Democratization of Communication: Methodological Consideration for Participatory Researchers

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Abstract
Rethinking participatory communication and its priorities is a necessity, especially as it relates to social change. The conceptualization of participatory communication in development implies questioning the component-approach to communication research which ignores the synergistic interaction among participatory communicators, message, strategy and beneficiaries. Inspite, of the best efforts of independent practitioners, governmental and nongovernmental agencies in the context of participatory communication, the required change that was expected is not demonstrably evident. This research explores how democracy can be brought into the relationship between participatory communicators and the target-beneficiaries. It attempts to present modus for incorporating genuine collaborative mutualism into the design of participatory communication so that the intended social change can be achieved. The research posits that for the potency of every participatory research, there is need to democratize the process by giving power to the beneficiaries from project formation stage to implementation stage. It concludes that participatory communicators should shun token involvement of project beneficiaries and democratize the scope, methods and direction of the process for the achievement of the objectives of participatory communication.

Key words: Democratization, Communication, Methodological, Participatory, Social Change

Introduction
Various approaches to research in the field of communication for development have emerged over the years. From the World War II era where modernist approach to research flourished to the emergence of communication research, scholars like, Quebral, White, Servaes, Rogers, Schramm, Freire, Mc Quail and Gumucio have attempted to develop several development models through research meant to arrive at dependable solutions to problems for the improvement of the society. It was the growing interest for a more democratic pattern of communication that 'participatory communication' was coined. Even though development communicators work with the faith that increased communication will lead to development, it is instructive to note that development without fundamental changes in social structures is an impossibility.

There exists a risk in participatory research that discussions never manifest in action. This is because the communication strategies that most practitioners adopt allow them as facilitators to frame how, and why participation will occur, and imply the facilitators as owning resultant research. This is a severe limitation of democracy and ownership in many participatory researches, which prevents the

motivation and collective struggle required for social change. So, it is gratifying that new theoretical thinking and model are emerging. This gives hope that development will be able to move from its obsession with 'modernization' and priorities on economic growth, towards a model which deem critical to the democratization of communication. The role of genuine collaborative mutualism is acknowledged as an unavoidable force for development, and can indeed be a positive one when framed within a culturally sensitive and humanistic focus. This research seeks to fill a critical knowledge gap in the appreciation of genuine participation as the proper means through which social change can be achieved.

Theoretical Moor

This research is hinged on the Congruity theory which was developed by Osgood and Tannenbaum, in 1995 deals with the problem of direction of attitude change towards both the source and the goal object. The congruity theory predicts change in attitude, the direction of attitude, as well as the amount of that change. Congruity is a state of balance of an individual's cognition. It is when a person's evaluation of a communication source and his evaluation of the source's message are similar. Incongruity, on the other hand, exists when there is difference in the cognitions held at a particular time.

The fundamental axiom of the theory is that when there is incongruity (i.e. when two cognitions disagree) an individual will feel motivated to change his attitude balance to restore congruity through a proportional change in each cognition. This means when a message results in internal inconsistency, the receiver is likely to change the attitude towards both the source and the message, not just to one of them. The principle of the theory states that when two attitude objects of different evaluation are linked with an assertion, there is a tendency for evaluation of each object to be similar or shifts towards a point of equilibrium or congruity. As such, if an individual is confronted with an assertion by a communication source regarding a particular matter which he/she believes, there is the tendency for evaluation of one or both of them to change so that the evaluations of the two objects are similar.

The congruity theory states that the evaluation (attitude) of the source changes along with the attitude (evaluation) towards the object of the assertion. The theory predicts that the higher the evaluative rating of a source, the greater the change of attitude towards the object of the assertion. Hence, the congruity theory links attitude change to the evaluation an individual has for the source of a message. If the source makes assertion, the receiver will change his evaluation of both the source and the assertion, either positively or negatively. Osgood and Tannenbaum's congruity theory is suitable for this research as it could be deduced that it places the source and the receiver in an equalitarian relation, inherently shifting source and receiver roles, i.e., dialogic communication transactions. This is a necessary component of democratization of communication.

