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Broadcast For The Promotion Of Health And Nutrition In Thailand

By

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BROADCAST FOR THE PROMOTION OF HEALTH AND NUTRITION
IN THAILAND

by

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Lack of health and nutrition information and functional literacy have been considered the obstacles to proper practices for good health and nutrition. There is no doubt that the goal of health and nutrition education is to bring about sound practices and behaviors, which will result in good health and nutrition status.

How to achieve this goal?

Attempts in health and nutrition education in Thailand have depended largely on face-to-face communication by health and/or agriculture personnel. This strategy, though effective, is limited by the quality and quantity of trained personnel. Therefore, other effective and efficient health and nutrition education must be found.

Since the fourth (1977-1981) to the fifth (1982-1983) National Economics and Social Development Plan, it was made explicit in the plan that improved quality of life is fundamental for development of the country. Health and nutritional improvement was clearly stated and strategies were indicated. Health and nutrition education was emphasized as an important strategy. The National Food and Nutrition Committee was appointed with one of the subcommittees on mass communication in 1977.

The Institute of Nutrition, Mahidol University (INMU) was established upon recommendation of the National Economics and Social Development Board to serve as a technical agency, particularly with regard to providing research and training according to National Food and Nutrition Plan. To this end, various operational research efforts toward improving the health and nutritional status of the rural population have been conducted. Effective communications in health and nutrition is one of our attempts in this supporting role.
characteristics of health and nutrition information

Health and nutrition information is often found to be rather complicated for lay people. A lot of time, it is difficult to communicate to a lack of clearcut boundary of the extent of the problem from which effects arise. For example, the same feeding practice by a mother to her two children may result in the deficiency in only one of the children, though the reasons that she can understand. Moreover, much information is controversial and based on statistics that health and nutrition education must be done carefully and ethically. Communication with rural people is rather complicated by their relative illiteracy.

Broadcast for the promotion of health and nutrition for rural villagers—experience in Northeast Thailand

The Institute of Nutrition, Mahidol University has conducted rational research using various media and communication strategies in rural northeast villages. The main target audience is mothers of infants and preschool children. These studies included:

1. Audio-cassette tape for nutrition education

2. Radio and interactive video tape for the promotion of proper supplementary feeding

3. Village wire-broadcast for nutrition education

The major concerns in these research projects are the message technique and media technology as well as the feasibility for implementation and potential of various media for health and nutrition education communication.
General guidelines in the development of health and nutrition education communication

In designing a communication program, two main aspects must be considered:

1. Media Production
2. Media Dissemination

The most important thing in this respect is to know about the target audience:—who they are; what their lifestyle is; what their present state of practices and behaviors are; and what social and environmental influences are present. Therefore, it is obvious that expertise in health and nutrition only is not adequate in attempting effective health and nutrition education. In addition, the matter we are really dealing with is communication for behavioral change. Expertise in areas of communications, social science and anthropology is also centrally important.

In our experience, it was found that in the development of media, attention must be paid to the fundamental principles of communication in order to determine how to best reach the targets. Education theory is essential, otherwise the media will serve only as entertainment. Socio-cultural influences must be understood. Anthropological study may be required to strengthen our ability to reach rural population. Up to this stage, we have not incorporated as much of the knowledge in sociology and anthropology. This is being considered as it is felt that better message design and communication strategies could be realized.

As to our conduct of communication research projects, the following steps have been followed:

1. Audience analysis to know about the audience, family and community
2. Identification of the behavioral objectives

3. Scope of the content or message to be communicated.

4. Message design and script writing

5. Media production with developmental testing

6. Field media dissemination

7. Evaluation

One more thought about communication for behavioral change is that we have concerned so much with modifying or changing detrimental practices or wrong behaviors. On the other hand, there often exist sound behaviors and practices amongst our target population which are often hardly mentioned. Reinforcing desirable behaviors and practices could possibly serve to reinforce the changing of the undesirable ones, as well as to maintain and promote the existing good ones. This idea has not been widely adopted, but is a potential strategy which should be explored. Finally, as for how to maintain and promote the proper behaviors once change occurs is another issue which needs more investigation.

