

Mass communications from the ground up—part way: a review

Wilbur Schramm, *Mass Media and National Development*

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In 1962 the General Assembly of the United Nations passed a resolution "expressing its concern that . . . 70 percent of the population of the world lack in adequate information facilities and are thus denied effective enjoyment of the right to information." The concern was based upon a survey, carried out by UNESCO at the Assembly's request, which indicated the gulf between UNESCO's minimum standards for a mass communication system and the realities in most underdeveloped countries.

The minimums are modest. For each 100 inhabitants, according to UNESCO, a nation should have 10 copies of daily newspapers; five radio receivers; two cinema seats; and two television receivers. In 1961, North America had 2¼ times the minimum in newspapers and theater seats, 15 times the radios, and 12 times the television receivers. In the same year Africa had about a ninth of the newspaper standard, about half of the radios, a third of the cinema seats. Asia was somewhat better off for newspapers, but comparable (despite Japan) in radio, television, and cinema facilities. A projection based on the recent growth rate indicates that most underdeveloped nations will meet the radio receiver minimums by the end of this

decade, those for television receivers and cinema seats around the end of the century, and the standard for newspapers only when the world is well into the 2000's.

To help close this gap, the General Assembly suggested to governments that they include adequate provision for the development of mass communications in their national planning, and requested UNESCO to give continued support. UNESCO has had a strong section devoted to mass communication since its beginning, and over the past fifteen years it has produced much valuable material. Most of this has been descriptive; there have been several editions of *World Communications* (the last in 1964), which is a handbook of national communication systems; there have been studies and surveys of the structure of news agencies, of legal regulation of media, of comparative newspaper "play" of the same news budget, of the impact of cable charges, and a variety of other useful inventory studies which literally no other agency in the world was equipped to carry out. Although action programs were not UNESCO's specialty, historically, leadership of the new drive inevitably devolved to it. The General Conference in 1962 authorized "the publication of a study

designed to help give practical effect to the mass media development program"—which is to say that somebody should write a book of useful advice on how to establish a major social institution. This astonishing assignment, simultaneously cosmic and pedestrian, was accepted by Wilbur Schramm, of Stanford's Institute for Communication Research, and *Mass Media and National Development* is the product.

There is no question that UNESCO got the best qualified man. For twenty years Wilbur Schramm has had a unique role in the linkage of communication research not only with other fields of social science research but also with the process of its application to live problems; for the last ten he has had increasing interest—and on-site experience—in the communication systems of underdeveloped countries.

Judging not only by its own content, but by the UNESCO promotion which accompanied its publication, this book is addressed to a small but extraordinary audience—the policy-makers and opinion leaders of underdeveloped countries. Its purpose is to explain to intelligent men whose previous comprehension of press and broadcasting has been largely visceral how institutionalized communication works, and to suggest to them concrete steps which might be taken to speed the development of an effective system. It is written with care and a marvelous lucidity, but the things it talks about are of less interest and importance than the things it cannot talk about. The reader of *Mass Media and National Development* finds it more difficult as he goes along to avoid thinking about these unspoken things, which makes this a most provocative book.

That the shadows are more stimulating than the substance is in no sense a fault

of the author. He more than fulfills the terms of the assignment. He begins by setting out some assumptions—some explicit, others implied. The assumption that the traditional nation-state should be—or at least will be—the model for development is implicit. The fact that this will require planned social change, including the reordering of values, is set out with careful emphasis; he points out, with a quick bow to David McClelland and Max Weber, that the establishment of something resembling the Protestant Ethic seems to be required. And he worries about this:

What are the ethics of the kind of action we are talking about in this book? . . . What are the ethics of using modern communication to do the tasks we have just been talking about—encouraging "productive" attitudes even though counter-productive ones may be strongly held, encouraging different kinds of farming even though farmers distrust innovation, encouraging better health habits in the face of fatalism and unwillingness to kill living things, encouraging people to work hard and save when they don't seem to want to?

Schramm admits that such questions add up to a straw man for readers in some countries, but he hopes that "these readers will bear with us while we make clear, for other readers, how we stand."

He stands essentially on the fact that "responsible leadership" in the developing countries already has made the choice to modernize their societies; that the choice seems a reasonable one, and that the problem now is the provision of help. He points out that these are only the beginning, however, and that a major objective of a mass communication system is putting people in touch with each other—the provision of means for involving the whole population in decisions about national growth over time. There is an assump-

tion here that more effective communication means more consensus and more stability, as well as an assumption that "responsible leadership" will want this kind of popular involvement. This is closely related to the assertion that development of the mass media helps make the innovation of social change easier—that, in effect, the high correlation of communication development and economic development is not merely a matter of phenomenological bedfellows. There is some cause-and-effect, Schramm feels, and it makes sense for the aspiring country to develop the communication system as quickly as possible. This is a somewhat more sanguine view than Daniel Lerner's, and almost all the evidence thus far on innovation has been collected in highly-developed countries.

Nevertheless, the author makes a persuasive case. He discusses the familiar specifics of media capabilities—they can widen horizons, focus attention, raise aspirations, and thus create a climate for development. He at the same time refuses to get carried away by his own advocacy; he carefully makes it clear that major attitude change, for example, involves personal influence and group norms in dimensions that the media can effect only indirectly. All this is familiar stuff to any member of the social science tribe, but to this book's intended audience it might well come as a revelation.

