

# Mobilizing Communication Globally

## *For What and For Whom?*

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Mobilizing communication globally: for what and for whom? This question<sup>2</sup> motivated this special issue of *Nordicom Review*, grounded in a concern over the future of communication for development as a field of theorization and research tightly linked to practice the world over (Wilkins 2008 and 2009; Enghel 2011).

Communication for development (Servaes 1999, 2002, 2007), also known as development communication (Wilkins 2008) and communication for social change (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte 2006), has a well-documented history. Over time, critical approaches to the field have called attention to important issues, e.g. the implicit power dynamics at play in the development industry (Wilkins 2000); the relevance of scholarship on social movements for participatory communication research (Huesca 2001); the need to address conditions of absolute poverty in communication interventions (Thomas 2002); and the shift towards technological solutions in a context of increasing inequality (Chakravartty 2009). Dialogic, participatory and democratic approaches to strategic communication have been studied for years – see e.g. Ascroft & Masilela (1994), Lie (1997), Jacobson & Servaes (1999), Huesca (2002), Shah and Wilkins (2004), Gumucio-Dagron (2009). Since the publication in 1989 of an analysis by Fair of more than 200 documented studies of media and development published between 1958 and 1986, a number of research assessments have attempted to illuminate several aspects of the field's evolution<sup>3</sup>: Fair and Shah (1997), Kim (2005), Morris (2003), Shah (2007), Ogan et al (2009).

The strengths of the field lie in those approaches concerned with power, human rights and social justice. Such contributions notwithstanding, in recent years the pressing call for 'demonstrating results' put forward by the development industry<sup>4</sup> has tended to get in the way of robust theoretical elaboration and independent empirical research. The commissioning of project evaluations more or less overtly called to demonstrate "success" may be hindering the possibility to learn from contingency and error, and thus to produce critical research that can inform conditions of increased transparency and accountability. Moreover, a lack of attention to communication's "unresolved range"<sup>5</sup> of potentials and the ways in which it can both enable and obstruct change may be limiting theoretical and methodological efforts. In addition, internal debates and differences over the direction of the field remain in tension with common efforts aimed at conveying communication for development's value to a range of audiences, including the wider academic community, decision and policy-makers, and donor publics.

Against this background, for this special issue we invited critical contributions that would address the relationship between communication, development and social change beyond so-called “success stories”. We called for papers attentive to the potential of communication and media interventions to provoke unexpected outcomes, at times harmful or unfair, and alert to the fact that “caution must be exercised in the adoption of social diagnoses based on specific, very narrowly conceived empirical constraints, and subsequent prescriptions” (Cabrera 2010: 156).

We sought approaches to development, aid, globalization, communication and media that shared a preoccupation for advancing substantive theorization, meaningful research and fairer practices. We made an effort to cover a broad span on several levels. Aware of the importance of interdisciplinarity, we invited the views of disciplines such as social anthropology (Hylland Eriksen) and international development (Richey). With the aim of promoting dialogue between academics and practitioners, we welcomed self-reflexive accounts from experienced professionals (Balit, Quarry & Ramírez, Ramafoko, Anderson & Weimer, Alfaro). To the extent possible, we included contributions focusing on Latin America (Alfaro), Asia (Thomas, Chakravartty) and Africa (da Costa, Ramafoko, Anderson & Weimer).<sup>6</sup> Because political economy considerations not always are a feature of discussions within the field of communication for development, we prioritized articles that tackled them (Richey, Chakravartty, Thomas).

In the context of increasing inequalities in both developing and developed countries (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010), for whom and for what to mobilize communication remains an open question. We propose that this question should be at the heart of future efforts to theorise and research in what ways and under which conditions communication might contribute to equitable development and social justice.

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To open the special issue, social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that a democratisation of the means of communication may be a key to a more equitable and thus less volatile world, and an important dimension of a world society. His article calls attention to recognition as a globally scarce resource, and raises the question of whether a cosmopolitan ethics, including the competence to listen across differences, might offer a way forward to make sense of the tensions inherent to the contemporary world.

