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A CASE FOR THE QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS

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What is dialog, and how can it be measured in a meaningful way? In this article, Jacobson presents an approach to assessing participatory communication based on communication in the form of dialog as conceptualized by Jurgen Habermas.

THE PROBLEM OF ASSESSING PARTICIPATION

The value of a participatory approach to social change for development has been appreciated for some time now. This approach represents a move away from program planning and implementation in which goals are determined beforehand and communicated to beneficiaries via mass media campaigns using print-media, posters, training programs, leaflets, radio or television. Instead, an emphasis is placed on leaving the power for decision-making in the hands of communities who may be in need.

There is still an important role for preplanned programs employing mass media. Media based public information campaigns are employed worldwide, in both richer and poorer countries, promoting public health, education, and welfare. However, today it is widely understood that extensive community participation can be usefully employed throughout the planning, implementation and evaluation of many kinds of programs.

Recognition of the desirability of community participation represents a meaningful addition to what is known about development processes and how to facilitate them. Beyond the by now general recognition of the importance of participatory processes, specific approaches have been developed for planning and implementing participatory programs, including Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), and Participatory Action Research (PAR) among others (Kassam and Mustafa 1982; Ramirez 1986; Durbhakula and Biernatzki 1994; Holland and Blackburn 1998; Parks, Grey-Felder et al. 2005). These approaches have advanced effective techniques for

facilitating community involvement in, and even control of, change efforts, including focus group discussions, preference ranking, mapping and modeling, seasonal and historical diagramming, and many others.

Some progress must still be achieved, however, in the area of program evaluation. Participatory projects are often seen as being difficult to evaluate. Agreed-on measures of participation are not available. Qualitative techniques are sometimes thought to be more appropriate but these are highly varied and also not widely agreed on.

The PM&E, PRA, and PAR approaches each offer evaluation techniques. These include, among others, counting numbers of community members attending program meetings, assessing the nature of leadership processes, analyzing the structure of decision-making processes, and evaluating the ease with which both genders are able to contribute to discussion. In the three approaches, community members play a central role in all evaluation activities.

Nevertheless, additional tools are needed in the form of evaluation methods that can concisely estimate the contribution of participatory communication to targeted program outcomes. The need for such “hard” data was discussed at the 2006 World Congress on Communication for Development, held in Rome and organized by The World Bank, FAO and The Communication Initiative. Some attendees argued that hard data are needed to convince donors of the effectiveness of participatory processes, since these are the kind of data donors understand and trust. Other attendees argued that “anecdotal” data and stories are most convincing to donors and decision-makers. The debate was not resolved, but it seems reasonable to assume that at least some large donor organizations would welcome hard data generated via standard quantitative evaluation techniques, if only participation could be evaluated in this way. Such data could be useful for program designers and implementers as well, indicating when participation is achieved and when not.

My standpoint is that one useful approach to evaluating participatory communication could be found by focusing intently on communication in the form of dialog. Leadership structures, decision-making processes and gender balance are indeed important. But it is the communication that takes place within these processes that is most relevant. If the communication that takes place within leadership activities, decision-making processes, and gender relations is itself participatory, then so will these processes themselves be participatory. And here dialog is key. From this perspective, the effective evaluation of participation in interventions must focus singly on the extent to which participatory dialog is allowed to take place. The focus on participatory dialog may then point the way to a useful quantitative assessment tool designed to indicate participation in its

many specific contexts (Jacobson, 2007).

This paper proposes a method for assessing the extent of participation in social change programs that is capable of generating quantitative data. The method is applicable in principle to the assessment of the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases in a range of interventions. It also has relevance for the assessment of citizen participation in the political public sphere and may be applicable to media development programs. The paper begins with a brief discussion of standard evaluation models used for mass media campaigns and one way in which these could be used to assess the extent of participatory dialog. A means of conceptualizing participatory dialog is then outlined with regard to the production of empirical data. The conceptualization is derived from Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. A discussion of measurement scales, questionnaire items, and data analysis follows. A summary section points to needed research and potential applications.

