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Is Development Communication The Same As Communication For Development?

By

Nora Quebral
IS IT GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION OR PEOPLE COMMUNICATION? 
("WILL THE REAL DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION PLEASE STAND UP?")

Nora C. Quebral

Back in 1977, the Development Communication Report, a publication supported by the Technical Assistance Bureau of the U.S. Agency for International Development, published side by side two views on the relationship between communication and development. The title of the first one was "Development Communication: Watch Dog or Lap Dog?" It was a catchy title, but one which gave me rather a jolt. I too had been trying to shape my own ideas on development communication and no way had I ever considered it - or myself as a proponent - in a lap dog role. For that matter, neither had I thought of myself particularly as being an adversary of government.

My consternation grew as I read on to the part which threw in an unattributed definition of development communication that was obviously one that I had tentatively put together in 1971. It was being damned by association with such negative concepts as media control, authoritarianism, cultural imperialism and Orwellian tendencies. As someone who had arrived at development communication by way of agricultural journalism, the four theories of the press,

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human development and development support communication, my reaction was to figuratively open my eyes wide and exclaim in disbelief: "You're not referring to me!"

The second article, called "Press Freedom: A Third World View," was more discriminating in that it distinguished between development journalism and development support communication, although it lumped the latter and development communication together. In pressing for national and Third World news agencies that could bring forward the views of developing countries, it carefully dissociated journalists from "professional communicators and government officials."

Each of these two articles typifies, to me, a major characteristic of the commentaries to date on the new world information and communication order: (1) the arguing at cross purposes based on misunderstood or undifferentiated concepts and (2) the dominant focus on journalists and news media in general and on news agencies in particular. I might add in passing that to a bystander like me, it seems incongruous that much of the discussion, revealingly called a "debate," meant to bring nearer the universalistic, consensual ideal of enough information for all should so often be done from drawn, battle-like, rigidly ethnocentric positions.

With all that has been said about development communication by its critics and advocates, only a good investigative journalist, or perhaps a beleaguered graduate student, would have the singleness of purpose to untangle and sort out the snarl of ideas into which it has snowballed. I will
only own up to what, in sheer self-defense, I have taken to calling development communication "Los Banos style." This is actually a simplification because my university colleagues and I do differ among ourselves on some points. On the other hand, many of the ideas that I should like to summarize in a moment are shared by those working in agricultural and rural development around the world.

They are not final statements. They will likely change - as they have changed - as we grow in wisdom. But at this point in our understanding, they make up the particular window from which we view communication for human development. Presenting them here may clear up some misconceptions and perhaps allow the development communicator to contribute much more than now to the work of equalizing information flows.

**Development as Learning**

We start with the unarguable premise that all human beings are entitled to seek to push outward and inward the limits of their capabilities. Because of deep-rooted poverty, an unfavorable environment, scarce opportunities and other related reasons including being a female, some are less equipped than others to do this. They are mainly the rural dwellers who usually comprise three-quarters of the population of any country known as developing.

The poorest of them, the bottom forty percent that live below the poverty line, cannot even satisfy their basic needs. In the Philippines they are the landless agricultural workers, upland farmers and sustenance fishermen. In India they are
the landless labourers, farmers with less than a hectare of landholding, fishermen and small artisans like leather workers and weavers. As a group they are malnourished, drink unsafe water, possess the minimum of shelter and household goods, have forgotten how to read or write if they ever knew how, consult a doctor only when terminally ill, die young. By virtue of need and number, they and their families merit first call on communication that claims to be for equitable development.

More than 900 million of the poor are in Asia and the Pacific region. Their number continues to grow without a corresponding increase in cultivated land area or in productivity, resulting in worsening poverty. In this deadlock situation, society in the person of the state is obliged to intervene for humanitarian and pragmatic reasons. This is the justification for state policies meant to give the poor an edge in realizing more income and in gaining access to life-maintaining goods and services. It is the same rationale for proposing communication policies that will assure the poor of information to raise their levels of living.

