# *Preparing Agencies to Receive Media Messages on Rural Development*

by Sybil L. James*

## *Abstract*

This article draws attention to the cognitive need of the communication receiver, and to the competence and intellectual skills that ought to be acquired if the target audience in rural development communication is to derive maximum benefit from their positive mental state and readiness for learning. It examines the concept of development in the African context, the cognitive abilities required for reading, listening and responding, and how these relate to development. It suggests instructional goals for curricula aimed at preparing message receivers for effective participation in rural development programmes.

## *Résumé*

Cet article attire l'attention sur le besoin cognitif du récepteur, les compétences ainsi que les capacités intellectuelles qui sont nécessaires dans le demaine de la communication pour le développement rural pour l'audience visée tire profit de leur état de connaissance et de leur aptitude à apprendre.

L'auteur analyse le concept du développement dans une perspective de contexte africain, les capacités intellectuelles requises pour lire, écouter et régair. Il examine également comment ils sont liés au développement. Il suggère enfin les buts pédagogiques pour la mise au point des programmes en vue de préparer les récepteurs à une participation effectuer aux programmes de développement rural.

*Sybil L. James is Head of the Department of Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

The question of the quality and type of preparation an audience requires, in order to receive media messages efficiently, should be a major concern of communication educators. This paper draws attention to the cognitive needs of the message receiver. It discusses the capabilities and intellectual skills that ought to be acquired for the target audiences to derive maximum benefit from their mental alertness and their readiness for learning.

Underlying this discussion are three basic assumptions. These are:

(a) Intellectual processing of the media message is indispensable to successful communication.

(b) The demands placed on the receptive communication skills (listening and reading) by transmitted and projected media are different from those required by the print media.

(c) Judging from the overwhelming research evidence highlighting deficiencies in reading and listening skills at all levels of the formal education system, it is reasonable to assume that a similar deficiency exists in non-formal education environments.

This paper will therefore:

1. Examine the concept of development within the African environment.

2. Discuss the cognitive abilities required for reading, listening and responding and the extent to which these abilities facilitate development.

3. Suggest instructional goals for curricula aimed at preparing message receivers for effective participation in rural development programmes.

### The Concept of Development within the African Environment

Development is a socio-political concept, the interpretation of which varies with the political leanings of the interpreter. In practical terms and for the purpose of this paper, it is a condition that is tied to the state of the society. Sears (1970), for example, provides us with the westernized view of this concept when he says that it is characterised by increased economic output in all sectors of the economy, and the distribution of this output in a fashion that would enhance the quality of life of the mass of the population. Rodney(1982), on the other hand, sees development in terms of the cognitive and affective growth of the individual (a growth which will, in turn, lead to his material well-being), and the same time in terms of the social and political self-sufficiency of the group. He says:

At the level of the individual development, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity and self-discipline, responsibility

and material well-being ..... At the group level, it implies increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships (pp. 9-10).

The development goals set by any country, therefore, and the strategies employed for attaining these are determined by the concept of development held by the recognised change agents in the society.

In the context of the developing countries in Africa where poverty, limited literacy and political instability are major factors impeding social economic development, it seems to me that a structuralist approach to the problem is needed. The structualists (Dehrendoff,1939; Heilbroner 1963; Preblack, 1970) recognise that social organizations are constantly in a process of change. The direction of this change is determined by one intervening force or another. These forces normally have conflicting interests and are coercive in nature. Under these circumstances, the survival of the society is made possible by institutional constraints and the coercion of some by others.

Since conflict itself could be a creative force, the educationally well equipped would be able to use it to their advantage and thus enhance their own well-being and that of the entire society. Education in general and communication education in particular must shoulder the responsibility of equipping the target population with the materials to overcome the constraints as well as the conflicts.

Ironically, both the conflicting and constraining elements use the mass media as their channel of communication. All segments of the community will therefore be affected for good or evil. But there are channels other than the mass media involved in the diffusion of knowledge and the influencing of human behaviour. It is, therefore, necessary to examine these other agents of information diffusion and human communication.

