Communication for Development in the Mediatized World

When the Berlin wall fell, in 1989, we all knew that we were witnessing History in the making. But we did not know that the global transformational processes that were both cause and effect of the end of the Cold War would in the coming decades be referred to as Globalization. Although the concept had been coined, that same year, by Roland Robertson it was only in the mid ’90s that it really caught on.

And it remained controversial for many years, with sharp positioning pro and con. Now, the word has lost its once inciting edge. Even its former fervent opponents talk quite matter-of-factly about globalization as one of the conditions for world development.

As we were writing this paper, in the autumn of 2011, we were quite convinced – as I believe that all of us were – that we are in the beginning of another historical revolution – that may or may not turn out to be even more far-reaching than the one unleashed in 1989.

I say were convinced, because it is quite amazing how fast perceptions change. What was said about “the Arab Spring” half a year ago already seems strangely dated… The revolutionary euphoria has somehow been replaced by more sinister and even cynical reflections.

( the dilemma of the present continuous ... the tyranny of the imminent, with little if any historical perspective... the imagined near future that rarely happens)

Yet, a common denominator in this resurging revolution, that has proved itself capable of toppling authoritarian governments is the mobilizing power of the so-called social media. Even if labels such as the Twitter or Facebook revolution are rightfully refuted, the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, that took the Western powers and the Western media by complete surprise, were clear-cut examples of a new and unprecedented communication power, which is largely out of the authorities' control.
(But so were the later so-called England riots, which spurred diametrically different reactions in the Western media.)

We have since become painfully reminded that the new communication power can be used for destructive purposes as well. Lately, (after 22 July 2011), the focus has increasingly been on what might be called the dark side of mediatization: The concoction of anonymous hate-speech, racism and xenophobia on certain websites that fuels aggressive right-wing fundamentalism all over Europe. Whereas the proliferation of new media enhances openness and widened views for those who are open-minded on the outset, it may just as well serve to further narrow the perspective of the narrow-minded.

What we are now witnessing are largely the consequences of globalization, AND a change in global power relations that resembles the post World War II era, but maybe – this is rather a question than a suggestion - the current transformation will in a five or ten year perspective be mostly associated with the elusive and still contested concept Mediatization.

When we started our collaboration, in 2000, on what was to become the web-based international Master programme in Communication for Development at Malmö University and, later, the Örecomm research platform, we made globalization and the emerging network society the framework for a renewed analysis of both communication and development. At the time, everything associated with “development” and “the third world” was widely regarded as obsolete, and the field of development communication, which had emerged after World War II and reached a second momentum in the 1970s, was in a state of crisis and decline.

Now, mediatization, like globalization, is increasingly challenging the field of ComDev. What are the causal relations between media development, agency and social change? And how do we study these dynamics? These are core questions for researchers as well as practitioners in the field.

Globalization and mediatization are of course inseparably entangled. What we see now is, if you will, the synergy effects of these two intertwined development processes.
In his analysis of the Network Society, Manuel Castells did curiously enough not have much to say about media and communication in particular, whereas in *Communication Power* (2009), his sequel to the trilogy, he really puts communication in focus as the key to politics, economy and all fields of human interaction in the network society, stating that “*power in the network society is communication power.*”

*Development* is also making a grand comeback, lately, after having been questioned and dismissed by neo-liberals and anti-liberals alike. In the current global financial crisis – which largely is a North American and Western European crisis - we are witnessing what sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2008) has described as the implosion of the neoliberal Anglo-American model and the return of the development state (the latter, not necessarily a democratic one). This will no doubt have enormous implications for international development cooperation. The bilateral and multilateral development industry, until recently dominated by the Western powers and Japan, is now entangled with and challenged by the new models for social and economic development that poor countries aspire to. China, India, and to a lesser but possibly increasing degree, Brazil are the all-encompassing role models.

The renewed prominence of both communication and development, due to globalization and mediatization combined, ought to imply a new momentum for communication for development.

It is easy to foresee that the world in the coming years will be faced with ever more severe and complex communication challenges, which today's development agents are poorly prepared to meet. The traditional western development agents are grappling with the new impetus of development and social change – that which is driven by social movements of all kinds, bottom up and grassroots’ initiatives, which in most aspects operate so very differently than traditional development organizations do, be they governmental or non-governmental.
The still common understanding of ComDev, as strategic communication interventions by development agents from the developed world – i.e. the West + Japan – in developing countries, still referred to as the third world, – is obviously obsolete. That conception was rendered obsolete already by 1989, with the closure of the Cold War. But the old conception of Development communication - as the means to achieve development, i.e. modernization, through communication, i.e. information campaigns for the diffusion of better practices in agriculture, health care, sanitation etc. in the developing countries – largely prevails. 

The relation between social media, civil society, citizens’ action and social change has been very much in focus at all the major international conference venues for media and communication scholarship in the last year. But these discussions are rarely associated with ComDev. That was for example a striking observation we both made at the IAMCR conference in Istanbul last summer. While the crucial role of media and communication in processes of social change and development at last becomes evident, it is paradoxically not associated with the field of communication for development and social change – with a few exceptions, not even by the development agencies themselves.

As ComDev scholars, and practitioners, we do have a communication problem here. But it is not only a matter of communication. This field is in a state of crisis. And it should be. Because what we are coping with is precisely the transitional processes of the global present, in all sectors of society and at all levels. And maybe the challenge for us, at this moment, is to take a step back and reflect, to analyze and understand, rather than to impose development strategies.

(taking a step back also implies escaping the tyranny of the present continuous)

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