Providing people with the means to get material goods and services will sustain life when they are still powerless to change oppressive conditions. National blueprints to signify where a country wants to go and how it plans to get there are announcements of intent. Policies can create a more benign environment in which plans have a better chance of succeeding. But if there is anything we have learned from the past decades, it is that government and development
agencies may propose but people, in the end, will dispose. No matter how poor, in matters that personally concern them, they remain active agents and at some stage make choices. Rightly or wrongly by government lights, they will decide to go along with public policy, repudiate, modify or strike out on their own.

This means that realistically governments have never had full control over the development progress of their countries. Their role indeed ideally diminishes as people acquire the ability to manage their lives better. They can be supportive by providing information; resources and opportunities that individuals singly muster; a favorable climate within which people can expand their wings. But in development seen as the growth of people's capacities to improve their lives and those of others with the means at hand, there is a line across which governments do not have the moral authority nor the real power to go. The bottom line in development, as so many have already said before, is that people develop themselves. Government, as the instrument of society, can help make it happen faster.

If development is so perceived, the soundest policies that a government can make are those that enable its citizens to learn creatively from their experience and that of others, at the same time that the policies attend to primary needs. Development then becomes life-long learning that is undergone by everyone. Participation in it is not a privilege granted by a tolerant government but an inescapable element of the process. Similarly, the values of self-reliance, initiative
and critical judgment inhere in the outcomes. For the government of a developing country then to expect its citizen learners to passively conform, to assent without thought or to accept without question is to contradict itself.

Who Is Government?

For those who couple development communication with government, a pertinent question to consider is what or who is government? The political machinery of a country is government. But so is its agricultural extension service. A state university is government. A rural health unit is government. The people who man the last three go about their professions regardless of who the political leaders are. Their first care is, or should be, for farm families, for students and for poor patients. To be government is not automatically to be political, and libertarians who sweepingly indict development communication because it is used by government agencies like the three previously mentioned are bad logicians - or misread the concept.

Three Communication Concepts for Development

Perhaps now is the best time to say something about development journalism, development support communication and development communication as they were originally conceived. The three shade into each other, being products of a common search for communication content and methods more apt to the circumstances of poor societies struggling towards a better
life. All three were meant to fight economic and social problems with information coming largely from science. If their advocates identify with any other group besides professional communicators, it is with social scientists, hardly with politicians. Interestingly, all three were developed in Asia.

The men who pioneered development journalism wisely wasted no time defining it. They just went ahead and practised it. In the late '60's, the Philippine Press Institute, headed by Juan Mercado, and the Philippine News Service began getting out in-depth news stories on, at that time, unlikely topics like population rates, forest denudation, the fishing industry, regional economic trends, housing, rat damage to crops, migration streams and water policies. Bothered by like problems in the region, a group of Asian publishers and editors set up the Press Foundation of Asia in 1968. In the same year PFA convened the first Asian Economic Writers' Training Course in Manila. The course reflected the twin emphasis of development journalism then: development economics in Asia and techniques of writing clearly about it.

Two outputs significant for development journalism date back to that course. One is Alan Chalky's Manual for Development Journalism. The other is DEPTHnews (whose first three letters stand for development, economics and population), a regular media packet of development news stories translated

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into a number of Asian languages for regional distribution. The participants of the course agreed among themselves to be called development journalists who would "consciously serve as a part of the effort of their nations to develop their economic resources and not merely as recorders of economic events." 5/

If development journalism was a child of press institutes, development support communication grew out of the international bureaucracy of the United Nations system. Also in the late 60's, Erskine Childers, then director of the Development Support Communication Service in Bangkok, expounded a methodology of communication appraisal and planning up to production and evaluation for certain developing country projects. These were projects assisted by UNDP and UNICEF and implemented and advised by the UN family of agencies. They were specifically those whose success depended in some way on sensitizing, informing and teaching certain groups of people at various stages of the projects in accordance with behavioral objectives.

The take-off point of the DSC methodology is the development project. The aim is to provide it with materials and evaluation that will assure it a motivated staff, the right teaching aids, utilization of its results, and a receptive climate for it in the project site clear out to other human circles whose actions might affect its results. The support

communication planner uses social science tools for project
analysis and whatever human and mechanical media suit the
situation.

