

Communicating with the Rural Poor

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The current explosion of knowledge has complicated the role of many Extension professionals. The dissemination of information from research to the clientele isn't easy when the receivers actively seek out this information. This study focuses on problems involved in helping the poor, who seldom seek the information, receive messages through mass media. This study shows that often the message sent to the poor through mass media is understood primarily by the sender and not by the poor.

What communication barriers exist between professional change agents (Extension and antipoverty personnel, for example) and their rural clients? Do the services provided by these agents accurately reflect the needs of their clients?

These were some of the questions constituting the focus of a study made in Yates County, New York, in 1972.¹ One of the primary objectives of the study was to identify economic, social, situational, and other variables affecting communication between community leaders and the rural poor. Concomitant with the communication problem was the relative apathy of the poor to services

created by community leaders to alleviate poverty-related hardships.

A review of pertinent research and literature revealed that messages to antipoverty programs have traditionally been sent through institutionalized channels—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. None of the studies reviewed made significant comments about the potency of noninstitutionalized channels—newsletters, comic strips, bulletins, and leaflets—in transmitting vital information from change agents to their clients.

Why do change agents rely so heavily on the institutionalized media to communicate with their clientele? There are at least two reasons for this. First, students

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of development, such as Schraam, Rogers, Rao, and Pye have written quite convincingly about the catalytic role of the mass media in stimulating change in the modernization process.² As a result, many people view media exposure as a behavioral indicator of the disposition to adopt new ideas, especially among the members of a client system.

Second, it's often assumed that with some education, cash, and motivation, an individual is likely to read newspapers and magazines. It's also assumed that those exposed to these print media are also likely to expose themselves to electronic media (which is what Daniel Lerner calls the "centripetal effect" of media exposure). Despite the fact that these claims haven't been empirically validated, they're nevertheless accepted on intuition by many practitioners.

This article reports findings that indicate that some of the "hard-to-reach" segments of rural populations could be reached through noninstitutionalized channels. The underlying assumption is that some members of this audience may be part of the rural clientele that Extension seeks to reach.

Research Site

As indicated before, the study was made in Yates County, in the Rochester region of central New York. This county was selected

for two reasons. First, the funding agency stipulated that the study must be conducted in a rural county. Second, the agency's preference was for counties that were rural and also poor in some measurable ways. Also, previous studies by Cornell researchers had shown that a substantial segment of the rural poor in Yates County didn't participate in programs designed to palliate or prevent poverty in the area.³

Of the eight counties in the region, Yates has the highest percentage of households in relative poverty (under \$3,000 annual income) and the lowest percentage of households in relative affluence (\$10,000 and over).⁴ In 1969, the Rochester Bureau of Municipal Research found that the cash income of 25.7 percent of Yates County households was under \$3,000. Monroe County (the richest) had but 11.7 percent of its households in that category. Also, while the cash income of only 16.0 percent of Yates County households was in the "\$10,000 and over" bracket, Monroe County had 40.9 percent of its households in the same category.

A predominantly rural and conservative community, Yates County is sparsely populated and relatively uncontaminated by some of the undesirable effects of modern technology. Because of its low level of industrial activity, the county has high rates of unemployment and underemployment—that is, of poverty. Thus,

while many young people in the area can boast of 2 part-time jobs, their combined income from the 2 sources may not amount to more than \$5,000 a year.

In spite of the county's relative poverty, its leaders had managed to provide for underprivileged persons all the poverty services found in more affluent counties. At the time this study was made, over 40 agencies in the county were engaged in poverty amelioration services. Some were professional change agencies, others voluntary organizations.

Methodology

Two samples were used in the study: 141 community leaders and 143 low-income families. All respondents were adult whites. Among those designated "community leaders" were town and city officials, Extension and OEO personnel, and religious and educational heads. Within the low-income sample were families on welfare as well as underemployed and unemployed persons.

Data

Data were gathered from the two samples by personal interview, using structured questionnaires. These questionnaires were pretested in counties similar to Yates in several important respects.

To obtain the kinds of information necessary to meet the

objectives of the study, each interview schedule was subdivided into four parts corresponding to the main hypotheses of the study. The first part was devoted to demographic data, the second dealt with socioeconomic characteristics, the third focused on beliefs and attitudes, while the fourth dealt with respondents' communication behavior. It's the findings derived from the respondents' communication behavior, especially their response and exposure to noninstitutionalized media, that are reported here.

Findings

This study's main aim was to discover sources of communication barriers between community leaders and their low-income clients, and to suggest ways of improving communication between them. To provide useful data, questions were used to determine the potential of noninstitutionalized media (advertising leaflets, solicitations, newsletters, and bulletins) for leader-client communication.

Tables 1 and 2 show that both samples were fairly well exposed to these channels. That community leaders read more newsletters than the poor and that the poor read more advertising materials than leaders is understandable, for media exposure is influenced by interest, need, motivation, and access to media, among other factors.

