

Communicating communication

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Communication specialists have not sufficiently discussed the place of communication in development programmes. Although theoretical and methodological aspects as well as programmatic experiences have received a great deal of attention, the institutional context of communication practice has been rarely addressed.

Though we may be convinced about the merits of communication, our institutional position will remain weak if we do not persuade colleagues in other fields. We need to address the perception about the contributions of communication to health, education, environment and other programmes. If we fail to make persuasive arguments about how communication makes a difference, the idea that communication is an optional component and misperceptions about what communication can achieve will persist.

We need to confront these issues head-on. We need to explain the strengths and limitations of communication to other audiences. We need to address mistaken expectations with strategic goals in mind. To engage in such exercise is not a mere intellectual distraction or a matter of professional vanity. Rather, it is about defining our institutional place and consolidating communication programmes in development initiatives. How communication is perceived and valued determines budgets, contracts, personnel and activities. Decisions about these issues shape the institutional conditions in which we put our expertise in practice.

Communication professionals typically encounter two perceptions. One position makes communication synonymous with information. Because it wrongly assumes that relaying information to audiences and communities about relevant issues is often sufficient, it asks communication to be just information production and transmission. It offers a mix of confusing ideas that reduces communication to institutional image, press relations, and materials.

The presence of this reductionist perspective is not surprising. It is partially the result of the concrete needs of governments and development agencies to 'inform outwards'. They need to 'communicate' with different audiences through promoting achievements and countering negative perceptions. Such perception is also the result of the fact that communication professionals who are typically in charge of those tasks have been trained in journalism and public relations, and are not necessarily familiar with a wider conception of communication, research, and strategies. Such view ignores a catholic, comprehensive understanding of communication that focuses on how people develop social connections to build and maintain individual and communal identities and to make sense of the world.

A second position has a broader understanding of communication and, in principle, recognises its potential to contribute to programmatic goals. This position, however, remains sceptical about its accomplishments. Whilst it acknowledges that communication is more than informational activities, it demands answers to a welter of questions: 'What is the impact of communication?' 'What difference does communication make?' 'How can communication results be measured?' 'How can we justify investments in communication?'

Communication professionals may consider these questions tired and unnecessary. They may retort by interrogating about the contributions of medicalised, purely economic, or engineering-driven plans to address development challenges. Why should only communication be put on trial? Although such reactions may be justifiable, those doubting and probing questions about the value of communication cannot be ignored.

Soft or hard science?

Unfortunately, in some development circles, communication still carries the label of being a non-rigorous, ad-hoc discipline. Some months ago, I was talking to an epidemiologist who casually said that we cannot ask communication to show results because it is a 'soft science'. His comment reflects an extended belief that questions the rigor of research and evaluation methods of communication.

Communication analysts may dismiss such perception as uninformed about old epistemological debates about the divide between the social and the natural sciences, or criticise them for idealising what in some quarters is considered a debunked model of science. They may even be annoyed that such perceptions still exist after more than a half a century of extensive communication work in/for development. Also, they may ask, isn't it obvious to everyone that communication matters? Doesn't the ubiquitousness of information technologies in everyday life in both the North and the South, the wide presence of communication language in development rhetoric, and the much-discussed influence of media coverage on development agendas offer plenty of evidence that communication is a central feature of the contemporary world?

We may strongly believe that communication has made important contributions to development initiatives, and that it is an inescapable, defining characteristic of our times. However, that hasn't been sufficient to change perceptions among key decision-makers who define the place of communication in development programmes.

Communication specialists have rarely responded to prevailing perceptions. Whilst we are often engrossed in long and Manichean discussions about whether social marketing or participatory

communication are mutually exclusive or complementary, or are busy in search of the illusory Holy Grail in development communication, the value of the discipline is not clear or is even doubted among colleagues whose opinions affect the conditions for doing communication work.

Why do we need to respond to what others believe about communication? Simply put: those perceptions affect the legitimacy of communication as a field of study and practice in development. The legitimacy of the field is demonstrated in various ways such as the size of budgets, offices, and programmes; the impact of communication writings on development thinking and strategic plans; and the power and influence of communication units and programmes among development agencies.

Ironically, despite the fact that numerous commentators have used 'information/network/media' and other ideas that denote 'communication' to characterise our global society, plus the astronomical amounts that governments and corporations regularly spend on advertising/public relations and other activities that fall within the conventional boundaries of 'communication', communication professionals are hardly in the driver's seat of development programmes.

The fact that communication jobs and plans are prime candidates to be scrapped when the axe falls on budgets or that programmes generally earmark very modest funding for communication activities suggest that the 'development industry' still needs to be convinced that 'communication' in its different meanings is a distinctive and central characteristic of the contemporary world or has much to contribute to improve the lives of people around the world.

With the exception of those who work on development programmes with specific communication goals, the majority of communication professionals work in institutions that aim to reach goals in other areas (e.g. reducing the number of malaria cases, passing environmental legislation, augmenting the percentage of girls who attend schools). Arguments that offer variations of the ambitious conclusion that 'development cannot be reached without communication' may have an important point to make, but such a glib formulation is hardly sufficient to make an impact. It ignores the fact that the large majority of development institutions have non-communication goals. The success of programmes is measured on the basis of whether they reach health, educational, political, and economic objectives, among others.

The professional background of officials who set development goals and design strategies also affects the place of communication. Because economists, physicians, engineers, and public health specialists are typically at the helm of programmes, their knowledge and beliefs determine expectations about communication. At best, many colleagues hold a favourable conception and assign communication the task of supporting the achievement of programmatic goals. We may question such an instrumentalist approach, but we cannot afford to ignore it.

Why is communication central?

The challenge is not only to modify such conceptions but also to demonstrate why communication is central to achieve any development goal. Are we willing to argue that development (no matter how it is defined) cannot be achieved without a broad conception of communication? How do we show effectively that past development programmes have succeeded or failed because they have either adequately or inadequately incorporated communication ideas and strategies? This is, I believe, one of the most important and pending challenges: to turn communication into a well-understood and respected field of theory and practice that makes unique and solid contributions to development programmes.

To meet this challenge, we need to expand the terms of the debate in our field, and get involved in discussions where key decisions about development programmes are made. The same way we need to understand immunisation experts in order to think about communication aspects of vaccination programmes or need to be conversant with farming experts to help us think about the linkages between communication and land productivity, we also need to make evidence-based, solid arguments to convince our colleagues why development programmes won't achieve goals if communication is ignored or misconstrued. This challenge demands documenting actual results, using language that is understood outside communication circles, and communicating the contributions of research methodologies and strategies of communication to other publics.

However, it is illusive to think that submitting solid arguments about the contributions of communication would be enough to gain fair recognition and secure a legitimate place. It is not only about the evidence that our colleagues keep demanding (although we need to admit that we haven't always been successful at addressing such perennial requests or provided necessary proof for why communication investments make a difference). It is more complex than offering evidence beyond reasonable doubt.

The place of communication also depends on institutional dynamics and power hierarchies inside governments, donors, multilateral and bilateral organisations, and non-government organisations. Institutional cultures and mandates largely explain why communication has been locked in certain boxes. Our reluctance to engage with this challenge explains why we are still locked.

If we don't confront this challenge, communication will continue to suffer from widespread misperceptions outside our professional and disciplinary boundaries. Without defining and communicating the unique contributions of communication to key decision-makers, the field will continue to have tremendous potential, but it will likely remain a well-kept secret among us or simply, misunderstood and relegated to a secondary role.

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