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HISTORY AND VISION OF PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION



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ABSTRACT

Dialogic communication objectives assess risks, identify opportunities, prevent problems and identify or confirm needed change. Being the results of a heuristic process, in most cases the objectives cannot be specifically defined beforehand. The impact of such an open-ended and process-oriented approach to communication is much harder to measure accurately. How to measure trust, empowerment, better project design, consensus-seeking, and problem prevention is still an unresolved issue.



In summary, the multi-track approach combines the theoretical potential of the main development communication families with their rich range of practical applications. This model uses theoretical interpretation to guide the selection and application of specific communication approaches, according to the needs and circumstances of specific initiatives. DevComm's experiences in a number of projects confirm the value-added of this approach, however, more long-term and systematic studies are needed to accurately assess its effectiveness.

In developing participatory communication strategies, media-specific concerns evolve around the following issues:

Types of media: from folk, community, and mass media to the new media of internet and satellite communication

Levels of media: local and community-based media to national and transnational media

Nature of media: electronic media, one-way or interactive, face-to-face communication

Institutional characteristics of media: from public to private, national to community-owned, free and independent to closely government controlled

Economic logic informing the media: commercial media, non-profit media, and mixed models.

Does the existing media environment stimulate dialogue and empowerment processes?

KEYWORDS : *Providing a voice, dialogical communication, social skills, practical approach.*

INTRODUCTION :

The vision of using new technologies to pursue better lives for humankind has always existed, and it was reinforced throughout the 20th century with each new technological advancement. In 1927

the German author Bertolt Brecht formulated a “radio theory” in which he envisioned the new technology, the radio, as a dialogical instrument for change: “Change this apparatus over from distribution to communication... On this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers” (Brecht 1927). It was in many ways a precursor to the theory and practice of participatory communication, as well as of interactive media such as the internet.

In the years that followed Brecht's early vision, the radio lost its dialogic potential as it developed into a mass mediated broadcasting instrument. However, today's rapid spread of community radio, as well as the growth of digital radio and interactive radio program formats, revives the participatory potential of radio technology.

Brecht's work contains the two core visions still inherent today in participatory communication: first, technologies possess the potential to improve the lives of many people by giving them a voice; second, his groundwork laid out the educational principles inherent in many of today's participatory communication models — dialogical communication.

Brecht's educational principles have inspired many in innovative theatre, including Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. Developed in the 1970s, his ideas from Forum Theatre brought principles of participatory theatre a step further, and they are still spreading around the world (Boal 1974).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda developed participatory action research (PAR) as a methodology involving stakeholders in the identification of the core issues in development process. Later in the 1980s, Robert Chambers, a research associate at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, UK, was instrumental in developing a successful methodology for community facilitation known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). PRA makes people express their own knowledge and conduct their own analysis, assessment, and action planning.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

When applying a participatory approach to communication in development projects, there are key questions and a framework of guiding principles to lead practitioners and stakeholders. The following are key questions to consider:

- + What is the development problem to address: information, lack of skills, or social inequality?
- + What notion of culture is inherent in the proposed approach?
- + Is the catalyst or change agent understood?
- + What principles guide the understanding of education?
- + Are there active stakeholders or audiences to address? What are their respective roles in the communication process?
- + What messages will be communicated: examples, life experiences or social issues?
- + What is the aim of the change: individual behaviors, social norms, power relations, social or economic structures?
- + How will outcomes be monitored and evaluated?
- + What is the time perspective to achieve the desired changes?

These questions are relevant to pose prior to any communication for development intervention. Chapter 3 will move a step further and provide practical guidelines and illustrations of how the monologic and dialogic approaches to communication for development can apply participation.

Guiding Principles

A number of principles emerge as fundamental to participatory communication. These principles stem from globally influential thinkers and contribute to the framework under which participatory communication has evolved. Although not an exhaustive list, the following are some of the most important principles:

Dialogue

The free and open dialogue remains the core principle of participatory communication. Paulo Freire defines dialogue as “the encounter between men in order to name the world. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this act of exclusion.” For Freire, the free and open dialogue whereby people can “name the world” is voice, the principle of action-reflection-action and horizontal communication.

