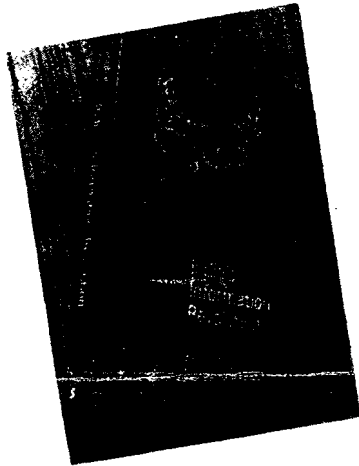


The magic multiplier



INDIA'S INFORMATION REVOLUTION
By Arvind Singhal & Everett Rogers
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Wilbur Schramm, the pioneer of development communication, died in 1987 at the ripe old age of 79. But his legacy still lives on in many third world countries. Schramm propounded the theory that information was a vital ingredient in moving a nation toward development. He called it the magic multiplier. Travelling extensively, he convinced many governments — Indian too — to invest in mass media. Indeed, Schramm's recommendations in the fifties and sixties formed the very foundation of India's communication revolution.

This book examines the nexus between information technology and economic development in the Indian context. What adds more worth and life to this extensive study are the illustrations, various programmes and life sketches of successful entrepreneurs who ventured into frontier fields. By the time India had begun to understand the significance of information technology, the more advanced countries of the West and Japan were already utilising it to transform their social and economic fabric. And, as is well-known the world over, "information workers" — those gathering, processing, distributing and developing information and information technologies — by far outnumber their industrial and agricultural counterparts.

In India, the shift has come about gradually but surely. Efforts to create a new

information order are being made, bringing about noticeable changes in the social framework. As one indicator, 10 per cent of the workforce are white-collar workers today. The active inclusion of micro electronics and computers, effective tools to crunch and process information in various aspects of life in the country, is another indicator.

There were other significant posts on the pathway to an information society. The establishment of institutes of technology and institutes of management from which graduated hundreds of engineers, scientists and managers. But, as the authors point out, most of these 'information workers' migrate overseas to better jobs, leaving behind a vacuum difficult to fill.

The greatest propeller, as elsewhere in the world, has been television. After ambling along for two decades, this powerful medium took off in the mid-1980s. In five years, the Indian television audience multiplied four times "to about 12 per cent of the total population of 800 million by 1988". The spread of information was faster than ever before and thanks to wider access to television broadcasts due to the use of communication satellites, various television programmes like soap operas became popular. Not only that, the television experiment also encouraged the diffusion of VCRs in India.

But there are negative effects too. "While satellite television can reduce illiteracy, it can also increase the knowledge gap; help reduce poverty and trigger economic inequity; can help national integration and cause resentment about the language of broadcast". According to the authors, these effects can occur if "contingency factors" do not exist. "For instance, satellite television will help reduce illiteracy only if ... there is an availability of teachers and school buildings". Furthermore, another issue that can be raised is whether increased consumerism widens the gap between the urban elite and the rural poor. Is television serving the social purpose it is meant to in a developing country?

The first sitcom on Indian television, *Hum Log*, answers this question. The authors examine the effects of *Hum Log*, which primarily began as a family soap opera and was watched by an estimated audience of 50 million people.

Hum Log launched the era of commercially sponsored programmes on Doordarshan and its success led to a proliferation of domestically-produced television serials cutting down the im-

ports of television programmes that have a negative social function — a malady faced by most developing countries. The study of *Hum Log*'s impact is extremely interesting as it brings out the close relationship between the mass media and the audience in a developing country.

Along with the spurt in television viewing and broadcasting, India also witnessed an increasing awareness in other areas like computers, microelectronics and telecommunications — vehicles used for dissemination of information. Although the authors feel that the "growth of hi-tech microelectronics will create jobs and wealth", they sound a note of caution when they point out that the country can expect benefits of high technology "at a certain human cost". Specially since India is a labour-intensive country where computers can replace or displace jobs.

But India still has advantages. For one, its pool of scientists and engineers who have been given access to and have a high degree of exposure to the latest technologies. On the other hand, there are in-built constraints like a burgeoning population, social inequality and cultural diversity. Moreover, there are other factors like destabilising government policies and a lack of venture capital that discourage the spread of information technologies.

The fact the authors rue the most is that India's scientific and technological goals are determined more by western conceptions than by the needs of its villages. "Indian science is characterised by high inputs and low outputs," they write arguing that priorities are mixed. With an R&D expenditure of two billion dollars a year, Indian science needs to be geared to solving the country's developmental problems in agriculture, health, literacy and population growth. Only then would the country be rid of its most basic contradiction — having the largest number of university graduates and, equally, the largest number of illiterates.

The book tries to answer many an important question related to the development as also the relevance of information processes in India. Meticulously researched, it draws heavily on the experiences in other countries like Mexico, Brazil and Korea. The numerous examples and case studies take this study beyond just an academic exercise. *India's Information Revolution* emerges as a handy reference book apart from being eye-opening reading material.

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