

Catalyzing Sustainable Social Change through Public Communication, Radio for Development, and Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation

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Collective Review:

Kristin Demetrious (2013). Public Relations, Activism and Social Change. London: Routledge; ISBN 13:978-0-415-89706-8; 180 pages; price: £80 (Hardback)

Linje Manyozo (2012). People's Radio: Communicating Change Across Africa. Penang: Southbound; ISBN 978-0-41552259-5; 376 pages; price: US\$25.00 (Paperback)

June Lennie & Jo Taachi (2013). Evaluating Communication for Development: A Framework for Social Change. London: Earthscan (Routledge); ISBN 978-983-9054-54-5; 189 pages; price: £22.95 (Paperback)

Key words: public relations; activism; social change; radio for development; communication for social change; most significant change

Abstract: This article reviews three recent books by four authors (two single, one joint) from Australia and Africa. The three books are related in that they all discuss the need to acknowledge the role of dialogic communication and popular participation as catalysts for sustainable social development in the developing world. Specifically, "Public Relations, Activism and Social Change" proposes that public relations (PR) needs to transform itself into public communication (PC), where people are made to make decisions based on dialogue and the correctness of the information rather than out of manipulative propaganda. "People's Radio" argues that radio can lead to tangible and long-lasting social change if it engages the primary beneficiaries in the planning, production presentation of the programs and management of (community) radio stations. "Evaluating Communication for Development" argues that through indicators defined by the local people themselves, evaluators can find evidence of social change brought about by communication for development activities. The book suggests that to be effective, monitoring and evaluation of communication for development ought to be participatory and use qualitative data collection tools such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, and most significant change (MSC) evaluations.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1980s communication for development and social change (C4DSC) has been acknowledged as one of the best approaches to sustainable social change in the developing world (MacBRIDE, 1980; PANOS LONDON, 2007). The WORLD BANK has endorsed C4DSC as follows: "Communication is integral to development and to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. For this reason, it must be built into development planning and embedded in strategies for poverty reduction, health planning, and governance" (2007, p.xxvii). [1]

The exponential increase in the number conferences, studies, theorizations and field projects related to communication for development and social change is a testament to the growing significance of C4DSC (for examples of C4DSC studies and theories, see SERVAES, 2008). At the core of communication for development and social change are: a) horizontal communication or dialogue and the repudiation of diffusionist, top-down or vertical communication espoused by the normative extensionist paradigm; and b) political empowerment and genuine participation in development planning, implementation and evaluation (AGUNGA, 2012; JALLOV, 2012; MEFALOPULOS, 2008; MELKOTE, 1991; TUFTE & MEFALOPULOS, 2009). Although in terms of the driving philosophy Paolo FREIRE's (1970) critical pedagogy could be seen as the bedrock of the communication for development and social change movement and practice, C4DSC practitioners have been refining the multifarious sub-models of C4DSC. This review of "Public Relations, Activism and Social Change," "People's Radio," and "Evaluating Communication for Development: A Framework for Social Change" discusses three additions—or refinements—to the theory and practice of C4DSC. [2]

2. Public Relations as a Catalyst of Social Change

In "Public Relations, Activism and Social Change," a 180-page book by Kristin DEMETRIOUS, provides insights into how public relations can be harnessed and adapted to create public and community awareness about an issue at hand and create dialogue to encourage people to adopt an idea, innovation, or issue that requires change. Through an analysis of three case studies, the author debates how and why manipulative approaches to public relations fail while more participatory and dialogic public relations succeed. Chapter 6 is particularly important because it is here that DEMETRIOUS successfully builds her theory of public communication (PC) and justifies why it should replace conventional public relations. DEMETRIOUS argues: [3]

a) That PR/PC does not need to be expensive, as the Werribee Residents Against Toxic Dump (WRATD) case study illustrates. While CSR (formerly known as Colonial Sugar Refinery), a public relations outfit, spent close to one million Australian dollars on the campaign to convince residents of Werribee, Victoria State, Australia, that toxic industrial waste being dumped in the area was safe and secured (p.106), the Werribee Residents Against Toxic Dump "did exactly

the opposite" (p.107). She quotes Harry VAN MOOST of WRATD as recalling in 2004 that:

