

A review of India's Information Revolution in the
Scientific American, August, 1990, pp. 112-114.

INDIA'S INFORMATION REVOLUTION, by Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers. Sage Publications, Inc., 1989 (\$28; paperbound, \$14).

The television revolution in India began bravely in 1975. Lively black-and-white images were beamed to the earth from a U.S. satellite positioned over India for a year. A crude chicken-wire dish picked up the signals, which were then fed to ruggedized public TV sets, one in each of 2,400 villages across six language areas. The programs being broadcast covered such subjects as health, farming, primary school matters and the rights of farmers and women. Resident observers certified that interest in the programs was highest among poor villagers.

Carefully planned growth along frugal lines of development was supplanted with one stroke in 1983 when the first government-owned satellite brought its color signal to a wide area of India. Now 90 percent of the population lives within range of one of 400 government-built local relay transmitters. A color TV is not yet for everyone; although the cost can be spread among some six or eight family wage earners, a television set costs half a year's wages for a factory worker. Instead of owning their own, many Indians rent a TV and a videocassette recorder for occasional entertainment. Still, the number of sets is growing: 15 million can now

be found in Indian households (about one in six), and mushrooming interest suggests an audience of close to 400 million by the year 2000.

At the same time that individual interest is growing, the government television network has gone commercial on a grand scale; its income from the sale of commercials has increased fortyfold since 1980, making it the one government bureau that pays for itself. Consumerism and its homogenizing trends are certainly spreading rapidly across kaleidoscopic India. A survey made by the authors in 1987 found that Maggi 2-Minute Noodles, which had been advertised on TV ("fast to cook, and good to eat"), were being eaten by a third of city viewers, even "though in India, noodles were perceived as a very Chinese product."

Most TV viewers in India today do not live in villages but in towns and cities where they form an urban middle class. The programs they watch are diverse, although most are entertainment shows, produced by the Indian equivalent of our Hollywood. Versions of ancient epics in the bejeweled song-and-dance style of the Bombay films, for example, gather a huge audience. Vignettes of these films, which touch on significant individuals and events, are found throughout the text. The reader meets the scriptwriter of the first Hindi soap opera, as well as the Indian-American magnate of the disk drive, along with other heroes and rascals.

The book offers a savvy look at the role of communication in development. It was once thought that a mass-information source like TV could influence development at all levels of society right down to the rice paddy. In the 1980's a new view emerged: uniform mass communication would be superseded by more interactive schemes focused on the individualization of messages in time and space.

Some examples can be cited. For three generations, farm women sold their home-grown vegetables on the bustling sidewalks of a growing city district. But police harassed them, claiming they were traffic hazards. Videotapes of the encounters, made by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), however, indicated that the women were not interfering with traffic patterns. Municipal leaders, on seeing the tapes, were moved to political action, and the farm women were once again allowed to sell their goods.

Hardware and software growth, along with VCR's and personal computers, are described in fascinating detail. The growth in well-paying informational jobs and the brain drain that has poured 6,000 Indian-trained electrical engineers into California's Silicon Valley are also examined. The book offers no sharp predictions, but its candor and catholicity divert readers at the same time it helps them to see farther, into both the developing and developed countries of the world.