A STANDARD MODEL FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

To explain this approach a little further, and how it might be useful, I will recall the standard approach to development communication and evaluation, and its use of measured variables. In this approach, experts decide development aims, either alone or in association with local voices. Mass media campaigns are designed to help implement those aims.

Evaluation of a media communication program involves measuring and analyzing two things. First, the mass media communications are evaluated by trying to estimate the extent of "exposure" to campaign messages among target beneficiaries. For this purpose, media exposure variables such as "message recall" are employed. Second, a targeted program aim, such as health behavior change, is measured in terms of visits to health clinics, condom use, or hygiene practices, for example, indicating the extent to which targeted aims may have been achieved. These are the independent and dependent variables, respectively, in a communication evaluation model. Analysis consists of statistically estimating the correlation between the media exposure variables and the behavior change variables. The idea is that when media exposure is higher, then behavior change will hopefully be higher. Significant positive correlations are generally interpreted to mean that the expense of a mass media campaign has been justified by its contribution to achieving the planned outcomes.

Using this approach to evaluation, if participatory dialog is to be employed in place of mass media campaigns during change oriented interventions, then the variables used to measure the communication intervention must

change. Dialogic variables must be developed to replace, or perhaps augment, media exposure variables.

EVALUATING PROGRAMS BY ASSESSING PARTICIPATORY DIALOG

This raises a crucial question. “What is dialog, and how can it be measured in a meaningful way?” At one level, asking local citizens/community members whether they felt they were listened to during a given program should answer such question. They could simply be asked whether they felt that decision-makers, program officers and/or community members working closely with program officers “listened to them” throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of a project.

But even if such a question probably represents the essence of participatory communication, the resulting single measure would most likely not serve to measure participatory dialog in an adequate way. One person may feel that they were listened to based on the fact that a speaker opened the floor for discussion and then made eye contact with the questioner and nodded thoughtfully, while another may feel that the same speaker was simply going through the motions without really answering questions. A more thorough analysis of the elements of participatory dialog is necessary in order to provide guidance in developing a more elaborate protocol for eliciting data.

A number of specific aspects of participatory dialog could usefully be addressed during the evaluation process by directly asking community members a number of carefully designed types of question (italics represents specific aspects of dialog in each type of question):

1. Did you clearly *comprehend* everything the organizer/facilitators were trying to say in their program materials and processes?
2. Did you feel free to challenge organizer/facilitators' grasp of relevant local *facts*?
3. Did you feel free to challenge the *cultural appropriateness* of organizer/facilitators' behavior and the way they conducted meetings?
4. Did you feel free to challenge organizer/facilitators' *sincerity*, i.e. whether the project was oriented toward solving local problems or just pursuing a donor organization's goals?
5. Did you feel you were allowed/empowered to speak *as often* as you

wished?

6. Did you feel that the organizers/facilitators allowed you to raise *any proposal or criticism* you wished to raise, i.e. was everything “on the table?”
7. Did you feel that every proposition or criticism raised was *dealt with fully* and to your satisfaction?

Although a thorough discussion of participatory dialog is not possible in the context of this paper, a methodological proposal can be made. It is important to begin by noting that there is no single way to define dialog. Theorists including Paulo Freire, Michel Foucault, and Hannah Arendt, among others, have all defined it in different ways. However, we can agree on what our definition of participatory dialog needs to achieve. Our definition of dialog needs to get at the question of whether community members are listened to. But it must be somewhat richer and admittedly somewhat more complex than the idea of simply being listened to. It must minimally cover the aspects of dialog indicated in the seven question types illustrated above.

There is at least one theory that I believe can offer a suitable basis for such a project: sociologist Jurgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Following Habermas, the seven elements of dialog numbered above reflect precisely the four “validity claims” and three “symmetry conditions” that the German theorist uses to specify communicative action. These seven elements can be used to specify a rich account of what is involved in dialog, and in being listened to during dialog.

