

EDITOR'S COLUMN: An unconventional partnership

by OSCAR HEMER

Untimeliness may not seem like a desirable quality. Who but an eccentric would *wish* to be at odds with the times? Yet, according to Chilean literary scholar Idelber Avelar (1999), the untimely – that which runs against the grain of the present – is the constitutive quality of the literary. It gives literature the unique ability to look back and look forward at the same time. To be untimely is perhaps not an aspiration for ComDev, although it may have appeared so at the time of its planning and establishing as a master course at Malmö University around the turn of the millennium. In the late 1990s, everything associated with “development” and “the third world” was widely regarded as obsolete. In perspective, however, the timing has proved to be absolutely right. But then again ComDev today is something quite different from what development communication was in its post-World War II heyday.

A 10th anniversary is a good opportunity for looking back and looking forward simultaneously. ComDev is by now a well-established part of Malmö University, with 120 graduates, a huge body of accumulated knowledge and experience, and a record number of newly enrolled and applying students. But we still have problems explaining to our colleagues in other areas what ComDev actually is. In many ways it is actually easier to define what it's *not*.

It is not an academic discipline in the traditional sense, although some wish to establish it as such. I'd rather describe it as a *multidisciplinary field of theory and practice*. There is an established tradition, dating back to the post-war era of the late 1940s and gaining momentum in the 1960s and early '70s, when *development* was an undisputed priority on the global agenda. *Development communication*, as it was then generally called, appeared as the means to achieve development – i.e. modernization – through communication – i.e. information campaigns for the diffusion of better practices in agriculture, health care, sanitation etc. in the so called developing countries

– or the third world, as it is still often referred to. (The term stems from the times of the Cold War, post-colonial liberation and the formation of the non-aligned movement. The first world was Western Europe. North America, Australia and Japan, that is, the more or less liberal capitalist world. The second world was the socialist world of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. The third world comprised *the rest*, encompassing completely diverse countries such as Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Papua New Guinea – and the two Koreas! (South Korea was still in the ‘70s regarded as part of the third world). And both China and India, of course!) That history indeed seems very distant today. When referring to it I feel that there is more rupture than continuity. It is certainly one answer to what Communication for Development is. But it is only a part of the picture.

So what *is* it? I believe that the field is in a way yet to be defined, or in a constant state of transformation and redefinition – just as the entire world is in a state of transition and reconfiguration. And, equally crucial, ComDev as it was outlined and developed here at Malmö University’s School of Arts and Communication (K3), did *not* emerge from *within* the existing field. It was rather a result of the conflation of what you could call a *global cultural studies* viewpoint on the one hand and a *media practitioner* perspective on the other.

Incidentally, this was also a reflection of my personal interests and motivations. My humble formal academic background – apart from a bachelor in Journalism – is not in Comparative Literature or Cultural Studies, but in Economic History and Spanish. I have an abandoned thesis project in my wardrobe, on “Brazilian sub-imperialism”, which was supposed to be a critical assessment of Latin American *dependency* theory – the contender to modernization theory, within the same economist paradigm. (I am glad that I never pursued it. I wrote my first novel instead.)

My likewise limited experience as a development communication practitioner dates to the late ‘80s in Ethiopia,

where my wife served as a midwife tutor for Swedish Save the Children, and I did some consultancy work for the local Sida office in Addis Ababa. One of my projects was a locally produced booklet about Ethio-Swedish development cooperation. The title, *Why are we in Ethiopia?*, was a subtle allusion to Norman Mailer's novel *Why are we in Vietnam?* And a very pertinent question at the time. Ethiopia was one of the last strongholds of communism, in a full-blown war with secessionist rebels in what was to become independent Eritrea. In the early '90s, I was engaged in an odd and informal academic institution called the Nordic Summer University. There I met Thomas Hylland Eriksen, now professor of Anthropology at Oslo University and a regular ComDev guest lecturer. Together we formed and coordinated a cutting-edge study circle under the theme *Cultural Globalization* – at a time when globalization had not yet come of age. Largely as an offspring of this collaboration, I was to coordinate two open academic conferences in Lund (Malmö University did not exist at the time): *Culture in the Global Village* (1993) and the sequel *Culture in the Virtual City* (1998), with culture and media scholar Kevin Robins as one of the invited speakers. Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Kevin Robins were the keynote speakers at the recent Jubilee seminar in Malmö in September, and they were also the speakers at the very first ComDev seminar in September 2000. Their work was – and still is – crucial for the theoretical framing of the program. (Kevin was at the time heading a master program in *Global Media and Transnational Communication* at Goldsmiths' College in London, which provided a lot of material that we could adopt to our curriculum.)

