

Meta-research of development communication studies, 1997-2006

by HEMANT SHAH

The field of development communication in the United States has been in ferment almost from the moment of its conception. Lerner's foundational study, *Modernizing the Middle East: The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), which established the idea of using mass communication to aid in the process of moving individuals and societies from traditional to modern, was not received with universal acclaim and acceptance among American scholars, as it seems now common to assume. Among the critics, one faulted the book for "generalizing on the basis of meager particulars" (Salem, 1959) and another thought it was full of uninformed political judgments (Badeau, 1959). A historian, noting a range of contradictory evidence, criticized the assumption of direct and powerful media effects in the postcolonial world. These and other critics were silenced, marginalized and otherwise brought into line with the predominant perspective that American experience with societal transformation was a universally applicable model that could be exported to modernize the new states of the postcolonial world.

Thus, the dominant paradigm of development communication, rooted in Lerner's model of communication and modernization (defined as individuals changing their behaviors and "lifeways" to emulate the ways of the white west that were shown in western media), did not become dominant because it was somehow naturally superior and obviously correct. It became dominant through the powerful policing of intellectual territory staked out by American functionalists and behavioralists interested in foreign policy initiatives designed to establish geopolitical bulkheads against the Soviets during the Cold War (see Gilman, 2003; Latham, 2000).

In any case, modernization did become the dominant paradigm underlying research into and the practice of development communication, defined broadly as communication-based interventions for social and economic improvement (see Singhal & Rogers, 2001; Wilkins, 2008). From the late 1950s through

much of the 1960s (though the specific time period can be debated), modernization-based development projects were planned for and implemented in the postcolonial world primarily by Western institutions and scholars (Melkote, 2002; Mody, 2000). As this research was carried out, intellectuals in the postcolonial world were increasingly critical of the modernization approach. Dependency theorists from Latin America led the attack on modernization theory (e.g., Frank, 1969), their arguments reflecting the general critique of global capitalism and colonialism offered earlier by C.L.R. James, Eric Williams, and Amílcar Cabral, among others (see Blaut, 1993).

Soon, Latin American scholars such as Beltrán (1976) and Díaz Bordenave (1976), and Pakistani scholar Inayatullah (1967), challenged the modernization-based approach to development communication as well. By the mid-1970s, Rogers (1976), who had trained many of those critics, edited a special issue of *Communication Research* titled “Passing of the Dominant Paradigm.” In the place of modernization theory a number of alternatives had entered the arena. Though many concepts from the tradition of US communication science retained their influence over the field (e.g., agenda setting, knowledge gap, and even the hypodermic-needle model of media effects), development communication practices also were informed by newer approaches such as participatory communication, dialogic theory, and theories of cultural integration.

Assessments of development communication research

The research referred to here was prompted in part by three assessments of development communication. Fair and Shah (1997) conducted a meta-research of 140 studies of development communication published between 1987 and 1996 which highlighted a number of trends: technological advances had forced development communication researchers to accommodate new media into development communication

theory and practice; more critical theoretical approaches were used, acknowledging that development communication was a more complex affair than assumed by hypodermic needle models of media effects, prominent in an earlier era; conceptualizing development communication based on alternative theoretical approaches was running ahead of actual implementation of the new ideas.

In a 1998 meta-research, Wei examined published research about Asian countries and found the dominant paradigm of development communication exerted strong influence. Alternative approaches to development communication were at the “inception and awareness stages” and rarely implemented in projects (Wei, 1998), and researchers were heavily focused on new information and communication technology and its potential for stimulating modernization. Wei lamented that more attention was not given to alternatives such as folk media.

More than ten years after the meta-research by Fair and Shah (1997), a number of factors have had important potential implications for development communication. For example, the worldwide incidence of AIDS and other health concerns reached crisis proportions. Further technological innovation expanded the range and scope of communication networks through the World Wide Web. Access to new technologies improved to such an extent that, though serious gaps remain, unprecedented numbers of people now have access to telephony, computers, and satellite communication. Given these trends, what is the state of development communication research today?

