

**COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN INDIA  
STATUS, TRENDS, PROBLEMS**

**Dr. G. Nagamallika, Associate Professor**  
Department of Mass Communication & Journalism  
The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India

**Abstract**

The reason for lack of quality research in India is one area of concern that most academicians share. Dearth of institutes of international standing in higher learning and quality research output has pushed India out of reckoning in the international market place of education. This paper traces the trajectories of growth in the field of Communication and Journalism, status of research, and associated problems, to the reasons for the poor output in research and finally, the shift towards interdisciplinary nature of communication and media studies that has evolved and widened the scope of the narrow understanding of mass communication research studies. The field of Development studies has been popular in the initial days of communication research in India, while post liberalization, trend has been in market research and voter studies. The disjunction between academia and industry especially in media has been one of the prime reasons for the lack of any worthwhile applied research, while fundamental research has not been conducive given the systemic limitations.

**Introduction**

The importance of research in Indian academia although not unknown, has been less than rigorous in recent times, as echoed in the voice of the President of India, His Excellency, Pranab Mukherjee in his address on January 7 2014, to all the University stake holders across India. He was concerned that none of the universities in India rank anywhere in the top 100 best universities in the world. It seemed a reflection of the growing apathy or lack of quality amongst the institutes of higher learning. It appears no different in the area of media and mass communication, a dynamic and challenging field. The departments that established the Mass Communication and Journalism programmes in Universities initially offered courses with an aim to produce trained professionals for the industry. The emphasis was on hands-on training and media exposure such that the industry absorbed them readily. Most of the faculty was from the media industry as the nature of the profession demanded the services of such professionals. The programmes imitated their western counterparts, drawing upon their curricula and their approach towards 'teaching' media and mass communication programmes. Leading institutes and universities have followed this model successfully for decades, training some of the well known journalists of our times. Understandably, not much importance was given to research, in communication.

As more and more teachers formally received training in teaching communication, it became imperative that along with industry exposure, there should be training in research. Research was accorded equal importance to training in skills. From having faculty only from the industry, the universities encouraged academically trained faculty to impart knowledge in theory and research in communication.

The growth of any discipline especially in a university environment is linked to its contribution to research in that field, which is the norm followed by universities in the West. One can say that this laid the foundation for some of the seminal work in communication in the west. Lack of research output from Indian scholars has been more keenly felt with the liberalization policy in place. With Indian universities attracting foreign students, it is natural that recognition in the international arena plays an important role. The government of India brought in policy changes in a bid to encourage research in universities. However, there seems to be a dearth of quality research in general, with Journalism being no exception. Individual scholars, who publish regularly, are still more nonresident than resident. This paper examines the possible reasons for this invisibility in the international scene and the problems associated with it.

Technology did improve tremendously, but only a section benefitted, while the human resources has been the other significant factor for the current state of affairs.

### **Background**

Post independence, the Nehruvian penchant for the growth of 'scientific temper' in the new Indian sub continent, led to the encouragement of education and higher learning, with equal emphasis given to the field of natural and social sciences. Lack of information due to lack of communication was recognized as one of the key problems for the lack of development of the nation. This followed the dominant paradigm of the '50s and '60s, where all developing nations were highly influenced by the western model of economic growth and increase in per capita income was considered as the only sign of development.

A natural corollary to this in India was to introduce job oriented as well as research oriented programmes through state universities. Mass Communication and Journalism was recognized as one such area that could open up job opportunities keeping in mind the status of the newly independent nation state. Academic institutions like the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (1965), portals of higher education like Osmania University (1954), Punjab University (1941) and University of Madras (1947) were some of the premier institutes that initially offered Diploma courses in Journalism which later progressed to post graduate programmes. By the eighties, almost all state and central universities across the country began to offer post graduate programmes in journalism and communication, although the emphasis was still on providing professionals to the industry, which until then, was predominantly the print media. It was only by the nineties that research programmes in the area of mass communication and journalism studies began. The research areas included even its allied subjects like advertising, public relations, marketing as well as film studies and cultural studies. So, research in Journalism and Communication has for a long time been carried out by scholars who either pursued higher education abroad or as individual projects taken up on behalf of their respective state governments as extension work. It was the impetus given by the University Grants Commission (UGC), (the apex body to guide university education in India) in the last decade that saw a growing number of research scholars in this field.

