

CHAPTER 17

BASIC AND MODERN COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS IN NIGERIA

*Emmanuel D. Akpan
Desmond E. Wilson
Mbuk A. Mboho*

INTRODUCTION

Man has needed a system of communication since he first appeared on earth. From the knotted yellow palm frond to the great electronic loop of the present century, man's systems of communication have made it possible for him to establish communities, stay together in social harmony or even in disharmony and people the earth.

Society owes its rise and existence to communication. Put simply, communication is the process of meaning sharing by which ideas, information, feelings, attitudes and opinions are shared between a source and a receiver. Without communication, it would be impossible to have communities because communities are made of communicating beings. It is because they communicate that they are able to come together and form communities.

Communication itself is a fundamental, essential process in human activity and society. There is no other way, except through communication, that men share their knowledge, experience, desires, and thought. Societies exist only through communication because communication acts as a social cement. It brings about interpersonal brotherhood and peace.

The term *communication* comes from the Latin *Communis* (common) or *communicare* (to establish a community or a commonness, or to share). Communication is a sharing, a meeting of minds, a bringing about of a common set of symbols in the minds of the participants, as well as the exchange of meaning.

Some educated Africans' dislike for things African is not merely that they are associated with "primitivity" and therefore supposedly "backward" and injurious to their amour propre; rather, it is because of Western acculturation; Western influences have forced them to lose their culture. They cannot, therefore, see immediately the relevance of much of what is African to affect it; and they have not been interested in developing a capacity to "appreciate" it through intellectualization. The aim of this

chapter, therefore, is to put early communication system as well as modern systems in Nigeria firmly in their social contexts, to show that the system of communication, whether simple or sophisticated, serves essentially the same purpose the world over. It points to the fact that a communication system is part of a common social heritage that makes for cohesion and solidarity and that helps insure the continuity of a group life.

Faced with the same basic problems of physical survival, ways to meet the elementary needs of communication had to be discovered. For this reason, in every society there must be some sort of patterned ways of sharing ideas, information, knowledge, and thoughts, that are understood and observed by everybody. Within certain limits, all human beings have the same communication needs, but the means used to meet these needs vary so greatly from society to society. The system of communication used in any society is dependent, to some extent, on locally available materials. The materials that have been available, the skill of the people and the imagination of communication system designers, contribute to the development of the communication system of any society. The system of communication is usually the product of the time and the place.

Since all mental processes cannot grasp reality itself, and in order to represent it, to hold it at all, they are driven to the use of symbols. The difference between the several symbols used in various societies, therefore, is accounted for by different world conceptions.

15.2 EARLY MASS MEDIA IN NIGERIA

Trado-modern communication scholars like Ugboajah and Wilson have insisted on an adaptive redefinition of the term "Mass Media" as it applies to traditional societies. While Western communication scholars insist that mass media must have such characteristics as the capability to address a large heterogeneous audience, messages reaching the audience at the same time, and the audience having a wide geographic spread, the Trado-modern communication scholars do not feel that all these criteria must be met before one thinks of the communication system that can be accepted as a mass medium once it has the capability and the capacity of conveying messages in comprehensible symbols to people who share meaning of the same symbols. This definition ignores the characteristics of the medium having a heterogeneous audience, and the audience having a wide geographic spread.

Trado-media use conventional signs which can be interpreted properly only by knowing their socially determined meanings. The meanings develop out of the needs and uses of each community. They reflect the experiences of the people by the objects and relations they

symbolize, and the values of the community by the emphasis they provide. Using commonly interpretable symbols by members of a community shows a standardization of perception is stereotyped. The use of symbols fits preconceived notions, which are created for the most part by symbols. Such symbols not only name the objects of experience, but they also place them in a context. As the context changes, the response to the symbols also changes. In other words, the context may alter response to the object, the evaluation of it and even the way it is perceived.

Pre-colonial Nigeria had its equivalent of mass media. There were mass media as such in the Western sense because all communication was interpersonal. Everything that its members sought to find out about events in their environment, everything they needed in order to discover their socially shared interpretations about these matters and prescriptions for reacting to them, everything about the value, rules and expectations of members of the society, everything that could serve as social lubricants – jokes, stories, songs and dances – were all available only through direct communication between individuals. Individuals made use of interpersonal communication to gratify their needs for information, guidance and entertainment.