Pertinent findings from broadcast for promotion of health and nutrition

Though the use of an audio-cassette in nutrition communication is not a broadcast, which this paper aimed to discuss, some of the findings are worth mentioning and in fact, served as our basis for further development of media in later projects. Therefore, those results will also be discussed.

A. Audio-cassette supported nutrition education (1981-1982) (Ref. 1, 2)

Six audio-cassette programs of 15-20 minutes length were developed. The formats included minidrama, interview and traditional music (maulum). The programs were prepared by INMU communication staff, while in-field implementation was conducted either by village-based workers, village leaders or village volunteers. The evaluation was by pretest-posttest and a follow up 6 months later. Some findings which I would like to bring up here are:
1. There were statistically significant changes in knowledge and attitudes at the posttest. Follow up at 6 months revealed that the knowledge gained declined, however, a substantial level was still maintained. It is interesting that the new attitudes which related to maternal and child feeding were maintained. This could possibly be explained by our observation that a long message but was repeatable whenever the audience requested allowed for better understanding. Furthermore, during the exposure, the audience was encouraged to discuss and ask questions. All questions were taped on the other side of the cassette and the answers returned to them as letters from the INMU. This was observed to be very stimulating to our target. However, the extent of the effect was not quantifiable.

2. No trained personnel are required to conduct the program. The equipment is simple to use and can be operated by villagers. The important finding is that a good village leader is influential in organizing and motivating the target group to participate in the program.

3. Radio broadcast for promotion of proper supplementary feeding (1982-1983) (Ref.3)

Radio is the most often thought of as the media to reach rural population due to its wide availability and accessibility. Radio has been used in many development programs including health, nutrition, agriculture and education.

The survey conducted in rural villages in the northeast showed that the accessibility by radio of different audience groups in a rural community varied. It was found that the favorite programs were different among men, women and teenagers. In general, only one radio was available in a household and was shared among family members. This put constraints
upon designing message and allocating time for broadcasting intended programs. In other words, the format must fit to the likes of and proper broadcast time for a specific target audience. However, another point of view can be taken that the nature of broadcast media will expose any members in the community to our programs. For example, the nutrition education radio program aimed at mothers is also heard by the fathers and other family members. It was found that sometimes they reinforced the mothers to conform to the desirable behavior or they also learned about the programs and how to conform to the desired behaviors.

In terms of the message design, it was found that a single concept radio spot reached the target audience well. A jingle worked better than a talk or minidrama. Repetition is another important characteristic which should be considered in broadcasting. Too much information in one short spot confused the audience and was not remembered. An idea which should be explored in designing the message is how to make an audio message which can be visualized in the audience's imagination.

One limitation to radio broadcast is the time allocation of the programs which is generally decided by the station not the people. Long broadcast costs so much that it is not affordable for nutrition education projects. Enough time may be given free of charge by radio stations, but it is usually at an unpopular time, e.g. late at night when it may reach only a few people, if any. A series of short spots may be tried to avoid this constraint.

Another hypothesis is that radio may be good for maintaining the new knowledge or reinforcing or reminding the audience after exposure to another media. The short and repetitive characteristics should be utilized, as used in many commercial advertisements. Although we have planned
to also test this hypothesis, due to constraints faced in the implementation, no conclusive results were obtained. Other attempts are to overcome radio's one way communication characteristic, such as radio forum. This is currently in our plan to explore the possibility in the Thai setting.


In many rural villages, it was observed that a small public address system, usually located at the temple is well utilized for announcement of special events. This idea was adapted to extend the coverage for the whole village by adding a few more loudspeakers at different locations in the village. The loudspeakers were connected to the central system at the village headman's house. The nutrition education programs were taped in audio-cassette and the headman and village health volunteer were requested to operate the system twice daily.

