

WHY A COMMUNICATION POLICY AND PLAN?

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**A paper prepared for a Communication Policy Seminar
in Papua New Guinea, October 1978**

Communication policies and communication planning go hand in hand. Policies provide the principles, rules and guidelines on which the communication system is built, while the implementation of policies is the business of planning.

Every new nation plans for development - in agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, education, health, transport and communications, social and community services. Plans take shape in accordance with policy decisions about the kind of society the government and the people want, the priorities for economic development, the importance placed on education, on the retention of cultural values and on the speed of progress.

Communication is part and parcel of this whole process of development and needs its own infrastructure. Communication in this context refers not only to telecommunications, not only to the mass media, but also to all those resources used by a society to enable information to flow within it. It must include organized face-to-face communication such as is involved in rural extension and community development work; and the traditional channels used to pass on information at the grass roots level.

For a country to try and formulate a coherent national communication policy does not, of course, imply that no policies in this area already exist. The telecommunication system will have evolved over a period of time, with ad hoc policy decisions being taken as necessary in the light of political considerations and technological innovations. While there will be some laws governing communication activities, other policies may not be clearly articulated but rooted in tradition and precedent.

Because communication is interdisciplinary and because it is the thread which binds a nation together, communication policies even if incomplete and implicit, are to be found in many different parts of a political and social system. Though a Ministry of Information may take the lead in drawing all the threads together and consolidating a comprehensive set of principles, the determination of communication policy in a

democratic society occurs at many different levels, in both the public and private sectors and within a large number of government ministries and agencies.

In Papua New Guinea, many policy decisions have already been taken which have a significant bearing on the sort of national communication system which is being developed.

At the apex of policy determination are national objectives which in Papua New Guinea, find expression in the Eight Aims. They set the stage for a communication system designed to contribute to greater equality, self reliance, and decentralization of economic activity, and placing emphasis on agricultural development and village industry and government involvement where necessary, to achieve the desired kind of development.

Elaborating these aims, the Government White Paper known as the National Development Strategy sets out broad policy guidelines for the development of Papua New Guinea and calls for a high proportion of the nation's resources to be directed to rural areas.

Policy decisions with more specific reference to communication are made by many components in the communication system - those who originate information, those who provide the channels for information, those who consume it and others who provide supporting services.

A Posts and Telecommunications administration will handle policy and plans for telephone and telegraph development and postal services, as well as the very important question of the use of internationally regulated radio frequencies. In a developing country, the Ministry of Information will have a broad range of responsibilities relating to both the content and the channels for government information, including feedback. Broadcasting may be directly under the Ministry or may have independent status. In either case it will conform to government broadcasting policy and, as in the case of NBC in Papua New Guinea, will develop its own philosophy and strategies within this framework.

The Education Ministry is deeply involved in communication, using radio

to supplement the work of the class teacher and for non formal education programmes and combining correspondence and radio for open education for some categories of students.

Such ministries as Agriculture, Health and Family Planning, Rural Development and Commerce organize their own inter-personal communication channels as well as using the facilities of the mass media and other supporting services to supplement extension programmes. Those concerned with commerce and industry have policies and activities which influence the form and availability of the hardware which provides the technical base for the media, while the customs authorities can encourage or restrain media development through import regulations. And at the heart of national development policies are the Planning and Finance Ministries which determine the investment priorities and allocation of resources for the whole of the public sector, including the information and media services.

Communication activities also have their international aspects. The legal authorities make decisions on conventions such as Copyright with far reaching consequences for the media while Foreign Ministries will have an important role in determining national positions at international and regional conferences and in connection with regional projects.

While broad policy guidelines will generally be established by a central government, more detailed communication policies in their own particular spheres will be determined by instrumentalities and agencies working at provincial and community levels and by the numerous non-governmental communication enterprises (news papers, cinemas etc.) and the training, professional and research organizations which are all integral parts of the communication system.

Granted that communication policies already exist in Papua New Guinea, even though fragmented and sometimes implicit rather than explicit, what is to be gained by formulating a comprehensive policy?

