

**Teaching Enabling Theory for Journalistic, Strategic and Dialogic Communication  
Practice to Address Social Justice Issues**

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### **Abstract**

The use of communication to address global issues of social justice has grown considerably fueled by international donors. Practice is dominated by the liberal modernization paradigm--individual level, behavior change models, and includes the ideals of indigenous participation only modestly and of dialogic communication rarely, the latter ‘failing’ largely ascribed to the difficulty of sparking and sustaining organic communication. The imperative of a “marketplace of social change” may be partly responsible for this. It is driven by demands for rapid, measurable results, its decision makers are not always cognizant of the importance of communication, its funding has lead to innumerable non-government organizations in the developing world which may have content expertise but not communication expertise, and so on.

Journalism is often part of these communication for social change efforts but it too predominantly follows the liberal model even when it deals with a development issue such as health or the environment. Often activist journalism--to highlight peace, to engage the public, to put community first--gets put on the back burner. The “ideal” status accorded to the liberal model of journalism that has been exported to the developing world is partly responsible for this.

While communication for social change education includes the diffusionist theories, it also gives considerable play to the participatory and dialogic theories, which are held up as the ideal in face of dominant practice of the diffusionist model adjusted today in some degree for participation and dialogue.

On the other hand, journalism education gives play mostly to the liberal model, but in developing countries also includes development journalism.

Essentially, the paper advocates the teaching of a wide spectrum of theories of journalistic, strategic and dialogic communication so that journalists and social change communicators are aware of the critical roles they play in their societies, do not have to be pigeon-holed into a particular journalistic identity or a particular communication for social change practice, and can be hybrid agents of change. Further, the paper advances the idea of teaching the theories “translationally” so that students see how practical

theories can be. The teaching of “enabling theory” is likely to lessen resistance to theory and improve practice.

The paper also advocates for more programs strategic and dialogic communication in the developing world, because training is falling far short of the demand for it in face of mushrooming NGOs.

## **Teaching Enabling Theory for Journalistic, Strategic and Dialogic Communication Practice to Address Social Justice Issues**

### **Purpose of this Paper**

Journalism education has seen an increasing amount of attention focused on it in the recent past, specially in the developing world as it deals with questions of indigenization of curricula to suit local needs and contexts. Two major globally focused documents on journalism education have been released recently (WJEC, 2007; UNESCO, 2007). These (and other) documents on journalism education do not position journalism as an agent of social change to address social justice issues. Additionally, because these curricular proposals deal with journalism, i.e., news, they do not discuss a communication for social change education.

The focus of this paper is on journalism and communication curricula that address social justice issues, such as poverty, disease, and the environment, many of which are embodied in the millennium development goals of the United Nations. The social change perspective is the rationale for the inclusions and exclusions in this paper; the “imperative of transformation” guides the inclusion in this paper of thoughts about and curricular suggestions for both journalism and strategic/dialogic communication for social change.

The discussion of journalism for social change in this paper is focused on major, mainstream media. Alternative media or citizen’s media (Rodriguez, 2000), funded by donors or community, already address social justice issues, by bridging journalism and communication for social change, i.e., by providing both journalism style news about the latest information and strategic messages/dialogue created by communication for social change efforts.

Essentially, the paper advocates the teaching of a wide spectrum of theories of journalistic, strategic and dialogic communication to raise students' consciousness of their communicative roles, giving due play to indigenous thought. More centrally, the paper suggests that theory be taught "translationally," focusing on specific guidance in employing these theories in the practice of communication, so that graduates can "practice theory." Thus the paper's basic premise is that "enabling theory" should be a part of the journalism and social change communication curriculum.

### **The Theory-Skills Debate**

In the United States, debates between journalists and academics have long raged on whether theory is an integral part of preparing journalists.<sup>1</sup> This divide is sometimes characterized as "liberal arts versus skills" training and, at other times, in a description more relevant to this paper, as "liberal arts/skills versus journalism/communication theory-based education" (Dickson, 2000).

Scholar-educators generally argue for the inclusion of theory so that universities graduate reflective students (Deuze, 2001) who engage in critical thinking about their profession, through understanding its effects and its biases. Glasser (2006) has said that journalism studies is the distinctive contribution that a university can make to the education of a journalist.

Theory courses would make students aware of the possible impact (positive and negative) that their stories could have—how the media sets the agenda and possibly influences cognitions, affections and behavior. Courses in media literacy, media sociology, and critical studies would reveal to the students the spectrum of influences on

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<sup>1</sup>To some extent, this debate is enveloped in the larger debate on the role of a university education for journalists. See, for example, Nolan (2008).

their profession from the power-based ideological to personal beliefs, engaging students in discussions of the illusory nature of objectivity. According to Garman (2005), unless the “uses of power are made overt within curricula, students will continue to assume that it is natural to emulate certain practices and that the moral discourse aligned with such practices is not to be questioned” (p. 207; also see, Fourie, 2005). At the same time, a theory-alone curriculum is open to the criticism, particularly from industry, of graduating students ill-prepared for their jobs.

