"Oramedia: Three Case Studies in Participatory Media Development"

By

Professor Daniel Henrich
Liberty University
Lynchburg
Email: mediastrategy@readmail.biz

Correspondence to:

Professor Daniel Henrich
Department of Communication Studies
Liberty University
1971 University Blvd
Lynchburg, VA 24502
(434) 237-6819
Email: mediastrategy@readmail.biz

"Since Kwasi was a child and his father and grandfather and, yes, great-great-grandfather Kwasi and all his village "lived" collective communication in the cool shade of the sacred boabab or mango trees in their villages. Beneath the palaver tree misunderstandings were resolved and critical community issues were discussed under the direction of the village elders. Villagers explained points of view and together, through group consensus, reached a final decision. But the palaver tree stood for more than group discussions and problem solving: it was the place of the festivals, the harvest celebrations and where the traveling storyteller would set up his camp in the evening to spin the tales of a place & time far off and free from the worries of rural farming. (Land 1992)"

One of the major criticisms of development is brought out in several areas of diffusion research. Luis Beltran (Rogers, Ed 1976) writes: *"In other words, diffusion research has shown us that those few privileged farmers who: 1) Own land, 2) enjoy a high socioeconomic status and 3) have ample mass communication opportunities are the most innovative in adopting new technologies."*

Beltran goes on to say that to concentrate rural development energies related to this 'easy to convince' minority so that it gains even more social & economic power while the majority poor is further deprived & depressed is wrong. This paradox is well documented in diffusion research and could be called an "innovation-needs paradox." (Rogers 1995)

This paper will review two case studies on the use of indigenous media in the change process. Time after time, diffusion research has shown that development communicators must understand the culture of a target people group in order to effectively persuade them to a point of decision to adopt the innovation.

Culture is not static. It is transitional. These transitional changes are less apparent here in the west because the west are used to varied inputs. Changes are expected and most have stories about how things are done "radically" different in just a few years- an example is how Americans spend leisure hours. From the proliferation of television in the mid-1950s a lot of time was spent watching one of the three channels. Viewing was "non-selective" as Gerbner discusses in Cultivation Theory (Rogers 1976). Now, most Americans have 60-120 channels and selective viewing or "channel surfing" is far more common. Evenings are spent watching bits and pieces

of many programs. Life was different just a scant 20 years previously -- growing up in a dirt poor section of rural Los Angeles, families spent time reading, listening to the radio, or, even talking. The commonality is that each of these examples all looked to mediated stimulation and entertainment of one kind or another.

In the rural areas of Africa, Asia and Latin America, cultural transitions are abrupt. The west was "ushered" into the 20th century, now self proclaimed development workers "wrench" the so-called "under-developed" into the 20th century. And when "innovations" are not adopted immediately - that took the west hundreds of years to adopt, the 3rd world are called "laggards" - not a politically correct term! The 3rd World (or is it more PC to say 2/3rd World, or developing nations) is expected to adopt democracy when they are used to thousands of years of consensus decision-making under the palaver tree. In recent years this decision-making style evolved into paternalistic chiefdom rule.

"Family planning" meant having many children who are regarded as a treasure, a source of farm labor and social security in old age. Now, development workers expect the women to draw water from a well without understanding that the river is a place of fellowship and relationship - valued much higher than the difficult to understand concept of "clean water."

Culture is defined for the purposes of this paper in the anthropological sense: as the way of life, the complex whole that consists of everything we think (ideas and ideologies), everything we do (norms and patterns of behavior), and everything we have (artifacts) as members of society (Eskamp and Swart 1991). Certainly, development workers have learned that culture must be understood in order to communicate. But culture should not be used as a tool to convince the "target" group of what is the modern way to approach "life." As Colletta states in "Tradition for change: Indigenous sociocultural forms as a basis for nonformal education for development," (Riley 1990) *"In order to ensure that behavioral change is substantial, cultural and structural changes would be mutually supportive... designers of development programs need to conceptualize interventions from a 'holistic' framework, using the community, rather than the individual, as the prime unit of intervention..." (Page No. 303)*

Coletta goes on to describe this holistic framework as traditional values, indigenous roles and leadership patterns, formal & informal associations and the interaction between these groups, as well as the flow of influence between these subsystems and other social systems.

