

My ICA 2013: Navigating the London conference in a quest for Development Communication... and beyond

By Valentina Baú¹

The [International Communication Association \(ICA\) Conference 2013](#) took place in London from 17th to 21st June. The London Metropole Hilton hosted almost 600 sessions, for a total of approximately 2195 presentations. All of the meeting rooms of the hotel, one of the biggest in the British capital, were booked by the ICA, which saw its largest conference happening this year, with a number of participants close to 3.000.

As a development communication researcher with a strong interest in this field of study, I decided to navigate my way around the hundreds of panels scheduled in the conference programme by attending those that I felt were closer to this discipline. Some overtly covered topics related to devcomm; others carried ideas that could be related to that field or simply touched upon development and/or experiences from the Global South. For those like me, fascinated by the use of media and communication in contexts of development, here is my ICA 2013 journey.

From a development communication perspective, the highlight of the conference was the panel organised by Jan Servaes (City University of Hong Kong, China) on *Technological Determinism and Communication for Sustainable Social Change*. Structured as an extended session - a nearly three and half hour long series of presentations - this panel saw the involvement of some of the major scholars from each of the two fields that it was trying to bring together: Social Change Communication and Technological Determinism.

On the Communication for Social Change side, Jo Tacchi (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia) and Karin Wilkins (University of Texas at Austin, USA) presented some of their work with women and technology. Tacchi introduced her research project with Indian women and mobile phones, highlighting how both society and the government in the country were placing more and more emphasis on the use of mobile devices, pushing down the priority list even issues such as toilets and sanitation. Tacchi stressed that when looking at technological determinism and communication for social change, it is important to consider both the constraining and enabling possibilities of media technologies, especially in contexts of poverty. She reminded the audience of the need to bear in mind the implications of transformative technologies.

Wilkins, in turn, reflected on the role that technology plays in small-scale entrepreneurship for women. Looking specifically at micro-enterprise programmes aimed at improving women's economic conditions, she put forward the key question of whether or not those programmes that are based on communication technologies (such as cell phones and computers) can be sustainable. The scholar emphasised how applying the 'participation' concept to these contexts may not suffice, since issues such as patriarchy within the household, economic crises within communities and global social trends might restrain the programme's positive results. In her view, social change is the only way that can help women out of their present situation.

On the Technological Determinism side, John Hartley (Curtin University, Australia) focused on the role that culture plays in processes of sustainable change, underlining how social learning occurs in and through creative and cultural systems. Hartley chose to exemplify his argument by discussing the use of digital storytelling, which he recognises to be a technology-based tool that can enable social change through cultural expression. In his view, this type of community media accommodates to new technologies, while at the same time helping to articulate individual self-expression.

Colin Sparks (Hong Kong Baptist University, China) emphasised how technology is not only linked to the issue of technical affordance, but primarily to that of human agency, which is in turn influenced by social structures. For this reason, Sparks argued that even though technology facilitates self-organisation, development cannot be separated from issues of politics and economics.

I was selected as one of the junior scholars who participated in the Servaes' panel, alongside Emily Polk and Song Shi, both from the University of Massachusetts (USA). Emily talked about the idea of 'transition towns' and of how technology – by way of social media – can help to mobilise people towards that idea; this is despite the fact that transition towns are founded on the principle of socioeconomic localisation, hence in contrast with that of global networks. Song discussed the role of ICTs used by activists to promote social change in China. By means of the Tiger Gate case study, he demonstrated how ICTs and other communication channels such as mass media interact with each other, pushing towards social change. I presented some of the findings from my PhD research in the Rift Valley of Kenya, illustrating how a participatory approach to a communication technology such as video allowed people to gain ownership of a new communication channel, and enabled them to establish a positive interaction between communities divided by the 2007/2008 electoral violence.

Beyond the Servaes' panel, development communication also popped up in a less structured fashion in presentations scattered across different sessions. I found, in particular, health communications to be a fairly recurrent topic, although not necessarily in connection with countries of the Global South. In the session *Communication Influences on Health Behaviour and Behaviour Change*, Renee Botta from the University of Denver (USA) talked about the application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to her team's work with women on water treatment and safe water storage in Kenya. Their approach, focusing mainly on mobilisation and face-to-face communication, showed how 'participation' was helpful in coming up with culturally relevant techniques that had the potential to be sustainable. Botta, who tested TPB with her team through qualitative methods for formative research, stressed the importance of tailoring this theory to each context, as it was created for a Western population.

Beyond Entertainment: storytelling for social change was another session that offered interesting learnings from a development communication perspective. Martine Bouman from the Centre for Media and Health in The Netherlands introduced the Dutch experience of SoundBites. This is an interactive film targeting young people in the country with the aim of passing on information on sexually transmitted diseases in an entertaining manner. The film is accessible online and the youth can decide the course of the events they prefer, based on the different characters and on the behavioural choices that are available to them.

