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## **Introduction: On the Mediation of Development**

by

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## Introduction: On the Mediation of Development

This *Development in Practice* special issue responds to the need for a radical rethinking of the theory, practice and pedagogy of communication for development. This field may be designated as communication for development, communication for social change, development communication or information and communication technology for development (Lennie and Tacchi 2013; Quebral 1988; Tufte 2017; Gumucio Dagron and Tufte, 2006). Our aim in this special issue is to contribute to the process of rescuing these approaches and their discourses from Westernization, theoretical elitism, and the 'developmentalism' that prevails in dominant organizations, institutions and analytical perspectives. This aim is in line with the ambition of celebrating the 'ethnography of development' (Escobar 1995/2012; Makuwira, 2014; Mosse 2005) and offering pathways for celebrating subaltern and periphery theoretical frameworks and experiences (Fanon 1965; Said 1978; Spivak 1988).

Rogers (1976) claimed that the dominant paradigm in the communication and development field which privileged Western framings of the cultural, social, political and economic development process in the 1970s had passed. It subsequently was claimed that this paradigm had undergone only a superficial revision (Mansell 1982). In the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process since the early 2000s, the primary focus has been to strengthen the role of media hardware and software as pathways for building and strengthening information or knowledge societies, ostensibly as a way of building deliberative democracies and inclusive development. The discourses have changed over time, but the prevailing approaches in the policy world, including the WSIS and the many institutions seeking to mobilize for the inclusion of excluded communities in today's digital environment, still focus principally on investment in, and the diffusion and use of, media and communication hardware and software. The assumption is that this is consistent with building deliberative democracies and inclusive development (Mansell, 2014; Frau-Meigs et al., 2012).

Building on Escobar's (1995/2012) work, this special issue profiles research that emphasises the role of the media and communication processes in constructing specific development narratives that call for, or result in, particular kinds of interventions that enable people to voice their preferences or to engage in action that can liberate them from the damage done

by exploitative power asymmetries. For example, take the case of a farmer in a remote community in the global South who grows cashew nuts which she is forced to sell to a dominant group of local traders. With the support of corrupt government officials, these traders monopolise the market and control the price she is able to set. She would seem to be trapped within structures of oppression, but perhaps not. If she should gain access to a farmers' radio programme, she may be informed that if she markets her product with other farmers in her community to overseas buyers, she will get a better price. When she and others buy a mobile phone, a WhatsApp group may soon emerge. A local agriculture extension worker might help these farmers to improve their yield by facilitating their access to loans and fertilizers and by linking them to overseas buyers. A dialogic communication process might start to occur about market expectations and the quality of the product. The farmers may modify their farming practices. A consortium of Chinese companies might hear about these farmers and seek to undercut a European buyer giving the farmers a better financial deal, at least for a time. The farmers might never have envisaged this outcome in the absence of dialogue and a communicative process that enables negotiation, increased self-awareness and collaboration among local and distant actors. Whether the new practices would be sustained in the face of attempts by other powerful actors to extract profit in a way that disadvantages these farmers can be treated as an empirical question. In this special issue, the contributors examine a variety of conditions under which it may be possible to resist the oppression associated with the dominant development paradigm. The manner in which such resistance becomes possible is through recourse to a variety of enabling communicative practices and, in some cases, the use of media and communication technologies. The authors examine lessons that can be drawn from research focusing on asymmetrical power relations that permeate institutions, communicative processes and practices in specific contexts.

In works from a Latin American perspective on critical pedagogy (Freire 1970; Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte 2006; Gutierrez 1988) to Asian approaches to development journalism and instructional technology (Agrawal 2006; Loo 2009), narratives, memories and literacies are often emphasized as is the power of the media and communication processes in framing the values and practices that emerge in developmental contexts. Media and communication are acknowledged as crucial in the experience of development – its inclusions and exclusions. Many of these processes occur through the way the media and communication interventions configure the discourses and practices of development stakeholders who,

through their governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other institutions, share development knowledge and practices.

