

EMERGING TRENDS
IN GENDER,
HEALTH & *Ag's copy*
POLITICAL
COMMUNICATION
IN AFRICA



A PUBLICATION IN HONOUR OF
PROFESSOR DR. IKECHUKWU S. NDOLO
— A WORLD-CLASS AUTHOR, TEACHER, MENTOR
AND LEADING COMMUNICOLOGIST

Edited By
OBIORA F. IKE
And
SUNNY E. UDEZE

Emerging Trends in Gender, Health and Political Communications in Africa

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The Psychology of Mass Communication



Innocent Okoye
and
Agnes Ahmadu

Introduction

Communication, as a rule, involves a process whereby information, ideas, emotions, skills, etc, are transmitted by the use of symbols, in the form of words, texts, images, figures, signs, and gestures, from one person to another or others. A basic communication model is that a sender encodes and sends a message through a channel, which may be interpersonal or mass mediated, to a receiver or destination, which must have the ability to decode the message.

The basic elements of the communication process are: the sender, also called source or communicator; the message, also called content; and the receiver, also called destination or audience. For the communication process to be complete there is feedback, which is the response from the receiver that the message has actually been seen or heard or whatever.

Indeed, all communication is undertaken with the expectation that it will have effects. Effect is any change in the audience's behaviour as a result of communication exposure. It could be overt, such as buying a brand of noodles or toothpaste, or voting for A or B party or enrolling in KWASU or ABUAD. Or the effect may be subjective, such as knowing something new or changing one's mind on using mosquito treated nets, etc.

Effects could also be short or long-run, reinforcement or conversion (Berelson and Steiner, 1964: 528). But effects cannot be uniform, and rarely exactly as planned, since the audience's minds are not *tabulae rasae*, or clean slates on which no impression formerly existed. All audience members are subject to predispositions, in the form of personality traits, interests, attitudes, beliefs, biases, ideologies, mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. Predispositions are the social and psychological states of the audience members at the beginning of the communication process, whose chemistry with communication brings about differential effects.

Incidentally, the important role of predisposition in the communication process was only discovered after a season of romance with the idea of "all-powerful media" in which the mass media were deemed, a priori, to have "direct, immediate and powerful effects" on the audience. Indeed, scientific research into mass communication, pioneered by scholars from psychology, was aimed at testing this hunch. The ensuing media effects tradition of classical mass communication could not support the initial notions of all-powerful media, but rather ascribed the media with only "limited effects"

Origin of Mass Communication Theory

Mass Communication is defined by Stanley et al, (2009:5) as a process whereby "an organization employs a technology as a medium to communicate with a large audience." This all-too-familiar definition presents a scenario in which the source is not an individual such as a teacher in the classroom or a pastor on the pulpit, but a complex organization, with various specializations, such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) network. The message is not casual but a product of "work", "standardized" and "manufactured." The audience is not one person or a small group but a "mass," not only large, but also widely dispersed and heterogeneous. Most importantly, the medium is not mere word of mouth or a letter, or even a simple technology like a public address system at a public function, but a sophisticated technology

combining a transmitter, antenna, complemented by a radio or television receiver; or film project; or a printing press.

Even at that, in offering their simple definition, Stanley et al, warn that "the mass communication environment is (constantly) changing." And they give the following examples to buttress their point that the frontiers of mass communication are indeed expanding:

When you receive a piece of direct-mail advertising addressed to you by name, and in which your name is used throughout, you are an audience of one - not the large audience envisioned in traditional notions of mass communication. When you sit at your computer and send an email to twenty thousand people who have signed on to a Listserv dedicated to a particular subject, you are obviously communicating with a large audience, but you are not an organization in the sense of a newspaper, cable television network or movie studio (*Ibid*).

Add to this the new reality that you can write your own television script, produce and disseminate your own programme to tens of millions of viewers via the internet. So where is the complex organization like the NTA envisioned in the old definitions of Mass Communication?