International development scholar Lisa Richey in turn calls for a global approach to communication about HIV/AIDS that can overcome distinctions of nationality, language, class, race and gendered-identities and thus the stereotype of the ‘suffering stranger’. Richey argues that representations of AIDS are critical to shaping the possibilities for understanding, tackling and living with the disease, and analyzes the market logic behind two communication campaigns driven by The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and Product RED, respectively, showing their connections to the pharmaceutical industry. The promotion of online compassion through consumption documented by Richey calls attention to the ambivalent capabilities embedded in digital media.

Communication scholar Bella Mody looks into what foreign news coverage says about civil wars and underdevelopment in connection with the aid, trade, and development decisions of foreign policy-makers. Setting the global as against the local, Mody links news coverage of the Darfur crisis in 2003 to the political and economic contexts

of ten media organizations based in seven different countries, each of them with differing interests in Sudan. Her article draws attention to the continued relevance of communication about development in terms of its potential to inform audiences of the root causes of underdevelopment, thus shaping the nature of foreign aid.

News coverage is also the point of departure for development communication scholar Nora Quebral, who pioneered efforts to practice and teach the discipline in the Philippines in the 1970s. Quebral reflects on the “underside” of communication in development, drawing on a careful reading of several stories covered by the Filipino news media to point at problematic aspects of the relationship between communication and development in developing countries. She focuses on women’s unequal possibilities to make a living, to live freely and to communicate – particularly those opting for migration as an alternative to poverty.

Communication and media scholar Paula Chakravartty examines the role of the information technology industry in promoting a specific development agenda in the case of India. Chakravartty argues that the Indian case reflects neoliberal shifts in governance, with national states mimicking transnational corporations, and both transnational and national corporations investing significant sums on public relations efforts to show that they are good citizens despite their responsibility for spectacular economic disparities. Chakravartty stresses the absence of public debate about controversial development interventions and the privatization of public resources, calling for critical attention to the role of technology in driving a pro-poor/pro-market logic.

Also concerned with the course of events in India, activist scholar Pradip Thomas looks into the ambivalent role played by the state in development, with an eye to identifying instances of governmental investment in public sector software that have led to practical benefits in the common good. Thomas calls attention to the risk of informational dependency and argues that public sector software mitigates the risks associated with private sector access to public data sets. Importantly, he highlights the need for informational reforms to be complemented by other social reforms.

From the perspective of Peru, communicator and academic Rosa María Alfaro, with a long-standing and internationally acknowledged experience in leading civil society interventions towards civic participation, media accountability and ethical approaches to communication, discusses the possibility of generating equitable national development through communication initiatives. Alfaro argues for the importance of promoting dialogue between ordinary citizens, the state, media enterprises and the business sector, and raises critical questions about the role of organized civil society in that process.

Bringing into the picture multilateral organizations, Silvia Balit, a pioneer of development communication within the United Nations (UN) system and former chief of the Communication for Development program of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) at a time when participatory communication was institutionally endorsed and regularly implemented, revisits the FAO experience to draw lessons from the recent past and identify challenges for the future. Balit calls attention to the risk of reinventing the wheel, addresses the obstacles posed by organizational structures, and highlights the need for qualified training at both institutional and national level.

Obstacles posed by the mechanisms at work in development interventions are the focus of the contribution by practitioners Wendy Quarry and Ricardo Ramírez who draw on a recent professional experience in Mozambique to situate a communication initiative in

the broader context of a development intervention where land ownership was at stake. They document their efforts to substitute a participatory approach for an outreach demand and exercise self-reflection in trying to identify the reasons why they failed. Quarry and Ramírez call attention to the ephemerality of consultants' efforts vis-à-vis ingrained practices within the development industry.