The post graduate and research programmes included theory and research as part of its curriculum formally. The European and American Communication schools paved the way for research ideas and scope of media research in India, as most of the faculty who were absorbed in the university systems in India were trained abroad. Thus, it was natural that the western school of thought dominated the field of media theory and research. A glance at the curriculum offered under theory and research indicates that apart from some attempts to talk about Sadharikaran and the Vedic connection to communication (Adhikary, 2009) that could perhaps have established an alternative theoretical construction to the beginnings of communication in one of the earliest civilizations in the world, most of the research was western oriented philosophy of positivistic research. Although debatable, one of the reasons for this western domination of thought as Sunita Vasudeva and Pradip Chakravarthy (1989) point out could be the 'ideology of scientific temper that subjected one to structures of oppression internally as well as internationally,' coupled with the fact of internalizing the western mode of thought.

There were a few voices of dissent in the early seventies like Prof Eapen about the lack of cultural and social understanding of Indian ethos in social sciences research unlike natural sciences. 'Methodologies that developed in the West under totally different social, cultural, economic and political situations were absolutised and transferred to India...These methodologies that took the principles of natural sciences for granted, did not make allowance for the distinct nature of social science inquiry' (Tandon, 1981).

### The Beginnings

The importance and significance of 'scientific' mass communication research along with professional opportunities was formally recognized and began with the establishment of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) in 1965. A National Planning Committee set up by the Indian National Congress under the chairmanship of Nehru had earlier recognized communication planning as an essential part of national planning (Vasudeva and Chakravarty, 1989). The first Five- Year Plan (1951-56) made specific references and recommended that 'above all, steps have to be taken to provide literature and information to the people in simple language on a large scale equal to the needs of the country' (Desai:1977, as quoted by Vasudeva and Chakravarty, 1989).

In the first decade or so, there were only a handful of agencies that conducted research in the area of audience studies. The All India Radio had in-house research units which functioned as the eyes and ears of the government of India. The Audience Research Units conducted what were called 'feed forwards', 'audience profiles' and 'need assessment' studies. Most of this research was seldom published or made available to public.

UNESCO and Ford Foundation research studies in the mid seventies gave a fresh insight into research on audiences and media effects. The first generation of Indian mass communication practitioners was trained by the US experts. This laid the foundation of mass communication research and practice that was 'strongly oriented in the mainstream neo-positivistic North American 'effects' research (Vasudeva and Chakravarty, 1989), which represented empirical study of effects of messages on individual's attitudes and behaviours far beyond that of AIR's research. This American orientation did not have much correlation to the Indian social context as there was a limited interest in the Indian media, whose understanding required a different world view. Indian media was seen as part of the larger Asian region, which gave rise to several contradictory findings as different countries had different social conditions. Statistical information used in such research often classified heterogeneous cultures in the same category. For example, in an exploratory study done by Prof Eapen, (1974) on "Communication, the Churches and Development" he commented that the Indian sub-continent was grouped with the city state of Singapore<sup>1</sup>, and landlocked Zambia with the island state of Indonesia. Media indices based on the number of radio sets, cinema seats, newspapers per capita, etc., in one country are compared with those in another for analytical purposes without discussion of the multitude of vital discrepancies among their cultures, social structures or colonial hangovers and with no mention of media content, control or the nature of audience use of "mass" media.

Thus the initial research in the industry was oriented towards media and audiences while the academia's leaning was towards communication; that too with a developmental approach, but both guided by the western school of thought. As Prof Eapen (1974) pointed out, 'Communication has to be studied as a social process and mass media have to be seen as social institutions within cultural, developmental, economic, ideological and political settings... Media policies and research strategies are frequently exported to the poorer countries from the West as though glaring diversities of this kind did not exist, and Western models are the right ones for facing varied challenges'.

