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Posted by admin on 19 December 2011 | 4 Comments

Communication for social change: How to turn a stone into a sponge (it's not magic, it's design!)

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Earlier this year we heard from Equal Access about their radio project in Chad and Niger. Dr. Karen Greiner conducted 3 months of field research over a two-year period as an external evaluator of the radio programs, producing an evaluation report as a result. Drawing on this work in the below post, Dr. Greiner shares her reflections on projects which invite interaction and promote dialogue.

In the world of communication for social change, design matters. The strengths and limitations of communication program design, and

FrontlineSMS set up at Equal Access radio station in Chad. Photo Credit: Karen Greiner

of the chosen medium or form of communication, can affect the reception and use of content. For example, let's say that a communication intervention is designed to disseminate information to community members about the importance of hand washing to avoid illness, and the medium used to convey this information is a written billboard message next to a crowded marketplace. The location might be well chosen but the form limits reception to those who can read, understand the chosen language, and happen to see that particular billboard. There is also no way to engage in dialogue with a billboard; a billboard, by design, is to be passively consumed.

What if we had chosen, instead, the medium of radio? With radio we can reach even those who cannot read, and we can also reach those who live beyond the marketplace, provided they own or have access to a radio. We still have to carefully consider language. For example, if we want to reach the urban teens in Dakar one would have to consider whether content be in French, Wolof, or both (budget permitting). And one might also translate content into additional languages for regional broadcasts. Whichever decision is made on choice of language, radio can clearly improve access and reach. The medium of radio, however, does not necessarily engage listeners in dialogue – radio is still often used for the disseminating messages.

The billboard and the traditional radio broadcast are one-way forms of communication – they are to be received and not responded to. I call one-way forms of communication "stones." Stones are closed, impenetrable and finalized; we cannot "talk back" to stones. A stone can be converted into a "sponge," however, when the form of communication is designed to invite response – to invite dialogue. A sponge is porous; it has holes – entry points – that allow liquid (or in this case audience members) to enter and exit. In this instance, the analogy of communication intervention-as-sponge is provided as the open alternative to the closed-form stone.

Solar powered radio
Moussouro in Chad. Photo
Credits: Karen Greiner

A radio broadcast converts from stone to sponge when it invites interaction; and one way to do this is to offer interaction through SMS. When an SMS number is embedded in the radio broadcast, along with an invitation to listeners to respond to the broadcast, audience members are given the opportunity to react and to share their opinions and ideas. Sponge designs invite dialogue.

An example of this type of engagement is provided by radio shows in Chad and Niger. From 2008 onwards, the San Francisco-based non-profit organization, Equal Access has been running several radio shows designed to promote democracy and encourage civic participation in community life as part of the Peace through Development project (PDEV). They recruited a talented team of local journalists and media professionals to produce and broadcast radio programs on topics ranging from civic engagement to community health and sanitation.

The design of the radio programs is very innovative, and very porous. Each radio program had several "sponge"-like features. Early designs of the program included an embedded text message number so that listeners could respond to radio content using their cell phones. PDEV staff-members used FrontlineSMS software and systems to track and organize audience member messages. In some cases the content of text messages inspired program producers as they wrote new scripts. In other cases the message senders were called and asked if they would be interested in forming a local listening club. Towards the end of the project, program producers began including the content of audience member text messages in new broadcasts. So, for example, messages received in response to broadcast #37 were included in broadcast #40.

This inclusion of audience-produced content is the difference between two-way dialogue and one-way monologue. Designs that invite audience input still face limitations of cost, literacy, language and access to technology. Some of these limitations can be addressed. For example, to offset the cost of sending messages, PDEV project staff was eventually able to obtain a toll-free phone number for the SMS in Niger. Mindful that literacy can be a barrier to text messaging, project staff – the last time I visited the project were experimenting with an open source, interactive voice response (IVR) telephone software called FreedomFone. The combination of FrontlineSMS with FreedomFone enables more radio listeners to enter the dialogue – or enter the "sponge." In this sense we can say that the design of our invitations for input to listeners also has implications for inclusion; the more we can reduce cost, language, literacy and technology barriers the more likely we are to hear from a wide and diverse range of listeners.

