

Comprehending social change in an era of austerity: Reflections from a communication perspective

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Abstract

This essay builds on, and furthers, some of the central discussions about the conceptual, theoretical and methodological challenges that have bedeviled the scholarly field concerned with the relationship between communication and changes in a society. Specifically, it is argued that the impacts of the current economic crisis and the resulting politics of austerity in Western Europe and the United States constitute significant ‘shocks’ that should shape future research about the role of communication in social change processes. In this regard, the essay ends by presenting four key issues which arguably constitute the major ‘austerity lessons’ that scholars interested in the relationship between communication and social change need to pay attention to.

Introduction

In a 2000 chapter titled ‘Rethinking the Study of Political Communication’, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch opened with an argument worth quoting at length here given its relevance to the overall arguments to be made in this essay:

‘Different fields of study call for different degrees of re-thinking and revision. Consequently, scholars working in diverse disciplines may be differentially obliged to take retrospective looks at the conceptual underpinnings of their fields. In part, this has to do with the ‘hardness’ or ‘softness’ of the fields concerned; in part it hinges on the pace of change in the societal, technological and intellectual environments in which their enquiries are situated...The physical sciences are clearly less exposed to the sources of paradigm shift than the social sciences. The seeming immutability of the laws of nature offers greater protection to the paradigms on which those sciences are based and to their theoretical underpinnings....The social sciences by comparison, clearly require greater theoretical and conceptual alertness. Processes of social, political and cultural change are bound to impact on the conceptual frameworks developed and deployed by sociologists, economists and political scientists since the phenomena they examine and the issues they study are continually being transformed...’ (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2000:155).

The points raised in this essay are framed within this broader argument outlined by Blumler and Gurevitch. My argument is that, as a discipline, communication for social change (CFSC) is now faced once more with a call for ‘re-thinking and revision’ in the wake of the 2008 economic crises and the austerity measures enacted in Western Europe and the USA to deal with the crises.

The essay identifies some key areas towards which this disciplinary ‘re-thinking and revision’ needs to be oriented. I start with a discussion of some of the central disciplinary challenges that have faced the field of CFSC in its historical and contemporary ‘format’. After these, I highlight the introduction, rationalization and impacts of current austerity measures in Western Europe and the USA in particular and lastly, I discuss the impacts of these on CFSC as a scholarly discipline.

Communication for Social Change (CFSC): of disciplinary birth, confusion and challenges

The academic discipline concerned primarily with studying the relationship between communication and processes of change in societies can be said to have been caught up in two major disciplinary challenges. The first of these involves internal, disciplinary-specific contradictions - nay, confusions, as far as the discipline’s core identity and concepts are concerned. The second disciplinary challenge concerns what can be called externally-induced imperatives for disciplinary reformulation, brought about largely by developments such as political changes and advances in communication technologies.

First, the internal contradictions - nay, confusions. Several scholars identify the late 1950s as the beginning of what passes for ‘the field of development communication’ (Waisbord, 2005:77). So, by 2008 when Jan Servaes edited the volume titled ‘*Communication for Development and Social Change*’, the field was about half a century old. Yet, where one would have expected disciplinary maturity and certainty, Servaes opened his introductory chapter by asking a question both basic and pertinent: ‘what is communication for development and social change?’ (Servaes, 2008:15).

Though basic, Servaes’ question is indeed pertinent and touches on the heart of the disciplinary crises that has bedeviled scholarly attempts to research the relationship between communication and broader economic, political, social or cultural changes in a society. Within the social sciences, it is arguably not uncommon to see disciplines mired in disagreement over core conceptual understandings or methodological approaches. Political scientists for instance, still grapple with the meaning of ‘democracy’ (see for instance Dufek and Holzer, 2013), while anthropologists fight it off over the meaning of ‘culture’ (see for instance Schak, 2005) - two concepts that are central to the respective disciplines.

So, conceptual and methodological disagreements are common (and at times healthy) features within an academic discipline. What is not common, however, is to see a discipline mired in a long-standing disagreement about its name and simultaneously, the core concepts that it engages with. This feat has been achieved by the discipline whose primary interest is to examine the role of or the relationship between communication and broader changes in a society.

