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## **Possible Implications of Modern Mass Media for Traditional Communication in a Nigerian Rural Setting**

by Ben Orewere\*

This article looks at two models of communication existing in a Nigerian rural environment: the traditional, largely interpersonal and interactive model, and the modern, mass mediated, impersonal system. Drawing from sociological theories of change, it finds that the traditional and modern (mass) communication systems interact in interesting ways as a new socio-economic system evolves within the traditional structures of village life. In spite of the imposed foreign language (English) which is the dominant transmission language of the modern mass media, there are significant and complementary outcomes of the interaction between the two modes of communication. The article argues, however, that the traditional systems of communication will retain their role in the transmission of knowledge and information, cultivation of beliefs, and other socialization processes for quite some time to come.

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## Implications Possibles des Masses Médias pour une Communication Traditionnelle dans un Contexte Rural Nigérian

### Résumé

Cet article se penche sur deux type de communication du milieu rural nigérian. Le type traditionnel qui est largement interpersonnel et interactif, et le système des masses médias à caractère moderne et largement impersonnel.

Se basant sur les théories sociologiques du changement, il découvre que les systèmes modernes et traditionnels de la communication de masse ont une intéressante interaction, pendant qu'un nouveau système socio-économique évolue dans les structures d'une vie villageoise.

En dépit de la langue étrangère (anglais) imposée de toute pièce et qui est la langue de communication dominante dans la transmission des nouvelles masses médias, l'on note des effets complémentaires résultant de l'interaction entre les deux modes de communication.

L'article affirme néanmoins que les systèmes traditionnels de communication retiendront leur rôle dans la transmission des connaissances et de l'information, le maintien des croyances et autres processus socialisants pour biens des jours avenir.



## Introduction

Every human society has developed its indigenous and traditional modes and channels of communication which characterise its existence, organization and development. These communication modes and channels form the basis upon which the communities, especially the rural community, progress. Policy makers, planners and administrators, desirous to effect functional economic and social changes, must first identify such community communication modes and channels and utilize them to provide the people with maximum information about such changes.

Communication, the transmission of information from a point called origin or source to another called destination or receiver (or audience), is the blood stream of every society. A society may be explained as a group of people who have lived together long enough to evolve common culture, norms and values. Culture distinguishes one society from another. Culture gives form and meaning to a people's existence. Culture is defined by Onigu and Ogionwo (1981) as 'the complex whole of man's acquisitions of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, custom, technology, etc, which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation.'

In this definition, culture includes those things which man has invented and produced and which we can see, feel, or hear, as well as those aspects of man's behaviour which we cannot see, namely, knowledge, beliefs or morals, language, philosophy, attitudes, etc. Communication which is an act, a process of interaction, is carried out primarily through the use of signs (or symbols). Such signs or symbols must arouse the same meaning in the other person (individual or group or people) as it does in one's self. Communication is an aspect of culture, the non-material culture. Indigenous and traditional communication modes and channels, therefore, have a sort of cultural relativity. Such modes and channels are identified, assessed and understood in the context of the particular culture and its value system. The communication process is initiated when the source or sender utters symbolic sounds which refer to his experiences, rooted in his environment. If the receiver or audience has had similar experiences, and has been conditioned to associate the given sounds with those experiences and attach a common meaning, we then say that communication has been possible. The communication would be effective if the desired response follows.

## Community Communication Patterns in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the indigenous and traditional community communication modes and channels tend to have variations from one cultural region or ethnic group to another. The modes and channels reflect the social structure of each community. Such social structure is similarly determined by the totality of the historical and economic experiences of the people. Some of these modes include message relay-running, festivals, drama, music/songs, dance styles and steps, bush or wood fire, smoke ashes, (colour of) clothing, tales and proverbs, gun shots, animals, birds and insects, grass knots, fresh leaves knots, hair looks, tribal marks, body language, talking drums,



weather, pottery and wood carvings, legends and myths, and so on. All these are the creations of human interactions, consensus and conflicts. They are made norms, given values and mystified by the indigenous and traditional channels of interpersonal and group communication, mostly based on age, kinship, gender, inheritance and marital status and with authority patterns embedded in the social structure and organization of the society. Face-to-face, interpersonal and group communication channels function both vertically and horizontally and are natural, real and inevitable in a community's planned and unplanned advancement.

