

**TRADO - MODERN
COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS**
- Interfaces and Dimensions

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Chapter Three

TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION: THE ENCODING AND DECODING PROCESS

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INTRODUCTION

Human communication is the simple but sometimes complex process by which individuals exchange and share ideas, information and various forms of symbolisms with themselves (intrapersonal communication), between and among themselves (interpersonal communication), between groups (intergroup) and between an organizational source and hundreds, or thousands or even millions of people (mass communication).

Traditional communication processes though simple in structure share several common elements with modern communication systems.

Many have referred to it and indeed classified it as interpersonal communication or at best as group communication. This ancient communication practice has been the forerunner to today's mass media practice. Indeed, because it has persisted, many who do not understand it simply regard it as a passing phase. They point to the fact that it is no longer the main source of information in developed societies. In fact, part of the reason it is classified as interpersonal communication is that it appears to be a form of community communication in which a communicator known as a town crier / messenger / reporter disseminates information to residents in his immediate community. There are no electronic processes – transmitters and receiving devices involved. But the system and process are not that simplistic in their performance.

The message bearer or town crier is symbolically an organizational media worker because he is the megaphone of the village or community communication council. He does not speak or 'narrowcast' information on his own. He is like the radio or television newscaster or the newspaper or magazine reporter. The difference between him and his modern counterparts lies in the fact that he is seen in flesh and blood by those who care. The traditional communication system in which he is a prime player follows a process whose format has remained largely unaltered over the years. It is this structure that we intend to examine here through the encoding and decoding processes.

Part One:

Introduction, History and Theoretical Overviews

This process begins when an encoder sets out to express the purpose of his communication through his message. The professionalization of the practice is not in the external but is an intrinsic inheritance of family skill. There is no dress code but he communicates through the rhetoric of his clothes. This process can be illustrated as shown in the figure below.

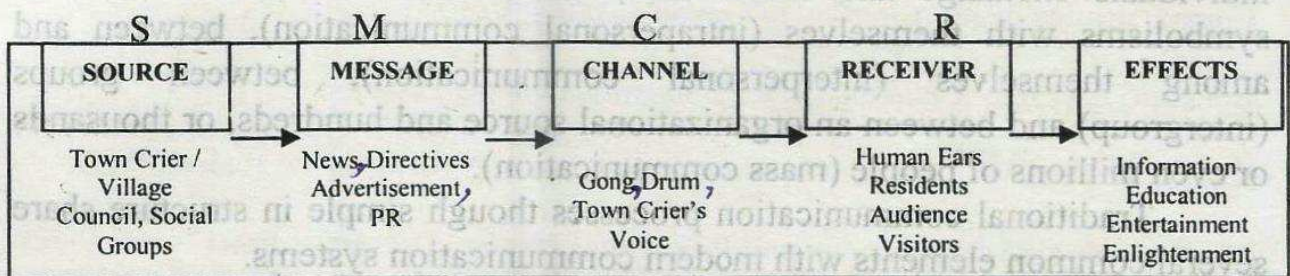


Fig 1: The Communication Process

The **source**, in the process, is represented by the town crier / messenger / reporter who acts on behalf of the village communication council or any of the social and other groups in the community. Thus it is clear that there is an organizational source which is the origin of the communication message.

The **message** comes to the audience in varied forms just as the varied contents of a modern mass medium. But the content here is more limited. It reaches the receivers as news of an event that has taken place, or is about to take place or will take place. It is also presented as information. This could be in the form of directives or announcements. The content here may be in the form of advertisement of a local product. The product owner induces the town crier before such product advertising takes place. Sometimes the product may belong to the community. At that point the community is ready to dispose of it. It does not directly pay for the advertisement but the town crier gets his 'honorarium' through the privileges extended to him at council meetings and the levies he is excluded from paying or the community task he may not perform.

The town crier is again part of the **channel**. He employs varying instruments – attention directing devices (ADD) – which may be a metal or wooden gong, woodblock, skin drum, or any other instrument that the community has validated and these are supplemented by his carrying voice

which must be loud enough to reach distant places in the village. This voice transmits the actual message. In some cases, he plays a certain signature language on the wooden gong which message his audience members within the community understand. But this is as far as it goes with regard to simple, repetitive messages. The general and common form of the town crier's message is rendered through the eloquence and loudness of his voice in common speech.

Then the **receivers** are the human ears which capture the sound waves and process the message to all human beings. These receivers are also the residents, visitors and the general audience present at the time the message is delivered. The receivers sometimes engage the town criers in an interactive session whereby further clarity is provided to the message. It is this situation that gives the picture of the traditional communication system as being essentially an interpersonal one.

Where signature language or message is played on the wooden drum, which is mounted on a raised platform or roof top, those in very distant places beyond the originating village, share in the message. The message gains its strength or power from repetition.

Finally, the outcome of the town crier's message on the receivers is that it provides them with information, education, entertainment, enlightenment, and brings about integration among other **effects (Burgoon, 1978)**

THE ENCODER - DECODER

Among human beings, the encoder is the speaking mechanism which converts a message into a code (language, symbol) verbal or non-verbal. Thus encoding involves putting a message into a code that is, translating nerve impulses into speech sounds. This is what the town crier does when he delivers messages to his listeners. This is an essentially oral process.

The decoding mechanism operates in a similar manner as in the encoding process. In human communication, the decoder is the auditory mechanism which extracts a message from a code. This process could involve the conversion of speech sounds into nerve impulses or neural information. At this point, there is meaning, exchange or sharing.

In the traditional communication setting where the town crier operates, he could serve as source / encoder. He encodes his message which is in the common code (language) of the community. His voice is the channel or

carrier which conveys the message to the receiver who now decodes the message.

