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Towards a Holistic Approach to the Study of Development Communication

By

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TOWARDS A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION IN THE 1990'S

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The topical focus of this keynote address - that is, a holistic approach - is seductive enough not to be ignored in thinking about development and communication. Yet it is also elusive both conceptually and operationally. Such elusiveness has been articulated by some scholars and researchers of which examples can be readily given.

The idea of holism has received various names ranging from the general to the specific. The term "general systems" as in "General Systems Theory" is positioned broadest. Midway is the term "integrated" as in Integrated Rural Area Development. At the specific point, the term "package" has been used to describe agricultural development programs, for instance, "the package program model for improved rice production."

In the chapter "The General Systems Theory Paradigm," Allen (1978) cautions readers about overestimating this method in social science research. Allen wrote:

"One does not have to be very bright, only to have lived a sufficient number of years, to recognize that societal problems are complex combinations of social, psychological, cultural, emotional, and economic factors with technological aspects. And everyone agrees that logical and effective approaches are needed to attack the problems if we are to get workable solutions. However, the issue is not the climate of heaven but how to get there." (Allen, 1978, p.21).

Allen, however, sees the need to bridge the "communications gap" between scientists delving into the questions of science. He averred that specialization has resulted in a breakup of the body of knowledge desperately needed to solve complex problems in society.

In their report on systems analysis and computer simulation as methodological additions to the social sciences, Carroll and Parace (1970) likewise noted the criticisms of these holistic techniques. They are unproved and unworkable and "their critics become skeptical at their first mention as possible aids in solving a research problem." Nevertheless, the authors feel that the two techniques are appropriate for certain types of research problems, particularly in the study of development and communication.
Of the holistic approach, we then see one side brimming with optimism and the other being besieged by rightful pessimism. The first estimate upholds the efficacy of holism as a methodology for better understanding and solving the problems in society. The second estimate doubts whether we can really put holism to work in such a task. Allen's memorable phrase lingers: "the issue is not the climate of heaven but how to get there."

For this essay, I have decided to share with you some of my thoughts about holism. I shall try to mold these thoughts by synthesizing my readings on the subject and my experiences with their applications during more than three decades of development communication work in the Philippines. The format shall be autobiographical of sorts. This means that my ideas shall unfold chronologically as they occurred in development communication work. Moreover, I have chosen to use as a metaphor or frame of reference, Kenneth Boulding's hierarchical levels of the complexity of systems, in other words, of a system of systems. (Boulding, 1956)

Boulding identified and described nine levels of such systems in our world. In their order, they are the level of frameworks, of clockworks, of the cybernetical thermostat, of the cell which is self-maintaining and an "open system", of the genetic-societal level represented by the plant, of the "animal" level, of the "human" level where the individual human is considered as a system, of the level of social organization which is formed by set of roles linked by communication channels, and of the ninth level which is unknown. Boulding remarked on this
ninth level, "It will be a sad day for man when nobody is allowed to ask questions that do not have any answers." (Boulding, 1956, pp. 20-31; Allen, 1978, pp. 19-20.)

Boulding's model of hierarchical levels betters other models in sophistication in that each level of organization therein includes characteristics from all the lower levels. He added that "at the present stage of human knowledge, our theoretical constructs are fairly adequate at the lower levels, but they become increasingly inadequate as we proceed to the higher levels." (Boulding, 1956, p. 28-29).

The Level of the Field

After graduate school in Michigan State where we read Boulding's book *The Image*, I returned to our country. It was here, through a young farm technician's work in a village, that I got my first brush with systems thinking in real, practical terms. The field reality transmuted into the conceptualization of broader themes in development. For present purposes, this case in development may be labelled the level of the field.

I had written about this case study in my book *Readings in Development Communication* (Jamias, 1975). The farm technician, 29 year-old Conrado Dimaano, was deployed in Barrio Coralan, a rice farming village, to spread the improved rice production practices from our College of Agriculture. He was able to win a number of converts to the recommended cultural methods. However, after just one season, the number of users had declined. The reason the
farmers stopped using the recommended practices, Conrado found out, was the paucity of irrigation water in the barrio. It is water that would make most of the recommended innovations viable.