Concept of Democratization of Communication

There are two major approaches to democratization of communication which almost every communicator today accepts as common sense. The first is the dialogical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970, 1983, 1994) and the second involves the ideas of access, participation and self- management articulated in the UNESCO debates of the 1970s (Berrigan 1991, p.19). Every communication project which calls itself participatory accepts these principles of democratic communication. Nonetheless, there exist today a wide variety of practical experiences and intentions. Before moving on to explore these approaches, it is useful to take a cursory look at the concept of democratization of communication.

In as much as it is difficult to pick a point in history when the concept was first used, the MacBride Report of 1980 entitled "Many Voices, One World" has been widely credited for popularizing and assigning legitimacy to the concept (White, 1980, p.253). The report, which was sponsored by UNESCO, perceived communication as a basic individual and collective right. It also stressed the need

for the decentralization of the media to allow for more participation and the accentuation of the needs and rights of the minorities.

Democratization of communication, therefore, simply refers to the wider process of redistributing social power and influence within a given society and the enforcement of more participatory communication across the length and breadth of any given society (White 1980, p. 233). As White (1980, p.234) puts it, democratization of communication involves:

> The studies of concentration of economic control over the press and other media; analysis of dominant ideologies in news, drama, and other programming; the unfavourable presentation of minorities and other less powerful groups in the media; the many studies of forms of cultural imperialism and multinational control of media products.

In the context of development work, this communication perspective of democratization is that of an interactive process characterized by the exchange of ideas, information, points of view and experiences between persons and groups. It is a two-way transactional process. The communicating partners are equal - two participants jointly arrive at a course of action. The uniqueness of this approach is that apart from revealing alternative ways of designing for grassroots, it also uncovers strategies and materials to enable people to create their own messages. They are enabled to voice their own perceptions of community needs, use local knowledge, open opportunities, define problems and seek their own solutions, confronting related communication issues as they arise.

The Major Approaches to Democratization of Communication

Two approaches where mentioned in the introduction – dialogical pedagogy and the ideas of access, participation and self-management. These two approaches we are going to focus on here have common ground and it will be interesting to accentuate it. The Freirean argument works by a dual theoretical strategy. Freire insists that subjugated people must be treated as fully human subjects in any political process. This implies dialogical communication and action. Although inspired to some extent by Sartre's existentialism – a respect for the autonomous personhood of each human being, the more important source is a theology that demands respect for otherness – in this case that of another human being. The second strategy is a moment of Utopian hope derived from the early Marx that the human species have a destination which is more than a fulfilment of material needs. Also, from Marx is an insistence on collective solutions. Individual opportunity, Freire (1990 p.94) stresses, "is no solution to general situations of poverty and cultural subjugation".

Since the theory of dialogic communication is based on group dialogue which is core to action research rather than such amplifying media as radio, print and television, we will quickly look at communication as a dialogue or a social process. This does not mean that the UNESCO discourse is by any means inferior. The assumed bias is strictly connected to the fact that the combination of both will not be suitable for understanding the democratization process in "collective" participation.

Communication as a Dialogue

This approach views communication as a continuous dialogic relationship which may arise through group interaction situation which could be among villagers, social groups mobilizing for development or even social scientists working with the NGOs. However, for the evaluation of the degree of democracy in a dialogue aimed at democratizing work, Gustervsen & Hunnius (1995, p.59) proposed nine criteria;

    i.   Process of exchange: points and arguments move to and from between participants
    ii.   All involved must have the possibility to participate
    iii.   All participants must be active in the discourse
    iv.   All participants are equal
    v.   Work experience is the foundation for participation
    vi.   Experience of participants as he or she joins the dialogue must be considered legitimate
    vii.   Every participant must be able to develop an understanding of the issues at stake.

viii.   All arguments with regards to issues under discussion are legitimate.

ix.   Dialogue must continuously produce agreements that can provide platform for investigation and practical action.

Meanwhile, these criteria may however reflect particular cultural context and may not necessarily apply in the other. For instance, while direct questioning and open dialogue obtains in the western world, it is ignored in many sub-Saharan African countries. Here also 'experimentation and mistakes are often regarded as conveying unacceptable risk" (Fernandez, as cited in Maclure & Bassey 2001, p.202). Hence, it is obvious significance to raise issues of what forms of participation under what context promotes emancipatory communications and how do these patterns differ in different cultural contexts.

