

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF NEW TECHNOLOGY
ON NEWS AGENCIES *

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Introduction

A whole new era has begun for news agencies with the advent of modern technology. The international news agencies and domestic news agencies in the West are reaping immense benefits by using these new technologies. The results in terms of speed, efficiency and profitability speak for itself. Member agencies in OANA have also begun to take note of these developments and some of them are already in various stages of introducing these new systems. Fear has been expressed that the technological gap between the agencies in the Third World and those of developed countries is bound to widen if no positive and timely steps are taken.

Recognition

Third World countries have realised the significance and importance of adopting the advances in electronic, computers and satellite communications. This was amply recognised in many regional conferences on communication. The NAMEDIA conference in New Delhi in December 1983 noted that the new communication technologies would provide tremendous opportunities for

development in the Third World countries and called for a leap-frogging into the electronic era instead of adopting a step-by-step and trickle-down approach.

Asian capability

Just a few years ago there was a feeling that these new technologies were too advanced, sophisticated and costly for news agencies in the Asia-Pacific region and that our journalists and technicians were not capable of coping with the complexity of these developments. Fortunately, these views are not shared by any of our agencies. A survey of developments in our agencies shows that we are in various stages of accepting and introducing the advances in computer and communication technologies. Some are fully computerised and others are in the initial stages of modernising their editorial operations. However, a good many are still in the manual systems, unable to operate efficiently.

Advantages

Enough reports are available on the importance of new technology to developing countries and to the media. This paper will concentrate on the advantages of electronic news handling and the challenges that lie ahead. The paper sets out briefly the advantages of systems already in operation, the need for exchange of

information in this field, the need for seminars on technologies, the new services that are possible and resulting new business opportunities. Brief is also made on real-time financial services, cost implications of new systems, satellite communications, tariffs and need for an orderly network configuration.

Current Developments

Scant information is available on the steps taken by members of the Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies (OANA) in adopting new technology. However, it should be noted that Antara, PTI, Yonhap, IRNA, BERNAMA, KCNA and others are all in various stages of modernising their operations. It is essential that in view of the rapid changes in technology and approaches, member agencies should share whatever information is available. In this regard the OANA Secretariat has made available a paper on BERNAMA's experience on computerising its operations.

BERNAMA's Experience

The switch from manual operations to a fully computerised system has opened up a flood-gate of important developments for Bernama. The agency reports that it is now able to handle its new services efficiently and speedily both domestically and internationally. A whole range of new business opportunities has also been made possible as it is now

able to introduce a wide variety of new services for both media and, more importantly, to the non-media market. The agency is now confident that in the not too distant future, it should be financially self-reliant, able to turn in profits which can be used to improve further its principle news services. What is also significant is that the system introduced is specially designed for news agencies and is therefore proving extremely effective in handling copy from about 40 destinations, including from DANA members. The new system has encouraged the agency to go ahead with plans to upgrade its national communication network so that a wide variety of services including real-time financial services could be delivered to clients all over Malaysia.

PTI, Kyodo, Yonhap are also in the forefront of these developments. PTI has pioneered in indigenous technology and their experience should be of use to all of us. Experiences of Yonhap and Kyodo in meeting their particular needs also merit mention.

Developments Elsewhere

The transnationals and news agencies in many Western countries had a head start in this field. Reuters and AP are shining examples of what innovations can do to improve efficiency and profitability. Interactive real-time financial services have transformed these two agencies into giants in the field of information services. Many of our agencies are already involved in

the distribution of such services. The experience of these agencies should also encourage us to enter into some form of domestic real-time financial services. The computerisation projects of domestic agencies like the Australian-Associated Press (AAP), ANSA of Italy and Press Association of Britain (PA) should inspire us to greater involvement in more sophisticated technology. The AAP, for instance, is already into its second generation of computers having introduced its first system in 1973. A wide variety of services can be handled by this system, including special services for newspapers, radio and television and also domestic and international monitor, retrieval and market reporting services. It has also ventured into specialised services such as corporate reports, PR news wire, form guide and Newscan services.

PA which has exhausted its media clients has, for example, introduced a dial-up news service. Users of this new service can dial up using a simple view data terminal and receive over ordinary telephone lines any current PA story as well as any story transmitted in the previous six days.

