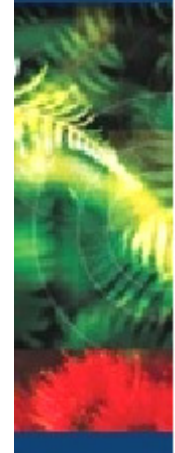# Massey University

Information rich, information poor

What are the implications for health?

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So you want a knowledge society?

New Zealand hopes to reinvent itself as a knowledge society, but what are the implications if we possess a significant proportion of information-poor citizens?

The knowledge gap hypothesis

"As the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socioeconomic status tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than the lower status segments, so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tends to increase rather than decrease."

(Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970, p. 159-160)

A practical implication of this for communicators may be that:

Attempts to equalise knowledge in a community by releasing information into it, may not only fail to remove knowledge gaps, but may worsen them …

The information-rich know how to access information and use it to their advantage (so can improve their situation) **but** the information-poor either do not **see** that information, do not fully **understand** it or its implications, or are indifferent to it because it does not connect with their **values**, or lack the **self-confidence** or self-esteem to make use of it, or lack the **means** to use it.

Information poor people usually:

- Are economically disadvantaged
- Have less access to print media
- Have fewer organisational memberships
- Lack family norms that foster achievement
- Lack high status personal contacts
- Are in a more closed information system
- Are relatively unaware of the power of information.

Poverty: informational and otherwise

- Since the mid-1980s NZ has experienced quickly growing divisions between economic rich and poor

- If there is a link between economic and information poverty, then there is a need to better understand the nature of information poverty.

Advantages of being upper socio-economic status (SES)

- Access to more (and more accurate) information such as specialised print media
- More organisational memberships
- More formal schooling
- Family norms foster achievement
- Higher status personal contacts.

Understanding your information needs:

"The disadvantaged may not be able to view their problems in terms of information needs and, when they do seek information, may not be very active in the search."

(Gaziano, 1983, p. 477)

Difficulties inherent in this kind of research

- There are possible contradictions of information rich researchers investigating information poor respondents
- The researchers need to be able to create the conditions where the respondents feel free to talk
- There is a confounding effect of lack of trust in the research enquiry
- Researchers need to build community capability in doing and interpreting research.

Knowledge gaps may be narrowed by:

- Media publicity
- The interest inherent in the topic
- The geographical scope of the topic.

(Gaziano, 1983)

Implications:

- Use media that reach your target market
- Demonstrate the interest inherent in the topic in terms that connect with your audience's values.

Knowledge awareness versus depth
(AKA simple vs complex knowledge)

- After concentrated media publicity, gaps in awareness knowledge may close

- But SES-related gaps in depth knowledge may be unaffected.

To achieve empowerment goals:

"When there is a difference in interest among population segments, knowledge gaps will widen."

<div align="right">(Chew & Palmer, 1994, p. 272)</div>

Implication:

Look for ways to foster **interest** in your desired outcomes, again linked to audience **values**, to meet knowledge access (and empowerment) goals.

Stressing the interest and appeal inherent in an issue

"When a topic is of specific interest or appeal to a group, regardless of whether it has more or less educated members, the group will tend to be well-informed about the topic."

(Genova & Greenburg, 1979)

Implication:

Reduce knowledge gaps by demonstrating the importance of the topic to your target audience.

Attentiveness and motivation

- Interest in a topic increases both attentiveness to it and motivation to acquire and transmit information about it.   (Ettema & Kline, 1977)

- After an information campaign, knowledge gaps based on motivation widened, but gaps based on education closed.

Implication: Differences in education are more easily overcome. Differences in motivation are more enduring and resistant to being changed.

Empowerment and learning

Empowerment necessitates sharing with your target audience information that enables them to understand their options and enables them to contribute to better health outcomes.

"An army marches only as fast as its slowest member."

A community can learn and develop only to the extent that all substantial parts of it are empowered.

What about technology?

In an Auckland study of low SES respondents:

- Our participants mainly had quite good access to technology in the form of TVs, VCRs, electronic banking, etc.

- Yet access does not imply use, or benefit from use

- Even though technological gateways to information might theoretically be available, this might be less important than social, attitudinal, behavioural and other environmental barriers to use of technology for informational purposes.

Issues arising from the Auckland study

- Characteristics of the stereotypical Kiwi character emerged: egalitarian, self-reliant and stoical
- Your neighbours would be there for you in a crisis, but are not essential in an everyday sense
- People say they receive little support from social agencies, but say they prefer not to.

Issues arising from the Auckland study #2

- Helping agencies were seen as helpful or not, depending on the staff encountered at the desk
- Access to information seemed to improve as a person gets beyond teenage years and early 20s
- Respondents prefered not to discuss "big" issues with friends, probably on the grounds of self-reliance
- So-called trivial talk or chit-chat may be important.

Pacific women and cervical screening services (Manawatu)

- Reinforced "knowledge-behaviour gap"
- PI women make less use of cervical screening services
- Resistance to the idea of "a Pacific problem", so that TV images should feature many different ethnicities.

Barriers to use of services included:

- Resistance to being defined as socially problematic
- Embarrassment
- Belief in the sacred nature of human sexuality
- Anxiety about lack of confidentiality within small community groups
- A perceived relationship between cervical smears and sexual activity.

Respondents wanted:

- Sources of information (interpersonal & pamphlet) mediated through their community groups
- Smear-takers who were preferably non-Pacific in ethnicity.

  Respondents' lived experience of "community connectedness" defined them as distinct from recent U.S. studies where participants were seen as highly isolated in their social environments.

<div align="right">(Sligo & Jameson, 2000)</div>

Literacy & Employment (Wanganui)

- A FRST-funded 3 yr longitudinal research programme investigating issues surrounding adult literacy and employment just getting underway

- Awareness of multiple correlates of low literacy including poor health (GoodHealth Wanganui), low income, low educational achievement, greater risk of being convicted of crime

- Massey is in partnership with four community groups including Te Puna Matauranga o Whanganui, Wanganui District Library, Literacy Aotearoa & the Whanganui Community Foundation.

Information poor or information different?

- Economic analogies are limited: supplying more information is not necessarily like supplying more money
- Information poverty may be closer (for some people) to a state of apartness or ambiguity than to deprivation
- Communicators need to enter the audience's world if we are to connect.

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