The research reported here was also prompted by a third overview of development communication published in the *Journal of Communication* (Kim 2005). That article seemed to confuse some concepts related to the study of development communication. There, the term neomodernization was applied to participatory, emancipatory, and action-research approaches to development communication, but it is more accurately applied to development communication approaches that retain

an emphasis on high-end technology and industrialization as the bases for national development (see So, 1990). The participatory, emancipatory, and action-research approaches fall within so-called postmodern approaches that do not view industrialization and sophisticated technology as central to development (see Fair & Shah, 1997).

Kim's assessment of modernization theory was also problematic. The author wondered whether "early modernization theories might have been disregarded by some [development communication] scholars prematurely" (Kim, 2005). Two points need to be made about this observation. First, it may not be the case that modernization theory was, in fact, jettisoned *in toto*. Clearly, newer theories were considered during the late 1980s and early 1990s and Lerner was not much referenced, but some mainstream communication theories related to the modernization paradigm remained (see Fair & Shah, 1997). Second, Kim's observation ignores one of the primary reasons that scholars, practitioners, and activists were disillusioned by the modernization paradigm. Despite the fact that development communication campaigns based on modernization models sometimes did contribute to *aggregate* nation-level economic growth and agricultural productivity, the *distribution* of those benefits typically were concentrated in the hands of elites – a pattern precisely the opposite to the one predicted by the original economic models of modernization theory (for example, Rostow [1960]). Despite these problems, Kim's review (2005) raised a number of important issues that could fruitfully be addressed by a systematic analysis of the most recent development communication research. For example, the ubiquity of technological advances in information delivery, the prevalence of new issues such as AIDS, and growing gender inequities. In terms of modernization theory, she asked whether some aspects of the theory are more useful today than others, and why the influence of modernization theory seems to have endured.

To address these and other issues and concerns about development communication, this article reports on a meta-research of development communication studies conducted between 1997 and 2006, in which research examining the role of mass communication in “third world” national development was examined using a coding scheme that replicated to the extent possible elements from two earlier meta-researches of the same field. As such, some results from this study can be compared to trends in development communication research from the 1958-1986 (Fair, 1988) and the 1987-1996 periods (Fair & Shah, 1997).

Method

Meta-research is a technique that allows systematic examination of completed research projects on a common topic. There are two kinds of meta-research (Rogers, 1985): (1) Meta-analysis, which integrates and reanalyzes quantified data from a body of research literature, and (2) propositional inventory, which codes into a set of standardized categories various aspects of studies, such as their theoretical frameworks, conceptualization, measurement decisions, conclusions, etc. The result of both procedures is an overview of trends and features characterizing the body of research. The project reported here is a propositional inventory of development communication studies published between 1997 and 2006. Following Fair and Shah (1997), the studies had to satisfy three criteria to be included in this meta-research: (1) deal with the media’s role in national development (primarily social and economic improvement, broadly conceived); (2) examine how radio, television, newspapers, magazines and/or new communication technology in developing countries affected people’s attitudes, behavior, or knowledge; and (3) be published in English as scholarly journal articles, book chapters, or books.

The research was initially located using all standard indexes and electronic databases. Once the items were collected, the citations and references in these articles and books were examined to

locate additional studies not listed in the databases. Then, the citations and references in the additional studies were reviewed to once again identify and collect studies that fit the criteria for inclusion. This cycle was repeated until no new items appeared. Dissertations, convention papers, technical reports, and items from the popular press were not included. Also not included, because they are based in traditions other than development communication strictly speaking, were diffusion of innovation studies (rooted in rural sociology and agricultural economics) and development journalism studies (rooted in press freedom debates). With these criteria specified, the literature search resulted in 183 items that were included in the meta-research (138 journal articles, 38 book chapters, and 7 books). Within the parameters established by the selection criteria, the 183 items represent a “near universe” sample, as the samples analyzed by the previous meta-researches. Researchers read items closely and coded for the following variables:

- Theoretical framework for national development
- Conceptual definition of national development
- Operational definition of national development
- Theoretical framework for media impact on national development
- Conceptual definition of media impact on national development
- Operational definition of media impact on national development
- Media studied
- Other media variables included in study
- Methods used
- Country and region of study
- Consequences of development communication
- Conclusions of study
- Suggestions for future studies

Response categories were developed based on the previous meta-researches (Fair, 1988; Fair & Shah, 1997) and supplemented and adjusted as needed to reflect unique features

of the current set of 183 publications. For each research item, coders recorded up to three codes for most of the variables listed above.