They have also proved very useful in the tasks of solving problems. This has been documented in field work experiences in the dissemination of attitudinal change-directed information, especially of new farm practices in the rural areas. Williams and Williams (1969), Alao (1975), Bogunjoko (1980), Orewere (1984), and Emenyeonu (1987) corroborate this perspective, although Bosomptra's (1987) conclusion varies on the question of source credibility. From his studies in Ghana, Bosomptra found that radio, as a source of health information, had more credibility than conversation, typified in the town crier, the market, and folk theatre. Tiemtore (1990), writing on local radio broadcasting in Burkina Faso, made the following observations:

After a decade, the limits of group listening structures had become obvious. The failure of ARCN<sup>1</sup>, as well as the rural radio stations of Benin and Burkina Faso attest to these limits. In particular, the rural public was alienated by the way radio had been used for development. In addition, while rural radio provided the rural community with necessary knowledge, these radio stations overlooked the fact that learning primarily consists of self-expression and self-education. Radio focussed on rural issues and the problems of the rural community, but amazingly rural populations had no say at all. A system had to be invented in which information would take into account the views of the majority of the rural population: information had to be decentralized and the rural community had to actually participate in managing organs of information. The solution presented was the horizontal communication concept.

Using this concept, local rural radio must inevitably schedule a new phase in rural development, working closely with the indigenously and traditionally existing vertical and horizontal channels of community communication<sup>2</sup> such as traditional councils, development unions, women's organizations and youth clubs.

Traditional and indigenous community communication in Nigeria has a unique network which may not be easily understood. And it is difficult to understand this unique network through externally imposed philosophies and concepts. One has to live in the village, *observe*, *study* and *understand* the network. This network can be effectively used for rural development. People communicate in the rural setting because they want to share meanings: they want others to know what they want to do, what they are thinking, and how they feel. They want to tell others what has happened, or what they hope will happen. They want others to listen to what they have to say. They want to get things done through others. This communication network is well laid-out, very stable, and is linked to the surrounding villages. Unlike the mass media, it is not interfered with and often calls for collective approaches to village development and welfare. The group/community interest overrides that of the individual, and participatory

development is the watchword.

The indigenous and traditional community communication network in Nigeria identifies rural development as a series of coordinated actions to be carried out by the people. It does not use sophisticated structures and technologies to which the people do not have access. It does not underestimate or disrespect rural values and technologies. It does not lose the opportunity for feedback from the experience gained, neither does it keep on making the same mistakes. The organizational structure among sub-cultures is basically similar in the southern states of Nigeria. Among the Isoko people in the Bendel State of Nigeria, for instance, the indigenous communication structures are based on age, kinship and gender. For example, each clan<sup>3</sup> has a traditional council with the King, or Odion-Ologbo, as the paramount ruler; a development union with the president/chairman as head; and the women's organization (Ewhaeyana) with the Odion-Eyana as head. There is also the youth organization with elected officials.

The traditional council, also similar to that of the neighbouring Urhobos, is made up of Edions (chiefs) from each of the quarters of the clan. There is also the Oletu-Ologbo (chief priest) who has his Eletus-in-Council representing each quarter, the senior Elebe (head of messengers/town crier) and the Osogba (head of traditional administration) with Esogbas-in-Council, each representing a quarter. Figure 1 shows the structure of the Traditional Council whose membership may be based on age and not necessarily inheritance or ascription (except for the king):

