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We've Come a Long Way, or Have We? American Research on Asian Mass Communication

Commentary:

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About this time 40 years ago, I was in the Philippines, beginning my career as a researcher of mass communication in Asia. In preparation for that trip, I recall, I scoured the many historical, social-economic, political surveys of Asia at Syracuse University, which had an excellent collection of books on Asia. If there was a mention of media in those volumes, and there usually was not, it was only a sentence or two on how a newspaper reported an event. My search of the journalism/mass communication periodicals yielded very little as well. I'm rather sure that had I attended Asian studies or journalism/mass communication conferences in 1964, I would not have been listening to many papers on international communications, let alone, Asian mass communication.

Reasons for this lack of material might have been:

1. The field of international communication was just emerging, with a few faculty here and there trying to start international communication, comparative and foreign press courses, sometimes designed along the lines of the us [U.S.]/them dichotomy of the Cold War; to pull materials together, usually primarily on North America and Europe, for some of the first books in the field, and to legitimize international communication by first identifying what it was. The latter task bothered international communication scholars for some time, to the extent that in 1971, the head of the still-young International Communication Division of Association for Education in Journalism commissioned me and two other scholars to survey how the field was or should be conceptualized. One of the respondents, Hamid Mowlana, provided this defense of the need to define the boundaries of international communication as a field of study:

"I am of the opinion that in the area of international communication there has not been sufficient time and experience to permit the formation of an analytic framework which can identify and define the central concepts and foundations, or precisely limit the scope of the field. Rather there exists a collection of diverse perspectives which try to order a vast system with nebulous boundaries. Its definition should be our number one agenda" (Huffman, Lent, and Markham, 1971).

2. In other disciplines of the academy, there was a resistance to admitting mass communication to their protected, hallowed ivory towers. I would go so far as to say it was more than resistance, more like snobbishness. In some quarters, journalism, broadcasting, and film were considered vocational endeavors, much of which was (and is still) true with programs that weighed production more important than theory and research and, which, catered to industry.

3. Funding by U.S. government and NGOs had not fully kicked in yet for the study of communication in other parts of the world, the intention of which was to change (Americanize?) their peoples and institutions. The development decade was just beginning. In fact, I was to witness part of its growth firsthand in Manila, as I attended seminars launched by the Philippine Press Institute on the not-yet-named "development journalism" and watched the University of the Philippines start its mass communication program with a "devcom" (development communication) approach.

All that was in 1964 -- a time when a researcher could point his/her (not many hers in research then) pen in any direction and identify an international communication topic

or area of the world inadequately studied. Of course, that was to change quickly over the next decade as the research poured out -- on cultural/media imperialism, news flow, and development and communications, much of the latter on Asia -- and some criticism of the affiliations (with government and military), intentions, and impacts of that research seeped in.

Fast forward 40 years and one finds a very different scenario -- a time when there must be hundreds of books published on aspects of Asian (or Asian countries') mass communication, a few journals with such emphases (such as *Asian Cinema* and *Asian Journal of Communication*), as well as special book series and journal symposia, and hundreds and hundreds of articles, including those in other humanities and social sciences journals. Not only mass communication, but also Asian studies, political science, sociology, history, economics, etc., conferences are dotted with panels and papers. Some associations have splinter groups on Asian media -- Popular Culture Association's Asian Popular Culture Group, which I started; Society for Cinema Studies Asian interest group; a Chinese journalism researchers organization, and so forth. In addition, there are independent associations such as Asian Cinema Studies Society.

The international communication field, as is Asian mass communication, is glutted with so much information that it is impossible to keep up with the literature, that it is necessary to be more content in newly-established sub-fields.

What accounts for this phenomenal growth? One explanation might be that it has resulted from the huge influx of Asians to U.S. graduate schools. This certainly holds true with China, which has had much written about its mass communication since Chinese students came to the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s. But, the migration of graduate students to the U.S. does not fully answer the question, for many of them study and research U.S., not Asian, media or more general theoretical concerns while abroad. This became apparent in an analysis I did of the 630 papers presented at the 2004 AEJMC conference in Toronto. In the program, 218 presenters with identifiable Asian names appear, but only 52 papers dealt with Asia and a number of those were by non-Asians. Asian researchers presented in most of the various divisions' panels, but not on Asian topics. For example, in Communication Technology and Policy, 49 Asians gave papers, but the division featured only six papers on Asia; in Advertising, the figures were 29 and three, respectively.

A second reason for the explosion of writing on Asian mass communication probably relates to funding availability, for like it or not, many researchers follow the money, wherever it takes them. With the stronger economies of the "little dragons" of Asia in the early 1990s, in addition to the global harkening of a so-called "information age," more money was available for studying media and communications, even if it was for a short period.

Finally, the research on Asian mass communication in the U.S. grew exponentially with the vast amounts of data unleashed through the new information technology, especially the Internet, and the loosening up of many governments of Asia.

But, more is not always better. Many gaps exist in American research on Asian mass communications. Time did not permit me to survey the printed literature to find out what types of research is being done and how it is being done, but I did look

closely at what was listed as being presented at three major communication/pop culture groups (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, International Association for Media and Communication Research, and Popular Culture Association) and the Association for Asian Studies (AAS).

