

# DIFFUSION MODEL IN DEVELOPMENT: MASS MEDIA AND PERSONAL INFLUENCE.

By

Samsudin Abdul Rahim.  
*B.A. (UKM), M.Sc (Wisconsin).*

## Introduction:

One of the most researched areas of developmental communication is the diffusion of innovation. Diffusion according to Rogers (1971:12) is a special type of communication by which innovations spread to the members of a social system. An innovation is an idea, practice or object perceived as new by an individual. Diffusion researchers in the past focussed a great deal on bringing overt behavior change emphasizing the rate of adoption or rejection of certain technological innovation by the client. Very little attention was paid to the diffusion of new ideas, new social values, new social relations or new ideologies and their effects on the perception, attitude and values of the client. This is not surprising since the diffusion model itself originated from the tradition of anthropology, which assumed that change in a society occurs as the result of the introduction of innovation from another society (Rogers, 1971:48). Although perception, attitude and values can only be inferred from the way an individual talks or feels about an object, and in many instances the inferences are inconsistent, nevertheless, it is an important area to be dealt with. Some researchers argue that change in overt behavior cannot occur unless it is preceded by a change in attitude and values. Aronson (1972) noted that it is important to internalize the attitude and values so that the individual can advocate and integrate it as his own. In term of diffusion, the adoption of an innovation will be more meaningful and more permanent.

The last decade has seen changes in the focussed area of diffusion research. Research increasingly focusses on the user perspective.

Among the concept used are local and functional relevancy (Brown and Kears, 1967), coorientation (McLeod and Chaffee, 1972), infusion (Rogers, 1976) and conscientization (Freire, 1971).

## Diffusion and Inequity

The classical diffusion model regarded innovation as prescription for development. The assumption seemed to be that all innovations are good and should be adopted by everyone. This model has been linked to the growth model of development which was predominant in that 1950s and 1960s. The growth in per capita and gross national product were regarded as indicators of development (Meier, 1976:5). The benefits of transplanting modern technology in central or urban areas was assumed to spread out to other sector of the economy and eventually trickle down to reach all individuals. This strategy for growth in gross national product failed because in spite of high growth, problems of poverty, malnutrition, disease and illiteracy still persist. Oshima (1976:17) attributes the failure to the neglect of the masses of traditional producers. As the use of modern technology expands, it displaces the more labor-intensive production resulting in unemployment, underemployment and low income.

With regard to diffusion model, the generalization was that the new technology would contribute to economic growth. Anxious for quick results, most extension services followed the strategy of lease resistance. This strategy assumed that the effect of the innovation would trickle down from the progressive farmers (Rohling, 1976:65). The practice of development agencies was often to provide

information and intensive assistance to a small number of innovative, wealthy, large, educated and information seeking farmers and to expect the effect of such assistance to reach other farmers indirectly by autonomous diffusion process. This strategy actually widened the gap, the economic as well as the communication-effect gap, between these farmers and their less advantaged counterparts.

The expected trickle-down effect of diffusion did not produce the marginal result. Diffusion as communication is not static. There are many subsequent innovations, and since innovations often cost money or involve risk taking which only relatively well-off can afford, the early adopters tend to reap 'windfall profit' (Rogers, 1962:276). The basis of ability to pay and of first come, first served, led to resource concentration and institutionalized inequality.

The laggards, or those resistant and not receptive to innovation, were regarded as 'hard core'. Roling (1976) defended this group by suggesting that resistance is more a matter of inability as the result of long oppression, failure, frustration and relative deprivation. Quoting a Kenyan example, he revealed that the real hard core were the local politicians, the ex Mau Mau fighters and their supporters, who were deeply frustrated in the post-independence period and now actively resist change. A parallel view is that of Fray in his study of soil erosion control among Iowa farmers. The study reported that 40 percent of the sample explained their slowness to adopt forage production and livestock farming due to their financial constraint and not a total rejection of an innovation.

Other views regarding resistance and lack of receptivity towards innovation suggested that the receiver lacks confidence in the new ideas or technology and is reluctant to take dangerous risks rather than following allegiance to oldways (Byrnes, 1978). Vera and Santoya (1978) blamed the lack of response to rural development to the unequal exchange of mutual expectation. According to them, the state expected farmers to accept innovation, to change to a new form of production and social organization, to produce higher yields and

change mentality. But this neglected the expectation of the people for better education for their children, for improving their standard of living and increasing participating in determining their future. Hurst (1978) summed up that development must not underemphasize the reasoning and discriminatory capacities of the people.

