

**THE BEGINNINGS OF COMMUNICATION STUDY: A PRELIMINARY
OBSERVATION**

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Introduction

The study on communication in Malaysia is relatively new. Communication study in Malaysia has a relatively short history or past to have a historical view but it is not long enough to provide for a meaningful historiography. Indeed to phrase it in terms of historiography would be an exaggeration of the various periods in the development of the field.

Nevertheless, tracing the history of communication study is indeed important as it will contribute to an understanding of the field. Scholars in the United States have traced the history of communication from two strands, one the history of communication as deriving from mass communication and the other from speech communication. The former, that is history of mass communication studies, can be traced to start from the first World War but communication studies, coming from Speech and rhetoric's, is said to have began earlier. Some scholars have suggested that the study on communication study to have started during the time of Aristotle and Plato. The communication study could hardly be started before the First world war, taking into consideration for both the two types of communication. Malaysia, therefore, does not have a long history to have periodical divisions of time to have a meaningful historiography, but needless, it would be possible to discern certain periods, though short in nature, that have contributed to the development of communication study in Malaysia.

Tracing the beginnings of communication study in Malaysia demands a perspective that takes into account happenings in other parts of the world.

There are several reasons why one should look at the history of communication study with some seriousness. For communication, the historical perspective would provide the grounds on which the present communication field is based.(Ahmad Murad Merican, 2003;Gronbeck, 1998) This is important for scholars who have just joined the profession to enable them to proceed to greater heights in the later part of their career. The second significance is to enable Malaysian communication scholars to proceed within the context of the global communication fraternity rather than be confined in the delight of the Malaysian scenery, without due concern to what is happening in other parts of the world. Malaysian communication scholars cannot remain isolated to what is happening in other parts of the world.

The third reason is to see how communication field itself has developed over a period of time. In that development process, new technologies are introduced as communication. Mass communication has been accepted as integral to modern industrial and postindustrial societies. In some eras or in some communication studies, it is still debatable to include or to exclude cassette or videos as part of the field. Lerner (1952) in defining communication in his field work could not include television and cassette (

because of its non existence then) , but included books as an item in communication. Likewise Blumer and Gurevitch included telephones as communication items. In recent times, satellites, computers and internet are included as communication items to be studied.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to understand and to discuss the factors shaping communication study in Malaysia, tracing as it were from a historical perspective. An attempt will be made to see this historical perspective in periods of time. What is of concern as we probe into the question of the beginnings of communication studies are a couple of questions. First, within what context did communication studies come into being? Second, having existed, what were their primary concerns with the passage of time? Were there factors within and without the country that shaped communication studies? What would be the current status of communication studies in Malaysia?

In Malaysia

With that hindsight, one would begin tracing communication study by looking at the history of communication in Malaysia and in many ways would also include the happenings of communication studies in other parts of the world, i.e. mainly from the United States.

One would hesitate to discuss the concept of communication. But this is important as it determines what constitutes communication and what technologies determine or shape the field. It also means what technology is accepted to be studied in the communication field. The communication field is divided into two main viewpoints, among others, shaped by two understandings of technology. On one side are the *rhetorics* whose premise is the development of communication based on speech. The other side would be the *mass media* whose premise is technology-based. Rogers (1999) said that the sub-disciplines of mass communication and mass media have slowed theoretical advance, limited the coherence of communication scholarship and violated the holistic nature of the human communication process. Both sides have their strengths and weaknesses. Both have their histories to tell. One has to acknowledge that the *rhetorics* have a longer history as it has a longer past, but the mass media have a history but quite a recent past, relative to the *rhetorics*. In the United States, both the rhetorics and the mass media have chartered their own course of history in the development of communication studies. The rhetorics have emphasized on speech, interpersonal communication, and writings, while the mass media have ventured into journalism, advertising, public relations, and broadcasting. The two have remained apart, each with their own proponents, viewpoints, departments/colleges and associations.