Results

The studies in 1997-2006 were conducted primarily in India (22.7%), followed by South Africa (7.9%), Nepal (5.0%), Thailand (4.2%) and Nigeria (2.1%). India was also the top locale for development communication research in both previous meta-researches. Nigeria also was among the top five in both previous meta-researches, and Nepal was in the top five in 1987-1996. Another way to see the trend in where development communication research is taking place is by regional breakdowns across the three meta-researches.

Clearly, Latin America has declined significantly as a locale for development communication since the first meta-research, as has the Middle East. Conversely, Africa has become a more popular place for development communication research, with one-third of the studies in the 1997-2006 period located there. Asia remains the most common location for development communication research.

Theoretical frameworks, conceptual definitions, operational definitions

Theories of national development were used relatively rarely to frame research on development communication. Over time, there is a drop-off in the proportion of studies that discuss theories of national development, whether they provided historical background or not.

From the first time period to the second there was a rise in the proportion of studies that used a theoretical discussion of national development to frame the research. Conversely, descriptive approaches to national development decreased from the first time period to the second. But in the 1997-2006 period,

there are again fewer theoretical discussions of national development. In fact, the proportion of studies that discuss theories of national development versus those with descriptive discussions of national development in the 1997-2006 period is similar to the 1958-1986 period. The patterns suggest that the field has moved back to emphases of the earlier era in terms of the extent to which theoretical discussions of national development are carried out.

In the studies that mentioned theories of national development in 1997-2006 (n=33), the five most frequently mentioned were modernization (47.1%), participatory development (44.1%), dependency (20.1%), feminist development (17.6%) and globalization (5.9%). Other approaches, all mentioned in 2.9% of the studies, were capacity building, post-modern development, liberation theory, democracy building, and self-reliance. In the 1987-1996 meta-research the most frequently mentioned theories of national development were political economy, dependency, basic needs, social transformation, national integration, and culturalist theory (no percentages were reported).

Many studies provided a conceptual definition of national development. In the 1958-1986 period 55% of the studies defined national development conceptually as modern attitudes and behavior. In the 1987-1996 period, 126 studies specified conceptual definitions, while in the 1997-2006 period, 115 did so.

Conceptual definitions in 1997-2006 are largely the same as those in 1987-1996. Exceptions are health education, social change, and democratic development. Other notable differences are that traditional-to-modern transformation decreases in frequency while raising living standards increases. Meeting basic needs and self-reliance also decrease from 1987-1996 to 1997-2006. In general, the range of conceptualizations of national development in 1997-2006 is similar to the one in

1987-1996, but the order of priority given to specific conceptualizations differs.

In all three time periods, most studies did not provide operational definitions for national development. In the 1958-1986 period, 71% of the studies provided no operational definition of national development; in the 1987-1996 period, 86% did not; and in the 1997-2006 period, 61.7% did not. In the studies that did, socioeconomic indicators and measures of political knowledge were the most frequently mentioned in all three time periods. In the 1997-2006 period, measures of health improvement also became prominent. The three types of measures – socioeconomic indicators, political knowledge, and health – accounted for slightly more than 81% of operational definitions of national development in 1997-2006.

This study also tracked how development communication research used theories of media impact on national development. Most research did not discuss any theories of media impact on national development, which was true for the two earlier time periods as well. However, development communication researchers dealt with theories of media impact more often in 1997-2006 (in about 47% of studies) than they did in 1958-1986 (in about 35% of studies) or in 1987-1996 (41% of studies).

