

Indigenous communication

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HUMANS ARE COMPULSIVE communicators. The way we behave, speak, stay silent, or greet people; the way we dress, the people we choose to befriend, and the style of our work send out a multiplicity of messages to those around us.

Good communicators know how to- use all of these vehicles to transmit a variety of messages to a variety of audiences, but effective communicators know that the most important part of communicating lies in listening. When we talk of people who 'communicate well', we usually mean that they listen well. Effective communication is an iterative process between people who want both to share their knowledge with others, and to listen to what others have to say. There is no 'perfect' medium for this exchange of views: the best medium is the one which is appropriate to the people taking part.

You will know, from years of communicating with others, that you try to present your ideas in a way which suits the needs, levels of understanding, and expectations of the audience. When talking to schoolchildren in England about how pastoralists in Kenya look after their animals, a teacher would not give the children a dense three-page report on pastoral systems. The children would probably neither read it, nor pretend to be interested.

The majority of children in the North are most receptive to information which comes from the television or videos, and from their friends. To compete for their attention, information has to be packaged in similarly exciting ways, using still and moving pictures, and relating wherever possible to their own experience, background, and culture.

It is the same the world over. People will, if given the chance to express a preference, choose a medium of receiving and transmitting information which best suits their needs. The AT movement has been slow to recognize this fact, and even slower to begin communicating effectively with technology users, i.e., using these users' own preferred methods of communication, and genuinely exchanging rather than transmitting information. It is about time this changed.

Media such as radio, television, newspapers, and books are the most conspicuous methods of transmitting appropriate technology information to large numbers of people. A great deal of time and money has been spent promoting messages through them in attempts to reach technology users. Some organizations have recently tried to enable technology users to transmit their own messages to their peers through these media by arranging access, and some serious attempts have been made to facilitate dialogue rather than monologues.

But often we forget another type of communication - the horizontal, or indigenous, exchange of information among people. Such communication does not take place through newspapers, radio, or extension organizations. It occurs within families, at meetings of village organizations, in the market-place, or at the well. Much of this communication is informal and unorganized, interpersonal, oral rather than written, controlled locally rather than by outsiders, and uses no, or low levels of, technology.



Indigenous communication is being replaced by external systems, and the survival of much valuable information, and of the local culture itself, is in danger.

Indigenous communication includes the transmission of entertainment, news, persuasion, announcements, and social exchanges of every type. While these topics are important, here we focus on the indigenous communication of technical information, since this has the greatest direct relevance to the appropriate technology movement, but has as yet received scant attention from researchers and development professionals.

Why is it important?

Indigenous communication has value in its own right. It is an aspect of culture which should be respected by outsiders. It is the means by which cultures and the indigenous knowledge embedded in them are preserved, handed down, and shared. Here are two examples.

The women of the Sudan have not only innovated, tried, and tested hundreds of ways of fermenting foods to ensure their families' survival, they have also shared their knowledge with other women throughout the region, over hundreds of years. In this way they have passed on accrued wisdom for others to build upon and adapt, as their circumstances change.

Among the Aguaruna Jivaro in Peru, men are hunters, and women are gardeners. More than 100 varieties of manioc are in cultivation, and they provide more than half of the calories in the people's diet. The women not only hold the information about the methods of preserving such biodiversity, but they also hand it down through the generations. The older women take pride in their knowledge and in their ownership of different varieties, and distribute rare varieties to younger women.

But indigenous communication is being replaced by external systems - schools, mass media, extension services, and bureaucracies - and the survival of much valuable information and of the culture itself is in danger.

Indigenous channels are important conduits of change. ‘Traditional’ does not mean ‘static’. Time and time again, research has shown that most farmers, men and women, do not learn about new technologies through the media or the extension services, but rather from their friends and neighbours or through their own experiments.

Indigenous channels enjoy high credibility because they are familiar and controlled locally. Local audiences are often sceptical of externally controlled mass media, viewing them merely as government propaganda.

External channels have a limited range. Television and newspapers are confined largely to the richer, urban households of the developing world. Schools reach only the young. Even the most common external channels, radio and extension services, fail to contact many people. Indigenous channels, by contrast, have a much wider audience, reaching those who do not read ‘ or write. They are crucial for the exchange of 1. information with those people who are out of the reach of external channels.