A group of experts advising Unesco on its Communication Policies Conference for Asia and the Pacific addressed itself to this question

in Manila in 1976, and cited the following reasons:

A national communication policy would create in a country the climate and the spirit of common endeavour;

It would help ensure the optimal and systematic use of the communication resources of a country in its efforts at social, cultural and economic development;

It would ensure also that the people of a country were not only kept informed of developments relevant to their daily life, but also motivated in a sustained way to contribute to and participate in their country's efforts at development;

It would help bring about the much needed cooperation and coordination between the various agencies and organizations in the public and private sectors which are actively engaged in the collection, processing and dissemination of information; it would facilitate and encourage participation of the public in communication activities which are by and large presently one-way and vertically downwards in the social structure;

The formulation of a communication policy, with the involvement of all interested sectors and institutions in a society, would promote the development of a rational structure for communication activities and help reduce unnecessary duplication of work, redundancy, and the wastage of limited resources.

It might be added that a systematic study of communication needs in a nation will probably reveal gaps and inconsistencies which can lead to policy decisions for a more rational and comprehensive system and to integrated communication planning.

Put in another way, in the absence of formulated communication policies and plans, communication growth is likely to take place haphazardly, responding to commercial incentives and with an urban orientation;

remaining fragmented with various sectoral interests operating independently; and without appropriate priority being given to communication in overall development planning.

Policies, it should be remembered, are not ends in themselves. They provide a framework for action. As a Unesco expert group put it: "Beyond policies is strategic planning, which determines the alternative ways to achieve long-range goals and sets the frame of reference for shorter-range operational planning. Strategic planning translates into quantified targets and systematic approaches, the general objectives of communication policies." Communication plans will provide for the allocation and utilization of communication resources, in conformity with national objectives and policies, taking account of existing infrastructure and facilities and practical constraints.

A systematic approach to integrated communication planning calls for a series of logical steps which encourage a clear formulation of objectives, a recognition of the inter-connection between the different components in the communication system, and focus attention on the need to evaluate outputs and assess the efficiency of alternatives.

The sequence of actions consists of:

- (a) an assessment of needs and resources
- (b) a determination of communication priorities in the light of national policies and developmental goals
- (c) evaluation of cost and efficiency of alternative approaches as a basis for decision making
- (d) preparation of an overall system design
- (e) detailed operational plans with a phased programme of development
- (f) monitoring, evaluation and revision of system and operational plans

There is no universal model for a communication plan and no ideal plan will ever conform to reality. Granted the constraints of a current situation and of political considerations, the best that can often be

done is to circumvent the obstacles and rationalize and improve existing conditions by undertaking remedial planning within the framework of a long term communication system design.

A number of problem areas - and frequently neglected areas - are common to many communication policies and plans in developing countries. Some of these are outlined below.

Decentralization: National planning is generally centralized and there is often a reluctance to delegate policy making and even operational planning to subordinate levels. The more local communication is, the more relevant and credible and effective it is likely to be as a factor in development. It is important therefore, for agencies and officials close to the people to have opportunity both to plan and to use communication facilities in support of their person to person work. In Papua New Guinea the Organic Law provides for the transfer to Provincial Governments of responsibility for certain basic government services such as education, health, agricultural extension and business development. These are the development activities which depend most heavily on communication so that it is imperative that a large measure of authority for organization and utilization of media and other communication services rest at the provincial levels.

This presents a dilemma, as major infrastructural facilities such as telecommunications and broadcasting are under centralized control and for technical and economic reasons alone, are likely to remain so. It will be necessary to devise some planning machinery to facilitate community level involvement in decision making. In the case of NBC, some decentralization of programming responsibility to provincial stations may provide the solution.

Coordination: Because communication is interdisciplinary and takes place at all levels of society, both horizontal coordination between Ministries and agencies is necessary as well as vertical coordination between central, provincial and local authorities. Lack of such coordination is the greatest weakness in most communication systems and is a principal reason for advocating integrated planning. In developing countries, particularly, some mechanism is necessary to ensure consultation on a regular and systematic basis and provide for coherent

planning and avoidance of wasteful duplication. Papua New Guinea has recognized this need by establishing a Communication Coordination Committee, whose role and membership might be further studied. It may be useful to explore as a possible model in the communication field, the National Education Board and the District Education Boards which are broadly representative of interested parties and operate at both central and provincial levels for planning and administration. It should be emphasized that in development, the role of face-to-face communication is crucial. Media should be organized and used to support field and extension workers and should be seen as one component in an integrated system. Communication is most effective when one channel reinforces another, so that a multi-media approach in developing planning is desirable.

