

Looking back, looking forward: on the renewal of CSC theory

By Pradip Thomas¹

One of the interesting developments over the last decade in communication and social change theory is the beginnings of efforts to engage with theoretical traditions and concerns that have not typically provided frameworks for understanding CSC. The special issue of [Glocal Times](#) (2012) simultaneously published with the [Nordicom Review](#) with its articles on causumerism and the politics of international development is perhaps the best example available of new thinking in the field.

Looking back at the field's history, one cannot but appreciate the importance of the participatory turn to the theorizing of CSC and in particular its emphasis on the exploration of a missing dimension – ‘process’- and the specific role played by multiple actors in exploring deliberative options in the planning and implementation of social change. This turn led to better understandings of the ‘how to’ of participation. And yet, in spite of this welcome occurrence, there was little or no attempt to engage with theory in order to get a better understanding of the institutions, networks, spaces, opportunities, political will that is fundamental to operationalizing participation in the real world. In other words, in the context of a global, multi-sectoral buy-in into participation, there were few efforts to understand the need for enabling frameworks for participation. Arguably, the ‘how to’ of process trumped any critical engagement with the institutions that had bought into process and validated ‘participation’ as the missing link in communication for social change.

In some ways this was understandable, given that these institutions were seen to be/are doing good work in terms of changing attitudes and behaviours in critical areas such as immunization, risky sexual behavior, tobacco and alcohol abuse and engaging with limited forms of advocacy. However, the global financial crisis in late 2000 highlighted the limitations of the neo-liberal pact that sustained not only the key global financial institutions, but also a wide range of inter-governmental bodies, foundations and international NGOs that had invested in neo-liberal development strategies. This crisis provided an opportunity to deal with the blind spots in CSC theory, and to explore not just context and process, but also the structures that maintained the legitimacy of strictly bounded understandings of participation. This critique included attempts to understand the extent to which the neo-liberal logic had crept into and changed the practice of development in its image. Take for example the attempts to analyse the role and politics of celebrities in development within corporate campaigns that are primarily about making profit and only secondarily about helping the disadvantaged. It is heartening to note that this critique is also being made outside of the development enterprise. A recent issue of the journal [Public Culture](#) (27(1) 2015) is devoted to understanding the relationship between celebrities and politics in the era of the internet. Zizek (2009) nailed the logic related to such commodified cultural practices by naming it ‘cultural capitalism’, a 21st century version of charity. Another scholar, the late Raymond Williams (2010), offered us the means to understand this logic by suggesting that culture too was material - and ‘cultural materialism’ is a means to understand the material and productive

nature of culture, of practices, of values, of discourses and process itself. Arguably, Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) as a process, is not meant to enlighten farmer's on the need for structural change, but to an greater awareness of the benefits of better planning as consumers, in a market-led agro-economy. My colleague Nic Carah's (2010) work on branding and music festivals has uncovered the novel ways in which interactivity and participation have been coopted by sponsors such as the liquor industry whose offline and online initiatives during music festivals and beyond have validated youth drinking lifestyles and in that process, helped corporate profits.

The critique of neo-liberal versions of participation leads on directly to the critique of institutions that support such development: inter-governmental agencies, global NGOs and foundations that currently have the funding and power to make policy and direct the course of communication for social change. It is quite extraordinary that CSC theory did not include the critique of institutions that have played a vital role in extending the dominant paradigm – as for example the extraordinary emphasis given to media development especially in countries around the world that are faced with one form of crisis or another – such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Myanmar, among other. There is an assumption that democracy, the market and privatised media will somehow bring development to these countries and lead them out of the chaos and conflict that they are presently faced with. Such discourses are not by any stretch of the imagination benign, but a throw-back to the era of Wilbur Schramm and Daniel Lerner accompanied with the new rhetoric of regime change. The Middle East is still dealing with the consequences of the Arab Spring and the disruptive forces that it unleashed including the rise of the Islamic Caliphate. How to theorise the institutions that provide the ammunition for and ideology supportive of such ruptures is therefore critical to the renewal of CSC theory today. New thinking aided by perspectives from critical political economy and an interventionist cultural studies, is in my view one of the better things that has happened to the theorizing of CSC during the last decade.

We do need to re-engage with a critique of the exercise of power in and through contemporary CSC institutions and practices, but also to invest in understanding how people engage with and use communication for social change in the era of the Internet. The Internet has of course changed all sorts of equations, and yet we are not any clearer of agency, of how people are accessing the internet, using mobile technologies, claiming and subverting technologies for their own ends, taking part in disruptive cultural practices, finding access in creative and innovative ways. I think that communication and social change is beginning to be enriched by studies of new mobile cultures, of new 'gift economies' that are emerging from the affordances of new technologies and new practices and the opportunities to rethink participation in the era of the digital. The late [Paulo Freire, in one of the few YouTube videos that engage with his thinking](#) (2009), explains that curiosity has been a central tenet in his life – curiosity to know the world in order to change it. And I think that that is a wonderfully evocative word, since it affirms that social change is all about enabling environments that support the pursuit of curiosity, of engaging with technologies, practices and ideas that have the potential to contribute to an affirmation of life. Our engagement with new theories and disruptive practices based on this kind of curiosity are important precisely because such curiosities have the potential to throw light on persistent problems and offer novel ways of thinking through solutions.

Finally, when I look back over the last decade, it has become clear that as a community of scholars we need to become a lot more adept at understanding practice in the light of relevant theory *in context*. I am not for a moment suggesting that we go back to nativistic thinking, but rather that, while Habermas' bourgeois public sphere is an extraordinarily fertile concept that has been absolutely critical to an understanding of the public sphere in Europe and offers us a principle that needs to be treasured, protected and expanded upon throughout, we also do need indigenous understandings of what that space called the public sphere is and means in contexts such as rural Tamilnadu and indigenous Australia. I am as guilty as others of using concepts such as this one without thinking through its history and epistemological antecedents, and of not giving enough credence to the need for validating local understandings and local thinkers who have contributed to discerning and sophisticated ideas on communication for social change. Perhaps this is an area that Glocal Times can explore as it looks forward to its next ten years.

References

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