Communication Channels in Rural and Urban Communities And Their Impact on People Participation

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the communication channels in rural and urban communities and their effect on people participation. The study's objectives are: (1) to ascertain what type of information from the village leaders were easily ignored, miscommunicated or created communication gaps among the residents of Pilar Village and Baranggay Cawayan, and; (2) to determine which communication channels were employed for the activities that registered the highest rate of participation among the residents of the two locales. Methodology includes survey and interview schedule gathered from respondents of an urban community (Pilar Village in Las Piñas City) and rural area (Cawayan in Dalaguete, Cebu). Tabulation of survey and conducted interviews showed that the richer the communication channel employed in disseminating village or community news and activities, the higher the rate of participation in community activities. Rural residents participated more in their community activities because they were well-informed by their leaders through rich channels like group meetings and one-on-one interactions. Urban residents, on the other hand, were addressed by their village heads through memoranda or letters, which was just midway through the richness scale. Given such medium, rate of participation in urban communities was low because of high message uncertainty and equivocality. This study will be vital in improving the information flow of an urban community like Pilar Village by taking lessons from the way rural leaders handle their residents.

Keywords: community communication, people participation

INTRODUCTION

Warren Agee (1988) defines the two communication concepts such that while interpersonal communication caters to the transfer of ideas or messages to another person appealing mostly to the receiver's senses, mass communication is "the process of delivering information, ideas and attitudes to a sizable and diversified audience through the use of media developed for that purpose". This transfer of information can sometimes bring about degrees of uncertainty and ambiguity resulting in communication gap or even misinformation. In this light, the concept of media richness, defined as the ability of the medium to carry the information, comes to the fore.

The Media Richness Theory of Daft and Lengel (1984) tackles the issue of uncertainty (*absence of information*) and equivocality (*ambiguity or existence of multiple and conflicting interpretations*). The two authors proposed that "communication media have varying capacities for resolving ambiguity, negotiating

varying interpretations, and facilitating understanding." The theory anchors on the assumptions that 1) people want to transcend "equivocality and uncertainty in organizations" and 2) "a variety of media commonly used in organizations work better for certain tasks than others" (Daft and Lengel, 1984).

Daft and Lengel (1984) presented a media richness hierarchy (high to low degrees of richness) to represent the "capacity of media types to process ambiguous communication in organizations." Four criteria were proposed along with the hierarchy. These are (a) the availability of instant feedback; (b) the capacity of the medium to transmit multiple cues such as body language, voice tone, and inflection; (c) the use of natural language; and (d) the personal focus of the medium (Daft, and Lengel, 1984).

Given the four criteria, face-to-face or interpersonal communication provided immediate feedback, nonverbal cues, and auditory cues thus making this medium as the richest communication tool. Going down the hierarchy are other media forms: telephone, electronic mail, letter, note, memo, special report, and finally, flier and bulletin.

Establishing commonality of meanings or similarity in mindsets can be difficult in mass communication than in interpersonal communication. Agee (1988) explains that as the size of the receiver increases, the overlap of frames of reference or mindsets of the message sender and the receiver is detached from each other.

The Media Richness Theory of Daft and Lengel (1984) will exemplify the relationship between the communication channels used by community leaders of Pilar Village in Las Pinas, Metro Manila and Cawayan in Dalaguete, Cebu vis-a-vis the participation level of their respective residents. With a particular medium in mind, the theory rests on two variables, **uncertainty** or the absence of information and **equivocality** or the existence of multiple and conflicting interpretations. In the first variable, Daft and Lengel (1984) asserts that as information increases, the rate of uncertainty decreases. High equivocality results in confusion and lack of understanding. Information richness is the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval. In this light, one can deduce that information channels that can transcend various forms of reference or resolve the ambiguous issues to effect change in understanding are considered rich.

Corollary to the above theory is Fastinger's *Cognitive Dissonance Theory* which is based on the following assumptions: 1) humans are sensitive to inconsistencies between actions and beliefs; 2) recognition of this inconsistency will cause dissonance, and will motivate an individual to resolve the dissonance. 3) Dissonance will be resolved in one of three basic ways - change beliefs, change actions and change perception of action (Festinger, 1957).

Communication Flow in a Baranggay Level

An undergraduate thesis done by Pasilan (1999) on the communication flow at the baranggay level is one related study to consider. Focused on the case of

Banlic, Cabuyao, Laguna, the research delved into the mode of communication preferred by the community, the existing communication flow in the baranggay and the problems common to participants while communicating. Using the standard questionnaire method, 161 respondents actively heeded the survey which included data on the "socio-demographic characteristics, mass media ownership and exposure, and interpersonal network of information" (Pasilan, 1999).

Vertical or downward, upward and horizontal patterns of communication were used as bases to describe the flows of information in the area under study. These flow patterns suggest that communication can be a) vertical or downward - flow from superior to subordinate (Davis in M.C.F., Habito, 1978); b) upward – subordinate to superior (Davis in Koelher, 1981); c) horizontal – message flows between persons of the same rank or position (Hamilton, 1990).

