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# Participatory Agricultural Extension from the Prospective of Audience-centered Communication Theory

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**Abstract** Transformation process to Audience-centered Communication Theory is introduced, as well as the basic idea of the theory in China. It is believed that using Audience-centered Communication theory can help to consolidate the theoretical basis of participatory agricultural extension. The communication essence of agricultural extension activity is studied, which is spreaders send information to farmers; then, farmers filter and process the information, transform it into their own experiences and feed back on time. Internal logical relationship between audience-centered communication and participatory agricultural extension is studied. Effects of Audience-centered Communication Theory on participatory agricultural extension are analyzed. One is that the Audience-centered Communication Theory defines the guidance and implementation basis of agricultural extension activities; the other is that bringing Audience-centered Communication Theory into agricultural extension research can help to expend the agricultural extension. Several enlightenments of the theory to participatory agricultural extension are obtained. Firstly, take audience as the orientation and focus on the needs of the audience. Secondly, advocate the participatory approach of process; and emphasize the importance of internal audience participation. Thirdly, establish two-way interaction mechanism; and make the promoters understand the implementation and performance status on time. Fourthly, develop vernacular knowledge; and better integrate the innovation and practice.

**Key words** Audience-centered, Participatory, Agricultural extension, Communication, China

## 1 The origin of audience-centered communication theory

Traditional audience theory mainly focuses on the strong power of the media, under which the audience acts only as the passive recipient or undertaker in communication activities, thus forming the voluntarism totally ignorant of the audience's initiative-Hypodermic Needle Model, which implies that the message sent by mass media has a direct, immediate and powerful effect on their audiences just like the pharmacy injected into the body does. According to this communicator-centered theory, the audience becomes the "thing" manipulated by the intended message under the "Stimulus-Response" mechanism, the heterogeneity among the audiences and the interaction among the main bodies are completely ignored. In 1964, in his *The Obstinate Audience*, R. A. Bauer broke the traditional communicator-centered theory and started to transfer to the audience-centered communication theory, he pointed out that the problem of the past is "what media does to people" but current problem is "what people do with media"<sup>[1]</sup>. The propose of audience-centered communication theory is essentially a humanistic return of the communication concept, it assumes that the audience takes an active role in the communication but the media acts only as a transmission medium. Thereafter,

Katz's "Uses and Gratifications Theory" and Wilbur's "Buffet theory" are all further development of audience-centered communication theory, their cores still focus on the interaction between the audiences and media and emphasize the audience's own subjectivity and initiative.

Originating from Marxist Views of Journalism, the audience-centered communication theory in China was firstly proposed by Chen Chongshan in the Second National Symposium on Audience Research in 1992. Chen Chongshan holds that mass media should aim to meet and satisfy the needs of the audience, protect their interests and regard them as the subject of rights. Later scholars shift the research focus from external behavior of the audiences' access to information to their inner world and clearly demonstrate that the information industry views human's information needs as its starting point and destination. In China, Taiwan scholars call the audience "reader and listener", while mainland scholars translate it into "recipient", usually referring to the receptor during a linear communication process. "Center" means the most primitive starting point and focus of human thought and behavior. "Audience-centered" means that in information dissemination process, the mass media should take the maximum maintenance of the audiences' interests as the starting point, the satisfaction of audiences' needs for various information as obligations and the improvement of audiences' ideological, political, moral, and scientific and cultural qualities as purpose, serving the audiences wholeheartedly<sup>[2]</sup>. It aims to explicit the audiences' status and role in the communication activities and create a harmonious relations between the media and audiences.

At present, the audience-centered communication theory

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is regarded by a number of extension researchers as the theoretical basis of participatory agricultural extension. As an innovational diffusion form of modern agricultural extension, it has transitioned from traditional "seeing things but not people" extension pattern to "seeing people by things" participatory pattern so as to theoretically reach the same goal with audience-centered communication theory. To analyze agricultural extension by audience-centered communication theory not only helps to consolidate the theoretical basis of participatory agricultural extension, but also strongly proves that peasants are no longer passive recipients of the innovation. The audience-centered communication theory is logical necessity of agricultural extension and development.

## 2 The communication essence of agricultural extension

Lots of scholars consider traditional agricultural extension as a kind of technological diffusion and modern agricultural extension as a kind of dissemination activity. In fact, with the development of modern agricultural extension and introduction of the audience-centered communication theory, agricultural extension itself is more characterized by communication activities. The essence of communication is to reach consensus with others. The author holds that communication is a bilateral process which affects the behaviors; the intended information is coded and transmitted to recipients through certain channels in order to arouse their specific responses and behaviors. The main part in communication is not fixed, it may be the communicator at one time and recipient at another. Dissemination is one-way proliferation, promotion and diffusion of information with the one-way persuasion as the target; while communication refers to the interaction, exchange and connection of information, it is a process of full information sharing, promoting the two-way interaction between the sender and the recipient.