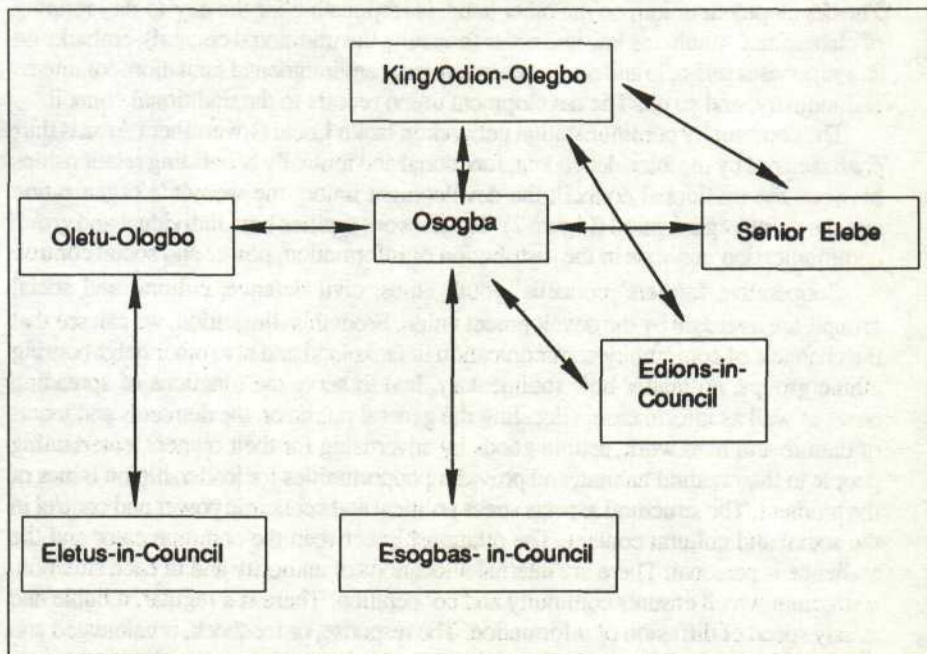


Figure 1. *The Network of a Clan's Traditional Council in Isokoland*



The development union has a president, a vice-president, secretary-general, treasurer, financial secretary, publicity secretary, assistant secretary-general, speaker, provost, and auditors. The Queen Leader, a member of the Ewhaeyana (Women's Organization) and the chief mobilizer of all women purely for development purposes, is also a representative member of this union. The youth organization and farmers' cooperative councils have a similar organizational structure with that of the development union and also a representative of the women's organization. The youth organization most of the time functions as the militant arm of the development union. Membership of the development union and the youth organization encompasses all men, women, boys and girls in the clan, depending on their ages.

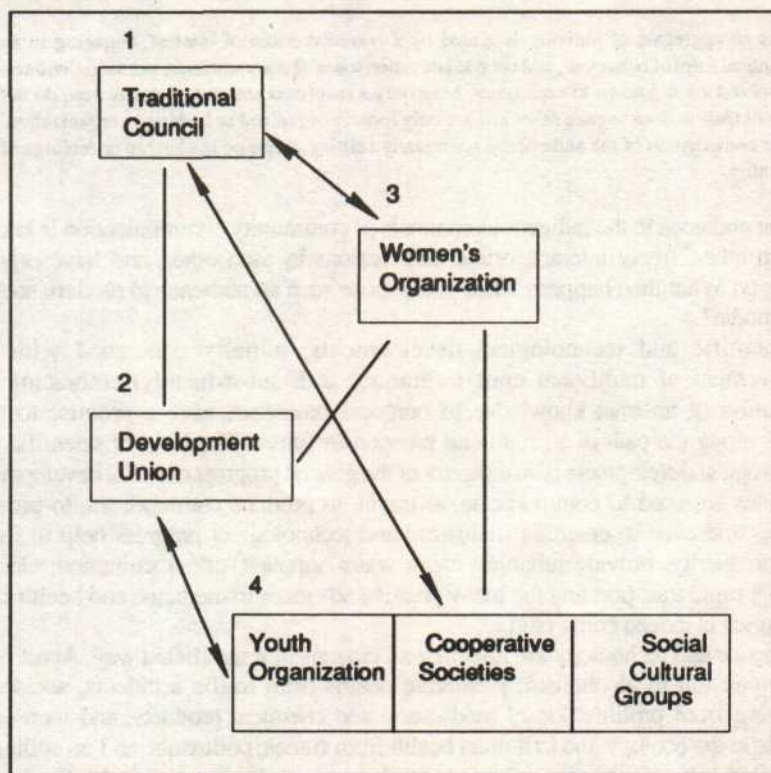
The Ewhaeyana (Women's organization) with the Odion-Eyana as head has the chief priestess, the Queen Leader (an administrative title) and a woman from each of the streets as members. Membership is based on age and functions to assist the traditional council whose main responsibilities include protecting the land boundaries and territorial integrity of the clan, protecting the history and culture of the people, settling internal (inter-family and inter-marriage) and external disputes (with other towns and villages) holding the land in trust for government, functioning as the link between government and the community, initiating and ratifying bye-laws on bride price, marriage ceremonies, burial rites, fines and chieftaincy titles, monitoring the economy, lakes and fish ponds, etc, and summoning meetings as the need may arise. The development union, on the other hand, is responsible for the day-to-day running of clan affairs, maintains law and order (assisting the traditional council), embarks on and supervises self-help and development projects, environmental sanitation, commerce and industry, and so on. The development union reports to the traditional council.