Drawing from Quarry and Ramirez (2009), Lennie and Tacchi (2013:4) recently noted that a major feature of this field has been its contested titles and descriptions, with the result being the existence of ‘multiple and confusing affiliations and provenances’. As identified by Waisbord (2005:77), some of these major ‘affiliations’ include: ‘development communication; communication for development; communication for social change; information, education and communication; behavior change communication; social

mobilization; media advocacy; strategic communication; social marketing; participatory communication and so on...'

The result of this panoply of disciplinary titles has been the provision of a 'rich analytical vocabulary' (Waisbord, 2001:1) but also the prevalence of methodological disagreements (see Lennie and Tacchi, 2013), not least because of 'conceptual cacophony' and 'maddening confusion' as to the precise meaning of terms or their similarities and differences (Waisbord, 2005:77). Looked at thus, the field is 'visibly incoherent, the broad range of practice possibilities inconsistent and the theoretical efforts confusing' (Engel, 2011:2; see also Manyozo, 2013:38).

These confusions have been exhibited in longstanding disagreements over the meaning of core concepts in the field such as communication; development; participation; empowerment and social change. These confusions have meant that at times, titles of articles, chapters or books (like that edited by Servaes in 2008 and mentioned above) for instance, use 'both development and social change, possibly representing an intent to appeal to both sets of interests (and perhaps an inability to take a stand)' (Wilkins, 2009; see also Tufte 2013 and Lennie and Tacchi, 2013 for recent interchangeable use of development and social change).

While the name 'development communication' has served for long as the 'umbrella term' to bring together the different strands of disciplinary identities indicated above (see for instance Waisbord, 2001:28 and Lennie and Tacchi, 2013:5), from the late 1990s in particular, thanks in large part to the activities of the Rockefeller Foundation and later what became known as the Consortium for Communication for Social Change, 'communication for social change' (CFSC) has been proposed and promoted as the new frontier of disciplinary identification in this field.

According to Gumucio-Dragon and Tufte (2006:xxix), CFSC has emerged as a:

'...key site of theoretical encounter and convergence. CFSC reflects recognized limitations in traditionally separate schools of thought within the field of communication for development and serves as the forum for debate of the new voices and the re-articulation of long-standing concepts of participation, dialogue and horizontal communication...' (Gumucio-Dragon and Tufte, 2006: xxix).

Defined as communication processes which allow people themselves to 'define who they are, what they want and need and how they will work together to improve their lives' (Gumucio-Dragon and Tufte, 2006:xiv), CFSC has been given the identity of an academic discipline (Gumucio-Dragon and Tufte, 2006:xxix; Tufte and Wildermuth, 2013:14); it was described in an anthology dedicated to it as a 'new field' of studies (Gumucio-Dragon and Tufte, 2006:xiv) but a few years later, this 'new field' is said to have matured into an 'established field' (Tufte, 2013:21).

Overall, this essay is anchored within this latest move in disciplinary identification, but the reflections recognize the historical roots of CFSC in what is broadly called 'communication for development' as well as the points of convergence between CFSC and earlier approaches (see Servaes, 2001; 2005; 2008; Gumucio-Dragon and Tufte, 2006; Wilkins, 2009 and Lennie

and Tacchi, 2013). Therefore, to the extent that some of these historical roots have shadowing effects on CFSC, it is argued that the points raised below can be seen as specifically relevant to CFSC as well as other approaches concerned with examining the relationship between or role of communication in changes in a society - especially that of 'communication for development'.

Concerning the second disciplinary challenge- i.e. the externally-induced imperatives for disciplinary reformulations noted by Blumler and Gurevitch (2000), the field of CFSC has not been totally indifferent to the mutations in the society and the implications of these on the discipline. For slightly over a decade now, recurrent self-criticisms within this field has moved beyond the normal conceptual disagreements to indicate a level of disciplinary challenges brought on by rapid changes in society, such as developments in the, and spread of, new media technologies; significant alterations in national and international politics, and the furtherance of processes of globalization.

Melkote (2000:39) famously declared that after enjoying robust growth especially during the 1970s, by the year 2000, 'the field of development support communication' was 'undergoing a 'middle-age crisis''. This 'middle-age crisis' theme was also echoed by Wilkins (2000:1) who noted that 'remarkable advances in communication technologies' amongst others, have put the field of development communication in a 'critical juncture' and that there was a need to 'reshape the field of development communication'.

