

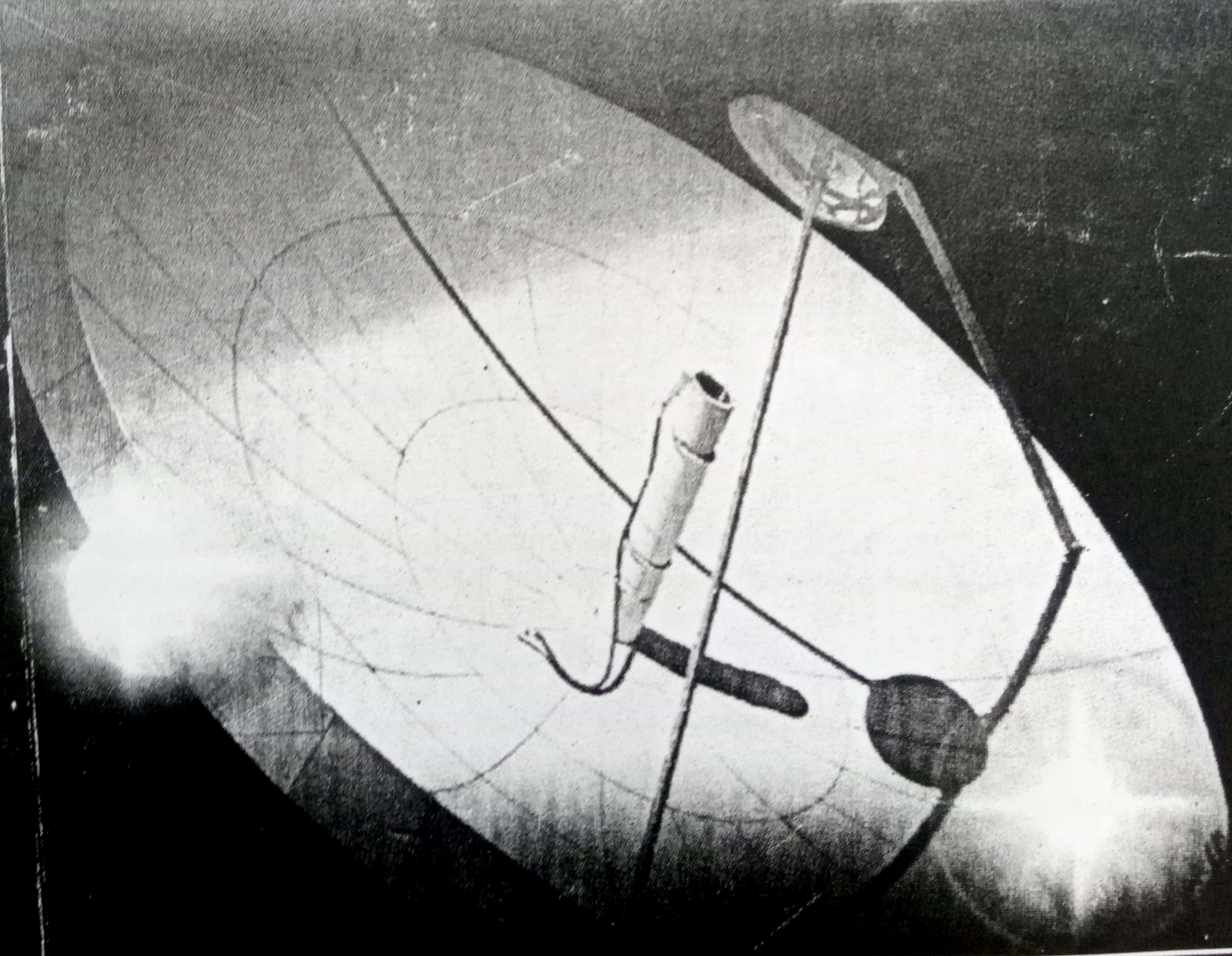
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# DISSEMINATING DEVELOPMENT MESSAGES THROUGH OPINION LEADERS- CASE STUDY OF ANIOCHA-SOUTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCIL AREA OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

BY

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## **Abstract**

*It has been argued that since opinion leaders directly affect the tipping of an innovation, a powerful way for change agents to affect the diffusion of an innovation is to affect opinion leaders' attitudes. This paper, therefore, examined the extent to which opinion leaders in Aniocha-South Local Government Area of Delta State have influenced the dissemination and adoption of development messages. The survey research method was utilized and the questionnaire used as instrument to elicit information from respondents. The simple tables construct and percentages were used for data analysis. Findings showed that opinion leaders have facilitated the dissemination and adoption of developmental messages in the areas studied. It was also found, that change agents communicate convincing messages about development to opinion leaders who in turn use these arguments to resonate with the masses to support their own adoption decision. Based on these findings, the study recommended that the influential role of opinion leaders be exploited by government in spreading development information.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