"[WRATD] got free printing of about 50,000 leaflets, but instead of letterboxing them, we handed them out to people and we talked to [the people] at shopping centers [...] and anywhere and everywhere we [went]. So we were communicating with the [community] directly [...] whereas [CSR used] typical PR style, as though that was going to convince people" (p.107). [4]

b) That manipulative tactics do not always work while more down-to-earth dialogic and participatory PC-based activities and approaches conscientize, convince, and empower people into action, and; [5]

c) that internet-based activism may not necessarily be an effective platform for social change despite its public-sphere outlook because internet-based platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, are more interested in selling numbers of their subscribers to advertisers rather than in taking specific messages to and engaging specific publics. Based on BECK's (1992) theory of individualization, DEMETRIOUS argues that online PR-based activist strategy ought to address four types of publics: 1. marginalized; 2. scarcity society; 3. reflexive; and 4. digital publics. The first two publics are more concerned with emancipatory politics than lifestyle eco-discourses and have limited online media literacy. These publics can only be engaged directly. In contrast, the third and fourth types of publics are online media literate and interested in lifestyle activism and eco-discourses. These may be addressed by online activism. Thus, DEMETRIOUS indirectly suggests that a robust social activism strategy should be integrative, combining direct and indirect communication activities to address different types of target publics/communities. [6]

"Public Relations, Activism and Social Change" underlines the Communication for Social Change Model (FIGUEROA, KINCAID, RANI & LEWIS, 2002), which emphasizes the role of PR, journalism, community discussions, and other forms of development communication tools, as agents or catalysts of social change that provide critical awareness and education. [7]

Though academic, the book is written in easy-to-read English. One would not hesitate to recommend it for use by PR organizations, students, and lecturers. Communication for Development practitioners, planners and implementers will also find "Public Relations, Activism and Social Change" a worthwhile read as they will certainly learn something worth replicating. [8]

One would recommend that, for the second edition, the author and publisher should consider proofreading the text again to remove grammatical errors, word omissions, and other minor issues. Otherwise, "Public Relations, Activism and Social Change" challenges PR practitioners to move away from manipulative practices and tactics associated with old propaganda approaches propounded by Edward BERNAYS (1928) and espoused by Joseph GOEBELS (see BRAMSTED, 1965), think critically, and be more audience-focused, because

today's audiences are active and hypercritical of messages they consume (FISKE, 1990; GAUNTLETT, 1998). [9]

3. Radio as a Catalyst of Social Change

In "People's Radio: Communicating Social Change Across Africa," Linje MANYOZO argues that radio is the most important, cheapest and easiest means of sharing information and getting news in Africa, where the majority of the population is too illiterate to read newspapers and online news and too poor to afford TV and multimedia-enabled gadgets to access online news and information (MYERS, 2008, 2010). [10]

"People's Radio's" central thesis is that unless it takes a self-bottom-up or at least a shared-bottom-up approach (Chapter 1, pp.1-45) by allowing the direct participation of the local people in program planning and production and radio station management, radio cannot act as an agent of African community engagement, conscientization, and liberation. Among other means of involving the public in radio, the author suggests such democratic platforms as listener clubs, radio forums, and team format selection. Citing the works of FREIRE (1970), GUMUCIO-DAGRON (2001), MOEMEKA (1991), and SERVAES (2008) MANYOZO also argues that radio can only be instrumental in promoting Africa's development if it directly engages community members in relevant developmental issues, empowers them by engaging them through dialogic communication, is culturally-relevant, and draws from folk communication forms. [11]

To illustrate his argument, MANYOZO gives several examples of successful radio initiatives that directly engaged the local people and paid attention to their proposals and priorities. One of them was the African Farm Radio Research Initiative (AFRRI), which allowed the direct participation of people in Malawi and four other countries to choose the issues to be addressed, how and when the programs should be broadcast (see FARM RADIO INTERNATIONAL, 2011; PERKINS, 2012). [12]

