Mass Communication and Development: Impact Depends on Strategies

Francis N. Wete, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impact of mass communication on development. It suggests that, depending on how it is used and what it contains, mass communication has the 'potential for good as well as evil'.

After reviewing the social and psychological prerequisites for development and effective use of the mass media, the paper discusses some research findings on the role of the mass media on development.

It argues that for there to be positive change in society, the people must appreciate the need for such change. The mass media can help in this cause, depending on their use and content.

*Francis N. Wete is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Mass Communication, University of Yaounde, Cameroun.

Utilisation du Théatre et de la Communication pour le développement en Afrique

RESUME

Cet article porte sur l'impact des moyens de communication de masse sur le développement. L'auteur suggère, que selon l'usage qu'on en fait et selon son contenu, ces moyens ont "un potentiel aussi bien pour le bien que pour le mal".

L'article passe en revue les conditions sociales et psychologiques pour un développement et une utilisation effective des médias de masse et traite de quelques conclusions de travaux de recherche sur leur rôle dans le développement.

L'auteur pense qu'il ne saurait y avoir de changements positifs dans une sociéte sans que les membres de cette sociéte n'epprouvent le besoin de ces changements. Les médias de masse peuvent contribuer à ces changements.

Communication scholars have been arguing for almost three decades over the impact of mass communication in development. During the same period, poor nations have been insisting that the purposive use of the mass media is an important part of their struggle for progress. They contend that the failure of economic progress, which should have followed the attainment of independence, can be seen in terms of their failure to control indigenous information systems. Mass communication researchers though, in the 1950s and 1960s, that the mass communication media were crucial to the process of modernization. Although that view has changed, developing nations still widely hold that if the channels of information within their borders were controlled from outside, they would confirmed "in a state of perhaps more hopeless dependence than before". (Smith, 1980)

These conflicting assertions raise the fundamental questions: Do the mass media play a role in development? If so, under what type of development strategy can the mass media be most effective? These are the questions which this paper will attempt to answer. Such issues as the theoretical underpinnings of mass communication and the emerging development strategy, basic to understanding the inter-relationships between the mass media and social change, will be considered.

Underdeveloped nations are characterized not only by poverty, disease, illiteracy and ignorance, but also by resistance to change. The intellectual debate over the role of mass communication in development is the product of the quest for alternative ways of informing, educating, and persuading large audiences in under-developed nations quickly, frequently, and cheaply. Changes in the economy, it is realized, requires psychological changes, particularly the acquisition of new attitudes favourable to developmental activities. By the same token, it is assumed that new attitudes can be fostered through the mass media.

Yet, the bulk of studies on the effects of mass communication conclude that it has no effect upon people. But a few, like Klapper's study, have found that mass communication can have, when it relates to audience characteristics, limited effects. Similarly, DeFleur and Ball-Rockeach developed the view that mass communication is a continuous process of interaction between the societal systems, media systems and media audiences. The societal system is determined by its structure, dynamic processes, and culture. Media systems are characterized by their economic goals, values, technology, and organization. The extent to which people will depend on media messages will depend also on the utility of these messages for individuals and for society. (DeFleur and Ball-Rockeach, 1975).

Consequently, DeFleur and Ball-Rockeach concluded that when media messages are not linked to "audience dependences", media messages will have little or no effects. On the other hand, when audiences are dependent on media messages, the messages will have "alteration effects" in terms of cognitive, affective, and/or overt activity.

The DeFleur/Ball-Rockeach "dependency" theory of mass communication avoids the all-or-none position of media effects. It allows one to specify in a limited way, when and why messages will or will not have significant effects on how audiences think, feel and behave.

On the other hand, consideration of the role of the mass media in development has received increasing impetus as discussions over development models have broadened. The concept of development has grown from one that centred on materialistic, economic growth to one that implies such values as social advancement, equality and freedom. After more than two decades of dominance, the "trickle down" models of development have broken down.

The idea that the benefits of per capita GNP would spread throughout the economy and reach all groups has not materialised. Urban-based industries have failed largely because the mass of traditional producers in the rural areas have been neglected. Neglect of the rural population undercuts the market for industrial goods produced in the cities. As a result, the growth of capital-intensive goods has been slowed down by the limited demand for them due to the low incomes generated by the agricultural sector. It is now widely

recognized that sustained development cannot occur simply by transplanting technology in the urban areas of under-developed countries while neglecting the rural areas where three quarters of the population live and work. Foreign aid, capital, and technology are not only enough but they have contributed to the furtherance of development in the recipient nations, as dependency theorists have properly pointed out. These external factors have widened the urban-rural differential and increased the dependence of the recipient nations on the donor nations.

There is, thus, a compelling need to find an alternative development strategy that will attract and benefit both the rural and urban populations, and broaden the market for sustained growth in under-developed nations. In this effort, it will be useful to specify the dependent, as well as identify the independent, variables. Smelser has noted that the things that change may be the "aggregate attributes of the population of a social unit", "rates of behaviour in a population over time", "cultural patterns", and that the determinants or causes of change include "the structural setting for change", "the impetus for change", "mobilization for change", "the operation of social controls" (Smelser, 1968). Although the Parsons structural-functional model which Smelser applies is no panacea to the study of social change, it nevertheless highlights the importance of specifying the dependent and independent variables.