One of the striking characteristics of the communication process in pre-colonial Nigeria was that it was not organized as a distinct system sharply differentiated from other social processes. There were no professional communicators as such; everyone participated in the communication process. Most of the functions performed by the modern media were also performed as a principle mass channel of communication. Lerth Rose (1939-86), a noted sociologist, had this to say about communication activities vis-a-vis the market place:

On market days, the women have a busy day. Nearly the whole day is spent in getting ready, walking the two or three or six or ten miles to the market place... one would think this practice of visiting different markets two or three times a week with all its attendant bustle and fatigue, would be gladly dispensed with but the market is more than a mere shopping centre. More perhaps than their home, it is the centre of their own individual lives. It is their battlefield; their opportunity; their channel of expression; it is their theatre, their newspaper and their post office. Here they can show that stuff they are made of; here they laugh and shout and chatter to their hearts content, here they meet friends and relatives, visitors from other villages they have not seen for months; they can hear the news and gossip and, most important, they can send messages to right and left, immediately passed from woman to woman, from one market to

another. One hears over and over again the remarks: 'I will speak of it in the market.'

Leonard Doob, in his authoritative book – *Communication in Africa*, also stressed the significance of the market as traditional Africa's most free channel of mass communication. According to Doob (1961:144);

Throughout Africa an extremely important institution is that of the market; some markets are open every day of the week... People at market receive and transmit miscellaneous information... It seems patently evident that people talk a great deal (in the market)... Topics include all the problems people might be expected to discuss, such as health, weather, and even politics... The market site, consequently, offers one of the few opportunities for communications to move from community or society to another. In addition, flirtations occur and rendezvous are arranged.

In pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial Nigeria, the market has always been colourful, noisy and fun. It provides the place to get the latest news, settle legal disputes, and pay respect to elders. The famous "bush telegraph" – the rapid spread of news by means unknown to Europeans – works in part through the market place. Nigerian traditional markets are major centres of entertainment. Dancers, work parties, and masquerades come to the market to display. Births and deaths were announced and celebrated in the market. Traditional "wedding" and marriages were "consecrated" in the market. Virtuous girls were rewarded by being carried shoulder high through the market. This helped to cultivate morality in girls. Boys and girls who came of age were publicly exhibited and honoured in the local market as soon as they passed through some institutional rites. Even thieves as well as other criminals were charcoaled and paraded through the market. There, they received taunts, beating and spittle on the face. These methods were a lot more effective in crime prevention than anything done by the modern mass media of communication.

15.3 HOW COMMUNICATION WORKS

Regardless of the sophistication or the lack of it, communication media in all cultures serve the same aim – transmission of meaning among people. The media are many things to many people and serve a variety of functions, depending on the interests and needs of specific individuals. From antiquity to modern times, man has used all sorts of objects to transmit meaning, as means of staying in social relations with other humans. Although man has used various objects as the media of

communication, it was not until 1948 that Harold Lasswell identified and grouped media function under the following headings:

1. Surveillance of the environment.
2. The correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment.
3. Transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next.

The fourth function of the media – entertainment – was added to Lasswell's list in 1959 by Charles Wright.

Apart from entertainment and education, the media perform a very vital role in providing information on a regular basis about the world we live in. The media provide a check on government, various institutions, and all manner of people in society. The media do not report on everything that occurs in the environment; rather, they focus attention on those pieces of information that have a high degree of news value. Information becomes news if it meets the news criteria of prominence, consequence, proximity, timeliness and human interest.

It would be difficult to imagine a world without the media for sharing common concerns. The media are the "market place" where political thought, economic thought, education and entertainment are exchanged. The media provide the citizenry with what to think about and, in some cases, exert influence on the patterns of thought of the people who expose themselves to the media. Advertising, through the mass media, has played a major role in the rise of the Nigerian standard of living. Advertising stimulates consumption and as consumption rises, production increases. Advertising stimulates competition among competing manufacturers. The stiffer the competition, the higher the quality of product brands. Attractive new commodities are as a result of demonstrated willingness to purchase by the consumers.

The surveillance function of the media has to do with informing and providing news. The media give warning on expected dangers like conditions of weather, threatening border wars, famine, epidemic, etc.

Correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment has to do with the selection and interpretation of information about the environment. This the dusk and dawn hours for the announcement of his messages. The drum had the main function of arresting the attention of the people, thereby, compelling them to pay attention to the announcement that follows.

The type of drum used varies from area to area, depending on the available materials for making the drums and the sophistication of the local

artists. Apart from vocal announcements made by the town-crier, most groups in pre-colonial Nigeria made extensive use of vegetable and animal products as media of communication. Such products were used (and are still used in combination with the modern media), to warn people of expected danger. They partly helped in the enforcement of social norms. Prominent among the vegetable products (flora) used in the palm belt region of Nigeria is the palm frond – a young folded leaf of the oil palm, used either as a bunch or a single leaf. The palm frond popularly known as *eyei* or *ekpin* (among the Efik and Akwa Ibom people), has remained a very unique communication medium among some ethnic groups in Nigeria. If the palm frond is tied to any object, it communicates prohibition in most cases. When tied across a road it means that the use of the road is prohibited.

