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COMMUNICATION -- PAIN OR PLEASURE?

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Anyone who thinks the communications game can't be fun shouldn't be in it — and I mean fun for everybody concerned, especially the people one is trying to communicate with. Social development is a serious matter, but you can't promote popular participation in social development by boring people.

I suppose Martin Luther was as serious about what he was doing as anyone who ever lived. He made a point of setting sacred hymns to singable German tunes, some of them based on popular love songs, for use in the new service he devised. I always thought the quip: "Why should the Devil have all the good tunes?" was Luther's. It turns out, according to the Penguin Dictionary of Quotations, to have been coined by Rowland Hill, an 18th Century English itinerant preacher. Luther is said to have once thrown an inkwell at the Devil, however, so I doubt that he would have been above stealing tunes from him.

Bertrand Russell, attempting to draw up a list of basic, categorical needs — that is to say needs that can't be explained in terms of other needs — started with the obvious ones: food, shelter, sex. Then he added another: entertainment (other than sex, presumably). He recalled a story about traders wintering north of the Great Wall in China. They got bored and began gambling. Some would gamble away their money, food and clothing to die of hunger and exposure. Boredom was a worse threat than death.

A survey of Bangkok's Klong Toey slum — a very evil slum indeed, built over stagnant water and almost devoid of social and sanitary amenities — revealed that 22 per cent of the households had television. Entertainment obviously ranked high in the order of the slum dwellers' "felt needs", as the sociologist would say.

I don't think I have to labour the contention that the best way to deliver a message is in an entertaining way. The advertising industry knows this full well and so do successful politicians. Why is it, then, that so much of the stuff put out by health educators, nutrition educators, and others is so deadly — so earnest, so wooden, so boring?

Most of it ostensibly aimed at village people who love to dance, sing and tell stories. Can anyone imagine that this is the best way to reach them?

Why do social development communicators so often shy away from entertainment? I ask this question without malice, and I would be the first to admit that the United Nations Agencies are often the worst offenders.

I have two theories. One is that people engaged in social development tend to acquire a puritanical attitude toward their work. Poverty, hunger and disease are no laughing matter. Therefore, it is thought there is no time for fun and games and only a deadly serious approach is permissible in social development communications. This may be a hangover from nineteenth century attitudes toward the poor in countries like Britain, where poverty was equated with moral slackness and the poor were uplifted through moral lectures.

My other theory is that we are still suffering from the divorce between art and teaching that began about the time of the Renaissance in Europe. The early church frescoes in Italy were designed to teach the Bible stories to illiterate people and in these frescoes art, entertainment and instruction were completely integrated. There was no such thing as art for art's sake. That was a concept that flowered in the 19th Century, when the divorce between art and instruction became complete, at least so far as the fine arts were concerned. Think of the visual glory of Impressionist painting, its only message an aesthetic one, and then think of the education institutions of the same period where the three R's were taught "with the aid of a hickory stick."

The Victorian critic Matthew Arnold, himself the son of the Headmaster of Rugby, faulted Chaucer for his lack of "high seriousness." I think Arnold was all wet, as we used to say about people we didn't like in my home town when I was a kid. I think anyone who tells you that serious messages cannot be propagated in an entertaining way is all wet. And this goes equally for anyone who tells you that the artist should work to create beauty alone — or whatever they say now that beauty is out of fashion — or that art with a social purpose is somehow degrading.

Short of holding a gun to their heads, the most effective way of getting messages across to people is to do it in a way that entertains them. I don't mean we should "sugar coat the pill." That's a common communications expression, and I don't like it. It implies that the pill — the message — is unpleasant and that it has to be disguised. We don't want to disguise the message, any more than the old Italian painters I spoke of wanted to disguise the Biblical message: we want to dramatize it, to present it in moving terms that our audience will respond to. Entertainment means different things for different audiences. To a mathematician it may be an elegant proof; to a village audience a puppet show. But it always implies pleasure and a sense of participation.

We have a few examples here of what I consider to be good project support communications items. First, I've got some gospel hymns on tape that I'll play to you; I think you'll agree they combine message and entertainment with a vengeance. I have a Kiswahili nutrition song commissioned by our unit and written and performed by the Super Volcano Orchestre in Tanzania. It made the top ten last year in East Africa.