Rogers (in Melkote 1991) redefined the development process as: *"a widely participatory process of social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement Including greater equality, freedom, and other valued qualities) for the majority of the people through gaining greater control over development." (Page No. 155)*

Cohen & Uphoff's framework suggests that to be participatory, four major areas should be considered with regards to the beneficiary of the project: decision making, implementation, benefits, and evaluation. (Melkote 1991)

In the following abstracts will deal with three aspects of the diffusion process.

Case Study #1: Oral Media in West Africa and the Opinion Leader

Traditional or oral media is defined as plays, puppetry, songs and stories, music and drumming, singing & dancing, miming and storytelling and their settings all form a participatory network of communication that is a vital part of the development process. These are based in the social & cultural realities of rural Africa. Frank Ugboajah (Riley 1990) defines these as "oramedia" to denote media represented by a "diffusion network of lower chiefs, age groups, the marketplace, women's organizations traditional priests, stall heads, village and the indomitable village crier"! Some of the elements that make up the oral communication tradition in Africa have been well documented. They include the performance aspect of the communication setting and the possibilities for improvisation. Storytellers can arrange their materials as they please and add new twists to a well-known plot. The determinants are the context of the performance and the inspiration & skill of the performer.

Given the number of occasions in village life, for example naming ceremonies, puberty & circumcision rites, marriages, communal work, harvest and religious festivals it is easily understood that the performers could integrate health & nutrition information.

Another area of oramedia is the use of the African proverb. The proverbs are used to introduce new ideas and practices, as well as inculcate morality and reinforce cultural beliefs and attitudes. Proverbs have a great deal of authoritativeness in parts of West African societies and

associated with "experts" in the community. A person who shows evidence of spontaneous mastery of their usage is held in high esteem.

In an attempt to understand more about oramedia, the Nigerian, Fiofori (Riley 1990), engaged six "professional oral narrators" in three towns in River State, Nigeria, and conducted a content analysis of many of the traditional stories in their repertoire. This could be considered as an application of Roger's "Entertainment-education" model. Entertainment-education is defined as putting an educational idea in an entertainment message in order to achieve behavior changes (Nariman 1993). Fiofori's analysis indicated the "loading capacity" of the stories and their infrastructural content and meanings. Together with the performers, he developed ways in which information on family planning could be integrated. The stories became part of the performer's story list and were performed in settings where the audience could ask questions, which the performers were ready to answer.

Fiofori learned that when traditional media loaded with pertinent information that is situationally relevant, the resulting song or story could be educational as well as entertaining. He learned that audiences accepted and enjoyed the way the "Knowledge" of the innovation was integrated into the familiar stories, and that the inclusion of "foreign" content did not so change the original story so that it would lose it's traditional meaning. He worked carefully with the storytellers and a "simple methodology was worked out to avoid overloading the content categories of messages infused into the familiar stories."

This case study in Nigeria utilizes the professional oral narrator as an opinion leader in the change process. Because he uses a familiar medium and the new "information" is integrated into that format it is more easily accepted. Knowledge, persuasion and possibly decision stages were addressed.

Case Study #2: Oral Media in India: The Villapatu Song format

India, with its rich and varied culture is host to literally thousands of traveling traditional theater and singing troops. It is an exciting time when a troop visits a remote village, sets up its rudimentary sets and embarks on telling the tale of one of the Hindu epic stories about the many gods of Hinduism. Large shadow puppets are used and the story is told in song, dance, and puppetry -- tied together by the adroit narration of the master storyteller. These nights of epic

storytelling last from sunset until the early hours of the morning for not one night, but for days and sometimes weeks - it depends, I suppose, on the money they receive from the villagers.

There are also troops of traveling musicians who play and tell amusing stories. One such format in south India is called Villapatu ("Bow singers" in English), after a longbow type of instrument that sounds somewhat like a guitar. Villapatu is a format whereby a leader narrator with his "villa" sits in front of a small group of musicians. The leader is usually an older man and the rest of the players are younger. The troop arrives in a village square and sets up. As they start to play, the crowd gathers. The attraction comes from the interaction the young men have with the old man. A story might start with a welcome to the villagers by the old man.

A sample dialogue:

OLD MAN: Now welcome to our story, we want to tell you an old, old story.

YOUNG MAN: Older than you, old man?

OLD MAN: Yes, older than me. Now shut up whelp...

YOUNG MAN: Can anything be older than Rajiv?

And it goes on. Song, story, banter, jokes, etc., for hours.

