

COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

WEEK ONE: Course overview, Communication, and Traditional communication defined

In this lecture, attempts have been made to explore the different meanings and interpretations of communication in general and communication systems to be specific. The next step will be to understand the functions of communication, then models of communication and finally Africa traditional communication/media systems. Communication is one of the areas human needs to survive in this world.

Learning Outcomes



1. Define Communication and African communication systems
2. Explain the functions of communication.
3. Explain the two basic models of communication
4. Discuss an overview of Africa traditional communication/media systems.

Communication defined:

What is communication?

There are hundreds ways to define communication, and we are going to look at a few, which are relevant to our study. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, **Communication** is the act or process of transmitting information (as about ideas, attitudes, emotions, or objective behavior), exchange of information between individuals through a common system of signs, symbols, or behavior. **Communication** is the giving and receiving or exchange of information opinion or ideas by writing, speech or visual means – or any combination of the three – so that the material communicated is completely understood by everyone concerned. **Communication** is the process of transferring information from a sender to a receiver with the use of a medium in which the communicated information is understood by both sender and receiver. It is a process that allows organisms to exchange information by several methods.

The root of the word “communication” in Latin is *communicare*, which means to share, or to make common (Weekley, 1967). Communication is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning (Pearson & Nelson, 2000). According to an article written for business communication by University of Minnesota, they state that “In communication, sharing occurs when you convey thoughts, feelings, ideas, or insights to others. You can also share with yourself (a process called intrapersonal communication)...” You can share with someone what they know and value. In

communication we share languages, which is verbal and other nonverbal cues found in our different cultures.

What is human communication?

Human communication refers to the process of human beings responding to the *symbolic behaviour* of other persons (Adler and Rodman, 2006).

What are the key characteristics of communication?

Communication is human though other animals and creatures communicate; human communication is a complex one. Sometimes we communicate with our pets.

Communication is a process it is a continuous ongoing process. Communication is not a series of incidents pasted together like photographs in a scrap book; instead it is more like a motion picture in which the meaning comes from unfolding of an interrelated series of images.

Communication is symbolic: symbols are used to represent things, ideas, or events in ways that make communication possible. Symbols are arbitrary in nature for example why should the letters *book* represent the object you read? We overcome the arbitrary nature of symbols by linguistic rules and customs. Effective communication depends on agreement among people about these rules. Spoken or written words are verbal, however nonverbal behaviour also do have symbolic meaning for example in many countries nodding your head up and down means “yes”. (Adler and Rodman, 2006)

Functions of communication

Communication systems in Africa have several functions, which we shall look at in the subsequent chapters, however in this lesson we shall address them generally. According to Adler and Rodman (2006), functions of communication include:

Physical needs: Personal communication is essential for our wellbeing, research evidence show that an absence of satisfying communication can jeopardize life itself such as early deaths, terminal cancers, common cold, and coronary disease and so on depending on the nature of isolation.

Identity needs: our sense of identity comes from the way we interact with other people. The others’ messages shaping who we think we are, the messages we create often are attempts (some more conscious than others) to get others to view us the way we want to be seen.

Social needs: communication provides a vital link with others. Some of social needs we satisfy by communicating are Pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation and control.

Practical needs: communication is an important key to effectiveness in a variety of everyday settings for example, a survey of over 400 employers identified “communication skills” as the top

characteristic that employers seek in job candidates. Communication is important for any practical instruction to be carried out (Adler and Rodman, 2006).

MacBride *et al* (1981) cited in the African Communication System I an online educational resource by National Open University of Nigeria (2018), identified some specific functions of communication as:

- a. information
- b. socialization
- c. motivation
- d. education
- e. cultural promotion and
- f. entertainment

Information: the collection, storage, processing and dissemination of news, data, pictures etc required for everyday life.

Socialization: the provision of a common fund of knowledge which enables people to operate as effective members of the society in which they live.

Motivation: the fostering of individual or community activities, geared to the pursuit of agreed goals.

Education: the transmission of knowledge so as to foster intellectual development, character formation and acquisition of skills.

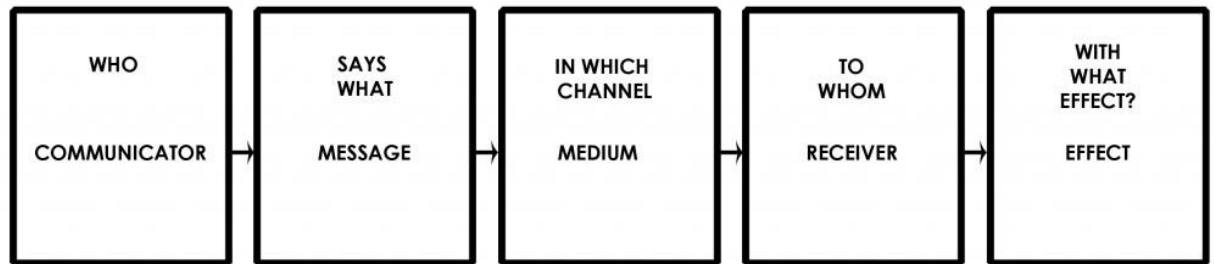
Cultural promotion: the dissemination of cultural and artistic products for the purpose of preserving the heritage of the past.

