

The Role of Research in Development Communication at the Liberian Rural Communications Network

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to "spell out and critically analyze the role of research in development communication".

After a brief discussion of the concept of development communication, the paper stresses the role of research in determining what is desirable change in a people's perception of development.

The paper zeroes in on the place of research in development communication in relation to the Liberian Rural Communication Network. The observations arising out of this case study are used to make some general recommendations for research in development communication.

Le Role de la Recherche dans le Developpement de la communication au niveau de Reseau des communications Rurales au Liberia

RESUME

Cet article se donne comme objectif de "definir et d'analyser d'une façon critique le rôle de la recherche dans la communication de developpement.

Après un bref aperçu du concept de communication de developpement, cet article met l'accent sur le rôle de la recherche dans la determination de ce qui est un changement désirable dans la perception du developpement par les gens.

L'article définit la place de la recherche dans la communication de developpement par rapport au Reseau de communication Rurale du Libéria ria. Les observations de cette etude sont utilisées pour faire quelques recommandations générales pour la recherche au communication de developpement.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to spell out and critically analyze the role of research in development communication. It is not as apparent as it might be what this role is to a number of significant actors in the arena of a development communication organization. Within such an organization the role of research and evaluation, while important to community relations, training and programming, in short an integral part of the entire operations, is not as well understood as it could be.

Even if it were that well understood within, it might be necessary to pinpoint what the role of research is for those outside of such an organization. Documentation of the supposedly critical role of research in development communication as opposed to the role of research in communication in general is then, highly necessary for development communicators purporting to represent the views of their target audiences, those for whom more development is sorely needed, more so than other communicators who cater to developed societies or the more developed sectors of society. The target group should serve as co-producers, enhancing a two-way process in this endeavour.

Another role of research in development communication (an agency such as the Liberian Rural Communications Network, LRCN being an example) is to attempt to throw light on how communication media can cater to development needs. This in our opinion is one of the least discussed or known areas of development communication. This situation is unchartered and unexplored and the establishment of projects using radio and other media for development communication are themselves colossal or giant experiments established as acts of faith or for reasons of fashionable interests.¹

Documentation of the role of research in an establishment such as LRCN is critical to understanding of Liberia's potential for development because some of the very factors that LRCN's research and thereby production will seek to understand will no doubt be of multiplier interests to other agencies for development and *vice versa*.

This tendency may not only be true of LRCN but was true of the stock-takers of communication research capabilities in

the African region who felt that in Africa problems and priorities for research should be different for other regions and considered four assumptions as guidelines:²

- 1) The fact that the overwhelming majority of Africans live in the rural setting;
- 2) The need to examine the role and effect of communication within the context of development objectives and activities;
- 3) The need to focus on different communication modalities and styles, values underlying different communication systems; and
- 4) The need to achieve regional self-reliance and the development of communication research.

The role of research in development communication clearly needs to be better understood. It is the hope of the writer of this paper that some contribution will be made in this direction and that even if new questions are raised, these will point to the very crucial requirements for research in development communication.

What is Development Communication?

There are varying views of development communication. Prior to establishing a working definition of development communication for purposes of this paper it would be instructive to examine a number of definitive views of development communication. Syed Rahim in "Communication Approaches in Rural Development",³ presents a number of views of development communication as:

- 1) The extension and community development approach which is the use of the extension service for the dissemination of useful and practical information;
- 2) The community development approach is one in which according to Rahim, there is a decentralised interpersonal communication system at the community development block level;

- 3) the ideological and mass mobilization approach where message content is predominantly ideological, and
- 4) the mass media and education approach in which the media play the dominant role in delivering informational messages to the rural population.

Development communication is the study of how to apply various kinds of communication technology and techniques to the solution of different social problems by developing countries.⁴ This view of development goes on to note that development communication has attempted to explore the application of communication principles and techniques in areas of such practical outcomes such as education, health, nutrition, family planning and agriculture.