Distribution: There is a tendency for media professionals to concentrate their energies on the production end of the communication process and when the radio programme is produced or the newspaper has gone to press to sit back and feel that the job is done. But a message without an audience is wasted. In an affluent society, people buy newspapers, magazines and books and can be entertained at will, by radio, television and cinema. In developing societies, many people have no ready access to mass media, may not have the financial means to buy their own radios or subscribe to newspapers and may not have the habit or the motivation to read or listen. Particular attention, therefore, needs to be paid to the problem of access. Radio listening opportunities may have to be organized and special arrangements made for the maintenance of broadcasting receivers and continuity in power supplies.

Participation and Feedback: Mass media by their nature are essentially one way channels, but communication is a two way process. It is important to build feedback channels into a communication system so that information does not simply flow from the top down. People need to communicate with each other, to talk back to their leaders, to make known their problems and their needs for more or clarified information. Media professionals need this feedback too for their own guidance in preparing media content rectifying misunderstandings and to establish the dialogue which makes communication so much more meaningful and effective. Policies and techniques can be adopted to permit grass roots participation in the planning and production of media programmes. Provision of adequate feedback in the communication system requires a technical base, organization

and professional skill.

Research and Evaluation: Communication research should not be seen simply as an academic exercise. Audience research is one important way of providing feedback to the media. Without it, a broadcasting organization, for example, is working in a fog. It does not know who listens to its programmes or when, what are programme preferences, what needs are unfulfilled. Audience data is an essential programme tool.

But there is much more to communication research than audience measurement. A national communication policy and plan must be based on information which has to be researched and assembled. The first step in the planning process is the assessment of needs and resources. The preparation of the data base for an integrated communication plan is a major undertaking. This will involve inter alia, an inventory of all communication facilities, services and plans, demographic and linguistic distribution, educational and literacy statistics, economic data, information on transport and communications, electrical supplies, agriculture, health, industry and commerce, manpower and training. Apart from such "hard" data, sociological research is needed on customs, beliefs, values and behavioural patterns all of which are relevant to the design of a communication system.

Communication policies and plans are not made once and for all. They must be flexible and respond to new situations, and new needs and be reviewed when in practice, they are found to be unsatisfactory. A communication plan, therefore, needs to have an evaluation procedure built into it to assess its impact. This requires a continuing programme of research and a responsible body to commission research and consider its findings and revise policies and plans accordingly.

Manpower and Training: The efficiency of the communication system depends on the capacity of the people who run it. The best use of human resources will be made if the needs of the system for trained manpower can be foreseen and recruitment and training policies devised accordingly. Long term projections need to be made of various categories of communication personnel and training requirements assessed. The output of training institutions and programmes should match as nearly as possible the needed intake of the various communication agencies both public and private.

It should be remembered that the introduction of television requires a long lead time, if programme production and technical operations staff are to be ready at the same time as transmission capacity, in order to avoid a heavy dependence on imported and often irrelevant programme material at the commencement of the television service.

Cultural integrity and international exchanges

A new nation needs to establish a national identity which is based on common social and cultural values and aspirations.. At the same time it needs to find its place in the international community and to have access to news, information and cultural material from other countries. These two objectives may sometimes be in conflict. The mass media have a powerful impact on individual and community values. They may be used to promote national unity, through a national language for example, and to encourage and preserve indigenous cultures and values. On the other hand, the media particularly television and film, may carry such an overwhelming volume of foreign material with alien values, that they may be destructive of national cultural integrity. Communication and cultural policies need to find a balance, by providing a window on the world, but at the same time resisting cultural pollution and fostering a national identity.

Media ownership

Democratic states support the principles of freedom of expression and diversity of information sources. At the same time, developing countries need the support of the media in building national cohesion and promoting economic and social development. The status rights and responsibilities of the private media will be matters for policy decision, though not necessarily for regulation. Limitations may be imposed, on foreign or monopoly ownership and the governments own role in supporting or operating public media organizations will need to be defined.