

Communicating to the Suburbs

Persons with a potential for change may be led to
"entertain" the possibility because of exposure
to Extension information

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SUBURBANITES have often indicated a need for Extension information, particularly in home economics and horticulture.¹ However, studies indicate that only a small percentage of suburban residents are aware of the Extension Service.² Also, information disseminated by Extension through radio and TV, as well as through other forms of mass communication, apparently has not reached large segments of the suburban population.

At the same time, Extension personnel have wondered whether they should try to serve suburban needs.³ In order to utilize resources that have been allocated to this audience, the general feeling has been that suburban information programs should be tailored to satisfy only the more widespread needs, utilizing those channels which economically reach large sectors of the suburban population.

This article will summarize some findings of the research that has focused on the problem of how to effectively communicate to the suburban population. In a series of studies conducted for the Cooperative Extension Service of Massachusetts special attention was given to the formal and informal communication channels through which information passes.

¹ Francis E. Barcus, *The Role of Agricultural Extension in the Suburban Community*, Communications Research Center Report No. 6 (Boston: Boston University, August, 1962).

² Francis E. Barcus, *Dissemination of Agricultural Information in the Suburban Community*, Communications Research Center Report No. 3 (Boston: Boston University, September, 1961).

³ See Patrick G. Boyle and Emory J. Brown, "Adapting 4-H to Urban Situations," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, II (Spring, 1964), 29-36.

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The major concepts utilized in the Massachusetts studies have been developed during several years of studying the flow of influence through communication.⁴ Ideas developed in the study of adoption of innovations have also been incorporated in the study scheme.⁵ For example, one notion introduced in early studies was that of a "two-step flow of communication." This notion encompassed the thought that mass media have their influence by reaching opinion leaders who, in turn, relay media content to everyday associates whom they influence. From such studies it was concluded that people are most influenced by informal leaders who are very much like the persons they influence.⁶

However, these ideas have been modified by subsequent studies. The most important modification, for the problem being discussed here, concerns the belief that opinion leaders are mainly advice-givers and that followers are primarily advice-seekers. Evidence indicates that opinion leaders seek advice even more than followers.⁷ It has even been found that opinion leaders of one group (or status level) tend to have opinion leaders themselves.⁸ Some evidence suggests that the flow of information may operate directly from media to the ultimate consumer, rather than through opinion leaders.⁹

Most studies of communication influence assume that the comprehension of factual information induces whatever influence occurs.¹⁰ Yet it is entirely conceivable that persons will be persuaded by communications even if they retain none of the specific content in the message. In fact, they may not even recall being exposed to a message. It is also possible that people may utilize infor-

⁴For a summary of most of these studies see Elihu Katz, "The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-to-Date Report on an Hypothesis," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XXI (Spring, 1957), 61-78.

⁵See Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962); Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Herbert Menzel, "Mass Media and Personal Influence," in Wilbur Schramm (ed.), *The Science of Human Communication* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1963), pp. 94-115; Everett M. Rogers, "The Adoption Process," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Spring and Summer, 1963), 16-22 and 69-75; Herbert F. Lionberger, "Individual Adoption Behavior," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Fall, 1963), 157-66; and Herbert F. Lionberger, "Community Adoption Patterns," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Winter, 1963), and 201-209.

⁶Summarized in Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1955), pp. 32-34.

⁷Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 109-10.

⁸Katz and Lazarsfeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-87.

⁹Paul J. Deutschmann and Wayne Danielson, "Diffusion as Knowledge of Major News Story," *Journalism Quarterly*, XXXVII (Summer, 1960), 345-55.

¹⁰Carl I. Hovland and Milton J. Rosenberg (eds.), *Attitude Organization and Change: An Analysis of Consistency Among Attitude Components* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 9-10.

mation provided by an agency without firsthand knowledge of the agency.

Wherever there is widespread need for some type of information in a community, there will likely be formal or informal channels through which the necessary information will flow to meet such needs. Without extremely large Extension staffs, face-to-face contact or meetings as a means of getting information to suburbanites appears virtually impossible. Therefore, to reach many people economically, some form of mass or specialized media is usually most efficient.

EXTENSION IN SUBURBS

In order to appraise some of these communication ideas for the Cooperative Extension Service, studies were conducted in the suburban Boston area. One factor prompting such studies was the feeling that the Extension Service might be doing effective work in the suburbs, even if residents were not aware of the agency itself.¹¹ It was suggested that information originating from Extension could be reaching large segments of the suburban population indirectly.