In this experiment, the villapatu format was selected as a possible way to communicate concepts & knowledge related to the creation of the earth. There is more then one Hindu creation story. One prevalent in South India was that the world is, and was, carried on the back of a huge turtle. This format seemed to be suitable to present knowledge of a fundamental difference of beliefs among a minority religion of India, that of Christianity in a format that was acceptable to a Hindu audience. As the Villapatu storyteller was an opinion leader and somewhat of an authority, it seemed an ideal format to adapt.

In a joint creative effort between the researchers and a Villapatu storyteller team, songs were developed and tested to small groups of Indians. Hours in a recording studio resulted in fine quality recordings. The next step was to perform it to a live audience with a culturally correct platform with palm fronds and straw. The ornamental Villa bow was made and the costumes sewn. Word of mouth was advertisement enough. By the time the showtime arrived, many hundreds had crowded empty area. Children climbed trees, sat on fences and parents shoulders. The performance lasted several hours because the audience wanted parts repeated and because of the interactive nature of the Villapatu format.

The comments afterward ranged from nominal to well interested. Just as many thought it was Hindu as thought it Christian. All were entertained. One solace was that the cassette was released to the commercial market and sold well for the next year. The traditional storyteller tried to record another cassette, but was unable to get local support of either religious community.

This case study is again related to the knowledge stage of the diffusion process. It also uses a participatory approach to message development and adapts a familiar storytelling format in the process of a social innovation. The project could have used a more formal formative evaluation process. One area that would be interesting to understand more about is whether the Hindu Villapatu format overpowered the content so much that the audience did not recognize that it was new "knowledge."

Case Study #3: Wonsuom Radio & Newspaper Project in Ghana

The Wonsuom project was a grassroots development communication project in Swedru District in Ghana. Managed by the University of Ghana Communication Department and funded by UNESCO, the goal was to use both radio and newspaper to communicate a whole range of development topics. The project location covered 18 villages & towns with a combined population of 90,000 about 75 KM away from the University. The main occupations of the villagers were fishing & subsistence farming.

With the arrival of the equipment and the seconding of an experienced Fante language broadcaster from Ghana Broadcasting, the radio project started in 1983. This was a low power station with community-based receivers in each main village. The project used "diffusion cones" (or speakers) to establish low cost listening locations. This was later a source of problems as the cables were washed away each rainy season.

The broadcaster was described in the study as the link between farmers, fishermen, extension officers, primary health care officials, rural reporters and the project headquarters at the University. This man would certainly been seen as either an opinion leader, a change agent or a "bridge", depending on which part of "Diffusion of Innovations" you read.

A key to the broadcasters success was that he produced programs in the field with these people and they saw themselves as part of the development effort, rather than the target of it. The four types of programs included "*Something has happened*" and focused on discussions of development oriented rural issues. The second was called "*Tell me the News*", including music and tidbits of all sorts of information and a sort of expose of people who had embezzled development money as well as activities of the benevolent clubs and societies. The third program was a rural magazine format on individual farmers & fishermen who, through their occupations had become a source of inspiration for their fellow villagers. The fourth show, "Well done workers," was a show of congratulations & praise giving. It would look at a single outstanding individual and portray their contributions to the community.

All along, the aims of the radio program were to:
- create awareness of the Wonsuom Project
- to promote adult education in all forms
- to mobilize people for projects that would improve the quality of life in the community
- and to work in cooperation with any local society or body in matters which would help attain the aims of the project.

A local schoolteacher who was sent away for specialized training edited the Fante language monthly paper. It was printed locally. There were a total of 33 rural reporters trained, an editorial staff of three and 10 people who worked in the local printing house.

Information Presented

The rural broadcasts and the paper supplies useful and timely information and news on health, agriculture, civic education and culture and entertainment around the area. The paper was not seen as separate from the project, but part of an integrated effort that could be seen as the knowledge stage in the diffusion process.

Listener Clubs

One aspect that the project did not expect was the establishment of listening clubs. It is clear that the project designers expected some interaction on the part of the listeners, but do not discuss whether they expected this groundswell of interest. A listening club is an informal group

of listeners who choose to gather together in a home, community center or church to listen to a specific broadcast and discuss it. We can assume that the Wonsuom Project designers expected the listening groups to operate much like the Radio Farm Forums in Zambia, which were operated by the Ministry of Agriculture, and Water in the Republic of Zambia between 1966 and the 1986(Mutava 1987). The Radio Forums were very structured, were designed to stimulate discussion and individual action like improved cultivation procedures.

