



## PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

History and future of the IAMCR Section

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Jan Servaes, Tom Jacobson and Ullamaija Kivikuru critically review the history of participatory communication research and its theoretical and practical developments both inside and outside the IAMCR, and share their views on future paths and challenges for the Section.

In July 2007, the International Association for Media and Communication Research, IAMCR, celebrated 50 years since it was formally established at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in 1957.

As part of the celebration, IAMCR's Participatory Communication Research (PCR) Section organized a special panel on the history and future of participatory communication research. In it, the Section's former heads critically reviewed the history of participatory communication research and its theoretical and practical developments both inside and outside the IAMCR, and shared their views on future paths and challenges for the Section.

### THE SECTION'S CREATION AND INITIAL YEARS

Jan Servaes<sup>1</sup> started the PCR Working Group in 1985 and, together with Tom Jacobson, coordinated its activities at a number of IAMCR conferences. The PCRNetwork was established in 1990, and as from 1993 onwards, a newsletter was published. When the IAMCR Board officially accepted the Section in 1994, Servaes became the first Section Head, serving until 1998.

Referring to the key debates and concerns within the Section back then, Servaes stated: "Getting the PCR Section and perspective accepted was an uphill political struggle, for at least two reasons. Participatory Communication Research was not appreciated by many 'mainstream academics' and IAMCR board members. It was considered too 'partisan' -

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not academic enough- and it was not regarded as different from international communication or community media (which were existing sections within IAMCR) by others. It was disappointing to learn that fellow travelers in other sections such as 'political-economy' did not support us in our aims to establish ourselves as a genuine scholarly community". As a consequence, he added, "we had to 'defend' ourselves and pro-actively argue our case intellectually and politically against those in power (from both the 'right' and the 'left')".

One of the Section's main interests back then was, in Servaes' account, "Getting ourselves organized in logistical ways -via the PCRNetwork, the newsletter, starting a database, etc. - on the basis of *an open and inclusive definition of participation*".

For an overview of the Section's intellectual debates during its initial years, Servaes refers the reader to the newsletters and books published then, and stresses: "We have always tried to keep the Section open to people from all regions and locales, and welcomed professional/policy/case-based perspectives as well as theoretical contributions".

When asked about the main developments related to participatory communication research outside the Section at the time, he said: "Gradually, the issue of PCR and participatory development become more 'fashionable' at international policy levels (UN, US-based NGOs, GOs, etc.). Some of us became more involved in lobbying and consultancy work at those levels".

In his view, an outstanding quality of the PCR section over the years has been that it is "A network of like-minded people who have a genuine interest and commitment to social development issues". A shortcoming, according to the well-renowned academic, is that "it is an open structure based on volunteer contributions and as such it cannot compete with well-resourced foundations and lobby-groups".

## THE PCR SECTION AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Tom Jacobson<sup>2</sup> recalls: "I had worked with Jan Servaes in running panel meetings on participatory communication at a couple of IAMCR conferences in the early 1980s and later seconded him in proposing that the Working Group be accepted fully as a Section within IAMCR. He assumed the position of first Section President, now called Section Head, and I was Vice President".

Since the Section's bylaws stipulated that the succession of Presidencies should operate via the Vice President becoming President, Jacobson became Head in 1998, serving until 2002.

During that period, he points out, "the Section was preoccupied with growing and becoming a useful place for individuals doing participatory work. The background of the work, and the reason that the Section was needed, was that the other Sections in IAMCR at the time did not reach out vigorously to scholars and practitioners doing development work, especially Third World scholars and practitioners".

Referring to the main theoretical and practical developments of participatory communication research within the Section in those years, Jacobson explained: "One issue was defining the Section's boundaries. We wanted it to focus on development but not to be too exclusive, because poverty and marginalization are common in the richer countries as well. Practically speaking, the first book published as a result of the Section's efforts gathered case studies and statements advocating the importance of participatory communication, while the second book was devoted to the problem of strengthening theory"<sup>3</sup>.

In his presentation at the *History and Future of PCR* panel in Paris, Jacobson noted a dismaying tendency, at least in the US, in terms of lack of institutional investment in research. When requested to elaborate on that, he said: "I was referring to a reduction in the number of graduate research programs in the United States that offered more or less systematic coursework and research in development communication. A number of factors have contributed to this in my view. The US' withdrawal from UNESCO in the mid eighties, and later on Glasnost, shifted attention from multilateral concerns with development in the 1970s and early 1980s and toward the challenges facing former Soviet states. In addition, funders shifted their attention from universities to consultant groups. Finally, ICTs have taken attention away from development issues. When a development communication scholar retires in the U.S., they are usually replaced with someone specializing in ICTs... And there are important ways in which ICTs can contribute to development, of course, but hiring an ICT specialist who may do some development work is not the same as hiring a specialist in development".