The terms mass communication and mass media were coined in the early 20th Century to describe the new communication system, which emerged as a result of the master trends of industrialization, urbanization and modernization, witnessed in Western Europe in the previous century. A body of theories emerged when scholars from related disciplines, notably sociology, psychology, social psychology and political science, began to study the impacts of the new phenomenon on the individual, the society in general, as well as on the political and economic systems. These pioneer scholars included the social psychologists, Kurt Lewin and Carl Hoveland; the political scientist, Harold Lasswell; the sociologist, Paul Lazarsfeld, and the demographer, Bernard Berelson. Oso (2012:3) rightly points out, "the roots of communication and media studies are deep in many older disciplines", agreeing with Wilbur Schramm, that "to comprehend the sum total of existing knowledge of human communication, a student must search at least half a dozen scholarly fields" (Oso. *Ibid*: 4).

The psychologists, naturally, were eager to ascertain the impact of propaganda, used extensively during the First and Second World Wars, as well as cinema and radio, on the individual audience members. Incidentally, before 1854 religion dictated how the nature of humans was considered. The dominant model was that humans were created in the

image of God, and needed to conform to standards prescribed by religious dogmas in order to be "saved." Non-conformists or "evil doers" would be lost forever in hell. But in 1854 Charles Darwin, an English biologist, published his seminal work, *On the Origin of Species*, in which he argued that inheritance and biology accounted for human behaviour. The so-called Darwin's theory of evolution postulated that humans and the lower animals had a common ancestry, and that all animals of a particular species would behave alike when exposed to the same external stimuli. It naturally followed that all humans would react in more or less the same way when exposed to the power of the mass media.

This view of humans as behaving like sheep was mingled with the theory of the mass society already articulated by sociologists. The result was a systematic and somewhat organized way of explaining mass communication phenomena, which later found accommodation in the Anglo-American university system. This is the origin of mass communication theory.

The Role of Psychology in communication research

Psychology is the academic discipline concerned with the study of the human mind and behaviour. It attempts to understand individuals and groups using some rigorous general principles. Mainstream psychology explores concepts such as perception, cognition, emotion, phenomenology, motivation, brain functioning, personality, behaviour and interpersonal relations, while the special branches delve into the realm of the unconscious mind and related things. (Wikipedia: Retrieved 15/1/14)

Originally studied as part of philosophy in ancient times, psychology received a great boost as an academic discipline in modern times, after its foremost scholar, William James, published his famous book, *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, which laid "the foundations for many of the questions that psychologists would explore for years to come" (Wikipedia, Ibid).

McQuail (2005, p.63) explains the areas of communication research where the social sciences made their mark. Sociology offered a functionalist framework of analysis for the mass media through Harold Lasswell's 1948 model of "who says what to whom, through what channel and with what effect?" Information science contributed the second theoretical element key to the dominant paradigm guiding media research with Shannon and Weaver's 1949 information theory "whose main concern was the technical efficiency of communication channels carrying information". Psychology contributed to the third theoretical element of the dominant paradigm of early communication research through its "high status of behaviourism and experimental research

method, which is based on one version or the other of stimulus-response theory”.

It is worthy of note that though alternative paradigms challenging the notion of ‘all-powerful media’ evolved as the field of communication research grew, the dominant paradigm has not been jettisoned altogether, as its aims of improving the effectiveness of communication for legitimate enterprises such as advertising or public information is still much in practice. In McQuail’s (2005, p.75) words, ‘it fits many of the contemporary media operation and it meets the needs of media industries, advertisers and publicists’. Thus, psychology has provided one of the founding pillars of theory building in communication research.

Littlejohn (1996, p.123) also shares the view that psychology played a key role in the emergence of media theory, which characterised early communication researches. He avers that psychological explanations appeal to many communication scholars. This is not unconnected to his idea that “though outcome of communication may be social, its genesis is individual, making psychological explanations crucial”.