The above view evolved from the works of Schram, Lerner and Pye⁵ which is exemplified by Lerner's communication model where urbanization leads to literacy and thereby to economic and political participation. The functions of the mass media in developing countries according to these scholars were: that the mass media can create a climate for change by changing values, attitudes, and modes of behaviour favourable to modernization or the mass media can teach new skills from literacy to hygiene to repairing a motor car among others.⁶

Increasingly over the years, there has come to be established the hope and perhaps prayer or at least messianic tendentiousness towards the media fostering development for those in the rural areas of developing countries lacking the requisite development indicators and achievements. Looking at this through the eyes of the editor of the book, *"Communication and Change: The Last Ten Years and the Next"*, the *Development Communication Report* of July, 1977, says:

Mutual framework of authors as seen by editor is a single generalization that flows from field testing of development communication theory over the past five years; it is that information communication to the rural poor can make a difference in improving the quality of their lives, but how much of a difference will depend on a combination of both technical and political factors that are vital to any significant change.

The working definition of this paper is that development communication is the utilization of mass communication for bringing about desirable changes in the lot of the broad masses of the population of those countries referred to or labelled 'developing'.

Basic to this definition of development communication is the use of the word 'desirable'. It is useful to note that it is the research undertaking in development which will determine which changes are desirable. Without the use of research it will be difficult to Ascertain what the desirable changes might be.

Why Research in Development Communication?

This question is the main one the paper will seek to respond to. Research in development communication implies a difference - that there is a distinct branch or kind of communication known as development communication. Some response to the question can be found in the work of Ra who says:⁸ "Most people seek information for specific purposes, e.g. they are receivers of some kinds of information and are not receivers for *other* kinds of information. The research task is to determine *what kinds of people* are most likely to receive what kinds of information related to *what kinds of development goals*".

Another response is given by Nkinyangi,⁹ who quoting Mattelart, says three factors account for the rising interest in communication studies:

- 1) penetration of the mass media into the audiences of developing countries and the corresponding potential of this development for reaching their development goals;
- 2) the emphasis on social reform policies called for widespread diffusion of new knowledge and techniques; and
- 3) political concerns as evidenced by American concern over structural changes in developing regions which would supposedly thwart the possibility of revolutionary take-over as in the case of Cuba.

According to Hein,¹⁰ "The early studies were focussed on the content of the mass media. Communication was seen as a means of transferring development software, science, technology, new methods of production, education Research was necessary to find out ways of presenting this software in order for it to be understood and accepted. This emphasis is clear since values and concepts were seen as the prime movers in social change Later, the focus of communication research moved to other areas (i.e., the language of the messages, the translation of ideas, purposes and intention into a systematic set of symbols)". Many of the diffusion studies as applied to communication came in the former vein of earlier studies.

Ugboajah,¹¹ speaking to the cultural and traditional bases of communication in Nigeria, mentions three types of potential audiences which roughly correspond to the city, periphery and village distinctions, as follows:

- 1) The active participatory audience-urban sector of elite/ruling class;
- 2) Pseudo-Participatory (Transients) - have abandoned rural life for urban periphery. This group has started to develop its own culture - that of the slum - but its communication needs continue to be ministered by both rural and urban sectors; and
- 3) The rest of the population including most of rural Africa, relies almost totally on traditional information sources and can be called the non-participatory audience in terms of media usage.

These categories depict audience needs to be diverse, i.e., rural, urban, professional, sports, hobbies, gender and other-determined. If what Ugboajah calls the rest of the population is the target of development communication then one can see and understand the importance of research for attempting to bring development to them through communication. For by large, while population-wise rural audiences are sparse and not as concentrated as in urban centres, the rural people in developing countries invariably represent the masses of the population which are often the most impoverished segments of these societies.

