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Issues In Development Message Transfer Through Popular Culture and the Media

By

Pradip N Thomas
At a popular theatre workshop that I had recently attended in Madras, one of the speakers spent nearly the whole session analysing the inconsistencies and the implicit assumptions in the topic title that she had been assigned. I do not think that she did a good job demythologising the terms used but in her inability to transcend rather obvious limitations she froze the discourse. I must say that when I was informed about my assignment at this seminar, I was sorely tempted to approach the topic through a dissection of the title. I do have problems with terms such as development message transfer and real problem with a multi-acentual term like popular culture. However, I am not going to spend time cerebrating the ideological assumptions behind the title. I would like to believe that we are all going to talk of communications rather than the transfer of information, that we all endorse a two-way process whatever the medium we use and that we all agree that communications for development in order to be meaningful must be based on the ethic of participation.

I do not think that the scope of this topic is vast, in the sense that issues in message transfer will differ from medium to medium. The circumstances of message generation, transfer and reception are medium-specific, determined by technology, form, economic and political circumstances. The performative circumstances of television and its appeal to our audio-visual perceptions is quite different from the situation of a folk theatre performance. One of the questions that we will need to consider over the next couple of days is related to how best we can use specific types of media with specific characteristics in a purposeful and consistent manner so as to communicate credibly. The medium and the message need to be recognised by the people as dependable allies in a common cause rather than as instrumental and inherently undependable devices.

I think that one of the important factors that influence the process of message transfer is the context-sensitivity of the message. When I was in India a few weeks ago, I was taken aback and really disturbed by the extent to which the dominant media, the press in particular, had dispensed with the need to be objective at a time of national crisis. The so-called liberal press had become the flag-bearers of a religious crusade, utterly insensitive to the needs of the hour. I remember that during my
stint as a field worker with groups involved the use of popular theatre in villages in Tamilnadu, South India, performances were successful to the extent that the performance and the performative circumstances were credible. Often, the group spent time in the village prior to the performance, learning local ways of expression, their use of language, their mode of reasoning and use of logic. And I think that this helped the group to deal with issues in a context-specific and sensitive manner. I do remember occasions when adequate time was not put aside for getting to know a people's culture and quite often the performance did not generate the intended response.

It is often the case, that experts in communications and development approach the target audience with pre-conceived messages. I remember asking Badaga villagers living in the Nilgiris if they had found the information supplied to them by extension workers and the farm broadcasts useful. The stock reply was that the information supplied was often too technical or overtly scientific. While they did acknowledge the usefulness of the end-result, i.e., the benefits from translating information into actual practice, the fact that these messages did not relate to their overall existential condition prevented them from understanding or accepting the messages as intended. I think that what was lacking in these messages was a "live" connection with a vivid culture. The message needs to be culturally acceptable and of course it needs to make economic sense. I have often heard farm broadcasts exhorting farmers to buy a particular brand of pesticide without ascertaining whether the people have the means to buy the product. And quite often the long-term ecological viability and impact of the use of dangerous pesticides like say 'Temik' in the case of horticulture, oh both nature and nurture completely escapes mention in the media blitzes. I do think that the objective of communications for development is to touch a cultural chord or nerve in the community, so as to activate people to take decisions - decisions that allow for positive change in the community and in the lives of individuals belonging to that community. For such a situation to arise, it is important that the message is generated in association with the people that it is intended to benefit.

I have come across very few instances of pre-project anthropological study, especially in the large-scale use of communications for development in India. The only exceptions are the pre-SITE and pre-KHEDA studies. The latter in particular is an interesting account of the conversion of the clinical, mechanical expert to a co-explorer and to a co-generator of messages with the people. It is rather unfortunate that these examples of formative research have not influenced policy-makers in the context of communications and development in India. I do know that advertisers targeting the rural audience often do some sort of brand and audience analysis before launching their product, but I am inclined to believe that the marketing of their product is their primary concern, however laudable and public their interests in the development of the nation.
In some cases, like in the use of the popular theatre, the message is often generated in performance - it is often pruned, honed and made understandable and acceptable through a method based on a dialogue. In such cases, the people generate the message and control it - they know the consequences of the message and what they can do to translate the message into working reality. However, most media are unlike the popular theatre in the sense that both mass media and traditional, folk media are organised on different lines, are based on complex mediatory processes and are often rooted in a received culture of operation that make flexibility almost impossible. But the formats available to both mass media and traditional media can and do allow for participatory message generation processes. For example, the radio rural forums that were vogue in the 60's in India relied on post-programme discussion for material for ensuing programmes. There is also the potent example of the Ahmedabad-based, Self-Employed Women's Association's use of the video. In fact, their participatory message-generation processes have been an important credibility factor in the growth of the women's cooperative movement in India. And the formats of folk theatre like for example, the Terrakoothu in Tamilnadu and the Tamasha in Maharashtra can be used for alternative, participatory message-generation processes.

