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Artículo

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por

Luis Ramiro Beltrán Salmón

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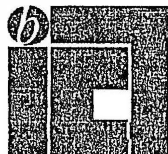

Development Communication: Latin America

Luis Ramiro Beltrán

Bolivian Catholic University

A universally valid and widely accepted definition of the field does not exist, but three conceptualizations have prevailed in the western world, the first two emanating from the US and the third from Latin America. The first, development communication, is the notion that mass media are capable of creating a public atmosphere favorable to change, which is assumed to be indispensable for modernizing traditional societies through technological advancement and economic growth. The second is → "development *support* communication," i.e., the idea that planned and organized communication – massive, interpersonal, and mixed – is a key instrument for the accomplishment of the practical goals of national development-seeking institutions (→ Planned Social Change through Communication). The third is the concept of alternative communication for democratic development. This assumes that, by expanding and balancing people's access to, and participation in, the communication process – at both mass media and interpersonal grassroots levels – development should secure, in addition to material gains, social justice, freedom for all, and the majority's rule (→ Communication Strategies for Empowerment).

PRACTICE CAME FIRST

The practice of communication for development began considerably before the inception of its theory. During the last quarter of the 1940s three events occurred simultaneously in Latin America, two of them native and the third coming from the US, all of them pioneering endeavors but emerging through divergent paths.

A parish priest in a remote Andean village of Colombia established a rudimentary broadcasting facility, *Radio Sutatenza*, with evangelical purposes. He rapidly turned it into the centerpiece of a cleverly conceived educational communication strategy that he called "*radio school*." It consisted of a number of small groups of peasants who met periodically to listen to programs specially produced for them to teach them literacy and, later, farming and health care. A trained local leader stimulated and assisted each group to discuss the lessons and applied them to undertaking community improvement activities. So successful was this endeavor that within about a decade it had grown into *Acción Cultural Popular (ACPO)*, a Catholic rural development agency endowed with a number of powerful broadcasting stations serving hundreds of "radio schools" across the country supported by a team of teachers, three leader-training institutes and a print shop to publish a weekly paper and teaching materials. The format corresponded to "development communication" and to "development support communication" (→ Radio for Development).

To break the isolation and silence to which they were confined, workers' unions in the rich tin mines of Bolivia established very modest broadcasting stations across a vast territory through contributions their members made from their meager salaries. In about a decade these *Radios Mineras* were to grow to about 30, operating at times as a network (→ Radio Networks). This transformed downtrodden and often repressed citizens into protagonists of mass communication. The main characteristic of the miners' radios was their "*open microphone*" *policy* that gave participants free and ample opportunity to become active sources of messages instead of remaining passive receivers. To that end, these radios not only welcomed people into their tiny studios but also went into the depths of the mines; in addition, much of their broadcasting was done through dialogue with people in their homes, churches, schools, marketplaces, and sports fields. They thus enabled people to speak out, even to criticize the unions' positions and performance. Unknowingly, the Bolivian workers of the mines were the pioneers of the practice of what many years later became known as "alternative communication for democratic development."

In the early post-World War II period, the government of the US launched an international program of development with emphasis on assistance for agriculture, education, and health (→ Health Campaigns for Development). Cooperative services specialized in those fields were established in Latin American countries. Each service focused on a particular line of communication activity such as agricultural extension information, audiovisual education, or health education. In the 1950s and 1960s, the program was to train hundreds of individuals in the principles and skills of communication for development so as to increase and improve the design, production, and distribution of educational messages through multiple media. And soon many other international agencies, such as FAO, → UNESCO, and UNICEF, were to do likewise. Over many years millions of dollars were thus applied, with different degrees of achievement, to hundreds of projects in this

commendable endeavor eminently corresponding to the development support communication and development communication formats.

THE ADVENT OF THEORY

In 1958, US sociologist → Daniel Lerner published a 50-country study of what he regarded as the extinction of traditional society to make room for → modernization. He found this process was taking place in four stages: (1) urbanization, (2) people's participation in mass communication, (3) literacy, and (4) participation in politics. In 1962, US rural sociologist → Everett Rogers formulated the theory of diffusion of innovations as the engine for society's modernization (→ Diffusion of Information and Innovation). In 1964, US communication scientist and journalist → Wilbur Schramm (1964) published a major study on development and mass communication. Perceiving the latter as "watchman," "teacher," and "policymaker," he stipulated a set of roles for it in helping people meet these needs.

