

FORMULATING MESSAGES FOR ILLITERATE RURAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

There is growing realisation of the difficulty to communicate with illiterate rural communities in South Africa. It is imperative that we also begin to use communication media that really "speak" to the people. The main aim of this article is therefore to challenge communication consultants in South Africa to take the development road when communicating with the Third World. Illiterate or low-literacy people must be identified and as the cost of failing to communicate successfully is prohibitive, simple and clear messages should be formulated to ensure understanding. Crucial to the viability of successful communication with illiterate rural communities will be the relevant role-playing factors in formulating messages, including the question of which media to apply.

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INTRODUCTION

Many projects for the development of rural areas through communication have been launched and although they may vary in nature, they have one thing in common: each is built on a series of ideological assumptions (Diaz Bordenave 1977: 1). In a work environment, such as *Z PR Communication Consultants*, emphasis is placed on the formulation of messages within communication strategies. Successful projects undertaken include *K-TV Market Day* in the Free State and Northern Cape; *UNISA* qualitative research focus groups on news definitions in the Free State and *Integrity Incorporated* seminars on for example, equity in the workplace.

To formulate any messages professionally, it is necessary to study the norms in society that govern assumptions about communication (Diaz Bordenave 1977: 105). Skinner and Von Essen (1999: 98) state that communication starts with a climate of belief and therefore messages must not only have meaning and be compatible with the recipients' value systems, but also be relevant to their situation. Wood (2000: 261) agrees that there should be a focus on creating and maintaining a constructive climate, thus encouraging recipients to participate freely in the process of development. In an attempt to reflect on the way in which South Africa's rural development could be conceptualised communicologically, various role-playing factors in formulating messages will be considered in this article. The approach is functional and the argumentation critical.

It is well-known in practice that to successfully transfer a message we must use signs and symbols that are perceived as real by the receiver. In contemporary Africa it is imperative, then, that we begin to use communication media and codes that really "speak" to the people. Illiterate or low-literacy people must be identified and simple and clear messages should be formulated to ensure understanding. The cost of failing to communicate successfully is prohibitive. Messages are unsuccessful if they are not received, duplicated, and understood or accepted (Skinner & Von Essen 1999: 401).

The success of the communication process depends on a variety of factors such as the nature and complexity of the message, the audience's interpretation of it, the environment in which it is received and the level of interference or "noise". In addition, the message receiver's attitudes to, and perceptions of, the source and the medium used to transmit the message must be taken into account. Often words,

sounds and pictures, as symbols, may have different meanings to different audiences and people's perceptions and interpretations of them will vary (Koekemoer 1998: 26).

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CIRCUMSTANCE

Within one geographical unit in South Africa, there is a multiplicity of groupings, many of which have little more than their sub-continental location as their common linkage (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1989: 227). Huge White / Black disparities in income still characterise the South African economy and the levels of literacy. This has given rise to a major debate, concerning the so-called First World / Third World dichotomy. Third World countries are underdeveloped in relation to other countries in terms of for example physical infrastructure, economic performance, and the social and political spheres of life (Melkote 1991: 20).

More specifically South Africa's market can be visualised in two fundamental phases of economic development: Firstly, a multi-racial, economic unit living broadly by Western standards on what one might call the developed First World level. Secondly, one that is to a certain extent typical of the developing Third World economics. However, evidence shows that the separation between the First and Third World is not rigidly racially-based as some Whites fall into the Third World segment and many blacks form part of the First World category (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1989: 231). South Africa's characteristics that are typical of Third World countries include the absence of communication infrastructure and professional skills; economic means and production and cultural resources; a shortage of recipients due to a high rate of illiteracy; diversity of languages; people living in remote rural areas; squatters; and a Black population without electricity that cannot afford mass media in any form. These characteristics influence the formulation of messages. Thus as Barker (2001: 3) states, amidst the realm of rapid growth and the technological explosion of most First World countries, South Africa is, and will remain for some time to come, as much a Third World country as a First World country.

