

COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

WEEK TWO: Introduction to Communication Systems in Africa

Learning Outcomes



1. Understand the basics of Communication System in Africa
2. Explain the characteristics of African communication systems
3. Analyze the differences between indigenous and exogenous communication
4. Analyze the similarities between indigenous and exogenous communication.
5. Discuss factors affecting structures and functions of media systems.

Introduction to Communication Systems in Africa

According to Okpoko, Okpoko, and Eyisi (2016), they state that “African communication is embedded in the tradition and culture of the people. It is therefore unique, original and creative in character. This explains why it is highly effective and enduring in the dissemination of interpersonal and group information (Osho 2014). These characteristic strengths ensured its sustenance in the contemporary world in spite of the growing influence of modern mass communication channels like books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the social media. Indeed, the indigenous media has continued to be in use because of its uniqueness and ability to permeate the rural communities in contrast to the modern mass media of communication which appear to appeal more to the elite and urban communities (Osho 2014).” This study focused more on the sub-Saharan Africa, whose media system was born in the colonial era. Following the partition of Africa in Berlin in 1884, the colonial era saw the establishment of mass media systems that initially served minority white settlers located in the emerging urban centres (Mano, 2010). Below are some of the uniqueness of African communication systems cited in African Communication System I an online educational resource by National Open University of Nigeria (2018):

- It is understood by members of a community
- It readily appeals and connects with the people’s language, culture, belief, myth, legend and customs, which enhances effectiveness of communication (relates to values, norms, ethos and culture of Africans)
- Uses symbols, values and indigenous institutions, which enhance messages’ effectiveness
- Projects African historical past (traditions)
- Derived from the culture, beliefs, and the way of life of Africans

- Rooted among the local people and respected by the people, especially the ruralites
- Embedded in the culture of the people, which is the driving force
- Relies on indigenous technology, employs values and symbols that the people identify with.

From a general point of view, the African Communication system is seen as a traditional or indigenous mode of communication and it is indigenous. Indigenous communication is steeped in traditional culture.

Characteristics of African Communication Systems

Below are some of the characteristics of African communication systems cited in African Communication System I an online educational resource by National Open University of Nigeria (2018):

Value

According to Ogwezzy, A. O., Ajibade, O., Oladokun Omojola, O., Ofulue, C. I., and Onwubere, C. H. (2018), Values in communication deal with effectiveness of communication. Effectiveness means that messages are received by intended audience, interpreted as conceived by the sender; message is remembered over a reasonably extended period of time, and message is used appropriately.

African communication systems have value, and it is an important aspect of our culture. It is the agency by which culture is preserved, handed down, responds to new situations and adapts. The influx and explosion of exogenous media, endangers the survival of and may even lead to the erosion of traditional African communication, which might threaten cultural transmission and the survival of indigenous technical knowledge (ITK).

Reach

African media are ubiquitous because they reach many rural people who are not reached by even the most widespread exogenous channels. So, it should always be realised in designing communication strategy and in choosing channels of communication that television, newspapers and magazines are largely confined to the urban areas in the developing countries. African

communication systems are useful in conveying messages to people out of the reach of exogenous channels (Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

Channel Credibility

Messages transmitted through the exogenous (i.e. externally controlled) mass media are more often than not, greeted with hostility or scepticism. Since traditional channels are familiar to the target and controlled locally, they are quite credible (Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

Channels of Change

Researches into the diffusion of innovations have shown the importance of informal and inter-personal contacts in persuading people to adopt, or reject innovations (Opubor, 1975). Opubor argued that mass media are strong in creating awareness but weak in persuading people to adopt change. So, such contacts are more commonly made through the traditional channels. Hence, traditional channels of communication are important conduits of change. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate indigenous and exogenous communication systems to enhance outcomes in development. Although some development intervention programmes depend on information diffusion processes to take innovations and development messages to their target audiences, many have made explicit use of traditional channels to reach their intended beneficiaries of innovations (Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

Useful for the Collections and Dissemination of Development Information

According to Ogwezzy et al. (2018), development programmes can utilise traditional communication channels for the collection and dissemination of development information. Data on the local situation and response to outside initiatives can be gathered by attending village or social groups meetings and interviewing local people. At some time, participants in a communication system act as a recipient-disseminator. So, recipient- disseminators who are linked to outside societies are important conduits for lateral exchange of both indigenous and exogenous innovations. This means that there is an interface between knowledge and communication types (Chambers, 1997).