Sarah Lubjuhn (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany) talked about the collaboration

options in the entertainment education industry that are available in Germany – from production to licence, service, in-script and co-production, explaining how the choice of each collaboration depends on the media channel used as well as on the country's legislations.

Lesley Henderson (Brunel University, UK) emphasised the impact that entertainment education TV series can have on their audience, putting forward the example of the acclaimed British series *Eastenders*. Henderson also shed light on the complex relation that is formed between the viewers and the scriptwriters, particularly when the latter need to create or re-adjust a storyline as a result of a powerful episode dealing with a sensitive issue, which sparks significant feedback from the audience.

Finally, two non-academic and yet very interesting presentations scheduled on the same session were those from Lucy Hannah from the Commonwealth Foundation, and Francis Rolt, Director of the UK-based organisation Radio for Peacebuilding. Hannah stressed, like Henderson, the crucial role that scriptwriters play in entertainment education, talking about her experience of providing training to those belonging to this profession in developing countries. Following the same line of work, Rolt talked about the importance of radio in situations on conflict and post-conflict, and of how radio programmes can be designed to address issues that contribute to peacebuilding in a country.

The session *Challenging Development Communication in Jordan, Benin, South Africa and Turkey* saw an unfortunate lack of attendance by most of its speakers. Only two papers were presented. Rong Wang's work (University of Southern California, USA) on ICT use and its link to human capability and development was presented by one of her colleagues, who explained how ICTs influence developmental outcome. Based on a study conducted in a number of Sub-Saharan African countries, she told of how the use of a Capability Approach to ICTs, assessing the things that a person has done, and/or has the freedom of choosing to do thanks to the technologies, can be helpful in predicting social capital change in local communities.

Robert Huesca (Trinity University, USA), building on his previous work on community media, discussed challenges to participatory communication on the basis of his reflections on a youth video project he recently facilitated in Benin. His presentation sparked a truly interesting discussion addressing issues of participation in this type of activities. Huesca illustrated both the participatory and non-participatory elements of the video project, explaining why some of those non-participatory elements were not only a result of project objectives' requirements, but also of logistical issues, as well as the fact that some of them appeared to be working quite well. The scholar concluded by advancing the idea of a hybrid approach - participatory and non-participatory. Through an entertaining account of the activities implemented with his participants, he also highlighted how even though the different themes to be addressed in the video were "imposed" on them in a top-down fashion, the youth succeeded in "Africanising" them and making them their own.

Another session that looked at experiences from the Global South was that on *Activist Community / Social Media and Global Youth Movements*. Rashmi Lutra (University of Michigan - Dearborn, USA) presented an analysis on the role of social media as a public countersphere in the Kashmir 2010 uprising, followed by a discussion on community radio as a political public space in India by Priya Kapoor (Portland State University, USA).

Federico Subervi (Texas State University, USA), known for his work in mass communication

aimed at raising awareness of the experiences of Latinos, talked about the ways Latinos - especially youth - influence other members of their ethnic community in the States through a number of media outlets. These are particularly important communication and information channels, given the large amount of people from this background living in the country, and can thus make a difference also at a political level. Jackson Bales Foote (University of Wisconsin, USA), in turn, examined the use of online social networks by the Chilean Student Movement, explaining how its protests were articulated through the web.

Despite the considerably lesser focus on development communication, another very interesting panel of this ICA2013 was *Communicating Protest Camps: Politics and Communication in the Occupy Movement and Beyond*, comprised of four young and bright researchers who have dedicated the past few years of their lives to the study of these emerging movements. Drawing from their upcoming book [Protest Camps](#) (Zed Books, 2013), Patrick McCurdy from the University of Ottawa (Canada) and Anna Feigenbaum from Bournemouth University (UK) offered an historical review of the rise of the camps followed by a sociological and cultural studies analysis of the concept of collective actions that characterises these sites. Their enquiry goes beyond their communicative aspect and includes the study of elements such as the location of the camps, their composition, the signs prepared by the activists as well as the political and social meaning attached to the use of tents.

Alice Mattoni from the European University Institute (Italy) and Anastasia Kavada from Westminster University (UK) talked specifically about Occupy. While Mattoni interestingly focused on the use made of online social networks by the Occupy Wall Street movement in Pittsburgh (USA), Kavada offered a remarkable examination of the internal functioning of Occupy London, particularly in relation to their media and communication operations. The young scholar presented findings from a number of interviews she conducted with some of the core members of the movement. The situation she portrayed was that of a highly organised PR office established in the group, comprised of media aware individuals with a fine knowledge of media relations practice. I was impressed by her recount of the systems that the activists had put in place to feed the press in a continuous effort to promote their cause and keep it at the forefront of the news.