The Wonsuom Clubs evolved into hybrid organizations, which were self-initiated, and self motivated. They sprang up in Project towns & villages to undertake self-help projects in those areas. It is true that they had their roots in the community listening groups, but became independent self-help social institutions. Although this was unanticipated, it is perhaps the longest lasting aspect of the project.

Collective Decision Process

These clubs are considered essential to the effectiveness of the project. When it is reported on the radio or in the newspaper that a certain village has undertaken a certain project, the clubs decide as a unit to do likewise for their town or village. Because the projects were reported on the radio, it meant (to the listeners) that the innovation was tested and proven usable by fellow Ghanaians - the demonstration stage was completely bypassed! This was an unintended effect of media impact.

The Club also developed a support structure and set timetables to ensure that each member got enough help to weed his farm on a specific date. They also donated money to each member who lost an immediate family member and to the family in the case of a member dying.

Success Factors

The messages presented in the newspaper and on radio were translated into a continuous series of "action" projects. Projects were planned on the behalf of other members, most importantly, decision-making was collective. While the primary research does not discuss why the Clubs were self-sustaining, it appears to relate to the fact that the Clubs had "ownership" of the development process - an important aspect in participatory development.

The Future

Funding for this project was scheduled to dry up in 1987. The first to go was the radio station. Without it, the newspaper remains as an expensive element of the information process.

What is clear from this analysis is that the Clubs themselves have become very amenable to innovative ideas and can be used by NGO development agencies to bring about social & economic changes in the rural communities. It is also clear that the Club's knowledge of traditional communication, i.e. proverbs, dances, and folk songs can be used to communicate development messages.

Conclusion

In this brief paper, we have looked at three projects that shared the following characteristics:

- a participatory approach to research and message development was used.
- existing social structures of communication and decision-making were used.
- oral traditions such as songs and folktales wove knowledge of social innovation into those existing formats. In the case of the Wonsuom Project, the success depended heavily on the collective decision making aspects of African culture. The Listening Groups themselves became collective change agents and early adopters.
- decision making on each project was heavily tilted toward the beneficiaries. Each was generally a bottom up development project with strong involvement of opinion leaders in the formative stages.

Limitations

Certainly the weakness of both the Nigerian and Indian case study is that the change agents themselves did not become adopters of the concept of integrating social messages into their "art." There is no data to show whether small aspects of the message was retained, in the case of Fiofori's "professional oral narrators" after their contract expired. The real challenge to the development communicator would be to convince the storytellers themselves of the validity of the knowledge and how it would uplift and empower their rural audiences.

References

Ansu-Kyeremeh, Kwasi. "Cultural aspects of constraints on village education by radio". Media, Culture & Society, SAGE Vol 14 (1992), 111-128.

Beltran, Luis. "Alien Premises, Objects & Methods in Latin American Communication Research". In Rogers (ed.) "Communication and Development: Critical Perspectives", SAGE (1976) pp. 15-42.

Epskamp, Kees & Swart, Jaap. "Popular theatre and the media: The empowerment of culture in development communication". Gazette 48: 177-192, 1991.

Land, Michael. "Ivoirien television, willing vector of cultural imperialism", Howard Journal of Communications, Vil. 4, Nos. 1&2 (1992) pp 10-27

Melkote, Srinivas. "Communication for Development in the Third World: Theory & Practice," SAGE (1991)

Mutava, Dominic. "A Zambian experience with radio farm forums", Media in Education and Development, December 1987.

Nariman, Heidi Noel, "Soap Operas for Social Change: Toward a Methodology for Entertainment-Education Television," Praeger (1993).

Obeng-Quaidoo, Isaac. "Assessment of the experience in the production of messages and programmes for rural communication systems: The case of the Wonsuom Project in Ghana," Gazette 42: 53-67 (1988)

Okunna, Chinyere Stella. "Small participatory media technology as an agent of social change in Nigeria: a non-existant option?" Media, Culture & Society, SAGE Vol 17 (1995), 615-627.

Riley, Marie. "Indigenous resources in Africa: Unexplored communication potential," Howard Journal of Communication, Vol 2, No 3 (Summer 1990), pp 301-314.

Rogers, Everett. "Diffusion of Innovations". The Free Press New York (1995)