Development communication as taught, researched and
practised at the University of the Philippines at Los Banos
accepts as valid the rationale and methodology of development
journalism and development support communication. It integ­
rates them into an evolving academic discipline that draws
from development theory, mass communication, agricultural
extension, education, and basic social sciences like socio­
logy, psychology, economics and anthropology. It was first
presented as a budding spin-off field at a university
symposium on break-throughs in agricultural development in
December 1971. For the record, the symposium preceded by a
good nine months the declaration of martial law in the
Philippines.

Not quite by design, that first paper tentatively defined
development communication with the accent on development,
but this is actually how the field has shaped up since. It
spoke of three perspectives from which development communi­
cation could operate: (1) at the country level, which means
as development journalism partly, but inclusive of the other
media; (2) at the sectoral level, such as the communication
infrastructure within the agricultural system, and (3) at the
field level, mainly as development support communication.
A fourth tier might now be added, the international level,
the scene of most of the verbal tussles about a more demo­
cratic world information order.
From their original theses, the three concepts have since grown to accommodate new thinking on development as well as changes in their environments. Depthnews no longer concentrates on population and economics news, for instance. It now covers other social beats, ranging all the way from child prostitution to art forms that portray a nation's culture. Development support communication has come out more strongly as a management function of development organizations working in rural areas. It now seems softer on behavioral analysis and heavier on the production of communication materials. Development communication is moving farther away from persuasion to communication as dialogue and experiential learning. It is seeking workable way of balancing top-down information flows with more viable and participatory communication structures in the villages. All three are beginning to cope with the ever-burgeoning richness of communication technology. None has lost its first commitment to bettering the human condition.

With development seen as participatory learning, communication associated with it cannot be less participative or educational in ends as in means. This is the logic behind current projects involving village people in making slide shows or video programs that convey their situation to the world outside their bypassed communities. The product benefits them all if successful. Properly guided, the experience enlarges their consciousness about their problems and helps them clarify their options. It also adds to their communicative skills, thereby giving them an extra
measure of self-confidence. The rub is this: from which of their varied activities to fend for food and other necessities do they pare off the precious time to produce a slideset that makes a statement?

Is DevCom Government Communication?

Going back to the image of development communication as government communication, the illustration just cited makes a convenient example of one type of communication for development that does not emanate from government. Since 1977 when the Lent article came out and possibly earlier, development communication has been deprecated or openly scorned as a propaganda tool of government. If it has been so used, that certainly was not how it was conceived. This is not the first time that an idea has been appropriated for an entirely different purpose or an object utilized for a function other than that intended.

Only the other day, Agence France Presse reported the purchase by the Australian Defense Department of 541,000 condoms to protect its weapons. When asked if contraceptives could indeed be fitted over rifle ends in wet weather "so you can shoot straight through them without having to remove anything," the Minister of Energy replied that "while the practice of placing condoms over rifle barrels is not formally recommended in any army documents, it is understood to be an effective means of waterproofing... Condoms do not offer a significant obstruction to rifle projectiles."
The example is somewhat frivolous or even a bit off-color. I agree, but apt all the same, don't you think?

One cannot fault the Australian Defense Department for knowing a good thing when it sees one, or information ministries of developing countries for seizing on a concept that seems custom-made for their work as they see it. Third World governments do have the responsibility of assembling national, regional and local development plans and of making sure that their citizens know what they are and how each one may participate. Information ministries are adept enough in publicizing the finished plans and in exhorting the populace to support them. Not readily accepted or understood are the prerequisites to citizen participation, some of which are:

1. That development plans are specific and clear enough.

2. That they do not merely echo the rhetoric of democratic development in their preambles but truly manifest in their strategies a primal concern for the welfare of the majority of the population.

3. That they are in accord with the opinions, aspirations, values, and backgrounds of the citizenry.

4. That they were therefore arrived at through consultation, dialogue and other mechanisms of egalitarian governance.

5. That the communication infrastructure for participatory planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in development has been laid out.

Not readily understood or accepted either is that information ministries, and the information offices of other ministries in less centralized government information systems,
share in the responsibility of bringing about these conditions for popular participation. This responsibility posits interpreting and mediating functions for government information persons not normally expected of them. The logic behind these functions partially explains the difference between mere information dissemination and the mutual exchange of information inherent in the concept of communication. Until government information officers also accept and exercise these functions, they cannot rightfully claim to be development communicators because they cannot be said to understand the true nature of development and of communication.