Various segmentation models are used to simplify the complexity of the South African market and this should be taken into account for the formulation of messages. In 1988, researchers began working on a new segmentation device that they called the AMPS Living Standards Measure (LSM). Its development was stimulated by the desire to have

an objective non-racial measure that was an indication of such factors as life-style, urbanisation, and sophistication (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1989: 236). The LSM is an all-races measurement devised to group the population into categories according to standard of living. Although the measurement was initially compiled to provide an indication of income, is not always reliable in determining individual wealth. LSM supergroup A comprises of LSM levels 6, 7 and 8, known as the established achievers. These people are predominantly urbanised, highly affluent and have had a tertiary education. LSM supergroup B comprises of LSM levels 3, 4 and 5 and they are classified as the emergent market and are predominantly metropolitan. The people in rural communities are part of levels 1 and 2, LSM supergroup C, categorised as the struggling masses and they constitute 6,8 million of the total South African population (Skinner & Von Essen 1999: 391).

The gap between the vision of a typical communication development project and the reality of an isolated Third World village is immense. Not surprisingly, the effort to use information to promote rural development forms the core of communication development programs (Stevenson 1988: 59).

As Barker (2001: 4) notes, the aim of the communication practitioner in South Africa should be to take up the challenge to use the development road to communicate effectively with its masses: the Third World component. The aim in communication with rural communities should thus be to formulate messages with the objective of reducing the distance of the knowledge gaps between the people (Melkote 1991: 217-221). The socio-economic gap should be reduced by the selection of a message where the quality and the complexity of the message are adapted to suit the lower socio-economic status (SES) groups. Further aims in formulating messages should be to provide knowledge in the form of relevant information that is not only essential to achieve communication objectives, but which is also persuasive (Koekemoer 1998: 30-32).

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO FORMULATING MESSAGES

An integrated approach to communication in general should be considered in order to ensure that the illiterate audience is reached effectively (Barker 2001: 12). In the development of an integrated

strategy for the formulation of messages, three critical issues must at least be considered from the outset: technology and communication infrastructure capacity, decision making approaches and human needs. Of course, the gender and age of recipients, their language preferences, educational levels and occupation are also role-playing factors and will be addressed. We end off this section with possible media that could be helpful in reaching out to the illiterate masses.

Technology and communication infrastructure capacity

It should be kept in mind that the diffusion of technology, the opening of communication channels and all other aims of rural development communication has zero effect, unless both an infrastructure and a social climate conducive to development are present (Diaz Bordenave 1977: 105).

As rural communities in South Africa do not have access to most sophisticated technology resources, the use of First World communication methods will have less influence than development communication techniques (cf. Barker 2001: 13; De Beer 1998: 16). Nevertheless, the lack of communication infrastructure in rural areas should strengthen the challenge to formulate effective messages and not be seen as only a barrier to communication.

Decision making approaches

In formulating messages for rural communities the only approaches to development that can claim to be receptive to the needs of people will be when a commitment to grassroots, bottom-up development is reflected. This development is owned and driven by communities and their representative organisations.

The guiding principle should be to proceed from a bottom-up perspective, rather than from the top downwards, as in the case of the classic power structure that disregards the views of the masses (Servaes 1999: 196).

In a nutshell, the successful formulation of messages is dependent on participatory decision making. As development concerns people, the local population must be involved constructively in the whole process of message formulation (Barker 2001: 4).

Human needs

A range of different needs motivates people. Sometimes those needs will conflict, as people won't all have their needs in the same proportion. Part of the role and function of communication is to

provide information in reaction to the expression of needs. Therefore often communicators will be concerned with examining people's needs, in order to respond to those needs. People's needs motivate them to act and by identifying those needs, we have a chance of reaching out to them.

