

Using traditional media in environmental communication

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Using Traditional Media In Environmental Communication

By

Victor T Valbuena

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

"Using Traditional Media in Environmental Communication" is an action research project which developed as a response to the interest of the United Nations Environment Programme to explore alternative channels of communicating environmental issues and messages to its various target audiences.

The project sought to test the feasibility of using certain forms of traditional media to carry environment-related concepts and messages, in three ASEAN countries, namely: Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand. The project envisioned the integration of environmental messages in the storylines, dialogues, songs or some other appropriate sections of selected traditional media; their presentation before public audiences; and their evaluation in terms of effectiveness in generating awareness and increasing knowledge of environmental issues, problems and concerns among various audiences, particularly the youth. These activities were to tie in with UNEP's long-term information, education and communication programme on environmental protection and conservation and careful use of natural resources.

The concept was developed at a two-day consultative/planning workshop at the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) in Singapore on 28-29 September 1985. Participants included three traditional media specialists, namely: Dr Umar Kayam, Head of the Cultural Research Center of the Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia; Dr Victor T. Valbuena, then Co-ordinator of the Extension Programme of the Institute of Mass Communication,

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University of the Philippines, Diliman; and Dr Surapone Virulrak, Dean of the Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, as well as Dr Harald von Gottberg, then Deputy Secretary-General of AMIC and Mr Kittisak Vardhanabhuti, Information Assistant, UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok.

The project was proposed for implementation in 1986 to highlight the celebration of World Environment Day on 5 June 1986. Duration of the project was set at nine months, inclusive of planning, implementation and evaluation phases. However, completion of the project in Indonesia and Thailand was delayed by a month due to certain circumstances beyond the control of the country project co-ordinators. Total cost of the project was US\$29,500, of which US\$18,500 were provided by UNEP. Remaining costs were met by AMIC.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

In general, the project sought to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of using traditional media to communicate environment-related concepts and messages and ultimately, to institutionalize working relationships between traditional media groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as government agencies involved in environment-related activities.

Specifically, the project aimed to achieve the following objectives:

1. to establish collaborative relationships between traditional media groups and non-governmental organizations as well as government agencies involved in environment-related activities;
2. to identify and select traditional media forms and performing groups appropriate for carrying environment-related concepts and messages;
3. to integrate environment-related concepts and messages in appropriate sections of selected traditional media forms;
4. to assess the effectiveness of this integration in terms of greater awareness and consciousness and increased knowledge of environmental issues and problems among specified target audiences; and
5. to generate insights and recommendations on the further harnessing of the potentialities of other traditional media for communicating environment-related and other development messages.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN*

The project undertook the following activities to meet its objectives:

1. Survey of literature/field research.

This activity called for a survey of the research and related literature on the use of traditional media in Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand. A considerable amount of research had previously been conducted in these three countries to document and assess the effectiveness of certain traditional media forms in promoting development programmes like family planning, primary health care and nutrition. The present project included additional field research to gather supplementary data and in particular, to look into traditional media forms that could carry environmental messages.

2. Selection of appropriate media/performing group.

After the literature and/or additional field survey, traditional media for possible use in communicating environmental issues were selected and recommended. At the consultative/planning workshop in Singapore, the three traditional media specialists initially suggested looking into the potential of

* Summarized from the final project reports submitted by Gadjah Mada University, University of the Philippines, and Chulalongkorn University.

utilizing the *ketoprak* in Indonesia, the community or rural theatre in Philippines and the *lakon saw* in Thailand. A corollary to selecting the form was an identification and selection of the performing groups who could carry out the task of communicating the environmental messages to the target audience.

The Indonesian project eventually decided to use the *keto-prak*, and after a survey of 114 *ketoprak* performing troupes opted to use the services of the popular P.S. Bayu Troupe of Yogyakarta.

The Thai project decided to use the originally selected form, the *lakon saw*, or sung drama, of northern Thailand. However, instead of opting for publicly performed *lakon saw*, it opted for the televised version of the sung drama. This was intended to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of using traditional media extended through the mass media. It chose the two *lakon saw* troupes already performing in northern Thailand's TV Channel 8 for the project.

The Philippine project decided to use the basic form of the *dula*, or folk drama, but integrated with other folk media forms like *dulang nakakatawa* (comic sketch), *balagtas* (debate in verse), *kuwentuhan* (story-telling), *tula* (folk poetry), *tula-dula* (drama in poetic form), and *bugtungan* (riddle). It engaged the services of *Dulaang Kamalayan* (Theatre of Awareness) of the Philippine Information Agency as its performing group.

