



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Problematizing communication's shift from development to social change

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Over time, academic attention to “communication for social change” has begun to eclipse “development communication”. The gradual shift in rhetoric is not linear, and may not represent an actual shift in practice or within the development industry led by bilateral and multilateral donors. However, it has achieved enough attention to warrant critical reflection.

After years of considerable critique against the perceived injuries resulting from a narrow implementation of *development communication*, scholarly attention began to reframe its work within the rubric of *communication for social change* (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006; Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Wilkins, 1999). While many good reasons for this shift in rhetoric indeed exist, we now need to question what the new term embodies. The following review of a history of communication approaches to development and social change will consider the value of transitions as well as signal the unfortunate cooptation of key terms.

DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

Current articulations of communication for social change build from a history of approaches using strategic communication to promote a public good in the field of development, such as e.g. improvements in conditions of health, food and agriculture, governance or material welfare. Historically, development communication can be seen as communication *for* development, in terms of building media infrastructure and/or capacity in addition to delivering strategic messages, as well as communication *about* development, with the emergence of more critical considerations of discourse and praxis (Wilkins, 2001).

Using communication *for* development has been the central focus of research, both in terms of academic and development industry attention since Lerner first published his treatise fifty years ago (Lerner, 1958).

ISSUE 13
November 2009

Evaluations of social marketing and entertainment-education projects have drawn attention to media's potential to change the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of individuals (when sufficiently motivated to do so). Such projects have been somewhat varied in terms of their effects depending on the resonance of the issue with the targeted community, the quality of the project (Hornik, 1988), the political commitment of agencies and communities, and the funding levels from donors, though across a range of projects Snyder (2002) estimates the average change in behavior at 10 %. Their commonality lies in the fact that they concentrate on individuals as a central focus for social change.

Studies of communication *about* development criticize those projects for their preoccupation with individuals as the key figure in the social change process at the expense of understanding cultural, political, and economic contexts that guide and constrain individual action (Wilkins, 2000). Such critical approach to understanding the ways in which development approaches communicate assumptions about strategic social change also functions as a useful guide for understanding a history of concepts in the field of development communication (Escobar, 1995).

Modernization approaches to development, not only prominent in the early years of development communication literature but also still quite present in the development discourse of salient bilateral and multilateral donors, articulate a linear model of preconceived transition from traditional to modern societies at the national level (Lerner, 1958; Schramm, 1963). Modern society is conceived as democratic and capitalist, while individuals are expected to propel this transition through their empathic projections from local to national alignments, inspired via their exposure to media (particularly radio and news in Lerner's framework). This model has been critiqued for projecting northern, western models, particularly positioned within white, male, middle class perspectives, as universal development trajectories. Moreover, it has been critiqued for emphasizing the nation as the critical venue and the individual as the central actor in the social change process, and for privileging science and technology over other approaches to knowledge production (Melkote & Steeves, 2001).

Dependency critiques of the modernization approach recognized the importance of global contexts in understanding national development, and brought political interests and economic structures into focus (Schiller, 1991), privileging structural dimensions of development. Nevertheless, dependency approaches were faulted for not allowing more agency to individual and collective actors outside of government and corporate agencies.

Asserting the potential of communities to engage development processes

of their own, participatory approaches in turn emerged as a critique to modernization, for following too much of a top-down process, and to dependency, for minimizing the ability of local groups to engage in decision making (Jacobson & Servaes, 1999). While modernization placed development within a national context and dependency situated it within a global context, participatory approaches emphasized the role of communities as a central venue for collective action.

The term “participation” was proposed initially in response to critiques of earlier approaches as a coherent and moral model for social change. However, over time the initial value of its meaning was lost. As some argued that participatory approaches should be used as an ethical approach to process while in practice the term was also applied to attempting to promote efficient strategies to achieve preconceived outcomes, ambiguities grew over what participation signaled (Huesca, 2002). Similar to the process through which the term “empowerment” became co-opted, proposed initially as a strong stance articulating an ability to control resources and decisions but over time becoming integrated into a right-wing mantra arguing that individuals did not require public spending on health or welfare if they were to be empowered, the term “participation” unfortunately became co-opted. At present, it is not clear exactly what is meant when the word is used.

While academic approaches to development communication became increasingly entangled with attempts to promote participatory models of social change despite what was happening in the practice of the development industry, scholars of social change began to incorporate political and sociological attention to the work of social movements (Downing, 2001; Huesca, 2001; Rodríguez, 2001). Integrating social movements along with community media came to mean understanding social change not just within the purview of the development industry, but also situated within community action. Broadening the scope of the field to include social movements and community media corresponded with a gradual shift in rhetoric from “development” to social change.”

COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Over time, academic attention to “social change” has begun to eclipse “development,” critiqued for its historically limited theory (particularly when approached within modernization paradigms articulating individual actors as most powerful within linear processes of change) as well as its limited practice, engaging hierarchical models implemented to advance the political and economic interests of donors.

While approaches to social change within communication have not discarded attention to the development industry's hierarchical development style, with research analyzing media effects of projects using communication for development goals, the shift signals a more comprehensive framework that integrates the work of social movements and activists as well as critical attention to what the processes at stake communicate about our assumptions concerning the nature of problems and appropriate solutions. Research now incorporates attention to the texts and forms of communication, as well as to the political and economic structures of production (Wilkins, 2000).

The shift in rhetoric may be more a part of academic and NGO communication discussion though than represent actual shift in practice or within the development industry led by bilateral and multilateral donors. The pertinent division within the International Communication Association (ICA) has changed its name in the past few years from "development" to "social change," formerly connected with "intercultural" and subsequently with "global." The Rockefeller Foundation and its 2003 spinoff, the Communication for Social Change Consortium, among others, have also articulated "social change" as their central focus (Dagron & Tufte, 2006).

The term "development" remains prominent though, in development institutions, some academic educational programs (such as Malmö University's graduate degree), in fields focusing on media development and ICTs, and even within more sociologically and culturally oriented publications (Hemer & Tufte, 2005). While in the last ten years about 10 academic publications (books and articles) in English have referenced "social change" in connection with communication, more than 20 have used "development" in their titles. Also worth noting is that these titles are not mutually exclusive, with many articles using both development and social change, possibly representing an intent to appeal to both sets of interests (and perhaps an inability to take a stand -and here I include myself in this problematic position).

The gradual shift in terms is not linear. Rather, the use of terms involves a dialogic process of negotiation, as groups with interests at times competing and other times intersecting assert their agendas through their rhetoric and practice. While the use of the phrase "social change" has not completely replaced references to "development," the approach has achieved just enough attention to warrant critical reflection.

“Social change” brings together two terms meant to resonate with comprehensive approaches to strategic intervention designed to benefit the public good. The term “change” assumes the preexistence of a condition that can be observed as changing over time. Moreover, within this framework “change” also implies that strategic intervention can in fact influence such condition. Without further explanation, though, the term can be potentially problematic, since not all change involves conditions that benefit people. Some change can hurt, or even kill. To draw attention to more positive transitions that serve public interest, the term “benefit” is proposed as preferable to the more ambivalent term “change.”

If the term “change” requires clear conceptualization, the term “social” is potentially even more problematic. In this context, “social” tends to imply work within a human community, which would be for the benefit of a public good. Defining what public good is becomes difficult, since its definition is often contested from different perspectives. As a framework though, by privileging the social, other political, economic, and cultural conditions become marginalized. Political dimensions are considerably critical in the broader field of development, drawing our attention to media development, governance, civic engagement, and activist movements. Economic conditions matter in terms of recognizing the importance of material conditions, poverty, and distributive equity. Cultural identity also needs to be incorporated into a broader framework attesting to cultural production. Relying on a purely human venue for change also excludes potentially intriguing work in artificial intelligence, recognizing the communicative potential of communication with and among non-human technologies ([Hamelink, 2008](#)).

Opening up the framework to include political, economic, cultural, and technological concerns with social conditions also requires incorporating attention to contexts. Instead of conceiving of development within circumscribed local communities or national boundaries rooted in territories, transnational spheres within global contexts need to be articulated within a new “geometry” of development (Shah & Wilkins, 2004). This emerging geometry connects those with power, in what has been typically referred to as centers in relation to peripheries, regardless of spatial positioning. Such geometric mapping highlights access to social, human, and financial capital as more critical in terms of defining quality of life than geographical positioning in bounded territories. It is not necessarily the nation in which one resides that matters most, but rather one’s access to material, political, and social resources for healthy living.

Given the ambiguities of terms and the broadening of conceptual approaches, it is time now to move past articulating our field in terms of “post- development” and “re-developing”. Instead, we can begin to assert more comprehensive frameworks for strategic intervention. The approach

should be comprehensive through granting interdisciplinary recognitions of multiple conditions, bringing attention to issues of power and control over the production of communication. And it should be critical, understanding what social change approaches communicate about people and processes in order to advocate for long-term, systemic transition that is more about justice and rights than about ambivalent change. What we call this direction, though, is an open question.

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SUBMITTED BY: FLORENCIA ENGHEL

2009-10-27

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FLORENGHEL(AT)GMAIL.COM
ISSN 1654-7985