

C4D over ten years

By Jackie Davies¹

I was a late comer to C4D. Only when I started the Master's in communication for development at Malmö in 2005 did I discover there was a world of theory and people and background in this area that I had been working on incognito most of my working life.

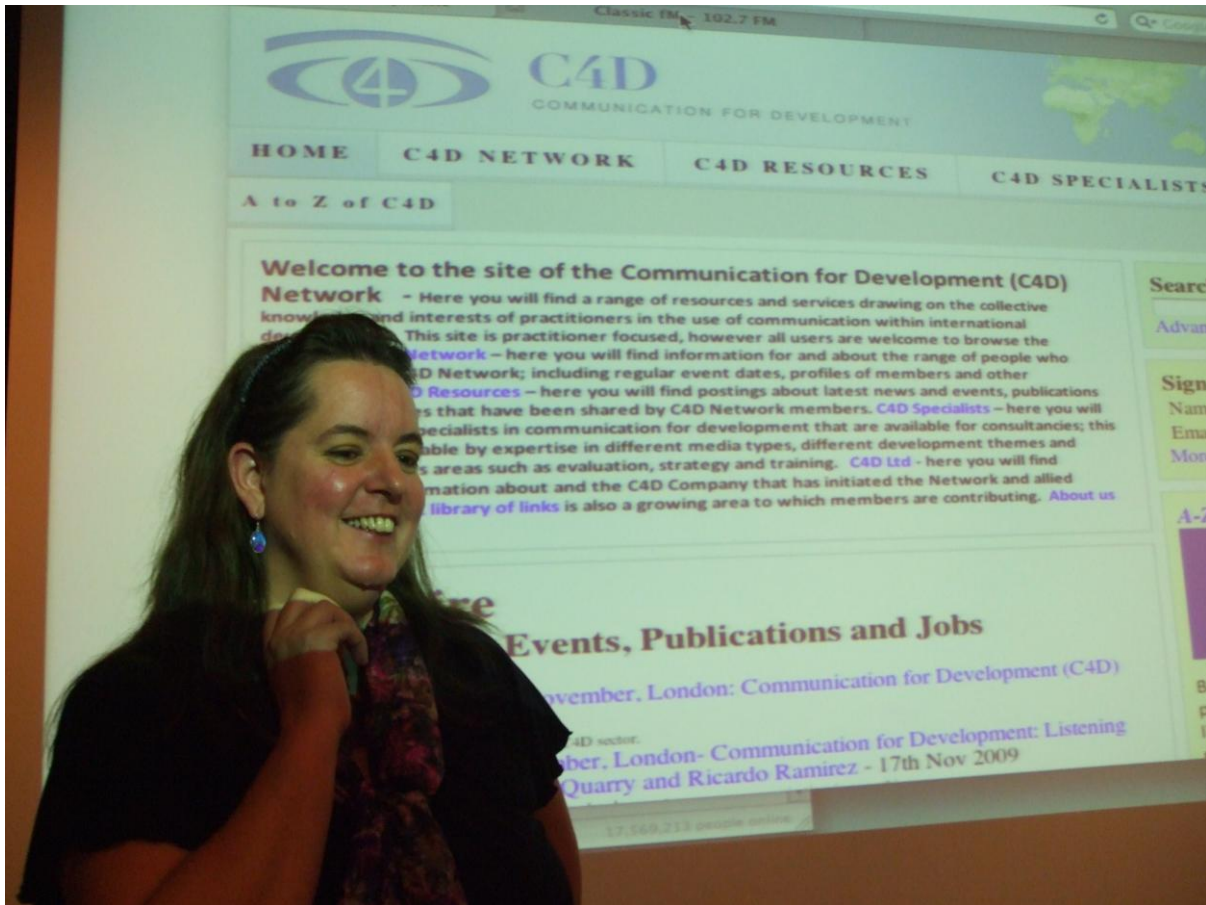
That had been the case for a lot of us. C4D had been under wraps, unnamed for a long time and to date it's still not easy to figure out why. Because when you are presented with it as a coherent sector with its history, core readings, gurus and strategies it seems logical as a sector, rather than the sort of thing that should be kept secret because it somehow is too complex or challenging to name.

In a nutshell, C4D is about systematically approaching communication in all its forms as a way to do development well, or even to do it better and in the process achieve those goals and hit those targets. Moreover, it's about giving a little help in order for people to flourish as their own communicators, expressing their views, advocating, and having their say.

Back in 2005, when I was first told that this sort of activity was indeed an area of practice, a field, a sector, I was naively surprised to find out how many scholars had been ruminating about the role of communication in social change over the years - from Paulo Freire in the 60s, to Manuel Castells in the 90s, and then people I actually knew like James Deane at *Panos*, and Warren Feek at *The Communication Initiative* -it was odd to find out that people you worked with were actually 'thought leaders'.