3. Production workshop.

This activity brought together traditional media artists as well as government and non-government programme policy-makers and implementors on environment to discuss issues and problems concerning the environment; to explore the possibilities for integrating environmental messages in the traditional media forms and styles performed by the selected artists' groups; to develop scripts and scenarios integrating the environmental messages; to identify target audiences and performance areas, and to work out other production details. This workshop could well mark the start of institutionalized collaborative relationships between artists' groups and NGOs

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and government institutions doing environment-oriented work, beyond the duration of this project.

4. Establishment of ties with other agencies.

The project sought the assistance and co-operation of other agencies and institutions engaged in environment-oriented activities in the implementation and assessment of project activities in the field.

The Indonesian project worked closely with the Centre for Environmental Studies, Gadjah Mada University, the Yogyakarta Institute for Research, Education and Communication, the P.S. Bayu Troupe and local agency officials.

For its part, the Thai project collaborated with the Department of Public Relations, TV Channel 8, the local school in Lampang Province, northern Thailand and two *lakon saw* performing troupes.

The Philippine project tapped the support and co-operation of the National Pollution Control Commission, the National Environmental Protection Council, the Departments of Health, Agriculture, Tourism and Natural Resources, among others.

5. Pre-test.

After messages had been identified, scripts prepared and production details finalized, a performance by the selected troupe was scheduled and held before an actual sample of the identified target audience of the UN Environment Programme. This performance was designed to test the effectiveness of the integration of the messages in the traditional media form used, and its impact on the audience in terms of reception and comprehension of the messages, awareness and knowledge of environment-related issues and reactions to the use of the traditional media form for carrying the environmental messages. To generate this information, a survey or follow-up discussion (depending on country) was conducted among the audience *before* and *after* exposure to the performance. Similarly, feedback from traditional media artists and scholars were solicited after exposure to the performance. Findings from the survey and feedback from artists

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and scholars were evaluated and used to make the necessary modifications in the production.

6. Performance series.

After making the revisions suggested by the pre-test results, the performing troupes did a series of performances in Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, particularly in areas identified as facing serious environmental problems.

7. Evaluation of performances.

To determine the impact of the performances, evaluation surveys were conducted among samples of the audiences. Simple questionnaires were administered by the project researchers to elicit indicators of increased awareness and knowledge of environmental issues resulting from exposure to the performances.

8. Process evaluation.

Designated project staff monitored and documented the implementation of the various activities of the project in written reports, photographs and video.

9. Consultative meetings.

Three consultative meetings were also held in the course of the project to review the ongoing activities and assess whether they were proceeding as planned or not, as well as to make any modifications in plans, if necessary.

CONCLUSIONS*

The results of the surveys/discussions with audience, and the experiences and insights gained from project implementation point to the following conclusions:

1. Despite the differences in sophistication in conducting the evaluation components of the study, in general, it can be said that the findings tend to support the claim that traditional media can be effective in disseminating development-oriented communication messages. In the context of this particular project, traditional media can be effectively utilized as channels of environment-oriented messages. They can create awareness of environmental issues and problems; increase knowledge of specific environmental concerns like deforestation, air and water pollution, community sanitation and public health and related matters; reinforce pre-existing knowledge on such issues; and potentially influence attitudes and future behaviour.

As the conclusion of the Indonesian evaluation states: 'Generally the respondents realize fully the cause and effect issues in relation to deforestation and flood/erosion that they try to avoid doing any harm to the surroundings in which they live. Some respondents who used to get firewood

* Synthesized from final project reports submitted by Gadjah Mada University, University of the Philippines and Chulalongkorn University.

for their daily home use say they would stop their harmful activities.

The respondents also understood the idea of pollution caused by industrial waste and smoke from factory chimneys and motor vehicles. However (being rural-based), they felt that these issues were still remote from their daily lives. In other words, at this very moment, they did not feel threatened by this kind of pollution.

The Philippine project also concludes that 'generally, it can be said that traditional media forms are effective in disseminating environmental messages which are considered very important by the people themselves'.

The environmental messages incorporated in the theatre presentation were remembered by the viewers, most notably on cleanliness, diarrhoea, epidemic, etc. This showed that not only did the audience enjoy what they saw but they also got valuable information from it.