The community communication network in Isoko Local Government Area is thus characterized by the inter-dependent, functional and mutually benefitting relationships between the traditional council, the development union, the women's organization and the youth organization (Figure 2). The network typifies both individual and group communication methods in the distribution of information, power and social control.

Cooperative farmers' councils, youth clubs, civil defence, cultural and social groups, are overseen by the development union. From this illustration, we can see that the channels of community communication in Isokoland and also other neighbouring ethnic groups, no matter how rudimentary, had to serve the functions of spreading news as well as information, educating the general public on the demands and tenets of culture and hard work, selling goods by advertising for their owners, entertaining people in their natural habitat, and providing opportunities for leadership on issues of the moment. The structural aspects stress political and economic power and control in the social and cultural context. The relationship between the communicator and the audience is personal. There are internal allocations of authority and in each situation, a structure which ensures continuity and cooperation. There is a regular, reliable and steady speed of diffusion of information. The response, or feedback, is calculated and relevant, a product of discussed, debated and digested reasoning, especially at meetings, conferences, sessions and small group or family unit discussion levels. This implies

that the selection and interpretation of messages by the community for programmes of development is done to suit the local situation and not in a vacuum or aimless mass mobilization.

Figure 2. *Indigenous and Traditional Communication Network in Isoko Local Government Area*



Note: The numbering illustrates hierarchy

With the advent of science and technology came industrialization and there has been a “massification” of the communication audience and methods. This followed from the application of a technology geared to mass production and wide dissemination. Radio, television, cinema, newspapers, and books are some of the mass media that have been heralded by science and technology. To qualify as a mass medium, Uyo (1987), citing Blake and Haroldsen, points out that the technical instrument must not only offer the possibility of communication via a mechanical device, making for impersonal relationship between the communicator and his audience, but it must also



actually be used to communicate from a single source to a large (mass) number of persons. The mass media could (and do) establish simultaneity of contact with large numbers of people at a distance from the source and widely separated from each other. McQuail (1969) lists among his characteristics of mass communication, the nature of the audience, a collectivity (supposedly) unique to modern (urban, industrial) society:

It is an aggregate of individuals united by a common focus of interest, engaging in an identical form of behaviour, and open to activation towards common ends; yet the individuals involved are unknown to each other, have only a restricted amount of interaction, do not orient their actions to each other and are only loosely organized or lacking in organization. The composition of the audience is continually shifting, it has no leadership or feelings of identity.

The audience in the indigenous channels of community communication is known to each other, freely interact, orient their actions to each other, and have organic solidarity. What then happens when you expose such an audience to modern society mass media?

Scientific and technological developments, initially concerned with the improvement of traditional craft techniques and, subsequently, embracing the application of abstract knowledge to practical problems, have a promise to lead society along the path of a bright and prosperous future. The level of scientific and technological development is an indicator of the general progress of social development. Machines are used to communicate, to travel, to produce commodities, to provide services and even to entertain. Industrial and technological progress help to foster local prosperity, provide reliable, clean water supplies, urban sanitation, electric lighting, rapid transport and the many positive advances in medicine and health care. But a price is indeed being paid.

