

BOOK REVIEW

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Communication for Innovation: Rethinking Agricultural Extension

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Context

When Daniel Lerner published his influential book *The Passing of Traditional Society* in 1958, the potential role of communication in promoting development was glorified. This idea that communication can transform societies quickly became the dominant paradigm. Prominent figures of the modernization theories like Daniel Lerner (1958), Wilbur Schramm (1964), and Everett Rogers (1962), presented communication as a crucial factor in the development process.

Lerner's communication theory of modernization relied not only on the *hypodermic needle effects* theory of mass media or the *stimulus-response* theory of mass media effects, but also drew on the Freudian theory of irrational human behavior, the concept of mass society, the mathematical theory of communication (Weaver and Shannon 1949), and Harold Lasswell's (1958) conceptualization of communication process (Melkote and Steeves, 2001).

Based on sociological research in agrarian societies, Rogers identified five categories of adopters: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. He also observed that the adoption of innovation occurs through five stages (initially described as awareness, interest, evaluation, trial and adoption, but later as knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, confirmation); with mass media playing a crucial role in the first two stages and interpersonal communication channels being more effective in the last three (Rogers, 1995, Rogers, 1962).

Just as the "leap forward" expected from the implementation of modernization theory never materialized, participatory communication process—the new dominant paradigm—has its limits. Notably, there are questions and a variety of opinions, not only about the meaning, principles, practice, evaluation, benefits, and impact of participation, but also allusions that the concept of participation might be somewhat utopian. Nevertheless, participation is now widely (if not universally) recognized as a critical factor of sustainable development. Yet, there is room for improvement (Ukaga and Maser 2004, Moumouni and Ukaga 2006).

It is against this backdrop that I see this book, *Communication for Rural Innovation*, providing new and useful insights about agricultural extension in particular and development communication in general. Designed as an update to its predecessors, *Agricultural Extension*

by Van de Ban and H. S. Hawkins (1988, 1996), this book offers fresh thinking about communication for innovation and its application to agricultural extension.

Content

The book consists of 20 chapters grouped into six parts. Part one consists of chapters: (1) introduction, (2) from extension to communication for innovation, (3) the ethics and politics of communication for innovation, and (4) the role of communicative intervention in policy planning. Discussed in this part are challenges facing agriculture and their implication for extension, conceptual evolution from agricultural extension to communication for innovations, political and ethical dimensions of communication for innovations, and (instrumental versus interactive) approaches to communication for innovations.

Part two consists of chapters: (5) understanding human practice, (6) knowledge and perception, and (7) communication and the construction of meaning. Discussed in this part are the role of knowledge and perception in human practice, communication and innovation, as well as key concepts in the field of communication and innovation studies.

Part three consists of chapters: (8) changing perspectives on innovation, (9) social and individual learning, (10) negotiation within interactive process, and (11) the role of outsiders and different intervention approaches. Based on the premise that more than mere distribution of information is needed to achieve desired change, organization of innovation process is discussed as a way to assure that communication is used primarily to facilitate network building, social learning, and negotiation. Part three ends with discussion about striking the right balance between instrumental and interactive communicative intervention.

Part four consists of chapters: (12) the potential of basic communication forms and media, (13) communication for innovation methods, (14) the management of interactive innovation process, and (15) the planning of individual activities. Discussed in this part are potentials inherent in basic communication media and forms, specific communication methods, interactive process, and the planning of individual activities.

Part five consists of chapters: (16) organizational management, learning and research, (17) agricultural knowledge and information systems, (18) privatization and the emergence of knowledge markets, and (19) the cooperation across scientific disciplines and epistemic communities. Based on the premise that an enabling environment allows professionals to contribute more effectively to change and innovation, this part discussed different ways of looking at organizations and their management. Inter-organizational issues, knowledge markets, and cross-disciplinary cooperation are also discussed as topical issues that relate to the organization of communicative intervention.

Part six, the epilogue, consists of chapter 20. This final chapter suggests additional conceptual research

needed to better understand the relationship between communication and innovation.

My Thoughts

The book is based, among other things, on two premises: (1) change and innovation are uncontrollable/unpredictable multi-actor processes, and (2) communication efforts aimed at facilitating both change and innovation would benefit from theories of social learning and negotiation. Fundamentally, it calls for adaptation of what extension is and why it is important. It also contains other nuggets of wisdom including the following.

Societal problems usually result from the way people interact with each other and with their natural environment. Hence, sustainable solution to these problems should involve development of new kinds of relationships with each other and the environment. This in turn requires shared modes of thinking and agreements among stakeholders, which calls for management of interactive processes - such as network building, learning, and negotiations—to bring about the desired relationships. Notably, an interactive approach to communication is based on different ideas and assumptions—such as the unpredictability of change—from the instrumental model. Nevertheless, “a certain balance and interaction between instrumental and interactive intervention activities may be required in several instances.”

Communication can be a powerful instrument for change because it is an important process through which experiences are exchanged, knowledge acquired/shared, and perceptions molded. However, communication workers such as extension agents are not the only ones with relevant expertise. Target audiences generally have unique knowledge and expertise about their specific situation. “The challenge for communication workers, then, is to offer a different kind of ‘expertise’ that recognizes” and enhances local knowledge and experiential learning. “In doing so, however, it will be unhelpful to develop one rigid package of innovations, as this tends to undermine the capacity to deal with diversity.”

Beyond appreciation of local expertise and diversity, there are other critical factors such as media selection and organizational climate. Notably, “media choices can have ‘political’ implications in the sense that they are to the benefit of some and to the advantage of others.” Therefore, it “is important for communication workers to reflect on the significance of unequal media access in a particular context and to take action to avoid negative consequences.” Further, communication

workers and their organizations need to be adaptive and responsive to continued change in order to effectively meet challenges facing extension. This requires an organizational climate in which people are free to act according to their best professional judgment and not expected to always do only what they are told from above.

This book expands and updates the knowledge base about agricultural extension and communication for innovation. Content is logical, theoretically supported, and highly cross-referenced. It includes theoretical and practical implications that can help communication practitioners, researchers, and policy makers improve their effectiveness.

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