



BEYOND BUZZWORDS

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'Mainstreaming' is one of these new expressions that have quickly become buzzwords in business, management and international development jargon. In my mind, its connotations are mostly negative: I think of complying with and adjusting to a public opinion or dominant market forces. In the arts, the mainstream has always represented that which we as artists question and rebel against -yet we are of course also well aware that it constitutes the very condition of our economic existence.

I am still not sure about the exact meaning of *mainstreaming* in development cooperation, but I understand that it has to do with *coherence* –another buzzword! And it is certainly of great value to have for example gender perspectives “mainstreamed” into all development partnerships –or, for that matter, to see media and communication as integral parts of the redefined mainstream of Global Development. However, I cannot help but keeping an ambivalent feeling about the very notion.

The World Congress on Communication for Development (WCCD) ^[1], organized by The Communication Initiative, FAO and The World Bank's Development Communication division, is coming up in Rome in October. It will gather researchers, practitioners, politicians and policy-makers from all over the globe in the first reunion of its kind. The congress may rightly be regarded as a major break-through for a ComDev perspective at the level of international and transnational decision-making, and the active participation of the World Bank seems to imply that substantial financial resources will accompany the new political priority.

This momentum has built up over some years, but still comes as a welcome surprise to a field that only a decade ago suffered from crisis and stagnation. After a period of marginalization, communication has once again come to the forefront of the development agenda, and some enthusiasts already speak in terms of “before and after Rome”. True enough, it will most probably become difficult –perhaps even impossible– for donor agencies and other major players in the field *not* to formulate communication policies or include media and communication components as integral parts of their sector programs at all levels.

Yet, the mainstreaming may possibly also have the undesired and perhaps

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inevitable consequence that communication loses its edge. The concept of development communication has gradually moved from one that mainly sees communication as a means to achieve a general goal of economic growth and modernization, to one that rather regards communication as a process and a goal in itself. This change of perspective was the prerequisite for a participatory approach to development, defined as social change at community and grassroots level. And ComDev practitioners like to think of themselves as the avant-garde in this respect, facilitating empowerment and enhancing democracy.

By putting a renewed emphasis on economic growth and the necessity of linking up with the global networks, to a certain extent economic globalization has fostered a revival of the old modernization paradigm and its top-down diffusionist perspective. The neoliberal recipe for development spells adjustment to the logic of global capitalism, and from a liberal point of view, communication policies are often equal to enhancing the free flow of information. That is, in reality, the unrestrained diffusion of (commercial) media messages in formerly closed and harshly regulated societies, opening new markets and giving the new consumers access to the opportunities of the global economy.

But globalization is more than the global penetration and consolidation of corporate capitalism. At the political level, it means for example the proliferation of non-governmental and civil society organizations, NGOs and CSOs. Transnational agency networks (TANs) and other embryonic forms of global polity are quickly reshaping the landscape of international development cooperation. Moreover, neoliberalism has been but one of several competing paradigms in the re-examined development discourse and hardly even the dominant one. The early 21st century's mainstream development is characterized by eclecticism and pragmatism, incorporating much of what was once defined as 'alternative development'. According to Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "the divide now runs between human and alternative development, on the one hand, and the number-crunching approach to development, the positivism of growth, on the other. Institutionally the rift runs between the UN agencies and the IMF, with the World Bank increasingly – and precariously – straddled somewhere in the middle." [2]

The World Bank's increasing interest in communication for development and social change should perhaps be seen in the light of this "precarious" middle position. What is communication if not a mediator? Some hardened ComDev activists may feel like they are being embraced by the enemy, but old antagonisms sometimes turn into fruitful partnerships, and the World Bank is of course more than welcome as one important player in this field.

Mainstreaming ComDev is fine, as long as we retain our ambiguity and bear in mind that the mainstream is just as dependent on the avant-garde as vice versa. In order to keep the mainstream moving in the direction of participation and dialogue, we must stay firm in our commitment, yet

ready to question and redefine all our presumptions. And we should always beware of buzzwords!

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After Rome, we shall be heading for Durban and the continuation of the experimental project of artistic and academic collaboration *Memories of Modernity*^[3], involving eight prominent artists from South Africa and Sweden and a number of ComDev master students who will develop their fieldwork in South Africa. As part of this project, in November a weeklong seminar and workshop will be hosted by the Centre for Culture, Communication and Media Studies (CCMS) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

You will certainly find more about Rome's WCCD and the *Memories of Modernity* project in coming issues of Glocal Times.

[1] See www.devcomm-congress.org

[2] Pieterse, Jan N. (2001) *Development Theory. Deconstructions/Reconstructions*. London: Sage.

[3] See <http://webzone.k3.mah.se/projects/mom/cmt04/default.asp>

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