A sense of obligation to the clientele served is part of the service philosophy understood well enough by the good agricultural extension worker or teacher. It seems reasonable to expect the same acceptance of accountability from anyone who professes to be in development. The question is whether the government information officer identifies only with his or her organization or also with the particular public in whose interest the organization was created. If it is the latter, the information officer must perforce represent the clientele to the government organization and work to reconcile conflicts of interest. If it is the former, then the information officer is indeed the spokesman of government, not the mediator and interpreter that he or she should be as a communicator.

Besides putting development plans together and seeing that they are carried out, Third World governments obviously also are responsible for monitoring their progress, honestly
assessing their results and, ideally, referring these back to their constituents. The corollary that government information officers are then duty-bound to assist in these tasks is perhaps an even more novel notion than their being spokesmen of the people. And yet if development has been internalized as a learning process, even for government themselves, letting people know how everyone did (unless governments claim to be the sole actors in development!) is the natural sequel of previously urging them to action. Otherwise the job of accurately reporting back to people how development programs fared is left by default to non-government communicators who, if they are the purely watchdog kind, tend to pounce on the failures more than on the successes. Since government information officers are accused of doing exactly the opposite, it is some comfort to believe that the two halves of information will meld, in the end, in people's perceptions. The risk is that they will cancel each other out, leaving the public in a confused state. For this the press too would be guilty if it told only half of the story.

Who is a Development Communicator?

A word of clarification is in order at this point. Important as they are, information officers in government development agencies do not constitute the sum total of communicators in development. Whether they accept it or not, development journalists are by definition development communicators. So are field workers and media personnel
of both government and non-government agencies. So too are communication planners, managers, researchers and other creative people who use their talents in personal, group and mediated communication for developmental purposes.

The stigma under which development journalism and development communication labor appears to stem from two things: (1) putting of the concepts to unintended uses by design or through plain misunderstanding, and (2) rightfully viewing them as part of the sociology of their times but investing them wholesale with their negative features.

No one seems to dispute the planned use of communication in village projects. If some university types want another peg on which to hang their teaching, research and extension, that does not raise too much of a stir either. But dare to seem to question the traditions of the Fourth Estate and the battle is on!

Human Rights and Development

In most of Asia, civil and political liberties are prized as fundamental values. In countries whose systems of law follow the Anglo-Saxon tradition, they are enshrined in constitutions as bills of rights. Social and economic rights are not. But they are firmly endorsed by countries with collectivist governments. Hence the split into two ideological camps over the human rights issue with one side asserting its worth over the other. Caught in the middle are poor countries who were intellectually nursed on civil and political
liberties but whose stark needs today lie in the domain of
economic and social liberties.

The UN Charter recognizes both aspects of human freedoms. The
Declaration of Human Rights affirms, among other civil and
political rights, freedom of opinion, speech, assembly and
religion; the right to equal protection of the law and due
process; freedom of movement; the right to a nationality;
the right to take part in the government of one's country.
It acknowledges, however, that they are meaningless without
basic economic and social rights like the right to work, the
right to education, the right to join and form trade unions,
the right to equal pay for equal work, and the right to social
security.

The hard truth painfully learned by developing countries
is that political liberty does not guarantee human equality.
In a sense their hope is to strive for socio-economic indepen-
dence and thereby secure political liberty. Whether it can
be done or not is the unspoken experiment.

Who are the People?

If earlier on we asked who government is, the question
now is who are the people for whom we wish equality? Not
the equivalent of the landed gentry in Thomas Jefferson's
rural America or of John Locke's English upper classes but
the masses of Asia, Africa and Latin America - the small
farmers, the landless laborers, the fishermen, the village
artisans and, yes, also the rural women heads of families
whose number is increasing. They are the majority for whom
the right to speak is empty because poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and isolation have muted their voices. Insofar as development agencies and the different arms of government - and of the press too - speak truthfully for and with them, then is communication for development served.

Let us review in communication terms what we know about this majority.