Carl Hovland’s Contributions

Psychologist Carl Hovland has been credited as being one of the founding fathers of experimental research on the effects of communication. Carl Hovland headed a team of Yale University researchers to conduct a social psychology study on the conditions under which people were likely to change their attitudes in response to persuasive media messages during the World War II. Known as the Yale Attitude Studies, the study sought to “lay a groundwork of empirical propositions concerning the relationships between communication stimuli, audience predisposition, and opinion change” and to “provide an initial framework for subsequent theory building” (Griffin, 2000, p.35). The research, which investigated causes of persuasive variations along the source of the message, the content of the message and audience characteristics generated much interest by bringing to the fore the issue of source credibility which is still much an issue in journalism parlance today.

Beyond its specific findings, Carl Hovland’s Yale Attitude Studies is significant to the socio-psychological tradition of communication theory because none of the researchers’ claim was based on faith, but on systematic methods (Griffin, 2000, p.36). The study was able to arrive at communication truths by carrying out careful, systematic observation which was a milestone in communication research.

Paul Lazarsfeld's Contributions

Paul Lazarsfeld, who was trained in psychological measurement, introduced empirical social research methods to establish the validity of theory between the 1930s and early 1940s (Baran and Davis, 2009, p.30). Lazarsfeld's interest in using the newly developed social science research methods such as surveys and field experiments to explore the existence of 'powerful effects' the media was thought to wield as at that time led to the conduct of his famous "American Voter Studies", which was aimed at documenting the media's power in election campaigns.

His research endeavour led to the conclusion that "media were not nearly as powerful as hoped or feared" (ibid). Rather, media audience had several ways of resisting media influence. Lazarsfeld's work introduced the concept of "intervening variables or mediating factors" where people's attitude to communication messages was said to be shaped by competing factors of religious ties, family and friends. Though Lazarsfeld did not label his work, it has however come to be known as the "limited effects model", which is still with us today. Therefore, beyond the study's specific findings, Lazarsfeld's contributions to modern day communication research cannot be overemphasised, as empiricism in communication research as we have it today, can still be traced to Lazarsfeld's "American Voter Studies".

Psychology in Contemporary Communication Research

In the wake of the new age of technology development, psychology and mass communication continue to interact. In contemporary times, the budding field of media psychology is gaining grounds, a child of necessity born out of the proliferation of media technologies, which is raising fears above hopes about their potential harmful influence. The hardware and software development in the world of information and communication technology is at the heart of media psychology. In the words of media psychologist, Rutledge (2010),

The rapid introduction of technology has triggered reactions, from that of enthusiasm to distrust... media psychology seeks to understand the interaction among individuals, groups, society and technology and make sense out of it so we can make decisions and go about our lives in the most positive and productive way possible.

Media psychology, as part of media studies, seeks to answer questions by looking at technological development, content producer, content perceptions and user response (ibid). Media psychology is also

related to Learning Theory which suggests four hypotheses for understanding the effects of Electronic Media Violence (EMV), especially on children and young persons. They are: Catharsis Hypothesis, Aggressive Cues Hypothesis, Reinforcement Hypothesis and Observational Hypothesis.

Audience Characteristics

As noted earlier, the aim of communication is to create effect on the receiver or audience. The nature of effect or impact will depend, to a large extent, on the predisposition of the audience, individually and collectively. A pioneer communication scholar, Bernard Berelson (1964: 528) defines predisposition as "the social and psychological state of the audience, or of the member of the audience, at the beginning of the communication". Understanding of audience characteristics is therefore essential "in determining what people see, how they interpret it and what effect it has upon them". All branches of human communication, including journalism, advertising, public relations, integrated marketing communication, consumer behaviour, health communication, entertainment and instructional media, require adequate knowledge of audience characteristics to ensure maximum desired impact and cost effectiveness. Accordingly, many classical mass communication theories and research traditions are derived from scientific studies about audience characteristics. For example, the initial notion that the media had "a direct, immediate and powerful" effect on a presumed passive audience, soon gave way to the Uses and Gratifications Approach, whereby an active audience, driven by social and psychological needs, choose and use media and media content for the satisfaction of such needs. Other theories associated with an active audience include the Selective Processes, Spiral of Silence, Diffusion of Innovation, Media Dependency, Technological Determinism, among others.