## Other Agents of Human Communication and their Relevance to Rural Development

For the purposes of this paper, two broad classifications will suffice: the interpersonal and the institutional. Human beings consciously as well as unconsciously operate at these two levels with the one mode constantly reinforcing the other. Schramn (1971) lists the communication tasks and identifies the implementation code showing the specific facilitators within each category. He says that knowledge of one's environment is diffused at the interpersonal level by informed persons in the society and at the institutional level by the mass media; that socialization of new members is done by siblings, parents, teachers, and other professionals at the

interpersonal level, and by the school system, the educational media and the publishing houses at the institutional level.

Persuasion, social and political control, or whipping up a consensus can be achieved through the efforts of influential leaders and agitators at the interpersonal level, and through government organizations and institutions with their media and propaganda machinery at the institutional level. Communication education, therefore, involves, the preparation of a given target audience to participate meaningfully in the act of sharing. Its goals should include helping the learner to become sophisticated message senders and receivers (Boyer 1978); to grow into sensitive designers of communication environments; and to become able users of a variety of communication media.

An examination of the course content of departments of communication in Nigeria, and of books and other instructional materials reveals that writers, teachers and instructional practitioners focus upon how to win audience patronage, how to persuade the receiver to accept or not to accept a particular point of view; how to frame a message to capture audience imagination; how to block out "noise" so that the message may reach its target without interference. But there is absence of similar type of literature or course content to teach the receiver how to protect himself from the barrage of media messages trying to impinge on his consciousness; how to decide when it is in his interest to block out "noise"; how to resist the ploys of senders and their messages.

My position is that despite the claims of scholars that communication is an act of sharing, in the contemporary media arena, the receiver is the junior partner, the cinderella left at home while the other siblings go off to protect their own interest, often at her expense.

If rural development is to be meaningful a new type of partnership must be forged, one in which the message-receivers, like the message-senders, are equally equipped to pick, choose and refuse, to consciously select or leave alone, to accept or reject, to agree to participate or not to participate. These, to my mind, are communication skills that the receiver needs to protect himself from media exploitation.

## *Message Senders and Receivers in Rural Communities:*

Rural communities in Africa have always had their indigenous interpersonal and institutional mediation channels. The town crier, for example, passed on important messages to the mass of the people. He was delegated to speak and therefore spoke with the voice of authority. In this

type of environment the inhabitants accepted without question, confident that their welfare and that of the community was being protected. One is tempted to argue, therefore, that people thus conditioned to accept without questioning will transfer this blind acceptance of media messages to the contemporary mass media arena where one must be able to discriminate if one is to survive. It is the responsibility of communication educators in Africa, therefore, to capture the spirit of the rural communities, focus upon their welfare and qualify like the town crier to be the voice of the community. Even more importantly, they must teach receivers to become *not* passive acceptors, but critical appraisers of media messages. This level of competence requires a number of cognitive skills.

## *The target audience of rural development programmes:*

The inhabitants of rural communities in Africa could, for the sake of convenience, be divided into two categories - the older group who are products of the oral tradition and the print culture, and the younger group, the productsof the video (audiovisual) culture. It is upon this latter group that the foundations for rural development should be laid. Carefully planned, formal education programmes are, therefore, of paramount importance.

The children in these communities, isolated as they may seem, will be, if not the products, the victims of today's technological age. They must therefore be equipped to be competent communicators adaptable to changing circumstances and modes of communication.

The older group comprises person who need either continuing education or functional education. Its members, being the product of an earlier age, will respond to strategies which were born out of that era. Communication educators should take this into consideration when planning rural development programmes. Other factors that should not be ignored when planning for this group are the traditional values and geographical location since it is assumed that one's exposure to contemporary values is related to the accessibility of his home to the urban centres. Though not yet supported by empirical data, I hold the view that many sensitive issues will not be readily accepted when presented through the mass media channels. Topics like family planning methods and female circumcision, for example, are too personal for the video channels. If they are viewed at all, affront and shock will cloud the issue and ruin the message. The slower, more systematic approach, would, I think, yield greater dividends among this older group.