Based on the results of the survey using frequency counts and percentages, most of the respondents preferred interpersonal communication over non-personal mode. Residents mostly communicate with their peers (horizontal flow) and upward flow is evident when residents consulted their leaders about the problems in the community. The baranggay heads, on the other hand, combined the types of communication flow in managing the community. A participation breakdown became inevitable when communication gaps existed between residents and officials. Factors affecting the situation include attitudes, channels and messages. The author recommended that an efficient feedback system should be in place to generate greater participation.

Communication Approaches to Partnership with Local Government

Since this proposed study is focused on the local government, a significant research to consider is the unpublished thesis in 1997 (Pasilan, 1997) which studied the Communication Approaches in Local Governance Partnership: The Case of Ugnayan. The study particularly clustered on the factors that brought about the partnership delving into the effective communication tools and approaches used to achieve partnership.

Given the data gathered through participant observation and interview from the active members of the UGNAYAN-LB and the municipal personnel directly involved in the local governance partnership, the study utilized simple statistical procedure, frequency counts, percentages and qualitative analysis of the given information. Results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis, particularly in the communication factor, showed that letter sending was the primary communication tool or channel used to achieve efficient partnership. Other tools include verbal reminders, dialogues, seminars, invitation and memorandum of agreement which was cited as the most effective communication tool. Top of mind among the communication approaches was interpersonal communication followed by socialization and personal relationship. Other approaches considered in the study were federation's visibility in the municipality, good rapport between UGNAYAN members and municipal officials, sharing of ideas especially during after 5:00 socializations. Because of constraints, De Guzman recommends further studies

should be undertaken to probe into other cases of partnership to reach a valid generalization regarding effective tools and approaches (De Guzman, 1997).

Community Participation

Community participation can be aptly explained by defining the words individually. An interesting definition of community was coined by Charles Abrams in his book, The Language of Cities: A Glossary of Terms, which illustrates community as, "that mythical state of social wholeness in which each member has his place and in which life is regulated by cooperation rather than by competition and conflict". Such definition clearly captures the essence of an ideal group of people in a particular physical space bounded and even strengthened by common goals (Sidorenko, 2006).

Though there are a myriad of explanations for the word 'participation', some illustrating the levels through a ladder, it is rather that we define the term as simple as possible to avoid ambiguity. In this case proposal, participation means, to borrow the meaning of Alexandre Sidorenko (2006), "a process of taking part in different spheres of societal life: political, economic, social, cultural and others." These spheres may come through people involvement in planning, implementation, decision making and evaluation.

According to Reid (2000), "community participation is one of the key ingredients of an empowered community. Participation is the heart that pumps the community's life blood—its citizens—into the community's business". So important is participation that it is often used interchangeably with "empowerment". In a one of the articles in the European Journal entitled "Participation as a Medium of Empowerment in Community Development", authors Nikkhah and Redzuan expounds community participation into a tabular representation.

Table1
The Summary of relationship among approaches, participation and level of empowerment

Approaches	Participation	Empowerment
Top-down (main activity of development emanates from the government or authority and community members are passive)	Participation as a mean (static, passive, controllable)	Low empowerment
Partnership (cooperative)	Working together	Moderate empowerment
Bottom-up (managed by the community for the community)	Participation as an end (active, dynamic, and self mobilization)	High empowerment and Sustainable Development

Table 1 above shows the different approaches that a community may adopt in order to reach sustainable development. Simply put, as participation becomes active and dynamic, the goal of empowerment becomes an easy task (Redzuan, 2009).

Hypothesis

Based on the theoretical framework of Media Richness, this study will rest on two hypotheses: 1) The higher the channel on the media richness scale, the lesser the uncertainty and equivocality and 2) The lesser the uncertainty and equivocality of the information disseminated, the higher the community participation is.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From an Urban Setting: Pilar Village

Pilar Village is one of the 20 baranggays in the City of Las Pinas with a present population of 3,700 households dispersed among the eleven zones of the village. The Pilar Village Homeowners Association Inc. (PVHAI) is headed by its President, Atty. Marlyn Velasco and a board of eleven directors who are also Chairmen of their respective zone. As Directors, eight of them oversee the following village committees: water and sanitation, security, business regulatory, environment, sports and youth, construction, transportation and ways and means. In the lower level, the Zone Chairman is assisted by street chairmen acting as council members.

In an interview with Village Administrator Freddie Viloria, he mentioned that the different media used in the village are flyers, posters, streamers, village meetings, email and newsletter. Planned to be a quarterly medium, the village newsletter dwindled in publication because of funds and internal conflict. The last newsletter published was in September 2010. To concur with the latest technology trend, the Village Council has partnered with Smart Communications for information dissemination. Should one register to this InfoBoard, a resident agrees to receive important announcements from PVHAI as well as send feedback to the council anytime at no cost. At present, there are 1,000 members subscribed to this system of communication. In the light of social networking trend, PVHAI tried, at one point, to have its own account in Facebook. Such move proved to be futile because the account had become a venue for gossips and rumor-mongering. The account was closed down as it had created unfounded, much less unnecessary, security issues both virtually and in reality. At present, PVHAI is in the planning stage of constructing a village website to cater to the technologically advanced residents in Pilar.