Promotes Participatory Development and Sustainability of Programmes:

Contemporary development experts such as (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall and Welbourn, 2000) argue that exogenous communication transfers knowledge, while indigenous communication promotes indigenous based development. To diffuse innovation, exogenous media need to co-opt traditional media, because traditional media enhance cultural continuity and hence sustainable change. They further argued that traditional channels of communication give the local people the opportunity to participate in development programmes. The local people should be involved in the choice of channel, messages development, design and dissemination; and they should communicate with themselves, decision makers and development experts in reaching a decision on their development programmes. This they believe would enhance the retention and control of the indigenous programmes, which will enhance sustainability. These might account for why Chambers (1997) and Cornwall and Welbourn (2000) argued that those outside the indigenous areas are not in a position to package development programmes for the indigenous areas without first-hand information and experience about the indigenous people (Ogwezzy et al, 2018)..

These support the school of thought that is promoting a bottom-up approach to development. Indigenous communication offers opportunity for participation and fosters a sense of belonging required for Sustainable development: Ignoring traditional communication could result in inappropriate development. So, development programmes can use indigenous communication, which encourages people oriented development and hence effectiveness and efficiency in outcome (Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

Problems of Indigenous Communication

Indigenous communication has some shortcomings, cited from African Communication System I an online educational resource by National Open University of Nigeria (2018), It has a problem of defining and explaining issues and illustration in modern language (lack appropriate terminologies). Again indigenous communication is an extension and externalisation of the individual knowledge system. So, the relevance of indigenous communication depends on the setting/area of occupation. There are the core and peripheral people who make up the indigenous people. Essentially, indigenous communication systems thrive most where they employ such indigenous forms of communication as the town announcer. Despite these shortcomings, indigenous communication would continue to be relevant for as long as there are traditional societies or settings (Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

What Are the Alternatives to African Communication Systems?

What are the alternatives to indigenous African communication systems? According to Ogwezzy et al. (2018), they are the exogenous, which are foreign to Africans. Exogenous media have limited range in Africa. They are urban centric, manipulative, lack immediate feedback and are affected by audience literacy level. They are also more likely to be affected by noise, which causes distortion and affects the range of communication. These further justify the need to study African communication systems.

Comparison of Indigenous and Exogenous Communication

Differences

Indigenous Communication	Exogenous Communication
<p>Organisation: Indigenous communication systems are developed locally; controlled by the local people; use local technology; and especially those that are not under institutional communication, are not bureaucratically organised</p>	<p>Organisation: Exogenous channels are the mass media (radio, television, newspapers, magazines and others) and such bureaucratically organised networks. So, exogenous systems are institutionally organised communication.</p>
<p>Structure: “African [communication] system is essentially owned by the society whose leadership only acts as the chief gate keeper. The channel or medium, then, is open to use by anybody to reach anybody. It has always operated under a clear-cut dynamic policy which serves the interest and need of the rural people” (Ibagere, 1994:83).</p>	<p>Structure: “The structure of the media is determined by the ownership (which is [ostensibly] not the society) which eventually determines the method of operation” and may influence messages (Ibagere, 1994:83).</p>
<p>Reach and Influence: Can reach few people but with a great deal of influence within the network.</p>	<p>Reach and Influence: Can reach more people with little influence.</p>

(Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

Similarities

There is sometimes no sharp dividing line between indigenous and exogenous communication. They overlap in all the four elements of the SMCR model of communication: source, messages, channel, and receiver (Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