Thus the University of Wisconsin, Madison, United States has two departments of communication, i.e. one called the Department of Communication Studies and the other is called the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Both schools have their own approach one emphasizing on speech and the latter with its due emphasis on the mass media and although housed in one building yet there was (and is) little interaction between the two floors. There is yet another department called the Department of Agricultural Journalism housed in the College of Agriculture that also provides courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The two different approaches in studying communication are also reflected in the professional associations that scholars belong to. The National Communication Association, once called the Speech Communication Association, draws members mainly from rhetorics, speech and discourse analysis. The Association of Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) draws membership from mass communication (journalism, public relations, international communication, advertising). When the two associations meet for their annual gathering of scholars, quite similar subjects are presented, but one would notice the differences in approach, symbolizing the two schools concept of communication. You would also pinpoint that AEJMC would devote more papers that derive from empirical studies while NCA would emphasize on qualitative aspects of research.

Malaysia and other Asian countries do not have several or multiple associations like AEJMC or National Communication Association to cater for different membership of communication interests. In fact, Malaysia have no organization at the moment for the differences to happen. Departments of communication outside the United States are not facing similar problems like the United States because of different history and the development of communication programmes. (Rogers, June 1999). Despite the absence of the two sub-disciplines, and the absence of a national association Malaysia is not been able to advance theories that are so lacking in the field.

Two questions remained in the minds of communication scholars. The media centric approach to studying communication and the society-centric approach in studying communication. McQuail explains that in media centric approach scholars based their premise that media technology are prime movers in social change, but among society-centric approach, the premise is that the roots of change lie with society (McQuail, 2000). The society-centric approach takes media as one of the institutions that play a role in understanding societal problems. The media institution among others, like the economic system, the banking institution, political institution, is a concept to be analyzed. It is another matter with the media centric approach. With this approach, media is predominant. Although societal problems can be the dependent variable, the media centric approach would take media to be centre stage. Media would also be independent variables to explain societal problems.

When the founding fathers of mass communication shaped the study of communication, succeeding scholars like Schramm, Chaffee, McLeod, Lang and Lang, included, took a media centric approach in their analysis. The media centric approach accounted for several well known theories or theoretical approaches among them would be the Agenda Setting, the Uses and Gratifications, the Diffusion of Innovation, the Diffusion of News,

The focus of analysis would be societal problems. But there would be a third approach rather than to accept the two categories provided by McQuail. One would accept the study of a media studies within a society-based approach. Under this perspective one would not dismiss the concerns on media without giving due recognition to the concerns in society, acknowledging that media institution exists within a bigger societal framework.

The early beginnings of communication study: The British Period

One must see communication study, or the rudiments of it, as part of the writings of British administrators within, therefore, the context of colonial interest. Prior to 1941, the British administrators were interested to know about the natives, the society and the political system and beliefs of the natives (Tham, 1981).

The studying of communication if anything would start off during the British period writing about the press. The writings were contained in JMBRAS. The scholars were mainly British administrators, and some Malaysians. The approach were historical and descriptive, trying to explain how newspapers came about into Malaysia, the ownership, the technical aspects of the media. Understanding the values of the natives and other peoples were important. Thus the push to understand the natives and other peoples were justified on the grounds of need, the need to administer the people well.

If one were to study the writings about the press within the context of the social science, one would notice also the progressive phase of social science development in society. JMBRAS was a prestigious journal and with the other publications contained writings about the history, the geography, the herbs and medicine of the ordinary people. They also contained the writings on journalism. Malaysia has much to offer to the British to learn. They had much to gather materials to write for others, including the other natives, to understand society at that period of time.

But one native stood out well. Zainal Abidin Ahmad or known as Zaaba (1941), the well known literary figure who later rose to be a lecturer in the School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London wrote, among others, on the early development of journalism, detailing the growth of early Malay journalism.

The Second Phase: 1957 to early 1970s

The troubled times of the day were to shape the writings of communication under the second phase. It was the rise of nationalism in midst of troubled times because the phase also marked the uncertainty of the time given the rise of Hitler and Mussolini in Europe. The second phase was still on journalism, with the print and the broadcasting included. There were writings on journalism in Malaysia/Singapore, but often times these were descriptive such as Ghazali Ismail's "Wartawan." "Tempat Jatoh Langit di Kenang." (For further insight on this period see Adnan Hussein, 1999).