The purpose of this study is to be critical of the message design; the incorporation of the voice of local authorities e.g. headman, health volunteer, health personnel, etc. to reinforce the listenership; and to understand the flow of the message. Topics were focused on breastfeeding, supplementary feeding and the Thai basic five food groups.

The broadcast is limited to one village. Though the specific target audience is mothers of preschoolers, the extent to which it reaches other villagers will also be assessed. The message package was designed with progressively increasing detail, i.e. in the first phase, the 30-second spots gave only the highlights of the issues. More explanation is designed and made as a 1 1/2 - 2 minute radio spots elaborated upon the same issues highlighted in the first phase.
Regarding the broadcast, the same set of spots were broadcast daily for 3 weeks. This design is to allow for the fact that during farming season, villagers spend more time in their field, but come back to the village every 7-10 days. This way during the farming season, the broadcast still continues. If this design showed positive outcome, the application could be for maintaining the intensive health and nutrition education given during summer, when villagers stay in the village.

This study is an ongoing project and no conclusion from the study is available as yet.

D. Interactive video tape program for promotion of proper supplementary feeding (1982-1985) (Ref.3)

Progress in electronics has been so rapid that the quality of the available media technology has also advanced at a fast pace. An audio-visual medium such as television, which was expensive and mainly served urban people now is invading the rural villages. Electricity is of no problem as most villages are electrified and a television can even be battery-operated.

Audio-visual media has certainly proven to be a very effective medium for communications. It has been used widely for distance education. Video tape has popularly been used for training by many industries. However, communication with rural populations on matter of health and nutrition education, which are aimed at sound behaviors and practices is not a simple matter. Our experience showed that to produce a good educational program, expertise in education and communication together with health and nutrition must be properly integrated. The scripting, design of visualization and audio must take into account of how to make the visuals clearly understandable;
how to use the audio to reinforce the perception of the pictures, rather than to simply explain the picture; and how to make an interesting, arousing, as well as informative program.

In our trial, an interaction during the showing of the program was incorporated as questions for the audience to answer. Immediate response was stimulated by having a person to conduct the tape show. This person, called "Interactor", tried to facilitate and reinforce correct answers. The evaluation at 3 months into implementation showed that the combined effect of clear visualization and interaction strongly improved the knowledge and attitudes of the audience. However, the program without the interaction was not designed that it can not be concluded if only the video tape program produced in this manner will be equally effective.

The application of this study is viewed in the context of utilizing it in the existing television network. A complete story of 20-25 minutes could be broadcast. Television spots using portions of the tape with rewritten audio script could also be shown daily.

The message design in terms of visualization learned from this study appears to be applicable and should be tried in developing other visual media such as posters, slides, and pamphlets. The value of these simple media should not be overlooked, as they also have high potential in supporting peripheral workers and volunteers. What matters is how to make attractive and meaningful materials. Finally, various interactive techniques such as a 'return' poster, a returnable audio-cassette, etc. should be explored and developed.
Conclusion

At this point, it can be concluded that communication strategies play significant roles in the effectiveness of health and nutrition education programs. Effective communications for health and nutrition requires appropriate integration of expertise in communications, media technology, sociology, anthropology, as well as health and nutrition. The well-produced media with effective message design showed the potentiality for communication to effect behavior. A well-planned media dissemination is also critical so that the target audience is exposed to the media efficiently.

Every media appears to have certain limitations, each of which can be complemented by another. Therefore, it is not necessarily the problem of what single media is better or should be used. But, rather, what mix of media are to be used for what purpose. For example, one media may be good for education and persuasion, while the other good for training. The proper combination of various media could be another effective communication. Moreover, as Thailand is working to improve health and nutrition through the context of primary health care, villagers have been encouraged to participate in these development programs. The broadcast media should appropriately incorporated with interpersonal communication to strengthen the communication of health and nutrition education.
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