<p>Interpersonal: Uses interpersonal communication.</p>	<p>Interpersonal: Also, uses interpersonal communication, as in extension activities and telephones.</p>
<p>Sources: Have sources – derives from the local people. E.g. indigenous experts (opinion leaders in their specialities); indigenous professionals (healers, sorcerers, shamans, scribes, traditional birth attendants, blacksmiths, and irrigation systems among others); innovators (seen as deviants in the communities, they experiment and try new things and ideas); intermediaries (do not originate but merely report information e.g. town announcers [Doob, 1966]); and recipient-disseminators (are informal intermediaries in the information chain and may receive an information and react to it [for instance by testing a new crop variety or animal species] before passing it on. Indigenous source is individualistic.</p>	<p>Sources: Also have sources - originated by outside institutions such as newspaper/magazine houses; and television/radio houses. The similarity is that a television programme may show a local source who has benefited or adopted an innovation. Furthermore, folk media have been widely used to communicate development messages. Exogenous source is mediated. Message and Channel: Messages conveyed by the two systems are sometimes similar. For instance, Message and Change</p>
<p>Message and Channel: Messages conveyed by the two systems are sometimes similar. For instance, news and entertainment. The only difference is that the indigenous media uses local channels (Wang and Dissanayake, 1984:22).</p>	<p>Message and Channel: News and entertainment messages are also conveyed through the exogenous media. The only difference is that the exogenous media uses modern channels (Wang and Dissanayake, 1984:22).</p>
<p>Receiver: Have receivers i.e. audience/ destination; though reach small number of people. Although, most educated elites rely on exogenous media for information, they still rely on indigenous</p>	<p>Receiver: Have receivers i.e. audience/destination; though reach mass audience (larger audience than the indigenous. Radios are common in the rural and even remote villages (Wang and Dissanayake,</p>

communication for a lot of information (Wang and Dissanayake, 1984:22).	1984:22).
Feedback: The obedience through the transformation into deeds and actions or not of the announced messages informs the village authority of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their messages. People respond favourably when they turn up en masse in support of the disseminated information. But they show apathy and indifference to the unfavourable and undesirable information.	Feedback: The exogenous media also has a feedback mechanism. It is mainly through letters to the editor for the print media and call-in/text messages to live programmes on the broadcast media.

(Ogwezzy et al, 2018).

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS IN MEDIA SYSTEM

The spread and access to the mass media in Sub-Saharan Africa has been a highly uneven process. Estimates vary as accurate and up-to-date figures are very hard to find, but development has been rapid in the past 50 years. Among old media, → radio has achieved the best penetration owing to its affordability and adaptability. The estimated number of radio sets in Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa) rose from 460,000 in 1955 to over 70 million in 1995. What is even more remarkable is that there was a tenfold increase in the number of radio sets between 1955 and 1965 and a fourfold increase over the next decade. Sub-Saharan Africa had 158 million radio broadcasting receivers in the late 1990s, up from 33 million in 1970 (Mytton 2000). Even the largely urban and elitist medium of → television has shown remarkable growth in Africa. UNESCO estimated that in 1997 Sub-Saharan Africa had 1,396 million television sets compared to 299 million in 1970 and 749 million in 1985 (→ UNESCO). The figures for print media titles published in Sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1990s show at least 224 daily newspapers with a combined circulation of 12 million, a marked increase from 199 newspapers in 1970, which had a combined circulation of just 4 million (World Bank 2006). From 2004 to 2008, the number of paid-for daily newspapers in Africa increased by 21 percent, from 361 in 2004 to 462 in 2008. In the same period, the total average circulation of dailies increased from 8.64 million (2004) to 14.62 million (2008). The number of free daily titles in Africa increased from 1 in 2004 to 5 in

2005, a 400 percent increase (World Association of Newspapers 2009). Today's rapid growth of the African media belies the fact that these mass media are recent and that they were mainly introduced during the colonial era.

Media Content Categorization

1. Low taste content
2. High taste content
3. Non-debated content

<https://www.chegg.com/flashcards/acom-100-test-2-notes-938da0b7-4e1f-4862-bc1c-aed614b81bfa/deck>

These contribute to the functioning or non-functioning of media systems. Depend on how a receiver receives a message.

1. Low taste content is:

- a. Widely distributed
- b. Widely attended to by the audience
- c. Consistently arouses criticism from viewer's e.g. pornography, crime dramas, violence and horror themes, abuse, suggestive music
- d. Low taste content is morally unacceptable and can lead the society to unacceptable contract.

2. High taste content

- a. Widely distributed
- b. Not widely attended to
- c. Critics say that it is morally uplifting, educational, inspiring for example classical music, religious material, sophisticated drama, political discourse, sophisticated magazines, academic journals etc. Media critics champion this content as they see it as the opposite of low-taste which is highly objectionable.