Science and technology are affecting all citizens in a significant way. Apart from the human toll in alcoholism, premature deaths from traffic accidents, accidental poisoning from proliferation of medication and chemical products, and increasing hazards to the ecology and to human health from fumes, pollutants, and oil spillages, and the lost habit of calmness, science and technology visibly function in the distribution of power and exercise of social control especially through the modern mass media. It does this both in material and ideological fashion. At the material level, technology sustains and promotes the interest of the dominant social groups in the society within which it is utilized. At the same time, it acts in a symbolic manner to support and propagate the legitimating ideology of the society, the interpretation that is placed on the world and on the individual position in it. These are possible because mass communicated messages via imported media reach the audience as independent individuals and not as members of a community with interwoven, interdependent relationships, unlike the indigenous community communication structures. Also, the modern mass media involve the use of capital equipment such as machines and other hardware which are foreign, technically complex, and too expensive for the non-



electrified rural areas. Besides, they are expected to be managed by experts, and the production of goods and services under this technology is geared to satisfying the international goods and services market.

To be effective, mass communication systems require complex formal organizations which need high skills for their operation. Their technology and messages are urban-directed. Because of the heavy capital outlay, international methods of finance are used to finance modern mass media projects, a system which is out of the reach of the rural poor, People's Bank of Nigeria notwithstanding. Inevitably, therefore, the modern mass media and information systems tend to stabilize a status-quo which is based on a structural dependency of peripheries on centres. Because of the focus on the individual, and not as a member in a social network, the mass media may not be said to, by themselves, be responsible for the occurrence of mass phenomena, nor can we safely argue that they are sufficient tools for the cause and effect of mass mobilization programmes. Rather, through the existing structure of society and the prevailing expectations, motivations and social institutions, indigenous and traditional community communication channels and the content and symbols which they disseminate may do the trick.

Communication, we do agree, plays an important role in the development process but communication channels shape or mis-shape the ingredients (content and meaning) in this process. The mass media have often been regarded as the possible panacea for many of the development problems of the Third World. They have often been accepted as major sources of knowledge, its dissemination and utilization, and as representing potential direct channels of influence and information transfer from researchers and experts of various sorts to a great majority of consumers. Could these assumptions, developed and tested in the scientifically and technologically advanced countries, be equally applicable in the developing countries? Have the modern mass media brought any promise to the rural Nigerian setting? What has been the performance of the modern mass media in Isoko Local Government Area when compared with the role of indigenous and traditional communication channels?

First, the mass media, especially battery-operated radio sets, mobile cinema and, in the few electrified areas, television sets, have had some effects, both on adults and on children and adolescents. To the extent that concern focuses on how individuals respond to media content, the fundamental effects of mass communication are cognitive. Roberts (1971) observes that regardless of whether influence is direct or indirect, immediate or delayed, short-term or long-term, regardless of whether ultimate concern is with emotions, attitudes, or behaviour, any effect of media content on individuals originates with whether and how people interpret and incorporate information transmitted by the media into their existing conceptualizations of the world. Thus, the basic link between media content and human social behaviour is forged in the interaction between information transmitted by the media on the one hand, and human information processing on the other. This implies that differences in responses to mass communication may derive from variations in exposure to media or types of media content. Differences in response may also derive from variations in how similar



messages are interpreted by different people or by similar people under differing conditions (Roberts and Bachen, 1981). These differences are minimal in traditional communication channels.

Second, transfer of technology does create problems since each technology was developed within a social and cultural background of the country in which it was created. Generally, in technological transfer there is need for adaptation, either of the imported technology itself, or by the person using it. Such adaptation has not been possible in Osoko Local Government area, partly because the Local Government area is only a constituent part of a state that has 20 local government areas, beaming out modern media messages from the capital, and partly because there is a high level of illiteracy among the exposed rural population. The English language is the predominant transmission language, both via television and radio, and even the cinema. Because of these, traditional channels of community communication will continue to play an important role for some time in the transmission of knowledge and information, cultivation of beliefs, campaigns and development, antisocial behaviour, and sex role socialization. Limitations notwithstanding, the modern media seem to have some influence in agenda setting, political socialization, responses to advertising, increased consciousness of nationhood, and knowledge of other parts and cultures of the country.

