



TOWARDS TRANSDISCIPLINARITY AND A COMPLEX ROLE FOR THE SCIENTIST

IAMCR's Participatory Communication Research section in action

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What is the role of the communication researcher or scientist in participatory communication processes? Rethinking and repositioning the concept of participation implies a discussion on such a role.

In the PCR Newsletter of Spring 1998, Jan Servaes and Tom Jacobson, who were the President and the Vice-president of the Participatory Communication Research Section of the IAMCR at that time, entitled the opening article *The Way Ahead*. In it, they stated that participatory communication had a rather low profile and was often looked upon as 'activism' and 'ideology' rather than belonging to the mainstream academic community. They contrasted a positivistic approach with an interpretative approach, emphasized the intersubjective construction of reality in participatory research, and concluded that "participatory research may be better than positivistic social science for many development and democratic purposes".

Almost ten years after that publication, most people working in the field of participatory communication will probably still agree with those statements and with the general conclusion in favor of interpretivism, but the term *participation* itself has become multi-interpretable, and a container concept. In its travel from the alternative to the mainstream, 'participation' appears to have been hollowed out. People now use the term without giving credit to its deeper underlying principles of dialogue and engagement. In many cases, it has become an obligatory concept, to be used at least 7 times on each page of a project proposal. Sometimes it is even used to refer to all forms of communication, including the linear form of asking a question and giving an answer. If a concerned citizen is asked about his opinion, he is not necessarily participating in a democratic process. However, in many cases this primary form of citizen consultation is seen as participation.

Participation is more than that, especially if linked to processes of social change and development. Real participation in change cannot be based

ISSUE 9
Novemember 2007

solely on consultation, but has to include principles of dialogue and commitment.

This process -the hollowing out of the term participation- demands a rethinking of what participatory communication research actually stands for. It is time to give substance to the word participation again. Such a rethinking, and repositioning, includes in my opinion a fundamental discussion on the role of the communication researcher or scientist in participatory communication processes. The role of the researcher seems to be evolving towards having an integral part in these processes. The field of participatory communication often deals with complex problems, and the active involvement of the researcher in such complex problems is under discussion as an integral part of participatory communication research.

Complex or wicked problems are problems that do not have one single solution that is right or wrong, good or bad or true or false. These are problems in which many stakeholders are involved, all of them framing the problems in a different way. Suggested solutions to complex problems can therefore often be contradictory; what might seem a solution to one stakeholder could be seen as a deepening of the problem by another one. Many of those wicked problems are studied by the life sciences, where many disciplinary based scientists, professionals, client groups and beneficiaries meet, and actual change demands participatory communication of all stakeholders. In areas related to development and change in the environment and health, problems are always complex. For instance, in natural resource management, multi-stakeholder platforms are created to ensure a democratic process and an effective dialogue. The creation of these participatory platforms is never easy, and an effective functioning demands a variety of competences.

The scientist is a participant in these kinds of platforms and as such, he cannot continue having only his traditional role as a researcher. He is also often a facilitator of these platforms and as a participating stakeholder an integral part of these platforms. He or she is an active participant in a change process, and as such, a creator of reality. The scientist is one stakeholder in the participatory process and the image of the scientist as an 'external expert' is under attack as he is not an objective outsider, but an engaged insider.

In this regard, we seem to be evolving from disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to transdisciplinary approaches. In contrast to disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, which stay within the borders of the academia, transdisciplinary approaches actively search for the inclusion of other voices and of non-academic knowledge. Especially the so-called 'voice of the local' is now often explicitly included in our

projects and research proposals. To give substance to participation, a communication researcher needs to be aware of the fact that he is not a neutral outsider to a project, or in the center of a project. He is only one of the participating stakeholders. Concerns of the researcher not only lie with issues related to critical analysis and monitoring and evaluation, but also with how to create commitment and engagement, how to manage the process of change and how to create and sustain equal participation of all.

One of the themes that ran through many of the PCR Section presentations at the Paris IAMCR conference held in July 2007 was that in this re-theorizing of participatory communication we need to put power issues in the center. Change occurs in interaction and in networks, and these inter-human relations are never power-free. There is a need to incorporate political theories in theories of participatory communication. How to include 'the local voice' in decision-making processes is a question that connects not only to logistics, but also to processes of democratic representation, hierarchical power structures and economic dependencies. It is in this area that future work of the Section could make itself of relevance to participatory change and development.

The Participatory Communication Research Section of the IAMCR continues to work with a broad definition of participation applied in a variety of fields. The Section still underwrites its original three basic aims, which were formulated as follows:

- To work towards theoretical and methodological clarification.
- To share perspectives of participatory approaches focusing specifically on the communication processes in contexts of social change, including development communication.
- To discuss case studies across the spectrum of social change processes focusing on the (often integrated) use of communication and media at different levels of society.

The Section brings media researchers and practitioners together in communication aimed at achieving democratic and participatory social change. Topics of interest are broad, including: the ways in which communication processes can be used to incorporate participation, the subjects and processes of democratization, communication and information rights, ICTs for sustainable development, health communication, environmental communication, agricultural extension services, folk media and social movements, communication planning activities and interventions, national and cultural identities, community studies and the relationship between participation, empowerment and gender, community radio and participatory video production, non-formal participatory forms of education, participatory rapid appraisals, and

participatory action research.

The Paris conference was very successful towards achieving the Section's aims and in addressing many of the topics listed above. During the three days of activity, the Section coordinated nine one-and-a-half hour sessions, with four till six papers presented in each one. People from 25 different countries participated and the panels and the sessions were well attended. Six poster presentations were added to the sessions. Although time was too limited to do justice to all the work, the Section's tradition to have discussants commenting on the presentations was upheld. Moreover, Section's members initiated and participated in two special panels.

In the first panel, the previous Section Heads discussed the history and future of participatory communication research. In celebrating the IAMCR's 50th anniversary, the panelists reflected on the history of participatory communication research and its theoretical and practical developments inside and outside the IAMCR.

The second special event that took place was a panel session on assessing participation in communication interventions. The event was co-sponsored by the Task Force on Media and Communication Policy of the IAMCR. The panel explored methods for assessing participation in social change efforts ranging from health communication projects to media development programs. In doing so various methods were presented and evaluated. Although the focus of the work of the presenters varied, all the presenters and other participants in the different events shared a commitment to communication and participation. The sharing of their work is valued and appreciated.

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