The play by Mr. Kabwo Kasoma that was staged at our opening session, a play about communications, is itself an example of using a dramatic format to communicate an idea. If you got the play's message — and I think most of you did — a good part of the reason was because it entertained you and hence held your attention.

Another example of combined entertainment and instruction is a short animated film we've brought along which was made in India to teach kids one of the letters of the Hindi alphabet. The idea was frankly lifted from the American Sesame Street series, produced there by the Children's Television Laboratory. Sesame Street has been criticized in the Soviet Union and some other countries for inculcating values that these countries consider undesirable. What we tried to show by this little animated film was that the Sesame Street technique could be adapted to different cultures. Incidentally, I lived in India for more than five years and never learned more than three or four Hindi letters. The one I learned easiest was the letter I learned from this film.

One social communicator who's doing it right is Mr. Herbert Mokhachane of the Lesotho Agricultural Information Service. Mr. Mokhachane runs a thrice weekly disc-jockey programme with tips about farming stuck in the way commercials are inserted in ordinary disc-jockey programmes. It's a simple format and an economical one and it's effective. If we ever get around to giving a PSC award for this region, Mr. Mokhachane will be my personal nominee.

The power of the entertainment media is tremendous. About twenty years ago a popular male star was featured in a Hindi movie set in a monsoon-drenched village. He played his part with his trousers rolled up a notch or two. Within days of the film's release, the young dandies of Bombay and Delhi were going around with their trousers rolled up, even though there was no rain in either city at the time. If the same film star had been shown munching a carrot, the young blades might have thought it smart to go around eating carrots, too.

Radio Sri Lanka, with the help of UNICEF, is now working on scripts and pilots for a rural family life serial, something like The Archers in England, whose aim will be to spread modern ideas of health care for children. The idea is a natural, really. The serial will follow the lives of a small group of characters experiencing the "heartaches, cares and joys" of family life in a village. Almost any health or nutrition message can be introduced into such a dramatic format. Audiences identify closely with characters in domestic radio serials; and such "soap operas", as they are called in America (where they were originally sponsored by manufacturers of products which "get your clothes whiter than white") are relatively cheap to produce.

A few words about folk media. Conferences on communications for development often recommend that greater attention should be given to traditional media. At first glance this seems to be a good idea, but I have some reservations. It is difficult to separate form and content in folk art: in the best folk art it is probably impossible. And in content folk art is conservative. The leading character in a folk tale is typically someone who succeeds for a while in turning the social order topsy-turvy but who gets his come-uppance in the end. In other words innovation fails. This is because the social function of traditional art is to transmit traditional values.

In an age when change is not only desirable but necessary, folk materials will have to be very extensively modified if they are to promote change. It is perhaps significant that in spite of all the talk that has been devoted to the subject, it is rather hard to find successful instances of the use of folk media for development. I stand to be corrected on this, but it's my impression. Most of the examples that are cited turn out on closer analysis to be pseudo-folk materials, and perhaps that is the best we can do. Or perhaps the very best we can do is to plunge in and take advantage of local versions of the newer popular arts that are emerging in our electronic age, like the rock musical.

Most of you are administrators, of course, not media people. That's why we invited you here: you're the ones who can initiate project-support communications work in your various national ministries. The message I want to get across to you is that when you're planning a PSC programme, you should get your national playwrights, artists, song writers, pop singers and actors in on the act from the start. These are the people whose livelihood depends on their ability to communicate and entertain, and they can help you.

I haven't been in Africa long, which is why I've used so many non-African examples in this talk, but I've been here long enough to realize that the continent is bursting with creative talent. Use it. Exploit it. A lot of ministries or departments have an unfortunate graphic artist hidden away somewhere. He's usually down in a basement studio waiting for somebody to send him a note saying: "Draw a glass of milk." That's not the way to use creative talent. Get them in on the act from the start. Get them to help you plan your programme.

And remember two things. Rowland Hill's question — so pertinent that we are tempted to attribute it to someone greater — "Why should the Devil have all the good tunes?" And the well established empirical proverb that "You catch more flies with sugar than with vinegar."

Thank you.



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Notes

**John Balcomb was at the time Chief, Communications and Information Service, UNICEF, Nairobi
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