Visiting the local irrigation administration office, he found that the trend of rainfall had remained consistent over the years. So, based on his findings, Conrado acted to change the cropping pattern in the village. The farmers agreed to move the date of planting to the months when there is more water in the area. With the cropping pattern changed, the farmers agreed to try the recommended cultural practices.

In my book, I concluded about the Dimaano case study.

"To achieve agricultural development objectives, communication should not be viewed as a lone, self-actualizing factor but as a part of a larger "system" composed of multiple interacting factors in development. Recall how, without adequate water supply, the farmers in Barrio Coralan would not proceed to use the recommended practices they had been already persuaded to accept. This illustrates how the intended outcome of the communicative act may fail or at most succeed only in a limited way due to a crucial weakness in one or more factors in the "system."

The Level of Organizational Structure

Shortly after my encounter with the Dimaano case study, the Philippine government launched a nation-wide program aimed to increase rice productivity in the country. The case I here recount may represent the level of organizational structure. The
program sought to achieve self-sufficiency in the staple and to stop our yearly imports. The program was given to the then Executive Secretary Rafael Salas to implement. He subsequently became known as the Rice Czar.

Using the systems approach, the program was based in a structure under the Department of Agriculture. This was called the National Rice and Corn Production Coordinating Council, later known as the National Food and Agriculture Council. All known critical factors affecting the rice production and development process were incorporated in the package design. These included the physical inputs such as certified seeds, fertilizer and pesticides; infrastructure like irrigation; farm credit; information and communication, and others. These components of the production system had to be created or supplied with the national government playing the key role that opened information and decision gates.

The rice production system could be broken down into sub-systems. And these could be broken down into yet smaller ones.

In information and communication, even just one aspect of the program turned out to be divisible further. To illustrate: When later, the Council headquarters learned of a bumper harvest in the provinces, the late Secretary Salas called the different persons and agencies represented in the Council to a meeting to thresh out the problem of spoiling and rotting grain in the fields. What could be done?
Agriculture engineering specialists proposed the introduction of improved post-harvest practices. Artificial grain drying was virtually unknown to farmers at that time. It was added to their traditional method of sun drying their harvest. For information and communication, many other elements had to be included: why and how artificial grain drying, where to get, how to use the equipment, and so on. At that time the grain driers had to be imported rush from Japan.

In its varied manifestations, the holistic perspective requires one to identify the various elements or components of the system of interest. All parts are interdependent, each component or part affects each other.

Both the level of the field and the level of organizational structure parlay straightforward grouping of the elements involved in implementing set goals. They are commonly observed in field operations, action projects and big programs. However, unlike in Boulding's hierarchical view of complex systems, the two levels do not necessarily proceed or build from the other. This attribute marks the difference between practice and theoretical formulations when adopted for applied communication situations.

The Level of the Individual

A discourse about the levels of the development communication system may appropriately start at the level of the individual human. The individual person is where the development and diffusion research and literature have initially proceeded.
Thus, the farmer client of agricultural extension effort has been characterized mainly by psychological traits or attributes. He possesses beliefs, attitudes, orientations, values, or other psychological or social psychological traits. Such concepts as general innovativeness, modernized against traditional outlook and empathy, belong to this genre of characterization. Yet, the early work in the diffusion of innovation research suggest that, despite the hard work and rigor expended, the view of the individual as a system of attributes has not given much practical significance for field work or action. Also, we do not know about the degree or how much such psychological attributes really account for the behaviors of interest, such as proneness to adopt or other behavioral change. I dare say that this is the reason why psychological explanations are not now taken as seriously as before. As a result, we do not now blame the farmer for our failings as agents of change.

A close assessment of the behavioral science approach should also make students of communication wonder about how much variance communication and information explain in terms of change. It is at present more realistic to avow that communication is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for development changes to occur. Much evidence comes from the cross-national research reports contained in McAnany (1980) Communications in the Rural Third World: The Role of Information in Development. Parenthetically what the research findings there reveal would as well have been written about the Philippine setting. The writers in the book have underscored a number of
constraints, principally social structural constraints on an information/communication approach. Citing two researchers, McAnany pointed out that a problem "is knowing how much difference information can make on the structural constraints of rural areas. Agricultural knowledge may not be able to make any significant impact on the productivity of very small farm holdings, already at almost a maximum of efficiency." (McAnany, 1980, p. 11) Other related structural problems that have been observed in development are those of land tenure, landlessness, paucity of access to and exercise of (social) power, lack of or limited physical infrastructures such as roads and shipping facilities, and biased, even exploitative, government policies. As a result of these observations, the concept of people empowerment has lately become salient in the development literature.