The second phase saw writings on the growth and development of print journalism and studies linking journalism with the political institution. Tham (1988) quoted writings by Nik Hassan (1963); Balakrishnan (1971), Coats and Dyer (1972), Glattbach and Anderson (1971); Coats (1973); that dealt with media development in the country.

The print media as an institution was in existence with the political institution, one friendly to the Malaysian based political institutions but antagonistic to the British administration. Safar (198), Abdul Samad Idris (1982), and Cheah Boon Kheng (1987) illustrate well the relationship between the press and politics. There was hardly any writings about the press and economic development. The press of the day was concerned about politics. The reasons are obvious. The press people were politically conscious and the politicians knew the importance of the press as a vehicle to express their political sentiments.

The administration was not to remain idle. The rise of nationalism was also felt to be a threat to the British administration. It was also a rise that the British were not able to

understand yet because it was preoccupied with the events in Europe, where events affecting London, were deemed more significant than the events threatening Malaya or Singapore then.

The appointment of Peet as the Director of the Department of Information, in 1939, paved the way for the growth of government information services and it would later to follow with the appointment of personnel in the Broadcasting and public relations.

This was the time when the communication institutions (broadcasting, print media) were to be integrated with the British institutions. The Policy on Broadcasting , detailed the growth of the broadcasting institution. As to be expected, the setting up of the Department of Information in Malaysia was part of the overall establishments of Information Departments in other parts of the world. Such is the strategy of the government of His Royal Highness to harness the might of countries within the British Empire.

One must also see the second phase in the development of communication studies in the United States and in other parts of the world. In the United States, the setting up of the Committee on War Information (succeeding in spirit and action of the Creel Committee of the First World War) and the subsequent events thereafter consolidated the growth of communication study. Scholars and practitioners served in the Creel Committee during the First World War and in the Committee of War Information during the Second World War. Scholars began to speak about the blessings of the Second World War that gave rise in a more structured way the studying of communication. Seriously. Scholars learned the usefulness of communication as a field of study and also how important communication was as a practical subject. It was in the research endeavours and tribulations of the communication fathers (Lasswell, Lewin, Hovland, Schramm, Lazarsfeld)after the Wars that shaped communication study in the United States. The founding fathers came from different academic disciplines. Lewin was a psychologist, Lasswell a political scientist, Hovland a mathematician and Lazarfeld was himself a social-psychologist. The four scholars made communication a variable and included them as part of their overall interest. It was later to give rise to a field with its strength in multiple methodologies but inherent weakness in theory. Field studies share common characteristics, they being weak in theory but strong in methodology. It was during this period that various models on communication were to be introduced. Lasswell came in with his classic model of communication of “Who Says What to Whom in Which Channel with what Effect?” a model that gave emphasis to the communicator over the recipients of messages. It was a model conceived during war conditions. It was a model that assumes acceptance of message. It was a model that became identified with communication research for many years to come.

The fear that communication research would wither away (Berelson, 1959) with the passing away or the withdrawal of fathers from communication was found unwarranted. Communication as a field of study continued to thrive in the United States as more schools and departments were formed, and with that more graduates were produced. In some ways, the growth of these departments and schools in the United States produced foreign graduates who later were to return to their countries and found or man various departments and/or schools of communication in their own countries . It was to the credit of Schramm who was able to implement the first Ph.D. programme in

communication, thus causing a big evolution in the field of communication study. The early studies on communication studied were made by scholars who were not in communication but in sociology, psychology, political science but for whatever reasons, the period saw the steady development of communication as a field of study, beginning in universities and academic institutions.

The Third Phase. (1970s)

It was in the third phase that more attention should be paid to when discussing about communication studies in Malaysia. Communication research became institutionalized through the universities. The setting up departments of communication in universities marked a big milestone in studying communication in Malaysia. It was obvious that scholars could study the mass media and its societal concerns, the media system and other issues relating to media and communication institutions than merely describing the existence of media.