In the foreword to their edited collection in 2005, Oscar Hemer and Thomas Tufte declared that 'the discipline of communication for development is currently at a crossroads and the approaches that have been taken over the last few decades require serious rethinking' (Hemer and Tufte, 2005:11).

They argued that there was a:

'...tremendous need for more systematic reflection upon where the field is heading. There is also an outspoken need for a clearer understanding of the key components in such a field of research and practice, for discussion of the epistemologies, the theories, the methods and the successful cases, all in an integrated manner' (Hemer and Tufte, 2005:20).

Seven years later, Hemer and Tufte (2012:234) revisited their assertions and, apparently finding the situation unchanged, re-emphasized that 'this field is in a state of crisis. And it should be....And may be the challenge for us at this moment, is to take a step back and reflect, to analyze and understand rather than to impose development strategies'. Following in a similar tone, Enghel and Wilkins (2012:9) pointed out that developments across the world constitute sufficient reasons to express some 'concern over the future of communication for development as a field of theorization and research'.

In echoing these concerns and summarizing more than a decade of 'unease' within this field, Thomas Tufte very recently argued, in line with Blumler and Gurevitch's exhortation of the need of disciplinary rethinking within social sciences following societal changes that:

'...All four dimensions- a new generation of social movements, the proliferation of new digital media, the growth and expansion of civil society and a strengthening of post-development discourses- are defining

new contexts, stakeholders and dynamics within which we have to redefine the discipline and practice of communication for development and social change...Communication for development and social change, both as a scholarly field and a communication practice is at a fundamental crossroads. In the light of the new digital media, ComDev as a discipline and practice, is being fundamentally challenged...There is need for a fundamental review of ComDev thinking and practice...We as researchers of ComDev need to revisit our notions of development and our perceptions and uses of media and communication and reconsider the possibilities and limitations of strategizing our way to social change' (Tufte, 2013:22-29).

In the next section of this essay, I pick up on and extend these earlier calls for an urgent disciplinary rethink by arguing that the current global economic crises which started in 2008 in the US as well as the current austerity policies in Western Europe and the US, constitute further 'shocks' to this field that should warrant a disciplinary rethink. As Allon (2013:1) has pointed out, these recent events constitute 'particular historical junctures' that should be of great concern to media and communications researchers.

Global financial/economic crisis and the politics of austerity

Since early 2008, the world has been experiencing what Sir Mervyn King, the Governor of the Bank of England described in 2011 as 'the worse financial crisis since at least the 1930s, if not ever' (cited in Campbell, 2013:241). The crisis, which initially started in the US following the collapse of Lehman Brothers, rapidly spread to the rest of the world with Western Europe taking a severe hit thus far.

The initial response to the crisis amongst Western governments was to institute stimulus packages. However, given the combination of rising public deficits and pressure from international financial institutions, these stimulus packages were shelved and replaced with austerity plans, ostensibly 'in order to prevent banking and sovereign default in some countries such as Ireland, Greece, Spain and Portugal- and rising public deficits and the risk of double-dip recession in others' (Sarfati, 2013:149).

Since this policy shift, irrespective of the several street protests against this change, Western Europe in particular, has been in 'the grip of the mantra of austerity with the welfare state also a target of cutbacks, for instance with the raise in pension age, increase in tuition fees and the limitation of the maximum duration in unemployment protection as implemented policy measures' (Reeskens et al, 2012:2). Part of the political ramifications of the current economic crisis and the politics of austerity has been the weakening of key liberal democratic processes as conventionally understood. As Campbell (2013:246) for instance pointed out in exemplifying these, the austerity measures in Greece:

'...created a crisis to the point where the leaders of the European Union were able to dictate to the Prime Minister of Greece that he should not hold a referendum on the response to the austerity measures and the packages that were being imposed by the European Union; the European Central Bank and the IMF' (see also King et al, 2012:3).

Overall, even though disagreements still exist about the rationale for austerity measures, there is a seeming general acknowledgement at the moment that the said measures have led to a 'greater impoverishment of the European population' although there is still a debate about the extent of this impoverishment (Reeskens et al, 2012:2; see also Campbell, 2013:245). Apparently facing the harsh reality of these impacts, the European Union is now hinting that austerity measures might have to be halted², but the damage from the current crisis and the austerity policies have already been too pervasive and are bound to last for a long time.