The Level of National Social Systems

The broad extension of these observations in the rural scene relates to the discipline of political science. In our developing country, this factor is manifested in the usual gibe by academics as well as media writers as the lack of political will. Political will typically refers to the willingness of government officers to undertake changes for the common good, the benefit of the greatest number in a society, in contrast to the interests of a powerful few. Yet, in a sense, political will also reflects the failure of exercise of power by the people. Fortunately, historic events in the Philippines and in other countries have
shown the reversal of the tides of people lethargy on the one hand, and the imperturbability of the ruling elites on the other hand. When the political factor is introduced into development study, the level of national social systems emerges.

The politics of development lodges clearly in government policies. Policies define what is to be done. On the other hand, actual performance also shapes policy. In our country at least, we now know the debilitating effect on the state of our development of ill-conceived, if not ill-intentioned, policies. Policies have pampered vested interests and VIPs. They have biased the direction of the country's socio-economic development. They have spawned festering problems in our society such as graft and corruption, cronymism, the wastage of natural resources and the environment.

Policy studies have been institutionalized at our University of the Philippines at Los Banos. The Center for Policy Development and Studies puts accent on agricultural issues while another policy research unit, the Forestry Development Center, looks into forestry development and environmental matters. Their findings and recommendations flow into national policy-making and decision centers. This research and advisory activity by our university exerts a critical influence on policies that can advance or break our national development.

Such policy study and action program extends the university's role beyond the traditional academic and scientific functions and links the university service to the Filipino public
It is significant to note another new trend in policy studies. This has been the infusion of normative or value-laden philosophical stances to the academics' perspectives as contrasted to the descriptive philosophical mode traditionally taken by them. To illustrate, in 1988, I participated in a Forestry Development Task Force coordinated by the FDC to formulate a Policy Agenda for the Philippine government's Department of Natural Resources. (The department is now called the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, one of the results of the Task Force's work.) Composed of specialists from the various scientific disciplines such as forestry, environment and ecology, chemistry, economics and, other natural and social sciences, the study framed a set of policy guidelines and recommendations for the nation's natural resources ranging from forest products utilisation and conservation to mining. What is to be underscored about the exercise was the formulation, before any assignments and discussions were made, of a set of basic principles that were seen as interdependent aspects of the whole system formed about natural resources utilization and conservation. The specialists avoided the piece-meal approach that development planners resorted to in the past.

The five basic principles set forth by the Task Force were social equity and social justice; sustainability; productivity; economic efficiency; and environmental protection.

The task force specialists stressed that it had to be the
systems approach to meet the problem of forestry development and environmental protection. The problem was taken holistically, with the people, or inhabitants, particularly the poorest of the poor who live in the uplands, as the core of analysis and attention.

The Level of the Discipline

The words "the study of development and communication" in the title of this essay largely connote the academic functions of instruction and research. The disciplines nurtured in the university come foremost to mind. In the present context, two facets are presented by the word discipline; one, that of an interdisciplinary system, and two, that of the singular system which is communication. The interdisciplinary notion lines up the various disciplines principally those of psychology, sociology, social psychology, economics, political science and anthropology. The challenge of this perspective is to coordinate these disciplines for development communication study, research and practice.

Admittedly, the interdisciplinary goal looms difficult and complex. Specialization, which is still increasing, has characterized the tradition of academe. The interdisciplinary approach reels under its unique problem-raising which does task the imagination. At present, the interdisciplinary dream may only seem feasible in encouraging communication among scientists i.e., bridging or narrowing the knowledge gap about each and every discipline. Hopefully, the building of interdisciplinary effort
shall be undertaken in further studies.

Development communication is, of course, not yet classifiable as a discipline. In fact, some consider communication study in its general sense still as a field of study, not a discipline. As a field in university education, research and extension, development communication has been laying down its own perspectives over the past twenty five years. This field of study formally started on March 11, 1974, when UPLB University Council approved the four-year Bachelor of Science in Development Communication (B.S.D.C.) curriculum. The program could be dated earlier - to 1962 - when the then Department of Agricultural Information and Communication in the UP College of Agriculture instituted a program leading to the degree of Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, major in agricultural communication.

