

Institutionalising social mobilisation as a social change process

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The emergence of new social mobilisations in developing countries has generated a new opportunity for deliberating and reconceptualising the institutionalisation of Communication and Social Change (CSC) processes in large development organisations. This paper argues the new social mobilisation offers valuable opportunity to better inform the streamlining of institutionalised CSC process in development policies and practices.

In the past decades, the theory of communication for social change has undergone a shift from an era of top-down flows of communication to a new era where horizontal, citizen-led participatory communication process has become the basis for leveraging social change. The underlining conceptualisation of this new era of communication process embraces social change as a dialogical process that involves engaging, listening and amplifying the voices of stakeholders into their own change agenda.

For many years now large development organisations such as the UN agencies and World Bank etc. have embraced and institutionalised CSC into their development policies. But the practices of these organisations around CSC have come under serious academic scrutiny in recent years. For example, in their recent book, Thomas and van de Fliert (2015: 2) raise critical concern that the neoliberal logic within these organisations has subjected CSC theories and practices to mere

“behavioural communication and instrumentalist leveraging of information and communication.”

Crucial to this understanding is that the principles guiding CSC practices undertaken by these institutions are largely driven by an “invited system-driven space” for communication (Tufte, 2013). In this space citizens are invited to engage in some kind of participatory process, often described in participatory communication literature as “lip service” (Van de Fliert, 2010). Arguably, the problem with the invited system-driven space is that the very core concepts that characterise CSC such as “participation”, “giving voice” and distribution of “power” are often wrongly interpreted and practiced. As a result, it has been argued that the current practices of CSC in vast development agenda and the arrangement of social order in developing countries have led to less significant empowerment of the stakeholders (Thomas & van de Fliert, 2015).

The evidence of this has partly been manifested in the emergence of neo-Marxist revolutionists across developing nations with their own new bottom-up CSC practices in the form of a new social mobilisation; the popular example being the Arab Spring movements. The new social mobilisation is based on the creation of an informal and non-institutional space propagated largely by digital media technology against the backdrop of challenging power inequity to leverage political and socio-economic opportunities.

It has been argued that the communication principles and practices driving the new social mobilisation are not “primarily connected to CSC field, neither taught in academia nor situated within the logic of development agencies’ institutionalised participatory communication process that is often tied to project or programme cycles” (Tufte, 2013: 20).

This disconnection opens new opportunity for not only deliberating on the underlying conceptual argument(s) that drives the communication process in the new social mobilisation, but also further interrogating whether such new forms of CSC practices create an opportunity or challenge the institutionalisation of genuine citizen-led CSC process in large development organisations.



Conceptualising social mobilisation as a social change practice

Social mobilisation is not a new phenomenon. It has existed since the 19th century under the broad nomenclature of “civil rights moments” in the USA, Latin America and some African countries. The fundamental tenets of these movements were aimed at claiming a space and articulating voice and citizens’ role in the development of their societies (Tuftte, 2012). Since the late 20th century, we have witnessed the resurgence of similar movements under new nomenclature, “digital activism”.

As the name implies, the new digital media are key drivers for the new social mobilisation, because they offer a “new communication model that is not linear, one-way or top-down. It is dynamic, interactive and multidirectional, and its opens multiple forms of citizen engagement” (Tuftte, 2013: 25). Arguably this form of engagement manifests citizens as claimants of development rather than passive receivers of strategic communication-based interventions often instituted by large development organisations.

Unlike the strategic communication interven-

Social mobilisation in Senegal. Photo: Tostan.

tion that is often organisation-driven, the new social moment is a genuine bottom-up process. It is a process where citizens identify their problems, mobilise and collectively advocate for change through self-created spaces located outside the structured institutional domain. Castells refers to the communicative principles of this new social movement as a “mass-self communication” process that allows citizens to enter public spaces using multiple communication sources (Castells, 2009).

He argues that this mass-self communication process through new digital media “increases the chances of enacting social and political change” (Ibid, 2009: 302). One would strongly argue that such change is fundamental for reclaiming the space for active listening and amplifying citizen voice within the neoliberal culture of development processes, as articulated in Couldry’s (2010) work on voice and Quarry and Ramirez’s (2009) work on listening.

As it stands, the communication principles that drive the new social movements are critical

for adapting inclusive and genuine participatory CSC practices into development policies and programmes at the institutional level. But the lack of theorisation to connect these principles to institutionalised communication practices precludes the visibility of its development potential. Thanks to Kavada (2011) and (Tufte, 2013) for their initial attempts to link social mobilisation to communication theory and CSC respectively and also to Thomas and van de Fliert (2015) for drawing attention to social mobilisation as a crucial element for theorising CSC.

However, given the centrality of the new digital media in articulating social mobilisation, another salient way of making this connection in theory and in practice, as argued by Tufte, is by drawing on Couldry's concept of the technology of voice discussed in his book *Why Voice Matters*. While critiquing the current neoliberal social order, Couldry argues for the role of new digital media in creating new spaces for "articulating strong voice against the socially and politically excluding forces of the current development processes" (Tufte, 2013, p. 27). In doing so, he outlines five possible ways that the new digital technologies are enabling these processes and creating citizen-government relationship.

Firstly, Couldry notes that the proliferation of digital and personal communication media has increased *new voices in public spaces for a vastly increased range of people*. Indeed, large numbers of people are now able to mobilise and convey their concerns, stories and messages to public spaces that were hitherto inaccessible to them. For example, from slums in Africa to cities in the Arab world and from cities in Europe to occupy Wall Street in New York, citizens have converged around digital media to mobilise and convey their voices against politics, social and economic inequality in public places.