Also, there can be no meaningful study of the principles of advertising and consumer behaviour without an understanding of the theories of perception, motivation, personality, attitude and persuasion, which are core to psychology. We shall therefore examine the interfaces between the above-mentioned psychology-based theories and some branches of mass communication.

Interface with Journalism

Journalism is the business of gathering, processing and disseminating timely information of public interest, otherwise known as news, via the print and electronic media, which include newspapers, magazines, radio,

television and the internet. The selection of the events to cover and include as news involves judgment of the news values, with the aim of achieving the most psychological impact of attention. Early research findings (e.g. Berelson: 1964) show that people tend to see and hear news that are favourable or congenial to their predispositions; they are more likely to see and hear congenial communication than neutral or hostile ones. Also, the more interested they are in a subject, the more likely is such selective attention. In selecting news, therefore, editors show bias for events that have geographical and psychological proximity for the audience. The reasoning behind this is that, as the British say, "the fly in our eyes is more important than the earthquake in China". Indeed, psychological nearness is stronger than geographical nearness.

But if the audience members pay attention selectively, they also perceive selectively. Research shows that people tend to perceive communication in accordance with their predispositions by evading the news or message or by distorting it in a favourable direction.

Research over time has established the following relationships between exposure and perception/misperception, (Berelson and Steiner, 1964):

- Accidental exposure is apt to lead to misperception of the message.
- The more trustworthy, credible or prestigious the communicator is perceived to be, the less manipulative his intent is considered to be, and the greater the immediate tendency to accept his conclusions.
- Communication attributed to sources of low credibility are considered more biased and unfair than identical communication attributed to sources of high credibility. The audience's perception of the source thus tends to influence its interpretation and acceptance of the content.

All the above goes to show that the audience members' perception of the communicator determines the fate of the message.

Interface with Health Communication

Health communication is the branch of mass communication which studies how to use communication theories and strategies to bring about healthier lifestyles in order to prevent or stem the spread of diseases. It became an issue in development following the failure of the so-called dominant paradigm of the 1960s to appreciably improve the quality of life in the developing world, by adopting Western European models.

In the concerted efforts to combat uncontrolled population growth, infant mortality and HIV/AIDS, health communication experts adopted a

broad range of strategies based on social psychological theories and models of behaviour. Most of these strategies have failed to achieve desired results but with varying consequences. For example, refusal to adopt family planning methods results in more babies, while failure to adopt HIV/AIDS preventive and management measures results in untimely deaths of a nation's active populations, with dire social and economic consequences. Development, or lack of it, has been associated with illiteracy, poverty, disease and their psychological concomitants such as attitude, behaviour, cognition, personality and all that.

It was to reduce poverty in the world by half on or before 2015 that the United Nations in September 2000 adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The agenda has eight components and several targets to be delivered particularly in the developing areas. They are:

- Goal 1. Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2. Achievement of universal primary education
- Goal 3. Promoting gender equality and empowerment of women.
- Goal 4. Reduction of child mortality
- Goal 5. Improvement of maternal health
- Goal 6. Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7. Ensuring environmental sustainability
- Goal 8. Developing a global partnership for development

Ever since its inception, MDGs has become the guide for measuring progress made by countries. Because none of these debilitating conditions can be decreed out of existence, they need the total commitment of the generality of the citizenry to be eliminated. This is where health communication comes in, to come up with strategies that would address the core issues. Airhihenbuwa *et al*, (2000:7) identifies the core health communication theories and models of behavioural change as: the health belief model, the theory of reasoned action, Learning/cognitive theory, diffusion of innovation and social marketing. Cullen (2009:104) notes that these theories and models of health behaviour based on individual psychology had been effective in certain societies for addressing certain diseases, although they were not so successful in stemming the tide of HIV/AIDS spread in Africa. This clearly calls for a better understanding of the African milieu and an interdisciplinary cooperation among scholars of communication, psychology, sociology and culture. Furthermore, health communication scholars are advocating a contextual approach rather than purely individual theories in the planning of communication strategies.