In project language, the process of “naming the world” is called problem definition. Rather than just a lack of information, the type of problems defined in such dialogues can be of social or economic nature, issues of inequality or injustice. In defining the problem this way, the communication strategy to be developed will entail a different pathway than if it were one of information, whereby diffusion-oriented solutions would be suggested.

Voice

Central to dialogic communication is a consciousness of power relations contained in any human relationship. Freire's concern was a shift in power, giving voice to marginalized groups, time and space to articulate their concerns, to define their problems, to formulate solutions, and to act on them. The role of the media in participatory communication possesses similar concerns. Supporting and strengthening community media can ensure the most marginalized groups have a platform to voice their concerns, engage in public debate and solve problems.

Liberating Pedagogy

For dialogic communication to happen, someone or something has to articulate the process. This catalyst is typically a person,¹ either internal to the community or external, acting to facilitate the dialogue. A radio or television program could also serve as the catalyst. According to Freire, however, the objective of the catalyst is not only to offer relevant solutions to pre-defined problems, thus simply disseminating information from the informed to the uninformed in a non-participatory manner. Rather, the catalyst would articulate a dialogue whereby collective problem identification and solution would take place (Freire 1970).

For this liberating pedagogy to take place, Freire outlined four pillars on which to communicate: love, humility (the absence of arrogance), faith and hope. The logical consequence is the establishment of mutual trust. The result of a liberating pedagogy based on dialogue is what he termed “conscientizacao,” which translates roughly into action-oriented awareness raising. Freire's liberating pedagogy contrasts what he called a “banking pedagogy” of depositing information in the minds of people.

Action-Reflection-Action

Despite the emphasis on dialogue and reflection, participatory communication is also strongly action oriented. As a crucial ingredient of participatory communication, the empowerment process is based on reflection on problems, but also on integration of action—the attempt to act collectively on

the problem identified. It grounds the "talk" in real life problems.

Key results of participatory communication are the articulation of awareness raising and commitment to action. First and foremost, it becomes a process of empowerment for involved communities that feel commitment to and ownership of the problem. Issues of leadership lay inherent in the attention given to the catalyst, and the emphasis of the collective nature of the process speaks to the need for mutually reinforcing the commitment to change, as well as speaking to the actual issue of power.

Today these guiding principles are widely recognized as the foundation of most participatory communication. In the 1970s, the Bolivian communication pioneer Luiz Ramiro Beltran spoke of "horizontal communication" as a way of pinpointing what participatory communication brings to the table, which is significantly different from the diffusion- and effects-oriented communication models (Beltran 1979).

Keywords: Naming the world, true dialogue, voice, power, liberating pedagogy, catalyst, concientizacao, action-reflection-action, horizontal communication.

Participatory Spaces: The Role of the Media

Access to spaces of communication and dialogue is crucial, as mentioned previously. This access is also a crucial step in the participatory communication assessment, which will be elaborated in Chapter 3. What is often not made explicit in participatory communication approaches, however, is the important role of media access, which is increasingly crucial considering the rapid changes in media tools, coverage and worldwide use. Thus, participatory communication is also about visibility and voice in the mediated public sphere, which leads us to ask further: what more concrete roles do the media play in participatory communication?

While some of the diffusion-oriented, monologic models of communication focus on national mass media's key roles in communication interventions, the more participatory strategies emphasize media that allows more dialogue, such as community-based media. Whether media serve only as channels of communication or whether they become catalysts of social mobilization and change in themselves is another distinction. The Colombian scholar Clemencia Rodriguez argues in her book, *Fissures in the Mediascape*, "citizen media are highly participatory by providing access and space for people to participate in all phases of media production" (Rodriguez, 2001).