Entertainment: the diffusion through signs, symbols, sounds and images for personal and collective recreation and enjoyment.

Basic Models of Communication

A model is a systematic representation of an object or event in an idealized and abstract form. Models are arbitrary by nature.

The linear model views communication as a one-way or linear process in which the speaker speaks and the listener listens. Laswell's 1948 model was based on the five questions below, which effectively describe how communication works:



Source: <https://www.communicationtheory.org/lasswells-model/>

Harold Dwight Lasswell, the American political scientist states that a convenient way to describe an act of communication is to answer the following questions

- Who
- Says What
- In Which Channel
- To Whom
- With what effect? <https://www.communicationtheory.org/lasswells-model/>

Shannon-Weaver model of communication

The Shannon-Weaver model of communication was developed by Warren Weaver and Claude Shannon in 1948. The two developed this mathematical communication theory to describe how communication occurs between a sender and a receiver. They initially designed it as a linear model to explain how a message is sent and received (study.com 2022).

In the engineering arena, the model is also called information theory and is mainly used in calculating transmissions that occur in machines. The model holds that a sender initiates the communication and is the source of information. Information is then relayed from the brain and through the lips in the form of a signal. This signal is mixed with other distractions and other sounds and finally received by the recipient (study.com 2022).

The Seven Key Components of the Shannon-Weaver Model

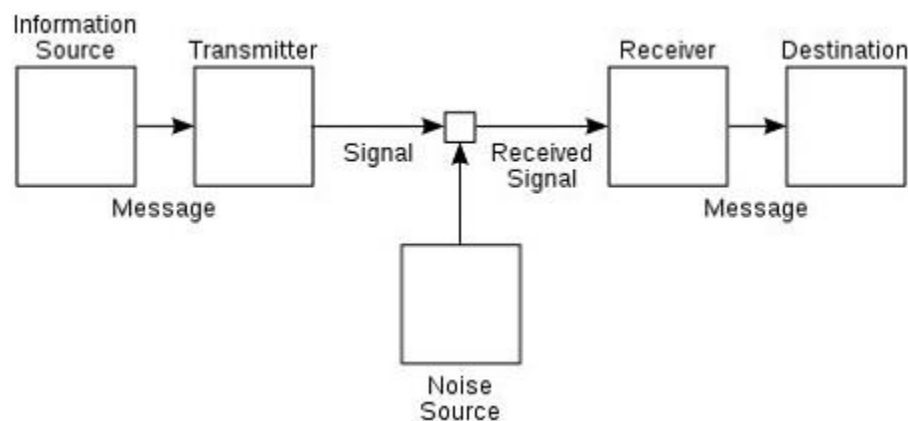
According to study.com (2022), there are seven key components of the Shannon-weaver model. These components are:

1. **Sender** - The model begins with the source of information or the sender. This is the person who holds the information that is to be conveyed. The sender chooses the message, the recipient, and the **channel** they will use to relay the information. The message can be sent in body language, in writing, through spoken word, or as music. An example is a news presenter on the radio. The news presenter will choose the message to convey before the broadcast begins.
2. **Transmitter** - This is also known as the encoder. This is the person or machine used to convert the message into a signal that can be relayed from a sender to a receiver. The model was initially created to explain how communication occurs using radio waves and binary

numbers in computers and telephones. However, a person can also be the encoder by turning the idea to be communicated into written or spoken words. An example of a transmitter is a radio station as it turns voice into radio waves which are then related through a radio.

3. Channel - This is the medium or device that carries information from the source and through to the **decoder** and receiver. For example, wires are used as the channel in a landline phone.
4. Noise - Noise is the interruptions that occur as a message moves from a sender to a receiver. It can be physical such as when a nearby child is screaming while a person is on the phone. It can also be psychological, such as when a mental distraction arises from something that happened some time ago.
5. Decoder - The decoder is the reception place where a signal is converted into a message which can be deciphered. Examples of decoders are equipment, software, machines, and individuals. It is the opposite of encoding.
6. Receiver - A receiver is also known as the destination. This is the end-point of the communication process. Here, a person gets the message sent to them after considering the noise. An example is when a person receives a text message on their phone.
7. Feedback - Feedback comes as a response from a receiver to a sender. An example is a reply to a text message.