As said before, many Asians presented at the 2004 AEJMC, but not necessarily on Asian topics. That is partly understandable as they contemplate career goals -- if they teach in the U.S., they will need to know about American communication; if they teach in their home countries, sometimes, unfortunately, they will be judged on what they know of the U.S. scene by senior faculty who went the same route a generation or more ago. Understandable it may be, but not practical or beneficial for the field of Asian mass communication study, for who can better carry out research on these countries than the scholars who know the cultures and speak the languages? Some findings that stood out in the AEJMC survey were:

1. The lack of presentations on specific media of Asia, with only three papers each in the Advertising and Public Relations Divisions, two in Magazines, one in Newspapers, and, appallingly, none in Radio and Television. Even with these small numbers, some papers were tangentially related to these media; the one presentation on newspapers compared Korean "traditional" dailies with their online offspring; one of the two magazine papers dealt with *Time* magazine's coverage of Indonesian affairs.
2. Equally sad was the lack of interest in topics very germane to the existence of mass media: Law, no papers; Critical and Cultural Studies, two; Mass Communication and Society and Media Management/Economics, one each; Media Ethics, Entertainment Studies, and Women and Media, none each.
3. When Asian media were studied, in at least 13 instances, they were tied to the United States in comparative analyses, or studies of coverage of U.S. or U.S. events in Asian media, existence of American media in Asia, or Asian media in the U.S.
4. Only seven Asian countries were written about, with China (20 papers) and South Korea (seven) dominating.
5. Much of the research focused on new information technology (Websites, Internet, telecommunications, "informatization," wireless communication technology, cellular phone service, online media), at the exclusion of the so-called "traditional" carriers of information.

What I particularly noticed in the 2004 IAMCR program was the scarcity of papers on Asian media by American authors working at U.S. universities, a total of 14. However, being an international body, IAMCR carried Asian-related papers by researchers identified with 19 other countries' universities. Also disturbing was the omission of papers on still vital topics such as cultural/media imperialism, news flow, and development communication relative to Asia; there was one paper on new media and rural Asia. Listening to these papers and others presented at American-based conferences is as if the 1960s and 1970s never happened.

I did not expect the 2004 Popular Culture Association conference to yield much on Asia. Until I formed the Asian Popular Culture Group in the 1990s, the PCA program was almost devoid of treatments on the region. Out of about 2,600 papers on 741 panels in 2004, 54 can be classified as Asia-specific. As for those dealing with Asian media, by a long stretch, about 20 were presented, most of which came out of

the Asian Popular Culture panels, and the majority of those dealing with Japanese anime. Anime and Indian Bollywood films were the two most popular Asian media subjects.

In light of the above comments about the earlier exclusion of mass media from humanities/social sciences studies, it was very gratifying to find the large quantity of well-conceptualized and executed papers, with varied and sometimes fascinating topics, on the 2003 AAS program. Out of 215 panels and about 860 papers, 63 papers relative to Asian mass media were presented. Even more striking was that there were 14 Asia-specific panels -- four each on China and Japan, two on Indonesia, and one each on Taiwan, India, South/Southeast Asia, and Asian visual culture. Thirty of the papers dealt with film, four each on book publishing/print culture and cartoons/comics, and the rest spread over topics such as television, magazine, radio, posters, animation, journalism, freedom of speech, mass media, and so forth. Not only were the AAS panels and papers more media-centric than those of the three mass communication/popular culture conferences, but they were better conceptualized to reflect current affairs or scholarly traditions, e.g. the panels on Indonesian Islam and media and media and history making in Indonesia. If comparative analysis was used, it involved a comparison between similar Asian countries, not with the U.S. Also welcomed were the number of papers on historical topics using primary documents, some of which were new to the field of study and many of which were in Asian languages.

Asian scholars in non-mass communication disciplines seemed free of some of the problems I associate with mass communication/journalism research in the U.S. -- the working to death of topics on the new information technology that benefits a small minority of the world's huge population; the heavy dependence on Internet sources, thus omitting much literature that predated computer databases and, in the process, making wrong assumptions about the development of some concepts; the slavish, almost groupie, following of certain theorists (usually the ones they worked with in graduate school or those anointed guru of the year by some journal or group) and the topics of their research; and the reliance on a narrow range of philosophical and historical knowledge, condemning U.S. scholars to reiterate things Euro-American, *ad nauseam*.

In 1964, mass communication, and by extension, international communication researchers (including those very few individuals studying Asian media), used a type of research that was almost exclusively cemented to positivist/empiricist theories and techniques, that measured the rest of the world by U.S. standards, that gauged scholarship by what was published in English, and that generally, avoided taking a critical stance.

Between then and now, there was considerable debate about mass communication research, a large part of that discussion relating to Asian media studies, the domain of a large portion of the development communication work. Questions were asked about the acceptance of funding by the very institutions that should have come under the critical eyes of scholars, namely governments and military/surveillance groups; about the exporting without change of U.S.-originated theories and methods to Asia and other regions where they were apt to clash with local values and mores; about the nurturing of "instant experts," which I divided in 1971, as those,

“who seem to parachute in and out of a nation, either for a conference, consultancy or a brief respite in an Asian atmosphere, and those who arrive with a toolbox full of communication research instruments that they plan to test on natives” (Lent, 1971: 15).

In 2004, as already indicated, Asian media scholars in the U.S. have a greater pool of data to draw from; furthermore, they are greater in numbers and have had the opportunity to be exposed to a multitude of new ideas and concepts. What is hard to fathom, however, is why they persist in not being more critical of the way U.S. media research has been carried out; why they have not worked harder to shape theoretical questions from Asian philosophical, religious, and historical bases; why they have not dug out more of the long-hidden or undiscovered government and archival materials, both in Asia and the West; why they have depended so heavily on Internet and other secondary sources; why, as they widened their range of topics to include what used to be called the separate field of telecommunications, they have nearly forgotten the mass media as we came to understand them, and, finally, as they have benefited from the acceptance of non-quantitative research methods, why they feel in some instances, that qualitative methods are an excuse for shoddy and imprecise research?

Maybe we have not come as far as we think we have.

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