There is no doubt that communication is essential for human existence. When was the last time you spent 24 hours without the media? Biaga (2005) has asked. Result from the moment you wake up in the morning until the time you go to bed at night, the media are

waiting to keep you company. One way or the other, we are engaged in one form of communication or the other daily. Communication when properly employed can work together with other social variables to facilitate change. Right development is one of such social changes. Sustainable rural

development, cannot be imposed from above. It will not take root unless people across the country are involved (DEFRA, 2002).

This is one reason, according to Nwosu (2000) why communication and development experts and practitioners in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other developing nations of the world have spent valuable time searching for methods, approaches, philosophies, techniques or strategies that will help them to put communication to the fullest and most effective use in achieving their various development objectives.

There is no gainsaying the fact that governments in developing countries, including Nigeria need to provide information to all facts of their respective countries. These are information concerning modern trends in technological advancements, results of research in agricultural development, sciences and other areas. Schramm cited by Ogbemi (2006:30) noted that "information is one of the basic rights of mankind and an indispensable requirement for the freedom and dignity of the world's people".

Ogbemi (2006) quoting Ashong has also said that development communication as a concept deals with the kind of media activities that are, principally related to development issues and problems. Development communication, or DEVCOM as it is sometimes referred to implies the creation of programmes and the

coverage of events that will create a climate of readiness for change and raising development consciousness, a persuasion of productive attitude, a change of behaviour that is backward in nature, a campaign for participation and other forms of support for development programmes/implementation of development programmes.

In other words, it involves educating the beneficiaries about programmes which they are supposed to benefit from, getting them involved and letting them know about the benefits of such programmes. It is also convincing them to change from bad habits to better good, educating them about good environmental behaviours, making them see reasons why they should change for the better and making sure that such changes are sustained. Udoakah (2004:7) puts it this way:

It is a remonstrance against western domination of the world information market. It is a philosophy for the use of modern media of mass communication in developing countries. It is journalism introduced to meet the development needs of developing nations. It is corrective, interrogative and revolutionary in nature. It promotes hope and change and proclaims

and extends values in society.

The idea of development communication emanated from the Developmental Media theory which is based on the fact that the press is a powerful instrument that can be used to achieve very positive results in any society. McQuail cited by Okoro and Agbo (2003) states that the major tenets of the theory are as follows:

- Media should accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy.
- Freedom of the media should be open to restriction according to economic priorities and development needs of society.
- The media in developing countries should align their interest with news and information in other developing countries that are close geographically, culturally and politically.
- In the interest of development in the state, media operations can be restricted.

The media in any developing country, including Nigeria therefore have to play a vital role in the development of the country. Apart from performing its traditional functions of information, education, entertainment and so on, it has the additional function of helping the government in disseminating development messages. These include messages aimed at

changing people's attitudes and making them to accept government's efforts at improving their lives. Campaign like the fight against HIV/AIDs, acceptance of immunization of children, adopting new environmental behaviours and so on should be championed by the media.

One way by which government can reach the people is through the use of opinion leaders. An opinion leader, according to Ogbemi (2008) is an individual who because of his or her knowledge or expertise in certain products or service area is able to exert personal influence on other consumers of these products or services. In politics, opinion leaders may be known politicians, or influential persons who are able to influence the opinion of others. These class of people are used by government for development communication.

Opinion leadership is a concept that came up from the theory of two-step flow of communication and is one of the several models that try to explain the diffusion of innovations, ideas, or commercial products. The opinion leader as explained by Wikipedia (2008) is the:

Agent who is an active media user and who interprets the meaning of media messages or content for lower-end media users. Typically, the opinion leader is held in high esteem by those that accept their

opinions. Opinion leadership tends to be subject specific, that is, a person that is an opinion leader in one field may be a follower in another field...

The point is that both the print and electronic media influence messages of people only through an indirect two-flow of communication. The direct transmission of information to a small group of people stay well informed is the first stage, while the second stage is the process through which these opinion leaders pass on and interpret the messages to others in face-to-face discussions (Griffen, 2000 citing A.W. Van den Ban).