Jacobson also referred to the risk of superficiality implied in the current use of 'participation' as a buzzword. Asked about why he thinks that the term is in vogue, he said: "Well, the idea of participation is hard to dislike. I think that the more recent interest in it does often reflect an interest in dialogical, two-way processes of communication. This is partly because we

now know that media campaigns are of limited use, important perhaps, but limited. Everyone is looking for better approaches. It is often only a buzzword, I think, because participation is much more difficult to take on and put into practice than designing and diffusing messages. It takes more time. And, we have yet to develop enough tools of participation and train people in using them. The fact remains that most people doing development communication worldwide today were trained in journalism, PR or marketing. Hence, participation is discussed and advocated more often than it is actually put into practice”.

Discussing the PCR Section’s outstanding qualities, Jacobson remarked: “It has sought to bridge the gap between theory and practice and between ‘first world’ and ‘third world’ scholars. It has produced scholarship and to some extent perhaps modestly helped advance practice”, In his view, the Section “has been reasonably successful on all these counts”. When asked to point at a shortcoming, he said, “it has been a fairly well organized Section among other IAMCR ones, but we could perhaps do more to reach out to new members and collaborate with other organizations”.

## THE MORE RECENT YEARS

Ullamaija Kivikuru<sup>4</sup> became the Section’s Head in 2002, and served until 2006. During her term, she says, there were “No dramatic debates. The name of the Section had been discussed for quite some time (most IAMCR sections do not have the word “research” included in their denomination), and there were occasional discussions about the possibility of merging with the Community Media Section. We still operate separately, but have had frequently joint sessions”.

According to her, the main theoretical and practical developments of participatory communication research within the Section during those years were connected to “the definition of what is meant by participation – above all, can web-based discussions and debates be considered as genuine participatory communication?”. Outside the Section, the main development was, in Kivikuru’s view, “possibly the partial return of modernity thinking in development communication”.

In her presentation at the *History and Future of PCR* panel in Paris, she referred to an actual contradiction derived from the Section’s evolution: the fact that the more popular it becomes, the less time its members have for discussion. According to Kivikuru, “because the Section has a limited number of sessions allocated by the IAMCR conference organizers, we tend to accept too many papers for each session, and then the time for discussion becomes scarce, while in previous years the Participatory

Communication Research Section was very talkative”.

She also referred to the fact that, although the Section is not keen on slogans, ‘participation’ is in a way its slogan. In connection to that, Kivikuru said she was not sure Paulo Freire would recognize the way in which the Section defines participation. “I meant”, she explains, “that nowadays one meets the terms ‘participation’ and especially ‘empowerment’ everywhere, for example in very crude and commercial market research, and therefore the real meaning of both concepts tends to be badly diluted”.

Asked to point at a shortcoming of the Section, she noted: “the sessions tend to include a certain amount of eclecticism due to a variety of approaches accepted” One of its outstanding is, in her view, that “It has been an eloquent and communicative group, and it has been able to combine theoretical and empirical research in its sessions”.

*This article is based on the presentations by Jan Servaes, Tom Jacobson and Ullamaija Kivikuru at the “History and future of PCR” panel held as part of the activities of the Participatory Research Section of IAMCR during the 2007 Conference in Paris. All three Section’s former Heads kindly provided additional commentary via e-mail. For more information on the PCR Section, visit*

<http://www.socialsciences.wur.nl/cis/pcr/>

1 Servaes is professor and head of the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia and editor-in-chief of *Communication for Development and Social Change: A Global Journal*. He chaired the Scientific Committee for the World Congress on Communication for Development (Rome, 25–27 October 2006), organized by the World Bank, FAO and the Communication Initiative. [j.servaes@uq.edu.au](mailto:j.servaes@uq.edu.au)

2 Jacobson is Professor and Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the School of Communications and Theater at Temple University, Philadelphia, USA. Jacobson studies national development, democratization, and grass roots communication. [tlj@temple.edu](mailto:tlj@temple.edu)

3 Servaes, Jan, Jacobson, Thomas & White, Shirley (eds.) (1996) *Participatory Communication for Social Change*, Sage, New Delhi and Jacobson, Thomas & Servaes, Jan (eds.) (1999) *Theoretical Approaches to Participatory Communication*, Hampton, Cresskill NJ.

4 Kivikuru is professor of journalism at the Swedish School of Social Science at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She has worked with eastern and southern Africa media matters for more than 25 years, in particular with community-based media in South Africa and Namibia. [ullamaija.kivikuru@helsinki.fi](mailto:ullamaija.kivikuru@helsinki.fi)



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