In order to appraise efficiency in disseminating ideas, research was designed to determine whether information about "ornamental horticulture" was reaching suburbanites via mass media. Even if only small numbers were reached, it appeared that concentrating on mass media might still be the best communication strategy because the persons reached might be "opinion leaders" in a "two-step flow" of horticultural information.¹²

Research efforts were concentrated in the suburban part of Middlesex County, Massachusetts (an area consisting of 19 towns in the Boston area). The Extension Service of Middlesex County controlled a form of mass communication, the *Middlesex County Bulletin* (a 10- to 16-page monthly newspaper). About 2000 county households subscribed at a cost of one dollar for a year or two dollars for three years. Over 400 of these subscribing households were in the suburban area. However, these 400 represented a fairly small per cent of the total suburban households (about 1 in every 300). The fact that these persons subscribed to an agricultural newspaper suggested that they might be the "opinion leaders" on the care of lawns, shrubs, and other plants. Therefore, the study was designed to determine the potential of this type of publication.

¹¹ Verling C. Troidahl, *The Communication of Horticultural Information and Influence in a Suburban Community*, Communications Research Center Report No. 10 (Boston: Boston University, March, 1963).

¹² *Ibid.*

in disseminating Extension horticultural information to this audience.

The *Bulletin* consisted mainly of local agricultural news. A preliminary study of suburban subscribers to the *Bulletin* indicated that they had a high interest in ornamental horticulture.¹³ Therefore, six articles on this topic were included in the October, 1962, issue. A week later the effects of these articles were studied by personally interviewing 176 subscribers.

Communication Patterns

It was thought that a basic understanding of the channels through which this information was flowing might be of great usefulness to those planning communication programs. But what are the basic patterns? Are they from mass media to people or are they from person to person? Or more appropriately: from which mass media to which people? Or, from which persons to which persons? And more specifically for the Extension Service, does information placed specifically in a county agricultural publication reach persons who are in need of the information?

Many Extension agents and other professional communicators have been frustrated in trying to apply the idea of a two-step flow of communication to problems. They have been told to identify the opinion leaders, communicate to them, then relax as the opinion leaders complete the task. Such advice is hard to put into practice. First, it is difficult to identify the opinion leaders in a given subject-matter area. Second, little evidence is available as to which media will best reach such persons.

In the suburbs, most *Bulletin* subscribers were (1) men (72%) 40 years or older (80%), (2) had some farm background, and (3) had either a high school diploma or some college. They were primarily white-collar workers (in proprietor-manager-official occupations) or retired farmers. Over half (54%) were identified as opinion leaders.¹⁴ These "opinion leaders" reported that someone had asked them for horticultural advice during the preceding week and that they were more likely than their friends to be asked for such advice. Seven of every 10 opinion leaders reported some type of farm background; four of every 10 followers did so.

Finding so many opinion leaders in the *Bulletin* audience suggests that this type of publication does, in fact, reach a select audi-

¹³ Verling C. Trodahl and Daniel L. Griffin, *Suburban Impact of the Middlesex County Bulletin, A Monthly Agricultural Publication*, Communications Research Center Report No. 9 (Boston: Boston University, December, 1962).

¹⁴ Trodahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-51.

ence of influential persons. Such a publication, therefore, may be a good place to concentrate limited resources in trying to serve suburban information needs.

About three-fourths of the persons interviewed reported that they had read the *Bulletin* issue containing the six specially written articles on ornamental horticulture. A substantial number of subscribers were aware of the specific articles. Surprisingly, however, followers were at least as likely as opinion leaders to report having seen the articles. This suggests that *attention* to horticultural problems can be obtained directly through mass media. Both followers and opinion leaders are reachable through the media themselves; they make up two different audiences receiving the same treatment.

Changing Beliefs

Getting subscribers to change their *beliefs* on how to handle a horticultural problem is another matter, however. Personal interviews with subscribers a month before the *Bulletin* was mailed indicated that many were using practices not recommended by Extension. Five of the six special articles produced no significant change in beliefs among those interviewed. This suggests that when belief change is the goal of communication, a "zero-step flow" may result (no one is influenced). Although the possibility of no effect seems merely common sense, professional communicators often are prone to send out a single message, then move on to the next problem. In many cases, if the situation warrants any effort at all, it may be necessary to transmit several messages through one or more media.