Benefits of the Dialogic Communication Approach

In view of the role which group dialogue plays in the overall democratization of communication, the following are considered as its benefits:

i.   The approach departs from the functionalist method that begins with the scientist's selection of its own model of societal organization down to reaching conclusions based on the pre-selected model. Instead, it places emphasis on the subjective and dynamic realities of the people that the researcher comes into contact with during the research.

ii.   The approach through discussion sessions, encourages participants to believe that individuals have the capacity for reflection, for conceptualizing, for critical thinking, for making decisions, for planning and social change.

iii.   It enables participants to embrace positive attitudes through dialectical and emancipatory process of action and reflection that constitutes the process of conscientization. If people are active in decisions affecting them, they are more likely to adopt new ways.

iv.   Through collaborative reflection, participants would understand that human beings have an innate ability to create knowledge. Emphasis on historical analysis reinforces the fact that no society is without a history, and people's history plays a significant role in shaping their lives and outlook on life.

v.   It reveals the fact that It is not merely awareness, however, that is important, but its relationship to a project of social transformation, whereby consciousness and action on consciousness are dialectically linked.

vi.   The approach, by its exposition of the gains inherent in participatory communication, also reveals how detached from reality idealistic models of communication research are; and how such models are inadequate in addressing the grievances and needs of those at the periphery of the society and the society as a whole.

Whatever name it carries, participatory research, collaborative enquiry, contextual action research, emancipatory research, participatory learning and action, community driven development, participatory rural communication and so on, and whatever form it now takes, users are cautioned against deviation from its underlying principles of participation and collaboration.

Problem Areas for Participatory Researchers

Inspite of the foregoing benefits of participatory methodologies in communication, there are still issues that deserve to be interrogated for clarity and probity. Let us look at them in turn:

One of the major problems participatory researchers face is that much of their policy-related research begins with the implied premise that the mere designing of a set of coherent rational policy and attaching to them both political and economic backing, is sufficient for the effective implementation of the said objectives. Based on this false premise, such research endeavours do not take into cognizance the fact that groups and institutions of participatory communication emanate from movements, and these movements do not rise from a vacuum but from the structural and historical contexts of a people.

A second problem is found in the development of communication theory itself – a development that is overly concerned with providing an explanation of the influence and consequence of mass communication, without paying much attention to explaining the factors of social change that bring about the process of democratization (White 1980, p.231). There is virtually little comparative analysis of the manner in which the democratization process occurs.

Thirdly, in the event that some researchers pay attention to the social change involved in the democratization process, they are too utopian in the model they proffer. This is particularly evident in their agitation for a revolutionary change which is greatly faster than what the reality of the social process allows (Ogbonna 2004, p.27). The reality points to the fact that democratization of communication does not occur at a neck-breaking speed but at a slow pace, which involves careful and steady negotiation with reality.

Fourthly, it is no longer news, that a good number of participatory research projects still adopt the conventional stratagem. This stratagem involves getting research experts that are external to the community being investigated and commissioning them to gather and evaluate information on the target community and forwarding a written report with conclusion and recommendations to external investigations. This strategy downplays not only the fact that the community members are also active participants but also the important role that they should play for participatory communication to be effective. More so, it is not every researcher that is the initiator or funder of the projects they are involved in and they are often constrained by the specifications of the initiator(s) or funder(s).

Lastly, researchers, many of whom are confined to the walls of educational institutions or research institutes, are often removed from the real-life situations of popular communication movements and do not have a first-hand experience of the reality of the actors in the movement (Okwori 2005, p.23). On this basis, researchers often do not share the profound commitment and passion typical of the actors of the movements themselves. Oftentimes, some of the researchers perceive a call to research as just another contract to accept and finish as rapidly as possible with shallow survey.

Adapting Communication Research to Strategies of Social Change

The adaptation of communication research to social change strategies is important for the democratization of communication. However, there are some limitations that communication researchers face in their research efforts. Here are some key limitations which are briefly explained below:

i.   Perceptual differences among researchers and community members: False perception can create a lacuna in communication. Perception plays a key role in communication; therefore, it is necessary to ensure that the researchers and the community do not have varying perceptions of the issues or problems that they are trying to resolve. The problem with unearthing rural people's perceptions and local knowledge lies in the fact that most of these communities have developed ways of hiding their true feelings and information from outsiders. Ascroft (1998, p.11) called this ability of rural people to treat outsiders nicely without revealing themselves, 'the conspiracy of courtesy'. Researchers should not go into a community making assumptions and judgments about the people and their situation.

