

Contemplating the future of "development communication" in South Africa today

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Abstract

This article offers some reflections on the state of development communication in South Africa, and suggests that closer attention needs to be paid to the theoretical underpinnings of communication for development practices, the emerging institutional contexts and the capacity building that is required in a rapid change situation.

It suggests that academics and practitioners need to find a middle way through the 'anything goes' and 'developmentalism' poles of the debate about how best to use communication for development, particularly in the light of the new Government Communications and Information Service and the Poverty and Inequality Report.

In this article I would like to look at a number of issues which seem to me to be significant at this time and which are related to the practice(s) of communication for development. I use this term to distance myself from the ideological baggage associated with, on the one hand, the dominant paradigm of development communication, and on the other, the more radical (and fragmented) participatory communication perspective, into which would fall the development support communication (DSC) strand. I need this distance because it is one argument of the paper that it is less important to slavishly follow an international trend than to look at our own context in order to establish the priorities, which in turn will provide the linkage between communication and development.

Continuing to think about communication for development seems to me to be a worthy enterprise as we undergo our first post-transition media shake-up. The new emerging broadcasting environment, the excitement over tele-centres, the launch of the Government Communication and Information Service, more money for community media, improving institutional capacity for development delivery and so on all point to a new milieu in which issues of information, communication and development feature prominently. Inasmuch as any debate about communication and development draws on a wide range of perspectives about what is good, I have tried to steer clear of such an approach in order to provide an overview of some issues that seem to be important.

DSC: anything goes or malevolent developmentalism?

Let me start by contrasting two very different views of how DSC is viewed in South Africa today. On the one hand, a piece by Mariekie Burger (1996) on media campaigns, and on the other, Stephan Sonderling's (1997) diatribe on the dangers of DSC. I have chosen these two papers in order to show, firstly, that DSC is probably broader in scope in a South African context than we may have thought, and secondly, that the whole question of development interventions remains problematic, an issue I've commented on before (cf. Burton, 1996).

Burger, in her evaluation of media campaigns, locates her discussion in a distinction between development communication and DSC, justifying her commitment to the latter on the basis of surveys indicating that rural people are information hungry and display a need to grapple with information issues in a small group situation (i.e., in some form of participatory manner).

Her argument is that small group, face-to-face communication is the delivery mechanism valued more highly as one moves further away from the urban areas. While I have doubts about the generalisability of this suggestion, knowing that the issue itself, or subject, may be a crucial determinant of the choices people make in choosing delivery systems, the point about strategising information campaigns according to audience, and knowledge about the audience itself are important. These two matters - audience characteristics, and our knowledge of them are central topics in what is generally called social marketing. I believe social marketing is the framework which is increasingly coming to be equated with DSC in South Africa today.

It is a framework that is not interested in lengthy interventions which are designed to facilitate a renegotiated form of life, or the gradual emergence of a social movement - the best practice of participatory communication in the Bob White and Jan Servaes type of approach, but one which is more interested in information provision for the purposes of inducing behavior change.

There is undoubtedly a need for such purposive communication, and practitioners should be involved in preparing media campaigns that will attack the information component of development needs. However, social marketing remains an ambiguous endeavor, suggesting as it does, that behavioral change can be directly traced back to a media stimulus. Furthermore, if we look at Alan Andreasen's influential *Marketing Social Change* 1995, we find that the concept of participation is not part of the theoretical foundations of the approach, and that the real purpose and challenge of social marketing are, he suggests, "[the] need to learn what triggers action - and how social marketers can pull these triggers more often" (1995:316). Such a viewpoint should lay to rest, once and for all, the equation of DSC and social marketing from a theoretical point of view. It does not of course remove the necessity of developing and refining communication strategies which

begin with an institutional imperative, particularly in the fields of health and welfare, where information about practices can be a matter of life and death.

