

Communication and social change: reclaiming 'the political'

By Thomas Tufte¹

What characterizes the multidisciplinary field of communication for development today? And how do the Master's programme in Communication for Development (ComDev) at Malmö University, the *Glocal Times* web magazine and Malmö University and Roskilde University's joint bi-national research centre Ørecomm position themselves vis-à-vis this field of research and practice?

Let's take the questions one by one. Firstly, if we look at the practice of communication for development, it is a dynamic field, which is expanding institutionally, in practice and as an academic discipline. Having lived through crossroads and crises during the past decade, today we are experiencing a vast proliferation in the global experience of ComDev (Wilkins, Tufte and Obregon 2015). We see an abundance of practices where activists and artists, communities and neighbourhoods, NGOs and community based organizations, networked organizations and social movements, in varying forms, are heavily involved in online and offline communication to articulate social and political change. A political dimension -the power struggle to achieve voice and visibility and, in particular, to influence and improve everyday life conditions- lies at the heart many of these initiatives, and such social movement-driven, bottom-up ComDev initiatives have gained prominence (Gerbaudo 2012; Tufte 2015).

Communication for development is not merely about changing certain individual behaviours by using prescriptive strategies and achieving maximum observable effect. In recent years, it has definitively expanded beyond the agendas set by the traditional donor community and large institutions in international development cooperation, and come to encompass the communicative practice experienced and claimed by citizens and movements pursuing agendas of social and political change. While in this scenario the communicative practice of the big institutions in international development may obviously still play a role, communication and social change -what in the most recent edition of the Ørecomm festival we have referred to as '[voice and matter](#)'- have come together in new ways². The change can be observed in the proliferation of bottom-up initiatives that are currently challenging dominant discourses of development.

The prescriptive agendas inherent in communication *for* development have been contested (Engel 2014; Thomas, 2015), and a growing number of alternative terms proliferate, indicating a variety of other agendas that avoid prescriptiveness and acknowledge a varying degree of attention to social justice, sustainability issues, governance, empowerment, as well as different ways of addressing these matters. Many have challenged the term 'communication for development', and [Teke Ngomba makes a fine argument in favour of communication for social change in a recent issue of *Glocal Times*](#), arguing for the need to westernize communication for development. According to Ngomba (2013), while research of communication and social change has long centred on Asia, Africa and Latin America, in the context of world development we also need to study development processes in the West. And we see indeed a growing research interest on social change processes in Greece, Ukraine,

Turkey, Portugal, UK, France and Spain in the aftermath of massive social mobilisations. As a rare example among the Nordic countries, Iceland has delivered a powerful experience of a strong participatory and social media enhanced process around their new constitution, a process that has attracted research interest around the communication and social change dynamic (Castells 2012).

However, it is important to note that what may appear to some as a ‘success story’ of communication for development is a mere necessity, occurring as a means to achieve –to pursue and to claim- changes in livelihoods in a time of increased marginalization, polarization and exclusion of the voice of ordinary citizens. It materializes as the insistence upon social justice, equality and human rights. On the other side of the coin we find repressive forces, undemocratic movements, governments and companies keen on surveillance, and the like. So, yes, there is plenty of communication for development being undertaken by a multiplicity of social actors, often with conflicting agendas and trapped in a political economy which is difficult to traverse. And, paradoxically, it is exactly these entanglements, dynamics, conflicts and contradictions that are elevating the importance for us, the community of researchers, to pursue our research into contemporary communication and social change processes.

This brings me to my second question, which I begin to address by congratulating Malmö University's Master's programme in ComDev on its achievements: 15 years of growth, increasing the quality of education and volume of students served, and achieving recognition! The Master's has contributed to building a strong basis for both an improved ComDev practice and its research. There is not a conference on issues of communication and development that I go to -and I travel to many- where I don't meet former ComDev students from Malmö, now as researchers, key actors in development practice both in the UN system and in government organisations, or engaged in activism and across civil society. While the offer of Master's programs in ComDev is growing across the globe, and formal and informal networks are being formed, it remains clear that the interdisciplinary ComDev program in Malmö and its large alumni network continue to play a pivotal role.

Likewise with the *Glocal Times*. In congratulating the web magazine for its 10 years of continued publication, I would like to highlight its ability to give voice to all relevant actors across the field of ComDev – students from the Malmö ComDev Master's and beyond, leading researchers, and practitioners. While it constitutes a forum for critical reflection and debate, *Glocal Times* also faces new challenges in the context of increased demands in academia for publishing in peer-reviewed journals. In revising its form, structure and content in the future, a section must be dedicated to peer-review articles, without letting go of the important venue for ComDev alumni to publish. I am in fact convinced that *Glocal Times* would become an instant success as a peer reviewed journal.

Finally, how does our joint bi-national [Ørecomm Centre for Communication and Glocal Change](#) position itself vis-à-vis this field of research and practice? Ørecomm has existed since 2008, when it was created to formalize and strengthen the longer-standing collaboration between Malmö's ComDev community on the Swedish side of [the Øresund strait](#), and that of Roskilde University on the Danish side. The platform gradually grew and was in 2012 formally accepted as a research centre and has since grown to recruit and co-finance joint PhD-students, and organized a series Ørecomm seminars that enabled ComDev researchers

and practitioners from across the globe visiting our region. It has also signed Memorandums of Understanding with FAO, UNESCO and UNICEF, and most importantly a [long-term agreement with UNICEF](#) New York opening up for internship placements, research collaboration, and the agency's participation in our activities in Malmö and Roskilde.

Perhaps our major achievement so far has been the organization of four [Ørecomm Festivals](#). The Ørecomm Festival has become the Centre's 'brand' – addressing a contemporary topic from within the field of communication and social change and bringing together researchers, students, artists, civil society, government officials, consultants and others engaged in our field. Online and off-line, in Malmö and in Roskilde, even in Copenhagen, night and day for 4 consecutive days [a myriad of activities have unfolded](#). The importance of the Ørecomm Festivals lies on several levels: it builds community, reinforcing what alumni networks in ComDev in Malmö and Communication at RUC already attempt; it sets agendas for debate; and it reflects where communication and social change is heading and has created an institutional memory by publishing festival anthologies and an online video archive. Most importantly, the Ørecomm Festival hopefully contributes to raise the profile of both research and practice in communication and social change.

As the research and practice of communication and social change take on new shapes and dynamics, the Ørecomm Center for Communication and Glocal Change, Malmö's MA in ComDev, the new MA in Communication taught in English at RUC, and not least the *Glocal Times* web magazine, are part and parcel of this field. I congratulate GT on its 10th anniversary, and hope it will continue to play its important role engaging in the pressing development challenges of today.

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2 Attention to *voice and matter* speaks to the interdependent relationship between processes of dialogic communication that put the ‘voice of the people’ at the centre on the one hand, and contemporary development challenges on the other.