

Another fine mess: communicative ecologies, *Glocal Times* and me

By Hugo Boothby¹

Congratulations to *Glocal Times*! Time to celebrate 10 years of the Communication for Development programme's (ComDev) web magazine. Indeed we have a number of important anniversaries in 2015: in the autumn the programme will mark 15 years, while I myself will have racked up a more modest five years on the teaching staff -five years that have been intense, productive and rewarding; a fortuitous time to be working with a programme that goes from strength to strength.

Glocal Times (GT) has been an integral part of my ComDev experience, both as part of my teaching practice and in nurturing my research interests. It is GT's input/output dynamic that makes it such a key part of the ComDev experience. It 'outputs' articles that become core reading for our courses and commissions 'input' from teachers and students, offering us a valuable forum to publish our research and reflect critically on the programme itself.

I begin this reflection on ComDev, GT and my ride so far by revisiting three of the web magazine's articles that have been particularly significant for me during my time with the programme. These three very different articles form a useful lens through which to view the programme, revealing changes, continuities and some challenges that we still face. This discussion will hopefully also make clear the significance of GT within [the Communication for Development programme](#)'s own communicative ecology. The concept of communicative ecologies² is examined here as an emerging analytical framework within the study and application of Communication for Development, which acknowledges that "In order to understand the potential and real impacts of individual media technologies in any given situation, you need to place this experience within a broader understanding of the whole structure of communication and information in people's everyday lives" (Hearn et al. 2009, p. 31 in Lennie and Tacchi, 2013, p. 50).

Individual media technologies and instances of communication do not exist in isolation but rather in combination with other technologies and as part of complicated social networks. Everyday life and the combinations of communication technologies we use can be messy, but embracing this messiness may allow us to move beyond the search for direct cause-effect relationships, towards an appreciation of the affordances³ that specific combinations of technologies might offer, or in other words, the possibilities and limitations of particular communicative ecologies.

Continuity, change, and challenges ahead

1. [Gossé, Kerstin \(2005\) Educating the world, *Glocal Times* issue 1](#)

When I first joined the programme in 2010 I was principally working with student facilitation. This was the year that ComDev evolved into a full programme and recruited significantly

more students than previously. I was to be the mythical 'spider in the web' working to make sure students had a solid point of contact and that there was good communication between staff members. My predecessor in this role had been Kerstin Gossé, a ComDev alumna and regular contributor to GT who went on to work as a communications officer for UNDP in Burkina Faso. Since returning to Sweden in 2010 she has worked in the public sector and is now a press officer for the healthcare administration within Skåne County Council. I have chosen to revisit her article here partly because it was one of the first from GT that I read, but also because it illustrates very well GT's function as a forum for self reflection and discussion around the programme itself.

In addition to my role as student facilitator, I was also tasked with researching how student fees, introduced in 2011 for non-EU students, might affect the programme and how we could limit their negative impact. Gossé's article reveals the anxiety that was already evident as the consultation process began in 2005. She argues that the implementation of fees would threaten one of ComDev's key strengths: "The mix of international and Scandinavian students is actually the main asset of Comdev. Culture, globalization, communication and development are central issues in the course. The discussions on the course's dynamic website would be far more one-dimensional and poor if only European citizens and international students who could afford to pay the fees got access to the masters' programme" (Gossé, 2005).

The ComDev programme has now had fee paying non-EU students for nearly 5 years, and the global (perhaps glocal) nature of the course is still integral to its teaching and design. We still have a broad geographical spread of students, with an increasing number of fee payers. However, the diversity and geographic span of our cohort is usually created by Europeans transplanted to the Global South, or those born in the Global South now living in Europe. The exchange of ideas and the working through of 'Globalization in practice' is still something that is important and enriches the course, but sadly, as Gossé predicted, many parts of the world remain largely unrepresented, most notably sub-Saharan Africa. So although the introduction of fees has not led to the disaster that some colleagues in our department had predicted, it would be difficult to argue now as Gossé did in 2005 that "the ComDev course could be regarded as part of the policy for global development, a specific form of development cooperation with the countries the international students belong to" (Gossé, 2005).

Increasing the participation of students from sub-Saharan Africa is a key challenge that we face and should remain a goal for ComDev in the future. Something that perhaps we will have made some progress towards by the time we celebrate ComDev's 20th anniversary in 2020.

2. [Warah, Rasna \(2010\) "The development myth" *Glocal Times*, Issue 14](#)

Rasna Warah was a student on the first international course, and graduated in 2004. Since graduating she has published four books: *War Crimes* (2014); *Mogadishu Then and Now* (2012); *Red Soil and Roasted Maize* (2011); and *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits* (2008). She also writes a weekly column for Kenya's largest newspaper *The Daily Nation*.

Warah's article was adapted from the introduction she wrote for the *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits* anthology and has been on the reading list for the Communication, Culture and Media Analysis course every year since 2011, when I first worked on that course.