CONCEPTUALIZING PARTICIPATORY DIALOG AS ACTION ORIENTED TO UNDERSTANDING

An introduction to the theory

Habermas’s theory was originally developed to provide a basis for criticizing systematically distorted, or ideological, structures of communication. This requires a model of undistorted, or non-ideological, communication. For Habermas, this model of undistorted or non-ideological communication is *communicative action*, which he also calls *action oriented to understanding*. And it is this model that closely approximates participatory communication because undistorted, non-ideological, communication is inherently participatory. The thesis of this paper is that Habermas’s model of action oriented to understanding, because of its level of detail, provides a basis for quantitatively assessing participatory communication.

Action oriented toward understanding, or what I will sometimes now refer to as participatory dialog, is understood in relation to expectations that underlie human communication. These are claims to the assumed validity of speech acts, called *validity claims*. In Habermas's view, individuals exchange speech acts with the presumption that those are: 1) true, 2) normatively appropriate, 3) sincere, and 4) comprehensible. Speech acts are received with these expectations, usually of an unconscious nature, and such unconscious expectations are what make possible the coordination of behavior among individuals. This theoretical argument holds that if at some level everyone were always at every moment concerned that he/she was being lied to and insulted by someone who was insincere and using incomprehensible language, then communication of any kind would be impossible. Habermas's theory simply "reconstructs" or identifies the assumptions that make communication possible, messy as it can be in actual practice.

The theory argues that validity expectations operate in an unconscious way as a substructure of communication, but they can also be made conscious. If doubt arises as to a speech act's validity, then one or more claims can be challenged and raised for discussion. This comprises the give and take of regular talk.

In other words, most everyday communication takes place unreflectively, in statements such as "I'd like to support you on that issue." This statement will normally be interpreted as referring to something truthful and real, i.e. an issue of some kind. The statement would also be normally interpreted in light of cultural appropriateness, i.e. whether it is culturally or normatively appropriate for this particular speaker to offer support. And it would be presumed that the speaker were sincere, meaning that he/she will genuinely stand-up for this issue if an occasion warrants. All this is presumed in the simple sentence.

However, everyday communications also provide an occasion to challenge the validity of statements. For example, perhaps in the speaker's absence the issue has already been settled. This means that the sentence makes an incorrect truth assumption about the nature of the issue. Perhaps the individual has no standing in the local cultural/political context to offer support, making the offer problematic. In this instance, appropriateness is violated. Or, perhaps in a given instance this sentence is used by a speaker who may not be trusted to come through with support in the end. In this case his or her sincerity may be challenged. In all these cases, the speaker can be challenged. And then discussion can be undertaken to establish the truth, appropriateness, and/or sincerity of the claims embodied in the sentence.

Understanding, as an outcome of discussion, takes the form of yes/no answers to propositions, either agreement or disagreement. “Great. I appreciate your support.” Or “Actually, given opinion about you in this town I’d rather not accept your support.” Whether the outcome is positive or negative, this discussion has concluded with an understanding. Any such understanding about the outcome of an exchange means that the exchange was communicative. In other words, these two may not agree, but at least they are communicating.

This kind of interaction, including the initial statement as well as the possible reply and subsequent discussion, is a simple example of what Habermas means by communicative action. As the example illustrates, it is common in everyday communication. In more complex forms, it is also common in specialized communication that takes place in professional spheres. Whether in one or the other, such action has a mutually shared aim rather than an individualistic purpose, i.e. understanding: “I shall speak of communicative action whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding” (Habermas 1984, pp. 285-6).