But the other equally important leg of ComDev is the practitioner experience. The idea of an academic course in Communication for Development in Malmö was not *mine* originally. It was proposed by my neighbor in Dalby, radio journalist Jan Petersson, whom I used to meet in the communal laundry room. I have already told that story in the editorial of the very first Glocal Times, so I am not going to

repeat it here. My point is that the Malmö ComDev master was the result of a series of happily coinciding circumstances. In fact, quite similar to the way Globalization and the Network Society emerged, according to Manuel Castells – the great theorist of globalization. It did *not* happen by historical determinism – as Marxists or victorious Liberals would have it – but actually by *chance*.

That is an intriguing and important point. That the world might have looked completely different. And that it may –and most probably will- look very different 10 years from now. The 1990s were framed by two landmark events: The fall of the Berlin Wall in '89, and 9/11 of 2001. The first decade of the new millennium is not as easy to define. There is no closing landmark event even remotely resembling 9/11. Not that we can see at present, at least. But in terms of communication, the last decade has been as revolutionary as the '90s. The digital revolution is perhaps the closest we can come to a permanent revolution. The proliferation of new, social media and applications in the last four five years have an enormous potential impact at all levels of society.

From the outset in 2000, we made globalization and the emerging network society the framework for a renewed analysis of both communication and development. Castells' *Information Age* trilogy was compulsory reading up until 2007 – when Thomas Hylland Eriksen presented a more comprehensive and up-to-date substitute.

Castells covered everything, but did in fact not have much to say about media and communication in particular, although he of course had a focus on new IC *technology* and later coined the term *The Internet Galaxy* as the successor to Marshall McLuhan's Gutenberg Galaxy. In *Communication Power*, his long-awaited sequel to the trilogy, however, he really puts communication in focus as the key to politics, economy and all fields of human interaction in the network society: "*Power in the network society is communication power.*"

Development is also making a grand comeback, lately, after having been questioned and dismissed by Neo-Liberals and Anti-Liberals alike. After the global financial crisis, we see what sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse, in his premonitory address to the IAMCR summit in July 2008, called *the implosion of the neoliberal Anglo-American model and the return of the development state* (which is not necessarily a democratic one). This may have enormous implications for international development cooperation. The bilateral and multilateral development industry is completely dominated by the Western powers and Japan, whereas the new models for social and economic development that poor countries aspire to are China and India, and to a lesser but possibly increasing degree, Brazil.

The renewed prominence of both communication and development ought to imply a new momentum for ComDev. Looking ten years ahead, it is easy to foresee that the world will be faced with ever more severe communication challenges, which today's development agents are poorly prepared to meet. (A main challenge to this field may in fact be to overcome the obstacle of the development industry itself.)

Looking back and looking forward, I am finally coming to the *unconventional partnership* between ComDev and K3. An unconventional partnership may sound like an old-fashioned euphemism for *aqueer* relationship. And in a way it *is* queer. But what I primarily mean by unconventional is that Communication for Development at other institutions – the rather few universities in the world that offer it – is conventionally hosted by more traditional communication departments, and/or closely linked to development studies. At first glance it might seem that Malmö University's department of International Migration and Ethnic Relations – or that of Global Political Studies – would have been a more appropriate environment for ComDev than the “arty” and hip K3. But the creative K3 environment has been absolutely crucial for ComDev's success – and it has certainly influenced both

content and form. Just as ComDev undoubtedly has been pivotal for K3's *internationalization* – to use a really obsolete term that calls for a substitute.

Many factors have contributed to the proficiency of this partnership:

- the integration of theory and practice;
- the ambition to combine academic and artistic research, and explore new formats and pedagogies;
- the cultural studies approach to media and communication, and the close collaboration with interaction design – which like ComDev also has a participatory approach.

These factors, all together, provided a very fruitful common ground. Yet it is only in the last few years that we have started to mutually realize its potential. Add the Ørecomm collaboration with Roskilde, on the verge of becoming institutionalized, and the coming ten years have the prospect of becoming as flourishing as the first decade.