The details of the revelation are examined in a chapter which begins with the explanation of the concept of system (one of Schramm's great talents is explaining, with genuine intellectual elegance, ideas which are generally presented in fustian clutter) and then proceeds to the discussion of four kinds of campaigns. These are in the areas of agriculture, health, liter-

acy, and formal education; the discussion is concrete, full of examples, research data, and even how-to-do-it suggestions.

Obviously there will be need for orderly evaluation of such programs, and this book makes a sound case for the establishment, early on, of centers for communication research in developing countries.

The author then turns to the building of the mass media, discussing the problems of financing, flexibility, and comparative utility; he makes suggestions about ways in which the impoverished nation can get the most for its money, the kinds of assistance that are most helpful (tax relief for small papers, for example), and the need for determining priorities (will television really be worth all the money that it costs²). He strongly urges the establishment of communication industries and a national news agency. Because of the need for generalization, this final section of *Mass Media and National Development* cannot be a blueprint—but it is, at least, specific instruction in how to make one's own blueprint.

One section of this volume was not written by the principal author. Fernand Terrou, a political scientist at the University of Paris and Director of the French Institute of the Press, contributes a few pages headed "legal and institutional considerations." There is no explanation, other than courteous mutual deference, why someone else should have been asked to write one brief section, but several reasons suggest themselves. Terrou has done much work for UNESCO in press law and regulation; his is the eminent name. Schramm, like most Americans who work in mass communication, has no great knowledge of (and, one suspects, little interest in) Terrou's specialty.

Terrou proceeds to tell the new leadership of the developing countries what kinds of press laws to write. The legal codes he recommends, not surprisingly, are based upon traditional French concepts of press law; they include provision for the regulation of content by the authorities on occasion and the licensing of journalists. The general tone is of an atmosphere which American and British (and most French) journalists would find highly restrictive. Terrou makes the case explicitly:

In these regions political consolidation, national cohesion, and, naturally, economic and social development require a mobilization by the public powers of all intellectual, moral, and material forces.

In the field of information, this mobilization sometimes means, inescapably, the taking over and management by the state of the great mass communications media. It is at this price that these techniques, especially radio, can be fully utilized, not only under the conditions analyzed in this book, for economic and social development, but also (for these tasks go together) for political unification and the creation of a real "public opinion." This imposes on the methods of organization and management obligations or restrictions of such a nature as to promote the action of the central power.

This passage is as close as this volume comes to discussing the use of institutionalized communications for political ends. Yet this, surely, is Topic A in the real world of underdeveloped nations; this is the question which becomes more engrossing each time this book evades it. Perhaps "evasion" is too bald a word. In the first place, the author is writing as a spokesman for the UN; his presumed clientele ranges, literally, from Albania to Zambia. Each of these has a political system at least somewhat different from the others; the chief thing they might have in common would be bitter resentment of advice on political morality from an Amer-

ican. Any obvious bias toward certain kinds of political institutions would simply alienate a sizable bloc of people who might otherwise be helped. There are small and skillful thrusts here which indicate the author's awareness—for example, an emphasis upon using the status conferral capacity of the media in behalf of *many* kinds of leaders—but they are generally disguised.

Furthermore, it is not the book's purpose to discuss political action. The basic assignment was to talk about the mechanics of communication systems as a help to the planners of national development. Here's some help in getting newspapers started and keeping them alive, UNESCO is saying; what you put into them is your business, and so is whatever comes through the simple transistorized radios we urge you to build. We would not presume to have it otherwise. If you build a better communication system than you now have, and if you use it to improve public health and to teach people to read and make them the beneficiaries of other noncontroversial improvements, you'll be well ahead.

This is unquestionably true. Yet even this book, skillful and honest as it is, reinforces an endemic misapprehension—the tendency to believe that better communication means a more stable, secure, and less troubled world. This has not been a belief confined to sentimentalists, evangelists, or newspaper editors; it can be found in the work of social psychologists, for example, at the end of World War II.

But it has been repeatedly proved false. The capacity for communication, both institutionalized and personal, has expanded fantastically in the last twenty years—and so has the incidence of belligerence and hysteria, of threat and conflict. Despite

Schramm's confidence, there is little evidence thus far that the development of mass media which *has* taken place in underdeveloped countries has been accompanied by an increase of either outward or inward stability. Mass communication systems are also effective in demonstrating differences and reinforcing hatred.

It is only naive to wish that, in light of this, there were some things to be said about communication to new nations that were more profound than suggestions about the need for a broad base of popular support in initiating social change. There might be some comfort in thinking that these profound things exist, but simply have not been put down in this particular context.

Apparently this is not the case. A first group of papers related to this matter, called *Communications and Political Development* and edited by Lucian W. Pye, was published in 1963. It is an awkward collection of discrete studies, some of which are only distantly related to the topic, held together by some heroic transitional writing by the editor. A few lines in the preface provide a kind of summary

of that volume, and a bleak comment on the things which *Mass Media and National Development* is not about:

. . . . in spite of the accelerating interest of political scientists in the problem of the underdeveloped areas, we have not yet accumulated the necessary insights and generalized knowledge to provide the basis for a sound doctrine for political development which in turn might be of value for the policy makers in new countries.

Nor have the sociologists, nor the psychologists, nor the communication specialists. In any event, these countries might as well go ahead developing their systems of mass communication. By the time they are completed, somebody just might have thought of something helpful to say about national policy.

REFERENCES

- PYE, LUCIAN W. (ed.). *Communications and Political Development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.
- SCHRAMM, WILBUR. *Mass Media and National Development*. Stanford: Stanford University Press and Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1964.