Health Education

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Publishing for the grass roots—a comic book on immunization

In some countries with very large populations, many languages are spoken, many subcultures exist, and reading skills are often limited. Health publications for the grass roots in these countries must therefore be simple and adaptable. In India, comic strips geared to local cultures, reading habits and storytelling traditions have been developed with a view to spreading knowledge about immunization. This article describes how a prototype was developed and tested, and how an adaptation kit was prepared so that state governments, local governments, and agencies, using local resources, could produce and distribute publications suitable for particular parts of the country.

Studies on the failure to fully immunize infants have shown that a lack of information about immunization is consistently cited as the major cause. If the availability and importance of immunization could be made known to communities there would be a dramatic increase in the percentage of children immunized. Schoolchildren have often been used to disseminate health messages to communities, e.g., information on immunization was provided in Bombay by this means (1). Yet few health education materials dealing exclusively with immunization are directed towards schoolchildren or semiliterate but influential persons.

The adult literacy rate in India is 36%, but, as in many developing countries, large sections of the population classified as literate cannot read well. Despite this, relatively little reading material is suitable for the weakly literate. And in any case the incentive to invest in books is small, given that 48% of the Indian people have less than about US$ 0.20 a day to feed, clothe and house themselves (2). The minuscule spending power of the majority that has most of the health problems makes it highly desirable to distribute cheap, easily understandable health publications such as comic books. This medium is already widely used in India for entertainment and

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disseminating serious messages, especially on religion and history.

India’s population in mid-1984 was estimated at 747 million. There are 1652 mother tongues, and 15 main languages are recognized in the Constitution, in addition to English. There are nearly 100 million students in India’s schools, more than 70 million of them at the basic educational level. To meet the demands for educational textbooks, staggering print runs are called for. For example, if only one copy of a publication is required for each village, a print run of almost 600,000 is necessary. Over 11,000 publishers contend for the Indian market. According to the Registrar of Newspapers (3), almost 20,000 newspaper and periodical titles with a combined circulation of over 50 million copies were published in 85 languages in 1982.

In deciding to produce a comic book on immunization for schoolchildren in India, some thought had to be given to the basic methodology of the publishing process. Most publications on health are aimed at decision-makers, university-educated specialists, and comparable people, at whom a fairly traditional publishing activity can be directed: texts are prepared by a technical unit and passed to a publications unit, which sees to the language-editing and the production of the printed and bound end-product. Distribution follows the usual channels adopted for academic texts.

Clearly, such a process would not have been appropriate for the audience we had in mind, given its size and level of literacy, as well as its linguistic, cultural and geographical characteristics. Publishing for the grass roots in India seemed to call for a different approach.

Preparing the material

It was clearly necessary to demonstrate how to increase public understanding of the Expanded Programme on Immunization. Given the numbers involved, centrally produced publications aimed at the grass roots in India can only be examples or prototypes. The function of a prototype is to serve as a basis for translation, adaptation and replication, and as a model end-result. Materials intended for use in prototypes, particularly those aimed at the grass roots, must be subjected to a rigorous cycle of preliminary and post-testing. This should go further than clearing the text with supervisors and experts: representative samples of the target audience should also be brought in. And it should always be borne in mind that it is the text that is being tested, not the audience: only the text, and the tester, can fail. Not only can testing help to produce a good prototype, but the results can serve to demonstrate its merits to anyone interested in using it.

A prototype developed for and tested in one area must be adapted and/or translated before it can be used in a culturally distinct area. Different photographs may have to be used and other illustrations redrawn. In order to facilitate the process of adaptation, a kit with instructions on adaptation, samples, and even printing materials can be provided. Basic information is provided on the cultural references embedded in the text or on the illustrations, focusing on the technical content. This is particularly
important when a fictional medium is used to convey technical content in a deliberately unobtrusive way; some guidance on the art of achieving this is essential if the content is to survive adaptation.

Finally, given the tendency of translators to translate literally rather than to adapt, the prototype adaptation kit should be such that the source materials are deliberately incomplete, thus needing to be adapted in order to be usable (4, 5). The specifics of adaptation are left to the government, local authority, or agency concerned. Some useful information on the pre-testing of learning materials intended for the grass roots is available (6, 7).