These austerity measures adopted by several European countries and the US have stretched the strains of the crisis to unbearable proportions for many people and countries. Globally, the Food and Agricultural Organization noted recently that since the start of the current economic crisis in 2007, the progress that had been previously recorded worldwide in reducing hunger has 'leveled off', with more and more people falling back into hunger and poverty. The U.S Census Bureau recently pointed out that largely due to the crisis, the number of people officially living in poverty in the US increased from 37.3 million in 2007 to 46.9 million people in 2010 (US Census, 2010, cited in Campbell, 2013: 246).

Although several countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia for instance were not hit directly by the financial crisis when it erupted, over the years, the economic slowdown in Europe and North America has also impacted the economies of these regions (see for instance Fennell et al, 2013). With budget cuts appearing as the new policy refrain, even sectors like overseas development assistance have been hit. The BBC reported in April 2013 for instance that the US was planning to cut down its financial contribution to international peacekeeping; humanitarian programmes and efforts to fight diseases in Africa. Aid workers, such as Tom Hart of the ONE Campaign told the BBC that the impacts of such cuts will be that 'about a million kids won't be vaccinated. A million bed nets that prevent malaria won't be distributed'³.

As concerns the impacts on employment levels, citing the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution, *The New York Times* recently reported that, although with 162.000 jobs added in July 2013 in the US, that month represented the '34th straight month of job creation', at such a pace 'it would take about seven years to close the so-called jobs gap left by the recession.'⁴. In Europe, the European Commission reported in April 2013 that about 19.4 million people are now jobless in the euro zone alone, and that a whole generation of young people risks being 'lost' due to the rising unemployment. Some of these young people from countries such as Spain and Portugal are now leaving Europe to go and search for jobs in places like Brazil and Angola⁵.

These austerity measures have also put a strain on the healthcare systems in Europe in particular. In a recent overview of the effects of austerity on health systems in Europe, Karanikolos et al (2013:1323) argued that the 'interaction of fiscal austerity with economic shocks and weak social protection is what ultimately seems to escalate health and social crises in Europe'. In Greece, for instance, the EU and IMF-imposed austerity measures stipulate that public spending on health in Greece should not exceed 6% of GDP and as Karanikolos et al (2013:1324) noted, this was a 'precedent for the European Union on acquisition of control over national health systems in individual countries' (see also McKee et al, 2013).

Like Shelina Visram noted in the case of Britain, it is possible that the wide-ranging impacts of the current economic crises and austerity policies can further the ‘growing economic and social inequalities’ in these societies and contribute to the ‘persistent segregation of society along class lines’ (Visram, 2013:859). In a recent message announcing the launching of Solidarity Now, a charity network of people and organizations working together to help people it considers ‘hardest hit’ by the current economic crisis in Europe, billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros, who is also the founder and chairman of the Open Society Foundations wrote:

‘Dear Friends,

The crisis in Europe is of great concern to me. The human cost is immense and growing. People are having difficulty making ends meet, are losing their jobs and even their homes. Those people who suffer the most played no role in the crisis. Despite these difficult times, I believe in the promise of Europe and hope that together we can show solidarity. Today we are launching Solidarity Now.
Thank you for your support.

George Soros
Founder and Chairman, Open Society Foundations’⁶

For a long time, such messages of desperation have been the *reserved domain* of places like Africa and Latin America. Obviously, the current crisis does not put Europe or the US on the same level with Africa or Latin America, but it does echo some of the experiences heard recurrently in the latter regions. In several respects, the current discourse about austerity; its rationales; implementations and effects in Europe and North America are reminiscent of those of the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) that were ‘imposed’ by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on several countries across Africa and Latin America with disastrous consequences on the political, economic and social systems of these countries (see for instance Campbell, 2013:243; Clarke and Newman, 2012:300; Riddell, 1992; Thiele, 2003 and Gibbon, 1996).