The design our communication interventions reveals our worldview: do we see a world populated by passive, ill-informed "targets"? a world made up of active, thoughtful community members with ideas and opinions worth reading and hearing? In short, should we be "monologic," by continuing to disseminate and broadcast messages, or might we aspire to be "dialogic," by trusting in the capacity of community members, engaging with them and inviting them to consider our ideas and then also share their own?

The good news is that it's possible to convert an inventory full of one-way stones into two-way sponges. Add a phone number to your billboard. Use FrontlineSMS software not just to send messages but to receive them as well. Add an email address, phone number or office address to your brochure and invite community members to get in touch and, even better, to suggest improvements to what you have created. It's not impossible – and never too late – to turn a stone into a sponge. A new design, based on faith in the agency and creativity of community members, is all it takes.

Of course, all analogies have limitations. The "sponge" analogy does not quite capture the dynamic potential unleashed by porous designs. The creative contributions of listeners may need a different organic analogy, and I would be grateful for suggestions. Thus to practice what I am preaching with this blog-post, I invite you to help me convert monologue to dialogue by responding and adding to what I have offered here. What do YOU think? Can you help me improve the line of thinking I have just put forward? Or contribute a more "dynamic" analogy to supplement the "stone" and the "sponge"? Let us declare blog post officially porous. Even critics are invited! So, if you would like to comment on (or improve!) this post, you are invited to do so below.

Karen Greiner in radio studio
N'Djamena Chad.

By Karen Greiner, Ph.D. Post Doctoral Scholar, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida. Email: kgreiner [at] gmail [dot] com.

Visit the Equal Access website [here](#) to read more about Dr. Karen Greiner's evaluation and access her full report on 'Applying Local Solutions to Local Problems'.

To learn more about our work combining our FrontlineSMS software with radio, visit the FrontlineSMS:Radio website: http://radio.frontlinesms.com/

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4 Responses to "Communication for social change: How to turn a stone into a sponge (it's not magic, it's design!)"

1. [David](#) 19 December 2011 at 5:11 pm [#](#)

   Thanks for the post. The mobile phone is a perfect compliment to radio since it can be used by listeners to provide feedback thro voice calls and SMS. also both can comfortably run off the grid and their a good choice for rural dwellers. I blogged about this sor time back here Thanks for this insightful post. infact i also discussed this in my blog on the post "Radio and Phone, the perfect marriage" which you can read here http://bit.ly/tJpV4j

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2. florence 19 December 2011 at 5:42 pm [#](#)

   Hi David,

   Thanks for sharing your post, and for your kind comments here! We will be sure to pass them on to Karen, who wrote this guest for us.

   I wonder if you have heard of our work combining FrontlineSMS with radio, in the form of our FrontlineSMS:Radio project: http://radio.frontlinesms.com/. Our work in this area is very much about drawing on the strength of using mobile & radio in interaction, and the potential of this combination.

   Thanks again!
   Flo

   [Reply](#)

3. [James BonTempo](#) 22 December 2011 at 4:41 pm [#](#)

   I see opportunities for this model in education/training, too. See an old post of mine proposing this at http://linearityofexpectation.blogspot.com/2009/07/new-kind-of-interactive-radio.html. Maybe we'll see a marriage of the Rad Learn projects at some point… 😊

   [Reply](#)

4. http://tinyurl.com/avinhowel52640 24 January 2013 at 11:46 am [#](#)

   "Communication for social change: How to turn a stone into a sponge (it's not magic, it's design!
) : FrontlineSMS" definitely makes me personally ponder a somewhat more.

   I personally cherished every single part of this blog post.

   Regards -Lukas

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