I do think, that despite the enormous advances that have been made in India - industrially and in terms of the growth and availability of technology, the benefits of this growth has accrued to a small, predominantly urban minority and not made a difference to the lives of the majority of Indians who live in scattered rural communities all over the country. We have heard so much of the growth of video-parlours in India, the increase in the number of television transmitters and so on. However, it would be an extremely naive view to assume that for these reasons, the media and the message are accessible to the rural populace. I was talking to a few people in Madras recently about the impact of alternative video in rural areas and many were of the opinion that in spite of the fact that people were used to the cinema, they invariably relate to the film-format at a different level, had different expectations of it and treated the product in a different manner from their treatment, expectations of and relationship to a folk-theatre performance. Some were of the opinion that because people had got used to and had predictable expectations of a film-based format, they expected the same from a video, however different the message and the intention of the producers. In the other words, people associate the film-format with a two and a half hour fantasy plus all the necessary ingredients - when they find that missing they relate to it like they relate to pre-feature film documentaries. There may be a likely possibility that people have not as yet received the new media into their cultural mind-set. They treat it as a diversion partly because the content for the most part has been so removed from their reality.

On the other hand, folk theatre performances for alternative purposes seems to have had more of an impact. Probably because
these performances touched a common, shared cultural memory, a shared consciousness of expectations. Perhaps the reason for the relative success of the use of the folk theatre was because it was a part of their livid culture, it was based on a format that the people were familiar with, that they understood — they knew the meaning of the language used, the import of the dramatic devices sued, they could relate to the symbolism and the abstraction, the imagery and the characterisation. In other words, they knew and understood the total performative circumstances of the folk theatre — it touched a shared memory which they ascribed to as a community. Unlike the SEWA situation in Ahmedabad where women related to the video message that they had helped create, in other areas, a video programme produced through a participatory process may not have the intended effect. In other words, it is very important to acknowledge that cultural preferences vary from region to region. If outsiders foist a medium on the people, there are chances that people will remain indifferent to it or even reject it outright. Despite the mounds of research that has been done on media impact in very many parts of the developing world, very little has been learned about people's actual preferences for the media variety on offer. I do think that media practitioners in the field must consider this reality seriously and attempt to work with media forms that people readily relate to.

The other important concomitant of message-transfer is related to the provision of back-up facilities, institutions and sources that allow for the translation of the message into actual reality. In India we have a gargantuan network of cooperatives that are supposed to cater to and complement the message transfer process. These agencies act as the provisioners of material, like for example, fertilisers and pesticides that have been advertised through bill-boards, radio advertisements and the personal approach of the extension worker. Access to these resources, is not always an easy process — it is often conditioned by a host of factors, including one's caste status, economic and political standing in the village and so on. Despite the fact that these cooperatives cater to the needs of people, most unfortunately, do not have an advisory function — I mean a systematic approach, an informed approach to advising people on the nature of the products in stock, the negative and positive characteristics of products in stock. The cooperative functions as a storage site and little else.

The performance of popular theatre is very closely related to people's organisation and mobilisation — in this case, the back-up for the message is the organised and combined strength of the people. The message creates awareness of an issue and the people act on the issue as a community. In the case of using theatre for change or for that matter any type of media used for mobilising people, the message cannot merely create awareness — for by itself it cannot bring about change. The message must also incorporate ways to deal with an issue or crisis confronting the people. And if needed the services of an organisation must be available to provide the necessary support for this process of...
message translation. Back-up facilities must be at hand, must be readily available and people must have access to these facilities - if not the message becomes a kind of noise, the kind of thing that filters in through one ear and out through the other. A good message needs to have the following characteristics - it must be clear, specific, appropriate and applicable. However, the production and reception processes need to be based on the ethic of people's involvement and participation - these are also crucial dimensions of the message transfer process. Unless a people accept a medium, the message may not create the intended interest.

Finally, the message must relate to a people's larger situation. The message cannot be seen as an isolated entity by the people. The average person in rural areas is bombarded with so many messages - the point is that he or she will only relate to the messages that are in line with his overall needs - that fit in with his or her scheme of life. I do think that we need to bring back the concept of communication into our deliberations for it involves a relating to rather than use the concept of message transfer with its rather obvious limitations.