So, looked at in a broader perspective, the experiences of the current economic crises and the impacts of the politics of austerity, though concentrated in Western Europe and the USA, have far reaching economic, social and political implications across the world. Within the framework outlined earlier by scholars such as Hemer and Tufte (2005, 2012) and Tufte (2013), and the exhortation by Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) for social science disciplines to rethink their core assumptions when the surrounding environment changes, the central question worth asking is this: what are the implications of the impacts of the current economic crises and the politics of austerity on CFSC as an academic discipline? In the last section of this essay, I identify four key aspects which I consider to be the implications of this crisis and the politics of austerity on our understanding of the role of and relationship between communication and changes in a society.

Implications of austerity on CFSC as an academic discipline

While it is a bit difficult to start drawing lessons from a process which is still in progress, the experiences registered thus far with regards to the manifestations and impacts of the current economic crisis and the politics of austerity especially in Western Europe and the US, provide a relative strong cushion upon which to base the arguments made in this section of the essay. Arguably, four important lessons can be drawn so far from the current crisis as far as the discipline of CFSC is concerned. These include the following: the need for empirical Westernization of the field; the need for genuine multidisciplinary; the need for clarity of the discipline's identity and the need for a clearer articulation on the meaning(s) of social change.

1) Need for Empirical Westernization of the Field

The traditional criticisms that are often levied (and rightfully so) against social science research in general and against communications research in particular is that they are too 'Western' and there is therefore a need to 'de-Westernize' these fields (see for instance Curran and Park, 2000 and Ngomba, 2012). Looking at research bundled under 'development communication' or CFSC, the reverse procedure is what is needed.

As a discipline, CFSC (including all its historical roots) has had its own fair share of requests for de-Westernization. But this de-Westernization has been more conceptual and theoretical than empirical. This has concerned for instance, arguments about what is communication or development, with the modernization perspective representing the poster child of all that was wrong with the 'Westernized' orientation of studies in this field. The challenging of these 'Western' perspectives and their subsequent enrichment by non-Western views has led to a relatively settled understanding that countries do not develop through fixed stages like Rostow would have had us believe, and that communication is more than a linear process of message transmission and reception.

Empirically however, the field has stayed staunchly non-Western despite the relevance of studying Western societies if we are to get a more comprehensive picture of the interrelationship between communication and changes in a society- however defined. Meta-analysis of published research in the field has shown consistently that the bulk of the research is focused on non-Western countries.

In an overview of research published between 1958 and 1996, Fair and Shah noted for instance that:

‘A region-by-region breakdown provides a better idea of the different geographical focusses of the researchers. In the 1958-1986 time period, Asian countries were the focus of 33.9 percent of the studies followed by Latin America (33.3 percent), Africa (22 percent) and the Middle East (7.3 percent). In the 1987- 1996 period, Asian countries were the focus of 33.6 percent of the studies, followed by Africa (17.9 percent), Latin American (5.7 percent) and the Middle East and Eastern Europe (7 percent each) (Fair and Shah, 1997:16, see also Braman et al, 2000:176).

Following the Fair and Shah findings in 1997, Ogan et al also carried out a meta-analysis of scholarly articles that 'address the topic of communication and development from 1998 to 2007' and they found that:

‘Perhaps because so many of the poorest nations in the world are located in sub-Saharan Africa, the largest percentage of the articles focused on that region (25.6 percent) while Southern Asia came in second with 19 percent and another 18 percent talked more generally about development communication and did not focus on any particular part of the world...’ (Ogan et al, 2009:662).

More recently, Hemant Shah has shown that regional breakdowns of where ‘development communication research is taking place’ show that:

‘...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’ (Hemant Shah, 2010).

Earlier, in an important collection of fifty ‘case stories’ of CFSC experiences, all the cases selected were from Latin America, Africa or Asia (Gumucio-Dragon, 2001). This shows that, empirically speaking, this field is significantly non-Western. Silvio Waisbord, in capturing this *non-Westernness* of the field, noted in 2001 that development communication ‘commonly refers to the application of communication strategies and principles in the developing world’.

What the experiences from the current economic crisis and politics of austerity show us is that it is about time to empirically Westernize this field in order to enrich our empirical understandings of core phenomena of interest. By arguing for this empirical Westernization, the suggestion is not that empirical research from the West is totally absent. Rather, the suggestion is that we need more of this research.