Conversely, in the recent uproar in Burundi where President Pierre Nkurunziza was attempting to defy the constitutional order, digital media have played a key role in amplifying multiple voices in public spaces, leading to the banning of radio stations and shutting down of mobile phone services. Messaging services including Facebook,

Whatsapp, Twitter and Tango were cut off in Burundi amid protests over the president seeking a third term.¹

Couldry's second point is that *a greatly increased mutual awareness of these new voices has emerged*. This suggests that those days have gone where citizens are cajoled with well-orchestrated political messages and isolated by limited possibilities to re-circulate the messages among themselves. In the new emerging technologies of voice, citizens are more connected and mutually aware of their problems. As a result, they are likely to easily share information, materials and stories about their problems that may provoke collective action.

This leads to the Couldry's third point that easy circulation of digital content has enabled the emergence of *new scales of organised political action* against dictators, corporations and elected governments. Well-known examples are the Arab spring movements, the anti-austerity movement in Spain and the occupy movements across many countries and the recent Burundi protests mentioned above.

The fourth point is that *our understanding of what spaces are for political organisation is now changed*. Indeed, rather than fixed or restricted political spaces that we know, the world has witnessed over the past years multiple political spaces emerging from both online and offline platforms. Citizens form networks of communication partners with known and unknown individuals to converge around common problems and make their voices heard. A good example was noticed in my six months ethnographic study in Sierra Leone where the convergence of mobile phone and radio has created a new digital space for political and socio-economic discourses.

Since the end of decade-long conflict in Sierra Leone in 2002, several citizen-centred radio programmes have sprung up to amplify citizens' voices and hold government institutions accountable. A popular example is a *monologue programme* aired by a citizen radio station. Together with the radios and the proliferation of mobile phones, these programmes have created citizen empowerment platforms to deliberate on political and socio-economic issues that affect them.



Star Radio, Sierra Leone, broadcasts In-Sight, produced and directed by editor Alex Terena (pictured above). Photo: Star Radio.

To participate, citizens use their personal mobile phone to call on the programmes and share their concerns with the expectation of spurring government officials into listening and taking appropriate action. As one radio produce noted:

“For some people in authority no sooner do they get any information through this medium they immediately come to the radio station and make a clarification or react immediately by issuing a press release based upon the issues deliberated here – so I believe that is one of the reasons why we established this program” (Bangura, male, 32, radio producer).

This ties in well with Couldry’s fifth point, the generation of *new intensities of listening*. With the proliferation of mass-self communication, listening to vastly increased public voices has become an imperative for public and government authorities. Governments who fail to listen to their citizens’ voices risk losing their powers. For example, in 2001 we witnessed a momentous change in the political atmosphere in the Philippines through what Howard Rheingold (2002) calls “smart mob technologies”. Rheingold notes that through SMS, President Joseph Estrada lost power to digital civil activists (see Rheingold, 2002). A similar histor-

ical moment was noticed in the 2011 Arab Spring revolution when three dictators were toppled by power from below.

Is social mobilisation a challenge or an opportunity?

The frequency and popularity of social mobilisation across developing countries suggests the need for change in how development and social change policies are organised and delivered. Therefore, the question is not whether the communicative principles of social mobilisation challenge institutional structures, but rather how do development institutions embrace these principles and incorporate them into development communication practices to engender what one might call a “new development communication order”.

Some scholars have already begun exploring key characteristics of how this new order should be shaped to maximise better development output. For example, Couldry’s five points highlighted above emphasise the value of voice in social arrangement – a voice that interrupts and challenges the neoliberal doctrine in the organisation of development policies and practices. Tufte deliberated on the move towards polyphonic networked communication formats as a key premise for new communication practices.

Conversely, the intensities of listening discussed both by Couldry (2010) and Quarry and Ramirez (2009) also characterise the new order. In all communication remains essential for engaging with

citizens, listening to them, addressing their expectations and promoting transparency and accountability. The question, however, is how can these communication mechanisms be best conveyed to engender the amplification of voices and participation in development agendas that affect human lives.

On this note, considering the fact that large development organisations have always been and still are key drivers for the development of most policy agendas in developing countries, particularly Africa, it is imperative for these organisations to capitalise on this relationship to leverage policies that embrace the new social mobilisation communication principles and practices. Such policies should aim at fostering a culture of listening and citizen/government dialogue in developing countries. In doing so, major institutional changes would need to be instigated at the levels of mission formulation, mandates and basic operations of these large development organisations (Van de Fliert, 2010).

In addition, the core process of participation in CSC projects is often carried out in fixed spaces under the facilitation of an expert. However, in the new communication order of social mobilisation, we have witnessed the emergence of multiple spaces and new forms of participation and deliberation outside this traditional framework of CSC practices. The experience from this new social mobilisation, as articulated in Couldry's five points, shows that citizens are aware of the problems that affect them and they are capable of organising themselves, engaging and sharing their problems without any facilitation from an external actor.

Therefore, the important question is how can these practices be explored and interpreted into development policies and programmes to build trust and bring about social change. Arguably, one way of doing this is by adopting a social constructivist approach as a core component for streamlining development programmes and practices. The new social mobilisations have re-emphasised the need to recognise citizens' voices and their participation in their own development agenda (Tufte, 2013).

The articulation of these voices into existing

CSC projects has been largely constrained by strategic communication and project objectives designed prior to the deployment of the projects. On the contrary, social constructivist approach provides a valuable way for capturing and articulating these voices in development practices from the bottom-up. In essence, the social constructivist approach enables government and development institutions to listen and engage with stakeholders in their socio-cultural milieus, to identify their problems, and to develop projects to address these problems.

Finally, the discussion in this paper suggests that the new social mobilisation offers valuable opportunities to better inform the streamlining of institutionalised CSC processes in development policies and practices. ■

Note

1. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32512668>

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