There are diversions, modifications, or adoptions, if I can use the term, from the mainstream American studies on communication. But it is with the international and the development oriented communication theories that Asians take a liking to when they discuss about communication.

What were the features during this phase? The first was the growth of universities in Malaysia and the acceptance of communication as an academic study at the bachelor and post-graduate programme. Second, scholars teaching communication in Malaysia universities were mainly educated in the United States, many of them were funded by the Malaysian government to obtain degrees from abroad. Third, the research was still confined to the print media (Them, 1981) adding television, radio, and film in between.

One must also look beyond the shores of Malaysia to understand how two important facets of communication study took its central role in universities in Malaysia or in Southeast Asia. The Cold War, that antagonism between two Superpowers, lead to the interest in international communication and part of this was the growth of Development Communication and other related subjects to bring about modernization to developing societies, mainly through American scholarship.

Side by side with the concern for Development Communication was International Communication and somewhat with Intercultural Communication.

Fischer (1970: xv) said in the preface that “ it can probably be said safely that it was in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s that the study of international communications really became important.” Communication scholars, political scientists, sociologists and psychologists expressed their interests in writings and research on areas in international communication. UNESCO was also responsible to make international communication a popular subject of study. Several reasons made international communication a popular study, but politics was one of them. The American’s involvement in the Cold War against the Communist countries of the Soviet Union and China was an important factor. International communication was made for Americans to understand the communication situation of other countries (the aliens), the relationship between the American mass media and the media of other countries. It was a decade where studies were made comparing the values of American journalism with the values of the journalism of other countries. Hence the concept of freedom of the press, the rights of journalists and how to write news was part of the concern of international communication.

But what was international communication to Americans was national communication of some sort when it was taught in Asian countries. It now meant that for the study to be effective in Malaysia it was to see Malaysia's connection of media and communication systems with the other countries of the world. So studying American media was foreign press.

UNESCO came into the picture through various reports on communication structure in various countries. But its Secretary-General made a big impact on communication studies when he called for the creation of an international information order. At the 1976 UNESCO General Conference, the Secretary General, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow set up an International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems whose concern included a consideration of international news and the role of the major news agencies. UNESCO's policy on this uneven flow of information gave another reason for scholars to rush into this new area (see special issue of *Journal of Communication*, 34 (4)). Added to this was the famous report of "One World One Voice" that stirred up the imagination of scholars for a possible redress of the uneven flow of information and with it the uneven concern of political power. One could see several studies related to the news flow, the uneven flow of news, the news agencies, or matters related to the New World Information Order. There were several studies made by scholars such as on the news agencies (Boyd-Barrett, 1980), news flow (Safar Hasim, 1991) and international media systems (Hachten & Scotton, 2002)

For the record, one could cite the numerous studies undertaken by scholars on the uneven flow of news, detailing how this uneven flow came about and making suggestions to overcome this problem. From the opposite side were scholars who began to talk about the hegemony of Western domination, and the structural reforms that were required. But the proponents of the Hegemonic school or the Structural School were few in number as against those who took a more functional approach in attempting to redress the situation. But for the Americans, it was the beginning of the end of their interest in international communication. The ending of the war in Vietnam led to more disinterest in international communication among American scholars and the seemingly withdrawal of American global interest. (for the time being).

Malaysians kept their arms long from debating against the American position, possibly fearful that they might be branded as communists or communist sympathizers even though some had taken the stand to begin a similar vein as that taken by UNESCO.

Let us take the development communication to see how it had an impact in communication study in Malaysia.

