

TOWARDS GLOBAL COGNITIVE JUSTICE? EXPLORING THE CRISIS OF DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION FROM BELOW

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ARTICLE

In this paper, I propose a critical analytical perspective to assess the nature of the current crisis of development from a communication perspective. What is the nature of the development crisis, and what is the role of communication in solving problems of development?

To assess this, allow me first to introduce the field of communication for development and social change. This area of both research and practice is about ways we use communication strategically to articulate social change processes. Traditionally, it is tied closely to international development cooperation. The practice of communication for development and social change is usually the work carried out by large UN agencies, NGOs, governments and other institutions that work in international development cooperation. However, these key actors, and the way they have worked with communication, have been challenged in recent years by the way social movements have mobilised, communicated and thereby responded to development issues.

I have dealt in depth with these challenges to the thinking and practice around communication and social change in the book *Communication and Social Change – A Citizen Perspective* (Tufte, 2017a). There I revisit the epistemological and ontological approaches to communication and social change, making a call for a new social thought where agency, processes of empowerment and collective action are guiding principles. At the heart of this critical review of communication and social change lies a need to clarify how to understand social change. A critical stance towards the ethnocentrism often implicit in dominant discourses of development and social change is also necessary. As many recent social uprisings are evidence of, social change is a non-linear, complex and often contested process. Recognising the complex relation between media use and social change processes is implicit in this critical analytical approach.

Global Cognitive Justice and “The Epistemologies of the South”

The current crisis of development is fundamentally a crisis of participation and inclusion. A big problem is the deep-felt experience of not having any influence on the decisions that affect one's own life. In many recent social uprisings, the experience of exclusion and injustice has been massive, and the feeling of inability to lead a decent life let alone have influence on the direction of one's own life is widespread.

The unresolved conflicts and development challenges speak to fundamental shortcomings in today's dominant economic growth-oriented and market-driven model of development. It is fundamentally a crisis of participation and inclusion, yes, but it is also a crisis of communication, of the right for all to communicate, to voice their concerns and, not least, to be listened to by decision-makers.

Catering to this crisis of development, the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has developed an ambitious project to formulate what he calls an "epistemology of the South". It is a social science project, which criticises the dominant discourse in modern science and suggests alternative epistemological pathways. Santos' ideas are rooted in a claim for global cognitive justice within which he again frames "a subaltern insurgent cosmopolitanism" (Santos, 2014: 134). By this he refers to "the aspiration of oppressed groups to organize their resistance and consolidate political coalitions on the same scale as the one used by the oppressors to victimize them, that is, at global scale" (Santos, 2014: 135).

In elaborating the epistemological foundations of the subaltern, Santos develops an "epistemology of seeing"; contrasting it with what he calls the dominant "epistemology of blindness". The blindness he refers to is a blindness to all the absences, needs and injustices of marginalised groups in society. The epistemology of blindness, Santos argues, is what has led to the historical process whereby a particular form of knowledge has come to dominate. He calls it "knowledge-as-regulation". It has come to dominate "knowledge-as-emancipation".

Santos' proposition for a knowledge-as-emancipation entails an understanding of the emancipatory as a common sense project that is "constructed so as to be appropriated in a privileged way by oppressed, marginalized, or excluded social groups and actually strengthened by their emancipatory practice" (Santos, 2014: 159). Here we are at the heart of Santos' epistemological proposal. It offers a conceptual foundation for a social and political practice where the citizen is listened to and engaged in knowledge production.

Central to his approach is the acknowledgement of other forms of knowledge, such as lay, popular, urban, peasant, indigenous, women's or religious knowledge. However, to allow these forms of knowledge to develop requires the right to communicate, to speak out and to be listened to.

So, if we translate this knowledge-as-emancipation and "epistemology of seeing" into an approach and practice in communication, the core challenge lies in enhancing communication practices whereby these other forms of knowledge and experience are articulated, made visible and have an impact on the processes of decision-making and social change.

The crisis of development cannot be reduced to technical questions about how best to craft communication interventions. Governments, transnational agencies, NGOs and social movements today all face the challenge of reversing negative spirals of social change. This also puts a strain upon the kind of research that is pursued and supported and has pushed research even more towards "administrative research" and generating evidence of impact and the like.

Therefore, if we wish to argue for an epistemology of seeing reflected in social research and in communicative practice, two principles stand out.

First, the emphasis on a “non-media-centric agenda” oriented towards understanding communication practices in everyday life and sensitive to the structural determinants that influence these practices. A non-representational communication model views communication as social practice. The relation between communication and social change is then less about media representations and more about social actions. It orients the focus of the practice of communication towards a broader social agenda where the actual communicative practice becomes an empowering experience, a transformative experience in itself.


The second principle is to view media uses and appropriations as active sense-making processes. Although not all sense-making activity is about citizen engagement, an active sense-making approach can enhance the right and opportunity for all to communicate. It entails citizen-driven social change processes as emerging from the development of localised knowledge bases, information systems and communication practices.

To illustrate some of the aforementioned perspective, we can look at the social uprisings we saw around the world, from Iran in 2009 up until today, presenting and discussing them as examples of communication from below. They are strong and evident indicators of, and communicative responses to, the development crisis. Examples include the so-called Arab Springs, the Indignados movement or the Occupy movement, mainly in New York (see, for example, Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; or Kavada, 2014). Other examples are Brazil's Vinegar revolution (Cammaerts & Jiménez-Martínez, 2014), Istanbul's Gezi Park movement (Tufte, 2017b) and South Africa's RhodesMustFall movement (Mpofu, 2017). These uprisings all constituted struggles for social justice. They revealed visions of another society and came to illustrate a form of communication for social change very different from many of the practices seen in the established field of international development cooperation.

Communicative Opportunities in Contexts of Risk

The waves of social uprisings and unfolding social movements have revealed many new dynamics and forms of communication and social change. However, they occur in a time and context containing risks and pitfalls that are potentially limiting communication from below from unfolding and global cognitive justice from flourishing. Despite the celebratory promises of infinite and dynamic communication practices that would emerge from people's increased access to new social media, we also see the contrary happening. Civil society increasingly complains about the decreasing public space for communication and action (Wagner & Dankova, 2016). We also see increased violation of the human rights of critical journalists, activists, bloggers and others from media and civil society. In other words, the logics and dynamics of communication is unfolding within a political reality that reduces rather than increases the ability both to represent civil society and other stakeholders, and to include them in formulating new development agendas.

This shrinking of public space and exclusion of experience connects with a weakness among many organisations that communicate for change: the lack of will to listen, and, in Santos' spirit,



to work from an epistemology of seeing. Recognising marginalised groups' experiences and emotions, and working to produce knowledge of and insight into these experiences is a shortcoming in many strategic communication interventions. To move beyond an epistemology of blindness requires the construction of spaces that open up opportunities for new social imaginaries to thrive and experiences to be seen.

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