3. Non-debated content

- a. Widely distributed
- b. Widely attended to

- c. Media critics have said very little about-examples, weather reports, some news content, music that is neither symphonic nor popular, magazines devoted to specialized interests. This kind of content is not believed to be a threat to moral standards in any society.

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Functions of Mass Media

According to University of Minnesota in their online content about Functions and Theories of Mass Communication, state that the mass media serves several general and many specific functions. In general, the mass media serves information, interpretation, instructive, bonding, and diversion functions:

- **Information function.** We have a need for information to satisfy curiosity, reduce uncertainty, and better understand how we fit into the world. The amount and availability of information is now overwhelming compared to forty years ago when a few television networks, local radio stations, and newspapers competed to keep us informed. The media saturation has led to increased competition to provide information, which creates the potential for news media outlets, for example, to report information prematurely, inaccurately, or partially.
- **Interpretation function.** Media outlets interpret messages in more or less explicit and ethical ways. Newspaper editorials have long been explicit interpretations of current events, and now cable television and radio personalities offer social, cultural, and political commentary that is full of subjective interpretations. Although some of them operate in ethical gray areas because they use formats that make them seem like traditional news programs, most are open about their motives.
- **Instructive function.** Some media outlets exist to cultivate knowledge by teaching instead of just relaying information. Major news networks like CNN and BBC primarily serve the information function, while cable news networks like Fox News and MSNBC serve a mixture of informational and interpretation functions. The in-depth coverage on

National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service, and the more dramatized but still educational content of the History Channel, the National Geographic Channel, and the Discovery Channel, serve more instructive functions.

- **Bonding function.** Media outlets can bring people closer together, which serves the bonding function. For example, people who share common values and interests can gather on online forums, and masses of people can be brought together while watching coverage of a tragic event like 9/11 or a deadly tornado outbreak.
- **Diversion function.** We all use the media to escape our day-to-day lives, to distract us from our upcoming exam, or to help us relax. When we are being distracted, amused, or relaxed, the media is performing the diversion function.
- **Source:** [Communication in the Real World](#) by University of Minnesota is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#), topic: Functions and Theories of Mass Communication, retrieved on 31st March 2023.

The traditional media of communication as effective tools in rural development

The traditional media of communication as effective tools in rural development include some of the key functions of the system.

Rural Mobilization: it mobilizes the people at the grassroots level towards community development and national consciousness. Serious- minded and mass — oriented program never succeeded without the active involvement of the practitioners within the health the traditional system.

Source of Information: it is a source of cultural, political, health and other educational and enlightenment programs for the masses, leading them towards self- actualization and national development.

Source of Entertainment: it is the dominant source of entertainment through arts and cultural festivals, musical show, dramatic performances by choral and masquerade groups and other musical and theoretical groups.

Promotes Unity in Diversity: certainly, traditional communication has promoted intra-cultural, inter-cultural and other communication over the years leading to group and national unity. Yam and ekpo festivals in Nigeria are examples of large traditional settings which bring inter-cultural and communication.

Defines Culture: Many of the traditional communication media are culture specific. Their mode of communication goes a long way to define their culture and who they are. It also differentiates them from other culture.

Source: gomtas Sep 26, 2017, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION MEDIA AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT, <https://medium.com/@ggomtas/african-traditional-communication-media-and-rural-development-5fe4796bdca1>, retrieved on 31st March 2023.

Summary



African communication system is embedded in the tradition and culture of the people. It is therefore unique, original and creative in character. This explains why it is highly effective and enduring in the dissemination of inter-personal and group information. It permeates the rural communities in contrast to the modern mass media of communication which appear to appeal more to the elite and urban communities. It relies on indigenous technology, employs values and symbols that the people identify with. In general, the mass media serves information, interpretation, instructive, bonding, and diversion functions.

The evolution of the African media system currently works in favour of new market-based operators, which are not producers but peddlers of foreign-produced content, within the parameters defined by colonial legacies. Information for citizenship is minimal in media diets that are urban-biased and market-driven. To sum up, Sub-Saharan Africa's emerging media system is diverse and fast growing but to a large extent is still influenced by its colonial legacy (Mano, 2010).

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