Robert Hornik's illuminating study of the knowledge-behavior gap, reminds us of the necessity to think about this issue through a number of levels of analysis: structural characteristics of individuals and communities, social influences at a community level, and learned and enduring characteristics of individuals (1989:133). Under different circumstances, each of these levels becomes more or less significant. The central problem facing purposive communication is sorting out which level of analysis is the crucial one in terms of a communication strategy with specified outcomes, and yet we do not have much research work in South Africa on this matter. While Burger's work does contribute to a growing literature on using communication for development, her interest is clearly in information campaigns, which are only one dimension of the participatory communication framework of which DSC is a part. It is interesting to note that social marketing is now seen as a legitimate field of study and reflection by the participatory school of communications for development. Schoen's article in Servaes, *et al* (1996) which discusses the role of communication in effective policy implementation, specifically addresses the ways in which behavior change can best be strategised using mass communication. Why has there not been more discussion about the impact of television programmes such as *Soul City* and *Buang*? These are clear examples where information is being imparted which should impact on action.

Stephan Sonderling, on the other hand, provides a critique of an approach to DSC which sees it as a panacea for the problem of power inequalities in the development process, a matter we are all familiar with. His critique has little force when one brings it all home, rather than operating at the level of North-South relations. We should not confuse the sometimes questionable matter of international aid with the project of national development. His refuge in an "alternative to development" is no place to hide when we start to think about development in our own society. Nevertheless, it is worth reminding ourselves of that development projects have two contradictory components: "Participation means fostering local initiative and control; management often requires meeting certain objectives, many already established long before the project begins, maintaining accountability and central control" (Craig and Porter, 1997:50), and Sonderling is correct to question the role of the DSC agent in sustaining this tension.

Sonderling's attempt to demolish Robert Agunga's argument in favor of the professionalization of communication workers, or DSC operatives, by suggesting that "the role of the change agent is always determined by his (sic) position within the development institution" (1997:205) is somewhat misplaced. Yes, there may be an element of 'persuasion' in certain development interventions, and this may be perfectly legitimate inasmuch as some structural, social or individual characteristics are identified as impeding the ability of ordinary people to engage in

a dialogical negotiation (e.g. a warlord, a clique, an ideology which prevents others from engaging). If development workers are committed to a people-centered approach, then it is incumbent upon them to set in motion a capacity building process prior to institutional involvement. The establishment of development committees, and training of members prior to project planning is the ideal to which we should aspire, although we know such organizations are often established in parallel with the project implementation, which can lead to all kinds of problems, as Eric Louw has shown (1995).

Far from being the agent of deception, the DSC expert, or the development professional with a DSC training, in a government department or agency, may in fact be our best hope. There are always successful extension officers, community liaison officials, fieldworker and facilitators. What makes them successful? How do they build solidarity and assist the visioning of a target group? These are the issues we should be investigating. Ultimately, Sonderling is coping out: there is no way that his critique is going to hold up the development juggernaut, and we should instead be looking for ways and means to undermine the 'framing' of development by outside experts.

Craig and Porter argue that the development professional who is aware of the limitations imposed by project performance goals and objectives, valued practices (needs assessments, PRA's, benchmarking etc.), the homogenizing taxonomic categories constructing subjects, and time frames etc., should seek the "creation of space and enablement" (1997:56). The former is an ethical and political act of allowing the development 'subjects' to make their own representations and projections, even if these run counter to the constructed frames presented to them. The latter means a determination to facilitate the 'subject's' access to the framing tools: the language of development, the planning technologies (such as LOGFRAME), and the institutional acumen, or inside story. In other words, it is the development professional's ability to develop new skills and new organizational forms which increase participation that is important. Some do this, and some don't!

If we think of DSC as playing some role in the interface between 'subjects' and 'development', either as communication experts or as the work that development professionals do, the views of Craig and Porter (and others concerned with the straightjacketing effects of development practices) resonate with Sonderling's own conclusion that, "DSC is a practical discipline, based on applied research" (1997:199) and is thus a goal itself, never a finished product, much like the notion of participation which underlies it. It is this problem of incompleteness that makes both the idea of participation and the practice of DSC interesting in the first place.