Development communication became very important in the United States when it was linked to American intention to provide assistance to developing societies. It could be seen within the context of Modernizing studies concerned with the idea to make societies and countries modern (i.e. American). The developing countries found that after achieving independence they needed development to fill the substance of independence. There were numerous studies made related to the question of modernization, among them was the quest to find out the "Modern Man" (Inkeles and Smith, 1974). Hence studies in communication conducted by Lerner, Rogers and Schramm became significant as they provided a perspective in bringing about development and modernization to the developing societies. At the core of development communication is the use of communication technologies and processes to promote

social change. (Wilkins, 2000). But there are many objectives in development communication, among them are improvements to be made in health, in education, in literacy, in family development. Development communication assumes the powerful effects of media. Media were said to be able to change the attitudes, the outlook and the work view of developing societies, and in some instances to affect behavioral changes

Morris (2003) divides development communication approaches into two categories, one she called the diffusion model and the other the participatory approach. The diffusion model, named after the research of Rogers, derives from the modernization theory of the 1950s and the 1960s which took the assumption of behavioral change from the several campaigns that were launched. The formula used was KAP, meaning Knowledge, Attitude and Practice. Knowledge was said to come from the planners, who would then send in the planned and coordinated messages to the farmers, which would then change their attitudes. Once their attitudes were changed, the farmers would then adopt the necessary practices.

The Participatory Model takes a different premise from that of the Diffusion Model which demands dialogue among the planners and societal members. Instead of the top-down communication model inherent in the Diffusion Model, the Participatory Model draws the significance of horizontal process of information exchange. People share in the decision making and decides what is best for them.

The diffusion studies on development communication came to Malaysia or Southeast Asia sometime in the early 1970s. Gloria Feliciano, a graduate from an American university, was said to be the pioneer in this field. She was instrumental in setting up the Institute of Communication, at the University of the Philippines. In one of her papers, Feliciano, talks of development communication, media development and international communication as priorities of communication research in Asia (1982).

If anything, communication development was the craze of the day. Alwi Dahlan (1982) of Indonesia, was also into this. Development communication was in the thing for communication scholars. It had to deal with the practicability of the subject. Planners were proud to be associated with a discipline that would be used and applied rather than some disciplines that were just theory oriented. To planners, they could see that communication could be use in family planning programmes, in health and literacy campaigns, in education, and in others. Media could be used with ease.

To politicians, development communication, was something wonderful. It took the attention of the scholars away from other mundane subjects like freedom of the press, or the ownership of the media. Media existed for society. The contents should be development oriented as it would be used for the benefit of the underprivileged people or the rural people. The other aspect on the concerned for development communication was that it took the attention of scholars away from the print media to radio. Radio was said to be cheap, but it was able to be accepted by the farmers who could tune in to the programmes and listened to the development oriented programmes.

If Development Communication as a study of communication came to the Philippines in the 1960s, it came to Malaysia in the early 1970s. Perhaps the interest was introduced when Universiti Sains Malaysia (then Unversiti Pulau Pinang) created the communication programme in 1971 and introduced a course called Development Communication. This was followed by Institute Teknologi MARA in 1972 when it introduced a sequence called Development Communication, besides other sequences

called Public Relations, Advertising and Filming and Journalism. When Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia introduced its Department of Communication in 1976, it created a sequence called Development Communication, besides the sequences in public relations, broadcasting and journalism. Development took a matured status when it was incorporated as a course within the Faculty of Extension in Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (now called Universiti Putra Malaysia). Communication scholars were trying to prove a point that communication could be utilized for the betterment of the poorer segment of the population.

Part of the study on development communication was the information holding and the information needs of the people. This assumption was made because of the KAP model, where the people was said to need knowledge first before they were able to proceed to improve themselves. In Malaysia, some of the early studies were conducted in Universiti Sains Malaysia. In 1975 Leslie Sargent did a comparative study of rural and urban information needs in Malaysia and proceeded in 1976 to have a report for UNESCO on the Communication Structure in Malaysia. Besides the reports, there were also theses written on development communication. Idid (1976) did a content analysis of development news as reported in selected Malaysian newspapers. Malaysians graduating from the Department of Agricultural Communication, University of Wisconsin, were also noted for their theses and dissertations on development communication as the Department itself is noted for extension studies.

