

REPORT OF A MEETING ON FORMS OF PRESENTATION, Geneva, 1979 (*)Statement of basic problems

- a) What are the forms of presentation accessible to people in general?
- b) What are the forms of presentation which permit some feedback?

Points raised in discussion

The points noted in this section have been grouped together subsequent to the discussion. It is hoped that in this form they will be meaningful to members of the network not present at the meeting in order that further points may be added within the framework or that the framework itself may be amended. Clearly the process of regrouping points in this way may result in some distortion of the ideas as originally put forward within the meeting. This too should be corrected in subsequent FoP sub-group work.

A. Basic questions1) What is to be communicated?

The importance of communicating what is not evident was stressed. On the one hand a presentation of different problématiques results in excessively balanced and undynamic communication; although on the other hand, the presentation of solutions results in a "missionary" quality which is equally undesirable. Related to this is the question of whether the communication should be didactic or conscientising (not the same thing)

2) To whom and/or with whom?

This is the question of the Zielpublikum or "target audience", although these terms reflect an approach to communication which does not conform to the criteria discussed below. They stress communication "to", or "at", rather than "with". Should the concern be primarily with a maximum number of people or should the aim be selective (e.g. decision markers)? What are the advantages of non-mass forms of communication? The disadvantages of mass forms?

3) To what end?

What is the desired effect of such communication? What is expected? Although again these terms imply a certain determining influence and a certain minimum of manipulation of the communication process which restricts the freedom of those involved. Should the intention be simply to interest people in the subject matter, or should they be challenged and stimulated to commit themselves to some course of action?

(*) Sub-project on Forms of Presentation of the Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development project of the United Nations University

B. Basic constraints

1) By whom?

Whatever institutional or other delivery system selected to disseminate the chosen form, certain characteristic weaknesses become evident. For example, an intergovernmental organization may ensure a very widespread distribution of a publication which then ends up in the private libraries of local officials and is not accessible to those whom it was intended to benefit

2) Costs

Communication involves costs which must either be borne or reduced (if not eliminated). Most obvious of these are the financial costs, which of course differ with form of presentation and the audience desired. Environmental costs may be high if the chosen form or method of distribution involves excessive use of natural resources, or energy, or results in pollution of the environment (whether in the form of noise, paper, etc.). Finally there are social costs associated with a particular form. These include need for preliminary instruction of the form is to be acceptable and usable, and the social cost of bringing people into the dialogue mode.

C. Means and implementation

1) Range of alternatives

Emphasis was placed on the importance of broadening the range of acceptable modes of presentation. The alternatives to the written medium, and particularly the traditional academic book or article, were stressed as being complementary to the written mode and not a substitute for it

2) Technical constraints

Clearly there is a question of appropriateness of the communication technology associated with a particular form of presentation, in a particular setting. Equipment (TV, video, projectors, etc.) may involve unacceptable investment, operating, maintenance, or preliminary training costs. This may prevent use of the chosen form at the grass-roots level. On the other hand the equipment may be unsuitable for climatic or reasons

3) Technical possibilities

The meeting was somewhat divided as to the desirability of forms of presentation associated with advanced technologies, especially computers but not including TV and video. This issue is dramatised by the rapid spread of such devices (e.g. TV games for children and in cafés, low cost mini-computers, computer conferencing).

D. Criteria for desirable forms

The discussion of the following criteria responded in part to the basic questions noted above, in the sense that the nature of the desirable medium defines the nature of the desirable communication (to paraphrase McLuhan).

1) Structure/content correspondence

The structure by which communication takes place (whether organizational, technical) should correspond to the content of the communications. Namely undesirable methods of communication should not be used to communicate desirable messages or else the value of the latter is compromised

2) Beyond the sender/receiver model

The tendency to perceive communication in terms of a sender/receiver model in which the sender aims to influence the receiver or "to fill a vacuum" in the receiver, should be rejected and denounced. This implies a unilateral cause effect approach which necessarily maintains and reinforces the privileged position of the sender and insulates the sender from the receiver's feedback.

3) Respect for those with whom communication occurs

Those initiating the communication should respect those who become involved in the process. The latter should be understood as capable of introducing dimensions of value to both parties as well as being able to adapt the form to local conditions

4) Dialogue

Dialogue should be incorporated into the form of presentation whenever possible to ensure appropriate feedback between both parties. The "dazibao" in China (a wall on which community messages and counter-messages can be hung) was cited as a desirable example. Other forms may permit dialogue to a greater or lesser degree (e.g. letters to editor, books with write-in-option, call-in-radio or TV)

5) Feedback

The three previous points all imply a form of feedback to those initiating the communication (however, does not the term itself imply an undesirable directionality to the communication process?). The basic point is to avoid alienating or hypnotising those exposed to the chosen forms. Passive communication consumerism should be avoided

6) Openness

It was suggested that the chosen form should in some measure leave those exposed to it open to dream, to disorder and to chance, namely free to impose whatever degree of order seemed appropriate at the time. In this sense the whole communication process should be conceived rather like the classic "message in the bottle cast into the sea". There should be elements of randomness as to how it will be received and by whom and what will be the result