There is but one cloud in the sky: the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU students as from 2011, which may affect the diversity of the ComDev community in a negative way. But I save those worries for another time.

References

Avelar, Idelber (1999). *The untimely present: postdictatorial Latin American fiction and the task of mourning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

In this issue (December 2010)

by FLORENCIA ENGHEL

Late in October, when I tried to log into the Glocal Times website to start uploading the contents of this, the 15th issue, the logon didn't work. The explanations provided by Malmö University's ComDev web developer referred to 'a persistent bug' and to the server (or the service?) having been hacked.

This may not strike the reader as significant news while Wikileaks is the hot topic, with the whistle-blowing group releasing classified U.S. State Department diplomatic cables in partnership with a global group of renowned media outlets – Great Britain’s “The Guardian”, Spain’s “El País”, the US’ “The New York Times”, German magazine “Der Spiegel” and France’s “Le Monde”- and its founder, Julian Assange, being held in custody in Britain, arrested following an international warrant to face sexual crime allegations in Sweden. Cyber-chaos 4.0: humans and technology interacting, not symbiotically, but in a context of information overload and massive confusion. However, the unexpected incident raised several questions for which there are no easy answers. At a time when governments are withdrawing their support to universities (with the United Kingdom as the most flagrant ongoing example, and the introduction in Sweden of tuition fees for non-European Union students as from 2011), how is the nature of university-based publishing affected, and how is such publishing to be supported?

The materiality of the Glocal Times project, usually disguised by the willing collaboration at a distance of many people that has led to the publication of 15 issues so far, suddenly became evident. A small staff of three part-time workers, we had no contingency plan in the event of the website being hacked, and therefore when things went wrong we were forced to face the situation with scarce resources. We lacked the time needed to move the webmag to a new publishing platform in a thought-through fashion. We lacked the patience to discuss precious details regarding the webmag’s “look and feel”. We lacked the immediate possibility to resort to an experienced graphic designer who could collaborate with the web developer in moving from a preset template to a custom design that would address our editorial needs. And so on. We are now online after a strenuous effort –and glad to be!, but also variedly dissatisfied and/or concerned.

The “do it yourself” ethos is a tricky one when it comes to generating a rich environment for the continuity and evolution of projects such as Glocal Times. Appearing self-reliant becomes a double-edged sword. It easily leads everybody – ourselves included- to believing that problems can be solved with little or no material resources, if only there is enough goodwill.

Our apologies go to our contributors, for the unforeseen delay in publishing after they raced to meet our deadlines. And to our readers, for any oddities that the new website might present at this point. In the coming months we will be exploring ways to rise to the challenge of turning the relocated webmag into a better version of itself.

In the meantime, in this issue, Hemant Shah starts from three preexisting assessments of development communication studies to look into trends within the field between 1997 and 2006.

Originally presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA) in 2007, his article raises important questions regarding the advancement of the theory and practice of communication for development.

Soledad Muñiz problematizes the question of whether participatory development communication does in fact create dialogue and empowerment. Focusing on a choice of community-based interventions in Latin America and Africa that use participatory video or participatory photography and group discussion as their main tools of action in order to create dialogue and empowerment, she reflects on lessons learnt and warns us about the reiterated use of non-participatory approaches for the research and evaluation of participatory processes.

Ylva Ekström introduces us to the subtleties of young women’s interaction with a changing mediascape in Tanzania. Based on her doctoral thesis “‘We are like Chameleons’: Changing Mediascapes, Cultural Identities and City Sisters in Dar es Salaam”, defended earlier this year, she discusses how the

possibility and ability to navigate through a glocal mediascape play a crucial role in the construction of Tanzanian young women's identities.

The Department for Methodologies and Aid Effectiveness of the Swedish International Cooperation Development Agency (Sida) introduces "Getting it together", a guidance note released earlier this year to provide recommendations on when and how communication can be used as a means to promote enhanced accountability, transparency, participation and non-discrimination within bilateral development cooperation.

And last but not least, Wendy Quarry and Ricardo Ramírez share their insights following a Syype-based public dialogue with a group of academics –all of them members of the Participatory Communication Research Section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR)- in which their book Listening before telling was discussed.

Your comments and suggestions are most welcome at florenghel@gmail.com