Mr. Viloria further revealed that among the activities that garnered the most number of participants was the meeting on the issue of Maynilad as the water supplier of the village. Information on this meeting was disseminated through a flyer and house to house campaign by the Zone and Street Chairmen. The meeting turned out to have 80% of the residents attending the said gathering. The other

activities of the village such as Bingo Bonanza, Medical and Dental Mission, Sports Fests and Ugnayan meetings have mediocre turn outs from its residents because of minimal information drive.

From a Rural Setting: Cawayan

Cawayan is one of the 33 baranggays of Dalaguete in Cebu. It is headed by Baranggay Captain Ricardo Villahermosa and his seven Council Members. Information on community activities, like livelihood projects of women organization and fishers folk groups, flow from the baranggay hall to the sitio leaders who reproduce the memoranda from the Baranggay Captain before conducting group meetings for possible feedback or response from the residents. Such system has elicited around 90% of the residents participating in the activities like the feeding program of the community. Villahermosa was likewise able to complete his Baranggay Information System (BIS) through a survey on the demographics of Cawayan residents. It is through BIS that he is able to get to know the type of residents of Cawayan thus enabling him to plan activities suited for the community. Sports seem to cater more to the youth sector while livelihood projects interest the adult members of the community. Public hearings of certain issues are announced through a cartolina posted in strategic areas. Streamers are another option for announcements but may incur bigger expenses for a baranggay. Given the limited resources, text messaging can also be too expensive, too.

A case in point on the impact of interpersonal communication on the community is when Cawayan tackled one of its pressing issues – that of the expansion of its water sanctuary from 6 hectares to 10.5 hectares to preserve and protect the water ecosystem. Through a public hearing with 300 persons attending the meeting, he was able to ascertain that the residents were against the expansion because of its effect on livelihood.

Survey Results

A survey sample of 47 residents in Pilar Village revealed that despite the 74% of the respondents having private internet connection, the residents still prefer to receive village information through letters/memoranda (19.4%) followed by the streamer or banner medium (18.6%). Lagging behind these two media are newsletter (17%), email (5%), village website (7%) , group meetings (17.8%), one-on-one conversation (5%) and text messages (8%). However, it is interesting to note that 28.8% of the respondents actually learn village information through word of mouth and seldom from the newsletter, streamers, flyers, roving public address system and text message brigades. In contrast, out of the survey sample of 35 respondents, Cawayan residents would want to be communicated through group meetings (28.8%) but are actually informed through word of mouth (36.6%) also. However, both Pilar and Cawayan residents agree that a village website, 31.9% and 45.7% respectively, will be an effective medium to disseminate information about the activities of the community.

As to the case that residents are well informed of community activities, the two groups revealed contrasting results. While 53% of the Pilar respondents believe that they are informed adequately, 91% in Cawayan unanimously accept that they are well informed. Because of such results, Pilar respondents tend to ignore the activities with 42.1% not participating at all. Cawayan, on the other hand often participate (34.3%) because information is ample for them to join in the activities of the community.

In terms of feedback to the information given by community leaders, Pilar residents prefer to conduct it through village meetings (33.9%) rather than surveys, house-to-house interviews, village website and text messages. This **[preference]** contrasts from Cawayan's choice of house to house interview (53.7%). Both Pilar and Cawayan agree that if residents are well informed, participation is high and that participation will mean empowerment for the residents.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since every community has unique needs, communication channels should aptly address the idiosyncrasies of the people in the area. This will mean that village leaders will be given a reference on how to give out messages that will suit the needs of the community. Given such move, a high incidence of community participation will likely [**happen**]. If people are well informed and are highly participative, problems of the community will ultimately be addressed in a democratic way. This study helped educate the residents of the village on the proper channel to use for their messages to effectively reach the leaders. As such, feedback of the information sent and received becomes symbiotic.

The survey results confirmed the Media Richness theory because in interpersonal communication, the factors on uncertainty and equivocality of issues are decreased significantly recognizing the fact that the richer a channel is in a community, the more available **the feedback will be**, the more capable it is for the medium to transmit multiple non-verbal cues and the more frequent the use of natural language is. Moreover, it can be deduced that urban communities use leaner channel of communication than in the rural area which uses richer channels like group meetings and interpersonal type of disseminating information as well as eliciting feedback. Further, the less ambiguous information is to the residents, the higher the rate of participation will be in a community.

Concepts unique to the communities under study were uncovered to serve as an example if not, a jump off point for further research. This might even be a reference for a comparative study with other communities to reveal similarities and differences.

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