This realization has not always been the pattern as explained below:12

It is difficult to assess what research has meant for the direction of applied communication activities. Perhaps it is realistic to say that practice has come first, research afterward, not the other way round. At the same time, however, it is clear that research in different forms is given a larger role today. Research has more is given a larger role today. Research has more to offer, since the methods have been considerably refined. But in the early 1960s when research was young and weak, it was the practitioners who steered.

But with the realization of the need for research in development communication the results of studies so far are at best mixed and less satisfactory from the point of view of the researchers or the projects under study. See for example, Smith and Ray's, *"Communication Strategies for Agriculture"*, which reports:13

Dozens of studies were carried out in the 50s and 60s to determine what is better - radio, tv, print or extensionist? The answer is now clear. "What is better, is the wrong question? What is better for what purpose? And some clear answers are emerging.

Broadcasting media are better at reaching a lot of people quickly with fairly simple ideas. Print media is best at providing timely reminder of information we cannot expect someone to remember without reinforcement. And interpersonal communication, including extensionists, group meetings, community organizations and demonstrations are clearly the best way to teach and develop credibility.

In contrast to the above results, Bogue,¹⁴ reports that a study commissioned by the National Association of Broadcasters in the United States in 1945 and supervised by the famous Paul Lzarsfield showed limitations of radio's ability to educate, thus:

Inasmuch as this survey was taken at a time when television was still in its infancy, and radio was still the major medium of mass electronic communication, this finding, that about one half of the listeners never use the radio for learning, but only for the news and entertainment, is relevant for most developing countries today.

This, however, is only one part of Lzarsfield's discoveries. He also found that the people who are susceptible to radio education are those who need it less. Educated people tend to use the radio for learning, less-educated people were much less prone to do this.

It is clear that the least educated persons had also learned the least, while the most-educated persons had learned the most from radio. These statistics (which are typical of many other later studies do not imply that it is impossible to use the radio for development, but only that the radio has definite limitations for this kind of communication.

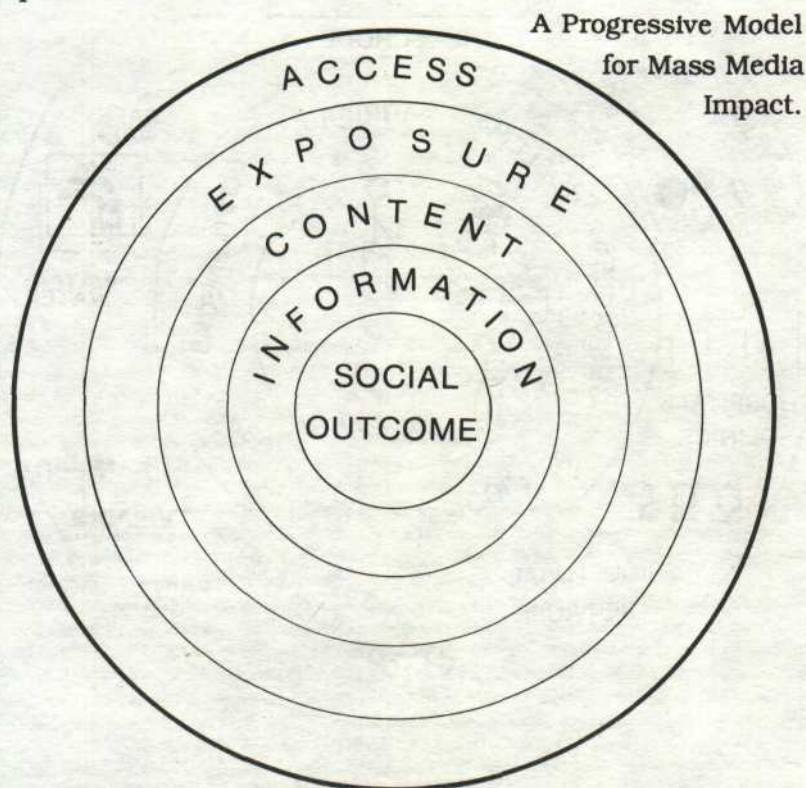
In terms of some hope in the area of research in development communication, Bogue offers: 15

The solution to the problem of overcoming the resistance of listeners to 'being educated' instead of 'being entertained' is to do both simultaneously. The strategy should be to introduce the message of social development communication into radio programmes of the type which the audience likes to hear, and to do so in such an interesting and entertaining way that learning becomes a pleasant and rewarding experience. Instead of trying to replicate the teacher-classroom situation over the air, the communicator complies with the listening preferences of his audience and "packages" his messages in forms that blend with and/or reflect the programming the audience is accustomed to accepting.

