

Enabling “next generation glocal communicators”

By Helen Hambly Odame¹

Introduction

Vast changes are occurring around the world in the ways in which people living in rural and remote areas are communicating within their communities and beyond them.² In part, this is driven by emerging information and communication technologies which are often referred to as “nextgen” (next generation implying a transition from Web 1.0 to 5.0, and plausibly, beyond) because the Internet is increasingly weaving human lives with digital devices, applications, data and blended forms of intelligence that involve different levels of human and machine interaction. This ‘internet of things’ is more than a catch-phrase; it is the deepening connection of human beings, networks and machines creating more complex forms of activism across a range of issues from economic austerity to climate change (Juris, 2008, 2012). The problem is that the Internet is largely urbancentric and structured in such a way that it is biased against less populated areas.³ This situation led to a dualism referred to as a ‘digital divide’ or who had access to the Internet and who did not. Yet, for rural and remote communities, it is not so much a case of having access to the Internet, or not, but rather, what is being done with that access and why that matters to the lives of rural people and the changing relationship between human beings and the natural environment.

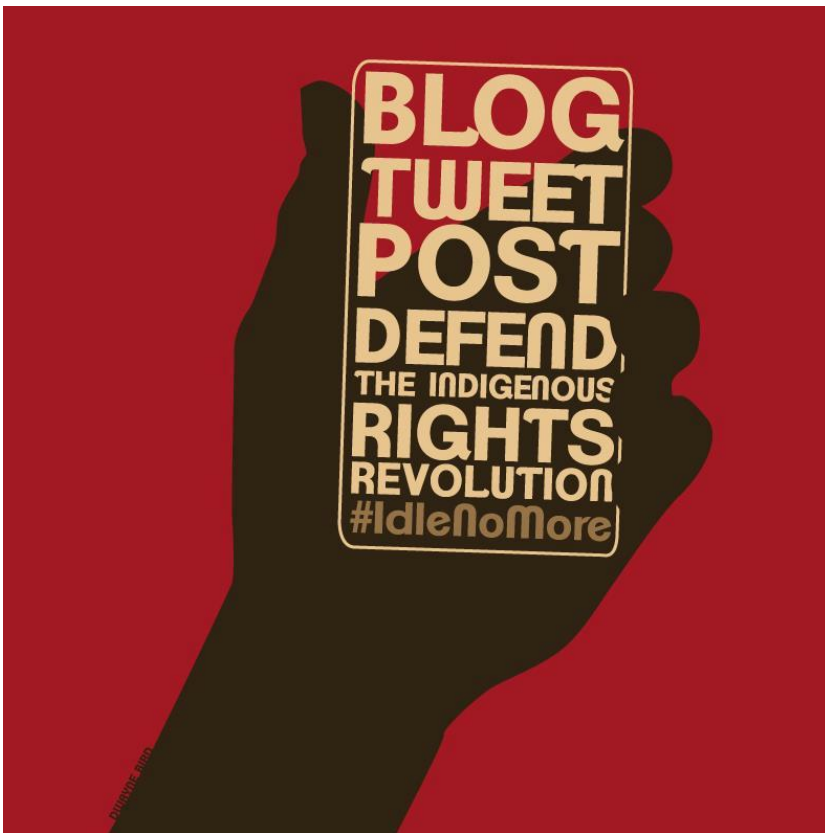
Ultimately, in this brief article, the intention is to draw attention to how we learn about the rural and remote dimensions of glocal communication. Often this takes us in the direction of reminding ourselves that much of what is associated with achieving basic human necessities of air, food, water and shelter relates closely to the rights of those people who live closely to Nature. My focus is on university efforts that specifically draw attention to and engage with remote and rural communities, including indigenous peoples. In what ways can glocal communicators be better proponents of those who live outside urban areas, and why is this important? How might ‘nextgen’ technologies and networks expose students and teachers to rural and remote places where they have never been before and may never go in-person? Briefly, this article points out examples of how remote and rural communities are using the Internet and emerging technologies to overcome distance and to create networks of support, make change and sometimes, build social movements. Only when we take into account what is happening in rural and remote areas of the world, including questions that take the human-Nature relationship into account, can we conceive of glocal communication and its importance in today’s world.

The context

Certainly, in both positive and negative ways, traditional ways of rural life are affected by information and media technologies and patterns of communication. For centuries, we can see the less desirable side of pushing “information as development” and recognizing that media have

been used to retain the core's centralized power over peripheral communities in order to modernize rural areas and remove from their 'backwardness' (Lerner, 1958; Manyozo, 2012). Yet it is equally important to recognize that the lives and voices of rural people and their communities are expressed in exciting, new ways through their appropriation of modern day ICTs. Digital or media-enabled activism in rural and remote areas is evident in two examples highlighted below.

[Idle No More](#) organizing and networking a movement that “unsettles” hegemonic neglect and abuse of indigenous peoples' rights in Canada as root causes of poverty, homelessness, suicide, addiction, disease, violence and incarceration. Building networks of support for change including dismantling of the America's “doctrine of discovery.”



