The Strategic Role of Communication in a Global Disease Eradication Programme

POLIO COMMUNICATION
A Decade of Change in India: 2003 to 2013

UNICEF & The Ministry of Health, Government of India

The Polio Programme: Brief History

Pulse Polio Immunization in India has been an active programme of the Ministry of Health and associated partners including UNICEF, WHO, CDC and Rotary International since 1995. Although India reached near eradication in 2000, the goal of polio eradication was jeopardised in 2002 as India suffered the largest outbreak in recent history with 1600 cases reported that year, a five-fold increase over 2001. The epidemic spread into states, which had been previously considered polio-free.

With concerted efforts forming the largest public health initiative in the world, the number of new cases decreased rapidly over the following three years. By 2005 India was immunizing 170 million children with OPV (Oral Poliomyelitis Vaccine) during National Immunisation Days at least twice a year and about 100 million children multiple times during Sub-National Immunisation Days in high risk areas.

This meant a massive field army of health service providers to immunise every single child in the whole of India. Not just once, but several times a year reaching remote regions and untouched populations. The end of 2005 saw India achieve the lowest number of reported cases, just 66, less than half the number of cases reported in the previous year.

But near eradication was not good enough. With great expectations of being on verge of realistically ending polio transmission, the year 2006 brought a fresh outbreak, once again threatening the eradication programme in the country. Such was the highs and lows on the path to eradication.

_The Polio drive demanded the participation of hundred thousands of field workers, health professionals, volunteers to immunise all children under 5 in the country on a specific date so as to break the transmission. This meant that every child had to be immunised on the same day._
Thompson Social’s Involvement with the Issue

Thompson Social’s relationship with Polio began in 2003. The success of our campaign based on the deep understanding of the issues, the community and the environment, led to our involvement in subsequent campaigns to reflect not just our ability to conceptualise effective campaigns but also our committed role as important partners in the eradication process.

From the time we addressed deep seated barriers at the ground level in 2003, to the time it was a part of the six deadly vaccine preventable diseases of the National Routine Immunisation Programme, till the time of eradication. We’re almost there. This document traces the path we travelled in devising appropriate strategies and creatives to respond to the changing situations prevailing in the Polio drive.

*Thompson Social is the specialist centre for development communication at JWT India.*
The Scenario at the Time

In the early part of the decade, the Polio programme was threatened by resistance. Minority groups, primarily the Muslim population in the heart of Uttar Pradesh (India’s most populous state) were swayed by prevailing myths and misconceptions leading them to believe it was part of the Government’s strategy to curtail the growth of the Muslim population. Fearing impotence, fuelled by insensitive media coverage, there was large scale rejection of the oral vaccine.

This was reflected in the low booth coverage ranging from 21% to 50% in 7 high risk districts where polio transmission emanated.

The primary task assigned to Thompson Social was to increase booth attendance – the location of OPV delivery – by addressing deep seated barriers and breaking resistance. The mass media component, however, remained with the incumbent communication agency.

The Outreach Communication Plan

Recognising that the reasons behind resistance required aggressive persuasion, an intense outreach activity was planned to connect with communities at the ground level.

Groups of religious leaders, men and women from the Muslim community as well as the Hindu population so as to not reflect any religious bias, were roped into community discussions with flipcharts, followed by participation at children’s rallies.
Persuasion through Strategic Content

Communities were invited to a Muppet Show comprising:

- An engaging story format mimicking popular Hindi cinema
- Key characters including a religious leader – a powerful figure of influence – a local Muslim father, an elderly woman upholding traditional practices and belief in rumours, and a doctor to convey the medical aspects of immunisation
- Critical messages to dispel myths and misconceptions

The Result

- The pilot activity was conducted in February 2003 utilising 55 vans and 461 dedicated field personnel in over 3000 villages in 7 high risk districts.
- In just 11 days of activity, booth attendance increased by an average of 15% from the previous round held in November 2002.
- Based on the success of motivating insofar resistant public, the outreach programme was extended and conducted several times during the year.
- By the end of the year, overall number of Polio cases had dropped to a mere 225, and further dropped to 134 revealing a success in breaking resistance.
The Prevailing Situation

While many countries were successful in eradicating Polio over the years, India was one of the last few endemic nations where polio still remained a threat to millions of vulnerable children under 5 years of age.