While the theory debate continues in the United States, in the developing world, journalism education was and to some extent continues to be largely composed of theory and descriptive skills courses, the latter now accompanied to a degree by practical skills training. The limitation in the teaching of theory is that it is mostly mass communication effects theory, though some theory deriving from media sociology is now added to the curriculum.

While journalism education, with or without theory or in some combination of theory, descriptive skills and skills practice, is now widely available, there is a dearth of education in communication to make social change (Kunczik, 1988). Many college and university level programs in the developing world pay lip service to this education by including a single course on development communication; a few others provide a fully developed curriculum. The teaching of theory is included in this course of study, so a case does not need to be made for theory. Instead, it is possible that the skills training in communication for social change may be insufficient. The single courses are often theory only; the few complete programs include some “production” as well as research skills courses.

## **Which Theory?**

The question that arises within the context of journalism/communication education in the developing world is: which theory? This question arises because theories of journalism and communication for social change have been and continue to be imported from western countries, and particularly from the United States. Their perpetuation is aided, among other things, by western donor aid and the importation of western resource material such as books (Scotton & Murphy, 1987; Morrison, 1997; Ogundimu, 1997; Napoli, 2002; Beltran, 1976). Thus notions of journalism and social change communication education derive from the liberal model, which focuses on the individual's freedom to choose and does not take into consideration structural constraints.

Calls for dewesternizing journalism studies and journalism curricula abound, many coming from Africa scholars (Banda, et al., 2007, Domatob, 1987; Moge kwu, 2005; Mano, 2009, for example) but also from others (Gaunt, 1992). It is believed that the western model of journalism does not give play to the indigenous need for development (Megwa, 2001). In developing an aspirational curriculum in face of an autocratic monarchy, crafters of a journalism curriculum in Swaziland have included social justice as a key element of the program (Rooney, 2007). Thus, journalism theories that attend to societal issues are more relevant to a journalism education in the developing world and should be included in the curricula. With the exception of a largely theory-based development journalism course (for Africa, see Wimmer & Wolf, 2005), neither the discussions nor the curricula include other journalism philosophies.

Calls for dewesternizing communication for social change education have also been frequent (Beltran, 1976) for similar reasons: western theories do not consider

indigenous conditions and modes of thought. Thus in academic discussion there is a certain rejection of the western, diffusionist, top-down theories; instead participatory and dialogic communication for social change theories are advocated. Further, much discussion centers on the gap between what is held up as the ideal by some academics—dialogic/participatory—and what is common practice in the field—diffusionist and hybrid models. Because education in social change communication is largely theory-based, it rather comprehensively includes these theories and the debate over them, but there is a caveat.

The diffusionist, participatory and dialogic theories are taught more as paradigms of social change and are rarely broken down into individual theories that may comprise these paradigms. Such theories are particularly available for the diffusionist paradigm; they include social marketing and behavior change theories such as stages of change and theory of reasoned action. While these theories are extensively used by academics in their research, in education they have become the province of short-term, donor-funded training programs.

A case has already been made for including media effects and media sociology theory within a journalism education, and media effects theories and increasingly media sociology theories are included in developing world programs. So the remaining discussion on journalism education in this paper will focus on journalism theories and teaching them to enable practice.

For communication for social change, because inclusion of theory (diffusionist and strategic/participatory) is not an issue, and the debate focuses on the ideal versus the actual, the focus in the remaining discussion on this education will be on the hybrid



models and the teaching of specific individual level change theories to work in consort with theories of participation and dialogue.

### **Journalism as an Agent of Social Justice: practice and education**

Because the dominant discourse about journalism has emanated from the liberal paradigm, the dominant discourse about journalism education is similarly limited. Schools in developing countries, aided by international donors, have added courses or entire programs in environmental journalism, health journalism, and so on. These journalisms are not informed by philosophies different from the dominant liberal model on which the libertarian theory of the press is based, but are applications of the same philosophy for a particular content. Thus while environmental journalism and health journalism may focus on specific content of importance to social justice, their practice could very well follow the conventions of dominant news practices—consonance, hot spot reporting, elite sources, western viewpoints, and such. Such civic advocacy journalisms, which also include attempts by non-governmental organizations and social movements to get their stories told to further social justice goals, stay within the norms of mainstream media not making any breakthroughs with regard to news conventions Waisbord (2009).