These contrasting views of DSC as social marketing and 'agency of deception' illustrate the need for local practitioners and theoreticians to take the role of communication in development more seriously. Francis Nyamnjoh's comments about DSC in his overview of the Culture, Communication, Development

Symposium are still appropriate," [On DSC] it was apparent from the presentations and discussions that there are still more questions than answers. A situation compounded by the paucity of literature in the area, and the fact that local research if still unfocused and uncoordinated" (1997:69).

Emphasizing information

Are there some general comments about the state of development information in South Africa? The final COMTASK Report, *Communications 2000* (1996), which created the framework for the new Government Communications and Information Service (GCIS), and the recently published *Poverty and Inequality Report* (PIR) (1998), both address the issue of information for development and merit some comment.

The launch of the GCIS in May 1998 would seem to be a significant development, considering both the developmental and political history of its predecessor SACS. The central thrust of the GCIS will be to ensure greater co-ordination between communication and information structures within government, and the successful delivery of information about national developments (particularly to the poor and marginalised majority). In a context where 80% of government information generated never reaches the public through the media, and serious tensions exist between ministries and departments in terms of communication responsibilities, the establishment of a new framework for the production and dissemination of information is to be welcomed. The report envisages a new set of relationships between the government and the people, mediated by a range of networks and organizations (government and non-government) operating dialogically at all levels from the grassroots upwards.

The PIR is a comprehensive overview of both poverty and the policies which have been implemented to deal with it in recent years. Looking through it, we can see a number of points which have implications for the use of communication and information for development. While matters of information pervade the report, particularly the issue of data gathering for monitoring and indicator development, the specific recommendations around communication and media are to be found in sections on 'information and technology' and 'infrastructure'.

Communication is here equated with reliable telecommunications (telephony), which is seen as the mechanism most able to provide access to information which impacts upon productivity and social networks, which in turn influences the ability of individuals and households to participate productively in the economic sphere (1998:24). Interestingly enough, the authors suggest that the majority of poor people will be unlikely to fully utilize the information technology systems because of educational and affordability problems. Notwithstanding this caveat, the report does suggest the establishment of multi-purpose community centers (MPCCs), as does the COMTASK report, with the equipment and resources for empowering

disadvantaged groups, particularly in the collecting, analyzing and sharing of information related to their development needs. This is an issue which was also raised in the Rural Development Strategy discussion paper 1995., and one which raises questions about the kind of capacity building that will have to be done in order that communities are able to utilize the resources that will become available.

This issue of building capacity is central to the PIR. The suggestion that "it is critical that the capacity to ensure that information flows take place is built up as a priority (1998:48), clearly relates directly to GCIS, but the report goes further, suggesting that the SABC, radio in particular, is used to inform people.

Inform them about what? Nowhere does it elaborate on the kinds of information that is necessary to contribute to the breaking of the forces that perpetuate poverty, although it is clear about the need to enhance the quality of life through improved access to physical and social assets (information being a critical social asset).

These reports set the stage for a much more meaningful debate about the role of information in development and nation-building. While we do have a fairly active public discussion about South Africa's position in the information economy, this debate has not really tackled the problems of information and action, of information and the knowledge gap, and the relationship between information and sustainability.

Institutional issues

Part of the problem of evaluating DSC in South Africa today is that most of the people doing it, or something like it, are not in a position to reflect on their practices. Research is urgently required on how people do 'development communication', in it's broadest sense, as a mobilization of communication resources in the pursuit of development goals.

We know that people in government departments, in sectors such as health, land and agriculture, welfare, and education are involved in various kinds of interventions, some of them directly developmental, in the sense of operating within a policy frame with clear objectives for identifiable beneficiaries. These communications officers, or technical assistants, are performing a wide range of tasks:

- liaising with the media,
- preparing materials for the media and stakeholders,
- organizing and coordinating events and functions,
- preparing budgets and plans,
- liaising with communities,
- training communities,
- preparing educational materials for project target groups and stakeholders etc.

All of this work can be characterized as DSC, although it may not be directly contributing to deepening participation within communities. This is the reality of the moment in a context where institutional capacity remains uneven, and the civil service as a whole is still firmly in a transforming mode.