However, 10 years of intensive efforts to eradicate polio, making this the largest public health intervention in the world, had resulted in 98% compliance amongst the population, a huge achievement, unmatched in the development sector.

Powerful, message driven communication featuring Mr. Amitabh Bachchan, the revered king of celebrities in India, was successful in establishing him as the credible and authoritative face of the polio campaign.

By the end of 2004, India had only 134 new Polio cases, the lowest ever, fuelling hope of ending Polio transmission over the next few years.

The Problem

However...

With success came the brutal reality that programme had reached a standstill. The communication intervention too had lived its life at a critical point in the eradication drive. We were close but not quite there.

Years of continuous activity, and immunisation rounds occurring as many as 8 times in a year, required the public to keep immunising without visible results, while simultaneously placing an enormous burden on the health system...

... leading to fatigue amongst both compliers as well as service providers.

With this background, the mass media communication contract for Polio shifted to Thompson Social in early 2005.

Task for Communication

Research revealed that a strategic shift and intensified spread was required to bring polio to an end. Therefore the task was to,

- Fight fatigue amongst both, the beneficiaries as well as the service providers, to sustain compliance and prevent fallout
- Refresh communication to aid message retention and counter the blind spot that was beginning to develop through the previous communication campaigns
- Build on the power of Mr. Bachchan’s credibility and authority to instill in the audiences to keep the faith.

The Target Audience: Primary

They are married couples with children below five years of age and their families
They belong to the lower socio-economic classes and urban slums and rural communities.
Unhygienic living conditions, poor health, low levels of literacy and ignorance combine to make them the most vulnerable.

The Target Audience: Secondary

Being dependent on a delivery system for the vaccine service providers and community leaders played an important role.
- **Service Providers** including health workers, social mobilisers, vaccinators, who motivate communities and are responsible for delivering OPV
- **Community Influencers** such as religious leaders, teachers, administrative heads, who are crucial to maintain the high levels of compliance.

The Strategic Shift

The strategy demanded a visible change from Mr Bachchan’s role as the superior who talked to communities from his pedestal.
- Mr. Bachchan, the authoritative face of the campaign, was brought from the distance of the studio into the heart of the community, right up to doorstep, creating a direct bond between him and the recipients. The intended message: I am ready to come to your door, so why shouldn’t you come to the booth?
The role of the community influencers as key mobilisers of the polio drive was vivified and acknowledged.
The public’s positive inclination towards immunisation was demonstrated through the beginnings of a ‘movement’.
Children were brought in as the ‘prime movers’ to the mission.

Communication Strategy

- Most importantly, the criticality of continued compliance was reinforced.
- This was done by shifting the focus. The pillar of the previous campaigns was ‘Do Boond Zindagi ki’ or 2 drops of life – often misunderstood as one time immunisation. A contradiction to the need for repeated immunisation.
- The new pivot became ‘Har Bachcha, Har Baar’ - Every Child, Every Time, to convey that all children need to be immunised every time, without which no child is protected against polio.
- The tone and manner was changed to one of ‘unified optimism’ from the previously depicted ‘authoritative dictatorship’ of Mr. Bachchan.

FiLM 1: Knock Knock

This film reveals Mr. Bachchan in the heart of the community directly connecting with the people he supports in the polio drive. He is accompanied by a community mobiliser (the vaccinator in the version especially for Bihar where most immunisation is done at home) knocking on the door of a house, pleading with the residents to come out and take their children for immunisation. With persistent knocking on the door, Mr. Bachchan declares that they will continue knocking on every door till every child under 5, even newborns, is immunised on each and every Immunisation Day. Because, even if one child is left out, polio cannot be eradicated.