The papers in this special issue are concerned with the way discourse and practice are constituted (Arendt 1958, Silverstone 2007), and with how and where development is mediated in practice. They are concerned with how the metaphysical and material 'space for such acts of exchange, listening and narrative formation' (Tuftte 2017, 178) give rise to developmental consequences. The call for papers for this special issue was informed by our commitment to research that enhances understanding of power relations in a mediated world. Insofar as these relations are being mediated for better or worse by the media and information and communication technologies (Livingstone 2009), then development outcomes must be understood through examinations of the ways that the media and communicative practice are contributing to the constitution of people's engagement with powerful actors and with the disadvantaged and oppressed within the contexts where they work and live their lives. The development process is increasingly mediated by older and newer media and communication technologies (Scannell 1996, Thompson 1995) and, as Silverstone (1999 p. 143) observed, 'it is all about power of course ... the power of definition, of incitement, of enlightenment, of seduction, of judgement ... It is about the drip, drip, drip of ideology'. Overt and silent processes of mediation are implicated in development processes and yet they are often neglected. Mediation means to intervene in the life sphere and its inclusions and exclusions are better understood when the roles of the media and communication in the development process are taken into consideration (Mansell, 1996). If mediation refers to 'the meta process by which everyday practices and social relations are increasingly shaped by mediating technologies and media organizations' (Livingstone 2009, p. 3), the study of mediation serves as an entry point for exploring potential opportunities for stakeholders to experiment with new ways of thinking about and doing development. This is arguably so even when they work within the constraints of asymmetrical power relationships, limited resources and the policies and practices that are given from 'above'.

The contributors to this special issue emphasise and critique the discourses and practices of communicating about development interventions within communities mainly in the global South, and the discourses and practices of formal policy making and development interventions. The global South for us, no longer refers only to 'Third World' countries. It also refers to the South that exists in the global North. In both, there are increasing numbers

of people and communities that are marginalised by colonialism or imperialism and being further left behind by the hostility and violence of capitalism, globalization and modernity. The papers present case studies drawn from experiences in Brazil, northern Canada, Ghana, India, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and sub-Saharan Africa. Also included are papers that provide a critical reflection on asymmetries of power that infuse development interventions in the global South at a more macro or structural level, specifically in the case of the African sub-continent, in an examination of the roles of 'experts' in the development process, and a consideration of power relations embedded in the collection, interpretation and application of empirical evidence in low and middle income countries. The authors focus on how development processes are mediated, although they do not all use this term. They are also concerned with potentialities for resistance to exploitative media and communicative practices and how such practices differ from a dialogic and empowering communicative practice on the part of those whose lives are oppressed, whether oppression originates with distant or proximate actors.

The first paper is a case study by Lauren Dyll who examines the role of the indigenous environmental knowledge of the San ǀKhomani Bushmen in the Kalahari desert region in sub-Saharan Africa with the aim of highlighting dualisms that are so often features of development interventions. These binary ways of thinking and communicative practice that divide indigenous from non-indigenous knowledge, nature from culture, researcher from the researched, developer from beneficiary, the sacred from the profane, and the spiritual world from the material world, are at the centre of the dominant paradigm of development. She examines an intervention at the !Xaus Lodge in the Kalahari which is a Public-Private-Community Partnership initiative. She demonstrates how socially and economically marginalized groups were able to contest the dominant development policies propagated by the government and NGOs in collaboration with private investors. This is illustrated through her analysis of the communicative processes that mediate the participation of indigenous communities and her insights into how this provides a foundation for challenging the persistent dualisms that create barriers to engaged and enabling participation.

The second case study by Verena Thomas, Jackie Kauli and Anou Borrey considers the role of participatory media and community-led interventions addressing gender-based violence in Papua New Guinea. Workshops were organised using indigenous and action research methods to build trusting relationships among participants and facilitators. The participants

shared technical and conceptual photography skills, took photographs and recorded narratives, reflected on their stories and photographs in a group setting, and produced the results as co-created media products. In this case, visual participatory communication was used to mediate representations of power relationships through a process of inclusive and iterative reflection on distinctive knowledge systems and active listening. The authors note that despite the potential of a collective learning space, its continuation was contingent upon government funding cycles, the support of local organisations and the availability of participants' time within demanding work environments.

Individual privacy as a contested notion in slum communities in the Philippines is explored by Cheryl Ruth Soriano, Ruepert Jiel Cao and Marianne Sison in their paper. Focusing on intersections between space, technology and sharing, they demonstrate the need for critical assessments of these relationships in the places where youths engage in mediated interaction using public internet booths. The analysis shows how a digital technology with global reach becomes integrated within the development process when the mediation process is embedded in local experience. Digital devices are shared and used within socio-spatial arrangements which are shown to shape how users engage with the technology and how privacy and publicness are experienced and perceived. The analysis stresses the importance of local cultural and ethical values when interventions to build the media and information infrastructure in low income areas are introduced. They emphasise that inclusive cannot be achieved by introducing external notions of privacy and data management processes.