Broadcast media and their role in community development are discussed in this special issue from the lens of African experiences. Communication for development expert Peter da Costa analyses the mixed record of donor-driven community radio projects in the region, particularly in terms of social, institutional and financial sustainability beyond donor funding. His contribution points to gaps between donor agendas and local needs, and calls attention to issues of ownership and participation. Practitioners Lebo Ramafoko, Gavin Andersson and Renay Weiner discuss the potential of the commercial reality television format to promote community development and organization. Their account of the potential for media visibility to push governments to better fulfil their responsibilities resonates with Alfaro's account of the Peruvian experience of media observatories. Importantly, it also raises questions regarding the material limitations faced by civil society organizations when their communication interventions raise the bar of citizen's claims.

Ylva Ekström, Anders Høg Hansen and Hugo Boothby, communication for development lecturers and researchers, document the uses of broadcast and so-called new media to bridge the geographical distances between Tanzania and its diasporas. Their contribution pays insightful attention to how traditional forms of oral communication are adapting towards the digital, and documents how citizens are filling information voids in an informal economy of news and stories in which everyday media practices are stimulated by concrete needs. This article calls attention to the persistent top-down practices of international media organizations and opens an avenue for the research of collaborative forms of information production and circulation in everyday life assisted by digital technologies.

Academic education and professional training constitute an important aspect of the efforts to advance the theorization and research of communication for development. From the perspective of the Canadian experience, which is importantly grounded in early uses of media technology as a tool in participatory community development (see e.g. Quarry 1994), Helen Hambly Odame and Natalie Oram discuss teaching and learning communication process oriented towards social change and development through 'community service learning'. Focusing on the experience's value as well as the challenges it raised, both in practice as well as institutionally, they draw lessons for future work. Concerned instead with the market-driven approach that seems to drive the recruitment of media managers for civil society organizations (CSOs) in the US, Peter Lemish and Kelly Caringer argue for a conceptualization and professional training of CSO media managers as critical communicators. Significantly, these two articles constitute collaborations between academic instructors and graduate students.

Looking into the future, communication scholar Emile McAnany explores the potential of the theory and practice of social entrepreneurship to inform a future paradigm shift in communication for development and social change, focusing on a series of best practices in social entrepreneurship innovation in the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs)<sup>7</sup>. Also with an eye to the future, communication

scholar Cees Hamelink argues for mobilizing forms of communication within cities that can counteract perceptions of risk and insecurity as well as experiences of humiliation. In his view, communicated cities could act as nodes of fairer global networks, provided that the Internet can be preserved as a free and open medium for social deliberation.

To close this special issue, Oscar Hemer and Thomas Tufte argue that a shift from globalization to mediatization in ongoing theoretical debates poses specific challenges for communication for development studies, and discuss emerging agendas for the field. These considerations are informed by their long-standing collaboration across the Öresund bridge, connecting Malmö University in Sweden and Roskilde University in Denmark.

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## Notes

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2. The question was posed to attendants to the "New agendas in global communication" conference organized in October 2009 by the Department of Radio-Film-TV of the University of Texas at Austin in the USA.
3. These studies also show the field's outstanding conceptual divides – diffusion vs. participation, top-down vs. bottom-up, modernization vs. dependency. See Waisboard (2000) for an example of an effort to map convergence and clarify what he terms as "conceptual confusion".
4. I.e. those bilateral and multilateral organizations that still fund most development communication interventions despite the rise of philanthrocapitalism (Kremer et al. 2010)
5. Quoting Raymond Williams' definition of communication as a keyword (Williams 1976, 1983).
6. This classification is by no means definitive, or fully representative of the rich content of the contributions. To give but a few examples: the article by Quebral draws on Filipino newspaper coverage, at times referring to the Filipino national context, and occasionally addressing the lives of transmigrant workers abroad; the article by Ekström, Høg Hansen and Boothby covers instances of distance and proximity between Tanzania and its diasporas.
7. While attention to ICTs should not be overblown, in line with the critical stands put forward by Chakravarty and Thomas in this same issue, efforts that e.g. bring together social entrepreneurs and small scale producers in less-affluent states as co-equals to promote fair-trade cooperatives would be worth exploring further (see Cabrera 2010).

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