Third, the presence of modern media acts as a catalyst in the willingness and ability of the rural population to learn to read and write at a functional level in the media language. Basic formal education becomes mandatory, and a drive that has never been in the priority objectives of traditional community communication channels. Since education is the transmission of knowledge in order to foster intellectual development, formation of character and the acquisition of skills and capacities in all stages of life among all categories of a population, the mass media, therefore, contribute in raising the levels of development of the rural people. An enlightened rural community continually reviews and evaluates the objectives and goals of traditional community channels of communication in line with the objectives and goals of government and other neighbouring communities. Innovations, adjustments and adaptations within traditional institutions, therefore, in the positive sense, become acceptable, and affect decision-making.

Fourth, the modern media, in establishing direct contact with individuals, by-pass the traditional community communication channels in issues such as religion, politics, education, commerce and the economy. Inroads are, therefore, gradually being made into the autonomy of the existing institutional orders, though not unresisted. There is a strong resistance, and later a gradual move towards accommodation, towards making use of the new, often accompanied by gradual and unannounced adjustments of practice. In this process some institutional orders become weakened while others are strengthened. The mass media could also be instrumental in developing new kinds of community communication networks or in abolishing the existing ones.

Fifth, the modern mass media amplify the voices of the political leaders, persons occupying powerful positions in other sectors of national life, and of prominent intellectuals. Because the media impersonally communicate with their audience, the

traditional community communication channels become mediators in the flow of mass communication content. Community structures could (and do) limit and determine whatever effects should occur from mass communication. Therefore, in the structure of relationships between society, communications and audience, the mass media tend to play a reinforcing or conserving role, conforming to prevailing community interests, values and norms. Effective communication in rural areas still attaches more importance to the source rather than the content of the information received because of the villagers' confidence in their leaders.

Researches have shown that development communication (traditional and modern) is a total process that involves understanding the audience and its needs, communication planning based on selected strategies, message control, message production, dissemination, reception and feedback. Since this process encompasses a measures of the relationships between the independent variables on the one hand, and the dependent and intervening variables on the other, (Figure 3), we propose a new theoretical framework rooted in sociometric analyses (Figure 4) for the understanding of flows of influence and information, the roles of existing hierarchy of power and esteem and the measurable impact of modern mass communication system.