As indicated earlier, the current austerity in Europe and the US is similar in orientation to the infamous SAPs imposed on several non-Western countries, and some of the impacts of these SAPs on the political, economic and social system are what we have been so concerned to study as contemporary processes of poverty, marginalization and aspirations in Africa, Latin America or Asia. These processes of poverty and marginalization are also taking place currently in Europe and the US, and are no less interesting than those taking place elsewhere.

The mindset of focusing on Africa, Latin America or Asia as sites to study processes of communication and social change risks pushing to the peripheries, interesting dynamics also taking place in Europe. We are prone to study how digital media for instance are changing the relationship between ordinary citizens and the state in Africa or Latin America but we do not engage as we should, within this specific discipline, on sustained empirical examination of how layoffs in the public sector in Europe for instance as well as the digitalization of the public service with exhortations of ‘Do It Yourself Citizenship’, are changing the relationship between ordinary Europeans and the welfare state.

The ramifications of the current crisis show that processes of social change or the ‘crisis of development’ (however defined) are not exclusive characteristics of particular regions. Drawing on Pieterse (2001), Hemer and Tufte (2005:15) argued relevantly that ‘development

is no longer a process reserved for ‘developing countries’, all societies are developing as part of a global process, making the dichotomy of ‘first’ and ‘third’ worlds obsolete-at least in the geopolitical sense’. In line with this, we should embark on a veritable empirical Westernization of this field to complement the abundance of research emanating especially from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

2) *Need for Genuine Multidisciplinarity*

The call for multidisciplinary research is rising to the level of standard clichés within the social sciences. It is exhorted by institutions and scholars but rarely engaged with in a systematic and sustainable level –that is why it is still mentioned as a disciplinary imperative, especially within this specific strand of communication studies (see for instance Hemer and Tufte, 2005:20 and Ngomba, 2011). The phenomena of interest to CFSC are also those of interest to several other disciplines ranging from political science, sociology, anthropology or economics to urban geography or journalism, to name but a few.

Thomas Tufte recently pointed out that:

‘While the crucial role of the media and communication in processes of social change has become ever more evident, this growing recognition is ironically not primarily connected to the field of communication for development and social change-neither as it has come to be institutionalized as a communication practice in large development agencies nor as it is taught in academia’ (see also Hemer and Tufte, 2012:229).

Basically, the argument in the assertion above is that, as we grapple to make sense of the role of communication in processes of social change, so too are political scientists or sociologists trying to make sense of the same phenomenon from different perspectives⁷. It is in our common interest to be exposed to and use these discussions in related disciplines if we are to get a more nuanced but better understanding of confusing processes like the changes in the society unfolding under the weight of the current economic crisis and politics of austerity.

3) *Can We At Least Be Clearer About Naming This Field And What We Do?*

Part of the implications of rethinking the orientation of CFSC as an academic discipline in the context of the current crisis and politics of austerity is that we have once again an opportunity to look back at some basics, amongst them, clarifications of the nature of the field. There is the ‘recurrent’ problem of the ‘definition of the ComDev field’ which is integral to the need for a ‘fundamental review of ComDev thinking and practice’ (Tufte, 2013:28). Hemer and Tufte (2012:235) had earlier pleaded that ‘we must become better at defining our field and carving out our space within culture, media and communication research at large’.

The crisis of disciplinary identity is not something that can be kicked down the road indefinitely. A mixture of terms by senior scholars in the field does not help matters. The 2008 book *‘Communication for Development and Social Change’* edited by Jan Servaes; the recent book by June Lennie and Jo Taachi titled *‘Evaluating Communication for Development: A Framework for Social Change’* and even forthcoming literature such as a

key text titled '*The Handbook of Development Communication and Social Change*' edited by Karin Wilkins, Thomas Tufte and Rafael Obregon; and a forthcoming special issue of the journal *Communication Theory* on the theme 'Communication for Social Change' edited by Jan Servaes and Karin Wilkins; all indicate through their titles, that this confusion is set to continue.