### Mass Communication research in India: An overview

The eighties and nineties was the time when the dominant paradigm was critiqued worldwide, giving way to participatory and development oriented alternate paradigm. It created a niche area for communication research among Indian scholars. Scholars opined that communication research ought to be of practical use in society as most of the research in social science was theoretical in nature as compared to natural science. 'Coupled with the problem of increasing information overload from research, there is a lack of people willing and able to apply the research findings to practical problems....We are going to have to train more people, to some degree, in research if we want to use the available energy of social research in general, communication research in particular, efficiently in raising the quality of life' stated Wilbur Schramm, (Schramm, 1974) and development communication research filled that gap.

Studies in development communication including extension education, health and family welfare helped communication researchers become the 'middlemen' who could make a difference to society, by applying their research findings to bring about social change.

There are several researchers today, who continue this trend by conducting research in the key areas of AIDS, family planning, and other health related issues, along with the effectiveness of state run schemes. The government still uses mass media for most of the dissemination for its schemes. As the private media industry was nonexistent in the broadcast sector, there was no alternate school of thought to that of developmental approach to communication throughout the eighties and nineties, while the print media industry did not rank research as a priority area, as it was concerned about the skills in communication dissemination.

#### **Development studies as an area of research**

A quick look at some of the web sites of research institutes that are working in the area of development research in India show that, areas of poverty, gender, empowerment, Right to Information, rural and agrarian problems are being researched.

Development and Educational Communication Unit (DECU, Ahmadabad) describes itself 'as one independent entity that has a definite role in meeting the goals of ISRO in promoting usage of space technology for the benefit of common man. The continuing expansion of space applications programs like Tele-education, Tele-medicine, etc. reiterates the increasing role played by DECU in providing direct benefits to the society. DECU continues to pursue successful goals on all fronts in meeting the objectives of space-based societal applications for the national development' ( DECU website). One of the major research projects carried out by DECU was 'The Jhabua Development Communication Project' launched in the mid-1990s by the Development and Educational Communication Unit (DECU) of the Space Application Center (SAC) in Ahmedabad (DECU implemented the Kheda Communication Project also). The purpose of Jhabua Development Communication Project was to experiment with the utilisation of an interactive satellite-based broadcasting network to support development and education in remote and pastoral areas of India. (indianetzone.com)

The Centre for Communication and Development Studies (CCDS), Pune 'is a social change resource centre focusing on the research and communication of information for change' (CCDS website)

The Institute for Development and Communication (IDC) is autonomous research training and evaluation organisation in Chandigarh started in 1992. 'In the field of Development Studies, its focus has been on issues like WTO and its impact on agriculture, rural employment, rural indebtedness and agribusiness. It has also been engaged in the study of issues relating to liberalization and its impact on health and education'. (IDC website)

The success of the SITE and the Kheda projects in the seventies inspired many a research scholar to work in this area. The seventies and eighties saw substantial research work being carried out by research scholars like Prof Eapen, Prof Usha Vyasulu Reddy, Prof Binod Agarwal, Prof Leela Rao, Prof Mira R Aghi, Prof Y V Lakshman Rao, Prof Bella Mody, Prof Joshi, Prof Syed Amjad Ahmed, Prof Vilanilam, and several others. It is the author's limitation that might have led to the omission of many names that did premier research work, than anything else.

Television in India was perceived as an efficient force of education and development. The University Grants Commission in collaboration with INSAT (Indian National Satellite) started educational television project, popularly known as 'Country Wide Classroom' in 1984 with the aim to update, upgrade, and enrich quality of education while extending their reach at the undergraduate level. An inter university Consortium for Education Communication (CEC) along with a chain of about 20 Audio-Visual Mass Communication Research Centres (AVRC) were set up by UGC at different institutions in the country to ascertain high quality of programming. (Vyas, 2002)

'Educational Media Research Centres' (EMRC) which later became 'Educational Multi Media Research Centres'(EMMRC) have been producing programmes for undergraduate students from open universities, now broadcast through Gyan Darshan, an exclusive educational TV channel of India, jointly run by the Ministry of Human resource Development, Information and Broadcasting, Prasar Bharti and IGNOU.

