

Is the Development Industry Taking Care of Business?

Why We Need Accountability in Communication for Social Justice

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Abstract

The development industry works to promote strategic programs for the public good, yet the trend toward privatization may be shifting accountability toward the values of profitable corporations at the expense of improving human lives. Instead, a communication for social justice orientation reminds us of the importance of equality and human rights. Accountability in advocacy requires thoughtful reflection on establishing appropriate goals and assessment strategies that are resonant with a social justice rather than a corporate framework.

Key Words: Communication, Development, Privatization, Accountability, Social Justice

Development work engages communication toward improving our lives; in order to enhance the potential for effective social change we must consider historical contexts and structural parameters of strategic intervention. Through understanding how programs have worked as well as failed, and under what conditions, we can reflect and build upon these experiences. Whether we see ourselves as practitioners, scholars, advocates, researchers, or citizens, our roles as engaged participants in a variety of circumstances intersect as we consider how best to improve our local and global communities.

Beginning with a broad sense of the development industry, one of the most critical shifts in our current development landscape marks a trend toward privatization of strategic programs designed for the public good (Wilkins & Enghel 2011). Private agencies and wealthy individuals have become increasingly involved in global development programs. Recognizing the diversity of funding schemes and missions within what could be called a private, nongovernmental sphere, the rhetorical exuberance of privatization in development calls for critical questioning and thoughtful evidence (Edwards 2010; Kremer, Lieschour & Went 2010), particularly given rising income inequities on a global scale (Milanovic 2011). At stake is accountability: to work toward social justice, we must consider how our resources contribute to or perhaps even constrain human potential, rather than measure success in terms of personal or corporate profit. Social responsibility means more than privileging corporate business.

Social justice marks a significant recognition in our field that equity and rights matter (Wilkins 2012), following gradual and selective adaptations in discourse from

“development” to “social change” in articulations of our work (Wilkins 2008). The well documented critiques of development communication have inspired attention to participatory, community, and alternative approaches to strategic communication (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte 2006; Huesca 2002; McAnany 2012; Quarry, & Ramírez 2009). Seeing the relevance of social movements and civic engagement meant that we needed to widen our initial scope from mainstream development agencies alone to be more inclusive (Escobar 1995; Nederveen Pieterse 2009). Development is not limited to the purview of a nation state, acting as if in a political and historical vacuum, but can be engaged by a wide variety of bilateral, multilateral, national, nongovernmental, civil society, social movement, private, and corporate agencies in a global context. Many types of organizations and collectives mobilize support to advocate positions to act to promote social change.

However, this open-ended focus on social change risks missing the fundamental importance of politics in structuring possibilities for programmatic intervention. Not only do we need to consider the politics of donor and recipient communities directly related to particular programs, but also the political context in which substantive issues become articulated as problems and potential solutions limited by global power dynamics. Addressing issues such as provision of health services, gender equity, and environmental preservation, for example, requires understanding the political contexts in which pharmaceutical, manufacturing, and other types of corporations attempt to influence or circumvent public policies, in relation to resistance from social movements and civic organizations.

These various agencies create and are constrained by structures of power within the global development industry (Dutta 2011; Escobar 1995; Wilkins 2000). Historical theories of cultural and media imperialism in our field remind us of the importance of global context as well as of hegemonic conditions of power in information and communication production and distribution in the global market and development spheres (Boyd-Barrett 2006; Sparks 2007). Although political conditions within our global sphere have shifted over time, including a rise of regional powers and of corporate players, the underlying assumption that global and political contexts matter remains relevant to development communication issues (Dutta 2011; Sparks 2007).

The rise of corporate power and celebrity philanthropy in the development world, facilitated through the profitable success of global communication industries, marks a critical shift in not only financing structures, but also in terms of privileging particular approaches to social change (Chakravartty 2011; Murphy 2011). Wealthy sponsors, such as Gates and Bono, support digital activism and consumption as social change strategies (Richey & Ponte 2011; Wilkins & Enghel 2011), while prominent celebrities, such as Oprah and Madonna, finance failed schools for girls in African countries (Peck 2008; Reuters 2012). While these programs have limited value in terms of actual poverty reduction or beneficial educational strategies, they do succeed in promoting a neoliberal agenda (Dutta 2011; Peck 2008; Richey & Ponte 2011; Smith, Stenning & Willis 2008; Wilkins & Enghel 2011).