Our B.S.D.C. curriculum has recognized from its inception that communication is an interdisciplinary discipline rooted in the social sciences. (See Quebral in Jamias, 1970, p. 31). Starting from a foundation of general education courses, our curriculum includes social science courses; a research, statistics and computer science courses; core and major courses in communication; and 24 units of technical subject matter courses in agriculture, forestry, economics or other technical field offered on the Los Banos campus. The social science courses help the students gain a basic grasp of the issues and problems of development in general and of an area of development in particular.
The UPLB undergraduate program in development communication education is dedicated to serve a rural clientele, and emphasizes action research. It has been adopted in other colleges and universities - ten schools in the Philippines as of 1989. The UPLB also offers the Ph.D. in development communication degree.

The Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang offers the bachelor's degree in development communication; Universiti Pertanian, Malaysia, the M.S. and Ph.D. degrees; and Kasetsart University in Thailand the M.S. degree. (Quebral, 1988).

Concluding Remarks

Development is defined in the new International Encyclopedia of Communication (1988) "as purposive changes undertaken in a society to achieve what may be regarded generally as a different ("improved") state of social and economics affairs." Validly or not, development communication assumes the role of communication in bringing about such changes, either as a catalyst, a mediator or as a direct participant or part of the development process. Development communication, as we discuss it today, belongs more to the Third World conditions characterized by widespread poverty, social inequality, low productivity and, in general, an impoverished quality of life.

Although the concern for both development and communication may have already been rife in other parts of the world even before the second world war, development efforts had their ferment in Asia during the two decades after the war. During the latter half of the forties and beyond, many former colonies
gained their political independence. Developmentalism was the response to the festering needs in the new nations. These needs largely defined the nature and forms of such responses. On this premise, we can better put in perspective the directions the development communication chart in our countries. The movement, Third World style, finally got a name in 1971. Development communication has since struggled deliberately to achieve the following:

1. Gear development communication programs to the developing countries' felt problems with understandable priority given to socio-economic problems.
2. Develop educational and training programs to produce the personnel having the philosophy, understanding and skills for the burgeoning challenge of development and change.
3. Activate mechanisms for research and related intellectual pursuits such as science communication, policy studies, and other tools of development.

Outright critics of development communication may show impatience with the unremarkable record so far. Debates ring over numerous issues - definitions, models, directions, strategies and so forth. But, positively viewed, these are challenges to improve the track record. Rightly, the query is being asked in this seminar-workshop: What needs to be done as we go into the 1990's?
It would be presumptuous on my part to be giving the prescriptions for what we have to do. Instead, with this present assay on a holistic approach, I may offer a prognosis of developments within the decade.

1. Our appreciation of the development challenge shall expand through the integration of the various disciplines. Disciplines like political science that we used to skip before shall become more important to us. My perception is that this change has been coming about, not because of exposure to its formalized body of knowledge, but because of the people's searing experiences of the effect of politics on their lives.

In the field, where extension programs are being carried out, we discover the relationship between crop yield and the interdependent factor of physical inputs and services such as shipping facilities. In the higher government level, we discover that the economic uplift of small crop holders responds to appropriate government policies.

2. Educational approaches will innovatively tackle the literacy factor including civic literacy of both the leaders and the masses. Much has still to be done to improve technical literacy and narrow the knowledge gap existing between the technology generating sources (e.g. scientists) and the intended beneficiaries of development information.

Empirical-positivist research shall be complemented by ethical and normative inquiry that will spur qualitative and value
changes. Mass education shall highlight the importance of self-reliance, independence and participatory ethos. The mass media can powerfully support such changes in the development milieu.

3. Positivistic research shall lessen appreciably allowing for more qualitative studies that probe normative issues, e.g. Development for whom? Who benefits and why from the forests and other natural resources? Who owns the media and what does the ownership structure do to communication?

As the early light of the decade of the nineties flickers in the horizon, the leaders and people in the developing countries see the adversities unabating in the near future. The torch of hope remains ensconced in development communication. It is to this commitment that we shall continue to dedicate ourselves, cultivating that frail plant and coaxing it, prayerfully, to fruit.
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