

Technology and gaps in communication

By N. Bhaskara Rao

RECENT events in the country and the undercurrent in the public domain throw open several challenges to the very process and technology of communication. The context of course is much larger. Certain myths are perpetuated in our public perceptions. The communication process and practice being the missing link we cannot but to look into it.

Over the recent years we as a people have become mere talkers. We are less of listeners and often bad at listening. We have become less appreciative of others' concerns, priorities and perceptions as individuals; even as neighbours. The threshold level of our tolerance of each other has declined as never before.

There are too many contradictory things going on in our public life today. We advocate decentralisation but ensure centralisation, we talk of coordination but impose strict control. We want to simplify matters but complicate them further, we want to involve people but we see them alienated more often; we talk of autonomy but ensure monopoly or build more structures. We talk of privatisation, but we do not like competition. We want more freedom but not responsibility.

If greater communication and interaction cannot improve representation of people and responsiveness of institutions but, on the other, enhances opportunity for greater manipulation, then we need to ponder a lot more seriously than we seem to.

While on the one hand the reach of the mass media, including television, is at the most a little over half of the population and limited to certain segments of the population, their pre-occupation continues to be more with mere entertainment and politics and government as if mass media exist more for the government or for the politician and for the advertisers. And often they thrive on surface level issues.

If not determined by the spokesperson of one or the other ministry, one-third of the total space of the print media in the country for example, is determined by about 100 people. Half of them are from New Delhi. They set the agenda for the country. They set the priorities for the nation and shape the perceptions of our people, and they decide the pre-occupations of our news media.

The mass media approach continues to be one of either too much or no coverage. Follow-up in any case is not their concern since resolution is not viewed as part of their concern. The big mass media of late, in fact, have become less "journalist prompted" and more "manager driven" as if it is no longer a missionary profession with "fourth estate" characteristics. And as if it neither has an "advocacy" or "mediatory" role.

for active and enlightened citizens.

However, thanks to the recent TV boom, apart from some level playing in the overall reach across various sections of the people there is also a visible impact on the Press these days; obviously because of the competitive compulsions. Once again newspapers are trying to become "forums" although for "market driven" forces.

Hardly five per cent is being spent by either of the mass media today for news collection and to bring original coverage from far off places when the need and relevance of news and current affairs is lot more today. The media imbalances are as galore as the contradictions in our social fabric and in the public scenario. It cannot be otherwise.

Public relation activities of the governments and other agencies have proliferated so much that our voluntary efforts and people's organisations cannot match them. And, yet the communication gap between any two segments of our society is widening. The voluntary sector is more often viewed with suspicions both by the mass media and the government. Recent proliferation in the number of personnel engaged in PR, theoretically speaking, should have positive correlation to the state of affairs we have today in terms of complexities, controversies, conflicts and misperceptions.

The impression that "the more the merrier" does not necessarily work when it comes to communication and technology even in terms of awareness, knowledge and skills, not to talk of attitudes, adoption and efficiency. Often, in fact, such proliferation might mean alienation, illusion and dissolution. Also such an explosion might lead to arrogance, ignorance or even prejudice as some studies in the West have brought out.

Often one wonders whether new information technology is helping to diffuse and decentralise power to the people, or adding more power to the State. Technology should help transform our politics into a direct democracy. Revolution in communication could prompt and induce direct democracy or "tele democracy". If technology cannot help bring power back to the people, there is little hope of a reversal.

Technology, like mass media, is a double-edged weapon, what determines its efficacy is not how we use it; rather with what intention. In any case, it is not a substitute for human relations, perceptions and prejudices. But we do not seem to realise that organisational and managerial capabilities of people are more important than technology in determining the pace of success-failure in communication situations. Information technologies will have greater and earlier impact.

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The mass media approach continues to be one of either too much or no coverage. Follow-up in any case is not their concern since resolution is not viewed as part of their concern. The big mass media of late, in fact, have become less "journalist prompted" and more "manager driven" as if it is no longer a missionary profession with "fourth estate" characteristics. And as if it neither has an "advocacy" or "mediatory" role. "Power politics" today has become the focus and thrust with "underdog" concerns becoming secondary and, at the most, isolated.

Becoming an all pervasive phenomenon overnight, television has become the prime entertainer of the nation. As if television is striving for a "captive audience" or "passive viewers" rather than

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Technology, like mass media, is a double-edged weapon, what determines its efficacy is not how we use it; rather with what intention. In any case, it is not a substitute for human relations, perceptions and prejudices. But we do not seem to realise that organisational and managerial capabilities of people are more important than technology in determining the pace of success-failure in communication situations. Information technologies will have greater and earlier impact only when such capabilities already exist.

We need more caucuses of people for common causes. Formation of active interest groups should be the first symptom of "tele-democracy". Networking of people and organisation is the need of the hour and people themselves should come together and organise common cause forums.

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