Table 1. Percentage of low-income respondents' exposure to selected noninstitutionalized media.

Media	Received and read	Received but seldom read	Received but never read	Other
Advertising pamphlets, leaflets, etc.	72.0%	15.4%	8.4%	4.2%
Solicitations	32.9	23.8	34.2	9.1
Newsletters	55.2	13.3	19.5	12.0
Farm bulletins	16.8	14.0	45.5	23.7

Community leaders were found to be considerably more exposed to newspapers, magazines, and books than were the rural poor. The significance of this finding is that messages intended by leaders to reach the poor via newspapers and magazines will reach more of the senders than the intended receivers.

Some of the low-income respondents who claimed they read newspapers on a regular basis turned out to be, in fact, referring to an advertising weekly called the "Penny Saver," produced and distributed free by area merchants. Seventy-two percent of the rural poor and 4 percent of the leaders read this weekly regularly. In addi-

Table 2. Percentage of community leaders' exposure to selected noninstitutionalized media.

Media	Received and read	Received but seldom read	Received but never read	Other
Advertising pamphlets, leaflets, etc.	42.5%	38.3%	14.2%	5.0%
Solicitations	35.5	32.6	15.6	16.3
Newsletters	83.0	5.7	0.7	10.6
Farm bulletins	44.7	8.9	6.7	39.7

tion to advertisements, the "Penny Saver" contains notices of important community news and events and thus provides one widely read means of communicating simple messages to a wide audience.

Implications for Extension

OEO and similar antipoverty agencies aren't the only ones trying to reach and help the rural poor. Extension is one of the foremost agencies that has labored through the years to raise living standards in rural communities.

Education for action—the kind in which an effective Extension system has no peer—will forever remain the mission and challenge of the Extension Service.⁵

For Extension to carry out its mission effectively, it must reach its clients in farm and non-farm populations.

The present data show that the majority of the rural poor regularly read most printed materials they receive. There's enough evidence from the data to warrant the conclusion that low-income families in rural areas are pragmatic in their choice of communication channels and content.

They view, read, and listen to what they perceive to be potentially beneficial and relevant to them. For example, they read advertising materials to compare prices and save money. They read newsletters because they belong to special interest (such as fishing

or stamp collecting) clubs that publish newsletters. They read solicitations because it gives them satisfaction to know that the general population recognizes that they too can contribute to charity. Why the respondents in this study didn't read farm bulletins as much as they read the other materials is a matter for speculation.

Based on these data, a few recommendations for Extension communication may be made:

1. Bulletins, newsletters, and short pamphlets will probably be more effective than newspapers and other institutionalized media such as radio and magazines, in reaching low-income families with situationally relevant information. It's possible to build into these media a feedback mechanism to facilitate two-way communication. For example, clients receiving the bulletin or newsletter may be asked to write or call Editor X if they have comments or suggestions to make.
2. When necessary, Extension bulletins should adopt the "Sesame Street" approach to enhance audience receptivity. Especially when new services and programs are established, some imaginative approach to message treatment should be considered in the diffusion campaign.

Some of the farm bulletins received by the low-income sample

in Yates County had information that would have benefited any poor individual that cared to read them. However, among those who received farm bulletins, only 16.8 percent read them regularly, while 45.5 percent "never read" any of them.

Conclusions

Executors of the current war on poverty, including Extension programmers, have relied heavily on institutionalized media—print and electronic—for the dissemination of their information. Available evidence indicates that due to differential access to printed materials, community leaders are considerably more exposed to print media than are low-income families.

Two obstacles to leader-client communication (through the printed word) were identified in the study—money and motivation. Lack of funds prevented the poor from subscribing to newspapers and magazines, while lack of motivation accounted for their low interest in the content of farm bulletins. Perhaps these disincentives can be dislodged or offset by the use of cost-free media that have some motivational appeal.

Footnotes

1. Njoku E. Awa, "Some Factors Related to Communication and Social Participation in Low-Income, Low-Density Populations" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1973).
2. Wilbur Schramm, *Mass Media and National Development* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1964); Everett M. Rogers, *Modernization Among Peasants: The Impact of Communication* (New York, New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1969); Y. V. Lakshmana Rao, *Communication and Development: A Study of Two Indian Villages* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1966); and Lucian W. Pye, ed., *Communication and Political Development* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963).
3. See Ivette Puerta and Robert Bruce, "Data Collection with Low-Income Respondents" (unpublished report, Cornell University, Department of Extension and Continuing Education, Ithaca, New York, 1972).
4. *Economic Analysis: Regional Summary and Yates County Profile* (Rochester, New York: Genesee/Finger Lakes Regional Planning Board, The Rochester Bureau of Municipal Research, 1969).
5. J. Paul Leagans, "Extension Education and Modernization," in *Behavioral Change in Agriculture*, J. Paul Leagans and Charles P. Loomis, eds. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 109.