[Via Campesina TV](#) describes its work as “this television is ours; it is a mirror of our daily lives, our dreams and our struggles.” Part of the international peasants' movement, La Via Campesina, its multimedia website gathers and shares voices, stories and music within the movement. It also links to collections in the World Social Forum and other movements.



Communication and media are shaping the ways in which those who live at a distance from metropolitan areas communicate with others as well as how they view themselves and their complex relationship to the natural world. What strikes me about the examples above is that these initiatives are never far from the basics of human life, such as food and water, emotions and social expressions, cultural identities and economic livelihoods. This is about generating one's own content and gathering others together to think critically about information and communicate about overcoming social, economic, political and ecological problems. Such local efforts fuse into globalized discussions of what is happening to this planet. This all matters for communication and media studies, especially for those who mentor students and help them to connect and build their capacities as glocal communicators.

The challenge: an action scholar

In this respect, university level teaching and learning must change along with the changes occurring in rural communities. We already know that the digital revolution in education has provided online learning tools to support new directions for collaborative learning processes and the co-creation of knowledge (Daniels et al, 2009; Hambly & Oram, 2012). In Canada, a number of schools and universities teach communication and media studies, media production, fine arts and journalism incorporating the latest digital technologies into their work. The programs still largely focus however, on theory and/or product, but not typically on process and real-world application. Any convergence with global or international development studies is especially rare. In particular, mainstream communication studies neglect place-based realities. We feel however, that the Internet and use of multi-media platforms for learning can provide opportunities to connect with rural communities, to hear from them and develop collaboration in alternative ways to what has been done in the past. This entry into a new age of rural communication requires new capacities as individuals, organizations and systems.

Since 1956, the Capacity Development and Extension MSc program and undergrad courses in the [online Certificate in Communication Process](#) within the [Ontario Agricultural College \(OAC\)](#) has offered course-based teaching and student and faculty research projects. We are now involved with new initiatives to take into account the internationalization of teaching and learning and the influence of next generation technologies in communication studies. Our current offering of elective courses such as interpersonal, educational, and international communication, organizational communication, and leadership and agri/environmental journalism still enable students from any degree to gain access to concepts and relevant practices in the field of media and communication studies. We give special attention to the connection between social and environmental change, particularly in rural areas of Canada and around the world.

At the graduate level, our students will often be involved in research or learning and development projects that engage with communities, community media, or explore critical or systemic dilemmas such as organizational change and conflicts between stakeholder groups. As explained in an earlier article, there are always challenges to providing students with opportunities to develop communication and media skills for supporting collaborative research, community-based action, and communication with an ever-growing range of issues and participants (Hambly & Oram, 2012).

So what we have done is to adapt our courses to appreciate the changes taking place in relation to new learning technologies and the absolutely essential aspect of internationalizing education and exposing students to the wider world around them. As a result, we seek out strategies such as pedagogical convergence in learning and technology available from initiatives such as the [Glocal Classroom](#) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) [CCComDev](#) platform.

To practice convergence pedagogy and internationalization of higher education, as well as draw attention to issues within rural and remote areas, we found so far that the project “*The Glocal Classroom: Sharing the ComDev Experience*” can bridge the gap between web-based learning and conventional forms of education on campus, by exploring innovative ways to combine the two. We subscribe to the idea of ‘glocal’ to characterize the process of globalization and its impact on rural and remote areas of the world but also to raise the voices of those who are rural and remote to the world stage. Perhaps this moves towards the need to render dichotomies such as global-local, rural-urban and human-nature irrelevant. To highlight our efforts, and as part of the Glocal Classroom initiative in Guelph, in May 2014 we organized a two-day seminar to capture experiences of communication for social changes in agri-food and environment in Canada and beyond.

The Guelph seminar was successful in identifying progress, achievements, and contributions from rural and remote areas of Canada and around the world. We highlighted local initiatives such as community radio activism by [Ryakuga](#) in eastern Canada, the [First Mile](#) project and [participatory research](#) on food insecurity in northern Manitoba with schools and Aboriginal communities. International examples included capacity building for [human rights journalism](#) and [farm radio](#) initiatives across Africa. During the seminar we also identified future initiatives such as exploring opportunities to consolidate partnerships among our universities.

Following the May 2014 seminar, and building on pre-existing alliances with other universities who have been actively involved in teaching and learning for rural communication, we joined CCComDev-FAO, a web-based platform established to share learning objects such as a document library, case studies and other resources as well as to generate new knowledge through collaborative research. This platform, which is managed by the University of the Philippines Los Baños, serves as a communication tool between the universities involved in the initiative which currently include University of Queensland, University of Reading and Wageningen University as well as University of Guelph. The group has also been using conferences such as the European Agricultural Education and Extension Society and the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) to meet up and network.



Guelph Seminar, Glocal Classroom.

The road ahead for our program and the wider institution is to keep on enriching the student experience in communication for social and environmental change as well as exploring new partnerships. Partnerships have at their core a strategic mission to link community practitioners, scholars, researchers and technical specialists working together to use new technologies to create a vertically integrated innovative pedagogical environment. We are mindful of principles of diversity and inclusiveness in the way forward. In our experience, teaching and learning innovations will help to make more efficient use of existing resources and open up new networks of knowledge and support. These efforts motivate faculty and enable student opportunities in their degrees and into their careers as glocal communicators ideally continuing to learn and work in and alongside diverse communities around the world, including those in rural and remote areas.