In summary, therefore, the age of the target population, the extent of its exposure to contemporary society, and the norms of its own groups are factors that should be considered when choice of media channel is being determined. The gentle "unfreezing" of the community through interpersonal communication should precede attempts at communicating through the mass media.

## Educational Objectives and Competencies Required:

The aspect of communication education which focuses on the receiver should include among its objectives, the following:

(a) Providing the learners with the techniques and experiences which will enable them to become appraisers of ideas.
(b) Creating the environment which will encourage learners to seek out the message source.
(c) Providing learners with skills which will enable them analyse the content of the message.
(d) Providing the opportunities for them to make appropriate responses within the framework of their own goals and those of the community.

## Competencies required of the message receiver

Print by its nature has a certain permanency; messages passed on through this medium are received at a much slower rate than those sent through the video or audio media. Print messages, therefore, tend to be considered more enduring and hence more important. Messages passed on through the audiovisual media, on the other hand, are more fleeting and less valued. Development planners, therefore, mindful of the constraints of time, cost, size of population, and distance, should utilise what is best in both types of media.

Efficient receiving of printed messages calls for much more than functional literacy. It requires the higher level reading skills of interpreting, evaluating, synthesizing, applying, and making personal judgements. Since the reader, through the printed page is in direct contact with the author, he is able to store the message, retrieve it at later time, and study it at his leisure. The likelihood of his making an appropriate response is therefore much greater. The video and audio media, on the other hand, call for listening literacy which involves the ability to discriminate between form and content presenter and author, content and presenter, and make appropriate responses to each of these variables.

Often, especially in the video presentations, the receiver is distanced from the author by a barrage of media technologists and thus denied the opportunity of making his interpretation of the author's message. Boyer (1978) expresses this concern rather succinctly when he says:

To educate our students wisely, we need courses in how to undeceive ourselves; on ways to spot stereotypes; on ways to recognise a premise, isolate a cliche; on ways to analyse fact from propaganda, analysis from banter; and to sort out important news from "coverage." In a time when the "novelization" of the show sells more than the novel on which the show was based, we must educate our students on how to sort out and evaluate the messages they receive .

One of the major goals of communication education for the receiver, therefore, should be to make the message receiver not merely a target of thoughts, but an appraiser of ideas; not a sponge soaking up onions but a detective able and willing to trace the source of the message. This accomplished, he would then be able to apply the same critical evaluation skills used in the reading of print.

Communication acts to which the receiver must respond include accusing, asserting, denying, describing, explaining, expressing, insisting, questioning and threatening. The competencies required to respond adequately to these are outlined in Table 1 below.

Whether the mass media or interpersonal channels are used, message receivers who possess the requisite competencies will be in a position to make intelligent responses and shoulder part of the responsibility for their social and economic progress.

## Summary

Communication is "an act of sharing" in which the receiver is not a passive decoder of information, but one whose psychological, sociological, socio-political, and economic make-up determines the extent to which he is able to participate meaningfully in the communication act. The perceptual field of the receiver, according to Anderson and Barry (1970) includes communication skills, attitudes, knowledge of the socio-cultural system, needs and other skills, but more specifically on the receptive skills of listening and reading as they pertain to listening literacy. Educational objectives have been suggested and the skills and competencies required for the attainment of these have been listed. The paper also recognises the need for empirical data on the relationship between the type of media used, the nature of the topic being discussed,and receiver response.

