

PSC Paper No. 22

-----  
"The Communication Process.  
The Role Played by the Audience"  
-----

by

Shawki M. Barghouti  
Communication Specialist  
Planning for Better Family Living  
FAO, Nairobi, Kenya.

For an International Workshop on  
"Communication for Social Development"  
held at the University of Zambia, Lusaka  
29th April - 10th May, 1974

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS  
THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE AUDIENCE

Communication specialists tend to associate communication with change. There is a reason. The word communication is used here in a very broad sense to include all procedures by which one mind may affect another. This, of course, involves not only the written word and the oral message, but also music and folklore art. Communication means the transmission of an idea from a sender to a receiver. This activity is the fundamental social process. Through this process, we can study the relationship that exists between two persons, or between one person and many, or between one object (such as a picture) and one or more persons. Bearing in mind that the basic function of communication is to relate people to each other, the objective of social communication can be discussed from two points of view: the sender's and the receiver's. From the sender's point of view the objective of communication may be to: inform; teach; please; propose or persuade. From the receiver's point of view the objective of communication may be to: understand; learn; enjoy; dispose or decide. 1/

Let us look at the motorist who is driving a car along a highway. He sees a sign which reads: "Dangerous curve - 40 kilometers an hour". The driver slows down. He has acted on the message which was delivered to him by the traffic department through a sign on the highway. His reaction to the warning is based on his previous experience with a similar situation. (He learnt to respect traffic regulations, or he was involved in an accident before, or he was fined by the police for high speed). The same could be said about a nutrition worker who is talking to a group of rural families about a nutrition problem. The reaction of the families is based on their experience with the problem she is talking about as well as on their experience with the field worker herself.

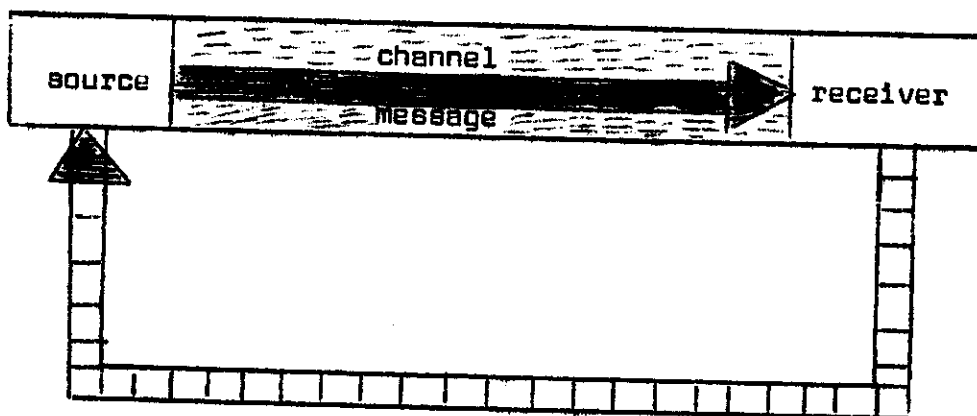
Essentially, communication is a process of interaction between a sender and a receiver, where the sender intends to alter the receiver's knowledge of an idea or to change his attitude towards it. The way in which the receiver reacts to the idea may subsequently be used by the sender to modify his further messages. This process is continuous over time, never ending and never beginning. Rogers describes the communication process as an activity that should always begin and end with the word "and" implying that no process ever begins as there is always something preceding it. No experience ever ends; something always follows it. 2/

The description of communication as a process is applied whether communication takes place between individuals through traditional personal channels or through more modern channels that have been brought about by new industry. Technology has brought us the printing press, the camera and the motion picture, radio and television, to extend man's senses and expand his ability to acquire information. There are also social institutions that function as centres of information like the school, government agencies, extension departments, commercial firms and so on. However, though we may choose a diagram or a model to describe the human communication process, we must remember that the process itself is more complicated than any picture or description we are likely to put down.

### The Element of the Communication Process:

When we look at a situation where communication takes place, we can identify the following elements: a source of a message, a message, a receiver, a channel, a receiver's reaction to the message (effect and feedback). Feedback should not be confused by effect. Feedback is that kind of information that comes back to the sender from the receiver.

Situation in which communication  
takes place



A simplified model of the communication process  
(Adapted from Rogers' "Communication Strategies")

The receiver may say, "I do not understand", or "this bores me", or, "this is great". While effect could be seen as the changes in the receiver's knowledge or action as a result of the message he has just received.

If it is so simple to describe the process of communication, what is it that is so important about such a process? Are there problems in our communication efforts to get a message across to an intended audience with the desired effect? Yes, there are many failures in our communication efforts. There are numerous educational campaigns in agriculture, nutrition, health and family planning that failed because of some malfunctioning in the communication process.