It was a period that other scholars from other disciplines were also interested in development communication, especially scholars in anthropology and sociology. Notables that should be mentioned were Dahlan, H. M (1980), Wan Hashim, Salleh Lamry. Dahlan and Wan Hashim (1979) did a study on the importance of communication in meeting societal changes in Perupok, Kelantan.

Development Communication lost its appeal in 1980s. The new universities or new programmes were established without any regard for development communication. Universiti Malaya's Department of Media Studies did not have any sequence of that nature and the Department of Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, did not have any sequence in development when it introduced its bachelors's programme. Development communication and International communication also lost their impetus in the United States.

Besides the role of scholars, let us also not forget the role played by professional associations and practitioners of communication in promoting interests in journalism, public relations, advertising and film during this period of time. A training center, called the Southeast Training Centre, a registered institution supported by the Malaysian press, the Ministry of Information and the Press Foundation of Asia was established to provide training facilities for journalists in editing, writing styles, and in photojournalism. It produced a journal called "Leader" containing articles related to the media and their problems. The "Leader" was taken over by the Malaysian Press Institute. The articles in the leader were descriptive in nature, but it is worthy because it was the start of more journals that were more serious and academic.

One is not able to trace the number of issues of the "Leader," but the writer has copies to indicate that the journal survived for three years (1972 to 1974). It was long after when another journal arrived on the Malaysian scene, this time it being published by the Communication Students Association, from the Department of Communication,

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. *Jurnal Komunikasi* was first published in 1982. but it was taken over by the Department of Communication and has managed to survive to this very day. (See review on this *Jurnal* by Fuziah Kartini Hassan and Mat Pauzi Abd. Rahman, 1999).

Other departments tried to follow suit. See , for example, Forum Komunikasi, by then School of Communication, Institute Teknologi MARA but it failed to survive. We now have a journal published by the Department of Media Studies, Universiti Malaya, *Journal of Media Studies*” but it is showing irregularity in production. The most current issue (at least to my knowledge) is 2001/2002 given the time check today is. July 25, 2003.

Communication in the 1980s and onwards

The era of 1970s made way for the 1980s when communication took another turn wrapped by commercialization and marketing concerns. The Cold War was over. Countries were not bound to support any ideology. International communication among American scholars became of less concern compared to communication problems of a general nature. The enthusiasm felt for communication study began to wane in the 1980s. In the meantime, the 1980s in Malaysia marked the turnover of the first generation of communication scholars who retired or had left communication. Among the notables were Vincent Lowe, Karthigesu, Sharifah Mariam, Mansoor Ahmad, Bebe Chooi, Shareen Kamaluddin, Hamdah Karim and Sankaran.

Communication departments in Malaysia continued to show interest. Funds for research were made available, and communication scholars made their presence felt among other disciplines. This was however, short lived when communication scholars regressed to their own fold. Few communication scholars presented papers in non-communication fields, but more scholars from other disciplines made themselves available in communication seminars.

It is to the other components in communication that one must address to in the 1980s, and even going into 1990s and 2000s.

Underlying dimensions

What were the underlying dimensions during the past 30 years of communication study? Communication study took a more dramatic change in the 1970s compared to the years before that. The change came with the setting up of universities. Communication became academic subjects to be pursued either at the undergraduate or post-graduate levels. The change with more in-depth studies came from the setting up of departments of communication in universities in Malaysia. Scholars began to conduct research in various aspects of communication. The concern of the 1970s on using communication for development attracted scholars in communication, and also from other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

The second impetus in the development of communication studies came from the setting up of associations and professional bodies. Examples of such associations are AMIC, Communication associations, AIDCom. These bodies would hold seminars and conferences and enabled scholars and practitioners to present their findings, interpretations or impressions. Yet Malaysian scholars lacked its own association that could organize seminars on a more regular manner.

The third dimension was the availability of journals such as *Jurnal Komunikasi* at UKM, *Jurnal Pengajian Media Malaysia* at UM, *Forum Komunikasi* at UiTM (now defunct). We need more quality articles in our journals and the journals to be more consistent in their appearance.