Oshima and other development economists imply the need for structural changes when they suggest a shift to a rural-based, labour-intensive strategy of development (Oshima, 1976). It will have the advantage of creating more jobs and producing more food. The language of development economists has shifted from take-off, import substitution, disguised unemployment, unbalanced growth et cetera to integrated rural development, agricultural intensification, appropriate technology, labour absorption, small industry promotion, health development, income distribution and so forth. This is the outcome of the realization that the growth of nations could not be understood adequately if only the quantity of inputs of labour and capital in the process of production was considered. Nor could unexplained growth be attributed only to technological change. Scholars of development have begun to feel the pressing need to take into

account non-economic factors and their interactions with labour, capital, and technology. Non-economic factors - social values, social advancement, equality, individual freedoms - reflect concern for the quality of life as the goal of development, as opposed to sheer material abundance. It also points to the direction of change in the new development strategy from focus on goods to focus on people, who are at the beginning and the end of development.

Changes in development strategy focusing on non-economic factors require the acquisition of new attitudes favourable to developmental activities. Comte argued that societal progress is closely related to appropriate cognitive functioning. People are, therefore, the architects of change. They must be convinced of the need for change, if change is to take place. For example, efforts aimed at establishing cooperatives will not succeed unless farmers are convinced of the need for such association. Accordingly, mass media messages extolling the benefits of cooperatives will be ineffective only if farmers are not convinced and do not become dependent on the media for information related to the establishment of cooperatives.

Thus, alternative approaches to social change and development imply a review of the role of mass communication in development. A development strategy that focuses on people, as the initiator and beneficiary of the process, indubitably depends on people. As noted above, poverty in underdeveloped countries is accompanied by dismal ignorance and strong adherence to tradition. The task of changing attitudes and values, ascribed to the mass media, becomes arduous.

A major obstacle in the search for determining the role of the mass media in development is the difficulty of separating the independent and dependent variables, the cause and the effect. In other words, what comes first? Does development make possible mass communication development or do improved mass communication facilities - and the resulting increase in the flow of information - make possible economic and social development? Merrill has suggested that unless some researcher or research foundation can establish two nations, one that will agree not to have any mass communication media and another that has primitive mass media from the start, then, after ten years, the impact of communication media on national development is observed,

it will be impossible to determine the effect of the mass media on development (Merrill, 1971).

Without subjecting people to media isolation for research purposes, Rao studied the communication system in two Indian villages: one had embraced some new forms of development like industrialization and the other continued, in large part, to depend on tradition, including the barter system. He found that in the developing village, where channels of information were varied and broad-based, the changes resulting from economic, social or political ideas creeping into the community were smooth. Furthermore, Rao discovered that when sufficient information is available, it contributes to a spiral of developmental activity. It helps farmers to improve methods and produce more. It also helps to transfer some of the excess manpower of the farms to other more productive jobs. More productivity leads to increased economic activity within the village (such as shops and restaurants), to new appetites for consumer goods, to seeking after new opportunities, and so on in a chain of related development (Rao, 1966).

In the past, however, mass communication concentrated on conveying messages from government to the public in a top-down hierarchical pattern. There was an over-emphasis on the source to the disadvantage of the receiver. This approach fitted the now discredited concept of social change which viewed development in terms of what government does to, and for, the people. The linear communication model implied in the dominant concept of development had a limiting effect on the contribution of the mass media in development.

By contrast, some critics contend that the linear communication model has been used by the ruling class to subjugate the masses in society. In this regard, Bell argues that technological changes have changed the nature of class relationship much like the bourgeoisie did in the 18th and 19th centuries. He believes that society is no longer based on class but on control of information. People in positions of power depend on information and knowledge and consider the ready availability of such information and knowledge to the public at large a threat to their power. To remove the perceived threat, the ruling class uses the mass media for brainwashing rather than for promoting development (Bell, 1973). Sure

enough, mass communication can be a tool in the hands of self-serving politicians. But there is no denying that the mass media can be, if properly used, an indispensable force in the education of the society, the sharing of consciousness, the creation of nationhood, and the promotion of socio-economic development.

Mass communication is, for instance, vital in the development approach which accords importance to self-development at the village and neighbourhood levels. Self-development means that each group, village, or community is responsible for deciding what type of development it needs most, for planning how to achieve this development goal, for obtaining necessary government and other resources, and for implementing their development activities.

With this approach, the mass media may be used to transmit information of a background nature to a group, village or community about their expressed needs, and disseminate innovations that may meet certain of these needs. Illustrations of this mass communication role can be round in radio campaigns in China, radio rural forums in India and radio listening group campaigns in Tanzania. Such a mass communication function is more effective because the audiences are dependent on the media messages. These kinds of media messages, as DeFleur and Ball-Rockeach would put it, have "alteration effects" in terms of cognitive, affective, and/or overt activity. Consequently, the role of the mass media in self=-development is more permissive and supportive than in the top-down development approach, where people are told what their problems are and persuaded to follow certain specific lines of action to solve them.