There are several interesting trends to note. First, Lerner's model of media effects on national development has reappeared in the 1997-2006 time period after disappearing in 1987-1996, though other theories from the same tradition of direct media effects remained (e.g., arguably, agenda setting, hypodermic needle, and cultivation). This is not to say that Lerner's model was not mentioned at all in 1987-1996, just that it was not utilized to theoretically ground the research. Second, only two other theories from the traditional US-based behavioral science approach, social learning theory and knowledge gap, appear in the 1997-2006 period. These trends suggest that researchers continue to find utility in Lerner's model – perhaps using

portions of the model that seem relevant in contemporary circumstances. The trends also suggest, however, that development communication researchers are more eclectic in their theoretical orientations than in either of the previous time periods. Theoretical models from a neo-Marxist tradition (hegemony, media imperialism, and dependency) and from various critical perspectives (such as participatory communication, conscientization, public sphere, and digital divide) now have a firm footing within development communication research. The third trend to note is that the two most prominently mentioned theories in 1997-2006 – participatory communication and social learning – reflect two popular development communication project orientations that were mentioned as innovations in the 1987-1996 study: participatory development and edu-tainment, respectively.

Media effects typically have been conceptualized as having direct or contributory effects on national development (at individual and structural levels). In 1958-1986, direct effects of media on national development was the predominant conceptualization. In 1987-1996, media were more often conceptualized as having contributory effects on national development. In 1997-2006, 142 studies specified a conceptual definition of media effects on national development. The direct effects idea is again the most popular conceptualization.

Operational definitions of media effects on national development were identified in 55% of the studies in 1997-2006. The proportion is similar to the 1958-1986 period (58% of the studies). In contrast, operational definitions were present in only 31% of studies in 1987-1996.

The most prominent operational measures in each time are more-or-less traditional measures of media impact from the behavioral science approach to media effects research. Even among those measures that appear for the first time in 1997-2006, only the “democratic decision-making” and perhaps the “audience feedback” operational definitions of media effects

reflect a newer theoretical framework (i.e., participatory communication). Despite many new theoretical approaches to media effects on national development, it seems development communication researchers continue rely on “older” operational definitions of media effects, suggesting perhaps that theory is outpacing empirical research.

Methods used in development communication research

Out of 87 studies in 1997-2006 in which research methods were specifically mentioned, 48.3% of studies were quantitative studies (surveys, secondary data analysis, content analysis and meta-research) while 40.2% studies were qualitative (interviews, case studies, observation, focus groups, and ethnography) and 11.5% used a combination of the two types. The remaining 96 studies specified no method or were essays with no need for formal social science methods. The relatively large proportion of articles with no methods specifically identified represents publications that were theoretical pieces, concept explications, or critical essays unaccompanied by empirical work.

A specific medium of interest was noted in 147 studies in 1997-2006. The media most often examined then were radio, television, and new media technology (e.g., Internet, satellites, wireless telephony). Videotape received little attention. Direct comparisons with the other meta-researches could not be made because they used slightly different coding schemes. However, in the 1987-1996 meta-research new media technology received little attention from development communication researchers and video was the third most popular medium of interest (see Fair & Shah, 1997).

The design of development communication research projects incorporated a variety of variables thought to intervene in the process of imparting information from source to receiver. Not all were measured in the behavioral science sense, but were taken into account in project planning, research, and/or

evaluation. (Only 80 of the studies in the current study mentioned such intervening variables.) Interpersonal communication was a variable quite commonly mentioned in 1958-1986 and in 1987-1996, but not as much in 1997-2006.

Several other patterns are worth noting. First, each of the intervening variables noted in 1958-1986 is carried over into development communication research in either one or both of the subsequent time periods. In each of those, however, there are some variables unique to the body of research. Government policies, political economy, message credibility, and capitalism appear only in the 1987-1996 period. In the 1997-2006 period, spirituality, race/ethnicity, language competence, technology, and local politics appear as intervening variables for the first time. The first three of these variables perhaps reflect that researchers were taking issues of culture and personal identity more seriously as factors that impinge on the development communication process. However, this newer focus may have been at the cost of not considering structural factors, reflected by the political economy and capitalism variables, which were taken up by researchers in 1987-1996 but not in 1997-2006.

A significant trend is that gender, which did not assume an important role in research design in 1987-1996, attracts much more attention in 1997-2006, becoming the most often mentioned intervening variable. The trend reflects Kim's observation (2005) that gender inequity has assumed an important place in the array of global problems related to development communication. Yet another trend of note is that education level, which appeared in the first two time periods, does not appear in 1997-2006. Perhaps literacy can be understood as a proxy for education in 1997-2006, but in the first two time periods literacy and education level both appeared separately as intervening variables.