The common denominator was the influence of American scholarship on Malaysian research in communication, very strong in development communication, diffusion studies, and now grappling with the demands for applied research. The American theoretical influence is strong. Scholars educated in England returned with a different theoretical underpinnings from those educated in the United States (Zaharon Nain, 2002a; Nain 2002b; Mustafa Anuar, 2002, Umi Khatab), bringing in a non-empirical interpretation to the communication phenomena.

The late 1990s saw the beginning of research on the new technologies, such as the use of internet, the question on the digital divide, etc. The internet has been given quite a substantial attention by scholars (see Musa Abu Hassan and Awatif Awang, 2001; Faridah Ibrahim, 2001, etc and colleagues from Universiti Putra Malaysia (Musa, Ezhar Tamam and Salleh) obtained an IRPA grant research on the digital divide, while Rahmah Hashim obtained funding from the German foundation for a workshop to be conducted in UKM. (Becker & Rahmah Hashim, 2001). Early in the 1980s, there were more articles on internet and computer use in *Jurnal Komunikasi* than before. What this meant was that scholars turned to new technologies when there was funding as what they did in the 1970s. This is something quite different from the United States as research on the internet continued to be small compared to research conducted on the print and the broadcast media. (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003)

Issues to ponder

Theoretical development

Scholars have said that the concern for discipline development is theory. But theories are lacking in communication. There are many reasons for this lack of theoretical development. We have the extra long reason that we do not have sufficient people conducting research to come out with theories. Or the other long reason that we do not have many people who are qualified, either at the masters level or Ph.D level, to conduct research to come out with theories. The lack of theories in communication is similar to the other fields in social science. Merton (1968), for one, mentioned that social scientists are not working hard enough to come out with theories compared to their colleagues in the hard sciences. They are still debating whether they should go for intermediate or universal theories, or between practical theories or academic theories (Craig, 1989; Stutton & Staw, September, 1995).

A recent study found that even in the United States, scholars with their articles in academic journals were also found lacking in theories. In an analysis of 889 articles in 10 academic communication journals Kamhawi and Weaver (Spring 2003), found that only 39% of these articles referred to a theory. Most common theories were Information Processing (16%), Uses and Gratifications (12%), Media Construction of Social Theory (10%), Hegemony Theory or Media as Maintainer of Status Quo (8%), Cultivation Theory (6%), Agenda Setting (6%), Diffusion of Innovation (3%), etc.

One American scholar said that by the 1980s, the milestones in communication research that was so much evident from 1930 to 1980 was gone "Overall, however, there

has been a conspicuous decline in theoretical advances in the study of mass communication compared to the earlier period.” (DeFleur, 1998:90). He gave six possible reasons on the decline of theoretical productivity in the study of the mass media, among them was a failure to develop and establish a programmatic approach to investigating the media processes and influences.

There has been different speculations about the paradigms underlying mass media research. Quoting Lowery and DeFleur, Potter, Cooper and Dupagne (1993), mentioned of three paradigms in the field, namely the mass society paradigm, a cognitive paradigm, and finally the meaning paradigm, with the study determining that the mass media paradigm being the most dominant but taking McQuail’s concern, the different perspectives from the functionalist school and the critical school could be viewed as one whole perspective

There has been an interest in Asia to contribute toward the development of theories, but this has remained at best minimal or as a rhetoric. AMIC came out with a compilation of articles contained in a publication called “Communication Theory: The Asian Perspective (1988) but it was addressing means of conducting research using various approaches. In Malaysia, we have not given serious discussion to theoretical matters but have quite successful in presenting empirical findings or using theories as evidenced in the various conferences. But by the 1980s, we see some engagements related to theoretical issues. What should be our concern is whether these theoretical perspectives were successful in explaining or/and describing the phenomenon at hand. Theoretical engagements such as the conference today would go a long way to promoting the discipline of communication.