Thomas (2000: 25) states that the behaviour of people at a particular moment in time is usually determined by their strongest need. A commonly used graphical representation of the structure of needs is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It progresses from the satisfaction of very basic needs through to self-actualisation. Maslow's hierarchy has the benefit of attempting a holistic account of human motivation, considering a range of influences on human behaviour. Maslow's hierarchy has been criticised for being based on successful individuals in Western society, and to what extent it might apply to non-Western societies is not clear. However, his framework helps explain the strength of needs: the physiological needs (basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter) tend to be the strongest until they are satisfied.

Psychologists and biologists identify *primary needs* that include the need for food, liquid, oxygen and a constant temperature. These primary needs are also known as *drives* and people are considered motivated to achieve *drive reduction*. When we feel hunger, we are motivated to reduce that drive by eating; when we feel pain, we are motivated to reduce that drive by moving away from the source of the pain. Whenever a drive is unsatisfied, *arousal* increases and we are motivated to reduce that arousal.

The Third World is largely village and rural based - where the community generally has not yet progressed beyond the Maslow's first two stages of physiological and safety needs. Their aspirations are basic; their life-styles simple and predictable; their discretionary expenditure low and their educational level at best rudimentary (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1989: 231).

The importance of researching the needs of the community should be emphasised, as communication actions should be based on these needs (Barker 2001: 13).

Gender and age

Gender and age are important factors to consider in formulating messages. According to Skinner and Von Essen (1999: 392), there are proportionally more female than male rural Blacks in South Africa.

The main age groups of rural Blacks are 16 - 24 and over 50 years old. Interestingly, there is a significantly higher than average incident of females and those over 50 years old in the LSM 1 group. LSM 2 has more 16 to 24-year-olds than the average.

Language

Language is the instrument of communication. Linguistic misunderstanding of development messages can be due to differences in social and cultural patterns. Although verbal understanding of English is increasing in South Africa, people retain powerful and emotional ties with their mother tongue in an everyday social context. In the Black population, in the rural communities, the vernaculars defiantly hold their own and English literacy drops substantially (Skinner & Von Essen 1999: 391).

Research reveals that when it comes to radio broadcasts, the ties to the vernacular languages are strong. A staggering 91 % of Black respondents prefer an ethnic language to English and thus only nine per cent of the black population prefers to listen to English broadcasts (Skinner & Von Essen *ibid.*).

Educational levels and occupations

A third of the LSM 1 group has had no formal schooling at all and just under a further third has had no more than some primary school education, leaving a balance of people with mostly incomplete high school education. In the LSM 2 group, one in three has no more than partial primary school education and schooling levels are little advanced on LSM 1, thus literacy levels are correspondingly low (Skinner & Von Essen 1999: 392).

Due to the education shortage and the resulting illiteracy, rural communities are mainly unemployed. A maximum of a third are economically active employed mainly in the agricultural, clerical, mining and service sectors. Thus the majority of rural communities are often ignorant, naïve, poorly trained and poorly prepared to receive messages (Skinner & Von Essen *ibid.*).

Mediums to consider

In South Africa cultural differences have played a major role in shaping the country's media systems. Therefore, the choice of communication mediums within a community context should be considered carefully. It is not simply good enough to formulate messages per se: one has to bear the appropriate medium in mind as

well – the medium that will reach the people. As the medium is often the message, the selection or combination of mediums in formulating messages for illiterate rural communities is of great importance.

Skinner and Von Essen (1999: 100) state that when recipients are illiterate, the message must be put in simple terms. Therefore, words must mean the same to the recipient as to the sender and complex issues must be compressed into simple, clear themes, slogans, or stereotypes. The further a message has to travel, the simpler it must be.

Formulating messages through mass media

Although mass media are necessary as carriers of development messages, they alone are not sufficient. The integration of traditional communication and modern mass media, as well as the active participation of people in the development process, is necessary.