Development programmes can use indigenous channels, both to collect and to disseminate information. ‘Keeping an ear to the ground’ by consciously tapping indigenous channels can help project officials discover the local situation and get reactions to project initiatives, and projects can make explicit use of these channels. Much progress has been made in this area, especially with folk media such as songs a puppet shows, but still there remains great potential for work and co-operation with indigenous organizations.

Indigenous channels offer opportunities for local participation in development efforts. Indigenous channels allow local people to communicate among themselves and with development professionals, using forms they are familiar with. Control is key here: professionals are often reluctant to give up control over the communication process in development projects. They are the ones who chair the meetings, determine the media broadcasts, write the newsletters. There are examples of mass-media technology being successfully controlled by project beneficiaries - participatory radio and interactive video for example - but such examples are rare. Consciously using indigenous forms enables local people to retain control of decision-making processes more easily.

Ignoring indigenous communication could lead to inappropriate development efforts. Irrigation planners in Bali ignored the role that a network of priests and ‘water temples’ had in the control of irrigation. This led them to introduce cropping methods and to construct dams and canals that were not appropriate to local conditions.

Everyone has the right to be the architect of his or her own future. If knowledge and ideas are the building blocks of a sustainable lifestyle, then each community needs to be at the centre of and in control of the networks that disseminate its information for the benefit of others; not just at the receiving end of information which is often packaged in inappropriate ways (e.g. in a book, which presupposes the ability to read). Giving greater credence to indigenous methods of communication is only the first step towards enabling people to gain control over their information and exchange it with others on an equal basis.

Forms of indigenous communication

Indigenous communication can take many different forms. Here are six:

Folk media are the forerunners of mass media. Like the mass media they are used primarily for entertainment, but may also promote education, social values, and cultural practices. Each culture has its own forms: song, dance, puppetry, festivals, plays, story telling, debates, proverbs, parades, and so on. Up until very recently, Icelandic communities passed the long

hours of winter darkness entertaining each other by recounting the great sagas. The sagas were used to transmit information which both amused and educated, and served to retain much indigenous knowledge in the communities. Television, introduced only in the 1960s in that country, threatens to undermine this tradition. When development professionals talk of communicating with technology users, many are thinking of the mass media or extension agencies. Vast amounts of money have been poured into building up these organizations and promoting messages through them, and a myriad of studies has looked at how they function and how effective they are.

Outside agencies have often adapted folk media to carry messages on topics such as family planning or politics. While such strategies can be very successful, they have two dangers: the implanted messages may not fit the chosen medium, and audiences may resent outsiders who tamper with the traditional form.

Indigenous organizations are legion. In one *kampong* (urban village) in Bogor, Indonesia, there are gatherings of male household heads to discuss problems, mutual-help work groups, Islamic groups that meet for prayer and religious instruction, revolving-loan associations that pool members' contributions and distribute them through a monthly lottery, and an organization that collects monthly donations of rice to pay for the funeral shrouds of deceased residents. Other examples include associations to manage irrigation facilities and water distribution, mothers' clubs, credit arrangements through which poorer villagers may purchase food from a local merchant, and the network of formal and informal agreements that link traders with their suppliers and customers.



This new programme to train community health assistants must work within the existing communication systems and become integrated if it is to be sustainable.



Folk media are used primarily for entertainment, like this carnival, but may also promote education, social values, and cultural practices.

Governments often ignore such arrangements, and establish new organizations such as co-operatives, training-and-visit extension groups, and irrigation management units. While new organizations may sometimes be necessary, structures which have been imposed suffer from two big disadvantages: they fail to take advantage of existing indigenous communication systems, and local people often feel no ownership or responsibility for the new organization.

Deliberate instruction. Parents teach children, craftspeople instruct apprentices, elders guide youths, and adolescents undergo initiation rites. Many societies have traditional, often religious, schools. Much of the information that is needed to survive is learned not through the occasional puppet show or even through schools or the mass media, but through deliberate instruction. This is just as true in the industrial world, yet deliberate instruction has received little attention from development specialists.