While the above is of consolation to both the producer and the researcher for ensuring listenership and programme quality, in terms of a wider impact of radio programmes for rural people and in terms of research that which is pointed out by Shore indicates: 16

What is apparent from these authors, and from the results of research in rural development over the past two decades, is the need to consider communication not as a simple independent variable but as both a dependent and independent variable in a complex set of relationships with social, economic and political structures and processes. Communication is more realistically and ancillary variable, subject to constraints of the rest of the social system.

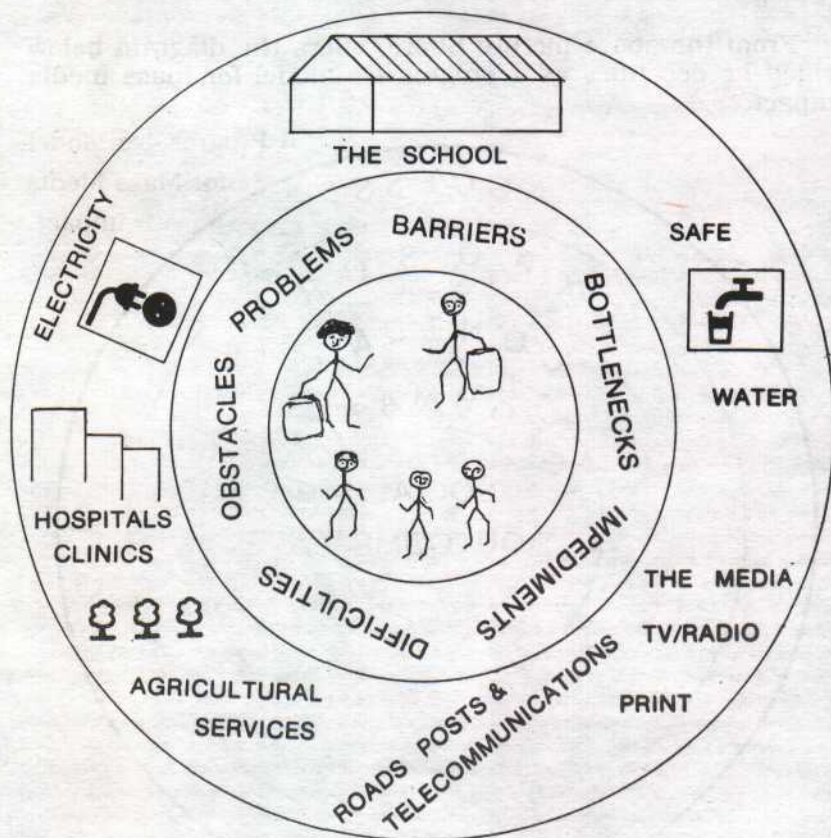
From the above picture Shore, offers the diagram below which he describes as a progressive model for mass media impact.



Note: Each stage is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the other.

With the above diagram by Shore and taking into conjunction the following by the present author, the role of research in development communication takes on the perspective of the problems and the limitations as alluded to by the diagrams.

THE RURAL POPULATION AND ITS CONNECTION TO FACILITIES BY MEDIA



BARRIERS/PROBLEMS

ROLE OF MEDIA

Languages
-Traditions/Customs
-Environmental Support
-Technical
-Logistical, etc.