In this process, the source and receiver must have the same level of language competence if they are to communicate effectively with each other. Even though they may never engage each other in a perfect one-to-one matching in respect of meaning exchange it is important that the gap in knowledge of the language used in communicating the message should not be too wide otherwise misunderstanding may result.

Yet at the level of purpose, each communicator must ask himself the question: what do I intend to achieve in the specific communication act? An answer to this question gives the lie to the neo-scholastic thinking that one can communicate without a purpose. Even one who is mentally challenged has a purpose for his communication.

Clearly, there are many reasons or purposes why we communicate in society. Some of these include: to inform, educate, entertain, socialize, persuade, reinforce, mobilize, ethicize, integrate, promote culture etc. It is for some of these reasons that communities have set up the traditional information dissemination system popularly known as oral media (oramedia) of communication or traditional communication system.

THE TOWN CRIER'S NARROWCAST

The town crier, who is the channel for realizing traditional communication, operates with a limited variety of content. His message content generally includes directive, announcement, advertising, public relations, news and general information.

He encodes the message either in the present continuous, past or future tense. In the present tense structure he may present the news as follows:

The village is going to punish all those who have failed to turn up for the ongoing weeding exercise at the village square. The council wishes to inform defaulters that they will be fined N100 for adults and N50 for youths. No excuses will be entertained.

This is a segment of a report on an ongoing communal activity for which more hands are needed. As a product of the village council decision, the message is

rendered in the form of a directive and an announcement. The action required is in the present:

The past perfect structure shows an action that has been completed or a decision taken on a completed action.

The village council has decided that all family heads must pay the sum of N100 before the Obo Market day, for the rehabilitation of the collapsed classroom of our village school.

This is another conveyance of a decision but it is a report rendered in the past perfect tense. What is required here is compliance. The news is that a classroom in the village school has collapsed. The directive is that the Village Council has estimated that if each family head pays N100 naira the rehabilitation can be done. A deadline for the payment is fixed but unlike in the first report, no sanctions are attached.

While in the case of the use of a future tense, the town crier reports an impending action or activity thus:

All adult males should assemble at the village shrine on Monday (Fionetok Market) so that we can decide on the appropriate response to the invasion of our farm lands by unknown criminals.

This report focuses on a future event. It announces an event that is to come. No decision is made apart from fixing the date of the meeting in future. It is at this future meeting that they will decide on what to do in self defence.

Apart from such grammatically structures whose meanings and time of occurrence are located in the decisions taken or to be taken, the presentation usually takes the form of **headline – detail**. Thus in a three-item report such as the ones presented above, the town crier mentions each item before giving the details and then summarizing as he makes his way around the village paths.

What emerges may look like this:

1. **News item No. 1** - **Headline - Detail**
2. **News item No. 2** - **Headline - Detail**
3. **News items No. 3** - **Headline - Detail**

4. Summary of news items 1-3 with additional briefs

However, before going through this process, the town crier uses the gong, woodblock, skin drum or any validated instrument as attention – directing device (ADD). This instrument is played or beaten to attract the attention of the audience members before the headline is given. This is followed by a call to attention: *mbufo ekpang utong-o* (Please give me your attention / ears).

When this has been done, the message is rendered using the headline – detail format. This format is similar to that which is employed in radio and television newscast. It is also important to remember that at this point listeners may reach out to the town crier and demand clarification of issues raised in his message. This interactive session may last for a few seconds or minutes depending on the explanation the town crier is ready to make and the resolve of the village audience to get at the root of the message.

It is also important to note that the message content in traditional communication is often limited to one or two items and rarely three. This limited number of ‘news’ items have made it necessary for residents to depend on it for their regular information. While it is possible to increase the systems’ inputs (content), it must be also borne in mind that the fewer the number of items, the more it is easier to understand them. Some have suggested an increase to make it more dynamic but it is feared that this could lead to the vitiation of its quality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above observation, we recommend the following as possible modifications to the existing system:

- (i) The operations of the town crier should be carried out on daily basis and twice a day
- (ii) The town crier should be paid a ‘salary’ for his duty
- (iii) The Village Communication Council should be set up under the leadership of a resident Chief who should report to the village head. Members of the Council should receive a monthly allowance.
- (iv) There should be a village communication centre with a television viewing facility, radio, newspapers and a library. In this centre, the meeting or editorial boardroom of the village communication council should be established.

- (v) The number of items to be 'narrow cast' by the town crier should be increased and a list of items should be compiled by the town crier. For this purpose, the town crier should be literate in English and the local language.
- (vi) The town crier should be appointed after a selection interview. He should be one who possesses the qualities of truthfulness, honesty, hard work, language competence, good voice, ability to play the local instrument, and should possess energy and strength.
- (vii) The town crier should be trained in news reporting and general communication principles.

CONCLUSION

In the present century, the town crier almost seems an endangered newsman! But he is not. He is only an undervalued and underutilized professional in rural areas. There is need for the introduction of a few innovations, not so that he can compete with Western media but so that he can be more effective in our rapidly changing world. This is what we have to decide and agree on so that we can make the institution more responsive to the needs of our time.

We need a nationwide workshop to work out the details especially now that electronic communication has been taken to higher heights. There is no doubt that the services of the town crier will continue to be desired in every rural community, irrespective of its level of sophistication.

The rural leaders must not allow new influences to relegate their institutions to the background.

We are not calling for the retention of practices that have no use today but for the improvement of those which, have refused to die and still have big roles to play in our lives.

Some of our national and state leaders urged on by some undiscerning scholars have given the false impression that our state of ruralness will evaporate soonest. Even the most developed countries in the world still have rural communities. Eliminating the town crier is like eliminating an essential part of our existence. We must not allow this to happen.

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