They are not newspaper readers. In India, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka, there are only from 17 to 27 copies of daily newspapers per 1000 persons. By comparison they are better radio listeners, although in the Philippines, for one, less than half of the rural households have radio sets. Less than one percent of them have television sets. In spite of the fast spread of videocassette recorders, it is doubtful if they have penetrated the deep countryside. In any case, like television or even radio, they are mainly carriers of entertainment for villagers.

For our rural majority, telephones are undreamed of city luxuries. They rarely get or send letters even if the postal service in their remote communities were more efficient. If a village association formed by a government extension worker or a religious offers concrete benefits, they do become members and attend its activities especially if held in the evenings. Once in a while some outside organization may show a movie, a filmstrip, some soundslides, a skit or a drama and the villagers flock to the treat. For the most part, however, village meetings are loose affairs of no more than a dozen or so persons, mostly men, talking
informally with each other. If the village is close to a
town, outside personal contacts are more frequent. Other­
wise the residents make do with their own company for days
on end.

In such a penurious communication setting, the debate
on information imbalances, cultural imperialism, licensing
of journalists, and control of news sources seem lightyears
away. People locked in it do not know that they are informa­
tion-deprived or are too engrossed eking out a living to
care. But like a shadow world, their state unerringly
repeats the conditions which have provoked the outcry for a
new world information and communication order among nations.

In the villages of developing Asia, communication faci­
lities and capabilities are meager. They congregate in the
urban places.

News about and for the cities dominates the national
media. The countryside makes the headlines mainly by way
of disasters, crimes and oddities.

Communication lines connect outlying areas to the
metropolis. Those same areas are isolated from each other.

Communicationally speaking, a developing country is a
microcosm of the world. If the Western or Northern press
neglects the primordial concerns of developing countries,
so does the latter's urban press. If coverage of industria­
lized countries extends even to the trivial and irrelevant,
so does coverage of the cities in contrast to the rural
districts. Information disparities are equally real in the
centers and peripheries of both. They mirror the socio­
economic inequities in their overarching polities.
Development Communication Policies

A new information and communication order for the countryside is clearly just as valid and as urgent for all the same reasons advanced on behalf of the world order. National communication policies must be put in place that will even up access to information in the urban and rural areas. If, as in the macrocosm, some of the reasons for discriminatory flows are rooted externally, then that is where they should be corrected. But Asian countries cannot in conscience decry unfairness in others while the same situation exists in their own backyards. Besides, the construct of the global poor has little utility in grassroots development. When one gets down to brass tacks, there are only the village poor for each country to concentrate on.

Basic needs call for basic answers. The communication policies required in most of Asia seem to be those that address illiteracy, weak national languages, inadequate educational systems, fragmented links among the masses of people. It follows that media policies wanted are those that will take a decisive stance once and for all and impress the existing media to combat these ills. Computer technology is fast revolutionizing lifestyles in industrialized cities like Singapore and Hongkong. This is the time, if it is not yet too late, to insure that the technology does not further widen the gap between the city and the village or the poor and the rich in Asia.
Except in some rare cases, the media as they now stand only have a negligible effect on raising people's capabilities in most of rural Asia. The solution is neither to reject them or to pour them into the villages but to let them in judiciously and in accelerating sophistication as people progressively increase their capabilities to manage and utilize them. At this stage the media desired are those that foster participation, not those that immure them in a passive bystander role.

To end on a pragmatic note, what policies will encourage public information officers to perform as spokesmen of people and not only of government? A few are worth exploring. One is to change their designation to another that signals to them and to the public the expected shift to a more mediatory function. This presupposes enlightened employers truly caring of people's development. Unless they are, the going will be tougher because development will have to proceed in spite of them.

Another is to professionalize the calling and to invest it with a service mission. Practitioners will be accountable to the public in the same way that journalists are even while they are employed by other interests. A code of ethics would be mandatory. In time a fine tradition could grow around the profession that future practitioners could strive to live up to.

A third that is related to the first two is obviously to improve training in communication teaching institutions.
Most communication curricula have emphasized media skills which now include computer training. The better ones have general education courses that are meant to add breadth to the student's perspective. For communication curricula to be even more relevant to Asian societies, perhaps two things more need to be brought in: (1) tutoring in personal interactions as the mode of communication still prevalent in much of Asia and (2) a deliberate focus on individual and societal values that will give direction to the course of human development.

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