As can be expected due to the lack of technological recourses, television viewing is low (Skinner & Von Essen 1999: 393). Reflecting the low literacy level, print media in impoverished rural areas have a relatively low level of penetration and exposure is negligible as readership levels are below average (De Beer 1998: 17). Barker (2001: 11) suggests that for illiterate communities priority should be given to visual symbols and voice-orientated media as symbolism and association based on more traditional forms will be of key importance in developing future messages.

Outdoor advertising as part of print media, is really the only mass advertising medium available, apart from radio (Skinner & Von Essen 1999: 393). Barker (2001: 11) agrees that outdoor advertising provides an increasing opportunity for communicating with Third World communities and that the medium is rapidly penetrating developing urban areas.

Although not adequate, radio is the best form of mass media for the rural areas and provides a good example of the technological advances in the communication field. Deregulation of radio in South Africa resulted in the opening of hundreds of community radio stations, with many new stations that will continue to follow suit (Barker *ibid.*).

In South Africa, what is heard is more widespread than what is written and seen. According to Mersham (1997: 35), radio not only has a massive reach but it also enjoys a staggeringly high credibility among its audience. Surveys show that nine out of ten Black South Africans

depend on radio for news and most accord it substantial credibility as a source. The main strengths of radio are:

- its immediacy;
- its reach;
- the possibility to disseminate important information instantly and widely;
- its familiarity;
- the fact that it encourages communication between people;
- the fact that it creates a sense of community;
- the possibility to stimulate entrepreneurship and growth; and
- its accessibility (in this new era of broadcasting).

Community radio stations also allow communication practitioners to take into account cultural traditions such as live public shows and village debates by communicating in local languages (Barker 2001: 11).

Formulating messages through theatrical techniques or traditional communication

The illiterate person undeniably has a distinctive visual awareness. For him or her, the whole world is a vast system of visual signs and symbols waiting to be interpreted and translated. The origin of writing itself, with its slow progression from the representation of an object to a form of symbolism, shows that primitive man used his eyes for tasks that civilised man later entrusted to his ears (Moravia 1996: 50). Nevertheless, human beings in general, learn far more effectively in a creative environment and there is a vastly improved retention of messages by art and colour.

According to Barker (2001: 9), in South Africa, with the high illiteracy and diversity of mother-tongue languages, industrial theatre as a high-impact, cost-effective communication medium, is a solution that works because it:

- Taps into the cultural framework of the participants;
- Provides an emotional and then a cognitive experience;
- Facilitates recollection of the relevant messages;
- Engages the audience; and
- Utilise everyday situations.

By using techniques such as humour, parody, dramatic irony and exaggeration, one is able to deal with complex and sensitive issues within the culture. These techniques create a safe space in which people can view their shortcomings and fixed ideas. They allow people to rehearse for real life and make it safe for them to change (Skinner and Von Essen 1999: 401-403). Koekemoer (1998: 46) agrees that messages designed to amuse, entertain, provoke smiles or laughter, are very popular and considered as attention grabbing. Another variation of the industrial theatre is street theatre where actors present messages in the form of a play or drama or through song and dance (Barker 2001: 10).

As illiterate people learn to read and write, they are likely to abandon the primitive, direct language of the image in favour of the more elaborate, more indirect language of the printed word. When this happens, we can expect to see a steady decline in the influence of images (Moravia 1996: 50), but until then theatrical techniques should definitely be one of the major considerations.

The tradition of using song, dance, mime, and theatre to transfer learning (vernacular communication through theatrical techniques) is as old as the history of civilisation. In Africa, this tradition is deeply rooted in the culture of its people (Skinner & Von Essen 1999: 401). Traditional folk media are cultural resources that accumulate indigenous knowledge - experiences and expressions passed down from generation to generation (Barker 2001: 11).

According to Servaes (1999: 276), the cultural perspective has become central to the debate on communication for development.

Culture (used broadly here) includes art forms such as painting, music, architecture and sculpture, beliefs, values, attitudes, dress habits, lifestyles, tools and artefacts that people construct for various purposes. Folk media or "people's communication" is the product of local culture, and is characterised by recipient-initiated communication.