Among the Yala people of Ogoja, the palm frond otherwise known by the people as *ichari* or *ichali*, is a powerful “mass” medium of communication. According to Ogbeche (1987):

The most unique aspects of the communication within and around the community occurs when a string of it so knotted is being used to demarcate a piece of newly acquired farmland. Anybody seeing it will immediately know that such piece of land has been acquired and no thoroughfare will be tolerated. Just as it is used for demarcating a piece of land, it is also used during sacrifices in ritualistic compounds and village squares. For example, if a sacrifice is being offered to the gods or ancestors, the fact that ichari has been tied all-round the compound and especially at the entrance to the compound or the village square, conveys the message that the occupants of the compound must neither talk nor be spoken to.

The palm frond has remained both a medium as well as a language of communication. As a language of communication, its usage and meaning depends on how it is knotted. The plates below show various meanings conveyed by the palm frond:



Plate 17.1: Summons Indicator

Communicates that the receiver of the palm frond has committed a serious offence and is therefore summoned to appear before the Chief.

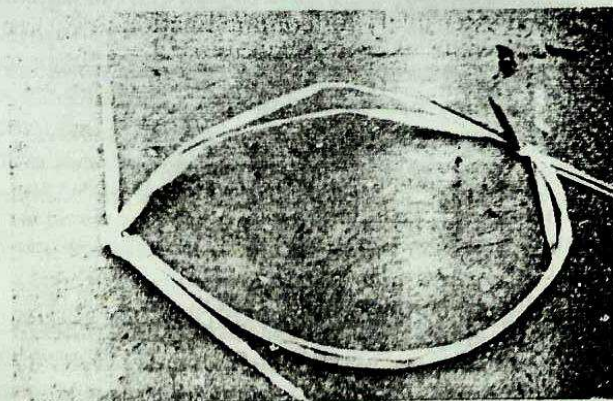


Plate 17.2: Ndak (Indicative of Qualification for Royal Stool)

If a palm frond of this configuration is sent to someone, it means that he has been considered good enough to be a Chief; he automatically becomes a chief-elect.

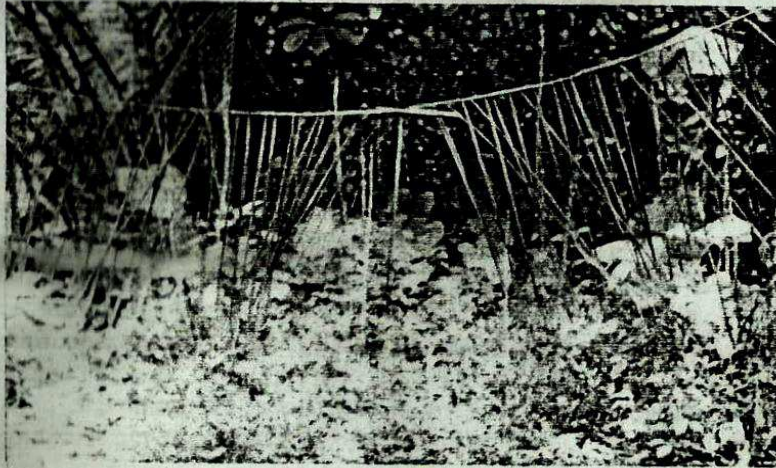


Plate 17.3: No Trespass

Communicates danger if the encircled area or object is made use by unauthorized persons. If placed around a building, it simply means that occupants of the building must quit immediately.

Apart from the palm frond, various other vegetable products were used and are still used extensively for communication in Nigeria.

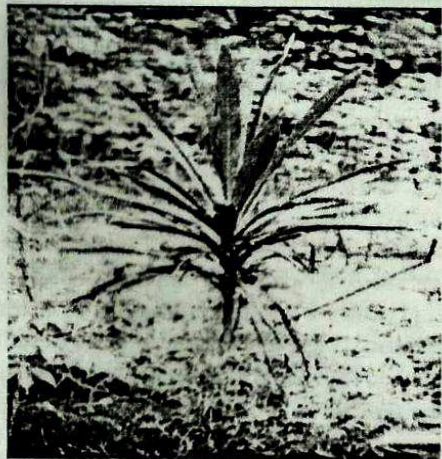


Plate 17.4: Okono (Boundary Indicator)