Premises

There are many premises that require some attention today. The study of communication in Malaysia or, for that matter, in Asia lacked a discussion on premises or underlying assumption. Scholars did not envisage a kind of society or alluded to the forms of society that mass media would rest itself upon. If at all, it was an adoption of a premise from the Western concept of society. One would provide various reasons for this state of affairs. Asian society was in a flux during Colonial and post colonial times. The concept of nationhood was debatable. Independence was achieved but with the configuration of societies in various dimensions. India came out as one amidst so many communities. Likewise Malaysia was formed, first in 1957 with the independence of Malaya with its indigenous and immigrant populations, and with Malaysia in 1963, the configuration became more different than the one in 1957.

The concept of *mass* in mass communication has not been debated in Asia. Mass society for the mass in communication has a different connotation in Europe. That mass media operate within the discussion of a mass society. There are numerous discussions on mass society and taking the central tenets of mass society, one would be able to understand the numerous research conducted on the effects of the media. Mass society springs into belief of a group of individuals who migrate to the urban centers and remain isolated from one another. They seek solace and friendship through the mass media. The media are said to be powerful when the audience are said to be passive. Likewise, the audience are said to be powerful or active, when the media are said to be passive. The notion is always on the effects of the media. If the media are assume to be weak then

media operators can, if they want to, make the audience passive and making their media apparatus to be powerful.. This powerful notion of mass society is seen in the development of the industrial revolution where there were masses of migration from the rural to the urban areas. It was a period when the industries were attracting people to migrate to the urban areas to seek for jobs and better status. In the Asian context, people migrate to the urban areas because of the push factors and once in the cities, life is more bearable than the rural areas. But finding employment in the industrial sector in Asia is not as the one premised as in the Western society.

Models

The First world War and the Second World Wars saw the rise of the communication studies. It was during war times that Lasswell came out with his linear model suggesting the flow and the effect of the media through the famous words of “ Who says What to Whom in which Channel with what Effect?” With the model posted by Lasswell, scholars began to provide theories on the mighty effects of the media/communication, beginning with the Bullet Theory, and then extending later to the Spiral of Silence.

Other models were to come, at times to amplify the model of Lasswell. This premise was to lead to the American scholarship on the effects of media for some decades to come. It became more glaring when international communication came to be regarded as another sequence. The might of the media were extended when media effects were studied in Third World countries. Can we contribute in the construction of these models? Modeling on the nature and the flow of communication is the first step in the construction of theories. Western scholars began with a model on what the communication pattern is all about and then began to forward theories about communication.

Conclusion and Discussion

Scholars had had discussions on charting the media and communication curricula but there was still a long way to go (Zaharom Nain, 2003). We have come quite a distance since communication studies were reported during Colonial time passing as descriptions on the history and operations of the press, to the relationship of the press and other institutions. It was in the later years when communication study was institutionalized in universities that a more focused concern was made on communication, specifying its relationship with known institutions amidst concern toward the end of the 1980s to the construction and discussion on the theories of communication and media. In Malaysia, American paradigm and theories began to be acquainted with theories that were popular in Europe and United Kingdom. The ferment in the field in the United States/Europe did not cause a brew in Malaysia or in Asia as far as differences in methodologies and theoretical perspectives were concerned.

Global politics in the form of the Cold War contributed significantly to the growth of international communication, and development communication (diffusion of innovations) and formed a core concern in third world countries, Malaysia included. Planners were attracted to the communication field as they were captivated by the utilitarian value of communication, but by the 1980s scholars and planners realized that there was a limit to what communication can do to solve societal problems. Like the concerns in other parts of the world, the effects studies and the Lasswellian model, and

the theoretical approaches (Uses and Gratifications, Agenda Setting, Spiral of Silence) continued to be dominant but studies on cognitions, meaning and text analysis, and cultural studies began to creep into the Malaysian communication studies. Recognition was made of both the empirical and qualitative studies. We do acknowledge at the lack of theoretical debates among Malaysian scholars, but this is where scholars should be heading to in the future. This is where we are and where we should continue our journey. Communication studies in Malaysia have to take their findings in the past and build up the future, cognizant that academic discussions are not nationally isolated

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