As teachers or mentors we need to watch for opportunities that come about because of the new spaces to learn and socialize that have come along with the changing generations of the Internet. This will include how the online world has moved from thinking about the Internet and what it means in way in which we communicate and share information. The transition has been dramatic over the past two decades moving rapidly from Web 1.0 (think email) and Web 2.0 (think social media such as blogging and tweeting) to the Web 3.0 (tailored search engines using big data) or even the frontline of Web 4.0 (bigger data with artificial intelligence) and beyond to Web 5.0 (a symbiotic web of ourselves and our emotions or feelings about information and indeed, our human existence). As communicators we are changing because we attach ourselves to more and more networks and thereby, expose ourselves and the communities we work with to ever-

increasing information and knowledge. Our devices become even more connected to the Web and media becomes omnipresent. We can even see this happening already in the most rural and remote areas of the world where sensors feed data into maps that can explain for instance, where our food comes from and who produced it and why. There are social media campaigns that spontaneously organize and build into wider campaigns against unsustainable resource exploitation building with them a new form of memory-keeping that may help to secure the rights of those people directly affected by environmental disasters or resource depletion.

Communication will change too as rural and remote users access ultra-high speeds and cloud-based applications that make local music and video file sharing possible. Free long distance voice calls or video conferencing that can connect people living and working at large distances becomes common place, even in remote areas. Hence, as scholars and educators we engage learners in thinking well into the future as well as thinking about what we can achieve as glocal communicators, here and now. In this respect, a resource person to the Guelph Seminar of the Glocal Classroom, Michael Gurstein, has remarked in commenting on the digital divide: “Notably of course, it was not the technology that failed nor the uses of the technology. Rather it was the inability to move from a position of technology empowerment to a position of political empowerment—to take the opportunities in part being presented by the technology and finding ways of translating these into structures and processes which have effect not just in the virtual world but in the physical world through mobilizing resources, motivating actions, being able to exert a direct influence on how events evolve—power at its most basic being the capacity to shape the future.” (Gurstein, 2015)

Our role as teachers and learners is to develop this capacity. To shape the future with all communities, including those which are rural and often on the periphery of hegemonic structures of society and economy. To do anything less would be to ignore the potential of glocal media and communication.

Acknowledgements

If the next generation of teaching and learning tells us anything it is that no one acts alone. I want to appreciate efforts of all team members in the Glocal Classroom at the University of Guelph including Dr. Ataharul Huq Chowdhury Adjunct Faculty, SEDRD; Dr. Lynne Mitchell, Director, Centre for International Programs; and Dr. Richard Gorrie, Manager, Learning Technology and Courseware Innovation, Open Ed, as well as so many students who made this work possible. For the CComDev activities I thank FAO (Mario Acunzo and Marzia Parfumi), Elske van der Fliert (Univ. of Queensland), Cleofe Torres (University of Los Baños in The Philippines), Rico Lie and Loes Witteveen (Wageningen University), and Sarah Cardey (University of Reading).

References

Borras, S.M. Jr. 2008. "La Vía Campesina and its global campaign for agrarian reform" in *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8(2–3), 258–89

- Desmarais, A. A. 2007. *The Via Campesina: globalisation and the power of peasants*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Edelman, M. 2009 "Synergies and tensions between rural social movements and professional researchers" in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36:1, 245-265.
- Edelman, M. 2005 "When networks don't work: the rise and fall and rise of civil society initiatives in Central America". In: J. Nash, ed. *Social movements: an anthropological reader*. London: Blackwell, pp. 29–45.
- Gurstein, M. 2015 "Information Systems from Control to Control? (Or Perhaps Something Else...)". Keynote Presentation at the Communities and Technology Conference (9) Limerick, Ireland, June 29, 2015.
- Juris, J.S. 2008. *Networking futures: the movements against corporate globalisation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Juris, J. S. 2012. "Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation" in *American Ethnologist* 39 (2): 259-279.
- Lerner, D. 1958. *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. New York: Free Press.
- Manyozo, L. 2012. *Media, Communication and Development: Three Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, USA: Sage Publications.

¹ Dr. Helen Hambly Odame is Associate Professor at the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development (SEDRD), University of Guelph, Canada. E-mail: hhambly@uoguelph.ca.

² The term community is used here not to assume homogeneity or agreement within a group, but to refer to being from or in a common place thus, the need to communicate and make things common. Regardless of how relevant the notion of “virtual communities” is to glocal communication studies there are also actual rural and remote communities that exist in a physical, real sense of the term. The rural is defined as such because it is not densely populated, it is peripheral because it exists at least to some distance from core or urban areas.

³ This is due to greater infrastructure and access to the Internet in more populated areas than less populated areas. In turn, this creates demand for Internet services and drives the urban production of content on the Web including preferred formats, languages and images, etc. relevant to urban areas.