Interface with Integrated Marketing Communications

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines marketing as:

“the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives.” (Belch and Belch, 2004, p.7).

Central to marketing is the concept of exchange, involving the giving and taking of something of value by two parties. But exchange cannot take place without communication. So, and promotion have traditionally been in the marketing mix. Advertising is famously defined as “any paid form of non-personal communication about an organization, product, service or idea by an identified sponsor” (Belch and Belch, *ibid*, p.GL2). Until recently, the promotional function of most organizations, dominated by mass media advertising, were undertaken as a distinct enterprise from public relations, sales promotion and direct – marketing. But in the 1980s companies started seeing the need for a strategic integration of their promotional tools, hence the birth of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). According to Belch and Belch, *ibid*, p.9), IMC involves coordinating the various promotional elements and other activities that communicate with a firm’s customers”, thereby offering a one-stop shop for a client’s promotional needs. The American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA) defines IMC as:

A concept of marketing communications planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines – for example, general advertising, direct response, sales promotion and public relations – and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact. (Belch and Belch, *ibid*).

Incidentally, all the marketing tools are built on the framework of mainstream psychology-based theories and models. For example, to determine what needs they want their products to satisfy, marketers must rely on the theoretical framework of Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow identified five basic levels of human needs, arranged in order of importance as follows: 1. Physiological; 2. Safety; 3. Social/Love and Belonging; 4. Esteem; and 5. Self –actualization. In Nigerian parlance, a marketer must understand that “man must whack” before he starts to think of buying a jeep.

Also useful to the marketer of goods and services is an understanding of the Psychoanalytic theory and the development of Personality, pioneered by Sigmund Freud.

Consumer Behaviour, as a component of the Mass Communication curriculum, is about what makes the buyers of a good or service to behave the way he or she does in relation to the product. The study of Consumer Behaviour involves the study of "what they (consumers) buy, why they buy it, when they buy it, how they buy it, where they buy it, how often they buy it and how often they use it". (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1994, p.7). Consumers, on their part, rely on communication, formal and informal, in making decisions on whether to buy a good or service. Informal communication is more persuasive than the formal, since the communicator of the former has nothing to gain by passing on the message. But formal (mass mediated) communication, has the advantage of creating general awareness. Marketers create logos or symbols that are associated exclusively to their goods or services, which the consumers instantly recognise. However, logos and symbols linked with undesirable things will create a backlash.

Summary and Conclusion

Communication is the exchange of ideas between a Sender and a Receiver, and all communication is undertaken with the expectation that there will be effect. Effect is any change in the receiver's behaviour as a result of communication exposure. Effects cannot be uniform, and are rarely exactly as planned, because all audience members are subject to predispositions, in the form of personality traits, interests, attitudes, beliefs, mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. Predispositions are social and psychological states of the audience members. Mass communication is the process whereby messages are disseminated to a large, diversified and heterogeneous audience by means of technological devices called the mass media. Psychology is the academic discipline concerned with the study of the function of the human mind and behaviour. This chapter has tried to examine the nexus between mass communication and psychology, by citing some historical and theoretical frameworks and practices. We explored the contributions of the pioneer mass communication theorists, who came from psychology. It was noted that psychology contributed to the third theoretical element of the dominant paradigm of early communication research through its high status of behaviourism and experimental research method, which was based on the Stimulus – Response Theory.

Contemporary communication research employs the so-called Media Psychology "to understand the interaction among individuals, groups, society and technology, and make sense out of it". This is needed for people to be able to live their lives meaningfully, and clear the confusion created by so much diversity. The effect of media violence is also explained against the backdrop of Learning Theory.

Next, we examined the interface between psychology and journalism, noting that editors use psychological proximity in selecting news and the audience also use it in selecting what to read and watch as news. With regard to health communication, it was pointed out that health communication experts have adopted a broad range of strategies based on social psychological theories and models. But there is now an urgent need to find strategies for meeting the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

We also saw that Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), which is the new trend in the marketing of goods and services, is also built on the theoretical framework of social psychology.

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