Based on the answers gathered from the evaluation, it was learned that people have long been aware of environmental problems like pollution. But the presentation helped them realize the big part they play in creating and solving these problems. Thus, the activities suggested, especially in the comic sketch, were well-remembered by the audience. They were new but useful information.

In the case of the Thai project, the integrated environment messages were carried not only by the televised *lakon saw* performance, but were also carried by announcements and advertising spots. While the audience 'received the environmental messages of clean environment very clearly and thought the messages were very important to them, their children and their community . . . they knew these subjects mostly from the advertising spots . . .' and only to some extent from the clown scenes in the drama proper.

But the Thai study concludes that 'regularly televised *lakon saw* has a strong impact on the village elders. Village

elders comprise a fairly large number of population. And they are still the constant viewers of *lakon saw*'. By tradition, village elders exercise strong influence on the attitudes and behaviour of younger people in their community.

2. Traditional media can be effective channels of environmental messages, provided its integration does not harm the form and essence of the media. As pointed out by the Indonesian project, the *ketoprak* was a logical choice because it was not bound by the rigid, formalistic structure of other traditional media like the *wayang kulit* or the *wayang wong*. Historically, the *ketoprak* could carry information and commentary on social issues without destroying its form.

If modifications are needed, again these must not necessarily destroy the traditional media form, but rather enhance it. As the Philippine project points out, 'an otherwise traditional form [such] as the *balagtasan* can also be utilized using the same rhyming, difficult words in the debate, but at the same time incorporating lively, easy to understand gestures that fit the topic'.

Further, if a traditional medium cannot fully integrate the environmental messages, it is still possible to exploit certain portions that can accommodate them without destroying its form, as in the case of the Thai project, where the clown scenes were used more than other portions of the drama performance proper.

3. The choice of traditional media performing groups or artists is critical to the success of a project of this nature. It is fortunate that the three country projects were able to identify performing groups who could be sympathetic to the cause of environmental protection and/or who have had previous experience in staging plays that carried social development messages. In the case of Indonesia and Thailand, the *ketoprak* and *lakon saw* troupes were only too willing and 'honoured' to be selected for the project. The modest production assistance grants given to the troupes could not have been the major motivating factor for their participation. It could have been more the prestige of being associated with a UN agency-assisted and university-implemented project, as well as the opportunity to innovate on and enrich their art in order to carry other themes and messages.

The Philippine project, for example, said:

The choice of *Dulaang Kamalayan*, the theatre arm of the Philippine Information Agency, to disseminate environmental messages through the traditional theatre form proved to be a wise decision. Although it was the first time that most of the people interviewed have seen a theatre presentation on environment, they found it to be good. One of the possible reasons for this is the competent performance of the actors/actresses of the play, making their messages more credible and comprehensible.

4. The integration with and extension of traditional media through mass media like television is an efficient and effective way of expanding the reach of environmental messages provided one is able to work within the TV medium's limitations. The unexpected but welcome broadcast of the Indonesian *ketoprak* play *Mirah* over TVRI-Yogyakarta, though abbreviated, enabled the project to reach not only rural-based audiences but also city residents. The planned use of televised *lakon saw* programmes in the Thai project demonstrated not only the possibilities of promoting environmental consciousness through the *lakon saw* clown scenes, but also through other channels like the announcement portions handled by the troupe managers, and the advertising spots.

5. Collaboration with both government and non-government agencies is very useful in ensuring the success of a project of this kind. The production meetings attended by both agency representatives and performing artists proved to be beneficial in cross-fertilizing each other's minds on the issues and problems on environment and the potentialities and limitations of traditional media in promoting these same issues and problems.

Likewise, the meetings proved beneficial in identifying resources that would not only enrich the technical content of the environment-oriented plays developed by the troupes, but would also facilitate mounting the productions in the specified performance areas.

As in the case of the Philippine project, for example, the Department of Tourism and Philippine Airlines made possible

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the performing group's trips to the cities of San Pablo, Puerto Princesa and Cebu, by providing free land and air transportation. The National Pollution Control Commission provided supplies and materials for programmes and sound equipment as well as co-ordinated with City Hall for the presentation in one of the four cities in Metro Manila. Local city and town mayors also endorsed the performances in their communities to ensure an audience.