As Josephi (2009) says, future discussion of journalism education needs to consider a broader range of journalisms. Such a range of journalisms is available, most of them departing from the liberal model to the socially responsible model. But the socially responsible role, often embodied in the development journalism philosophy, is not without controversy. Western journalists consider the idea of development journalism reprehensible because they believe it is an excuse for government control of the press

(Sussman, 1981). Some scholars and journalists disagree.<sup>2</sup> They believe either that development journalism only means raising the profile of social justice issues in news coverage with the same balanced, and may be even critical, gaze (Aggarwala, 1977), or that activism for social causes falls within the legitimate domain of journalism. In face of accusations of compromising on journalistic objectivity, they argue that objectivity is a myth and that even the most libertarian practice of journalism is prey to bias due to ideological, extra- and intra- organization, and personal influences through a mix of policy and routines of journalistic practice (as outlined by Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

In fact, Hamelink (1983), as cited in Kunczik (1988), has suggested that development journalism requires a complete deprofessionalization of media so that the media are no longer manipulated and ordinary citizens perceive their participation as a public service. The framework of professionalism “makes invisible the practices of induction into a particular community of meaning-making, pretending that journalists are simply stenographers of a passing reality rather than producers of a cultural product called journalism” (Garman, 2005, p. 206).

In the United States, alternative press philosophies have been proposed not so much as a way to address social justice issues, though poor representation in the media of marginalized publics was one reason behind the social responsibility press theory, but in the service of democracy. Both the social responsibility theory, based on ownership/state-press relationship, and the functionally-based public/civic journalism theory (Rosen, 1994; Lambeth, et al., 1998) met with considerable resistance, the former not really seeing any implementation of its ideas (Lloyd, 1991; Merrill, 1996), the latter having a

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<sup>2</sup>Banda (undated) says that if development journalism transcends both its statist and market propensities (deriving from its association with modernization), and focuses more on a participatory-communicative journalistic practice, it will be emancipatory practice.

little more success in actual practice. Others have suggested peace (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Pauli, 2005) and communitarian journalism (Black, 1997; Christians, 2004), both of which have also been criticized (Hanitzsch, 2007; Barney, 1996). Still others have discussed critical journalism (Jones, 2005), socio-technological development journalism (Kunczik, 1988), and empathy journalism.<sup>3</sup>

Most of these journalisms do not have a universal definition (see for example the definitions of public journalism in Friedland, Sotirovic and Daily, 1998, and Merritt, 2002). Thus, in extreme definitions these journalisms may be seen as advocacy journalism—advocating for peace, supporting government development projects/social change, advocating for community interests, etc., or as engagement journalism—having journalists engage in community and country for their betterment and then reporting on them. In their less extreme definitions, they suggest a journalism that engages citizens in the governance of their country but also in its social growth, that redefines news values and adjusts its professional practices so that stories are told in alternative ways rather than from the mainstream news paradigm alone, that gives salience to social justice issues rather than only to political, economic, entertainment and sports news.<sup>4</sup> Thus community and society hold a central place in these theories.

Hanitzch's (2007) criticism of peace journalism is that a journalism of excellence subsumes it. A journalism of excellence, within the libertarian model, might accomplish some of the goals of these different journalisms, but to the extent these journalisms include communitarian values, mention morality, and discuss solidarity and empathy with the less fortunate, they go beyond the limits mainstream libertarian journalism prescribes

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<sup>3</sup>Northwestern University's School of Journalism offers a course in Empathy Journalism.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph (2005) discusses journalism's inclusiveness and exclusiveness in its award of the title of journalism to political news but its reluctance in defining sports or magazine writing as journalism.

for itself. Hochheimer (2001), for example, suggests a journalism of meaning, a journalism from within rather than without, a journalism that is dialogic and connects with its community and includes unity and spirituality. This journalism of transformation, where journalism may be both the site and the instrument of transformation, has the goal to fully develop a democratic society and this includes redress of inequalities, reflecting the country's demographics, and championing the cause of the marginalized (Wasserman, 2005). This interventionist "ethnographic" journalism "would lead journalists to refuse passively accepting human misery" (Wasserman, 2005, p. 170).<sup>5</sup>

Practicing journalists are not totally unaware of pluralism, and in fact surveys have found that most journalists in the developing world negotiate apparent role contradictions and allow the coexistence in their professional roles of the liberal and development journalist, the pushing of "development through a watchdog position" (Kanyegirire, 2006, p. 172; Ramaprasad, 2001). In fact, Shaw (2009) argues that the watchdog role for journalism has coexisted with the "associational and participatory values" of African journalism since the oral tradition of the griot to this day, the most recent example being during the democratization debate when views critical of the administration coexisted with a journalism of affiliation to ethnic communities.