The original model that Shannon and Weaver proposed did not have feedback. Norbert Wiener created the feedback step to address criticism of the model that it was linear or one-way communication. Adding feedback turned the communication process from linear to cyclical (study.com 2022).



Shannon-Weaver model of communication

Source: <https://study.com/learn/lesson/shannon-weaver-model-communication-theory-parts-transmission-model.html>

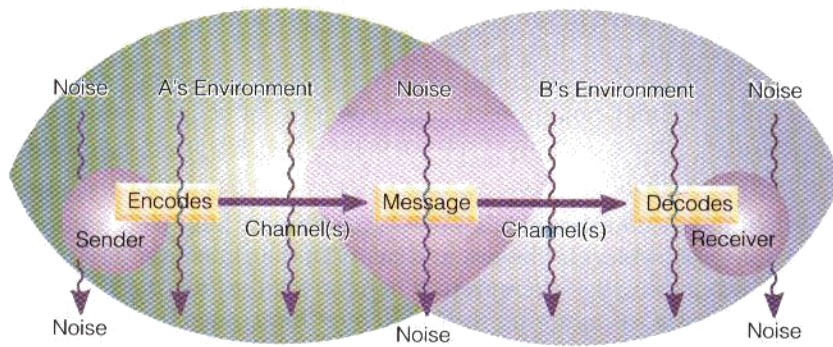


Figure 1-1 Linear Communication Model

Linear model shows that communicators often occupy different environments that are fields of experiences that will help them understand other's behaviour. Environment here not only refers to a physical location but also to the personal experiences and cultural backgrounds that participants bring to a conversation. The model shows that environment A and B overlap. This area represents the background that the communicators must have in common. As shared environment becomes smaller, communication becomes more difficult. In linear communication model, communication is like giving an injection: A sender encodes ideas and feelings into some sort of message and then conveys them by means of a channel (speech, writing, and so on) into a receiver who decodes the message. In linear model noise is a term used by social scientists to describe any forces that interfere with effective communication. Noise can occur at every stage of the communication process.

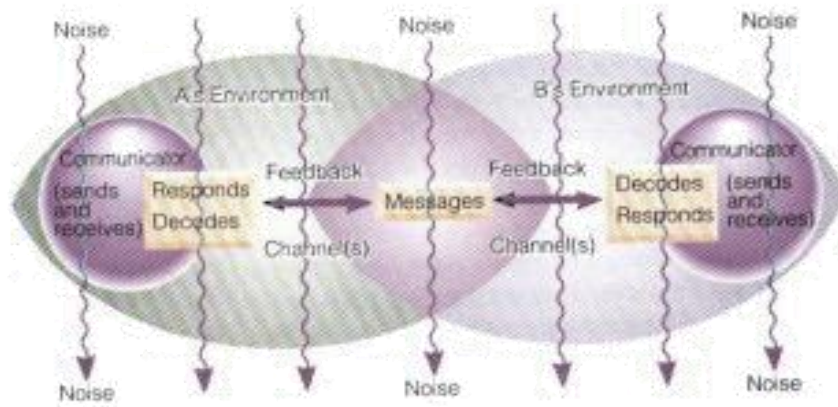


Figure 1-2 Transactional Communication Model

The transactional model reflects the fact we usually send and receive messages simultaneously. In this model we are capable of receiving, decoding and responding to another person's behaviour, while at the same time that person is receiving and responding to ours. The response of a receiver to a sender's message whether verbal or non- verbal is called a **feedback**. It shows that communication is indeed a two-way affair.

What is a system?

According to Oxford Languages online dictionary (2023), a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network; a complex whole for example "the state railway system". It could also be defined as a set of principles or procedures according to which something is done; an organized scheme or method for example "the public school system."

What is a communication system?

According to Wikipedia (2023) A communications system or communication system is a collection of individual telecommunications networks, transmission systems, relay stations, tributary stations, and terminal equipment usually capable of interconnection and interoperation to form an integrated whole. The components of a communications system serve a common purpose, are technically compatible, use common procedures, respond to controls, and operate in union (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communications_system, retrieved on March 11, 2023).

A communication system is a way of transferring information from one source to another.

Transference can occur between two humans, a human and an animal or a human and a machine.

