

LATIN AMERICAN CRITICAL RESEARCH ON COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

A Brief Overview of its First 15 Years

Luis Ramiro Beltrán S.

ANTHOLOGY MEETING

Bellagio, Italy, May 3 – 5, 2004

COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE CONSORTIUM

193

Beltrán S., Luis Ramiro (2004) Latin American critical research on communication for development: a brief overview of its first 15 years. La Paz. 5 p. Document presented at the Anthology Meeting held in Bellagio, Italy, May 3-5, 2004, organized by the Communication for Social Change Consortium.

The production of scientific literature on what is generally known as “communication for development” has been going for a bit more than half a century in Latin America. Its starting point can be traced back at least to the 1960-1969 period in which probably around 100 documents or so were published on this subject matter. Its highest point was recorded from 1970 to 1979, a booming period in which at least some 700 documents must have been published. The period of declination occurred in the 80's and the 90's decades in which perhaps at most some 200 titles might have seen publication. And from 2000 to the present year there are in the region hardly at all indications of production activity in this area of intellectual endeavor. These are gross estimates made in the absence of a comprehensive and up-to-date regional bibliography as well as of compilations of major works. Nevertheless, they seem appropriate to suggest the importance of the Latin American contributions to the literature of this field.

The authors of said contributions were so numerous that it is just not possible to review even the essence of their writings in the time available here for the appraisal of seminal works. Thus, skipping names and avoiding quotes, I will just have to attempt providing a very brief and sketchy discussion of the nature of said contributions. And I will do so looking only at a 15 year period of production - corresponding to the prevalence of precursor critical research – which included its inception, going from 1965 to 1969, and its apogee, going from 1970 to 1979.

Prior to presenting the summary, however, it seems necessary to briefly re-pass the three conceptualizations of the relationship between social communication and national development that prevailed in Latin America. Interrelated but different they were the following:

Development support communication, which refers to the notion that planned and organized communication – massive, interpersonal or mixed – is a key instrument for the accomplishment of the practical goals of development-seeking institutions and projects.

Development communication, which refers to the notion that mass media are capable of creating a public atmosphere favorable to behavioral change, which is assumed indispensable for modernizing traditional societies through technological advancement and economic growth; and

Alternative communication for democratic development, which refers to the notion that, by expanding and balancing people's access to, and participation in, the communication process – at both mass media and interpersonal grassroots spheres – development should secure, in addition to material gains, social justice, freedom for all and the majority's rule.

In practice and in theory, development support communication came first as of the late 40's and its birth place was the United States of America; development communication was next, and was also born in that country as of the middle of the 60's; and, born in Latin America in the early 70's, alternative communication for democratic development was last. Nevertheless, they at sometimes run parallel on the scene.

It is also important to recall the broader context within which the critical research about communication for development evolved in Latin America over the indicated three-luster period. The United Nations had called the 50's "the First Decade of Development". But even by the middle of the next, that of the 60's, it became evident that, in spite of substantive funding of numerous projects by international assistance agencies, not much development had taken place at least in terms of improving the deplorable situation of the majority of the people. The native ruling elites still exerted stern domination over the masses, especially the peasantry, which impeded the social, economic and political changes indispensable to bring about real development. On the other hand, the terms of international trade exchange were such that the countries of the region were increasingly selling their raw materials to the developed countries, mostly the U.S., at low prices while buying from them manufactured goods and technologies at high prices. This led a group of outstanding social scientists of Latin America to formulate the "Theory of Dependence" through which they made clear that under such unfair and disadvantageous situation genuine and effective "modernization" was not feasible.

The "Cold War" decade of the 70's – again called the "Third Decade of Development" by the U.N. – proved rather the decade of dramatic collapse of the materialistic and elitist model of development that our governments had uncritically adopted from the developed ones. The oil crisis that shook these latter at that time had disastrous consequences for Latin American countries, which had to suffer instead further underdevelopment. Their foreign debt had an extraordinary growth with devastating consequences on their economies. The powerful minorities grew richer while 40% of the families fell into levels of critical poverty. High prices and salaries eroded by inflation afflicted most of the people and public service expenditures had to be drastically curtailed. In many of the countries of the region military dictatorships added bloody repression to the misery of the people. Perhaps as a reaction to it and in view of deficiencies of the political parties, several autonomous social movements emerged on the political stage. The Catholic Church condemned authoritarian conservatism and often supported the people's struggle for justice and freedom; one of its members proposed a "Theology of Liberation". Cuba first and Nicaragua later established left-wing revolutionary regimes. Joined by some of the Latin American nations, a Movement of Non-Aligned Countries was born in Algeria in 1973 at the world-wide level coming to propose to terminate dependency through the establishment of a New International Economic Order and demanded from the United Nations Organization support for this equity-seeking proposal, that caused acid debates between these countries and the highly developed ones. In 1974, through their Declaration of Cocoyoc, the Latin American countries formulated in Mexico a set of guidelines for the attainment of a more humane, fair and truly democratic development. And in 1976 a group of distinguished social scientists put to work for a year by Argentina's Bariloche Foundation came up with a mathematically sustained and daring proposal for a new development model, which was published in a book titled Catastrophe or New Society?. It was to no avail. Nobody listened to these voices and the classical model capable only of generating more underdevelopment and less democracy was blindly and stubbornly kept in place.