Because action oriented to understanding is not always simple, the theory analyzes acts of reaching understanding at length, with particular regard for *speech conditions* that must be obtained for action to be communicative. For example, in certain kinds of political negotiations, a host of strategies is available to those parties involved who may wish to avoid an open exchange of information and viewpoints. Those may include refusing to discuss certain matters, discussing them only partially or in irrelevant ways, etc. Habermas explains that parties to genuinely participatory dialog, or action oriented to understanding, must be free to “call into question any proposal”, to “introduce any proposal” and to “express any attitudes, wishes, or needs.” There must be a “symmetrical distribution of opportunities to contribute” to discussion. And everyone’s proposals must be treated with equal seriousness. Outcomes must be determined through “good reasons,” or the “force of the better argument” (Habermas 1990, pp. 88-89).

Validity claims and speech conditions together are used to describe the main features of action oriented towards understanding. We may think of them as criteria that must be met if communication is to be oriented to understanding. Key concepts and their individual criteria are summarized in Table 1 (including category numbers introduced for the convenience of discussion below).

Conceptual Category	Category Criteria	Criteria Number
Validity Claims	Comprehensibility	1
	Truth (accuracy)	2
	Appropriateness	3
	Sincerity	4
Speech Conditions	Symmetric Distribution of Opportunities to Contribute	5
	Ability to Raise Any Proposition	6
	Equal Treatment of Propositions Raised	7

Table 1: Key concepts for action oriented to understanding – The criteria of validity and speech conditions

Together, validity claims and speech conditions provide a detailed specification of the expectations that underlie all communication, including speech in the public sphere. It is important to clarify that Habermas' theory does not assume that all communication is oriented toward understanding on the surface level. Sometimes communication is oriented instead to achieving aims, as in military commands and orders. Other times it is manipulative and deceitful. The theory intends to provide a basis for distinguishing these different kinds of communication from one another, in contrast to the model of open and earnest communication.

For our purposes, the criteria of validity claims and speech conditions together can be used to describe communication that is participatory, or oriented to understanding, on the surface level. "A given communicative exchange can be described as oriented towards understanding, i.e. as participatory dialog, if all individuals are free to engage in any form of speech condition with the aim of challenging any validity claim" (Jacobson, 2004).

The paradigmatic context or problem in development communication processes is that local "beneficiaries" are not truly invited to participate through genuine dialog. Instead, they are addressed in a superficial manner if at all.

In such cases, we can say that the criteria for action oriented to understanding are not fully met. Referring to Table 1 above, local citizens may not understand what is being offered to them (1), may not be asked what they want or given equal opportunities to contribute to discussion (5), and so on. Alternatively, they may be invited and encouraged to contribute to discussion on subjects of interest to the donor but not on subjects of most immediate interest to them (6). Another possibility is that they may be ostensibly invited to talk about anything they wish, but actually be treated seriously only on certain subjects (7). Or perhaps the donor representatives may be open and willing to undertake mutual understanding, but fail to understand the local cultural context and therefore behave inappropriately or ask for behavior of locals that is culturally inappropriate (3).

In some respects, the criteria of validity claims and speech conditions seem rather plain, obvious, and common. However, Habermas's theoretical edifice is developed in large part to argue that even though they are common, they are not arbitrary. If true, this in turn suggests that the criteria can be used with some confidence to remind program designers and evaluators to pay attention to them, i.e. all the criteria of participatory dialog are important. It can also be used to justify the working assumption that, if these criteria are met in a given context, then there is a good chance that participation has taken place.

In this line of reasoning, then, the criteria can be used to design methods for gathering data on the conditions required for participatory communication in a wide range of contexts (See Table 2). Local participants in a health intervention project could be asked whether they were given equal opportunities to contribute to discussion overall (5). They could be asked whether they felt encouraged to raise any and all topics for discussion during planning meetings (6). Citizens could be asked whether news media allowed them access during the public discussion of a specific political event, be it as individuals or as members of a group (5). Or they could be asked whether news media covered all those subjects about which the community felt strongly, and whether these subjects were covered thoroughly in the public sphere overall (6, and 7).