This problem of institutional capacity, and the definitions of tasks associated with such capacity is a theme that is commonly referred to in the COMTASK report. The GCIS will re-affirm the importance of the communication function within departments, which for a long time has been neglected. The capacity requirements are not only on the supply side, but the COMTASK report suggests that "a more professional approach towards communications needs to be developed, including the institution of a culture of continuous evaluation of needs, audiences and objectives" (1996:41). In order to deliver the appropriate information to the appropriate sector will require a network of delivery agents whose task it will be to provide the capacity for the target groups to seek appropriate information.

Needs assessments, it is now widely recognized, should involve those who will be service or program users (directly or indirectly) in the initial stages of defining, targeting and carrying out the research, because they will be the group most intimately effected by the findings. The necessary data collection and research which is part of needs assessment is now viewed as part and parcel of the broad DSC endeavor, and is in line with Sonderling's views of DSC as an applied discipline. The establishment of needs is also not a once-off audit, but an ongoing process which reflects the changes that development itself brings to people's lives. Institutions need to establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of new information on target groups, and this requires capacity building at all levels. The finding of PIR that, in an exercise to gauge the type of indicators used to measure the impact of government programmes, no reference is made to participation of communities in any stage of government project implementation and impact assessment, does not bode well for the careful monitoring of information impact.

Deborah Eade (1997) has shown that capacity building can mean a number of different things, depending on whether it is seen as a means, a process, or an end, and whether it is something that is primarily aimed at strengthening organizations/institutions or the capacity of stakeholders. In the case of organizations, the capacity building is aimed at improving the ability of the organization to perform activities, gain coherence in the matrix of mission-structure-activities, and fulfillment of the mission. In the arena of civil society, capacity building as a process is primarily one of fostering communication (including debate, relationship building and conflict resolution).

Information is vital to participation and empowerment, and is an essential resource for building knowledge, training, engaging in dialogue and decision making.

The major problem is that institutions involved in development must have results. This is not only a political reality (survival), but in our context, development is closely linked to governance and citizenship. As William Munro (1996:4) has argued, development policies and plans are attempts to specify the parameters of the new state's legitimate and appropriate role in shaping the new social order, and to secure the overarching social authority of the state.

The capacity-building project of the RDP, which aimed to empower community's themselves by placing the state within the community (at the local level) has been rolled back by the GEAR project, giving rise to the ongoing tension between development as a political process of entrenching and legitimating a new political order, and as a participatory 'people-driven' process from below. As the PIR report suggests, the realization that social assets (networks, norms, trust relationships which facilitate co-operation) are a feature of social organization which have been neglected, should contribute to the construction of programmes to build and enhance social assets through linkages, exchanges and sharing of knowledge and information at the grassroots level itself.

Conclusions

There seems no easy way, in present day South Africa, to extend the debate on the role of communication in development. Since the ground breaking Symposium on Culture, Communication, Development hosted by the HSRC in 1996, and the follow-up in 1997, there has been an explosion of networking around the issues of culture and electronic communication, but little academic engagement with themes raised by a distinguished cast of local and foreign experts on DSC itself. Perhaps Srinivas Melkote's summary of problems besetting the further application of DSC, the problem of power in particular, has dampened enthusiasm, or the academic environment is not conducive to further research in the field.

I believe it is time to step back from the theoreticism characteristic of early DSC which was attempting to break out of the shadow of the dominant paradigm, and recognize that DSC can mean many different things. We should be thinking about some of the following issues, and I hope that this paper has provided some points of departure:

- **Facilitation:** as institutional frameworks for policy implementation are consolidated, so too a new institutionally driven process of facilitation is underway, albeit with a number of different approaches and models. What are these methods and models which underpin interventions?
- **Information:** as the importance of communication is increasingly recognized (in all its forms, but driven by the IT revolution) so there remains the problem of capacity, both in institutions and on the ground.

- *Research*: what are the research priorities for academics and practitioners in a context of nation-building, GEAR and information technology? How do academics relate to the people who are directly involved in communicating around development issues?

A commitment to communication for development still poses more problems than it solves, and in a fast moving environment such as our own it remains an important task to develop our own responses and frameworks of analysis.

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