The type of research presented in this panel could be useful, from a communication for social change point of view, when one looks at the role of social movements and social mobilisation in the Global South. Social movements have been and still are crucial actors in the achievement of political and social rights for marginalised groups in the developing world. An important example is the work that is being done by activists towards the social and political inclusion of people living with HIV&AIDS, as well as in relation to gender issues. At the same time, a number of NGOs but also major agencies such as UNICEF are using planned social mobilisation strategies in their communication work to extend the reach of their social change programmes.

Another session that I feel deserves a mention here is the one dedicated to *Audiences in the Face of Distant Suffering*, with Lilie Chouliaraki from the London School of Economics (LSE, UK) in the role of discussant. Different studies on mediated pain were presented (von Engelhardt & Jansz, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Joye, Ghent University, Belgium) with one addressing especially the role of celebrities (Scott, University of East Anglia, UK). The presentation that most caught my attention was the one from Bruna Seu (Birkbeck University, UK) on *Public Responses to Humanitarian Communication in the UK*. Seu introduced the findings of a study that Birkbeck is conducting in collaboration with

the London School of Economics, on the way the UK audience respond to campaigns on international development issues and humanitarian appeals: the full project goes under the name of [Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge](#).

After presenting the different findings, Seu's conclusions emphasised how 'ideologies and practices are not intrinsically connected to humanitarianism'. On the contrary, 'humanitarianism intersects and often clashes with other ideologies'. This means that people do not necessarily donate money or feel empathetic towards a particular development cause because of the importance or urgency of the cause, but rather when that issue and its context are in harmony with their value system. This concept actually reminded me of behaviour change communication, in particular of those healthcomm theories that focus on 'self-efficacy'. Self-efficacy is a key determinant in persuading someone to change their behaviour: this principle consists of giving an individual the impression that they are fully capable of performing a suggested task (i.e. stop smoking, eating healthily, etc.). The question I therefore ask myself here is: would a different presentation of humanitarian causes to an audience, based on generating a stronger sense of self-efficacy rather than empathy in the viewer, be a more effective way of communicating these issues and increasing public response? If a viewer was presented with specific guidance to make an actual (even though) small individual difference in the life of someone who is suffering, would they feel more encouraged to engage in direct action rather than adding their money to the 'big pot' out of a feeling of compassion and guilt?

Last but not least, I enjoyed the "all British" panel dealing with *Research into Afro-Pessimism and the International Media*. I believe this subject is particularly topical in consideration of the changes that Africa has undergone over the last few decades, both at a political and social level. Media coverage of the continent is transforming, and the studies presented by the four speakers (Nothias, University of Leeds; Franks, City University; Scott, University of East Anglia; and Bunce, Oxford University) have looked at this issue from different angles.

I had an early start on the last day of the conference to get to the 9AM session on *The Human Challenge in ICT4D Research*, only to find out that the entire panel had been cancelled. Lesson learnt, always check the errata! But what happened to all the presenters? No one was able to give me an answer...

Overall, I was pleased with my first ICA Conference. When I initially handled the programme, I felt a bit overwhelmed. The presence of development communication or related subjects, in addition, does not come out strongly. Yet, the way one chooses to navigate sessions across different divisions may offer the opportunity to find what is most relevant to one's work. From a devcomm perspective, I believe that what is lacking in the present organisation of ICA is a clear definition of how 'social change' is understood. The meaning of this expression seems to vary depending on the scholar who is using it and on the communication field he or she belongs to. ICA's Division for Global Communication and Social Change, for example, encompasses a wide range of approaches in relation to this term, which makes it confusing for those whose work has a specific focus on 'communication for social change'. The fact that, out of almost 600 sessions, only one was explicitly dedicated to development communication is a sign that more space could be given to the presentation of research that looks at the use of the media and other channels of information and dialogue in the South of the world. Calls for abstracts could include points with a clearer reference to communication for development. With regards to the structure of the conference

sessions, presentations that fall under this common thread should be brought together. To give one example: I did not understand why Botta's communication work on health and sanitation in Kenya was presented alongside a research on sleep behaviour among college students in the States....

In the hope that these suggestions may be useful for both organisers and participants, I should conclude by saying the ICA Conference remains an excellent event to attend for those involved in any field of communication research. The range of topics presented is so wide, that it is unlikely that one will be unable to find what interests them. At the same time, this conference is a wonderful opportunity for networking and exchange, full of enjoyable social occasions for scholars too.

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