It might be potentially useful to simply call the field communication *and* social change instead of communication *for* social change. The latter perspective connotes an 'interventionist' perspective and the *agential* use of communication to bring about social change. This will address issues such as the appropriation of new media by activists to weaken undemocratic regimes or at more institutional levels, the use of communication strategies by governments, political parties or politicians to legitimize social change policies like those of fiscal austerity. But by privileging in its appellation such processes, emphasis is lost on the myriad ways in which people use communication as a process or media technologies to negotiate and adapt to changes within their communities such as the use of media technologies to 'off-set' effects of physical absences of family relations due to migration for instance.

By looking at such examples through the lenses of communication *for* social change, one might be tempted to ask 'what kinds of social changes are caused by using media technologies this way?' Apparently that will be a difficult question to answer, but by approaching these issues through the lenses of communication *and* social change, an empirical openness and clarity is created to examine both processes that 'cause' social change and those that are more about 'adapting' to social change.

4) *Need for Clearer Articulations of the Meaning(s) of Social Change*

The last point worth paying attention to is the need for a clearer articulation of the meaning of social change within this field. This point flows from and brings together, the two previous points mentioned above. If we proceed with the argument that we need to approach this field as communication *and* social change studies, it becomes important to at least clarify the core concepts in the discipline's denomination, especially social change.

Communication as a concept, has been a subject of longstanding discussions and while there is no need to reproduce the debates here, suffice to mention that some divergences notwithstanding, the overall perception is that communication within this discipline should be seen as *dialogical* rather than in its historical *transmissional* sense. What then about social change? The concept, as Waisbord (2005:85) pointed out, has the potential to serve as a rallying point for analysts and practitioners 'from a variety of disciplines to find common ground and articulate efforts toward a common vocabulary'.

But for this to be really effective, it is necessary to be clear about the meanings given to the concept of social change. In reference to another key concept within the field, Tufte (2013:29) argued that 'we as researchers of ComDev need to revisit our notions of development' through a profound debate and clearly and explicitly take a normative stance with regards to the issue. There is a need for a similar process as far as social change is concerned.

The different phenomena of interest for this field can be approached through the prism of social change. The concept has been around in the discipline for a while but arguably, the conceptual discussions around it have been less dense relative to the centrality of the concept in the field. The Rockefeller Foundation for instance, the forerunner in demarcating CFSC as a field in its own right, defined social change as ‘change in people’s lives as they themselves define such change’ (The Rockefeller Foundation, 1999:8). This definition reflects the ‘people-centered’ orientation of CFSC but on a critical level, it fails to account for the broader economic, political or cultural changes that can be ‘thrust’ upon people and which they will be ‘forced’ to engage with to either change or adapt to. The wide-ranging changes in several European countries sparked by the recent economic crisis and politics of austerity constitute one of such instances.

So far, the bulk of scholarly engagement with the concept of social change within CFSC has not been significantly enriched by discussions about social change from ‘sister disciplines’ like sociology and history (for recent discussions going along the routes argued for in this essay, see Waisbord, 2005 and Lennie and Tacchi, 2013). The broader CFSC literature has addressed social change with particular qualifiers such as ‘positive social change’ exemplified in aspects like reduction in prevalence of HIV/AIDS and enrollment of more girls in school (see for instance Rockefeller Foundation, 1999:16 and Lennie and Tacchi, 2013:1). I argued above that there is a need for genuine and systematic multidisciplinary in this field and the discussion of the concept of social change is one avenue where this is really needed.

The discussions about social change within sociology can serve as important entry-points and anchorage for researchers within communication *and* social change studies. The analysis of social change is one of the representative ‘touchstones of sociology’ (Wiswede and Kutsch, 1978:vii, cited in Haferkam and Smelser, 1992:3) and useful collections such as those from Bourdon ([1984] 2003); Haferkam and Smelser (1992) and Goodwin (2008) can serve as good cross-disciplinary bases to enrich the articulations of social change in this field.

There are of course several conflicting definitions of social change within sociology with the concept even described by some as simply a ‘catchall term referring to just anything in a state of flux’ (Goodwin, 2008:2; see also Salawu, 2010:2). So what is the use then of diving into such confusion from an already-confused field? At least two uses.