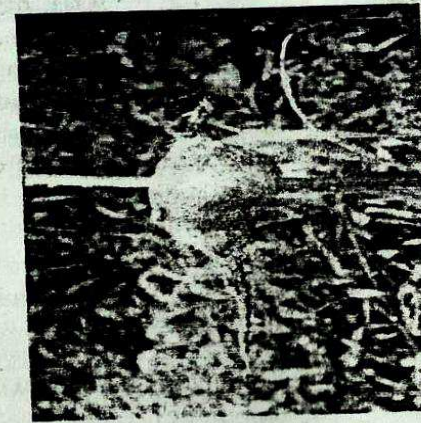


Plate 17.5: Scrotal Hernia (or Hydrocele)

Animal skin – a sort of “microphone” which masked the voice and provided a bit of amplification. The voice was purposely distorted through the use of the mouthpiece in order to conceal the human identity of the newscaster.

As the *akata* or *ekpo ndok* operated only at night, they had no need for masking their faces. They hid their identity behind the distorted sound of the mouthpiece. The *ekpo ndok* exposed deviants, enforced social norms, conferred status on both famous and notorious characters, and put a strong check on the behaviour of those in government. There was always the fear that any time one was caught in an immoral act, such a person would be sung about by the night masquerades. The night masquerade came only during its special season in the year. Members of the masquerade society kept in their memories, the list of events until the masquerade season would come again. This means that everyone had something to look forward to during the season of the night masquerade. It was a very powerful communication medium for enforcing social norms and maintaining consensus by exposing societal deviants.

RESTRAINING ORDER MEDIA (*Unwang*)

Many people have wondered why there was so much peace in the days of our forefathers. Stealing, for instance, was not as rampant then as it is now. One of the reasons for this can be traced to the extensive use of restraining order media for the protection and safety of property. As was discussed earlier, most of these media were made of animal or vegetable

materials. When used as restraining order media, the materials suddenly had religious links. Religion, as we all know among the Africans, has to do with all of life – farming, hunting, art, education, naming, etc. Every aspect of life is held within the unifying ambient of religion, neither does the African separate religion from life nor the spiritual from the material. The African believes in a supreme being spirit (good and evil), a pantheon of gods, and ancestors who guard.

When some vegetable or animal materials are constructed in certain ways, they carry with them spirit which are said to be capable of causing death to unauthorized users of the property the restraining order medium is expected to guard. The diseases which lead to such death vary according to the way the medium is designed. Plate 4 communicates a warning that an unauthorized user of anything around which this medium is placed, will suffer from paralysis. Plate 5 stands for scrotal hernia or hydrocele.

It is the common belief of the users of these restraining order media that once the spirits are invoked in the media, they can inflict punishment on trespassers. Such punishment may be swollen body, frequent stooling, tuberculosis, stroke or pneumonia. We learn from sociology that if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequence. Truth or falsity is immaterial.

15.3.3 Transmission of the Social Heritage

The transmission of the social heritage function of the media in pre-colonial Nigeria was well served by the various media we have so far discussed under surveillance and correlation of the environment functions. The early communication media in Nigeria carried in their contents, cultural imprints. Whether it was singing, drumming, talking, or trumpeting – everything was done in accordance with the accepted values and norms of the society or community. As the media serve the functions of surveillance, correlation of the different parts of the environment and entertainment, they, at the same time were transmitting the social heritage. They communicated information, values and norms from one generation to another or from members of a society to newcomers. In such ways, social cohesion was increased through the widening of the base of common experience.

Folktales and games were very powerful media of transmitting social heritage. They served, primarily, entertainment functions, but their contents were full of lessons for the younger generation. These lessons were in the areas of societal norms and values.

Work game such as *etibe* (Voluntary contribution) instilled in the children honesty, determination, respect for agreements, trust, interpersonal co-operation and so on. The game *esasat owo* (discrimination) helped in enforcing certain socially acceptable behaviour among the youth. The list at one time might include selecting only people with clean teeth, clean habits, etc. At another time it may include people with good working habits and so on. The game *mkpa* or *nko* taught the children alertness, sensitiveness, and respect for agreement.

15.3.4 Entertainment

We have already discussed the use of folktales and games as media of communication in Nigeria. It may be necessary to re-stress here the significance of entertainment to the African. The life of the African is a life of celebration – from the cradle to the grave. Singing, dancing and drumming form the integral part of daily life. In ancient times, masquerades of various forms and shapes, singing parties, dancing troupes, organised by various age groups provided the needed entertainment.

On moonlight nights, the people would gather at their community square for free shows. They would sing and dance to their hearts' desire until it was time to go to bed and rest in preparation for work the next day. The village or community square, therefore, provided another channel for news, gossips, etc. there, both the young and old would gather to sing, dance, or clap. There were hardly spectators as such because everyone was a performer.