Throughout the 1960s these conceptualizations born in the US were received with interest in Latin America by communication specialists in universities and development agencies. No criticisms were recorded at that time. On the contrary, some conducted research based on the propositions, especially those of Rogers, notably in Colombia and Brazil. Others just proceeded to attempt to apply what they learned from the readings to their field operations. Many seemed to have even come to share with enthusiasm the faith in the mass media as endowed with powers to virtually generate development by themselves.

REMOVING BLINDFOLDS

The theory and the practice of communication in general and of communication for development in particular came into question in Latin America at the start of the 1970s. This decade was plagued by dictatorships, by the failure of the development undertaking, and by the collapse of the region's economy due to the effects of a grave oil crisis in the developed nations. A movement of young communication scholars committed to radical social change to build a real democracy emerged during the first quarter of the decade. They criticized the classical model of communication in general, formulated by → Lasswell in the US in the late 1940s and expanded in the mid-1960s by Schramm and Berlo (S-M-C-R, i.e., source, message, channel, and receiver). It was regarded as unidirectional (monological) and impositive (vertical) as well as conservative, mechanist, and effects-oriented toward securing manipulative persuasion.

The pioneering propositions of Lerner and Schramm were also somewhat challenged, but the most criticized was Rogers's theory of diffusion of innovations. The main objection was that this model ignored the determinant influence of the archaic power structure, which in Latin America made possible the exploitation of the oppressed masses, especially the peasantry, by the oligarchy. Some critics argued that, in fact, it was that structure that defined who was to be an "innovator" and who would have to be a "laggard." And they added that the concept of leadership in the model hid the reality of the elite; that the notion of cosmopolitanism disguised the linkage between the powerful of the urban and

the rural areas; and that the use of the term "reference group" could dilute the reality of internal domination that victimized the peasants in Latin America.

TOWARD "HORIZONTAL" COMMUNICATION

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1969) gained international celebrity as of the early 1970s for his proposal of an "education for liberation" through "conscientization" based on dialogue. Extrapolating from this, Frank Gerace, an American living in Bolivia, was the first to suggest the notion of horizontal communication. Paraguayan specialist in educational communication Juan Diaz Bordenave (1982) soon engaged in creative reflection on the matter, which made him a chief proponent of theoretical bases for the democratization of communication for development.

Francisco Gutiérrez (1973), Daniel Prieto (1987), and Mario Kaplún (1978) were also prominent in this effort. And many other scholars of the region produced proposals for alternative communication, also understood as "dialogical," "participatory," and "popular." Chilean journalist Fernando Reyes Matta (1977) advanced a scheme for "communication with active social participation," in which he emphasized instrumental organization and education (→ Participatory Communication).

At the end of the 1970s, taking into account the critiques of the US-oriented models and seeking to conjugate the Latin American propositions to replace them, Beltrán formulated a set of bases for a model of horizontal communication, defined as follows: "Communication is the process of democratic social interaction based upon exchange of symbols by which human beings voluntarily share experiences under conditions of free and egalitarian access, dialogue, and participation. Everyone has the right to communicate in order to satisfy communication needs by enjoying communication resources" (Beltrán 1980, 3).

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

The era of neo-liberalism, globalization, and the "information society" started in Latin America with a catastrophic and paralyzing economic crisis in 1982. This seriously curtailed state development programs and, consequently, their communication components. By contrast, activities of alternative communication recorded considerable growth and improvement. Although multiple media were a part of this evolution, radio was by far the favorite for many grassroots organizations, especially in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, Costa Rica, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic. Films were used in Bolivia and Nicaragua, and video in many countries. Puppet shows, street theatre, dance and songs festivals, "mini-papers," and even circus-type presentations were successfully used for various educational purposes. Along with the numerous Catholic educational broadcasting stations, modest but highly participatory "community radio" activities proliferated across the region, sometimes suffering repression.

The decade of the 1990s saw the intensifying of health communication activities, especially for family planning and for the struggle against AIDS, as well as programs to prevent adolescent drug use, to inhibit violence against women in the family, and to promote environmental protection.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Communication Strategies for Empowerment ▶ Development Support Communication ▶ Diffusion of Information and Innovation ▶ Health Campaigns for Development ▶ Lasswell, Harold D. ▶ Lerner, Daniel ▶ Modernization ▶ Participatory Communication ▶ Planned Social Change through Communication ▶ Radio for Development ▶ Radio Networks ▶ Rogers, Everett ▶ Schramm, Wilbur ▶ UNESCO

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