However, MANYOZO's proposals may be difficult or even impossible to implement in most African countries because, there, private commercial and public radio broadcasting is driven by commercial and state-monopoly programming logic, respectively, and may not be willing to open up to popular participation. This leaves community radio as the only democratic medium where bottom-up and shared-bottom-up approaches may be practiced. As several studies have demonstrated (e.g. MYERS, 2008, 2010; OSMAN, 2008), community radio in Africa faces a lot of problems, most which are associated with financing of operations, maintenance, and "NGO-ification" (pp.252-253). According to MANYOZO, NGO-ification is the interference in typical community media, such as community radio stations, by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other exogenous institutions, which leads to the thwarting of the community agenda and imposition of the NGO agenda. [13]

To circumvent NGO-ification, MANYOZO suggests that community radio stations hold on to a community agenda and broadcast format but take a commercial funding route through advertisements and outside broadcasting. This could help community radio stations avoid over-involvement, dictation, and domination from donors, NGOs, and civil society organizations (CSOs) in determining what goes on air and in the management of community media. NGO-ification undermines the concept of popular participation as empowerment and substantiates the observation that in most cases the much touted participation of local people in the development of their societies or communities is a mere buzzword (BERNER, 2010; COOKE & KOTHARI, 2001; HEEKS, 1999; WAISBORD, 2008). One radio station, Breeze FM of Chipata, Zambia, has already taken this commercial-cum-community broadcasting pathway and its success seems to endorse the approach MANYOZO proposes in "People's Radio." [14]

"People's Radio" is well written and theoretically grounded in participatory development and communication discourses. It is recommended reading for students of journalism, communication for development, agricultural communication and extension, health and environmental promotion in Africa and beyond. [15]

4. Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation as a Catalyst for Social Change

Evaluating the social change which results from communication interventions is the subject of "Evaluating Communication for Development: A Framework for Social Change," a 189-page book by June LENNIE and Jo TAACHI (2013). [16]

Several authorities have indicated that communication for development is workable. However, an equally large number of reviewers find the impact of communications on development and social change wanting (e.g. INAGAKI, 2007; WAISBORD, 2001). ANYAEGBUNAM, MEFALOPULOS and MOETSABI (1998) argue that evaluators who fail to see change brought about by communication do so because they ignore the fact that communication for development deals mostly with awareness, knowledge and attitude change, and practice or behavior change issues. [17]

In "Evaluating Communication for Development," LENNIE and TAACHI agree with ANYAEGBUNAM et al. (1998). Basing their work on the Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) project, they advance the argument that program evaluators often fail to find the positive impact of communication for development interventions essentially because they operate from a different paradigm, usually the dominant quantitative, log-frame based philosophy, and ignore the input of the local people who are the primary beneficiaries of development efforts. [18]

To properly contextualize their argument, LENNIE and TAACHI dedicate substantial space to distinguishing quantitative from qualitative evaluation (Chapter 1, pp.1-43). They posit that quantitative evaluation aims to gather data whose analysis helps the program funders, planners, and implementers to gauge,

quantitatively, the level of change that has occurred in terms of predetermined benchmarks or indicators derived from the program's initial baseline studies, program documents, operationalization plans, and the Logical Framework's Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound (SMART) objectives. In such an evaluation, success criteria are already known. Naturally, such indicators can be monitored and evaluated formatively, that is, as the activities are implemented, and summatively to determine the overall impact of the project (STAKE, 1967). [19]

However, qualitative evaluation is different. It aims at tracing and gauging long-term qualitative changes relating to popular empowerment, feelings of self-worth, awareness, attitude change, happiness, inclusion, participation, and gender-relations; the very characteristics of social transformation. These types of change are often slow and unnoticeable to quantitative evaluators. In an earlier publication TAACHI, FOTH and HEARN (2009) argued that this kind of assessment is not very popular with most development programs because "anecdotal evidence of interesting social change" (p.34) is difficult to measure and quantify using SMART objective-based impact evaluation methods. [20]