Global communications industries, benefiting from neoliberal principles, create the financial and cultural capital for donors and celebrities to dominate development participation through structural concentration of power to determine agendas and resources (Richey & Ponte 2011). Mainstream development agencies are increasingly using ce-

lebrity status to attempt to invite attention to their work, such as Bono's high visibility in the *One* campaign (Wilkins & Enghel 2011), and Kim Kardashian's visual presence in the U.S. Agency for International Development's digital advertisement of their programs to reduce child mortality (USAID 2012). These attempts to make global poverty issues trendy operate as sleek superficial campaigns, avoiding discussion of the serious issues that create these global problems (Richey & Ponte 2011). Thus, we are left with a disjuncture between measures of success: in an advertising model, acquiring hits on a web page would suffice, but in a social justice framework, we must assess how social concerns are affected by strategic interventions.

What we evaluate in terms of success depends upon the model of social change assumed in the articulation of the program. Whereas some models of social change rely on targeting individual behavior, others attempt to shift normative and structural conditions (Wilkins 2000, 2008). As social beings we do have a human responsibility for the choices we make, yet these choices are also structured through the decisions of those with the power to do so. When development programs concentrate on individuals alone as responsible for behavior change, they are limited when circumscribed by a pluralist model of power, assuming each person has equal opportunities to act. Alternatively, studies that assume hegemonic processes of power bring attention to inequities in determining how resources are spent and how problems and solutions are conceptualized. This approach reminds us to consider broader global considerations in the production of development programs rather than just focusing on the effects of individual projects.

Globalization is a term we use frequently, with many different understandings of what we mean (Lule 2012; Sparks 2007). Against a more enthusiastic articulation of the glories of globalization, the rise of regional powers, and the liberating potential of transnational digital communications, concerns with inequity in power resources remain. Political domination is evidenced in current military interventions and imposed leadership without consent of citizens. This political power is connected with a global economic elite that profits from material inequities within and across nations. In the process of attempting to maintain control, global elites attempt to manufacture consent through dominating cultural production, in terms of language, content, and more (Dutta 2011). An additional concern to those raised historically within this tradition is that of the environmental consequences to these artifacts (Maxwell & Miller 2012). The disposal of spent cell phones, computers, televisions and other electronic devices will affect life on our planet for many future generations.

The central point in considering power in global contexts is that the ability to make decisions is limited to that of a few. In each case, we need then to consider which groups have that power, how they attempt to engage in maintaining control, and what might be the consequences. Understanding this broader context matters in the cause of social justice.

Social justice allows us to foreground our concern with inequity in access to key resources and our interest in supporting resistance through advocacy communication (Wilkins 2012). Advocacy communication works for social justice when attempting to shift social norms and change policies in ways that support marginalized communities and resist dominant agencies. In working for social justice, this approach might use a variety of communication technologies and processes, across genre (news, popular culture) and approach (media advocacy, entertainment education social marketing). It is

not one medium or strategy that matters, but how best to work in the particular context on each issue. Moreover, advocacy communication might use a reflexive approach, understanding how discourse and praxis communicate about social justice. This dialogic approach allows strategic action to build on thoughtful reflection.

Accountability is critical and possible through dialogic research, in which the politics of the research process itself become part of the conversation (Wilkins 2011). If we are able to focus on understanding the historical contexts of problems and comprehensive attempts toward resolution, then we should move away from focusing on individual projects that are predicated on pluralist frameworks, and toward constructive dialogues based on understanding hegemonic control and resistance of strategic communication for and about social justice. We need accountability if we are to address the key issues of social justice. This is not taking care of business; we are taking care of our communities.

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