I started my two-year part-time Master's at Malmö in the second year of its existence, while I was managing online radio projects after a decade working in radio in Africa. Doing the Master's seemed a good idea at the time although I had not met anyone else who had done it or knew about it. In retrospect, I am still cloudy about exactly how I discovered it, in those pre social media days, before these information tools that we think of as so essential these days such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

After my studies I began to meet with fellow 'C4D-ers' in order to talk with like-minded people; with colleagues from *Panos*, BBC and with a range of independents we met like clandestine cultists, starting with monthly lunches at the British Library and this developed into a social network that is now global – this is the [C4D Network](#) which has over 2,000 members in 136 countries.



Jackie Davies introduces The C4D Network.

By now, in 2015, many friends and colleagues have gone through the Malmö programme, and at the C4D Network we encourage people every year to apply. I really think it's one of best and most accessible routes to giving oneself a grounding in communication for development, which in turn makes moving into consultancy or senior strategy roles much smoother. From what I have observed, the programme also aids people to make the jump from media to development, or vice versa, based on the acquisition of a whole shelf full of new learning about what each involves and how and when they cross-over.

With hindsight, what has changed over the ten years since *Glocal Times* was first published? Or have things stayed the same? Is communication for development now truly out from under the bushel? In my view there are good news and bad news, which calls for a creative balance.

The good news is that C4D is attracting more and more attention, as indicated by the increase in academic courses about it; whether styled as media and development, innovations and development, ICT4D, or a range of other permeations the subject is being studied, Master's courses have become available all around the world, and undergraduate courses are starting.

In this context, what are the job prospects for the many graduates? That is the bad news: the jobs are few and far between, and very often communication for development is confused by line managers with other external or internal communication functions. Students may be getting their theories about social norms sorted in their essays, but once working, they are

more likely to be asked to edit their organisation's website than to contribute to the design and implementation of an exciting social change intervention.

To address this problem, what is needed is assistance for NGOs and other potential employers to learn how to define communication for development jobs and how to write terms of reference for commissioning communication for development consultancies.

It's that 'being unnamed, light under the bushel' problem again - we have not yet done an adequate job as a sector in presenting ourselves clearly. As communicators the irony is (almost) too obvious to comment upon. Is this 'blaming the victim'? Well perhaps, but it is our job to communicate about what we do and why we do it, it is too much to expect other development colleagues to guess simply because we are not practicing what we preach – we are not effectively using communications to make an impact.

I may be wrong, but based on my professional standpoint, I see C4D being more of a subject of interest amongst development colleagues. Many people join the Network because they want to find out more about C4D: there is energy devoted to learning more, meeting others in this field, getting 'into it' theoretically and practically.

An unscientific little study that I sometimes conduct at the start of Network webinars is to ask participants when they first heard the term 'communication for development'. The majority say 'in the last year' -an answer that has been consistent in the past few years.

The growth of membership of the C4D Network also echoes this dynamic - among the 2000+ vetted members there are experienced C4D people for sure, but there is also an increasing stream of other professionals from other sectors -donors, NGO management, business - who have engaged with C4D more recently and who express a desire to understand it more and work with it better.

Yet, we still don't explain ourselves well. Certainly the Network could have done a better job in introducing the sector's basics before launching people into the depths of all the activity, publications, events and pilots that are steaming up the Twitter Trawl every week. There is a lot going on, but do people outside our sector know? Do we let them in?

If we don't, then the ebb and flow of interest in communication for development will recur again. There may be more interest in communications for development at present, and more academic study about it, but it is not a stable sector in terms of funding.

I have seen good organisations go down in the past few years - *Panos London* and *Healthlink* in particular (and *OneWorld.net* were I worked had some serious wobbles). These were organisations with decades of cutting-edge communication for development experience, that embodied a valuable institutional knowledge for all of us in the sector, but when donor interests changed, that was that.

But where does the problem really lie? Donor fickleness, or our inability to present a compelling story about the value of C4D?

Over the past ten years, the language of information and communication has changed and the

so called 'global information society' has sped up; but we arguably have not kept pace: we are still navel-gazing about what to call the sector: C4D, or commdev, or devcom or whatnot? Likewise, we are still discussing whether behaviour change or social change have more merit, or whether 'media development' is a separate sector or whether it is under the C4D umbrella. These internal debates do our sector no favours, as they distract from the more pressing need to be united in presenting a clear and compelling proposition to our development colleagues and to expand job opportunities.

While we have been ruminating, innovators and tech-led development gurus have taken the stage, behaviour change gained new strength in line with behavioural economics and the entry of the private sector, and donors and agencies are exploring whether advertisers can produce better impact in campaigns and research. What should the C4D organisations be saying and doing in this context?

I think that on balance there is more good news than not - the energy visible in the Network, champions around the world and, thanks to Malmö and other programmes, a growing cohort of academically solid practitioners who know how to ground practice in good theory and strategy.

We just need to organise ourselves better to talk about what we are and what we do -we need to figure out how to package this commodity of ours so that we can mainstream communication as a central component of effective development practice. How about asking current students of the Master's at Malmö to develop an advocacy campaign for C4D as an assignment? Let's give the newcomers a chance to shine our light as brightly as possible.

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