In the process of agricultural extension, the extension workers deliver technology, information or services to farmers through the information carrier by communication and other means and methods so as to enhance the farmers' knowledge, improve their skills, change their beliefs and attitudes so that they can consciously change their behavior. This extension process is essentially a communication activity. The promoters transmit the information to the farmers who filter and process the information immediately after they receive it and transform it into their own wisdom, experience and understanding and then make corresponding feedback. One part of the feedback information will be returned back to the promoters for references and assessments, the other part will be transmitted to other farmers so as to achieve the comprehensive innovational diffusion. Different from traditional understanding, the communication process in extension has no isolated communication chain and fixed "first drive", the communicator and audiences are in equal and interactive relationship; the whole process of communication is based on freedom, equality, openness and autonomy, the promoters and farmers can communicate harmoniously and equally; the purpose of communication is to stimulate

the farmers' own potential and creativity through the nurture of agricultural extension content so that the farmers can become free and conscious men with comprehensive development who are able to master their own destiny, in other words, to sublimate from simple technological transfer to people's own capacity-building. Therefore, from the perspective of the audience-centered communication theory, the purpose of agricultural extension is expanded to take peasants as the core, help them with their self-development, respect their rights to participate and choose, and promote the coordinated development between male and female farmers and between man and nature<sup>[3]</sup>.

From the development trend of agricultural extension, the academic title of extension has gradually been replaced by "Communication and Innovation Studies". The communication essence of agricultural extension has become increasingly prominent, its core of content has changed from technology to farmers, and people are the ultimate goal of extension. Gradually breaking the shackles of traditional thoughts, scholars reexamine the natural, social and thought attributes of agricultural extension and study agricultural extension as a communication activity so as to provide a feasible way to optimize current agricultural extension by using audience-centered communication theory.

## 3 Audience-centered communication and participatory agricultural extension

According to the research, no matter which agricultural extension method is used, the extension performance has significant positive correlation with the participation of extension objects<sup>[4]</sup>. The higher the farmers' participation level, the greater the extension's influence and the stronger the farmers' tendency to change their behavior under the intervention of development. In order to improve the efficiency of the farmers' acceptance of information and technology and form a good interaction between promoters and farmers, the method and theory of participatory agricultural extension emerged as required. Participatory agricultural extension fully emphasizes the importance of the extension objects as the project subjects and the improvement of the objects' capabilities during the whole process of the options, plan and implementation of agricultural extension. Thus the audiences have become the initial location of the extension projects' goal setting as well as the logical starting point and final destination of all agricultural extension activities. The participatory agricultural extension under the guidance of audience-centered communication theory not only achieves the optimization of innovational diffusion efficiency simply through the farmers' participation, but also stresses all-around exchange and communication between the promoters and extension objects and establishes a harmonious partnership between them to further enrich the connotation of "participation", that is, to build the awareness of mutual trust, establish the demand orientation, respect vernacular knowledge, attach importance to project process and so on.

The influence of audience-centered communication theory on the participatory agricultural extension can be seen from two

points. On the one hand, audience-centered communication theory makes clear that the agricultural extension activities should follow the orientation of farmer's demand and take the demand as the basis of technological research and development, agricultural extension and farmers' training. "Participation" no longer limits to simple intervention of human, but stresses the formation of a system with smooth flow of information, in which the farmers' demand can get immediate feedback, the promoters conduct intervention according to the feedback information, and the farmers are elevated from the low-level "participants" to active subjects and social resource collection; on the other hand, to study agricultural extension from the perspective of audience-centered communication theory shows that, agricultural extension is a kind of rural education and consulting services with farmers as the core instead of a pure government behavior, meanwhile the providers of education and services should be diversified, the content should be extended to the science, technology, management, marketing, finance, housekeeping, law, society and other fields according to farmers' demands and the development of modern agriculture rather than be limited to general guidance on production technology and management knowledge. From the practice of agricultural extension in China, as early as in 1920s in the circuit training school, Dingxian County and other agricultural extension practices carried out by Yan Yangchu, a similar audience-centered humanistic thought had already taken its shape; in 1980s the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) implemented in China laid the foundation to later introduce the concept of audience into agricultural extension practice.