The first is that we can draw on some of the definitions of social change that can be useful to specify discussions of it within communication *and* social change studies, especially bearing in mind the experiences of the current economic crisis and politics of austerity discussed above. Some of these include definitions of social change as constituting ‘observable differences in any social phenomena’ (Salawu, 2010:2); social change as constituting a ‘process of planned or unplanned qualitative or quantitative alterations in social phenomena’ (Economos et al, 2001:40) or in social units such as families; groups; institutions or countries (see Haferkam and Smelser, 1992:2).

The second is that, given the long-standing approaches, especially systemic perspectives that have been used within sociology to discuss the causes, course and effects of social change (see in particular Bourdon [1984] 2003 for an instructive overview of these), the successes and failures of theoretical and methodological approaches to study social change within

sociology can serve as useful eye-openers for communication *and* social change scholars if this literature is engaged with in a systematic and sustained manner.

In a tone hinting at exasperation with the conceptual confusion that has thus far plagued the field of CFSC, Silvio Waisbord (2005:78) argued that 'it is worth attempting to solve the conceptual complexity that is inherent to the field, but it remains unclear what benefits this will bring to communication practice'. An important benefit in attempting to clear the conceptual webs, especially with key concepts like social change is that, as Lennie and Tacchi (2013:45) recently put it, the way in which we conceptualize phenomena has an impact on how we evaluate it. With its strong attachment to 'project evaluations', the discipline of communication *and* social change studies needs more battles for conceptual clarity- not less.

Concluding remarks

The central objective of this essay has been to argue that the impacts of the current economic crisis and the politics of austerity in Western Europe and the US have led to significant changes within and beyond these societies. Drawing on previous discussions on the need to rethink the discipline of CFSC, the essay went on to argue that these crisis and austerity-induced changes constitute 'shocks' that should push our rethinking of the field within four key directions: the need for empirical Westernization of the field; the need for genuine multidisciplinary; the need for clarity of the discipline's identity and the need for a clearer articulation on the meaning(s) of social change.

The points raised above are obviously not conclusive statements regarding the challenges facing the field. The aim has been to extend prior discussions, and the hope is that the points raised in this essay will serve as entry points for sustained discussions amongst scholars and practitioners within the area of communication and social change as they try, each in their respective domains, to make sense of the ways in which communication fits within processes of social change in both Western and non-Western societies.

A combination of developments in national and global politics; the furthering of processes of globalization in all its dimensions; the advances and spread of media technologies and the fallouts of the current global economic crisis and the politics of austerity, has made the task of disciplinary introspections within the social sciences imperative. In their introduction to the most recent edition of *The Sage Handbook of Political Communication* Holli Semetko and Margaret Scammell (2012:4) argue that:

'The familiar phrase 'the only constant is change' has a special meaning for scholars and practitioners in the field of political communication. Failure to innovate is not an option. Under these rapidly changing conditions, scholars and practitioners have to constantly reassess their research priorities'.

The overall aim of this essay has been to 'bring home' the pertinent observation above and the observation is as true for political communication scholars as it is for communication *and* social change scholars.

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² See BBC News of 26 April 2013: 'Austerity: Is the European Union Changing Tack?' Available online at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-22307926> Accessed on 9 August 2013.

³ BBC News of 5 April 2013: 'Aid groups fear impact of US austerity budget' Available online at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21970920> Accessed on 9 August 2013.

⁴ The New York Times of 2 August 2013: 'U.S. Adds 162,000 Jobs as Growth Remains Sluggish' Available online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/03/business/economy/us-adds-162000-jobs-less-than-expected.html?emc=edit_na_20130802 Accessed on 9 August 2013.

⁵ BBC News of 1 September 2011: 'Portugal's jobless graduates flee to Africa and Brazil' Available online at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-14716410> Accessed on 9 August 2013.

⁶ <http://www.solidaritynow.org/>

⁷ See for instance special issues of journals like *The British Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 64, Issue 1 of March 2013) and *The Sociological Quarterly* (Vol. 54, Issue 2 of Spring 2013); for pertinent non-communication-based perspectives on the 'Occupy Movement' and for similar analyses of the 'Arab Spring', see for instance *The Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 24, Issue 3 of July 2013). As concerns the current economic crisis, publications like the October 2012 special issue of the journal *Politics and Policy* on the theme 'Governance, Democratization and the World Economic Crisis' contain important non-communication –based perspectives that can substantially enrich analyses of communication and social change in this era of austerity.