

BOOK REVIEW OF THE MONTH:

Who is to know?

Mass Media and National Development: The Role of Information in the Developing Countries

by Wilbur Schramm

OF ECONOMIC SURVEYS of the world and of the poorer countries especially, there are many. But the peripatetic Director of Stanford University's Institute for Communication Research has written here the closest approximation to a survey of world *communication* conditions that can be found. The analogy should go further: As economics is to wealth, as political science to power, so communications are to enlightenment; communications development should be treated like economic development or political development.

"Bill" Schramm's work then is a treatise on a special part of the problem of *who possesses the means of information*, how they use them and with what effects they are employed. He analyzes the important literature in international communications, reflects upon his extensive study tours of the world, gathers the fruit of many a conference—none of which fatiguing experiences has sullied his sunny disposition—and answers the questions: who does *not* possess information; how can they get it; what will be the effects of it when they do?

The correlation of levels of mass media communications with those of economic development is positive and high. Schramm concludes that "the flow of news among nations is thin, that it is unbalanced, with heavy coverage of a few highly developed countries and light coverage of many less-developed ones, and that, in some cases at least, it tends to ignore important events and to distort the reality it presents." Travel is similarly weighted against international communication. If, as is shown, only nine of 283 items of an AP newswire on a given day get to the readers of a Wisconsin nonmetropolitan daily, it is even more dismal to note that the news agency itself, along with the four other great news agencies of the world, will gather in only faintest traces of activity from the great majority of nations of the world. Turned the other way around, the news agencies will of course report back to those countries a highly distorted picture of the rest of the world—concentrating largely on what is happening

in the USA, USSR, Britain, and France.

The countries starved for information are given a weird, haphazard, and scanty diet. When UNESCO decided to set up a minimum and immediate target for sufficiency of mass communication facilities around the world, it prescribed 10 daily newspapers per 100 inhabitants, five radio receivers, two cinema seats, and two television receivers. A hundred States fell below the minimum in all respects, with two-thirds of the world's people. Only the radio sector has shown a rapid enough rate of advance to carry the world beyond the minimum level within the next decade.

The improvement is concentrated in the cities excessively, with the rural masses often far behind in facilities and information. Yet the country folk flood the cities as they do in the USA, bringing their essentially distorted sense of the larger community and a fairly complete lack of information.

Of what use are the mass media? The mass media teach of the greater community, says Powdermaker from Africa. They help create the needed ties of community, reports Holmberg from the Peruvian haciendas. In

Rao's view, from two East Indian Villages, they smooth the transition and pave the road for change, while in Daniel Lerner's expression from Near Eastern studies, they act as a great rapid multiplier of contacts, like large-scale assembly-line industry, even in poor countries.

Professor Schramm also sets forth in plain and simple terms what the mass media are potentially capable of doing. They can widen horizons, focus attention, raise aspirations and create a climate for development. They can help only indirectly to change strongly held attitudes or valued practices, but they can affect attitudes lightly held and channelize stronger beliefs. They can feed richer material into the interpersonal dialogue that must carry much of the informational flow in less technically developed areas. They can confer status upon those who are trying to lead and those who are trying to follow the news leads. They can introduce new dimensions to problems. They can enforce social norms, and help form tastes. They can help substantially in all types of education and training.

To provide for these idealized objectives requires organization and personnel. Schramm offers a scheme

by Fernand Terrou for a special statute of information regulating rights and privileges of those working in, enjoying and managing or owning information enterprises. He offers further an extensive questionnaire to all countries for self-examination in respect to their media of information. He recommends central planning of mass media development, seeking balanced and measured growth. Investment in such a plan by the government and outside aiders is urged. Countries are advised to bring the mass media and the educational establishment into close relations. They should try to speed up the circulation of news and to strengthen local media, whose finances are desperate. They should be careful to do systematic and regular research on the media operations and effects. The training of information personnel should be fostered.

In some cases, basic industries for newsprint and radio receiver fabrication and for some cinema gadgets should be established, as the only way of assuring a regular flow of the required supplies of the mass media.