Mass media;s role in development depends, in the final analysis, on the media messages reaching the target audiences. But the paucity of mass media facilities in under-developed countries is compromising the potential impact of mass communication in development. Africa, for example, has the least developed mass media facilities in the world. With the exception of radio, the other channels of mass communication largely remain within the cities. In most cases, only the radio reaches the quasi totality of the population of a country. Development planners will have to address problems related to making mass media facilities widely available so that development messages can reach the people.

With regard to investigating mass media effects, Rogers and Kincaid propose network analysis through the convergence model as a methodological approach. The convergence model compels the researcher, at an interpersonal level, to study the relations, differences, similarities and changes in the "information exchange" relations between two or more individuals over time as communication leads to the formation of cliques and networks. They contend that network analysis requires an overview of the entire social structure. At the mass communication level, then, the convergence model requires the researcher to investigate more than just the direct effects of mass media messages on individual audience members; equally important is how these direct effects spread among the communication networks of audience members and how the media are given meaning by "receivers" through their interaction with other individuals (Rogers and Kincaid, 1981). Thus, network analysis overlays the social structure on the communication flows in order to better understand both the structure and the message flows.

Given this holistic approach, it would be futile to design a mass communication campaign without knowing who will be communicating to/with whom and about what. Hence, to facilitate understanding - the ultimate goal of all communication - participation, mass mobilization, and group efficiency, an appropriate development model should encourage local involvement in development planning, decision-making and execution.

The convergence model does not, however, predict the nature of flow of communication or impact for, to paraphrase Pye, all audiences under all circumstances in all countries. At this stage of its development, there is as yet no adequate predictive communication theory. In the meantime, McNelly has suggested the pragmatic approach on the role of mass communication in development. It calls on communication researchers to adopt, with respect to new types or combinations of messages or channels, a "try and see if it works" approach (McNelly, 1968). It implies a disposition to seek empirical evidence in the field uninhibited by any rigid advance assumptions; and to accept evidence on the effect of mass communication in other cultures even though it may be out of harmony with seemingly well-established theoretical models.

From the foregoing, it appears that while the earlier blind belief in the power of the mass media in development is no longer tenable, a role for mass communication as an instrument at the service of development is quite evident. It has the potential for good as well as for evil, depending on its use and content. In Polynesia, it is used to divert attention from national problems (Barney, 1973); in Latin America, Beltran showed that mass communication content is frivolous, irrelevant, and even negative for rural development (Beltran, 1974).

On the other hand, even Merrill admits that communication is "obviously necessary for a nation to grow and progress, just as it is for an individual person". Deutshmann concluded that mass communication is necessary to national consciousness, spirit, and concerted national action. It can contribute to dissatisfaction and a desire to change; it can heighten a sense of collective power; it can stabilize or disrupt the society; it can instil in the people realistic goals or create in them extravagant expectation.

In sum, mass communication can be used either as a stimulant or a tranquilizer. For the purposes of development, it can serve as a catalyst by generating information within the people so that they can define their own problems. The impact of this role in any given society would appear to be a direct function of its development and mass communication strategies.

References

Barney, Ralph B. "Mass Media Roles in Development: A Descriptive Study from Four Developing Countries", *Gazette*, Vol.19, No.4, 1973.

Bell, Daniel, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Beltran, Salmon Luis R., "Communication in Latin America: Persuasion for Status Quo or for National Development". Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1974.

DeFleur, Melvin L. and Ball-Rockeach , Sandra, *Theories of Mass Communication.* New York: David McKay Co., Ind., 1975.

Klapper, Joseph T., *The Effects of Mass Communication.* Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960.

McNelly, John T., "Perspectives on the Role of Mass Communication in Development", David K. Berlo, Ed. *Mass Communication and the Development of Nations.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1968.

Merrill, John C., "The Role of the Mass Media in National Development: An Open Question for Speculation", *Gazette*, Vol.17, No.4, 1971.

Oshima, Harry T., "Development and Mass Communication: A Re-Examination", Wilbur Schramm and Daniel Lerner, eds. *Communication and Change: The Last Ten Years - And the Next.* Honolulu: University of Hawai East-West Center Press, 1976.

Parsons, Talcott, "A Functional Theory of Change", Etziono, Amital, eds. *Social Change.* New York: Basic Books, 1964.

Parsons, Talcott, *Sociological Theory and Modern Society.* New York: The Free Press, 1967.

Pye, Lucian W. ed. *Communication and Political Development.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.

Ráo, Y.V. Laksmana, *Communication and Development: A Study of Two Indian Villages.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960.

Rogers, Everett M. and Kincaid, D. Lawrence, *Communication Networks: Toward a New Paradigon for Research.* New York: The Free Press, 1981.

Smelser, Neil J., *Essays in Sociological Explanation.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

Smith, Anthony, *Geopolitics of Information: How Western Culture Dominates the World.* London: Faber and Faber, 1980.