## Table 1

### Competencies required of message receivers

| Competency | Related Skills |
| --- | --- |
| Isolating the content from the form of the message or the style of the presenter. | identifying the topic/subject of the message.<br>recognising the specific aspects of the topic being singled out for discussion.<br>identifying ( where appropriate) the setting within which the message is placed.<br>● determining the originator of the message. |
| Understanding the content. | ● noting facts and details<br>● grasping the main idea or central thought.<br>● following instructions and directions.<br>● distinguishing between ideas and facts.<br>● recognising relationships, e.g. cause-effect; whole-part comparison-contrast sequence or chronology. |
| Evaluation the content. | ● distinguishing fact from opinion information from persuation news from propaganda analysis from banter. |
| Evaluating the style (form) of the message. | ● identifying the following thinking processes:<br>theorizing;   generalizing<br>classifying;   predicting;<br>concluding;   evaluating. |
| Evaluating the motives of the sender. | ● recognise attempts to arouse the imagination; coerce; control; incite; inform; persuade; prevaricate; propagandize. |

## REFERENCES

ANDERSON, Robert and T.F. Barry (1979) *Advertising and Management.* Columbus, Ohio. Charles Merril Publishing Co.

BASSET, R.E., N. Whittington & A.S. Spicer (1978). "Assessing communication literacy. The basics in speaking and listening for High School graduates.", *Communication Education* 27: 4 Nov. 293 - 303.

BLUMLER, T.G. & E. Katz (1974) *The Uses of Mass Communication.* London. Sage Publications.

BOYER, E.L. (1978) "Communication: message senders and receivers." *Communication Education* 27:4 271 - 276

CAREY, J.W. and Kreiling (1975) "Popular culture and uses of gratification." in Blumler and Katz. *The Uses of Mass Communication* 225 - 248.

CHAFFES, Steven (ed.) (1975) *Political Communication: Issues and Strategies.* London. Sage Publications.

DEHRENDORF, R. (1958) "Out of Utopia: Toward a reorientation of sociological analysis." *American J. of Sociology* 64. 115 - 127.

ELLIOTT, Philip (1974) "Uses and gratification research." in Blumler and Katz. *The Uses of Mass Communication. London Sage Publications.*

GERBNER, George (ed.) (1977) *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures.* N.Y. John Wiley and Sons.

HAVENS, A.E., *Methodological Issues in the Study of Development* (19  ) Madison University of Wisconsin Land Tenure Center.

HEILBRONER, R.L. (1963) The Great Ascent: *The Struggle for Development in our Time.* N.Y. Harper and Row cited in E. Havens Methodological Issues in the Study of **Development.**

KLINE, F.C.; P.C. Miller & Andrew J. Morrison (1974) "Adolescent and Family Planning Information: An exploration of Audience needs and Media Effects." In J.G. Blumler & E. Katz (ed.) *The Uses of Mass Communication* pp. 113 - 136.

KATZ, E.J. Blumler & M. Gurevitch (1974) "Utilization of mass communication by the individual." in Blumler and Katz (ed.) *The Uses of Mass Communication,* pp. 19 - 32.

MC GUIRE, Wm. J. (1974) "Psychological motives in communication gratification." in Blumler and Katz. *The Uses of Mass Communication* 167 - 196.

MC QUAIL, D. and M. Gurevitch. "Explaining audience behaviour. Three approaches considered." *in Blumler and Katz The Uses of Mass Communication,* 287-302.

PREBISCH, R. (1976) *Change and Development: Latin America's Great Task.* Washington. Inter-American Development Bank in E. Havens Methodological Issues in the Study of **Development.**Wisconsin Madison University of Wisconsain Land Tenure Center.

RODNEY, Walter (1982) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Enugu. Ikenga Press.

WOMAN, John M. (1978) "Needed Research in speaking and listening literacy." *Communication Education*, 27: 4 Nov. 310 - 315.

SEARS, D. (1970) "The Meaning of Development, *Agricultural Development Council Papers and Reprints.*

SCHRAMM, W. (1971:   ) *The Nature of Communication Between Humans*. Urbana. University of Illinois Press.