In 2011 I was not the course coordinator as I have been subsequently, just one of a number of teachers giving lectures and grading papers. I remember clearly that this article made a very strong impression on me, one of many that I read as I rushed to familiarise myself with the course literature, assignment instructions and ComDev teaching systems.

It is a clear, concise and articulate critique of both the development industry and the neo-liberal consensus that informs it. Rereading the article again now, nearly five years later, it is still as crucial and relevant. Its power, I think, comes in part from the strong African voice in which it is delivered. Warah is Kenyan, and this article, informed by her work in Kibera with UN-HABITAT, has remained on the reading list for so long because it demonstrates a reflexivity that we hope to encourage in the work of our students. Reflecting on an interview that she had made with a slum dweller, Warah observes: "I was sub-consciously doing what many people in the so-called development industry do: I was objectifying her, seeing her as part of a problem that needed to be solved so that she could be neatly compartmentalised into a "target group" category. This allowed me to perceive her as being "different" from me and bestowed on her an "otherness" that clearly placed her as my inferior, worthy of my sympathy. Like most professionals working in the development industry, I had failed to see that my work and the structures within which I operated were self-serving" (Warah, 2010).

This contribution from Warah also demonstrates how GT offers a platform where alumni can share the research they conduct both during and after the programme. By allowing alumni to stay connected to the programme, it ensures that new students benefit from the huge knowledge and expertise of graduates who participated in the course.

Warah finishes her piece with a plea: "It is my sincere hope that the 21st century will herald the end of the so called development industry as it exists now and give birth to a new era where poverty and underdevelopment are viewed through the prism of social justice rather than that of charity or aid" (Warah, 2010).

It is my sincere hope that a critical engagement with the development industry, a rigorous self-reflexivity, and a belief in social justice will continue to inform the programme and the work that we do, and that GT can continue to provide a space for critical voices from the global south that, sadly, tend to be lacking in academic discourses around development.

3. [Ekström, Ylva, Anders Høg Hansen and Hugo Boothby \(2012\). "The Globalization of the Pavement", *Glocal Times* Issue 17/18 & *Nordicom Review* Nr. 33](#)

The third article is one that I co-authored with two of my ComDev colleagues, Ylva Ekström and Anders Høg Hansen. I include this article because it illustrates well the important forum that GT offers teachers on the programme, enabling us to share our research, making it available on an open source platform easily accessible as a teaching resource.

The initial writing was quick and intuitive, emerging out of a conversation that Anders, Ylva and I had one morning in the ComDev office. Typically for ComDev the 'office' on this particular morning was extended into virtual space, with Ylva connecting via Skype from Uppsala while Anders and I were in Malmö. During the night there had been huge explosions at an army munitions store in the Gongo la Mboto district of Dar es Salaam. Anders and Ylva both have family in Dar es Salaam, and had observed how those in Dar and their relatives in

Scandinavia used social media as an important information source during the uncertain hours that followed the frightening explosions. Citizen journalism quickly filled the void left by traditional local and international media that was slow to react and later reluctant to ask difficult questions of the authorities.

We each had our own perspective on the events and the media practices we observed but from our different vantage points it was clear that new practices were emerging -a form of news production that was transnational and African in character. Before joining ComDev, I worked with the BBC World Service's African Service. To an outsider, the lively rumour and speculation evident on Facebook, Twitter and Tanzanian blogs following the explosions could not be more different from the rather stiff, rigorously sourced and checked news about the explosions on the BBC. However, we observed that international mass media and user generated social media content were interconnected and co-dependant: part of an intricate web of offline/online connections and exchanges between Africa and Europe that resembled Louise Bourgault's "Pavement Radio"⁴ (1995) adapting towards the digital. In our article we suggest that globalized electronic communication technologies are combining with the oral or interpersonal communication practices, that have previously been described as pavement radio to open up new transnational spaces of user generated news production. After observing the communication practices that followed the explosions in Gongo la Mboto, we argue that "so called social media may supplement and enhance street corner communication, expanding everyday private and public spaces, and opening street corners abuzz with rumour and gossip to global audiences and other media producers" (Ekström et. al., 2012, p. 7).

Importantly this understanding of social media as an extension of pavement radio emphasises the possibility for people in the diaspora to be connected into user generated news production that occurs both on- and off-line.

Originally written as a post on the ComDev blog, *Glocal Times'* invitation to publish the article as part of the 2012 17/18 special issue in collaboration with [Nordicom Review](#) encouraged us to revisit, develop, edit and focus the piece into an expanded version that was suitable for journal publication. I am grateful to GT for providing the impetus to rework our original article, and for providing a platform that ensures the article is safely archived, searchable and easily accessible for all.

Taking another stroll along the Globalized Pavement

Much has happened since we wrote the first version of "Globalizing the Pavement" in 2011. Social media penetration within sub-Saharan Africa has accelerated, and academic research on its use has proliferated. Rereading our article now, it is the messy combination of so many technologies that I find fascinating. Not just the interconnectedness and co-dependence of social media and the traditional mass media, but also the glocal online/offline dynamic that was evident: those in Dar es Salaam that did not have access to the internet used cheaper and simpler methods of communication like SMS to connect with relatives in Europe who were online and could search for news and information. It is also significant that rumour and interpersonal communication were part of the networks that we took into account for this article, a broadening out to focus on the social networks within which media technologies are used as much as on the new technologies themselves.