ii.   Theoretical limitations in the critical research tradition: This limitation stems from researcher's overreliance on theoretical frameworks and utopian models to the detriment of the practical day-to-day realities of the communities being researched. Such research gives little information on the cause or the occurrence of the process of social change, just as it also pays a little attention to the peculiarity of the context from which such a change has emanated. Using the monolithic model of societal organization, it does not consider the revolutionary tendencies of the masses toward the distribution of social power and resources within their society. A dialectical model of societal organization that takes these tendencies into consideration is a more appropriate model for evaluating societal organization.

iii.   Inadequate frame works for comparative analysis: In an attempt to adapt communication research to the realities of the people, it is valuable to have a systematic framework on which to do a comparative analysis of the peculiarities and diverse needs of the population. Also, this framework is needed to move from the level of mere isolated and idealistic experiments conducted in different pockets of the society to the level of an integration of the experiments into the national framework of communication. This new framework will be better placed to make room for the participation of everybody and also cater for every facet of the society.

iv.   Definition of research objectives and procedures: Inasmuch as researchers possess some technical expertise to collect and analyze data, they have to bear in mind that research is not just a conglomeration of theories and systematic methodologies. Hence, in deciding on the research objectives and procedures, the community has to be put into consideration. In fact, the objectives do not have to evolve from baseline studies of the audience's existential realities.

v.   The relationship between the researcher and the host group: Any research that does not adopt a symbiotic relationship between the researcher and the host group is most likely not going to be effective as it will not be able to capture the intricate and convert experiences of people. This is more so if the researcher enters a community knowing that they too are learning a dialogical fashion espoused by Paulo Freire's pedagogy, they will be better placed to translate their technical expertise into goals that suit the community (Freire 1990, p.81)

vi.   The understanding of Professional research organization and research centres: In many cases, research centres and organizations have put their myopic and preconceived agendas before the interests and needs of the audience they seek to research. For instance, the pace and timeline of the research they conduct is long determined before the project even begins. The pace and duration of projects should not be determined by the terms of the timing of a contact but by the rhythm and steady progress of audience itself. Communication researchers certainly need to stay in the community as long as the people do not see it as an inconvenience.

Conclusion

Information need to be provided on all sector of the society. But more than just the mere provision of information is the need for the information to be relevant to the development of the society. In the same vein, the accessibility of the information to every member of the society is significant for participation in communication to occur and for the holistic development of the society. Thus, the rural people should be given the privilege that will enable them to articulate their opinions and perceptions, identify and prioritize their problems and needs to improve their livelihood in a sustainable manner. It is not enough to pool the inputs of grassroots into an information reservoir. Their inputs need to be considered and integrated into the fabric of communication policies and development initiatives of any government or intervention group. Rather than indoctrinate the masses with a preconceived idea of participatory communication, whereby the masses are only meant to be a clean slate onto which the ideas of external interventionists are dumped, we need to adopt a liberating philosophy typical of Freirean pedagogy, whereby the masses are not perceived as passive entities but as active agents of change.

To say the least, researchers are indeed valuable to the process of democratization of communication. However, they must not pay lip service to the project they are embarking on by dictating to audience their personal ideas and trying to force the audience and their realities into an already – made research frame work. At the same time, it is important for researchers not to see themselves as facilitators and co-participants with the audience in research. Also, researchers need to view research as a learning process both for the audience and themselves. This learning process may lead them to the realization that the masses are themselves protagonists of the social change which the researchers are investigating.

It is germane to remember that participatory research is not just a fixed hodgepodge of theories and abstractions of objectives but a dynamic process that involves a marriage of both theories and praxis, and takes into consideration the existential realities and participatory inputs of the target audience. Inasmuch as the researcher possesses technical expertise to analyse a given societal organization, it has to be noted that the target communities themselves are not a bunch of ignoramuses but are in fact protagonists of social change from which researchers can also learn valuable experiences that can lead to a more thorough and representational research outcome. Such an outcome can lead to holistic communication and development in the society. Finally, researchers need to make conscious efforts to extricate themselves from any prejudicial agenda that external interventionists may have interwoven into the research script presented to them.

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