The case presented by Joe Straubhaar and Stuart Davis focuses on empowerment through music production in Brazil where local Afro-Brazilian NGOs have become significant in enabling potentially transformative social change. The paper examines how music skills training and digital inclusion interventions have supported an innovative approach to social inclusion, participation and empowerment. Their focus on individual and group empowerment through building a sense of pride in Afrocentric identity and a racial consciousness is shown to be generative and to be crucial for young people to strengthen their self-confidence and sense of self worth. The analysis serves as a powerful critique of dominant discourses on 'empowerment communication' as formulated by The World Bank and other international bodies. It demonstrates the potential of music to work as a mediator of transformation through digitally supported learning and the initiatives of local

organisations that work towards a process of digital inclusion that enables participants to address external problems.

In her paper, Maria Touri explores the less visible features of economies and their dependence on non-monitory relationships, even within global capitalism. She takes the case of Indian organic farmers' participation in Alternative Food Networks to illustrate how a dialogic communication process contributed to the farmers' well-being, creating opportunities for social change. She shows how face-to-face interpersonal interactions between rural farmers and buyers yielded novel decisions about the marketing and promotion of their products. This was achieved by enabling their voices to be listened to. In some instances, this resulted in less asymmetrical power relations than when communication was mediated by digital technologies such as email. She suggests that an ethical and cyclical learning process that takes account of the quality of relationships between speakers and listeners is more likely to be activated in this way than when the diversity of local economies and their mediated practices is neglected.

The paper by Thomas Tufte and Lise Grauenkaer explores the role of strategic communication initiatives involving radio, social media and interpersonal communication in advancing cultures of governance. A case study of efforts in Ghana to strengthen the communicative capacities of young people. They ask whether the strategic use of communication can yield a transformation in youth perceptions of their own agency by examining the social processes and cultural practices that give rise to local knowledge communities. They emphasise the participatory, bottom-up processes that provided opportunities for a reweaving of pre-existing asymmetrical social bonds among the actors involved in a citizen journalism project. Despite the reliance of the project on external funding, in this case from a Danish development agency, they contend that cultures of governance were strengthened and that this enabled a local group to act 'according to their needs'.

These case study contributions are completed with a Viewpoint paper by Patricia Audette-Longo and Lorna Roth in which Lorna reflects on her long experience of mobilising action for transformative media in indigenous communities in the northern Canadian territory of Nunavut. In an interview, she considers how relationship building and co-movement enabled community 'cultural persistence' over four decades. This involved rethinking power



relationships, negotiating expectations and much experimentation. Cross-cultural knowledge making is shown to be a critical pathway in infrastructure and resource development, especially when a framework is created through participation. This is in contrast to approaches that mainly involve resisting externally imposed frameworks. Participatory development is shown to require openness to diverse solutions and ambitions as well as a 'diplomacy aesthetics' which encourages a sensitivity to diverse forms of communication.

The case studies in this special issue also focus on the potential for countering oppressive communicative processes and practices through face-to-face interpersonal communication and/or through the use of digital technologies (radio, email, social media). The next paper in this issue turns to the structural features that characterize many communication for development interventions in the global South. Jonathan Makuwira's paper explores the role of international NGO actors in contributing to the dominant development discourse. He argues that NGOs operate as agenda setters and that these institutions are in the forefront of development planning and implementation in the global South. Neoliberal ideology and dominant practices of development aid intervention are shown to permeate power relationships with the result that donor funding and NGO practices skew relationships and outcomes in favour of donors and the international NGOs. This occurs through a mediation process that influences how such interventions are imagined and implemented. Taking the 'logical framework approach' as the exemplar of practices that are antithetical to securing the empowerment of local participants, he reflects on the insidious ways in which practices of listening can become coercive, in this case, in the African context. He calls for a radical rethinking in which external organisations and practitioners adopt the position of an 'ignorant expert', proposing that this might open up a space for a discourse that is not disabling.

The characteristics of the evidence base that underpins development intervention are considered by Mariya Stoilova, Shakulanta Banaji, Sonia Livingstone and Anulekha Nandi, in this instance, focusing on interventions intended to support young people's engagement with information and communication technologies in low and middle income countries. They examine the gap between the rhetoric of empowerment and the reality of practice. Their review reveals that 'good intentions' to provide digital access as a solution to inequality usually fail due to programmatic interventions that do not attend to context or

consequence. The modernising assumptions and practices of many development projects using digital media are shown to lead in many instances to negative outcomes because they are poorly thought out. They call for a radical rethinking of mediated communication, childhood and development in the light of local experience, struggle and context.