-Motivating
-Integrating
-Coordinating
-Following up, etc

Further it becomes the task of research to attempt to account for the ideal and the real, taking these two models into account.

Three reports on the success and failure of educational media projects are of interest here:

One report is given by Quarmyne who declares:¹⁸ "Going through a list of some 23 projects which have been labelled as educational radio projects in Africa over the past two decades, there are only five which I am able to identify as having successfully fulfilled their objectives or as being in the process of doing so. Five out of 23 is not an impressive score".

Also, in the same vein, it is reported: "A number of studies have examined individual programmes and short-term experimental projects, but there is little evidence that much progress has been made towards establishing participatory media systems in the Third World".¹⁹

Radio Bahai of Otavalo, Ecuador, has been cited as a successful educational radio project,²⁰ while McAnany and Mayo,²¹ cite Radio Santa Mario in the Dominican Republic, the Nicaraguan Radio Mathematics Project, the Tanzanian Radio Study Campaign and the Indian Satellite TV Projects as relatively successful projects.

On the 25th Anniversary of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Sprague notes in this optimistic vein:²²

Approximately fifteen years ago the Office of Education in the Bureau for Science and Technology (then Technical Assistance Bureau) determined that communications technology could play a vital role in delivering information and providing instruction in developing countries. Beginning with pilot demonstrations in primary school mathematics and

nutrition education, the programme has developed into full-scale operations in almost every sector.

Emphasis upon the systematic use of media began with a thorough analysis of the social and economic conditions that developing countries would face for the foreseeable future. It was readily apparent that well-trained, fully-qualified teachers, trainers, extension agents, and administrators would not be available in sufficient numbers, especially in rural areas, to implement development programmes. As a result, many people would never receive the education, training or information they need to improve the physical conditions of their lives. In addition, many of the development programmes would be of such uneven quality that even if the information or training reached the intended audience, it could be ineffective and consequently wasteful of scarce human and fiscal resources.

Countries as culturally diverse as Honduras, Kenya, and Nepal have successfully demonstrated with AID support that communications technology can overcome the barriers of distance and isolation and make up for the scarcity of trained personnel. Children have been successfully taught reading and mathematics, mothers have learned how to administer oral rehydration therapy to sick infants, universities have extended the reach of talented professors to distant campuses where students would otherwise rarely have the opportunity to hear them, farmers have learned how and when to use fertilizer - all by the systematic and judicious use of communications technology.

It is our task now to inform governments, donors, and all who are concerned with development, that a tremendous tool exists which demonstrates its effectiveness and affordability if properly designed and implemented. That is the task that lies ahead.

Within the framework of the diagrams and the above references, the Liberian Rural Communications Network, a development radio network was established. It has the goals of fostering:

- 1) the increased utilization by the rural population of existing government services;
- 2) the expansion of these services to a greater portion of the rural population;
- 3) increased communications between villages and the local, regional and national governments;
- 4) increased involvement and participation in local and national efforts.

Research in Development Communication and the LRCN

Some Areas of Research in Development Communication

Some areas of research in development communication are needs analysis/assessment; audience research; formative programme research utilizing feedback systems; impact assessment, community studies; among others.. A brief discussion of some of these follows:

Needs Assessment is the process of finding problem areas or deficiencies which exist at the national or local levels from gathering data from the audience than can be translated into programme objectives.

Audience Research provides information on the size, population, language, interests, attitudes and views of the audience. The danger of the broadcaster transmitting his own views or that of his social milieu is avoided and a two way relationship with the audience is assured.

Formative Evaluation is done continuously to ensure programme quality. It is different from summative evaluation in that it occurs before the end of a programme or project. The use of listening groups whose selection is based on their representation of the target audience is instructional in formative evaluation. Other feedback systems such as radio clubs, use of programme advisory committees, suggestions and letter boxes or mini-surveys/ratings, could greatly assist in formative research and evaluation.