Finally, the door opens to reveal a lady coming out of her house carrying a baby.

Surprised on seeing Mr. Bachchan himself, she tells him that she was anyway leaving for the polio booth but she was just getting her slippers! She proceeds and we see her leading a group of women carrying their young ones, to the polio booth.

The film ends with Mr. Bachchan’s reminder, ‘Har Bachcha, Har Baar’

Every Child, Every Time.
FILM 2: Knock Knock Musical

This musical film shows children as the prime movers of the mission to eradicate polio.

It opens with Mr. Bachchan knocking on the door of a house. Children, from all over the country are seen knocking on the doors of homes urging everyone to come out and take their children for immunisation.

The popular melody borrowed from cinema and energizing lyrics of the song sung by children persuade people from various corners of the country to come out and join the movement to eradicate polio. In the absence of Mr Bachchan (he was unavailable for the shoot), a child wearing a mask of Mr Bachchan, using stilts and trying to speak in his manner, reminds people of the necessity to administer polio drops to all children of the country who are under 5 years of age ending with ‘Har Bachcha, Har Baar’

Every Child, Every Time

With just 66 cases at the end of 2005, less than half the number of cases reported in the previous years, India had achieved the lowest number of reported cases.

A moment of celebration.

A little Battle was won...

... but the War was not.
**By the end of 2006, Polio had come back**

...with a vengeance.

Slippages in the immunisation coverage and high dropout rates led to missed doses, particularly in Western UP, the hotbed of polio transmission, resulting in a sudden outbreak of new polio cases.

The previously compliant public had begun to lose sight of the benefits of immunisation and the implementation reduced in intensity, therefore they were merely complying to fulfill what they perceived to be government health requirement.

**Revised Task for Communication**

The sudden change in the situation demanded a more aggressive approach to awaken the public, both communities as well as service providers.

Therefore,

- Break the apathy which was setting in by heightening the seriousness of the issue – polio affects mobility, for life!
- Reinforce the benefit of the immunisation – prevention
- Reinforce the criticality of ‘Har Bachcha, Har Baar’ – repeated immunisation for every child
- Leverage Mr. Bachchan’s unique power to reflect the current situation and persuade

**Shift in Strategy**

Accounting for the change in ground realities, the communication strategy focused on:

- Bringing Mr. Bachchan from the door step to the **Moment of Truth** - the Polio Booth, the most distinct and recognisable feature of the polio campaign, where attendance had been falling. He was repositioned in the role of the ‘gatekeeper’.
- The change in Mr. Bachchan’s tone - anger, helplessness and resignation reflective of his disappointment at being let down by the very people he faithfully guided and supported.
- The consequences of missed doses and the harsh reminder that **Polio does not give any child a second chance**, thus the criticality of continued immunisation.
**FILM 1: Table Overturned**

This film brings Mr. Bachchan directly to the polio booth.

His tone has changed to anger and disappointment. He overturns the table at the polio booth in anger, startling the volunteers, because of seeing a poor turn out at the booth. He exclaims that they might as well stop immunisation because people are not bothered any more. But it is the innocent children who will continue to suffer because of their parent’s indifference.

Mr. Bachchan says that despite the government’s efforts polio is returning with a vengeance because people are not immunising every time. He pleads with folded hands to ensure that every child under 5 years takes every dose of polio drops ending with the reminder ‘Har Bachcha, Har Baar’.

**Every child, every time.**

![Images of the film](image1)

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**FILM 2: Boy on Crutches**

This film introduces Raja, a polio afflicted boy, to remind communities of the compelling reason to act and shake them out of their apathy.

Mr. Bachchan is seen sitting in a polio booth when he begins to talk about Raja, who is seen helping the volunteers at the booth. He says that Raja is assisting at the polio booth to ensure that what happened to him does not happen to any other child. He wonders as to the number of children who suffer the same fate as Raja just because their parents did not care enough to take them for immunisation on every immunisation day.

