

The Importance of Interpersonal Communication in the Diffusion of News Events

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A tradition of news diffusion research can be traced through the studies of the mass society. Early research was promulgated on the assumption that individuals were detached and isolated. The strength of this view diminished when sociologists found that modern men were not isolated, but worked, played, and attended to mass media, in group contexts (e. g., Shils, 1951). Since then, it has been indicated that the network of an individual's social relationships intervenes between the mass media and the individual (e. g., Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Berelson et al., 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). In a sense, these studies seem to emphasize the importance of social integration through interpersonal relationships. Studies of diffusion of information concerning innovations also indicated that both integration in a network of social relationships and access to information are of crucial importance (cf. Rogers, 1962). Then they raise the question of how variations in the structuring of interpersonal relations mediate access to the flow of information. Greer and Orleans (1962) showed that differences in the characteristics of residential areas are associated with those in access to the parapolitical structure—that is, the network of social relationships which transmits politically relevant information, even though it is not political in its functions. Further, sociologically distinct segments of a society tend to occupy geographically distinct

areas. Individuals sharing common life styles congregate together and those who possess certain skills or disabilities are forced together by circumstances beyond their control (Greer, 1962). Thus localities become the basis for social interaction among relatively homogeneous segments of the population. In smaller communities, for example, less segregation by social type and less segmentation in the polity would be expected whereas the metropolitan area would produce high segmentation. These seem to suggest that one of the neglected areas of research on news diffusion is the rural-urban dimension in the importance of interpersonal communication as a source of news information. Though studies of diffusion of innovation information fixed the attention mainly on rural settings, many studies of news diffusion were conducted in relatively urban settings. The present state of knowledge concerning rural-urban patterning across cultures is incomplete, but rural-urban differentials in societies, especially in transitional societies, appear to differ according to whether the society is committed to a totalitarian form of government or to a democratic one. If a study of news diffusion is to be conducted in other cultural and political settings, therefore, the rural-urban dimension in the importance of interpersonal communication as a source of news information should be taken into account.

From the evidence obtained in the studies of Deutschmann and Danielson (1960), Greenberg (1964a; 1964b), Greenberg et al. (1965), Hill and Bonjean (1964), Larsen and Hill (1954), Rogers (1962), and others, it seems reasonable to derive the following hypotheses with respect to the rural-urban differences in the importance of interpersonal communication as a first source of

information in the diffusion of various news events.

1. (a) *For major news events, interpersonal communication is more important as a first source of information in rural settings than in urban settings;*

(b) *The rural-urban difference in that importance of interpersonal communication is greater for anticipated major news events than for unanticipated major news events.*

2. (a) *For minor news events, interpersonal communication is more important as a first source of information in urban settings than in rural settings;*

(b) *The rural-urban difference in that importance of interpersonal communication is greater for anticipated minor news events than for unanticipated minor news events.*

“For events of interest only to a minority audience, that minority would be expected to disseminate original information about such events to others” (Greenberg et al., 1965, p. 11). However, this would be more likely to apply to the case in urban settings. Those who live in a rural setting are more likely to share common interest in the event. Further, the minority would be expected to disseminate more information about the minor anticipated event than about the minor unanticipated event, because that minority could make plans to have more exposure to that anticipated event.

3. (a) *For modal news events, interpersonal communication is more important as a first source of information in rural settings than in urban settings;*

(b) *The rural-urban difference in that importance of interpersonal communication for anticipated modal news events is similar to that for unanticipated modal news events.*

Across the nations of the world, as Hiniker (1968) pointed out, the extent to which interpersonal communication serves to disseminate news information is a function of such variables as level of development and style of government. In general, it would seem that the lower the level of national development and/or the greater the impact of autocratic rule, the more likely is interpersonal communication to serve to disseminate news information.

Rural and urban interrelationships in advanced societies differ markedly from those in developing societies. Industrial societies are dominated by metropolitan agglomerations. Most people live in or near the large cities which dominate the political, economic, and cultural landscape of the society. In these metropolitan centers, like New York and Tokyo, especially Hypotheses 2 would be highly supported. Greenberg's finding that "Interpersonal communication is most active as a first source of information in the diffusion of events attended to by nearly everyone or by nearly no one" (Greenberg, 1964 b, p. 494), would be also highly applicable to these settings.