Communication specialists have provided us with useful suggestions to better understand the causes of such failures. These suggestions can be grouped in three major areas: the relationship between the sender and the receiver; the social and cultural background of the sender and the receiver; and, the processes of perception and exposure to the message.

### The Relationship between the Sender and the Receiver:

For a sender to get his message across to the intended receiver, he needs to clear four hurdles: to attract attention; to have it accepted; to have it understood and correctly interpreted; and - so the communicator hopes - stored away for later use.

It should be noted that the need for information may determine the position of the communicator on the communication process. The power of the communicator and his ability to influence the receiver's decision may well be a result of how important the message is to the receiver.

The tremendous power the mass media have in shaping political and social institutions in developing countries stems partly from the ability of the media to inform and to satisfy the audience's need for information. Also the political and social status of the sender may partly determine how people react to a given message. Political and social issues receive more attention and have more credibility when a national leader or an influential figure presents them to the public. Professional communicators try to utilize the prominent figures in a given community to advertise an idea or a product. The use of movie stars and celebrities in advertising campaigns to attach some importance to the product being used is very common.

The tendency among people to attend to messages that are presented to them by important figures makes it difficult sometimes for the extension agent to attract the attention to his message without some help from influential people in the community.

### The Receiver is an Active Component in the Communication Process:

Communication campaigns traditionally have thought of the audience as a sitting target; once it is hit by the message, the audience will act in the direction intended by the communicator. The assumption that the audience is passive has been held by practitioners in advertising and propaganda to fit their model of one-way influence: the communicator can do what he pleases to manipulate or to persuade the audience.

The results of advertising campaigns have indicated that this model does not correspond to the situation in the real world. We have been told by the results of cigarette promotion campaigns for example, that these campaigns do not influence more than 2-3% of the market. On the other hand, relatively unpublicised campaigns for vaccination against polio showed that 60% of the public in a given community had had one or more polio shots. Here we see that the audience acts on information that has some usefulness to it. The fact is that the audience is typically active and responsive when it sees the usefulness of the message. People tend to seek information that might have some utility or which they expect to benefit from in dealing with their daily problems. They are not sitting waiting for them. It is always fortunate that the communicator's objectives can satisfy the audience's needs. It is only then that the audience attends to the communicator's message. In other words, the audience is a full partner in the communication process, and in the final analysis, it is the audience which decides whether or not this process is effective.

### The Social and Cultural Background of the Receiver:

When we talk about the receiver we tend to create the impression that he receives and acts on the message in isolation from the rest of the community to which he belongs. Studies on the effects of various campaigns show that the audience of any campaign is not as individuated as we once assumed, rather it is made up of groups of individuals. These groups may be family members, colleagues, friends and neighbours, sales people, school teachers, or others. The connection among the members of these groups plays a significant role in the communication process. When an individual receives a message from a communicator, he tends to refer to his social group for interpretation and suggestions on how to act on the message which he receives. 3/

The communication process may be more effective if the sender and receiver belong to the same social group. If the source-receiver pair are similar in certain attributes like beliefs, education and social status, they will tend to talk the same language and use the same social references for their behaviour. Thus, individuals enjoy the comfort of interacting with others who are similar to them. Rogers argues that the most effective communication in changing people's attitudes and behaviour is that which takes place between a sender who is most like his average receiver on social status, beliefs, and education except for technical competence about the idea promoted. 4/

At a farmers' training centre in Kenya for example, new agricultural methods are presented to visiting farmers by a well trained farmer who is employed by the centre to cultivate the land under the supervision of the technical staff. This method of teaching farmers through another farmer was found to be effective because the visiting farmers can identify with their teacher whom they perceive as one of them except in his technical competence. Also, in family planning programmes, it was found that the most effective communicators about family planning in a traditional rural community were those who were poor and uneducated, like the rest of the community, except that they have been practicing family planning.

One reason for this effectiveness is that the source who is similar to the receiver will have a high degree of credibility (as related to trustworthiness and competence, as perceived by the receiver).

One must also take into account the characteristics of the audience. Are they old or young? Educated or not educated? It is essential for the communicator to know what type of people he is sending the message to. He needs to tailor his message to an audience's characteristics. For example, a message aimed at college-educated people must be structured differently from a message sent to elementary school graduates. It is apparent that different people have different tastes and interests - young people from old, rich from poor, literates from illiterates, males from females, and so forth.

By categorizing the audience in groups, we can better understand the social and cultural frame of reference of the group. Thus, it becomes relatively easy to find answers to questions such as: "What sort of audience do we want to reach?", "what is the audience's need?", "what does it believe in?", "what does it know and how much?". When a source sends a message through a selected channel, he usually has a receiver in mind. For some reasons, the receiver may not attend to the message. Why? The message has been sent through a channel which is not available to the receiver. A written message (a leaflet) might not find its way to an illiterate person, or a radio programme about a nutrition problem might not reach a poor rural family who cannot afford to purchase a radio set.