Mr Bachchan reminds them with ‘Har Bachcha, Har Baar’

**Every Child, Every Time**

He ends with a question to parents: why can’t parents walk just two steps for their children?

*For the first time, in recent years, a polio afflicted boy was shown to remind communities of the compelling reason to act and shake them out of their apathy.*
What Happened Next

- Polio cases fell from 874 in 2007 to 559 in 2008.
- But the number of cases again rose to 741 in 2009.
- Most of the cases, over 97% [719 out of 741 in 2009; 538 out of 559 in 2008] were in UP and Bihar – the two states that remained the hotbed of polio transmission, not just a continuous threat to India, but the entire South Asian region as well.
- While the numbers may appear small, in a country with about 175 million children under 5, it is pertinent to appreciate that every new polio case presented the risk of transmission to the weakest, least immunized.
Identifying the Problem for Communication

After the outbreak of polio in 2006 and 2007, by 2010, with programme partners and key decision makers believed that India was entering ‘the final inch’ of the polio programme. The majority of the population at risk, especially in hotbeds of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, were in favour of polio immunization. According to the KAP Study in 2008

- 86% of mothers & fathers in UP felt polio could be eradicated forever
- 98% in UP & Bihar think every child should receive OPV

However, the continued pressure of repeated doses and numerous immunisation rounds was inevitably leading to greater fatigue and the perennial question:

“Why more doses?”, “How much longer?”

Source: Qualitative SMNet Field Monitoring Data

At the same time, with successful implementation of immunisation rounds there were fewer cases of polio visible leading to low threat perception amongst the population at risk. Further, the recent KAP study revealed that communities believed that

- Polio affects people in India, and the community but only 11% believed it could happen in their own household; and secondly that
- Over 50% caregivers believed polio can be cured

Therefore, communities continued to immunize but saw no urgency in it. At least not enough to ensure ‘every time’ at every round. There was more passive acceptance of the vaccine rather that actively seeking OPV.

Task for Communication

- Ensure all care-givers of children under 5 remain favourably inclined towards polio immunisation to maintain 98% coverage in each round
- Address key barriers:
  - Fatigue & the big question “how much longer?”
  - Missed doses, skipping immunisation rounds
  - Low threat perception of polio
- Retain positive tone of the current campaign
The geographic focus would be:

- High Risk Areas: Uttar Pradesh & Bihar, which continued to be the hotbed of transmission
- 107 endemic blocks in UP & Bihar (where supporting care practices would also be promoted)
- Special focus mobile & migrant communities

**Communication Solution**

The communication strategy was built on 3 strategic tenets

- Recognising the favourable disposition to immunisation, communication sought to reinforce the benefits of polio immunisation as a reminder of the reason they adopted the practice in the first place. That is, **protection against a life crippling disease**.
- As low threat perception was seen as responsible for passive acceptance of OPV at best, the question was, what would drive motivation? It was time to bring the issue closer to home. The strategy shifted from ‘overall national eradication’ – signified through “every child, every time” to personal protection – “my child, every time” so that **protection every time becomes a personal responsibility for the family, a commitment till the child reaches 5**.
- Familiarity with a long running campaign translated into assumed knowledge leading to a wallpaper effect of the communication. Hence **communication was refreshed with a new look to attract attention and be noticed**.

**The Proposition**

Given these 3 tenets, we understood that at the very basic level communities seek protection. And they assume they are doing what they need to do.

*BUT they don’t realise that they can only protect their child if they follow the regime.*

Therefore, there was a need to

- **Re-define** protection, and
- **Define** the regime: **no missed doses** till the child is 5

If doses are missed, protection is incomplete.

Thus the proposition: encapsulates the action, the personal deadline, the promise, the personal reward and the impact of polio as a clear threat as a compelling reason to act:

**Two drops every time till the age of 5 ensures complete protection for your child against life crippling polio.**

**New Look Logo with Key Elements for Consistency**

Protection from Polio
Two Drops for My Child, Every Time
The Creative Idea

The creative idea is based on the understanding that the things you do for your kids are symbol of your love for them...