The problem with diffusion model is its tendency to equate problems in getting proper responses to an innovation, as problems of communication. Diffusion ignores the social and institutional structure in promoting development. Individual's personality, needs, attitudes and values are interdependent with each other. If the proposed innovation requires a change in an important attitudes and values, other attitudes and values must likewise change. Kivlin and Fliegel (1976) noted that 'social approval' as a non-economic return is also considered important in determining adoption of innovation. According to Brown and Kears (1967), skillful communication can only help backward farmers to see opportunities they ignore.

Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) offer some criteria to distinguish characteristics of a product or an idea that is to be introduced to the people. However, they make reservation that this consideration will not guarantee the success of diffusion but one must consider the cultural norms and values. The characteristics are:

- i. Relative advantage — the degree to which a new idea or product is judged to be superior to something else used earlier.
- ii. Compatibility — the degree to which an innovation is perceived to be in line with the existing values or structure within a society.
- iii. Complexity — the degree to which an innovation is difficult to understand.
- iv. Trialability — the degree to which an innovation may be tried out on a small scale.

- vi. Observability – the degree to which an innovation can yield result which are visible to others.

#### **The New Development Paradigm:**

The passing of the dominant paradigm has seen some new perspectives in development. There is a realization of the fact that development is for the people and the human being is the object of development. There is a strong emphasis on the basic needs and equitable distribution of socio-economic benefits. The new paradigm also emphasized the popular participation of the people in development planning, decentralization of certain development decisions to the village level. One other aspect of the new paradigm is the integration of traditional with modern systems. Rogers (1976) noted that tradition is actually yesterday's modernity, therefore development should not imply that traditional institutions would have to be replaced by their modern counterparts.

Research on development communication in 1970s shifted its concentration to the client perspective. More research is being done on the structural framework in which innovation takes place, the study of cultural effect on receptivity of the clients towards the new idea. Grunig (1971) in his research among Colombian farmers conceded that communication is a complementary factor to modernization and development; it can have little effect unless structural changes come first to initiate the development process. Eapen (1975) agreed that communication has to be studied as a social process within the cultural, developmental, economic, ideologies and political setting of the country. Holloran (1981) reaffirmed the need for such study by noting that it is not an either-or situation, but we must pay attention to types of individuals as well as to types of societies.

There is also a concern for 'bottom-up' strategy to infuse information, problems and needs upwards to act as 'feedforward' to development planners in knowing the needs of the clients before development policies are formulated and implemented. However, the need for

'top-down' communication in development in order to diffuse innovation which would provide an 'eye opener' on a wider horizon must not be underemphasized. Otherwise, the farmers' thinking will be confined to his locality.

Recognizing the need for more permanent and meaningful adoption of an innovation, Paulo Freire (Bordenave, 1976) proposed the concept of 'conscientization'. According to him the term of 'givers' and 'receivers' in communication should be abolished because both of them are actually 'learners'. The 'learner' will problematize his situation through his association with others and through the use of cultural tools. In this particular respect, the individual is critically aware of his own situation vis-a-vis the social structure, and the development of his aspirations, growth, adoption and participation. Therefore if an innovation is accepted it will be permanent and not a temporary gesture because he was being pressured by others. Bordenave (1976) suggested that adoption of an innovation is a human decision based on four 'ingredients' (i) willingness to do things (ii) knowing what to do (iii) knowing how to do them and (iv) having the means to do them.

#### **Mass Media and Development:**

Rogers (1976:136) revealed the notion that mass media exposure had a high correlation with modernization in developing countries is misleading. When individuals were asked about the source from which they learned of new ideas, mass media were almost never reported. Instead, interpersonal channel with peers totally predominated in diffusing the innovation. This is not surprising since horizontal communication in a rural setting is of interpersonal nature whether within the individual family, village community or in group organized into association or cooperative. Bostian (1974) hypothesized that farmers in any society will do most of the communication within their own social group unless very important information is sought. They will then seek a source which they perceive as more competent.

The mass media as channels of vertical communication are centrally organized and designed to reach wider spectrum of audience. The messages disseminated through newspaper, radio or television do not provide the advantages of interpersonal communication. On the other hand, an interpersonal channel is decentralized, where messages flow as people talk to each other or exchange written statements. The horizontal communication that exists with interpersonal channel interaction offers the advantage of two-way communication, a more dialectic process. The individuals can freely offer their opinion, knowledge, experience, and under certain circumstances try to convince each other of their opinions, attitudes and values. Frey (1973) noted that interpersonal communication involves two-way flow, flexibility, immediate reward and punishment, use of more proximate and trustworthy others. Bostian (1970) agrees with the importance of interpersonal communication. He considered such communication as more personal and thus assumes it to do more persuasive.