### The Selectivity Processes in Communication:

We have the tendency to seek familiarity and reinforcements for our beliefs and action. One argument presented by communication specialists suggests that people choose to listen to or read messages with which they agree to begin with. Thus, we expect for example, that individuals who participated in a harambee (self help) project are more likely to read about it in the next day's newspapers than are the individuals who did not participate. Also we do not expect moslems, for instance, to attend a meeting about the economic advantages of raising pigs. Applying this argument to a nutrition campaign, we can say that people who resist new ideas about nutrition are unlikely to attend educational programmes on nutrition. But a mother who is using a new foodstuff to feed her baby will be interested in seeking further information about this type of food. In other words, people tend to expose themselves to information which supports their beliefs, and to avoid information that is inconsistent with their value system.

One reason given for this tendency of selective exposure is that the individual commonly does not want to be in a state of conflict with himself. For example, a person who smokes cigarettes will not be comfortable listening to a message about the relationship between cancer and smoking. In this situation he may understand the message or he may avoid it. He may listen to it even though he will not act on the information he has received.

His perception of the message will be selective and biased. The factors that affect the perception process are mainly related to needs, moods, past experience and memory of the individual. Obviously, these factors will affect the individual's physical perception, which is a product of the neural effects that a message will evoke in the nervous system of the individual. Thus, strange and new ideas are not seen by us as meaningless, but are immediately perceived with a meaning. This accounts, in many instances, for our misinterpretation or misunderstanding of messages because we tend to attach the new message to what we already know. In other words, we interpret messages in terms of our beliefs and to fit our past experience. For example, Fuglesang found through his research in Africa that in environments where there are none or very few pictures, for example in the remote villages, people may misread the details and thereby interpret the whole picture wrongly. 5/

We often realize, unfortunately later in our campaigns, that people interpret our messages in ways that we did not intend. There are many illustrations of this problem in the fields of agriculture, nutrition, health, and family planning, where posters and symbols were misinterpreted by the public. This fact points to the warning that the way we present our message may determine how people accept or reject this message.

Another hurdle in the communication process is that there is a tendency among people to remember only that part of the message that is consistent with what they already know or believe. Many extension agents tell us how people remember conversations with them in a quite different way from what the extension agent had said. The loss of message accuracy due to selective recall leads to the spread of rumours. Rumours arise in an unclear situation where the receiver cannot fully understand the message. The ambiguity of the situation where communication takes place may lead the receiver to reorganise and distort related ideas so as to be consistent with his knowledge and experience.

#### References

- 1/ Schramm, Wilbur and Roberts, Donald. The Process and Effects of Mass Communication; Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1971.
- 2/ Rogers, Everett. Communication Strategies for Family Planning. New York, The Free Press, 1973.
- 3/ Read, Hadley. Communication for All Media. Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1972.
- 4/ Rogers, Everett and Shoemaker, Floyd. Communication of Innovations. New York, The Free Press, 1971.
- 5/ Fuglesang, Andreas. Applied Communication in Developing Countries. The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1973.



CF Item Barcode Sign

Page 27  
Date 8/28/2007  
Time 1:13:40 PM

Login Name Saroja Douglas



CF-RAI-USAA-PD-GEN-2007-000184

Expanded Number **CF-RAI-USAA-PD-GEN-2007-000184**

External ID

Title

**"The Communication Process: The role played by the Audience" by Shawki M. Barghouti, PSC paper No 22. Distributed at the UNICEF/PSC Workshop on Communication for Social Development, held at the University of Zambia, Lusaka, 29 April to 10 May 1974**

Date Created / From Date  
4/1/1974

Date Registered  
6/20/2007 at 12:14 PM

Date Closed / To Date

Primary Contact

Home Location **CF/RAF/ZW/A118\_-1987-000016913 (In Container)**

F12: Status Certain? **No**

Owner Location **Programme Division, UNICEF NYHQ (3003)**

Current Location/Assignee **Upasana Young since 8/26/2007 at 6:49 PM**

Container **CF/RA/BX/PD/RP/LB/1987/T005: Africa: Social welfare, Nutrition, Sanitation, Comm**

F13: Record Copy? **No**

d01: In, Out, Internal Rec or Rec Copy

Contained Records

Document Details **Record has no document attached.**

Date Published **6/22/2007 at 12:05 PM** Fd3: Doc Type - Format Da1:Date First Published Priority

Record Type **A01 PD-GEN ITEM**

Notes

**The author was communication specialist, Planing for Better Family Living, FAO, Nairobi.  
The paper was discussed during Part II of the workshop, "General considerations in project support communications."**

Print Name of Person Submit Image

Signature of Person Submit

Number of images without cover

SAROJA DOUGLAS

Saroja Douglas

7