All these research institutes mentioned above unfortunately lie outside the domain of the regular university system, where, ideally, collaboration should have been possible to facilitate research initiatives with academic training. Although located within the premises of university campuses, it is not often that one sees an active partnership between the two. However, the academia's orientation overall has been towards the broad area of development studies.

### **Research as a commercial activity**

While development related research was one strong strand for academic professionals, research for commercial and political insights has been the area of interest for the industry professionals. Globalisation in its wake brought about intense competition and market fragmentation. It also saw a proliferation of private media with over 800 television channels, over 80,000 newspapers and over 500 radio stations, leading to intense competition for the advertising pie. Consumerism also meant that there is a huge increase in product categories that enter the market and a dynamic consumerist interest that has had tremendous pressure on marketing and advertising agencies. Clients became more demanding expecting results with measurable outputs. This alone gave a fillip to market research on which organizations depend for market assessment, market pulse, audience profile and market needs. Similarly, online product sale and virtual markets have established the superiority of the World Wide Web. Along with this, websites offering research services have also increased in number. Of course, the only market research organization that has been present, much before the era of the web is IMRB, or the Indian Market Research Bureau that has now spread its wings to other countries as well, keeping in tune with the times.

Politics is another field where the importance and relevance of research is visible. Almost every political party worth its salt, conduct research for a continuous monitoring of party popularity, its cadre's feedback and, most importantly the voters' preferences of political leaders. While ORG MARG were the pioneers in such election related research, one finds that almost every private newspaper or television channel both regional and national like NDTV, CNN IBN, The Times of India, Eenadu (Telugu) and ABN Andhra Jyothi ( Telugu) The Indian Express, The Hindu and several others conduct opinion polls alone or jointly, to plan their future strategies.

While the above mentioned are examples of a highly research oriented industry, it does in no way reflect the contribution of academia. Indian academics and the media industry never did see eye to eye with both dismissive of the other. With the clash of interests in the inherent socialist pattern of the academia research with that of libertarian approach of media industry, the synergy which should have existed like the West is missing in the Indian context. One of the primary reasons for this divide is the lack of coordination between academia and the industry and the new set of regulations that do not provide space for the industry specialists to step into the hallowed portals of higher education. Further, unlike the West where the academic institutes depend on the industry for their survival, an assured regular salary in India does not necessitate much interaction. The tragedy is, despite the total independence, academic institutions are not able to come up with original, path breaking research.

### **Problems in conducting research**

There are several reasons that can be attributed for the apathy that exists especially in academics. This paper focuses on the problems in the field of mass communication and journalism, although some of the problems listed below may be applicable to any field. Firstly, the Indian educational system, as is at present, lays emphasis on teaching than on research. The learning environment in India encourages instructional teaching than interactive learning. The onus lies on the teachers to teach long hours than on the students to read and discuss. This leaves the teacher with little or no time to pursue research, unlike their counterparts in any of the western countries.

One does not find encouragement or time to do research work that can be of reasonably high caliber for a large number of teachers in the teaching fraternity. The dedicated few, who work against odds, face problems from the management, especially the private organisations, which do not understand the nature of the discipline in many instances. Most view it as an individual activity that does not meet the requirements of their organisations, rather than

a reflection of their institute's outlook towards a larger goal. As one academic from Mumbai stated, 'the problem is of disciplinary location. I am part of Home Science faculty wherein most of my work is in journalism and mass communication. So it takes a lot of effort to make my superiors understand that!' In fact, significant research in the field of Extension studies is done in this discipline.