Researchers on diffusion attributed the lack of effectiveness of mass media in developing countries to lower literacy rate and lack of availability of the mass media in rural areas. While this notion might be true, it is certainly not true to generalize to all developing countries. The literacy campaign, adult classes and the availability of cheap transistor radios has helped to overcome this constraint. However, the main problem of mass media in developing countries is the lack of proper, appropriate and relevant content. In some countries the limited air time and news space of the mass media are being devoted exclusively to publicize government activities to the extent that it is considered propaganda. The film shown by a mobile unit to rural people for development purposes ends up showing dignitaries in the foreground and the people just visible behind them with the project barely in sight. Childers and Vajrathan (1966) noted that mass media in developing countries were used as publicity platforms for political or administrative figures visiting projects, cutting ribbons, laying foundation

stones or dispensing welfare grants. Therefore under such circumstances the people are just not motivated.

Considering the constraint of the mass media, communicators in developing countries should utilize the resource of interpersonal channels that already exist in the rural setting. Interpersonal communicators who shares similar demographic factors such as sociological or psychological variables could contribute to effective communication. Rogers (1971:14) suggested that transfer of ideas occurs most frequently between a source and a receiver who are alike and homophilous: similar in certain attributes, such as beliefs, values, education, social status, and the like. Berscheid and Walster (1978) reported that even strangers who shared similar views to the one already held by a person, was like a good deal more than strangers who expressed dissimilar views. Accordingly, it is assumed that homophilous interaction is more likely to be rewarding to both the receiver and the source. This is so because the effectiveness of communication in development depends very much on the potential to create clients' awareness towards the innovation.

#### **Interpersonal Channels in Development:**

The process to convince and influence the client is not simple. It has to depend greatly on the personality of the client himself and his perception of the source of the information. The client will only expose himself to information which is relevant and reinforces his attitudes and emotions. As a receiver of communication, he can be selective in his exposure to information that is available, selective in his perception, interpretation and retention of the messages received. However, for various reasons according to Havelock (1971:5-4), individuals are strongly attracted to each other as members of a group. Therefore, if the norm of the group is congruent with the influence attempts, the likelihood of acceptance is very great. On the other hand, if a deviation from the group norm is required, the group will be resistant to the attempted change.

The element of homophily can be found in the balance theory (Heider, 1946), concepts of opinion leadership (Lazarsfeld and Katz, 1955) and the coorientation model (Chaffee and McLeod, 1968). Heider, in his balance theory contended that people strive for balance and harmonious relation by making harmonious the sentiment relationship such as admiration or love and unit relationship such as proximity, similarity and casualty which exist between themselves and the other. By harmonious, Heider simply means that positive and negative attitudes we have towards someone, our liking or disliking, gratitude or contempt, love or hate for that person and so on are consistent with one's own feeling.

An opinion leader is an informal leader. He is not elected but earns the respect of his community due to certain qualities. Rogers (1971: 199) defines opinion leadership as the degree to which an individual is able to influence informally other 'individuals' attitudes or overt behaviors in a desired way with relative frequency. One of the main characteristics of an opinion leader that makes him influential is his conformity to the system norms. Rogers and Svenning (1969:230) found that an opinion leader in a relatively modern village was more innovative than his followers but in traditional villagers the opinion leaders were only slightly more innovative than their followers, older and less cosmopolite. In his study of family planning communication in Africa, Fiofori (1978) revealed that the social activist who is an opinion leader has none or very little education. On the other hand, he is well versed in the traditional activities and has an excellent knowledge of the local culture.

It is important to note that homophilous attributes could differ from situation to situation. For example, Bose as quoted by Rogers (1971:214) found a very high degree of homophily among the residents of an Indian village on the basis of caste ranking, education and farm size. However, in the nearby city of Calcutta, income was considered important in place of caste in structuring interaction patterns. Rogers (1969:238) in a study of Colombian

villagers noted that in the modern village an opinion leader was sought because of his competency in innovation but, in the traditional village, the attraction was due to his gregariousness, sociability and age rather than to competence with new ideas. Lerner (1958:389) supports the age factor of opinion leader in traditional society by noting that '... age-brings-wisdom possibly works well in immobile isolated villages where changes are slow and experience was the only teacher'.

In the coorientation model, it is assumed that the major function of interpersonal interaction is information exchange. High level of agreement, congruency, accuracy and understanding can be expected if the two groups involved in communication share similar orientation towards the problem at hand. A study on cognition and the interrelationship of interaction between farmers, extension agents and agricultural scientists in the Philippines by Groot (1970) supported the coorientation model. Groot found that extension agents occupy an intermediary position between farmers and scientists. In this respect, the extension agent could perform the function of diffusing and infusing information to and from the farmers.