It was in such an environment – also characterized by the upsurge of new technologies of information - that critical research on communication for development evolved in Latin America. It did so along four major thematic lines: (1) diagnosis of the mass media situation and of the international information patterns in reference to development; (2) denunciation of the lack of democratic development and of democratic communication and proposition of changes leading to the democratization of both; (3) recording of the region's experience of alternative communication for democratic development; and (4) critique of the premises, objects and methods of communication research as conducted in the region following alien models.

The studies corresponding to the line of the mass media situation found, in essence, that they were clearly instrumental to the internal domination exerted by the elites over the masses. Press, radio and television were analyzed chiefly in terms of distribution and reach in the population, message content and media ownership. The studies indicated that access to the media was but another privilege of minorities; the mass media hardly reached the mass mainly because those who were not in the market were not considered as part of the public of interest. Information and opinion were concentrated on the activities of the power circles, hardly ever referring to the forgotten majorities except when social upheaval occurred in protest for the oligarchies' abuses. Often conservative and at times trivial, the messages were for the most part indifferent to development concerns and opposed to social transformation towards real democracy. And ownership of them showed as well in some countries the prevalence of monopoly. State ownership was minimal and, far from meaning resolute support to development aims, it was mostly functional to propaganda. Freedom of information was seen as a privilege of the few. On the other hand, numerous studies found evidences of cultural dependency mostly due to the hegemony of a few international news agencies which controlled the flow of foreign news in the region misreporting often the realities of it. Likewise, clear indications were found of a major U.S. influence on television content and of a virtual monopoly of transnational advertising of the same origin. At the middle of the 70's the Non-Aligned Movement fostered very actively in the "Third World" the ideal of establishing a "New International Information Order", which was strongly rejected by the Western developed nations. Latin American research made many supportive contributions to it by advocating for balance in the international news flow, for treating news as a social good and not as just another merchandise, and for creating regional news agencies.

Along the line of proposition of changes towards democratization two avenues of effort were paramount: building conceptual basis for national communication policies and reformulating the model of communication while questioning also the model of development. In the first case, Latin America produced since the early 70's pioneering proposals for policy formulation that would establish a normative system to effect, through public consensus, changes in the system and improvements of the process of communication. In 1974 UNESCO held in Colombia the first meeting of experts in communication policies, which contributed a set of guidelines to formulate and apply those policies. In 1976, confronted with strong opposition from the regional associations of media owners, UNESCO took the matter to the level of a meeting of Ministers of Information of Latin America held in Costa Rica. This activity culminated in a declaration and a set of recommendations to formulate and implement such policies

to legally and peacefully seek the democratization of communication. In the second case, already as of the middle of the 60's, a few Latin American scholars started questioning the appropriateness of the prevailing models of communication, originated in the United States of America, for the Latin American conditions. Some of these researchers advanced, by about the middle of that decade, propositions to build a substantially different model that would be democratic and "horizontal" in the sense of perceiving communication as a two-way process based on equal opportunities for access, dialogue and participation of all people in the communication process. Furthermore, there was also a proposal to reformulate as well the development paradigm adding to economic and technological concerns, pertinent to material growth, considerations of social justice, political participation and freedom for all. This was, of course, directly related to the Latin American definition of "**alternative communication for democratic development**". And it was linked with equally innovative proposals in terms of communication rights and of freedom of information.

Precisely in the line of alternative communication Latin Americans produced a large number of studies of the rich and diverse experiences that, having slowly started in the 50's, flourished along the 70's. The idea behind it was that common people came to own and run media of their own to try and do with them a kind of popular communication that would represent another option vis-à-vis the commercial and governmental mass media. The material modesty of the small and elementary media was to be compensated by their militant commitment to social change and by their participatory manner to operate. Broadcasting was clearly a favorite for people's organizations to express themselves through creative formats such as radio schools, radio forums, radio theatre and radio cabins handled by "people's reporters". Video and small-format movies were also used imaginatively and in a dialogical fashion. Projects in rural communities and in poor sub-urban areas appealed also to loudspeakers, street theater, puppets, songs, mural press and "mini-newspapers". The researchers gave systematic and analytical testimonies of these attempts at endowing thousands of humble citizens with the power to say their word.

And the last line of Latin American critical research related to communication for development focused on the nature of research itself. The positivist and functionalist orientation of the U.S. models of scientific investigation in this field was strongly criticized on various counts, but especially on that of them being favorable to the perpetuation of status quo through the people's adjustment to the will of the powerful minorities. Latin Americans also criticized the individualistic and psychological approach to the inquiry at the expense of denying the determinant influence of social structure in the behavior of persons. In addition they challenged the notion of a value-free science and the excessive reliance upon quantitative data at the expense of the qualitative one. In summary, they questioned some premises, objects and methods of research characteristic of U.S. communication science. And a significant number of studies put particular attention to the theory of diffusion of innovations regarded highly instrumental to rural development. They clearly showed that, blind to socio-structural considerations, it was not applicable to the realities of the region mostly because it proved appropriate to favor the progress of the rural elites at the price of further underdevelopment for the subdued and impoverished peasantry.

What made possible in Latin America all such advancements in critical scientific inquiry committed to social transformation towards true democracy? It was the confluence of several factors. Namely: (1) the existence of professional associations of researchers and professors of communication, as well as of journalists; (2) the existence, by the outset of the 70's, of some eighty university schools of communication; (3) the existence of some very active, creative and influential communication centers in the region; (4) the availability of several professional journals; and (5) the support of some international development agencies. But perhaps even more significant than all these factors was the fact that a community of young communication scholars having no flag, by laws or directorate came to embrace the dream of helping build a new society from Chiapas to Patagonia and thus joined the struggle of millions of downtrodden human beings in pursuit of that dream.