Secondly, lack of infrastructure in terms of books, journals and research material that is required for any basic research, handicaps a person who does not have the wherewithal to access the latest happenings in the related field. Very few universities boast of having a reasonably good collection of books. While this has disappeared to a large extent thanks to internet connectivity and high end computers, all universities and institutions cannot afford such luxuries. This leaves many at the mercy of secondary and tertiary sources which gets reflected in their work. There are a few who have assiduously built their own libraries over the years, as an academic and author stated, 'Over the past 30 years, I have built up my personal library of books, articles and newspaper clippings'. But where does this leave the majority, especially the young faculty?

Thirdly, academic activity especially research, requires networking. It is only the few who are wired that have access again to their counterparts across the globe. Those that carry on independent research do not have institutional support which hampers certain kind of research activities. Most universities within India do not have a common platform to share their research activities which is one of the main reasons that one cannot completely assess the quality or the quantity of research that is being conducted. No exchange of ideas takes place and this leads to a narrow outlook towards research. Research collaborations across universities and industry would narrow this gap, and lead to better output in terms of quality in research activities. 'Collaborative Spaces/forums for funders as well as researchers would be one way of increasing research output', stated a teacher. Of course, the flip side to this could also be that all energies are only devoted to creating a network, but not on the quality of research, as one senior journalist commented, 'youngsters entering media as a profession are more focused on needless networking, than on working hard that might not be of much use at the end of the day'. This holds good for the teaching fraternity as well.

Fourthly, there is a visible lack of interest in many of the teachers to take up research. Although it might be true that all teachers need not be good researchers and vice versa, it is a predominant activity that has to be undertaken by all faculty, especially in Universities. Many of the central and private universities cannot complain of any of the above impediments any longer, yet one does not find an incremental difference in terms of research output. While personal qualities like dedication and commitment are required, lack of extensive reading, language skills and understanding of issues could be other reasons that impede their progress. Although said of the early mass communication research work in India, Vasudeva and Chakravarty's (1989) statement that 'researchers have become more and more like technicians, trained to use a package of techniques, but not educated to think and develop explanatory theories' stands true to a large extent even today. In addition, not being equipped with enough exposure or with the techniques of writing research papers that can be internationally accepted, many Indian researchers are only now trying to break the mould.

Lastly, the industry – academia partnership needs to be encouraged. While seeing each other as adversaries is no solution to the problem of lack of meaningful research, it does indicate lack of understanding and respect for each other's work. The university system needs to be aware of the necessity in involving media professionals regularly in running programmes of this nature where the distinction between theory and practice cannot be separated. Over a period of time, even trained professionals lose touch with the latest trends in the industry, often making them outdated when they switch to teaching. As the scope of media and communication has increased tremendously with the technological changes that are taking place rapidly, it is imperative that teachers are in touch with their counterparts in the field. Conversely, even the media should come to regard the university as a partner than as an adversary or worse still, something to be ignored. As one media teacher stated, 'media industry ought to recognise public university expertise' and come forward to encourage research. The quality of research that is conducted with no knowledge of the working of media industry in a dynamic situation would not make for meaningful research whether it is in critical or effects studies.

**Present trends**

A quick 'googling' for media related research institutes other than the regular universities indicate that there are three or four apart from IIMC. For instance, Jamia Millia Islamia's AJK Mass Communication Research Centre in New Delhi, The Mudra Institute of Communications Research, (MICORE) Ahmedabad, TAM Media Research, India, Centre for Media Studies (CMS) and National Institute of Social Communications and Research Training (NISCORT) from the Catholic Church in India are some of the research institutes in communication that are visible on the net. Research has not been given its due in India especially in this field. Conducting research even on a small scale require funding. Very few funding agencies encourage such studies, as most would like to spend on science related projects than on social studies, which is a worldwide phenomenon. This is one of the reasons why we find so few research institutes. With its wide socio political variance, Indian media is at the least very colourful. This should provide ample scope for research in media.

The number of research journals that are published regularly are even less. Interface from Osmania University, The Media Mimamsa ( in English and Hindi) a research journal from Makhn Lal Chaturvedi Rashtriya Vishwa Vidyalaya in Bhopal, Journal of Creative Communications from Mudra Institute of Communications, Ahmedabad, Communicator from IIMC are a few.