Furthermore, another distinction regards choice of medium—whether to use mass media or face-to-face communication like theatre or concerts. Linked to this choice is a concern for how the chosen media and communication formats are used. For example, theatre can be used not only for one-way communication but also in very participatory and dialogical ways, as in Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre.

Over the years, a series of concepts have emerged emphasizing different aspects of media's role in participatory communication processes. F. Ogboajah spoke in the mid 1980s of the "Oramedia" in Africa. These media were all the popular forms of communication from poetry and folk tales to theatre and musical concerts. They were grounded in indigenous culture and both produced and consumed by members of a group, reinforcing the values of that group. This concept stresses not only the cultural characteristics of these media but also the people's participation in their production and consumption. With a more political approach, the concept of "Alternative Media" emerged in Latin America in the 1970s to signify the grassroots media—community radios, murals, video documentaries—in opposition to the mainstream media. These came to symbolize a resistance platform in the fight against

the military dictatorships and provided a space for the voice and visibility of oppressed groups under these regimes. In 1984, British-American John Downing coined "Radical Media" and Clemencia Rodriguez the concept of "Citizen Media" in 2001. Each in their own way, these theories incorporate aspects of citizenship and people's participation.

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Does the existing media environment stimulate dialogue and empowerment processes? This question needs to be answered to assess how and to what degree collaboration with media can contribute to giving voice and visibility to the communities involved.

The list of related media issues could be expanded to include a distinction between analog versus digital media, state of legal regulation of the media, diversification of media types, massification of access. These are keywords that describe the process leading to a new media scenario where new opportunities are provided for people and groups to be directly involved in program development and management.

Keywords: Media access, community-based media, culture and Oramedia, politics and alternative media, citizenship and citizens media, new media scenario

Combining Theory with Practice: The Multi-Track Model

The multi-track model originated from the need to combine the richness and complexity of operational approaches and development challenges into a consistent methodological communication framework. To highlight its flexibility and adaptability to various situations, this model divides its approaches to communication into two basic categories: monologic communication and dialogic communication.

Monologic communication comprises one-way communication approaches such as information dissemination, media campaigns, and other diffusion approaches. Dialogic communication approaches refer to two-way communication, where the process and its outputs are open-ended and the scope explores issues and generates new knowledge and solutions, rather than just transmits information. Table 1 illustrates the main features of these two communication modes.

Table 1. The Main Features of Communication Modes

	MONOLOGIC (one-way communication)		DIALOGIC (two-way communication)	
	Communication to Inform	Communication to Persuade	Communication to Explore	Communication to Empower
Main purpose	Raise awareness, increase knowledge	Promote attitude and behavior change	Assess, probe and analyze issues, prevent conflicts	Build capacities, involve stakeholders
Main model of reference	One-way (monologic)	One-way (monologic)	Two-way (dialogic)	Two-way (dialogic)
Preferred methods and media	Predominant use of mass media	Predominant use of media	Heavy use of interpersonal method	Use of dialogue to promote participation

This categorization shows clearly what communication methods and tools should be used in specific initiatives. No approach fits universally, but each should be applied appropriately according to circumstances and desired objectives. Similar to the others, the multi-track model divides a communication program into four main phases: research, strategy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. However, differently from the other models that are defined by one of the two modes, the multi-track model divides and combines the two according to the needs of each phase. In the first phase, the dialogic mode should be the guiding principle, since in any investigation key stakeholders build trust and seek solutions jointly. In this way, dialogue and two-way communication become necessary to reconcile different perceptions and positions and to define the priorities for the development initiatives. Since the objectives of the communication initiatives are identified and decided in phase one, the initiative is shaped through a participatory approach, even if an imperfect one.

The objectives set in the first phase will decide the communication modes of reference of the other phases. If the objectives are a health campaign to prevent the spread of avian flu, for instance, the communication strategy may be based on monologic, one-way approaches. Instead, if mobilizing communities to take a more active part is the strategy, many of the communication approaches will be dialogic. Other cases may be a more balanced combination of both approaches.