	Validity/Speech Criteria	Illustrative Question Types
Validity Claims	Truth (accuracy)	To what extent do you feel the donor organization staff was <i>knowledgeable</i> about local conditions?
	Appropriateness	To what extent do you feel the donor organization staff behaved in a manner that is <i>appropriate</i> for your local culture?
	Sincerity	To what extent do you feel the <u>donor organization staff members</u> were <i>sincere</i> in their attempts to help you solve local problems?
	Comprehension	To what extent do you feel you <i>understood</i> what the donor organization was trying to tell you?
Speech Conditions	Symmetric Opportunities	To what extent did you feel free in having an <i>equal opportunity</i> to raise questions during project meetings?
	Free to Raise Any Proposition	To what extent did you feel free in raising <i>any proposal or idea</i> you wish for discussion?
	Equal Treatment of Propositions	Throughout the project, to what extent did you feel your proposals <i>would be treated equally</i> to others' viewpoints, including the donor organization's views?

Table 2: Assessment contexts

Assessment methods could be qualitative. In that case, the criteria would be used to design discussion topics for community meetings, focus group questions, or open-ended survey questions. Assessment methods could also be quantitative, in which case the criteria would be used to design

close-ended questionnaire items with scaled response categories.

MEASUREMENT

It is the quantitative application that I will explore further in the remainder of this paper, by presenting the kinds of questionnaire items that can be derived from communicative action criteria and the kinds of analysis for which the resulting data could be used.

The fulfillment of validity claims and speech conditions in daily conversation is normally an approximation, or a matter of degree. During typical interaction, a hearer will treat a speaker as being “correct for present purposes,” “appropriate enough not to raise ire,” “sincere but not perhaps caring very much.” Therefore, it is suitable to measure answers to questions regarding validity and speech conditions at an ordinal level of measurement or higher. Likert type scales can be used to score answers to questions such as those illustrated above. (Likert scales are the kind of questionnaire items asking respondents to check a box ranging, for example, from “Not at all Likely,” to “Somewhat Likely,” to “Very Likely,” and so on.) Table 3 illustrates the kinds of questions that can be asked for each category of validity claim and speech condition.

	Validity/Speech Criteria	Illustrative Question Types
Validity Claims	Truth (accuracy)	To what extent do you feel the donor organization staff was <i>knowledgeable</i> about local conditions?
	Appropriateness	To what extent do you feel the donor organization staff behaved in a manner that is <i>appropriate</i> for your local culture?
	Sincerity	To what extent do you feel the <u>donor organization staff members</u> were <i>sincere</i> in their attempts to help you solve local problems?
	Comprehension	To what extent do you feel you <i>understood</i> what the donor organization was trying to tell you?
Speech Conditions	Symmetric Opportunities	To what extent did you feel free in having an <i>equal opportunity</i> to raise questions during project meetings?
	Free to Raise Any Proposition	To what extent did you feel free in raising <i>any proposal or idea</i> you wish for discussion?
	Equal Treatment of Propositions	Throughout the project, to what extent did you feel your proposals would be <i>treated equally</i> to others' viewpoints, including the donor organization's views?

Table 3: Illustrative question types

Each of these kinds of questions can be answered on a Likert scale ranging from *Not at all sincere*, for example, to *Completely sincere*. The questions presented in Table 3 indicate only the kinds of questions that should be asked, in relation to specific validity claims and speech conditions. In practice, questions for each validity claim and each speech condition must

be designed in a manner suitable for the specific project being undertaken, whether a health intervention or a media development project. Cultural context and practical matters must be taken into consideration. Finally, each validity claim and speech condition should be tapped, or measured, via multiple questions to improve measurement validity.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The resulting data should be analyzed using standard statistical techniques, addressing a number of different aspects of the communicative context.

The overall context could be analyzed by combining all measures to produce a single summary measure of the extent of participatory dialog. Alternatively, the measures of different validity claims and speech conditions could be assessed to determine whether different aspects of the communication context were oriented more to understanding than others, i.e. were more participatory. For example, general access to the media might be very good, but getting certain topics represented in the public sphere might be very difficult. Staff members of donor organizations might be considered very knowledgeable, able and willing to discuss matters of a factual and technical nature, but they might also be culturally insensitive. Alternatively, they might be considered culturally sophisticated and sensitive but more concerned about the donor organizations' goals than about local needs, and therefore judged to be somewhat insincere.

