

# As instruments of change

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Do we know at present what are the benefits that accrue from investments on mass media or do we only assume and presume that others have achieved a great deal?

Isn't it high time that we had an economics of communication?

We do not need a traditional economics of communication enterprises, their profits and losses. A bit of this in the case of the press has been brought out by the Fact-Finding Committee on the Economics of Newspapers.

But what we need is an economics of communication which will enable us in India to determine, on the one hand, the human and social investment in mass media at all levels, and, on the other, to determine the human and social pay-offs from these investments.

Suppose some 10 crore people are spending 30 to 60 minutes a day reading newspapers or listening to the radio, we can estimate how much newsprint or AIR time has gone into such exercise and how much it costs to collect the news or views, process and distribute or broadcast them. But then there is another more fundamental question. What are the human and social costs of the investment which those 10 crore people are making, and what are the pay-offs—the return-on-investment—for each of those persons, and for the society at large?

## The costs, the benefits

What are the costs, and what are the relative benefits, for us individually and for the society at large.

Don't we need to try and answer this question on the basis of our own needs, resources, aspirations, and then perhaps on the basis of what we keep hearing about the experiences of other societies?

We know how measures are being taken to keep the railways competent in the light of changing travel paths and increasing population mobility. And the railways have certain guidelines as to what constitutes a profit level, desired level and competent performance for every operation involved.

## Criteria for competence

Did we ever work out what it means to be competent to run and utilise today's media in today's context?

We hardly bothered to define and periodically redefine what it means to be competent performance of the role that people now play in the mass media, and for the social functions that those media serve? What sort of educational system do we have at present to impart professional orientation to competently handle various operations in our communication system? How relevant and worthwhile is it to our present; and then in the context of our future aspirations?

There is hardly any sort of test of the competence of those who manage and run mass communication enterprises. The so-called "New Wave" trend appears forcing upon the "Old Current" some sort of such built-in test in the film industry.

But the press looks like shirking such an opportunity instead of grabbing it to test for itself before somebody impose it. I am referring not only to the newsprint shortage but also the way "news" is being covered and coloured or avoided.

A newspaper when it faces short supply of newsprint rarely questions its competence or uses its skill to take a fresh look at all the operations in using the available space on the one hand, and covering the events and reporting the news, on the other; it simply raises its rates or its subscription price or both.

So, given the obsolescence or irrelevance of traditional ways of assessing competence in the production and distribution of mass messages for public consumption, how is competence to be assessed and evaluated. Otherwise, how is one to distinguish competence and survival capacity from sheer exploitation of the "captured audience" out there.

Then, how about the competence of the consumer of mass produced and mass distributed goodies? Things cannot just be achieved because of the sheer fact one has seen or read a newspaper. You cannot do things to people via communication in general and mass media in particular, except as they are capable and susceptible.

This leads us to another important question.

## Communication in the context of human development

Do we have an understanding of the role of communication in human development and social

evolution? Do not we need to get that better understanding built into the way we conceive of and operate mass communication systems.

There are communicational deficiencies just like there are nutritional deficiencies.

Not many people seem to realise that in the nations that have so-called advanced mass media, there is increasingly the stunting and disfiguring and retarding of intellectual and emotional growth—in the same way that in India, there is physical stunting and disfiguring and retarding of physical growth.

And yet we worry about physical hygiene, but we have got communicational hygiene obscured and tied down by a lot of obsolete notions—like "freedom" of the press. Should uniformed, misinformed opinions be given currency simply because mass media is "free"?

## Mass media no wonder drug

To treat change and development either "too slow" or "too rapid" without any reference to context and criteria by which such things have to be judged is loose talk.

To consider a gap in change and development as merely a problem to be solved or an obstacle to be overcome—with the help of mass media—greatly oversimplifies the rather more profound issues at stake.

Such short-sighted attempts consider rate of growth all important, and progress synonymous with urbanisation and media growth. They forget that nowhere on the globe do men live the beautiful and comprehending lives promised by our ideologies or technologies and projected by or through our mass media.

In a country in which more information is available to more people than ever before, there is nothing but misunderstanding, confusion and frustration. Needless to name the country. And yet UNESCO norms consider this country as the most developed in mass communication!

## Let us be concerned with the substance

What we have to try to affect is the substance of our communication rather than the means. The Vietnam war was often described in public com-

munication as a "T.V. war" in the USA as if it was not real people and real places that were being bombed, killed or destroyed.

## A famous example

Journalist Malcolm Browne was on the scene in 1963 when a Buddhist monk burned himself to death. Browne's picture of this human sacrifice was admired and published in newspapers around the world. When asked later why he didn't try to do something to stop that suicide, he said, "Frankly it never occurred to me to interfere. I have always felt that a newsman's duty is to observe and report, not to try to change it. This attitude may be subject to criticism, but that is how I reacted—and how I would react again". Browne later won a Pulitzer prize for his reporting from Vietnam! There are similar instances in India of reporting on Anand Marg and RSS activities.

Think about it!! Is it desirable and worthy that we emulate what has occurred elsewhere in the name of development and in the form of international norms?

## Future orientation

Don't we need a living concern for the shape of things to come—whatever be the operation we are engaged in the process of human communication. We need a new morality for the use of all communication media, and we need one which includes the audience as well as the producer. Unless some sort of obsession for some kind of social transformation exists, an exercise in communication is purposeless, futile and obviously not worth investing.

All our present moralities—all of our prescriptions and styles for saying and not saying to each other—were either invented long before or in all likelihood far away from India.

We need criteria to evaluate and refine every operation involved in our communication efforts; we need to question the assumptions implied in the present ways of doing things with a living concern to the future and a sense of commitment and involvement in the present.

Thanks to the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, for the first time some thought to these issues is now being given and this is one of the most significant contributions of the present Emergency.

(Concluded)