Hence, the multi-track is an integrated and project-oriented model, combining different approaches within a flexible framework. It always requires dialogue with all key stakeholders during the initial stages, problem identification and research of an initiative, no matter what the purpose or the sector of the intervention. After this the approach becomes truly multi-track, using a variety of approaches appropriate to the situation. The various approaches—information dissemination, social marketing, lobbying, community mobilization and others—are considered tracks and intended as actions or paths to be followed. This model is not simply the sum of different communication approaches: it has a consistent theoretical and methodological framework, which is capable of containing the major differences of the two opposing paradigms without incurring in basic contradictions.

The participatory communication paradigm does not call for a replacement of the basic communication functions associated with information dissemination, but rather broadens its boundaries to include more interactive ways of communicating. This new conception contains functions of both communication modes: the monologic and the dialogic. When the two are fully understood and properly applied, if needed combined together, development communication is used

to its fullest advantage.

The theoretical conception of the multi-track model considers communication fundamentally as a horizontal and participatory process, at least in the crucial initial stages. It also acknowledges that in development there are information gaps and areas of needed change that can be supported effectively by approaches linked to the linear flow of monologic models. Such approaches, or communication tracks, however, would be used only after the horizontal communicative process occurs and determines the objectives of the intervention in a participatory way.

Whenever local stakeholders are not engaged from the beginning of the intervention, the possibilities for problems and failures rise dramatically. Examples are innumerable in which communication failed to achieve expected changes due to people's initial lack of involvement or to their limited or contradictory understanding of issues by various stakeholders. That specific behavior changes cannot be achieved without recognition of wider social acceptance and/or changes is increasingly acknowledged.

The fact that the two main communication perspectives, monologic (one-way) and dialogic (two-way), rely on different theoretical perspectives and methodological frameworks should not be considered as contradictory, but rather as an asset capable of better addressing the complexity of many situations. This asset derives its strength from the selective and purposeful use of specific communication approaches applied according to the objectives of the initiative.

When dealing with the challenges of each individual phase of a communication program (research/communication-based assessment, strategy design, implementation and evaluation), it is easier to see what type of communication to apply for which purpose. The research phase must always be based on two-way communication methods and is most effective in investigating, assessing, and uncovering key issues. This greatly reduces the possibility of relying on incorrect assumptions and avoids the risk of alienating relevant stakeholders by leaving them out of the decision-making process. After this phase, approaches of both modes can be used according to the needs and scope of the initiative.

Different from other models, the multi-track approach selects and combines different communication approaches into a unified grand approach. The differences between the two modalities, however, remain significant. The monologic/diffusion mode and its tracks can be considered as a close-ended linear communication flow. When tracks such as social marketing or Information, Education and Communication (IEC) are designed and implemented, the end objectives are always defined from the start.

The dialogic mode instead can be considered a circular, open-ended process, since the objectives are usually not specifically defined, and even when they are, they can be changed according to the output of the investigation. The primary goal of the two-way communication process is not to persuade audiences to adopt a predefined change but rather to engage stakeholders to explore the situation and define the needed change.

How each perspective defines or conceives a communication objective and the relative implications for evaluating the impact of the intervention reflects the difference between the two modes. In diffusion approaches, the communication objective requires changes in awareness, knowledge, attitude or behaviors/practices of specific groups of people. A baseline study before and after the intervention assesses the impact, while other variables that may interfere with the communication are taken into account.

Dialogic communication objectives assess risks, identify opportunities, prevent problems and identify or confirm needed change. Being the results of a heuristic process, in most cases the objectives

cannot be specifically defined beforehand. The impact of such an open-ended and process-oriented approach to communication is much harder to measure accurately. How to measure trust, empowerment, better project design, consensus-seeking, and problem prevention is still an unresolved issue.

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Notes

1 This would certainly be one of the key tasks of the "new communicator" or communication specialist.

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