## 4 The enlightenment of audience-centered communication theory on perfecting participatory agricultural extension

**4.1 Taking the audience as orientation** From the perspective of audience-centered communication theory, the essence of agricultural extension is to coordinate the relationship between extension activities and farmers' attribute with the audiences as the starting point and standpoint. Different from traditional government-led agricultural extension, participatory agricultural extension more emphasizes on the audience and pays attention to their demand. The audience here refers specifically to the communication objects in agricultural extension, that is, the rural audience. The so-called rural audiences are the people who live in rural areas in urban-rural dual structure and receive information in communication activity, they are regarded as the beneficiaries, extension subjects or trainees in the agricultural extension chain. Rural audiences are usually the vulnerable group in communication field, they are not competitive compared to urban audience in the enjoyment and use of resources, the possession quantity of the information reception tools, the time to enjoy the media and the capacity to receive information and express themselves, as a result, the farmers should be firstly entrusted with powers to make up their capacity weakness and lack of natural endowments<sup>[2]</sup>. As traditional participatory agricultural extension did not take into account the

relationship between audience level and the whole, the extension activities carried out have small scale, low efficiency and cover limited quantity of audiences, the so-called "participatory", at most time, aims to draw the audience indiscriminately into the extension activities, it's no more than a formal "participation". The "participatory" promoted by audience-centered communication theory, however, is a full empowerment to current audiences and potential audiences, it fully takes into account the diversity and complexity of the audiences while setting the scope of extension objects so as to eliminate the potential gap and conflict among the audiences.

During the participatory agricultural extension, the promoters should stratify the extension objects and pick out valid audiences. The communication scientist Klaus divided the audiences into three levels according to their scale: the first level is the total population in the community who have access to extension information; the second level refers to the people who maintains regular contact with specific information; the third level includes those who not only come into contact with extension content, but also actually accept the influence brought by extension activities both in their attitude and behavior<sup>[5]</sup>. For an extension worker, the people in the third level belong to the valid audiences. As extension is a communication activity from point radiating to the whole, the promoters, in addition to accurate location of valid audiences, should also activate the participatory potentiality of the potential audiences, enlarge the audiences as many as possible and then adopt corresponding extension strategies. They should also pay attention to the farmers with low degree of social relevance at the lower ends of the extension system, such as the illiterate who are the single-type rural audiences, and seek to extend extension services to the blind spots in rural communication. Only then can agricultural extension effectively prevent polarization and benefit the peasants.

**4.2 Advocating the participatory approach of process** The "participation" from the perspective of audience-centered communication theory is the integration between the audiences' external participation and internal participation, "participation" aims to bridge the gap between the values of communicators and audiences. In traditional agricultural extension, the collection, filtering, processing, production and publishing of information are all decided by the promoters, which deprives the audiences of their autonomy to choose and places them in a status of passive acceptance. Traditional participatory agricultural extension hopes to build a two-way communication mechanism on the basis of previous extension system and achieve the "participatory" extension by entrusting the rural audiences with the participation rights. But it is impossible to achieve the demand-driven agricultural extension only by entrusting the audiences with the participation rights, because even though the farmers are involved in it, the passive, policy-oriented participation could not really meet the practical demands of the farmers and even could not fully develop abundant human resources in rural areas. The "participatory" agricultural extension referred to that audience-centered communication theory enables

the farmers recognize their demands for technology, information and services through their participation in agricultural extension activities and make them realize the important and unique role agricultural extension plays in their life and development so as to continuously deepen their awareness and understanding of agricultural extension, strengthen the values of extension and form a positive initiative to participate in the extension activities. The audience-centered communication theory holds that the participation of audiences can be divided into passive participation and active participation, among which the active participation is the audiences' conscious action and reflects their democratic spirit. Thus, the farmers' involvement in extension activities should be an active participation; it is the inner impulses and autonomous behavior of the subjects.

In the agricultural extension activities, the promoters should try to establish a platform on which the peasants could participate in the discussion of public affairs and express their views, to stimulate the communication motives of rural audiences, to summarize production experiences and discuss production problems with the farmers, to prompt them to have the will to adopt new technology and take appropriate extension measures according to their demands. Moreover, audience-centered communication theory holds that audiences' involvement in communication activities through external behaviors is called external participation and their active seeking, selection and assimilation of information through the way of judging knowledge belong to internal participation, but the "participation" promoted by agricultural extension should emphasize more on internal participation. As internal participation has significant relationship with the modernity of audiences' thoughts, the promoters should change the farmers' external participation to internal participation through rural dissemination and education, and improve the audiences' internal participation.