In traditional and contemporary African societies, there is a system which is a complex organized way of living. These societies have communication systems made of interconnection and interoperation to form an integrated whole. The cultural orientation Africa societies is collectivist. Members are not supposed to be individualistic, and as such the systems of communication are collectivist, which follows the Ubuntu philosophy of "I am because we are" or "humanity towards others." Ubuntu pronounced [ùbùntú], is a traditional African concept. The word ubuntu comes from the Zulu and Xhosa languages, and can be roughly translated as "humanity towards others." [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ubuntu_\(philosophy\)](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ubuntu_(philosophy))

An overview of African Traditional Media

This is a snippet of the lessons we are going to engage on the African traditional media systems. These are the indigenous means of communication used in the past from various countries of the World's second largest continent after Asia. According to Osho (2011), Africa as the source of humanity and civilization is not only unique in customs, tradition, and culture, but in its means of communication. As Osho (2010) notes, that 'all the means of communication originated from the earliest Africans in the old Egypt. The civilization later spread to China, India, Greece and Rome'. Osho (2011), further states that the African oramedia like the use of gongs, drum beats, town criers, puppet shows, dance, singing and masks actually influenced the Greek and the Roman civilizations (Scannell, 2009) which Harold Adams Innis, a Canadian economic historian of the 1940s, who influenced the thoughts of McLuhan, describes as the best means of communication that will be enduring. According to Innis (1950),

The civilization of the Greeks is underpinned by the 'oral tradition', while Roman imperialism is underpinned by writing. This distinction is strongly normative. (It is called Bias of Communication). Oral cultures are praised for their power and vitality, their freshness and elasticity, in contrast with 'the dead of written tradition' that threatens to destroy the spirit of Western man.

Africa remains a continent that its history, heritage, culture, and customs have been distorted. The historical accounts about Africa are mostly incorrect, slanted, and dented to tilt the true account of history from Western perspective (Osho, 2011). Hall and Kirk (2005:276 cited in Osho 2011) agrees that '...this is part of the European imperialist enterprise, an intellectual counterpart of

military conquest which marginalises or disparages the cultural traditions and civilised achievements of the original inhabitants of Africa...’.

According to MacBride et al (1981, cited in African perspective Blog), ‘Traditional media or oramedia are body languages and other non-verbal languages being used in the traditional societies for millennia for a variety of purposes, their validity and importance today, despite obvious limitations. The messages and ideas are transmitted by means of itinerant dance and mime groups, puppet shows and other folk media which serve not only to entertain but to influence attitudes and behaviour’.

According to JoHavemann (2011), argues that by the thought of Wilson (1999), Oramedia or traditional media ‘are the local means of communication that remain what essentially sustain the information needs of the population which represents over 70 per cent of the national population in the rural areas’. It is important to note that oramedia are highly effective than all other means of communication because they are interactive, inter-personal, combines verbal communications with non-verbal codifications, and they are simple, natural and less expensive. The high content of non-verbal in the oramedia actually makes them to be more effective because non-verbal communicates the mind more than verbal (JoHavemann, 2011). When anybody wants to lie, it is non-verbal that readily contradicts the verbal lies. Really, Hall (1959) corroborates this position that ‘non-verbal codes speak louder than words and shout the truth where words lie.’ However, on the efficacy of non-verbal ,Mehrabian (1981) confirms in his research findings that, ‘93 per cent of meaning in a conversation is conveyed non-verbally; 38 per cent through the voice and 55 per cent through the face’.

Oramedia are embedded in the cultural values and tradition of the people through body language, signs, and objects. According to MacBride et al (1981:3, 47 cited in African perspective Blog), ‘starting with the simplest vocal and gestural signals rooted in their physical structure, human beings developed a whole range of non-verbal means for conveying messages: music and dance; drum messages, signal fires, drawings and other forms of graphic symbols, including the pictogram, followed by the ideogram, important especially because it associated with the representation of an object with an abstract idea...facial expression, gesture, mime, dance, images, music, songs, drawings, paintings, sculptures, sport...of special value are lip reading and sign languages used by millions of handicapped persons’.

Indeed, oramedia is culturally based as it is natural with the tradition and customs of the people. It involves their language, dialect, individual occupation or family occupation or communal occupation. So, people of another culture may not necessarily understand the message within a particular oramedia, because it is culturally situated and conditioned (Osho, 2011).

Summary



The root of the word “communication” in Latin is *communicare*, which means to share, or to make common. Some specific functions of communication include: information, socialization, motivation, education, cultural promotion and entertainment. A model is a systematic representation of an object or event in an idealized and abstract form. Models are arbitrary by nature. The African traditional media are the indigenous means of communication in the various countries of the second largest continent in the world. Oramedia or traditional media ‘are the local means of communication that remain what essentially sustain the information needs of the population which represents over 70 per cent of the national population in the rural areas. Oramedia is culturally based as it is natural with the tradition and customs of the people.

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