One way in which outsiders can make use of these channels is by training and learning from indigenous professionals, adding to instead of replacing the skills of traditional healers of both humans and livestock, blacksmiths, and midwives. These experts can then teach their new skills to their clients and apprentices. Tapping into and co-operating with the indigenous experts who already serve their communities avoids the costly training of new personnel from scratch, avoids creating tensions in the community by superimposing new people and staff where capacity already exists, and ensures that people in remote areas receive services that would be difficult to provide conventionally.

Informal channels carry perhaps the bulk of indigenous communication. At home, in the tea house, in the fields and on the road, in the chief's house and at the market - all are situations where technical information and skills can be communicated. Such communication is not orchestrated or controlled, but is spontaneous and informal.

Development professionals have tried to take advantage of informal channels by trying to place messages in the form of posters and radio programmes into areas where people gather, such as mosques, coffee shops, grinding mills, and wells. Outsiders often hope that these informal channels will take over and diffuse the message further once a few key opinion leaders have been informed. But this is not always the case. People must consider a message sufficiently 'newsworthy', and credible, before they pass it on to others in informal conversation. And what they do say is coloured by their own memory and interpretation, which can lead (in the eyes of project officials) to message distortion and loss. But in the eyes of local people, such selective communication can also lead to local innovations and cultural adaptations.

Records may take many forms. Balinese irrigation associations traditionally write land ownership records and tax obligations on palm leaves. Chinese libraries contain ancient

works of immense current value - an example being the descriptions of medicinal plants that Chinese scientists have drawn on recently to discover the new anti-malarial drug, artemisinin. But records need not be written: African storytellers narrate memorized historical epics and genealogies in detail and at length.



Most of what we learn is taught by deliberate instruction, but the existing systems are often ignored by development workers.

Direct observation Communication does not have to be intentional - or even involve another person. Most learning during childhood and apprenticeships is a result of imitation. A farmer may see a neighbour's bumper crop and conclude that the variety or technique used is good.

Interaction

Local people have a wealth of knowledge about their crops, livestock, environment, and themselves. This indigenous knowledge is locally adapted - often as a result of many years' experience - and changes continuously as people experiment to find better ways of doing things. While Western science has typically derided indigenous knowledge as being based on superstition and ignorance, much of it has a firm basis in rationality. Urban-based development specialists often fail to realize that it is the local practitioners who are the greatest experts on their own problems, strategies, and priorities, because the specialist attaches greater value to that which is apparently modern, sophisticated, and scientific. Indigenous knowledge is undervalued because it is seen as primitive, irrational, low-cost, small, exotic, unquantifiable, irregular, invisible, untidy, unpredictable, and dirty. And yet, just as farmers, rather than agricultural scientists, brought about the agricultural revolution in England, so too African farmers' management strategies for controlling tsetse flies 'made more headway than the colonial scientific services. Technology development should rely on local skills and knowledge, not just for moral reasons, but on the grounds that it is good science."

Indigenous information is preserved and adapted by being used and communicated to others. Just as the mass media and other external channels mainly carry messages generated outside local communities, localized indigenous channels mainly carry information about local issues. Understanding how such information is communicated could be an important key to identifying local technologies that can be adapted and used elsewhere.

There also remains much potential for using indigenous channels to carry external information. Folk media have been most used for this purpose, but other, less common approaches show promise - for instance by using local organizations and apprenticeship arrangements to

disseminate new techniques. Exchange visits between groups of women in West Africa have helped to spread knowledge of innovative food processing techniques, for example.

Indigenous healers in Ghana have been trained in simple Western medical techniques such as oral rehydration therapy. They now co-operate rather than compete with local hospitals, referring patients they cannot treat to the hospital, which in turn sends them patients - often psychological cases - it cannot cure.

It is also possible to use the mass media and other external channels to carry indigenous information. For instance, extension personnel and local women could be encouraged to identify, test, and disseminate promising local technologies to other areas. Where agricultural research systems are weak, farming systems complex, and local knowledge rich, an indigenous-knowledge-based approach to extension could pay far higher dividends than the more usual top-down methods.

Institutionalizing such a consciously bottom-up approach would require fundamental changes in the structure of research, development and extension organizations, and in the reward systems of their personnel. Learning to respect what we are unfamiliar with requires a change of attitude towards other people, and this, for all of us, may be the most difficult and the most necessary step to take.

Reference

1. Richards, Paul, *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution*, Hutchinson, London, 1985.

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