**4.3 Establishing two-way interaction mechanism** Audience-centered communication theory emphasizes two-way interaction in communication activities and holds that extension activity should be a feedback-oriented two-way communication instead of one-way innovational diffusion. Traditional participatory agricultural extension generally only emphasizes the importance of farmers' demands and pays more attention to the surveys on target group and collection of secondary material before extension activity, but often neglects the feedback and system evaluation after the activity. Audience-centered communication theory considers that the value of communication activities for the audiences and the audiences' behaviors in communication activities can be known from their feedback<sup>[6]</sup>.

Agricultural extension itself is a two-way interactive process, the promoters should promptly grasp the farmers' feedback about extension activities and then conduct phasic systematic evaluation so as to understand the implementation and performance of extension activities. For example, it is after knowing how much the farmers can accept the new technology and what their attitude towards the adoption of new technology that the research and development department of agriculture can further develop the new technology according to the

farmers' feedbacks; it is after knowing the effects and problems of agricultural extension training through assessment that the trainers can make adjustments and design on the curriculum and strategy. In fact, the participatory agricultural extension should be established on a communication channel through which the information up and down can exchange smoothly and the information can not be distorted because of the intervention of the audiences' selective psychology, it can promptly transmit the farmers' real demands and feelings to the promoters so that the promoters can deeply understand public feelings, fully reflect public opinions and widely pool public wisdoms. Moreover, apart from getting timely feedback through communication mechanism, the promoters could also find lots of hardly visible practical problems by using assessment system. They should build a comprehensive assessment methods and index system, then carry them out in phases in different periods of agricultural extension activities and conduct respective assessment of the training demand, plan, implementation and effect so that the promoters can have a comprehensive knowledge of extension dynamics and make prompt feedback according to the problems.

**4.4 Developing vernacular knowledge** Audience-centered communication theory emphasizes the importance of the farmers' vernacular knowledge; agricultural extension should complement and cooperate with farmers' prior old knowledge and experience. Traditional participatory agricultural extension pays more attention to the extension efficiency of technology and information, it holds that external intervener has natural advantages in both knowledge and technology, the farmers' traditional knowledge and thought are "outdated" and "backward" and the knowledge should be transmitted by extension workers. But audience-centered communication theory deems that extension is not only an external intervention process, but also an interactive reversed learning process. Although audiences have the tendency to accept the strongly inherent concept, they do have an acceptable range, as long as the extended technology and information are included by the audiences into this range, the audiences not only do not resist, but sometimes even actively approach and absorb them.

The extension workers should lay emphasis on the knowledge and experiences the farmers obtained from production practices and seek the meeting point of expert knowledge and vernacular knowledge so as to promote the complementarities and cooperation among different sources of knowledge and enable better integration of innovation and practice. Through the extension workers' absorption and recognition of vernacular knowledge, the innovation knowledge and vernacular knowledge could be combined together and internalized into the farmers' own knowledge scheme and transformed into meaningful experiences to guide their production activities at any time. By regarding the farmers' vernacular knowledge as the medium of knowledge transformation, innovation can breakdown the farmers' traditional mental set with the help of existing psychological mechanism so as to enable the farmers to conduct effective adoption and innovation in the effective range.

(To page 37)

and reinforce base construction of non-pollution agricultural products, green food and organic food; it also should strengthen rural greening, improve rural resident's life level in order to raise the green agricultural development level fundamentally in southern Jiangsu. Because the technological and economic strength of central Jiangsu is at the medium level, and there are restricted factors including economic factor and ecological factor in the green agricultural construction, so central Jiangsu should pay attention to the development of economic construction and ecological construction in tandem. We should propel agricultural industrialization development, and improve agricultural production scale and technology level; according to land condition in central Jiangsu, we should crystallize the direction of land use, adopt advanced technology and promote land use rate; we should increase the investment of afforestation in consideration of the problem of low forest coverage rate, poor ecological protection ability, and serious natural disaster. Northern Jiangsu's ecological environment is good, but the economic technological foundation is shaky. Hence, Northern Jiangsu's green agricultural development should give priority to economic development. Firstly, it should promote use rate of agricultural resources, adjust agricultural industry structure reasonably, extend initial agricultural products processing chain, and increase the added value; it should strengthen the investment of urban pollution governance, protect the rural environment, intensify the rural environmental protection awareness, improve farmers' quality through technology training, reduce the environmental vandalism during agricultural production, enhance sustainable development of green agriculture, and construct harmonious green new village.

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(From page 30)

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