In the United States, furthermore, the older regional distinctions, based largely upon agrarian and cultural traits, have become homogenized: the industrialization process has greatly reduced the rural-urban differentials. Although certain differences persist in the United States (Duncan and Reiss, 1956), the dominant trend has clearly been toward a breakdown in the traditional distinctions. In the United States, therefore, the rural-urban differences in the importance of interpersonal communication as a news information source would be unlikely to be found. However, the decline of the rural sector awakens efforts on the part of some elements of the

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population to cling to the rural past (White and White, 1962). Rural communities in industrial-urban orders are frequently the repositories of traditional or antiurban values and norms in the family, religious, and political realms. In this sense, the rural-urban differences would be probable even in the United States.

Japan is one of the societies that have emerged from a preindustrial civilized past whereas the United States has industrialized and urbanized without having to discard a feudal social structure. Many Japanese farmers, especially the more tradition-bound ones, have experienced considerable difficulty in adapting to the modern way of life. Thus some transitional conditions still persist in many rural areas. In such settings, the rural-urban differences in the importance of interpersonal communication as a news information source would be highly predictable. Nippon Shinbun kyokai (Japan Journalism Association), in the study of farmers' use of mass media in the Tohoku (East-Northern) district, concluded that most farmers tend to mention interpersonal communication as a source of information concerning social and economic news events and their farming management rather than mass media (Nippon Shinbun Kyokai, 1961).

Beijer (1963), in his survey of the literature on rural-to-urban migration in twelve European countries, pointed up the persistence of strains as societies attempt to incorporate ruralities into the urban social setting. These strains are likely to be derived from the decline of the semi-skilled and unskilled urban occupations to which in-migrants from the depressed farming areas have aspired. Many of these in-migrants, however, remain in urban areas. In Japan much of city growth is a result of this in-migration. Migrants.

and nonmigrants often differ in age, sex, and education. The in-migrant is often employed through the intervention of friends or relatives and learns through them how to survive and even to get information concerning urban events. In this sense, the rural-urban differences would be found even in urban areas. This view would apply to the case of lower-class urbanites, the culture of poverty, in the United States.

Quite in contrast to these rural-urban differences in democratic urban settings are those in totalitarian urban settings. The prime examples are nations within the Communist orbit. In mainland China, for example, the formation of an industrial-urban order has been considered the main goal, and the leaders have taken a strong anti-rural stand (Mitrany, 1951). Most writers commenting on the Chinese revolution discuss it in terms of a rural-urban conflict. The Chinese Communists have used the peasantry as a means of acquiring political control of the society by organizing a revolution of the peasants rather than of the urban proletariat (Johnson, 1962). Further, collectivization has served to uproot the traditional rural structure. Destruction of the long-standing emotional bond between the peasant and his plot of land has pushed many persons into the urban labor market. The Chinese Communists have also been intent upon building industrial cities, which are usually found in rather backward rural sectors. In these rural-dominated urban settings or in the urban-oriented rural settings, the rural-urban differences in the importance of interpersonal communication as an information source would also be significant.

Not only have the Chinese Communists aspired to an industrial

urban order, but also they have used maximum political coercion to push the populace toward the ideal. As for the channels of communication needed in and around such maximum coercion, the Chinese Communists provided wired radios in every village, compulsory membership in community groups, compulsory community meeting attendance, group newspaper reading, wall newspapers, *Tatsepao*, and so forth, all spouting the same message from the center (Hiniker, 1968; Worth, 1967). A number of full-time professional propagandists have been created, with most of them working at the interpersonal level. From these points of view, interpersonal communication would seem predominant in all social settings, even as a first source of information in the diffusion of news events. However, the following notion must be taken into account.

...there is not so much a likelihood of inadequate communications as a likelihood the Chinese people will react with defensive internal mechanisms analogous to those with which we defend ourselves against our own inescapable television commercials (Worth, 1967, p. 228)

Finally, it seems clear that the rural-urban dimension in the importance of personal Communication as a first source of information concerning various news events would have manifold implications for other cultural settings, especially for transitional settings, even though they are committed to a totalitarian form of government or to a democratic one.

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