In fine, the study indicates that traditional media, with necessary support from the appropriate institutions and agencies, can be utilized effectively as an integral part of an environment promotion campaign and can reach audiences that may otherwise not be reached by the now conventional mass media.

LIMITATIONS

The above conclusions are in the main positive and supportive of the idea that traditional media are appropriate alternative media that can be utilized by environmental agencies in their information-education-communication programmes. However, institutions contemplating such utilization must be made aware of certain constraints and limitations that the three country projects faced in the course of implementation.

These include the following:

1. **Political/economic factors.**

Integration of messages on deforestation could not be included in the *lakon saw* performances in Thailand for the reason that influential political leaders were in control of timber concessions linked to widespread forest denudation in northern Thailand, the precise area covered by the project. On the economic side, the same message could not be used because many of the intended audience were woodcarvers and dependent on the forest for their livelihood. The message on deforestation would be more of a threat to their livelihood. Thus, the decision to focus on environmental sanitation and health issues in the *lakon saw*.

A related political factor is the periodic shuffling of personnel in the government bureaucracy. The implementation of the project in Thailand was delayed due to the changes in the administration of the Department of Public Relations and TV Channel 8. These changes necessitated a second round of negotiations by the project co-ordinator.

2. Production constraints.

Technical problems could not be avoided in the course of the presentation, considering that what were being performed were traditional or folk media forms. As the Philippine project pointed out: 'The low ratings given by the audience to the clarity of sound, dialogues and presentation were expected and understandable. What is more encouraging is the fact that in almost all the places that the group presented, people considered the topic of the play they saw as relevant.'

In Thailand, the studio production of *lakon saw* reduced the visual impact of the medium, but the TV channel could not, with its limited resources, provide more interesting and appropriate settings and props. On the other hand, the location-shot *lakon saw*, while potentially visually interesting and of considerable impact, suffered from less-than-professional video camera work.

It was not possible for the Indonesian project to mount a total of 10 performances due to cost factors. A *ketoprak* performance is a large-cast, three- to four-hour show which necessitates more expenses than a small-scale production like that of the Philippine project. Given the communal nature of the performance and the limited budget of the project, the P.S. Bayu Ketoprak Troupe could only reasonably be expected to mount four 'official' project productions, fewer than the 10 originally envisioned. It is to the credit of the troupe that on its presumably sponsored roadshow performance, they still carried environmental messages in their presentation.

3. Weather conditions.

Implementation of the project coincided with the rainy season in the Philippines. The monsoon rains caused postponement of some of the performances; in some instances, the performances went ahead—the show must go on—with the performers doing their act under the rain and the faithful spectators under their umbrellas. The poor weather and postponements affected the audience turn-out in a number of performances.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings of the media performance evaluations and on the experiences of the three country projects, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutions and agencies engaged in environmental concerns and problems should explore further the utilization of traditional media (either alone or in concert with mass media) in their information-education-communication campaigns.
 - a. Direct performances using traditional media forms may be adopted in the rural areas of a country, particularly those affected by environmental problems like deforestation and poor community sanitation.
 - b. Traditional media performances integrated with the electronic media of radio and television can be adopted in rural-urban or more urban areas to expand audience reach. This may be effective particularly in urban or urbanizing areas affected by such environmental problems as air and water pollution, lack of green 'breathing' city spaces and poor public sanitation.
2. The same institutions should initiate measures to identify and reach out to traditional media performing groups whose art forms have potentialities for integrating and carrying environmental themes and messages in their structure, plot or dialogue.
 - a. Environment agencies can provide assistance to these groups in terms of orientation and education seminars on their programme of activities; consultation services in

- terms of technical review of scripts and other programme materials containing environment-related concepts and messages; and possibly co-ordination assistance to facilitate production and staging of traditional media shows, particularly in areas where the agencies operate.
- b. The agencies can also offer institutional sponsorship of traditional media performances carrying environment-related themes and messages, during Environment Week, for example, or as part of a long-term campaign to promote environmental protection.
3. At the same time, innovative and progressive traditional media performing groups would do well to establish co-operative ties with government and non-government environmental agencies, not only as a means to secure patronage for their groups, but also as a means to expand their awareness and perception of social and development issues and problems which could be good content material for their performances.
 4. Collaborative ties between performing groups and environmental agencies and among environmental agencies themselves should be strengthened. In some places, the different country projects found that people attended performances because they were aware of the agencies' functions concerning the environment even if they were not so familiar with their activities.
 5. Since the various mass media have been identified as sources of information on the environment by the study respondents, they should be used as support for the folk media, even if only in terms of reinforcing the important ideas in a play or other folk media presentation, or advertising/announcing them in advance.
 6. Schools of mass communication should be encouraged further to conduct field research on the various traditional media and explore their potentialities as channels of various social and development messages. These schools should make every effort to ensure that their studies are brought to the attention of development agencies like those involved in environment, either through publication or research dissemination/utilization seminars.
 7. A traditional media presentation incorporating environmental protection as theme and message is welcome to many