7) Reinforcement of the existing good

Communication which reinforces beneficial tendencies and processes is much to be preferred to communication which attempts to introduce alternatives conceived as "good" by outsiders. Aside from the risk that the latter will be rejected the former is more readily understood

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8) Simplicity

The importance of conceiving forms of communication in terms of the needs of simple people was stressed, in contrast to the tendency to develop increasingly complex forms of presentation. It was also argued that even those who have received a specialized education are simple in those domains not covered by their speciality. There is therefore a need to communicate with the simple in each of us, including (and perhaps especially) those in positions of responsibility

9) Action possibilities

Exposure to the chosen form should not simply trigger wonder or interest which do not necessarily offer the individual any possibility for action. The content should challenge and indicate action possibilities so that the individual is not left frustrated and alienated by the inability to act

10) Schematic approach

Because of the above criteria, and particularly the impossibility of determining the needs of each set of users (especially where a variety of cultures is concerned), there is an advantage in leaving the product somewhat unfinished. It is completed for local distribution, if it is not completed by the user as part of the process

11) Complexity

Although there is need for simplicity in communication, as noted above, it is also clear that an important feature of what needs to be communicated lies in the interrelatedness of a number of simple notions. Seen as a whole the interrelationship pattern is complex (e.g. ecosystem notions), often involving non-linear features. The challenge is to find a means of communicating complexity simply and rendering such patterns comprehensible. The conventional tendency to focus on isolated questions (e.g. children, food, health, disarmament, etc.) as though they were independent should be avoided, if only by treating each of the elements in the pattern as part of a pattern. For example, by producing a set (not a "series") of posters on individual topics such that when hung together in a room the pattern between them emerges. It is not the element which should be stressed but the pattern of relationship between them.

E. Complementarity of forms of presentation1) Complementarity

As noted above, stress was placed on the manner in which forms should be conceived as complementing one another. The nature of this complementarity remains to be explored in the complete range of forms (of which Annex 1 is indicative of the variety). By complementarity is meant that the possibilities, limitations and characteristics of one form may be complemented by use of one or more others - each appealing to groups with different mind-set and communication preferences

2) Transformability

It is desirable that communication through one form should be transformable into communication through another if the latter is likely to be more appropriate. As with complementarity, the limitations on transformability remain to be explored

3) Privileged modes

The prevalence of certain forms was noted (e.g. books, articles). Attention is required to the manner and extent to which alternatives can be used. On the other hand the present degree of commitment to such privileged modes ensures any substitution can only be limited and may only be possible in areas where the written mode has not yet become habitual. In the final analysis these difficulties are raised by many forms of presentation which have emerged as a consequence of industrialization.

F. Evaluation and research

1) Successes and failures to date

Much has been done in the way of experiment over the past decades in order to communicate development related concepts to many different audiences. The work of the different UN Specialized Agencies through their information programmes is one example. Many more experiments have been conducted at the national level. The question is to what extent have these experiments been successful, and to what extent a failure? Is improvement possible and in what areas, in the light of past experiences? What has blocked such improvements in the past?

2) Evaluation

Attention is required to the method by which different forms of presentation can be evaluated and compared, for example, with regard to the time period over which they effect useful change (i.e.g. immediately or in 15 years) and the number of people which can be involved. There may be various kinds of tradeoff between different advantages and disadvantages

3) PopPs as an object of research

Beyond the problems raised by evaluation are those concerned with understanding how different forms come to be preferred or needed by different groups of people. Why are some new forms perceived as "gimmicks" and rejected in favour of traditional forms?

4) Influence of new PopPs on research

It was recognized that innovation in forms of representation had facilitated development of understanding in certain fields (e.g. chemistry and structural models= geography and maps). Any breakthrough to suitable new forms could therefore have important consequences. New vehicles are required for new concepts.

G. Meta and other questions

1) Purpose of communication

Whilst the importance of specifying the effect desired on those exposed to the forms was stressed (see above), some attention was given to the question of the purpose of achieving that end. To what extent were the forms not only a means but an end? The goal/process relationship (e.g. in the GPID project itself) was compared to the zen attitude as exemplified in the art of archery - the two blend into a new unity. The challenge

is to improve the objective forming potential. Should attention be on FoPs or on the process in which they are embedded, or on the process whereby they are generated?

2) Re-assesement of communicant status

An ideal FoP places communicants in a situation in which they are encouraged to re-assess their own position vis-à-vis each other and the subject matter ("une mise en question"). This process is basic to any approach to non-linear thinking (e.g. zen, de Bono, Drzybski)

3) Self-education

The implication that GPID's FoP concern was limited to an audience of simple people "out there" in the streets or in developing country villages was questioned. Given the variety of development problems and obstacles which are characteristic of our current institutions and their inhabitants, a useful test for GPID success in this area would be its ability to formulate FoPs which would facilitate meaningful change to new patterns within such institutions and programmes, and communicate with a wide variety of people.