The final paper is another Viewpoint contribution. Jessica Noske-Turner considers what the notion of development 'expertise' entails in relation to communication for development. She observes that communication for development 'experts' who work with international development organisations can feel threatened by participatory development programmes. She argues that they feel the need to justify their presence by adhering to strict operating procedures and 'proper' models. She contends, however, that there is a potential for new thinking and communicative practice if communication for development is strategic and its practitioners pay attention to the issues and concerns that are communicated to them. She highlights the complex role of the 'expert' and emphasizes the need to integrate 'communicative development' with other forms of expertise, and to focus on local ambition, rather than on the importation of distant innovation models for development.

## **Conclusion**

In this special issue the need for alternative ways of communicating and practising development interventions is emphasised. There is clearly a need to further develop a notion of a development practice that serves as a catalyst of social change (Figuroa, 2002) and as a critical educator in Freire's (1970) sense of a pedagogy of the oppressed. Just because development interventions involve consultation with local people, this does not mean these people are heard or that action occurs that is consistent with their aspirations. The design and implementation of such interventions must involve a dialogic approach to communication and listening that gives agency to individuals and to their local organisations. A community communication approach is privileged in many of the papers as a means of achieving this. However, the authors also find evidence of constraints imposed, for example, by funding structures and the importation of insensitive project management models and requirements. These have to be resisted if development interventions are to be empowering and if they are to offer more than superficial changes in practice; changes that do little or nothing to dislodge power asymmetries and simply perpetuate violence in society (Fanon, 1965).

The papers in this special issue are theoretically and methodologically eclectic. The research benefits from rich ethnographic and other qualitative methods and from the structural assessment of power, consistent with a political economy approach. Since communication for development interventions were launched the world over in the aftermath of World War Two, scholars, practitioners and community members have been calling for the involvement of local people and communities in imagining, conceiving and implementing their own development. This was a prominent theme in the early pioneering work of Nora Quebral (1988) on communication for development and it is present in other approaches that have emerged (Manyozo 2012). The continuing need to resist models that implicitly or explicitly call for communicating knowledge from research institutes and other actors such as NGOs to end users retains its dominance. At the same time, there are approaches to communication for development that have the potential to enable forms of participatory communication that engage individuals, community groups and institutions in implementing sustainable and locally sensitive development interventions. Communication for development must be about producing development together, about deliberative communicative practice, and about resistance to asymmetrical power dynamics.

After the 2008 financial crash, the Post-Crash Economics Society called for a radical rethinking of economics and the social sciences generally. Alternative theories, reflections and practices can be regarded as having the potential to work as an antidote to mainstream theories and approaches (Feraboli and Morelli, 2018). In the context of communication for development, this means thinking critically about indigenous knowledge bases and about bottom up responses to post-colonial oppression. This involves a continuing struggle to establish communication for development theory and practice as a dialectic and dialogic process that is reflexive and responsive to the voices of local community actors who seek to mobilise social change that is empowering (Manyozo 2017).

The papers in this special issue outline several alternative communication for development theories and practices. They confirm that when critical thinking is present and the focus is on everyday life experience and institutional practice, mediated by the media and by dialogic communication, it is possible to begin to understand how discursive imaginaries of development are constituted and how they might be dislodged. In this way, local people may be able to shape their development in a way that reflects their ambitions and

aspirations. Thus, some approaches to mediated communication appear to have the potential to render the material and the symbolic spaces of development less confrontational and contested. Yet, some of the contributors are less sanguine than others about this potential in view of local dependencies on external funding, on organisational strategies that are insensitive to local voices, and on the dynamics of global capitalism.

Communication for development interventions are influenced by access to and control of the media and digital technologies, just as they are by gender, ethnic and class relations. They are also influenced by as well as by literacies and other capabilities of populations with diverse expectations. International development organizations continue to play a major role in shaping the social change agenda, typically in line with a Western-centric, technology deterministic and capital intensive, modernist model. The persistence of this model leads to deepening inequalities, an observation that led Escobar (1995) to observe that 'development' itself should be discarded as a harmful discursive imaginary. Nevertheless, the papers in this special issue confirm that by highlighting and critically examining both discourse and practice, the ways in which power relations must change can be revealed. This provides at least the potential for local people to claim their right to emancipation and to improvements in their lives. Thus, research in the communication for development field can play a crucial role, not only in enabling communication about the role of the media and communicative practice in development initiatives, but also, and crucially, in critically examining the dialectic of struggles over contested power relations in the policy making and implementation process.

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