Sustaining a research journal too becomes a major challenge to any organization. Conversely, getting quality content becomes equally challenging. Persistent efforts at bringing out regular issues establish its credibility, which can attract quality research. As the editor of Media Mimamsa stated in his blog, after years of persistence with the management he finally started the journal after his retirement. Online journals have become a via media for such of those who cannot afford the cost of production and delivery of research journals.

There are several areas little explored by the western scholars, which can be the strength for the researchers in Asia. The Chinese, Korean and Japanese scholars have already made their mark in those areas of work specific to the Asian community. With regionalization, new media technologies, ICTs for development and Community media being critical in the current global scenario, Indian scholars could work in these areas. Similarly, cultural and epistemological studies, ethnographic and sociological studies, the politico-economic aspects of media are some of the areas that are popular. Film studies, Women's studies, Literary Criticism and Cultural Studies, have emerged as important areas of interdisciplinary studies with media related courses being offered within their programmes. Thus the mass communication scholars are now spread more widely as communication and media studies scholars, under social sciences and humanities. As Vasudeva and Chakravarty stated, 'India has been dominated by a restricted set of theoretical tenets and a correspondingly limited repertoire of rules for collecting and analyzing evidence' (Vasudeva and Chakravarty, 1989). Widening the scope of operation, and more exposure to western scholars ought to help Indian scholars to get an understanding of the latest technological and methodological tools to conduct research, along with the caveat: to adapt them for the Indian social and cultural milieu.

**Future of communication research**

As an eminent scholar stated, 'Communication has so far been treated as a science which can be transmitted or acquired in research and training institutes. But it must be redefined as an art which can be learnt only through active involvement in the processes of social living' (Joshi, 1984). Media being one of the foremost institutions in society, its communicative influence is all pervasive in this information age. Communication research scholars need to develop new orientations in examining the media, in all its avatars. One need to work in all aspects of the media, including the empirical studies, as one cannot undermine its importance in understanding a society. Academic rigour, training in computer aided research methodologies and exposure to latest technological tools ought to be nurtured along with sustained interest in their area of research, which is the need of the hour.

The current trend in all western societies and universities indicate a distinct interest in the Indian media. Be it the new media, television or cinema, Indian media has caught the fancy of the western scholars (although one cannot strictly

categorise new media as Indian). The Indian media with its rich source of materials for research can capitalize on this resource and utilize it for intense academic and research related work. Research that ought to be carried out in the Indian context could be different from that of their western counterparts based on the socio-cultural developments in India. Critical approaches to social realities and media in India would open up an entire gamut of research in communication and media studies. Issues of identity and nationalism, cultural and cross cultural morphism that are influenced by media and in turn influence the media are highly debatable in the academic world.

India is now being recognized as a growing publishing field, and publishers are willing to publish Indian authors. The time has come for Indian authors to come up with relevant books that suit the Indian populace, as there are not many books that are published keeping in mind the Indian media and the Indian context.

### Conclusions

However, this should take place within the larger context of modifying the education policy. Education policy in India should be reoriented towards providing space for scholars to come up with innovative research. Although the government talks of encouraging 'innovative research' it does not do much at the ground level. As one researcher and senior faculty in a state university stated, 'although we asked repeatedly for funding to do research, we have not been given grants for that. However, ready funds come to us, if it is for infrastructure'. In fact, finding suitable research personnel and funding are the most difficult to come by, despite the large number of research scholars.

With attractive pay and incentives, more and more youth are now eyeing teaching jobs as a lucrative career. However, that should not remain the only incentive, but a lifelong commitment towards all aspects of teaching. UGC, in its wisdom, has linked research activities to promotions, but that could also lead to a scramble for numbers game than for quality. Instead, an atmosphere to encourage research for the growth of the discipline, along with some accountability would probably help.

Most importantly, UGC's initiatives in conducting workshops and training young research scholars in writing research proposals and research articles go a long way in encouraging faculty to face international standards of publishing, where 'publish or perish' has become the dictum!

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