You always give your complete love to them...
You never leave things half done or incomplete when it comes to them...
Your complete love is the complete protection for them

2 drops every time...
Signifies your complete love for your child

Theme Communication

Mr Amitabh Bachchan continued to be the faithful ambassador for Polio Immunisation – to persuade communities to immunise at every round.

Three films were developed:

- The first, the launch film carried the theme message – your love for your child is complete when you give OPV at every round.
- The second film highlights the consequences of missed doses implying that when immunity is lower is when polio attacks.
- And the third film was created for emergency situations where a young man, now a community mobiliser, tells the story of how he was affected by polio..

Launch Film: Incomplete Love, Incomplete Protection

The film plays on the fact that parents do not give incomplete love to their children. Whether it is washing one foot and not the other, or protecting them from rain with an umbrella which doesn’t have the cloth cover or giving them half-cooked food - nothing is ever half-done for their children.

Then why do they give incomplete protection from polio? If a child does not get immunised at every round their protection against polio is incomplete. Without complete protection they may get polio and may not be able to walk again.
Film Highlighting the Consequences of Missed Doses to address the belief that Polio is unlikely to affect my child.

The film focuses on the consequences of missed doses.

The film shows how a mother secures the latch on the window every night before the family retires for the night. But when she misses it just once on a stormy night, rain and wind destroys their house and frightens the child.

Therefore the film urges parents not to miss even a single round of polio immunisation for their child, because if they do not give polio drops every time it is offered, protection is incomplete and chances are that their child may get polio and may never walk again.

Film to highlight the impact of Polio, to be used in emergency situations.

The focus of the film is the incurable nature of polio.

The film is a testimony to Amit Kumar – a young man now who has polio and has fought all odds to become a polio vaccinator in Bihar to prevent other children from getting the incurable disease.

He says that polio is irreversible - unlike a cough and cold which can be cured by home-made remedies, bruises or cuts which can be treated by an ointment or a fever for which the doctor gives medicine. But if a child gets polio then all the efforts by the parents and doctors cannot reverse it.
Communication Support for Ground Level Interventions

A range of communication material was developed to

- Extend the communication theme of ‘complete protection for my child’
- Polio Immunisation round date reminders
- Communication aimed at migrant population who were on the move and thus likely to miss rounds
- Inter-personal communication through flip books to persuade communities to keep immunising till their child is 5.
- Collaterals such as T-shirts, caps, umbrellas for the field staff and service providers to generate greater visibility on immunisation days.

Theme Communication

Inter Personal Communication

Flip Book to persuade communities to continue immunisation to protect their child from polio. It further communicated the importance of following additional care practices to improve immunity and which enables OPV to work better.
Some Collaterals
Streamers, caps, umbrellas, bags... were some of the collaterals of the campaign

Results

By the end of 2010, there were just 42 cases, with just 2 in the last quarter – the lowest ever.

The last case of wild polio virus type 1 – the most threatening virus – was reported on 13th January 2011.

The last case recorded in Uttar Pradesh – deep in the Polio hotbed - was in April 2010, and that too the less threatening P3 virus.

- UP had been free of the P1 endemic since November 2009.
- The one case recorded in West Bengal was the only case for the entire year of 2011.

It has now been three years since a new case has been recorded.
Free of new polio cases for three complete years marks the greatest achievement in the history of the global polio programme with India so close to polio free certification.

February 2014.

“India's success is arguably its greatest public health achievement”
- Margaret Chan, Director General, WHO

"It is a matter of pride for the nation that not a single case of polio has been detected in the three years. This is one of India’s monumental and biggest milestone achieved, through a massive and sustained immunization programme,"
- Ghulam Nabi Azad, Health Minister, Government of India
Bibliography

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- Field Visit Reports
- SMNet Reports, Qualitative Studies, Tracking Reports provided by UNICEF India
- Thompson Social proprietary library, knowledge bank and experience

Campaigns presented in this document represents the work done by Thompson Social|JWT for polio immunisation under contract with UNICEF India.