Folk media as the expressions of cultural lifestyle consists of a number of forms such as folk theatre, puppet shows, oratory, folk dances, ballads and mime. Traditionally, folk media fulfilled an important entertainment and religious role. In addition, different folk media is also designed by local groups to help in their struggle for a better life (Jayaweera 1987: 17).

The advantages of using folk media in the development process according to Jayaweera (1987: 17) are:

- Folk media is part and parcel of the rural environment and is a credible source of information;
- Folk media can be seen as so-called living media and is a good example of two-way communication;
- Themes of folk media are usually flexible and lend themselves to the incorporation of new messages;
- Folk media is relatively cheap when compared to mass media; and
- Folk media represents actuality and consists of an inexhaustible variety of forms and themes.

Knowledge of folk media should be acquired to understand the known traditional media in a particular area. It is necessary to establish the flexibility of folk media as rigid folk media is usually ritualistic and religious in nature and is inclined to reject all new messages, whereas flexible folk media will probably allow an unlimited introduction of new messages. As mentioned above, folk media can be used in the form of folk theatre, puppet shows, oratory, folk dances, ballads and mime (Barker 2001: 10).

Mass media and folk media are not by definition incompatible. According to Servaes (1999: 276) a combination of mass media and folk media can be very effective if appropriately used in an integrated fashion, according to the needs and constraints of local contexts. Integration of folk media with mass media can be to the advantage of both types of media. Mass media provide large geographical coverage, while folk media provides a limitless number of themes.

However, if the integration of folk media with mass media is not done carefully, serious disadvantages can develop. Careless integration procedures can cause folk media to lose much of its original character, while mass media may lose its credibility. An essential element of folk media is that the local people are constantly in control of this type of media. Folk media may integrate with modern mass media, but local people should remain in control of the performances.

CONCLUSION

As stated, in a work environment such as *Z PR Communication Consultants*, emphasis is placed on the formulation of messages within communication strategies. The aim in communicating with illiterate rural communities would be to focus on an integrated and well-planned communication strategy through the formulation of

effective messages. This can be accomplished by the selection of a message where the nature, quality, and the complexity are adapted to suit the relevant lower socio-economic status groups. By successfully providing relevant information, communication could enhance, even change attitudes and feelings, as well as create desires. All in all, attention to the formulation of messages is essential, as communication should have the *potential* to contribute constructively, if modestly, to Third World development in general.

Maude (1979: 218) states that people feel threatened by any form of change – largely because of the social disruption that it inevitably causes. Pace of implementation is therefore an important factor. The more the pace is forced, the higher the cost and the greater the disruption. When change is introduced gradually, piece by piece, no single innovation implies a major disruption – and resistance is reduced.

In addition, according to Renton (2000: 45), globalisation is going to have a huge impact on traditional ways of providing information. Eventually the Third World needs to embrace the information age, not reject it. Ideally, they need to do so dispassionately, taking from the new knowledge and technology that which is reasonable and useful, avoiding that which is merely appealing (Stevenson 1988: 178). However, the fact is that the rural communities or masses in South Africa do not have access to technology and will not have it for some time to come (Barker 2001: 12).

It is only by constantly analysing and seeking to avoid the mistakes and misconceptions of the past, that we can hope to make communication better serve rural populations in the future (Diaz Bordenave 1977: 107). There is an increased awareness regarding the right of all people, also illiterate people, to live in a world that is meaningful to them. As Julius Nyerere (1973: 60) notes:

People cannot be developed; they can only develop themselves. For while it is possible for an outsider to build a man's home, an outsider cannot give the man pride and self-confidence in himself as a human being. Those things a man has to create in himself by his own action. He develops himself by what he does; he develops himself by making his own decisions by increasing his understanding of what he is doing, and why; by increasing his own knowledge and ability, and by his own full participation – as an equal – in the life of the community he lives in.

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