

Communication about communication for development: the rhetorical struggle over the history and future of C4D

By Martin Scott¹

There are many different ways of telling the story of the study and practice of communication for development (C4D) over the past ten years. There is clearly a great deal to be said about how social media and mobile technologies have enabled social movements in Brazil, Chile, Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey and elsewhere to mobilise in pursuit of positive social change. From an institutional perspective, we might highlight instead how information, communication and media appears to be gradually achieving a higher profile within the international development community. The most prominent example of this is the potential inclusion of reference to 'access to information and media' within the new Sustainable Development goals. There is also a story to be told about the increasing number of postgraduate university courses related to the study of C4D that have been established in the last decade. In the UK, for example, there are now at least eight different postgraduate degree programmes concerned with this subject; signalling a growing appetite amongst students to study these issues.

Another compelling narrative, frequently reproduced in the media, concerns the potential of new communication technologies to transform conventional development projects. Whether in the context of humanitarian response, education or agricultural practices, new technologies are often framed as offering innovative and cost-effective solutions to long-standing development problems. Conversely, though, we might also tell a story of how such technologies have enabled governments to monitor public and private communications and to suppress dissent more effectively, or how they are being used in increasingly sophisticated ways to further the goals of terrorist organisations such as Islamic State.

My purpose in sketching out these alternative narratives is to make clear that there can be no universal definition or history of the study and practice of C4D. The variation in these accounts also helps to demonstrate that the history – and potential futures – of C4D are socially constructed – and contested. In defining and describing the history of C4D we face inevitable choices of drawing attention either to institutions or individuals, state actors or non-state actors, communities or corporations, global processes or local actions. These choices are important because they help to legitimise some actors and forms of action over others. Put another way, once we acknowledge the rhetorical nature of narratives concerning the role of communication in development, then we can also begin to recognise that such narratives are also closely tied to different interests.

To present access to new communication technologies as the central objective of C4D, for example, and to describe the history of C4D as a struggle to bridge the 'digital divide', clearly serves the interests of those (companies) who benefit from an expansion in levels of access to such technologies. This is the narrative of Internet.org, for example, a Facebook-led initiative - supported by Ericsson, Samsung, Nokia, Qualcomm and Mediatek which seeks to 'bring together technology leaders, non-profits and local communities to connect the two thirds of the world that doesn't have Internet access'. Recently, Internet.org has been accused of compromising net neutrality because the restricted range of services it offers are chosen not

by users but by Facebook, and because the inclusion of a limited number of already established services has a distorting effect on competition. From a neoliberal perspective, the discourse of the digital divide has been criticised for, 'justifying the expansion of global industry and the conversion of poor beneficiaries into mass consumers of rescuing (western) technologies, techniques, and business models' (Abdelnour and Saeed 2014:15).

Narratives about the role of communication technologies in social change are now also increasingly evident in popular discourses about contemporary events. Furthermore, these narratives can be linked to certain political and commercial interests. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the way in which Facebook and Twitter were framed within international news coverage of the 'Arab Spring'. In her analysis of US news coverage of the protests in Egypt in early 2011, Karin Wilkins (2012:56) argues that technology was central to the construction of an Orientalist narrative. She describes a dominant Hollywood narrative which not only 'essentialised complex communities to a reductive tale of hero, victim and villain' but specifically prescribed technology as part of the heroic efforts that allowed victims to be saved from villains. This privileging of the 'bright potential' of digital media, Wilkins suggests, distracts attention from the importance of collective human engagement and the broader context of political resistance and, ultimately, leads towards 'the justification of U.S. foreign policy and resource allocation'. She adds in her conclusion that, 'to underscore "Facebook" emphasizes corporate branding over human potential' (Wilkins 2012).

In telling stories about C4D, the type of intervention being discussed also matters because different forms of C4D have different kinds of rhetorical value that can be used to support different agendas. It is often claimed that the rhetoric associated with participatory communication, for example, which conjures up notions of equality and self-determination, is used to mask the adoption of practices that are, in reality, not inclusive at all. On this basis, participation has been criticized for acting as a 'double agent of deception' (Sonderling 1997) because of its redeeming effect on 'top-down' practices. Similarly, behaviour change communication is often associated with a rhetoric that conceives of media as a politically neutral 'tool' which can be used to deliver 'messages' which directly influence the knowledge, attitude and practice of individuals (Scott 2014). By attributing underdevelopment to individual psychological deficiencies rather than structural forces, the rhetoric of behaviour change communication draws attention away from the consequences of global capitalism and neoliberalism and places the responsibility for poverty firmly on the individual. From this perspective, governments are no longer at fault for not providing adequate healthcare, for example, and multinational corporations are not to blame for the externalities of global capitalism (Wilkins and Enghel 2013). Instead, we are encouraged to rely upon the technical fixes of discrete development initiatives as the most effective means of promoting social change.

Academia is certainly not immune from this rhetorical struggle over the history and meaning of C4D. It is also often within the interests of researchers to offer similarly optimistic and media-centric accounts of C4D because it legitimises their field of study, attracts students to their courses and may resonate better with potential research funders. Who wants to be told that perhaps communication technologies aren't really that important after all? Whilst there is, of course, a great deal of robust, critical and insightful work in this area, this exists alongside scholarly discourse which has an explicit agenda to 'demonstrate the positive impacts of communication on development initiatives' (Inagaki 2007:1)

If the primary aim of this special issue of *Glocal Times* is to elicit reflections on the history and future of C4D then I hope to have demonstrated that such contributions to public discourse should be seen, not as a neutral reflexive exercise, but as a vital academic contribution to an ongoing political struggle. As Melissa Loudon and Theo Mazumdar(2013:54) explain, ‘the way technology is represented in relation to social, economic and political development is part of a particular knowledge system, reproduced by and legitimising particular exercises of power’. Given this, I suggest that one of the most important features of C4D has been, and will continue to be, the rhetorical struggle over its meaning. The nature of communication *about* communication for development has implications, not just for the field of C4D, but also for the character and practice of international development in general. In which case, I hope that in future the field of C4D is more attuned to its own rhetoric and the rhetoric of others.

References

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