With the above considerations in mind, the comic book project was devised to produce a prototype of the completed text for thorough pre-testing and evaluation, together with an adaptation kit, which was a form of the prototype shorn of cultural and social characteristics and giving detailed instructions on how to adapt the prototype and thus produce local models.

Promotion

The prototype and adaptation kit were clearly only going to be of value if used by central or state governments, other countries, or agencies. Accordingly, the promotion of adaptations of the prototype comic book was considered an integral part of the publishing process.

The activity of promoting a publication can be carried out at various government levels, through funding agencies, and, ideally, at the community level. Promotion can also include supporting or subsidizing the translation of the publication into a local language, or taking the lead in arranging co-publication by communities, government bodies, and commercial booksellers. Among the factors conducive to promoting translation and adaptation are the interest and involvement of national and state authorities at all stages. As a part of the promotional package, printers can be supplied with film positives, negatives or offset plates; this greatly facilitates local printing of the text, and can be used to encourage community participation.

The target audience

In pre-testing the literacy of the target groups of schoolchildren, we found that those in urban schools had no difficulty in reading the most sophisticated comic books, while those in rural schools often had to decipher the medium for the first time and were unable to construe the visual shorthand used (extreme close-ups, noise-words, thought bubbles, speech bubbles, etc.) in any but the most basic comic books. A comic book aimed at a seven-year-old in a rural school would thus probably be too simplistic to hold the attention of an urban seven-year-old.

It was decided to aim at children aged 10–15 years and even young adults in rural areas, with the intention that the product should also be interesting to younger children in urban schools.
Design

Visual literacy and the use of colour

Most people remember what they see longer than what they hear. However, in some cultures and in rural societies where there may be little familiarity with printed media, visual literacy (the ability to interpret images) cannot be taken for granted, particularly among those whose reading literacy is weak. Colour can be an irritant, rather than an embellishment, and may even be intimidating.

Studies in northern India among different socioeconomic groups have shown that simple line drawings are generally only slightly inferior to photographs as regards recognition and preference. When cost factors and reproducibility are taken into consideration, the line drawing as used in simple comic books emerged as the best type of illustration for such grass-roots texts.

Weighing the needs of different sectors of the target audience, it was decided that the comic book would be illustrated and printed in four colours, but that the illustrations would be intelligible in black and white as well. In this way it would be possible to reprint the text in colour where colour presses were available, and in black and white elsewhere (e.g., at community level on simple local printing equipment).

Texts aimed at the grass roots tend to rely heavily on illustrations to convey meaning.

Comic books may have:
— a slab of text beneath each panel, the panels illustrating some of the actions described in the text;
— no descriptive text under the panels, information being conveyed by means of illustrations and speech bubbles;
— both text under the panels and some speech bubbles.

In our survey, somewhat contrary to expectations, we found that schoolchildren in rural areas preferred the first type.

Length

Accepting the conventional wisdom that publications intended for use among weakly literate people should be short and simple, we decided that our comic book would have four 8-page stories, rather than one 32-page story. The stories were complete in themselves and suitable for separate production by other publishers as black-and-white booklets for rural schools, while the four-colour, 32-page comic book containing all four stories was intended for urban schools. General information on immunization was placed on the inside cover, which was designed in such a way that it could serve equally well in colour for the 32-page comic book and in black and white for the 8-page booklets.

Size and materials

The dimensions of a book can affect its acceptability to the target audience. Our preliminary survey indicated that the standard large format of 178 x 241 mm (7 x 9½ inches) was intimidating to impoverished rural people. We therefore chose the small sheet size normally used locally, measuring 159 x 203 mm (6½ x 8 inches). The cheapest quality of
paper was quite adequate. This was particularly important, since paper accounted for about half the cost of a job exceeding 20,000 copies.

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As yet, relatively few publications have been aimed at lower-level health workers and the general public. A recent survey, carried out by the author, found that, among the World Health Organization's 1300 or so titles, only 11 were suitable for primary health workers and that a further 5 were suitable for teachers of primary health workers. Much more support is undoubtedly needed for primary health publications.

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References


Controlling malaria

The experience of the past indicates that what is needed in order to improve malaria control, even more than the development of new and improved technology, is a better understanding of where and how to apply the general knowledge already available.