICO.

One cannot outwardly demand a regulation of international flow of news from North to South unless inwardly the prerequisites for a fairer utilisation of such facilities exist. At the transborder level, the media organisations of Third World countries, that have called for a new information order should initially create the means for communicating among



themselves without bringing in the transnational agencies of the North. For instance, Asiavision News Exchange is a step in the right direction. But much more remains to be done in this area. The communication links among Third World countries are still poor. Laws governing visas, foreign exchange, accreditation of journalists all militate against the quick deployment of persons among these countries.

No doubt, the North-South dimension of the debate will remain the main challenge to the Third World countries. Many professionals and policy makers in the West now accept the argument of the Third World for adequate representation in the world information order and for self-depiction in the media of the North. But, this has remained mostly a theoretical gesture. All attempts at interstate regulation of the flow of media from North to South have failed. In this situation, the Third World will have to fall back more on their own resources and ingenuity to set in motion the conditions necessary for the New International Information and Communication Order which they have demanded. Hopefully, the Third World will receive a modicum of unselfish media support from the developed countries of the North to create for them equal competitive chances in the international market for information.

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