Opinion leaders have been used extensively in the dissemination of information to both the urban and rural areas in Africa and other developing nations, including Nigeria by governments to reach the people. The question however is whether these opinion leaders have been able to effectively reach and convince the people they are supposed to reach. The critical questions to address are: have the people actually accepted the opinion leaders as credible sources of information from which new knowledge can be learnt? Have these opinion leaders not been distorting messages before they get to the final consumers? Have the opinion leaders really contributed to government efforts to disseminating development messages? Who are

really these opinion leaders and so on? These are important questions that need answering. The objectives of this study therefore include the following:

- To find out the contributions of opinion leaders to development communication.
- To determine whether opinion leaders are credible sources of information.
- To establish whether opinion leaders in the course of disseminating information distort the real message.
- To ascertain whether the theory of selective perception has any effect on the opinion leaders with regards to the type of information which they subsequently pass on to the opinion followers.
- To confirm the extent to which the objectives of development communication have been initiated by the rural dwellers and the impact it has on them.
- To make recommendations for further studies based on the findings of this study.

In addition to these, this study will test the following hypotheses.

#### Major Hypotheses

- Opinion leaders are very influential in the dissemination of development information.
- Opinion leaders do not distort the information they disseminate to their receivers.

#### Minor Hypotheses

- Opinion leaders are the only

credible source of developmental information open to the people.

- Developmental messages received from the mass media are reinforced by opinion leaders.
- Views of well placed and educated family members and friends about development issues are respected, accepted and adopted.

### **Significance of the Study**

Littlejohn and Foss (2005) citing Katz and Lazarsfeld have confirmed that some kind of individuals referred to as opinion leaders seek information from the media and pass such to other people. All groups have opinion leaders. However, it is difficult to distinguish these individuals from other group members because opinion leadership is not a trait but a role voluntarily taken by some individuals in certain circumstance. Opinion leadership as a matter of fact changes from time to time and from issue to issue. There are two kinds: those influential on one topic called monomorphic and those influential on variety of topics, or polymorphic. Monomorphism becomes more predominant as systems become more modern.

Depending on the circumstance, the role of an opinion leader could differ. This is the reason why it is difficult to generalize on the role of opinion leaders in different societies and different situations. There is

therefore need to specifically find out the particular role and effect of opinion leaders in different societies. This study will therefore be important to the government in general and specifically to change agents and designers of developmental messages for different societies. It will also be useful to people wanting to carry out research on this and similar topics

### **Theoretical Framework**

This researcher is not aware of any study that has been specifically done on the role of opinion leaders in the dissemination of developmental messages in Aniocha-South Local Government Area of Delta state. There are however, other works that have been done on the role of opinion leaders in the dissemination of developmental messages that bear on the problem of this study. In most of the studies, findings suggest that opinion leaders to a large extent influence the dissemination, adoption and diffusion of such messages. Some of these findings will be briefly examined.

Greg (2003) citing Rogers (1995) confirmed that well informed opinion leaders communicate their approval or disapproval of an innovation, based on the innovators' experiences, to the rest of the social system. The majority responds by rapidly adopting. This analysis suggest that the spread of an innovation hinges on a surprising small point: namely whether or not opinion leaders

vouch for it. This further confirms that the opinion leader is very important and influential in the dissemination, adoption and diffusion of development information. It was also argued by Greg (2003) that successful efforts to diffuse an innovation depends on the characteristics of the situation. To eliminate a deficit of awareness of an innovation, mass media channels are most appropriate. To change prevailing attitude about an innovation, it is best to persuade opinion leaders. Opinion leaders are therefore important and cannot be ignored.

Fade and Savastano (2005) in their study, however concluded that there is no clear evidence on whether opinion leaders are more effective if they are similar in socio-economic attributes to the other farmers rather superior to would-be followers. Multivariate analysis of the changes in integrate pest management knowledge in Indonesia among follower farmers over a period: 1991-1998 indicates that opinion leaders who are superior to followers, but not excessively so, are more effective in transmitting knowledge. According to Rodman (2007) some well informed members of families, neighbourhoods, and peer groups tended to be sought out by others as sources of information. Opinion leaders thus created what researchers called a two-step flow of communication: Ideas he said: "often flow from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them

to less active sections of the population.

This study is therefore anchored on the two-step flow theory which was put forward by three researchers, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Brerelson and Hazel Gaudet who studied the American presidential campaign in 1940. While interviewing selected voters about the election, they discovered that most of the information voters got about the campaign came from other people. The concept has however been expanded upon since then, but the primary hypothesis remains essentially the same-that much of the information disseminated by mass media comes to the individual's interpretations of it (Bittner, 2003). The findings of Lazarsfeld and his fellow researchers, according to Biagi (2005) suggest that only eight percent of the voters were actually converted, the majority of voters, 53 percent were reinforced in their beliefs by the media and 14 percent were activated to vote. Mixed effects or no effects were shown by the remaining 25 percent of the people.