Impact Assessment gauges the extent to which a programme causes changes in the desired direction. It implies that there are specified operationally defined goals and criteria for success. A programme that has impact is one that achieves some change towards the desired objectives.²³

The Importance of Research for LRCN

Research in development communication is important at the Liberian Rural Communications Network because the whole conceptualization or reason for being of the network is development promotion, that is the large question of whether LRCN will in fact significantly impact on the masses of rural Liberian and fill or bridge a kind of gap that existing development and government agencies cannot attend to, not unmindful of the limitations and exigencies referred to by this paper earlier.

Research in development communication is also important at LRCN because in order to make a difference in programming, research is one dimension that needs to be highly relied on for better programmes oriented to development needs of the people and existing realities.

Research is important in a development communication agency such as LRCN because it is research which will show graphically what LRCN is doing, i.e., whether its programming is successfully or not. Research is further important to LRCN because its clients, development agencies want to see whether their programmes were successful or not and their impact in changing behaviours, attitudes, interests, etc. in the desired direction. As such from the client or development agency point of view, research will be instructive. Research is further important at LRCN because as result of its efforts quite a number of researchable problems with implications for LRCN's work will emerge.

Formative programme research is important at LRCN because this is the kind of research that will greatly affect programme quality. Also basic and baseline research are important at LRCN because we need these to do further research and inform our work.

Research at LRCN is basically geared to understanding the target audience and the context or environment of the target group. Some examples of these studies would be studies on the population languages and customs or traditions as seen through ethnographic research on the target groups. As she undertakes these research projects, new insights, methods, etc. will hopefully emerge.

Evaluation at LRCN would be not only an assessment of the programming and production capacity of LRCN through

transmission of the correct messages to the target group. It would or rather should go further to evaluate the research done of itself as applied to production as well as the technical and other input lent to production at LRCN.

However the most critical question for research in development communication in our opinion is whether there is research which explicitly shows that development can be enhanced by communication.

With reference to the project document, the role of research and evaluation would enhance the success of LRCN by three means:

- 1) Its knowledge of the needs of the rural people of Liberia;
- 2) Its knowledge of whether LRCN programming has a significant audience which is being influenced in the desired direction by the programming; and
- 3) Its ability to alter programming as soon as it learns that current efforts are not achieving the desired results.

Continuing, the project document elaborates:²⁴

It is through research of various kinds that LRCN will learn of rural people's needs, develop programming which contributes to rural development, and refine the programming until its objectives are met. In the absence of research, LRCN can only guess at, or arbitrarily decide upon, what the needs of the rural people are. The LRCN's programming decisions will, therefore, be based on empirical information and a rational decision-making process provided by a systematic and continuous feedback mechanism. The result will be a network which will be well managed and responsive to rural Liberians.

Conclusions

The present paper has focussed on the topic, "*The Role of Research in Development Communication at LRCN*". The paper has striven to bring some understanding to the establishment of the vital need for research in an entity such as LRCN. The paper has discussed the purpose and rationale for research in development communication; elaborated on

what development communication is; dwelled at length on reasons for research in development communication and touched on areas of research in development communication while focussing on research in development communication at LRCN.

Though the role of research in development communication was at first obscure and dominated more by practitioners; the need for research has become increasingly more pronounced and critical. Of the many projects established, it is research which is shedding light on which projects are succeeding and which are not. The objectives of the projects and the fulfillment of these should both be determined by research.

LRCN's impact results for example, after one year of broadcast, will hopefully attract more users to the system, serve to guarantee its viability, as well as lend insights to educational TV in Liberia, already in the pipeline and assist in other development media efforts.

The Liberian Rural Communications Network can bring to cognizance new methods, experiences, etc. in development communication from its own work while at the same time, it can impact on national development, unity, language questions, literacy, among others.

With the findings from this paper showing that much more research needs to be done than has been done and that the proper research questions for development communication and communicators are still being fashioned, the need for research becomes much more apparent. The role of the Liberian Rural Communications Network in this tremendous task is no less difficult.

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