



## COMING OF AGE

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The new Millennium is five years old. So is the Communication for Development master course (ComDev) at Malmö University. The world has gone through some dramatic changes in these few years –from the still lingering post Cold War euphoria of the late '90s to the on-going War on Terrorism- with its equally global implications. Some even suggest that the decade from 1991, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union put a symbolic end to the short 20<sup>th</sup> century, to 11 September 2001, supposedly opening the slightly delayed 21<sup>st</sup> century, was just a strange interregnum characterized by the already obsolete G-word.

I do not wish to believe so. I'd rather see the obvious current shift in global politics –from euphoria to paranomania, from tore-down walls and opened frontiers to xenophobia and the building of new barriers – as a temporary backlash. The over-all picture is not as dismal as it may seem at a first glance. Although the global divides between rich and poor remain and even get wider, there is an absolute increase in global wealth, making the UN Millennium goal to radically reduce world poverty a potentially feasible one. The dual character of *globalization* is even more striking from a cultural view-point, with on the one hand the agglomeration of the global media industry and, on the other, the increasing variety and multipolarity in artistic expression – the de-westernization of modernity, if you like.

It is a cliché but nevertheless, we *are* living in global times. Although scattered, fragmented and partly dysfunctional, we are witnessing the appearance of a global public sphere – or a patchwork of overlapping spheres – and a previously unseen popular sense of global responsibility. The global media coverage and response to the recent tsunami catastrophe in East Asia was an illuminating demonstration of this important shift.

Generally speaking, there is a growing awareness of the crucial role of media in every aspect of globalization –not least from the perspective of global development and the promotion of social change. Yet it is surprising and somewhat depressing to see the low priority still given to communication components and policies in international development cooperation, be it bilateral or multilateral. Communication for Development – or Social Change – is coming of age as a field, but remains a seemingly marginal phenomenon in the global development business.

ISSUE 1  
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Globala Tider (Swedish for Global Times) intends to become a forum for discussion of the inter-relations between globalization, media, culture and social change. It was founded in 2001, intended to be an archive for the Project Works produced on the ComDev master course. Some forty students have so far completed the course, after having done their field work projects in more than twenty countries, from Peru to Indonesia. Another ten students are about to be examined as I write this editorial. After five years and four completed courses, the mass of accumulated knowledge and experience is becoming quite impressive, and I see the re-launching of Globala Tider as a combined archive and webmag as the perfect way to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the ComDev course.

Thanks to the efforts of the editor Florencia Enghel –herself a ComDev student from the first all-international batch of 2002– we can proudly present some of the leading actors in the field as contributors to this first issue of the webmag. They have all been involved in the development of the course in one way or the other and contributed to the widening and redefinition of the ComDev field that we are aiming at.

Looking back at these first five years, I am stunned by how far we have actually come since the idea came up in its embryonic form in the laundry room of my residential quarter in Dalby, 30 kms from Malmö.

It so happened that I often booked the same laundry hours as my neighbour and colleague Jan Petersson, a regular traveler to Vietnam and other far-away places, where he was conducting local radio development projects for the Swedish Radio. I was at the time working in the cultural section of the regional daily *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, specializing in a kind of essayistic travel writing from mostly Latin America and Africa, and I had also been engaged in the Nordic Summer University as the coordinator (with Thomas Hylland Eriksen) of a “circle” on the Globalization of Culture. When we met in the laundry room Jan and I shared our experiences, and out of our discussions emerged the concept of a course which would combine the field practitioners’ need for theoretical foundation with the implementation of globalization studies in concrete project work.

We were from the start convinced that the form of study should be distance learning on the Internet. So we contacted a friend of mine from the Nordic Summer University, Jan Olof Nilsson, who was a pioneer in Lund University’s distance education program, applying a form of web-based pedagogy that appealed to us. With the elaborated yet embryonic concept of a distance learning master course we approached the by then recently started Malmö University’s School of Arts and Communication, which was in an expansive phase, open to new ideas, and which would turn out to be the perfect environment. Malmö University applied to the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency, Sida, and got the necessary support for the planning of the first pilot course, which was given in Swedish and with Scandinavian participants only.

We are now selecting applicants for the sixth course –the fourth international one– to start in September 2005, with immensely more sophisticated web applications than the ones used on the first course site. But the concept and content of the course are essentially the same; a rethinking of communication and development in the light of globalization, conducted through a combination of seminars and individual assessments and finally implemented in a Project Work, preferably although not necessarily in a developing country.

The most important step was undoubtedly going international and making the course open to participants from all over the world. Thus we started realizing the incredible potential of web-based learning. But globalizing the course also meant an enormous pedagogical challenge. On the two first courses, the chosen form of study, with regular seminars in Malmö, was unproblematic, since we could demand that all Scandinavian participants attended the seminars in person –and they did! With participants from Argentina, India, Zimbabwe or Kenya it was of course a different matter. We could not ask of them to come to Sweden six times during the course (in fact, we could not ask of them to come at all –but we have actually been able to invite most of the overseas students to one seminar during their courses, thanks to support from Sida). Therefore, we had to develop forms of broadcasting the lectures and seminar discussions on the web, making them accessible for all participants. Because the seminars remain a corner-stone of the ComDev pedagogy.

They do not necessarily take place in Malmö. In December 2003 we held one seminar of the ComDev03 course in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as part of cooperation with the Nordic Council of Ministers. In February this year we held one seminar at the Museum of World Culture in Göteborg, and another one will be held in Istanbul, Turkey, in October. And for the coming course, to start in September, we already have one seminar scheduled for Durban, South Africa, in November 2006. All these seminars are of course accessible online for those not able to attend in person.

Web-based learning should be regarded as a new form of education that possesses its own logic, not as a virtual version of campus-based teaching or, worse, as the old correspondence courses in digital form. The truly revolutionizing property of distance learning is not, as it is often claimed, that it enables students to study where and when they want, but that it enables them to communicate with other participants wherever in the world they may be, and actually engage in group work with peers scattered throughout the globe.

Group dynamics is the key factor. It requires a shared timeframe, marked by the regular meetings at the seminars, in person or online. Transparency is another key element, with all communication taking place through the open website and being accessible to all participants. In fact most of the information is also accessible to the general public.

However, the acquired dynamic “team spirits” have been linked to the respective course sites and once graduated, many former ComDev students have suffered from “abstinence” when the website activity has gradually faded. So, a third important aim with this renewed Globala Tideris to provide a “community” for former, present and future ComDev students and practitioners, welcoming theorists as well in an attempt to bridge the points of view and production of the different actors in the field. Your active participation is absolutely essential to make this the lively and innovative forum it has all the potential to become.

If I had known how consuming this on-going project would become I might have given it second thoughts. So I’m glad I didn’t, because these five years have no-doubt been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Seeing the ComDev network grow worldwide really gives a sense of actually changing the world. So, I proudly leave the floor to you all!

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2005-05-26



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FLORENGHEL(AT)GMAIL.COM  
ISSN 1654-7985