Consequences of development communication research

The table shown below reports the five most frequently mentioned consequences of development communication specified in 148 studies in 1997-2006. Reported alongside are the proportions of studies from the other two time periods that mentioned these same consequences.

Table: Suggestions for future research in development communication research

	1958-1986 (n=224)	1987-1996 (n=43)	1997-2006 (n=38)
Develop new dev comm. models	—	—	27,0%
Examine content relevance	32,0%	13,3%	27,0%
Need indigenous models	—	36,6	24,1
Study new technologies	—	6,7	21,6
More comparative research	32,0	6,7	18,9
Need more policy research	16,0	40,0	8,1
Develop new normative frame	—	13,3	5,4

The consequences reported most often in all three time periods are those consistent with the more traditional views on modernization – that is, media activate modernity and media raise knowledge levels. The three other consequences listed are associated with views critical of modernization – particularly the perspectives that media create development problems and benefit certain classes. The consequences associated with a traditional view on modernization were less frequently mentioned in 1987-1996 and make a strong return in 1997-2006 (accounting for nearly 86% of the studies), while the view that only certain classes benefit from development communication decreases from 1987-1996 to 1997-2006.

Conclusions in development communication research

The most frequently reported conclusion in 1997-2006 is that development theory needs more attention. In 1987-1996 this conclusion was even more frequently mentioned, indicating that scholars were being urged to continue thinking carefully about what development means. Researchers in 1997-2006 frequently concluded that development communication has a positive impact on social structure as they also did in 1987-1996. One difference is that negative impact on social structure is much less frequently mentioned as a conclusion in 1997-2006. Studies in 1997-2006 do not often conclude that there are positive impacts of development communication on individuals, while in 1958-1986, this was one of the most common conclusions, mentioned in one-quarter of all studies.

Another important finding in the 1997-2006 period is the apparent dissatisfaction with the state of the art in theory and research in development communication. Aside from urging attention to development theory, the studies also urged more attention to development communication campaign planning by taking into account, local culture, gender issues, and multimedia delivery of information, and to improving research methods.

Suggestions for future research

Despite the fact that many studies in 1997-2006 concluded that development communication can have positive impact, there is a call for developing new models of development communication, which perhaps indicates a level of discontent with the existing dominant approaches. The suggestions encouraging more comparative studies and developing indigenous models of development communication also may be indicative of discontent about the existing models. Another important result in the suggestions for future research is the drop-off from 1987-1996 to 1997-2006 in the call for policy research. Also dropping off from previous years is the suggestion to develop normative frameworks for studying development communication. The suggestions in 1997-2006 to pay more attention to new

technologies is consistent with other findings in this meta-research that reveal more concern overall for computers, the Internet, the World Wide Web, etc.

Discussion

The title of the Fair and Shah (1997) meta-research was “Continuities and Discontinuities in Communication and Development Research Since 1958.” It is worthwhile to revisit this theme and review patterns and trends in development communication research in light of findings from 1997-2006.

First, there are some clear consistencies over the time periods:

- In the 1987-1996 and 1997-2006 meta-researches, there are similar conceptualizations of national development.
- In all three meta-researches a core set of mediating variables are taken into account, accompanied by variables that seem to come and go over the time periods.
- In each time period, researchers conclude that development communication has a positive impact on individuals, social structures, or both.

Second, some patterns seem cyclical. Some results of 1997-2006 return to distributions that look like results in 1958-1986 after a different set of results in 1987-1996. For example:

- Though there was not much theoretical discussion of national development in any of the three time periods, the frameworks for discussing national development (i.e., theoretical or descriptive) appear in about the same proportion of studies in 1958-1986 and 1997-2006.
- In terms of conceptualization of media effects on development, the direct effects model was frequently used in 1997-2006, as it was in 1958-1986. In the 1987-1996 period media mainly were discussed as having contributory effects on development.
- In terms of specific theories of media effects on national development, the Lerner model reappears in 1997-2006, but

was not used at all as a basis to theorize media effects on national development in the 1987-1996 time period, though several theories of direct media effects remained in play.

- In the 1997-2006 analysis, the consequence of development communication most often mentioned was that it activates modernity, which was also mentioned most often in the 1958-1996 meta-analysis.