15.4 PROPAGANDA AND MASS MEDIA

The word "propaganda" has a Latin origin – *propagare* which literally means pinning the fresh shoots of a plant into the soil so as to produce new plants which in turn will take on a new life. The word was first used in a sociological sense by Pope Urban VIII in 1633 when he established *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, the function of which was to spread the Catholic doctrine. Until World War I the term propaganda was a good term. During that war, lies became the order of the day and so the word became a devil-term. Propaganda today has got both the positive as well as the negative side. Propaganda can be used for good causes (e.g. a wide campaign to secure aid for victims of natural disasters).

Whenever an initiating communicator tries to manage attitudes and actions of other people by playing on their pre-existing biases with messages designed to appeal to their passions rather than their rationality, he is using propaganda. Propaganda forms a good part of the modern mass media content. The media are the main vehicles through which propaganda

is transmitted; the mass media also create and propagate propaganda. They are saturated with a large assortment of propagandists.

Advertising is one aspect of communication that utilizes a great deal of propaganda. Propagandists make use of propaganda devices in their attempt to influence behaviour and actions of others. Some of the propaganda devices are:

1. Name Calling - Labelling in order to reduce the prestige of a person, product, institution or service.
2. Glad Name - Giving an attractive name in order to make the attitude or object look good and acceptable in the midst of competing attitude objects.
3. Bandwagon - Stimulating the desire to belong, to be like others.
4. Glittering Generalities - Using colourful words to deceive.
5. Transfer - Naming in such a way that the sterling qualities of other objects seem to be transferred to another object which the propagandist is trying to "sell" (examples: champion, lion, national, lux, etc.).
6. Testimonial - Employing a well-known figure to give testimony about a product or service.
7. Plain Folk - Making a person of high status to do things like the ordinary folk in order to arouse the interest of the common people and others.
8. Card Stacking - Telling only half-truths and concealing facts about the bad side.

A student of mass media must know that the propagandist wants to influence, to persuade and to affect the attitudes and actions of people. Except for propaganda aimed at the welfare of the people, propaganda is not an invitation to the audience to contemplate, to question and to deliberate. The aim of the propagandist is for his audience to come to quick conclusion without spending time to think and decide. As educated media consumer, the audience ought to be able to know when the initiating communicator is trying to exploit him.

15.5 MASS MEDIA ADJUNCTS

Have you ever wondered where all the news features and programmes you see, read or listen to come from? Press associations, feature syndicates and independent producers are the sources from which the media obtain news, features, stories and a wide variety of programme materials. Apart from the press, associations and feature agencies, advertising agencies contribute a lot to the media content on a daily basis. Some of the press agencies include NAN, PANA, UPI, AP and Reuters.

15.6 SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have tried to put in focus the early communication system in Nigeria and discussed modern mass media as well. To appreciate the ingenuity of our forbears in developing communication devices, one has to remember the type of world in which they found themselves – a small, crude world. It was a small world indeed, and it is likely that every one knew every one else. They studied their immediate environment and picked from it materials which they shaped into very reliable communication media. Through such means they were able to share essential meaning about important things in the environment.

Owing to the fact that life in the area now known as Nigeria was organized on small ethnic/family communities, communication was largely carried out on a face-to-face, interpersonal basis. There was no need for designing media that would send messages to distant places. The important thing was that the devices and system of communication used were very credible and effective.

The secret of the effectiveness of the traditional media can be traced to the religious connections of the media. There is the belief that because of this religious link, going contrary to what any traditional medium of communication commands its audience to do or not to do, could bring about instant calamity to the victim.

Judging from what our forefathers were able to do with their traditional media before the advent of the colonialist, it behoves us as a people to find genuine ways of incorporating our traditional media with the modern, Western-based system without unnecessary loss of our culture identity.

The mass media play a very vital role in society. The functions of surveillance of the environment, correlation of the parts of society, transmission of the social heritage, and entertainment, are all essential functions that the media must carry out for the benefit of society.

The modern man must know something about the modern media of communication in order to be able to avoid being manipulated. He must understand the working of the media so as to be able to benefit from the good things the media have to offer.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What role does communication play in the establishment of Human Society?
2. How would you account for the effectiveness of the Traditional Media of Communication in Nigeria?
3. "No society can exist without some form of Communication Media." Discuss the falsity or truth of this statement.
4. List and discuss the four functions of the Mass Media in Society.
5. What is the relationship between the Mass Media and propaganda?
6. List and discuss five propaganda devices.

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