Figure 3. *Typical Communication Model for Development*

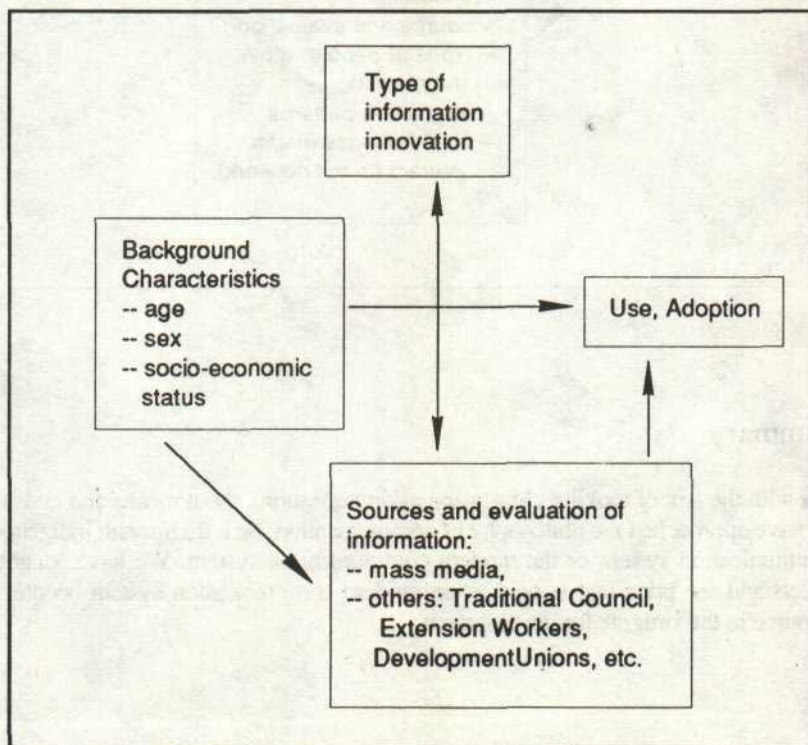
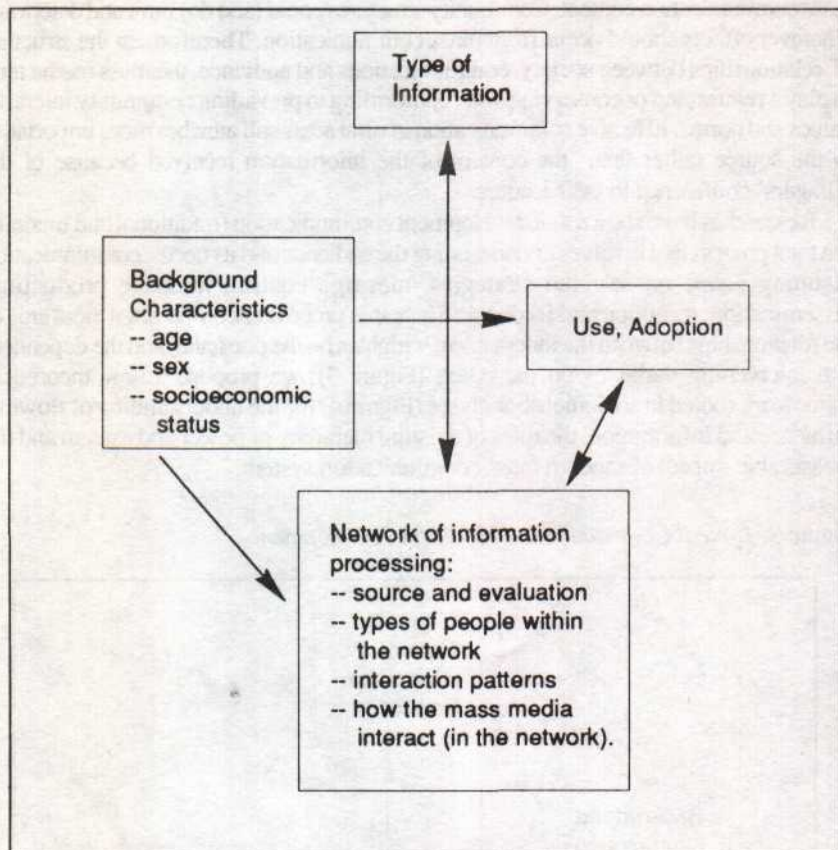




Figure 4. *Suggested Theoretical Framework*



## Summary

It is with the aim of looking closely and asking questions about means and ends that we have approached the philosophy of communication, be it traditional, indigenous communication system or the modern communication system. We have sought to understand the price that is paid when modern communication system becomes a resource in the struggle for development.

## Notes

1. ARCN means the Association of Radio Clubs of Niger.
2. Vertical communication as used here should not be understood as one-way information transfer from a central sender to numerous individuals in a linear, inoperative mode with practically no feed-back options. It is the dissemination of information which can be carried out both from above and below through the influence of the elders, the elite, the age-grade and organizations. Horizontal communication here is an interactive dialogue geared towards shared meaning of two or more people in an egalitarian and participatory fashion.
3. Isoko people are found in the Isoko Local Government Area which is made up of 17 clans, each having some peculiarities in its ancestral origin. A clan is made up of quarters (or wards) and each quarter is made up of streets. The Isoko Local Government Area is one of the major oil producing local government areas in Nigeria. Out of 17 clans, only 6 have electricity.

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