

ComDev in the Margins

By Oscar Hemer¹

Ten years and twenty-one issues ago, when I wrote my first editorial for *Glocal Times*, the headline “[Coming of age](#)” came naturally. It alluded to the then five year old Communication for Development Master programme at Malmö University, for which this *Glocal Times* has been an indispensable companion ever since. That statement may at the time have seemed prematurely self-assured, but a decade later the MA programme has definitely reached maturity, and arguably even seniority (in the academic sense of the word). Now *Glocal Times* is coming of age as the “relevant digital reference in the field of communication for development and social change worldwide” it set out to become.

The past decade is an interesting time frame from the perspective of ComDev as an interdisciplinary field of theory and practice, representing both crisis and consolidation – implosion, and a possible new beginning. *Glocal Times* was launched in 2005 at [a meeting at the University of the Philippines in Los Baños](#), which aimed at founding a global university network in Communication for Social Change and Development. This [initiative](#), driven by the Communication for Social Change Consortium, was one of many in what seemed to be a new momentum for media and communication in development cooperation, in the run-up to the first [World Congress on Communication for Development \(WCCD\)](#) in Rome, 2006.

For some reason, the anticipated breakthrough never happened. On the contrary, the Rome congress was instead followed by a strange fallout of the field. For example, FAO, one of the organizers of WCCD, demoted their C4D department, which has only recently been revitalized. (The university network unfortunately never took off either, although many important bilateral contacts came out of it, such as the long-standing pedagogic collaboration between Malmö University and the University of Guelph.)

The backlash incidentally coincided with the veritable explosion of social media and the emergence of new forms of social mobilization, building up to the popular uprisings of 2011 that took the world, and not least the development industry, by surprise. At the IAMCR conference held in Istanbul in July 2011, at the height of what was still referred to as the Arab Spring, the social media and the new social movements were discussed in almost every panel. But these world-shattering occurrences were rarely, if at all, associated with ComDev. Hence, ironically, when at last the crucial role of media and communication in social change processes became evident to everyone, the existing field of ComDev theory and practice seemed to be by-passed, unable to seize the momentum.

This startling turn had the dual effect of boosting the field and adding to its crisis at the same time. The urgent need to analyse and understand the new phenomena (that turned out not to be that new, eventually) further underscored the need for new theory and transdisciplinary approaches. The impetus in current media and communication research on social media, civic engagement and spontaneous social change processes has arguably impacted on Media and Communication Studies as a whole. Development Studies has during the same period tended to move from hard-core economics and social sciences towards a humanities orientation, increasingly focusing on cultural aspects and *representations* of development and globalization. A third clear tendency, linked to the other two, is the rising impact of

Anthropology in the field, as can be observed in the attention given to media ethnography, visual and digital storytelling etc. All this speaks in the favour of ComDev, although not in its conventional hands-on conception of communication *for* development. In this broad, culturally oriented understanding, ComDev is rather the analysis, at meta-level, of the interplay between communication *and* development. This shift is more important than it may appear to be at a first glance. It is perhaps only now that ComDev is beginning to come of age as a problem-oriented academic field of research in its own right. On the other hand, perhaps partly as a consequence of this reorientation, we may be seeing a resurgence of the original DevCom; that is, the strategic, solution-driven communication practices with roots in agriculture extension. Hard-core development issues are gaining renewed priority in marginalized areas of the globalized world.

These seemingly oppositional tendencies mirror in a way the field's constitutive tension between theory and practice -academics and practitioners-, and there is not necessarily any contradiction. Colombian media scholar Clemencia Rodriguez, one of the keynote speakers at this year's IAMCR conference in Montreal, advocates the notion of *media at the margin*, a concept and approach which may apply to remote rural communities as well as transnational activist networks. Instead of focusing on media technologies, she suggests that we look at the appropriation of media at grassroots' level. With examples from the geographic margins of Colombia, as well as the Occupy movement in the US, [Rodriguez underlined in her address](#) how some of these grassroots' initiatives have developed "idiosyncratic media pedagogies" based on local languages and aesthetics. Rather than looking for linearity and homogeneity, she says, we should focus on processes of cross-pollination, adaptation, hybridization, and replication, which are often visible in grassroots media.

I find the margins to be an apposite metaphor for Communication for Development as well. ComDev is thriving at the margins, both in theory and practice. Once 'participatory communication', 'empowerment' and 'social justice' become buzzwords in the hegemonic development speak, there is really reason for caution; not only due to the devaluation of the concepts, but because the institutional logic itself tends to be counter-productive and even destructive. There are innumerable examples of NGOs and other agencies that, albeit well-meaning, quell rather than incite citizens' own initiatives. (As ComDev scholars and practitioners, we must be open to the possibility that the main obstacle to change may be the development industry itself.)

Celebrating its 10th anniversary, *Glocal Times* is now evaluating how to take a major new step. We intend to become a fully-fledged peer-reviewed academic journal, yet still remaining a forum for graduate students and professional practitioners. You are, dear reader, most welcome to contact us with suggestions on how to solve that riddle. Meanwhile, enjoy this fully-fledged Jubilee double issue! It looks back on the past ten years, in personal reflections by a selection of the scholars, practitioners and alumni that have contributed to the success of the journal and to the development of ComDev at large. It moreover contains a thematic section on participatory video, which was one of the subjects of last year's Örecomm Festival ([Voice and Matter](#), 17-20 September 2014). There will be no Festival this year – only a 15th Anniversary ComDev seminar in Malmö. But the Örecomm Festival is due to be back in 2016. And so, of course, is *Glocal Times* – in whatever new form it may take.

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