The study found that instead of changing people's beliefs, the media primarily activate people to vote and reinforce already held opinion. It also concluded that:

- Family and friends had more effects on different people's decision than the media.
- The media had different effects on different people.
- The major source of information

about candidates was other people.

McQuail (2005) in his own contribution added that it has become clear that the division between opinion 'leaders' and 'followers' varies from topic to topic: roles are interchangeable, and there are many who cannot be classified as either one or the other. It is also clear that direct effects of the media can and do occur without 'intervention' from opinion leaders, and it is highly probable that personal influence is as likely to reinforce the effects of media as to counteract them. Although such sources of influence operate spontaneously and are not easy to manipulate for planning communication. The transmission of information and ideas from mass media to opinion leaders and then to friends and acquaintances is called the two-step flow of communication and is the foundation of this study.

### **Methodology**

The survey research method was used for the purpose of this study. The reason is principally that unlike other research methods, the survey research method is probably the method available to a social scientist interested in collecting original data for the purpose of describing a population too large for direct observation (Babbie, 1975 cited by Ogbemi 2007). The instrument used to elicit information from respondents was the questionnaire and the

simple table construct and percentages were used to analyse data collected from the respondents. The main reason for this, is the fact that the study is essentially an analysis of facts and decisions already taken. All responses given were tallied and the number of frequencies of each choice converted into percentages. The data was eventually interpreted, then deductions and generalizations were made.

### **Study Area**

#### **Validity of Research Instrument**

The content validity of the questionnaire was considered appropriate after necessary adjustments have been used by some experts in the Department of Theatre Arts and Mass Communication, in the University of Benin. The test, retest method was also employed to establish the reliability of the research instrument.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings**

#### **Testing the Hypotheses**

As earlier stated, five hypotheses were tested in this study: two were considered major, while the other three were minor hypotheses. The first major hypothesis is that opinion leaders are very influential in the dissemination of development information. To test this hypothesis, respondents were asked whether opinion traders facilitated



development messages that get to them. Responses showed that 160 (80%) said they facilitate development messages, 35 (17.5%) said they do not, while only five (2.5%) said they have no comment.

Table I below shows that majority of the respondents, 160 (80%) out of the 200 interviewed said opinion leaders facilitate development messages. It can therefore be deduced that the opinion leaders are very influential in the dissemination of development messages. The first major hypothesis is therefore supported by the data collected.

Table I: Opinion Leaders Facilitates Development Information

Value Label	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	160	80
No	35	17.5
No Comment	05	2.5
	200	100%

The second major hypothesis is that: opinion leaders do not distort the information they disseminate to their receivers. To test this hypothesis, respondents were asked whether the information they get are different from what they receive from the mass media. Responses from respondents show that 45 (22.5%) of the respondents said information got are distorted, while 126 (63%) said No. The remaining 28 (14.5%) however said they have no comment.

From Table II below it can be seen that majority of the respondent, 126 (63%) said the information they get from opinion

leaders are not distorted. The data collected therefore supports the second hypothesis which states that opinion leaders do not distort the information they disseminate to receivers. This is however not in consonance with the finding of Ossai (2006) that opinion leaders as mediators still distort and hide some developmental communication messages and information from the rural people.

Table II: Opinion Leaders and Distortion of Information

Value Label	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	48	22.5
No	126	63
No Comment	29	14.5
	200	100%

Apart from the two major hypothesis, three minor hypothesis were also tested. The first minor hypothesis is that opinion leaders are the only credible source of development information open to the people. To test this hypothesis, respondents were asked if opinion leaders were the only credible source of development information.

Table III below shows that an overwhelming number of respondents, that is 123 (61.5%) said no, while 64 (32%) said yes. The remaining 13 (6.5%) said they have no comment. The data collected does not therefore support the first minor hypothesis that opinion leaders are the only credible source of development

information. This does not however suggest that opinion leaders are not credible source of information. Data also collected from this study supports the fact that opinion leaders are credible source of development information.

**Table III: Credible Source of Development Information**

Value Label	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	64	32
No	123	61.5
No Comment	13	6.5
	200	100

The second minor hypothesis is that messages received from the mass media on development issues are reinforced by opinion leaders. To test this hypothesis, respondents were asked whether messages on development issue got from the mass media are reinforced by the views of opinion leaders.