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audiences, provided the integration is seen as appropriate and in no way harmful to the cultural structure and function of the media. The United Nations Environment Programme should continue to support efforts at utilizing traditional media for development communication.

8. Finally, the project proposes the following guidelines in using traditional media for environmental communication. These guidelines are based on the experience of implementing the three projects in Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand.

GUIDELINES FOR USING TRADITIONAL MEDIA IN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

- 1. Do a survey/review of related literature or research studies on the use of traditional media in development communication.**

The Unesco Population Education Clearinghouse in Bangkok, Thailand, the Institute of Culture and Communication, East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, the Department of Communication, Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, the Center for Cultural Research, Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the Institute of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines, and the Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, are sources of materials on folk media in development communication.

- 2. If no literature on your own traditional media is available in your country, collaborate with a local university to conduct field research on the subject.**

You may interest senior/graduating undergraduate students, graduate students or faculty into doing this activity. The thought that the research will be utilized is good motivation for researchers to do field study.

- 3. Conduct an inventory of traditional media groups and artists in your country/area.**

This inventory is useful in identifying groups and artists

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already doing traditional media presentations incorporating development messages and in assessing their potential effectiveness for environmental communication. It is also useful in identifying other potential groups who may be co-opted into doing environmental communication work.

4. Do an inventory of government as well as non-governmental institutions engaged in environment-related work.

This activity is useful in identifying the different environment-related concerns of various agencies. Such information is necessary in identifying the technical resources available to you, when you decide to launch an environmental protection campaign focused on one concern or another.

5. Establish collaborative ties with these agencies to ensure maximum participation in your programme.

It is a must that you enlist the participation of as many *appropriate* agencies as possible in your planning and implementation process. This is useful in generating ideas for information-education-communication projects and in ensuring support during actual implementation of your particular project.

Co-ordinate with local officials and community influentials as they can facilitate presentations in their localities.

6. Organize a co-ordination committee.

Organize a staff to co-ordinate planning and implementation of your traditional media project. This is useful in delegating responsibility for various activities, for example, linkages with agencies and artists, co-operation with media and local officials, etc.

7. Conduct integrated production workshops with environmental agencies and traditional media artists.

It is beneficial to bring together environmental agency representatives and traditional media artists in integrated

production workshops. These encounters provide an opportunity to orient and educate the artists on the issues and problems concerning the environment. In the event that the artists decide to take up the subject in their presentations, there is greater likelihood of more accurate, if not sympathetic, depiction of the particular environmental problem chosen. On the other hand, the artists can take the workshop also as an opportunity to enlighten the technicians on the possibilities of their art form as channels for environmental messages. Together, these two groups can work on production scenarios that acknowledge the strengths and limitations of both content and form of the traditional media chosen for a project. Both can also work on collaborative review and refinement of scripts if they are required.

8. Pre-test a demonstration performance before a sample audience.

This activity is necessary to ensure that there is public acceptance not only of the message but also of the media which carries it. It is useful in generating feedback on what audiences like/dislike about the performance, about their reception and perception of the integrated environmental messages and about their suggestions to improve subsequent presentations.

9. Monitor and evaluate other performances.

Different audiences in different areas will respond differently to the same media presentation. It is essential that such response is monitored, noted and evaluated so that modifications can be made to suit the particular information needs of target audiences in various areas. You can collaborate with universities for evaluation assistance.

10. Hold regular co-ordination meetings.

This is necessary to ensure that planned activities are done on schedule and implementation problems that arise occasionally can be addressed right away.

11. Enlist media and local community support.

Tap the co-operation of the media in promoting your traditional media project. If possible, try to extend traditional media reach through the mass media.

Seek the assistance of local officials and community influentials who can facilitate presentations in their localities.