If homophily could facilitate communication flow in development, it could also act as a barrier. People of same attribute and social status might communicate among themselves and the information gained might not trickle down to members of other social groups. Therefore, with regard to using this concept in development, one has to make certain reservations.

#### **Homophily and Village Influentials**

Opubor (1975) criticizes the manipulation of rural masses by the centralized, urban content media which are being controlled by urbanized and distant bureaucrats. He suggested using a more localized, more personalized more situation-realistic approach which allows an interchange of initiative which explicitly involves the talent of local people. According to him, using media which are familiar and accessible

to them, and sources whom they respect and trust will in a long run lead to creation of a climate for change towards a goal of better life.

This argument is not invalid. Firstly, it could overcome the perception of psychological distance (Knapp, 1978:88). Secondly, increase in proximity to the source which is respected, trusted and accessible usually increases familiarity and familiarity tends to generate attractiveness (Berschied and Walster, 1978:37). Thirdly, Rogers and Shoemaker (1971:537) noted that more traditional systems are characterized by a greater degree of homophily in interpersonal interaction.

In most Asian villages, there is a vast potential for using local communication networks for development purposes. As mentioned earlier, tradition is actually yesterday's modernity, therefore one must shake off the tendency to associate traditional with lack of progressiveness, resistance or constraint to development. Even if the notion is considered true, one must find out the circumstances that led the traditional factors to be such powerful stumbling blocks. Therefore, these constraints could be exploited into resources for more positive purposes.

A rural community has its own hierarchy of authority either through formal appointment or traditional sanction. Local traditional authority or leaders who are regarded as village influentials normally provide the homophilous leadership with their clients. Pye (1965) warned of the danger of bypassing these leaders because they could well feel threatened in their positions and refuse their cooperation. In Malaysia, three types of leadership exist at the village level, namely the family leader, religious leader and political leader (Ali, 1977:150). Family leader normally refers to an elderly individual with experience. His influence is recognized and accepted especially those concerning family and cultural matters. With regard to religion, leadership falls to those who have religious background such as *imam* or *ustaz* (religious teacher). The imam plays an important role not only in leading prayers but also in other aspects of

village life. This is so because the mosque besides being used for praying purposes is also used as a place for the villagers to gether and discuss their problem. The imam is regarded as the final authority pertaining to religious matters in the village and his advice is widely accepted. The ketua kampung (village head) is the administrative and political leader in the village. He is part of the traditional hierarchy. However, in the bureaucratic expansion he was absorbed and become the lowest administrative position of the government.

Wilson (1967:134) in his observation of a Malaysian village noted that the offices of village head and imam including other mosque officials such as bilal (caller to prayer), ustaz (religious teacher) and khatib (reciter) carry with them status and esteem. The imam is considered influential in Malay villages because Islam provides the overall formal design of the village life while the custom and mutual convenience mold actual everyday conduct and values. The school teachers are also considered influential in Malay villages for they are usually the most educated and more sophisticated people living there. The teachers are also familiar with the bureaucratic process and thereby of great help to the villagers and could be utilized to initiate change.

The village influentials who command considerable influence and are perceived as credible by the community could help with the dissemination of messages for development purposes. They would give the local sponsorship and trust credibility to the messages that come from the cosmopolite sources. Rogers and Bhowmik (1971:538) pointed out that homophilous sources with respect to safety could lead to change. It must be noted that perception of credibility in the rural community is not confined to dynamism, competence and trustworthiness. One can be perceived as credible if he earned the respect of his fellow villagers. Wilson (1967:112) reflected this argument when he noted that the manner of interpersonal behavior in a Malay village is quite definitely modulated by adherence to a set of commonly held values concerning respect, esteem, sensitivity and skill.

**Conclusion:**

Considering the above argument, the question to be asked is whether traditional leader or village influential such as the religious and local leader can be utilized to play constructive role in development. The argument that can be made is that modern leaders are more educated, trained with relevant skills and understand the development objectives. On the other hand, one can also argued that traditional leader are likely to have more experience with the local situation and have the confidence of the people and able to mobilize local efforts. Miller (1968) based on his Tanzanian experience suggested that traditional leader be regarded as an indispensable bridge between the community and the government with regard to development. In another African scenerio, Charlick (1972)

found that the government could not bypass the traditional leaders with its rural development programs although it tried, since these leaders could easily gain control of cooperative and other new institution at the grass-root level. Another argument in support of the role of traditional leader in development is by Lande (1973). He found that leadership based on association between the local leaders and other members of his community which is based on some common trait is more likely to gain greater support for participation than leadership which is based on patron-client relationship. In Malaysia, the respect shown by the villagers towards the local and religious leaders led Swift (1965:162) to conclude, '..... they can be regarded as a sort of aristocracy and high influence group among the peasants'.

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