Videotext Services

Many of our agencies have ventured into various forms of videotext and teletext services, including the Newscan services. International news agencies have also started similar services. Teletext services have proved successful in a number of countries with news agencies

acting as information providers. The pace of development in this field is so tremendous that news agencies may be put out of business. Many agencies have worked out high rates for providing information to teletex services or have entered into joint-ventures or simply have refused to provide news for such services. Videotext services have also grown in sophistication and advertising elements can now be included.

Photos

Dramatic developments are also taking place in the field of photo services. Many national news agencies have entered this field. Reuters and AFP have also started news picture services. What is significant is the development of high-speed digital photo transmissions. More and better news picture can now be delivered to all parts of the world. Systems have also been developed to process and edit pictures in the same way an editorial system can be used to edit words. Kyodo, of course, in association with Nikon has done some pioneering work in the field of photos.

This is just a brief illustration of the new possibilities for our news agencies and how new revenue can be generated, enabling news agencies to operate under a healthy financial environment without having to be highly subsidised. Investment in technology is a prerequisite and it would pay for itself in the long run.

Studies

A number of studies have been made on news agency computerisation. Several regional news agency groupings are also making studies on the subject. We in OANA have had benefit of a Unesco-sponsored study by J.G. Thompson. Although the report deals with Asia-Pacific News Network (ANN) Communications, there is invaluable advice on all aspects of news agency computerised editorial systems. The report provides invaluable information on automation of news agencies as well as improved systems of delivery of news. Every aspect of automation is covered briefly and is a useful reference for all of us. It also provides estimated costs for automated systems, advice on formats and other information useful for establishing a system.

Costs

A computerised editorial system should be the first step for any agency interested in modernising its operations. Costs have always been a prohibitive factor. But over the years hardware costs have fallen dramatically and there are now news agency software packages that can be bought off the shelf and adapted to individual requirements. Costs for systems can be anything from US\$100,000 for a simple system of a few terminals to as much as US\$1.5 million.

System costs vary from supplier to supplier. The system used by BERNAMA cost US\$750,000 and with all

facilities such as false floor, airconditioning, wiring, fire protection equipment etc., the total came to US\$1.2 million. A slightly more sophisticated system by another supplier would have cost US\$2.0 million. A recent study for OANA showed that it would cost US\$600,000 to provide a system of 35 terminals for Antara and US\$240,000 for 10 terminals for PNA. As the advantages outweigh all other consideration, OANA together with national governments and Unesco, UNDP and Third countries should see how national news agencies could be provided technical assistance so that they can establish simple computerised systems immediately. This will ensure that they get into the mainstream of development and not be left behind as before.

Communication and Tariffs

One of the impediments to effective operations of national news agencies has been poor communication network. Because of the high communication tariffs, many agencies have not established a good system of communication network. A good network is equally essential for delivery of news services.

Unesco as well as OANA have recognised that high rates levied by telecommunications authorities were the greatest impediment to the free flow of information. This subject has been discussed at many national and international forums and many resolutions have been adopted calling for Press Bulletin Service (PBS) and Development Press Bulletin Service (DPBS) rates. A

number of countries have responded by reducing tariffs. If our agencies are to enjoy the benefits of new technology, they should have all the necessary communication facilities, be it telegraphic or data circuits. Tariffs in our region are one of the highest, in some cases three to four times that in the West. In Europe, press tariffs are very much lower largely because of preferential tariffs. Enough resolutions have been passed and it is now time to press national government for some positive action.

Satellite Communication

Satellite communication is also revolutionising media activities and they are far cheaper than terrestrial circuits. Terrestrial circuits cost increase roughly in proportion to distance whereas satellite circuits costs are relatively independent of distance.

The advantage of satellite communication is that once the signal is broadcast it can be picked up at an unlimited number of points within range of the satellite on low cost receiving devices. This will help immeasurably in bridging communication problems faced by countries where communication infrastructure is still in its infancy. Satellite communication can also play an important role in helping our agencies to receive from a central point cheaply.

Seminars

DANA agencies should expose themselves to all the technological developments taking place around them. One suggestion is that more seminars on communication technology and computerisation should be organised for our senior executives and technical staff. The Technical Committee should also include the subject in all its deliberations. DANA should also be a member of IPTC so that it could keep abreast of the latest developments. The DANA Newsletter could also pay greater attention to this subject.

Conclusion

The future is bright for national news agencies provided they begin to adopt new technology. Ignoring these development will result in us remaining backward and ineffective in our operations.

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