The author is sanguine about who will be helped by all this development. He raises, it must be said, the first ethical question of all applied science: is it permissible to change the environment? In its special social form, the question is: should people be manipulated? "Let us put the question in the ugliest way: Are we advocating that mass communication should be used in the developing countries to *manipulate* people?" He has three reasons for saying in effect "yes" (no one dares recommend manipulation as such). First, "change is inevitable." Then, "it is very hard to argue against change based on assumptions that, other things being equal,

- knowledge is better than ignorance;
- health is better than disease;
- to eat is better than to be hungry;
- a comfortable standard of living is better than poverty;
- to participate actively in one's nation is better than to be isolated from it."

Thirdly, more communications mean less, not more, manipulation. "The greater and freer the flow of information, the less likely it is that manipulative communications will have any effect."

The last is practically a contradiction in terms. Or perhaps it is the naturalistic fallacy. It is the liberal man's pious wish, endemic in the behavioral sciences, that unformed, free-flowing communications can only do good in the long run; all those who hate to be told what to do and to tell others what to do must share the wish, but just as stoutly resist its dominating their scientific thinking. Unfortunately good communications do not drive out bad ones: if anything, bad communications, or at least the "static", drive out the good. By "bad" communications is meant the "undesired" political use of symbols, misinformation, and diversionary signals. The evidence supporting any belief that communications development can come about without heavy and permanent political controls is inconsiderable.

One must move directly to the question: Will the political control of the mass media that will accompany their development be good or bad? UNESCO is incapable of making distinctions among countries in this regard, and Professor Schramm, writing this work in the fullness of collaboration with UNESCO, cannot treat it straightaway. Yet it is a fundamental question. Adverting to the kinds of changes that allegedly cannot be argued against, there must be placed alongside them a list of disturbing and depressing political accompaniments against which it is equally hard to argue, because they are so bad.

A developed set of mass media gives the ruling elite more power, more wealth, more respect. If reread, in fact, in this light, the list of what the mass media can do, as put forward above, is seen to incorporate a malignancy in each one of those seemingly beneficent roles. One must conclude that communications development can bring about a great many things, both bad and good, and that,

if by some miracle Ghana, Indonesia, and China leaped abreast of the United States and the Soviet Union, they could thank the miracle-workers for having brought them mass neurosis and mass bureaucracy, plus the privilege of being first to bare their breasts to the blasts of nuclear weapons.

Professor Schramm's work and, *pari passu*, a great many of the better works on economic and social development in the modern world must rest their case on the two facts: change is inevitable, and men of good will must rise to the challenge of controlling it for good. *It is not helpful to conceal the probability that communications development will do more harm than good; that will only lull everybody to sleep and keep both activists and scholars from devising techniques of communication organization and control that can only be used for the "good."*

It is questionable, finally, whether the distinction between developed and developing or undeveloped (or my preferred "poor") countries is useful in communications any more than it may be in economics or politics. None of the problems raised in regard to developing communications in the poorer countries is peculiar to a poor country, no more than are their economic or political problems unknown to the wealthier lands. It would be more scientific and perhaps ultimately more useful in reform to treat the communication system of a country along with its economic and political culture as a dynamic whole, having its *unique* capability of change with predictable benefits.

Comparison with countries of related culture may be made, if every fact is kept in context and thinking and planning proceeds contextually. But across-the-board prescriptions for the one hundred sub-minimum developing countries of the world can create a great many illusions and assist many a detestable cause. One can conceive of an ultimate worldwide formulation, but it would have a base that is much more elaborately excavated and constructed than Wilbur Schramm, despite his unmatched excellences, has established here.

Media's role in national development can be analyzed from political, economic and social perspectives. In the political sphere, media's role in raising political consciousness and public relations is positive. In the economic sphere, media can play their role in advertisements and tourism. In the social sphere, media has an important role in combating corruption, ignorance, criminal violence, and health problems. The western media are often responsible for disseminating false information about Eritrea. The distorted information about Eritrea generally fails to inform about the context or background to any event. The mass media continued to play a key and leading role in the struggle for the preservation of independence and national reconstruction.