The most highly displayed experimental article included in the October, 1962, issue did induce a significant number of followers to change their beliefs to those recommended by Extension. (A smaller number of opinion leaders adopted this belief.) Again, the surprising finding was that when beliefs changed as a result of exposure to the message, followers were as likely to be affected by direct exposure to a mass medium as opinion leaders were.

Several subscribers had talked about the care of lawns, shrubs, trees, or other plants during the week preceding the interview, largely because they had a particular horticultural problem. There was some evidence, however, that it was primarily the persons who saw the special *Bulletin* articles who had talked about horticulture. This was especially so if (1) they had seen the articles and (2) their own horticultural practices conflicted with those recommended in the articles. This suggests that media articles which draw attention

... to some practice may stimulate persons not already using the practice to talk with other persons (presumably their opinion leaders) about what to do.

It seems that opinion leadership may occur primarily when a follower becomes aware, through the media, of something prescribed in the media which he is not presently doing. If so, the very persons who have a potential for change, and should be the targets of Extension communications, may be led (because of their exposure to Extension information) to "entertain" the possibility of changing.

If media exposure induces followers to seek out their opinion leaders for advice, it is possible that "reasons why" information in the articles has little effect—the recommendation of a practice is all that may be needed to get a follower to seek out advice. In fact, there was some evidence that followers were "short-circuiting" the gathering of information, moving directly from awareness of an idea to accepting it. This suggests a "tell me how to do it; don't bother me with reasons why" approach to problems. If persons change their beliefs without a fairly substantial level of information, perhaps professional communicators should devote most of their content and display to the recommended beliefs themselves. However, enough information should be provided somewhere in the message to offer "reasons why" for those who desire such information.

Suburban subscribers who became aware of the content of the social *Bulletin* articles were more likely than other subscribers to "talk about" the topic with someone afterwards, but were not more likely to "seek advice" about the message topics. It seems, therefore, that any reliance on media-initiated information through face-to-face contacts would occur, not because people actively try to spread ideas, but because the new ideas get passed on in regular day-to-day conversations. When these conversations about horticulture occur, however, they are likely to involve persons with both an interest and some competence in the subject. When followers did seek advice, they were more likely to seek out a person whom they perceived as "expert" on the topic than to seek out someone with whom they were well acquainted. Keeping this in mind, professional communicators should exert considerable effort in reaching relatively expert persons with messages about new ideas. This task is much easier than the more vague prescription, "reach the opinion leaders." Often these relatively expert persons may be the "professional intermediaries" discussed by Barcus.¹⁵ These include

¹⁵ Barcus, Report No. 6, *op. cit.*

such persons as hardware dealers, landscapers, and nursery dealers. They can be reached economically—they are usually among the target audience for Extension communications anyway.

It was expected that some subscribers might become aware of the recommended practices through the *Bulletin*, but would not accept the practices unless they talked with their opinion leaders. No reliable evidence of such a “second-step flow” of influence on beliefs was found in this study. Either few subscribers were influenced by their opinion leaders, or their opinion leaders tended to give them support for their old ideas instead of the new ones.

CONCLUSION

Findings from studies on the flow of information and the adoption of new ideas and practices have suggested a number of ways of viewing the transmission of communications. This is a particularly relevant concern of the Extension Service in its efforts to reach large segments of the suburban population with limited staff and other resources. As a way of investigating the potential for mass communications, a series of studies were conducted for the Massachusetts Extension Service in the Boston area.

Studies have indicated that suburbanites want horticultural and homemaking information. Because Extension could not expend much energy on this “secondary audience,” it was interested in knowing if fairly small-scale efforts would meet the information need. Findings in this experiment suggest that Extension may fill much of the suburban information need with mass-media and specialized-media campaigns.

Followers, as well as opinion leaders, can apparently be reached directly through mediated communication. Repetition of practically identical messages is needed, however, even when the target audiences have strong need for the information. Furthermore, the beliefs being recommended should probably be more emphasized than “reasons why.” Finally, some personal contact may be needed with persons relatively expert in the subject so that anyone seeking advice is likely to receive the most up-to-date information.

EVERY MAN who rises above the common level has received two educations: the first from his teachers; the second, more personal and important, from himself.—EDWARD GIBBON.