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Is Government Communication Or People Communication?
(Will The Real Development Communication Please Stand Up?)

By

Nora C Quebral
IS 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, 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 discrimination 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."

1/ Professor, Department of Development Communication, College of Agriculture, University of the Philippines at Los Baños.

2/ Authored by John Lent, Professor of Communication at Temple University.

3/ Authored by Narinder Aggarwala, Project Coordinator, Technological Information Pilot System, UNDP.
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 Baños 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. We cannot like about the dream without telling about our ideas on what development is.

Development as Learning

We start with some ideas of what development is, 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. 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. 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 rational 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 ever 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 cannot muster, they can provide 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 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.
With development seen as participatory learning, communication associated with it cannot be less participative or educational in ends as in means.

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.

Journalists make the most caustic critics of development journalism and a development communication. The stigma attached to both appears to stem from two things: (1) putting of the concepts 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 tamper with the traditions of the Fourth Estate and the battle is on!
Is Devcom Government Communication?

Since 1977 and possibly earlier, development communication has been depreciated 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 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 of an object utilized for a function other than that intended.

One cannot fault information ministries of developing countries for seizing on a concept like Devcom 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 or 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.

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 consituents. 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 governments themselves, letting people know how everyone did is the natural sequel of previously urging them to action. Otherwise the job of accurately reporting back to people how development programs fared or are faring 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 and PIOs would be equally guilty if each told only half of the story.

Human Rights and Development Communication

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 which 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 faces of human freedom. 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 people in developing countries is that political liberty does not guarantee socio-economic equality. In a sense their hope has been to secure the latter by trading in some of the former. It has not worked that way for every country, however. The accumulating evidence in Asia is that human liberties are not divisible for long. Sacrifice some, even partially, in the name of development and the others will be eroded as well. The lesson for development communication is that it cannot be for equality and justice in the socio-economic
realm only. If human development is seamless by nature, people need to learn economic and social and political and cultural independence at the same time. As an early step, they must strive for group empowerment by learning to work together in organizations.

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 1,000 persons. By comparison they are better radio listeners, although in the Philippines for one than half of the rural households still have no 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 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. Otherwise 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 seems light-years away. People locked in it do not know that they are information-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 facilities 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 macrocosm of the world. If the Western of Northern press neglects the primordial concerns of developing countries, so does the latter's urban press. If coverage of industrialized 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 policies.

**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 the 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 eternally, 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. If follows that communication policies wanted are those that will take a decisive stand once and for all and impress the existing communication technology to combat these ills. Computers are
fast revolutionizing lifestyles in industrialized cities like Singapore and Hongkong. This is the time, if it is 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 o 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. Under the circumstances, policies that will support outreach workers and local organizations must be seen as development communication policies.

To end on a pragmatic note, what measures will encourage public information officers to perform as spokesman of the 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 and interpretative 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. And unless the political leader­ship of a country acts in good faith, development policies as they stand are not worth a candle. They or the leadership will manifestly have to be changed.

A second step is to professionalize the public information 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 with its own heroes could grow around the profession that future practitioners could try 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 even 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 interaction as the mode of communication still prevalent in much of Asia and (2) a deliberate focus on the individual and societal values that will give direction to the course of human deve­lopment.