SACHS (1995, p.2) warns against evaluators being "ensnared by statistics alone" and urges them to study "phenomena observed rooted in their historical grounding [as] there is no way history can be quantitative and nothing else." In an interview with BIEKART and GASPER (2013), Robert CHAMBERS, research associate at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Essex, UK, also emphasizes the need to acknowledge change as perceived by the primary stakeholders in a development endeavor since "what is good, what change is significant, and so on [...] cannot be reduced to economic growth alone, as [economic] growth is only one sort of change" (p.719). [21]

In "Evaluating Communication for Social Change," LENNIE and TAACHI rightly argue that the best way to learn about social change is to engage primary stakeholders or beneficiaries of development interventions in dialogue, and in listening to their life histories as they spell out what has or has not changed. Local people measure change against their own past. LENNIE and TAACHI propose that primary beneficiaries must become part of the communication for development evaluation teams. Among other tools, LENNIE and TAACHI recommend the use of most significant change (MSC), an evaluation tool developed by DAVIES and DART (2005), which recognizes communities' narratives as sources of data on what has or has not changed. [22]

Like MANYOZO (herein reviewed), LENNIE and TAACHI propose that evaluation of communication for development should center on recording evolution in community political and theoretical empowerment as well as adoption of new practices. Change can only said to have taken place if, as CRANTON has indicated, "a person [or society] starts responding to an alternative habit of mind by reconsidering and revising prior belief systems" (2006, p.24). JUPP, ALI and BARAHONA (2010) have challenged that these qualitative changes can actually be quantified. [23]

"Evaluating Communication for Development" argues that for the kind of approach the authors propose, there is a need for capacity building of researchers and community members to act as intra-community evaluation experts and work with external evaluators. [24]

5. Conclusion

"Public Relations, Activism and Social Change," "People's Radio," and "Evaluating Communication for Development" share three distinct positions. Firstly, the three books share the argument that without engaging the grassroots, neither public relations nor radio can bring about social change. Second, the books share the conviction that without involving the local community in determining communication for development project benchmarks and in the monitoring and evaluation of the influence of communication for development interventions, communication for development will always be found to fail. As SEN (1999) has observed, involvement or participation of the people in processes meant to promote their lives is critical because society can only change if its component units, that is, members of a particular community, understand their role as the accelerators of that change. Similarly, involvement of the local people in social activism, radio programming, and monitoring evaluation is critical. FIGUEROA et al. (2002, p.iii), too, have strongly recommended human agency as "the trigger that initiates the community dialogue about a specific issue of concern or interest to the community." Although the ideal is full control and self-management of these activities by the community itself, shared bottom-up approaches, where external and internal agents work together, are better than purely linear and top-down or vertical approaches. [25]

Finally, the three books share a methodological commonality since they are all based on case studies that involved participatory action research. For instance, TAACHI and LENNIE acknowledge throughout their book that their proposed evaluation framework draws from their long-standing experience with three participatory action research projects, notably the Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) project. MANYOZO, too, acknowledges that "People's Radio" was partly informed by several review studies of how radio had been used in development interventions in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Most importantly, the author acknowledges that "People's Radio" benefited from the African Farm Radio Research Initiative (AFRRI) participatory action research work in Mali, Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania, and Ghana implemented by Farm Radio International in partnership with the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) (see FARM RADIO INTERNATIONAL, 2011). In an interview with her publisher, DEMETRIOUS indicated that her book is based on her experience as a PR practitioner and observations of how PR was used to manipulate situations in Australia¹. In one form or another, the three books recommend participatory approaches to communication for development and social activism, as such approaches are politically and socially empowering. Communication for

1 See the interview at http://www.routledge.com/articles/kristin_demetrious_discusses_public_relations_activism_and_social_change/ [Accessed: May 5, 2014].

development and social change students and experts will find the three books informative and helpful in planning, implementing, and evaluating communication-related development interventions. [26]

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