In retrospect, recent work around communicative ecologies (Lennie and Tacchi, 2013 and Slater, 2013) offers a useful analytical framework within which to better understand the significance of the communication practices that we were observing after the explosions, and could provide a fruitful way to develop this work further. Understanding the communication processes as part of a communicative ecology would help us to consider the affordances of a transnational communication network that combines GSM mobile phone SMSs from Dar es Salaam with ADSL internet connection in Copenhagen, and a trip to the local market to ‘gossip’ with friends and relatives. Mapping a communicative ecology helps to reveal how media technologies are used as part of everyday life, their possibilities and limitations. In other words, it renders visible how “communicative resources [...] messily combine or conflict, [...] are networked with some entities but [...] block others” (Slater, 2013, p. 43).

This approach is well suited for better understanding the complicated combination of technologies we observed, and other communicative ecologies like them, it allows us to acknowledge the importance of communication technologies without succumbing to a technological determinism that denies agency to individuals that appropriate and use communication technologies as part of their everyday lives.

ComDev as a Communicative Ecology

The Communication for Development Master's programme aims to engage with and facilitate participation from students dispersed all around the world. We broadcast lectures and try to open up dialogue between students and teachers that are often in different time zones and live different realities. To achieve this, we have purposefully avoided adopting a closed ‘professional’ IT solution that would combine video streaming, conference calls, live text chat and all the other functions we require into one system. Instead, the programme’s interaction designer Mikael Rundberg has developed solutions for combining a variety of different technologies together. This means that in order to conduct an oral examination we use the consumer application Skype to connect together a teacher and small group of students. The pictures and audio from Skype are then mixed with live images from our studio using the digital vision mixer Wirecast, and this ‘mix’ of audio and images is then live streamed in a variety of bandwidths using the Bambuser application. The Bambuser video stream is then remediated using a bespoke website called Live Lecture, so that we can combine the video stream with a live text chat function that enables students not on the Skype call to participate in the session. If you are a student enrolled in the programme, then the names of some of these technologies will already be familiar to you. Their combination can, as a teacher at least, make ComDev feel quite messy, but I do not intend this qualifier as pejorative. I like the messiness, and I think it exists for important reasons. The combination of different technologies that we use, both high-tech and lo-fi, affords the opportunity to create a learning environment that is engaging, dynamic and flexible. After a recent oral examination session, a student used the text chat function on Live Lecture to share her thoughts: “the experience is really great on skype between the professors and handful of students, feels like a real classroom.” Jenn Warren (Communication, Culture and Media Analysis course, 29th May 2015).

In this example Skype is the primary interface used to connect students with the teacher, but it is what we combine Skype with -the experience we build around this free consumer application- that opens the possibilities for Skype to afford the classroom-like qualities that

Jenn highlighted. In the Glocal Classroom project, the ComDev programme, together with the University of Guelph in Canada, Flinders University in Australia, and Stellenbosch University in South Africa, is trying to better understand how our messiness works, and how it makes our own variety of distance learning special. In my view, communicative ecologies might be a useful framework to help us understand our own work on the programme better.

It is clear that *Glocal Times* is an integral part of ComDev's communicative ecology, as important for the programme as its learning management system (It's Learning), its [lectures video-streamed via Bambuser](#), or text-chats facilitated by a teacher. Over the last 10 years, it has established a large open access archive of ComDev research articles that includes valuable contributions from teaching staff and alumni. It creates space for voices from the Global South and the most current thought and research within our field, while maintaining a critical engagement with the development industry and encouraging self-reflexivity around our own place within this industry.

Thanks for the last 10 years, GT, and here's to the next 10.

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²Don Slater defines communicative ecologies as “the whole structure of communication and information flows in people’s ways of life; and the complete ensemble of (symbolic and material) resources for communication in a locality, and the social networks which organize and mediate them” (Slater, 2013, p. 42).

³ The term affordance was introduced by the psychologist James Gibson (1977) and can be understood as “the capacity of objects in our environment to meet the interests we have as creatures in the world”(Harper, 2011, p. 126). Affordance has been used fruitfully within Radio Studies (Dubber, 2013 and Tacchi, 2012), and Musicology (Harper, 2011) to explore the potential and limitations of different audio technologies and the environments of which they are part.

⁴ Bourgault uses the term Pavement Radio to describe “the circulation of lively news through unofficial oral channels of interpersonal communication which penetrate African cities. The stories which circulate typically treat topics of interest that the official press ignores or covers scantily in coded language. Thus, radio trottoir is underground news, an alternative to the official press, which is tedious, censored, uninformative, and often unintelligible”. (Bourgault 1995, p. 202)