Finally, some patterns reveal important changes over time, but apparent advances in thinking are sometimes accompanied by trends that may undermine progress. For example:

- Gender issues received prominent attention as mediating variables in 1997-2006, but relatively few studies conclude by calling for giving more attention to gender.
- Questions of cultural and identity received significant attention in 1997-2006 (e.g., race, gender, and spirituality are mentioned as important mediating variables), but at the cost, it seems, of attention to structural issues (e.g., political economy and capitalism as mediating variables) that were more prominently mentioned in 1987-1996.
- There is now a more eclectic set of theories that guide thinking about the potential media impact on national development, but this seems to be accompanied by a continued reliance on a narrow range of operational measures that are present in each time period.

The results of this meta-research have revealed the contours of the body of development communication research conducted between 1997 and 2006. Examining these findings and comparing them with results from previous meta-researches has provided some insights into the trends and patterns in this area since 1958.

The results also allow us to address some of the issues raised in earlier assessments of the development communication field by Fair and Shah (1997), Wei (1998), and Kim (2005). Fair and Shah (1997) noted that development communication researchers had incorporated new communication technology into

development communication theory and practice. The 1997-2006 meta-research showed that new media were at the center of many studies and there was a call for even more research on new communication technology and development. The critical approaches to development communication that first appeared in 1987-1996 are present in 1997-2006, but the “older” ideas about modernization and about mass media have persisted into the most recent era, as Wei (1998) noted in the study of development communication in Asia. Part of the explanation for this persistence may be that technological innovations have rekindled confidence in the Lernerian version of communication and development. This renewed hope in Lerner’s model is an old story: Each new technological innovation in the postcolonial world since 1958 – television, satellites, microwave, computers, call centers, wireless telephony – has been accompanied by determined hope that Lerner’s modernization model will work to increase growth and productivity and produce modern cosmopolitan citizens.

However, development communication researchers have acknowledged, at least since the 1987-1996 meta research, that development communication is a more complex process than Lerner’s model and hypodermic-needle media effects models imply. In the 1997-2006 meta-research the recognition of complexity is reflected in, for example, the popularity of conceptualizing media effects in the contexts of participatory communication and edu-tainment approaches. Both take into account the multiple layers of social and cultural life that even small communities embody, consider the complications involved in how people make and take meanings from media messages, and employ interdisciplinary message theories to analyze effectiveness of development communication programs. On the other hand, however, conceptualization and theorizing about development communication continues to run ahead of operational measures. The most popular measures to determine impact of development communication in all three meta-researches were knowledge gain, frequency of media use, and

behavior change – all of them individual-level measures. Social change indicators, which would reflect the “newer” conceptual emphases on structural change, are much less frequently used and first appeared only in the 1997-2006 time period.

An important new area in development communication research reflects the growing importance of health issues. In particular, the global AIDS crisis seemed to touch off a flurry of development communication projects oriented towards changing the health behaviors of vulnerable groups. Closely related, is the growing attention to gender issues as they are linked to women’s health, inequity, and empowerment. Gender has become the primary mediating variable of concern to development communication researchers in 1997-2006.

Kim (2005) suggested that modernization had resulted in economic growth and in many cases researchers had been too quick to reject it. She did not take into account, however, that the benefits of growth had been unevenly distributed. The analysis reported here suggests not only that modernization has not been rejected completely, but also that development communication may result in uneven gains in which only certain classes and groups benefit.

Finally, we might consider why modernization theory seems to endure and even flourish despite heavy criticism and the existence of a number of viable theoretical and practical alternatives (see Manyozo, 2006 on the latter). First, the open-endedness of modernization is quite seductive. According to Lucian Pye (2004), one of the stalwarts of political modernization theory, the biggest mistake of modernization theorists was not specifying a time frame. In his view, modernization will always work if given enough time. Second, modernization persists perhaps because it allows adherents to legitimately claim that no person, no country, no culture need be left behind. The lesson from the modernizers is: If you just follow the path earlier followed by the West, you can be like us. Finally, because modernization theory was framed as altruistic

aid to the poor and dispossessed, it seems to have persisted methodologically as a blueprint for practical development communication projects and ideologically and discursively as a foreign policy centerpiece despite little evidence that it actually works to distribute benefits equitably.

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