Table IV below shows that majority of the respondents, 149 (74.5%) said yes, while 40 (20%) said no. Only 11 (5.5%) of the respondents said they have no comment. Data collected therefore supports the second minor hypothesis that messages received from the mass media are reinforced by opinion leaders. This supports the views of McQuail (2005) that it is highly probable that personal influence is as likely to reinforce the effects of media as to counteract them.

**Table IV: Opinion Leaders Reinforce Messages**

Value Label	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	149	74.5
No	40	20
No Comment	11	5.5
	200	100

The third minor hypothesis states that views of well respected and educated family members and friends about development issues are respected, accepted and adopted. To test this hypothesis, respondents were asked whether they respect, accept and adopt the views of well respected and educated family members and friends about development issues.

Table V below shows that 182 (91%) of the respondents, which is an overwhelming majority said they respect, accept and adopt such views, while only an infinitesimal 18 (9%) said they do not. No respondent said no comment. The third minor hypothesis that the views of well respected and educated family members and friends about development issues supported. This agrees with the findings of Lazarsfeld and his colleagues reported by Biaga (2005) is therefore that family and friends had more effect on peoples decision than the media. This also is in consonance with Greg (2003) findings that change agents communicate convincing messages about development to opinion leaders, who in turn use these arguments to resonate with the masses to support their own adoption decision.

**Table V: Views of Opinion Leaders are Respected**

Value Label	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	182	91
No	18	9
No Comment	0	0
	200	100

### Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary objective of this study was to seek general information about the role of opinion leaders in the dissemination of messages on development. It also specifically tested two major hypotheses and three minor hypotheses. The first major hypothesis is that opinion leaders are very influential in the dissemination of development information. This hypothesis was upheld: more than two thirds of the respondents interviewed, that is 160 (80%) of the 200 said that opinion leaders facilitate development information that get to them. The second major hypothesis that opinion leaders do not distort the information they disseminate to receivers was also supported by the data collected. One hundred and thirty six (36%) of the respondents said they do not distort the information they get, while only 48 (22.5%) said they distort such information.

The first of the three minor hypothesis is that opinion leaders are the only credible source of development information messages open to the people. This hypothesis was not supported by the data collected. Only 64 (32%) of the respondents said Yes, while a majority, 123 (61.5%) of the 200 respondents said they do not. The second minor hypothesis is that messages received from the mass

media on development are reinforced by opinion leaders. This hypothesis was supported. Majority of this respondents, that is 149 (74.5%) said Yes, while only 40 (20%) said No. The third minor hypothesis which is that views of well respected and educated family members and friends about development issues are respected and adopted was also supported by the data gathered. An overwhelming 182 (91%) of the respondents said they respect, accept and adopt such views.

One other finding of this study is that majority of the people preferred radio as a medium of getting news and information to television and newspapers. This can probably be explained by the fact that radio is cheap to procure and batteries can be used in the absence of electricity which is a very rare commodity in the areas under study. The study also found out that most of the messages and information disseminated by the opinion leaders are got from the mass media and that there are deliberate efforts by the government to specifically use the opinion leaders to reach people in the area. It could be concluded that the designers of development messages to some extent liaise with opinion leaders to feel their pulse and that of the people before designing messages that are disseminated to them. This does

not totally agree with Nwosu (2000) view that many change agents, rural development officers, public relations officers, involved in preparing news, articles and features for rural development do not consult the people and do them well enough to properly achieve their objective. Another interesting finding is that opinion leaders are considered by the people as credible source of information. They are however not the only credible source of information. From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that opinion leaders play a very crucial role in the dissemination of information on development to the people in Aniocha South local government area and other areas in the country. Although, they are not the only source of credible information, their views are no doubt highly respected by the people and their credibility is not in doubt.

It must however be printed out that the two-step flow theory has been rethought since Lazarsfeld's time. For example, television, virtually unavailable in 1940 has given everyone a more or less equal opportunity to consume media content first hand. There is no doubt therefore that opinion leaders still exist we often ask friends what they have read or heard about a certain movie, book or CD but their centrality in the mass communication process

diminished (Baran, 2002).

Based on the friendship of this study, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- Change agents and designers of development messages should consult more and liaise regularly with opinion leaders and the people such messages are intended to reach.
- The government should make deliberate efforts to identify influential opinion leaders and be able to coordinate them to effectively reach the people.
- The local government councils should accord recognition to opinion leaders to enhance their effectiveness.
- Further studies should be carried out on the role and effectiveness of opinion leaders in other local government areas in Nigeria.

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