If data such as these are gathered in baseline and planning studies, they could be useful in planning the communication elements of social change programs. They could be employed in initial needs assessments or in modifying communication needs assessments. They could be used in summative assessment of overall levels of participation, or in relation to specific validity or speech condition problems.

Such data could also be used to evaluate the contribution of participatory dialog to targeted program outcomes. Development specialists today increasingly link the difficulty of achieving sustainable program outcomes with the difficulty of obtaining genuine community involvement. Or stated conversely, community involvement is thought to increase the likelihood of achieving program goals. This is true at local levels where community members must support new health or land use practices if achievable goals are to be permanent. It is also true at the level of democratic government, where citizens will be motivated to obey the laws and

regulations promulgated by political institutions only if they feel that their interests are taken into account in legislative processes.

In both cases, if citizens are consulted during decision-making, then their willing involvement is more likely. This is one element of what political theory sometimes refers to as the problem of democratic legitimacy. In Habermas' view, citizens are more likely to comply with laws passed by institutions they believe to be legitimate, i.e. democratic and participatory. This communicative legitimacy relationship holds in smaller scale change as well. Local community members may be more interested in owning program goals if they feel that planning and implementation processes included their participation.

If this is true, then the impact of participation on program outcomes can be evaluated by assessing the association between the extent of participatory dialog on one hand, and citizen buy-in on the other hand. This is a dialogically oriented application of the standard assessment models normally used for mass media campaigns. The mass media exposure variables can be replaced, or augmented with, participatory dialog variables.

The design of specific measures of citizen buy-in would vary by context, but could include summative measures of citizen belief in the democratic legitimacy of government, measures of community member belief that program outcomes represented community interests, measures of individual willingness to participate in the program, etc. Media development measures could focus on the extent to which citizens believe the news media are representing the voice of the people (Wolfensohn and Short, 2000). Programmatic responses could focus either on addressing program weaknesses or on addressing public perceptions as needed.

Research into the relationship between participatory dialog, measured as described here, and the democratic legitimacy of political decisions has begun to establish the empirical promise of such an assessment model in the context of municipal policy making in the United States (Jacobson and Joon, 2005; Chang, 2007). Further research is needed to begin evaluating the applicability of the model to development communication conditions. In principle, the model should be widely applicable.

IN CONCLUSION

The proposal I want to advance is that new assessment tools should be developed that focus on the measurement of dialogue, or more specifically, on the measurement of community members' feelings about dialogic

conditions. Such tools should be useful regardless of what kinds of communication contexts are relevant to a given program, whether these are community meetings, festivals, or media campaigns - all of these can be undertaken with various levels of authentic participation. The measures would aim to evaluate just how participatory, in terms of communication, those contexts turned out to be. Were community members really given authority in contributing to decisions? This can be answered at least in part by asking the community members themselves whether they believe, in so many words, that they were listened to.

Reflecting the standard evaluation model, if increases in measured participatory dialog are accompanied by increases in desirable behavior and/or support, then data would support donor investment in participatory programs. Such tools would not assess the extent to which Freirean empowerment took place as an outcome of “conscientization.” However, they could help produce meaningful assessments of the extent to which community members felt free to participate during the planning, implementation and/or evaluation of program interventions.

The proposed measures could be gathered in face-to-face or paper-and-pencil interviews. Such quantitative assessments of participatory dialog would be inexact and partial, as are all measurements. But if such quantitative assessments were employed in association with standard means of estimating error, with humility as all assessment methods must, and in association with qualitative techniques where possible, then they may offer a useful addition to the toolkit of participatory communication techniques already available. Specifically, they might help provide the kind of quantitative data that certain donors require in order to justify their financial support.

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