Kanyegirire (2006) asks, "Is this hybrid agency?" (p. 174).

At the same time, because the normative model of libertarianism is held up as the ideal, journalists around the world predominantly subscribe to it and predominantly place themselves within it even though this may not be what they practice. What is taught as the norm thus colors perceptions of the actual role (Mancini, 2000), blinding not only practitioners but also researchers. According to Josephi (2005), Hallin and Mancini's

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(2004) debunking of the liberal model as norm by proposing three new models allows for future theorizing for the developing world. This theorizing could elevate the legitimacy of those theories of journalism, which may not reject freedom, but which are contextually located, culturally appropriate models that serve social justice. In this contested field of journalism (Berger, 2000), there may coexist several journalistic identities such that journalists are not cubicled into one philosophy but may take the best from all.

The purpose of this paper is not to place a value on these “social” or, as per Kanyegirire (2006), social agenda driven journalisms. Rather, it is to propose that these journalisms, which appear to largely remain within the scholarly literature of academics, receive wider circulation, that they be included in journalism curricula so that journalists in training leave school knowing, even if not agreeing, that others perceive other ways of doing journalism.

### **Strategic and Dialogic Communication as Agents of Social Justice: practice and education**

As in the case of journalism education, the dominant discourse in communication for social change became the dominant discourse for education in communication for social change. Thus the largely western communication for development paradigm, focusing on economic welfare, outside experts, and individual blame for non-development was the standard course material (Rogers, 1978). Examples of models within this paradigm, some influenced by marketing communication, include diffusion of innovations, social marketing and behavior change communication specifically looking to change knowledge, attitude and particularly behavior of individuals through messages disseminated via the mass media.

Unlike the liberal journalism model, which has not lost its “ideal” status, the “diffusionist” paradigm is no longer the pinnacle of social change ideals. This paradigm met with deep criticism within a couple of decades of use because it failed to reap meaningful development (Beltran, 1976). The following criticism by Kupe (2004) is typical: the current media fare is made up of “didactic developmental programmes sponsored by donors or informed by popular culture that resonates with populist concerns, but hardly empowers communities to question social structures and power” (p. 364).

Alternatives were proposed by non-Western scholars and practitioners that are more indigenous and dialogic in nature, focus on well-being rather than well-having, and recognize structural constraints to and the play of power relations in development (Jacobson, 1994; Freire, 2000; Melkote and Steeves, 2001). Their mantra is participatory change rooted in respect for local knowledge and action and recognition of domination. These theories accord a central place to community and society. Examples include participatory theory, conscientization and social movements. These theories soon became standard fare in social change communication education and began to gain the status of the “ideal” in most academic circles if not in practice.

Today attempts are being made to bridge the gap between the diffusionist and participatory approaches to the extent the basic premises of these models allow. The initial diffusionist models while narrow in scope are becoming more multidimensional incorporating institutional and societal change, and more important, participatory/dialogic philosophy. The alternative participatory/dialogic models while laudatory in their strategies and goals are working on practical definitions of participation and dialogue to

enable implementation and measurability. While their practicality and measurability may keep the diffusionist models the dominant practice in the field, as each model is borrowing from the other, more hybrid forms are being used. Thus an increasing hybrid agency, where more and more dialogue and participation combine with information dissemination, may be the immediate future in this field with impetus from communication for social change education, which must also try to include skills and the practice of skills to accompany the education in theory.

But communication for social change education also needs to shore up the teaching of certain theories that come from the diffusionist paradigm but may be adjusted for participation and dialogue. Various individual level change theories are little known and rarely used (in comparison to the number of interventions world wide, big and small) to conduct formative research before planning a communication intervention. These are the theories behind the social marketing and behavior change communication initiatives, and include stages of change and theory of reasoned action. Decades of development of these theories have made them user-friendly. The individual behavior change theories provide practical measurement and analytic tools.

Still, another problem plagues the teaching of communication for social change; not enough attention is given to it despite the tremendous need for people educated in its theory and practice. In highlighting this problem, Gamucio-Dagron (2007) also describes the schism in the field between communication for social change models and the reason for the larger prevalence of the diffusionist, dominant paradigm model in actual practice:

“The current situation of academic studies on information and communication is troublesome. Roughly there are some 2,000 universities offering journalism studies in the world ...; their orientation is towards mass media (press, radio, TV, marketing, advertising, public relations) and not on communication processes. Fewer than 20

academic programmes in the world offer options to train communicators for development and social change, communication strategists, and not just technicians to produce audiovisual or print messages for mass media.

There is in fact a deep gap between development organisations (international aid agencies, NGOs, governments) and the academic world. Though there is a great need for communication professionals specialising in development, universities do not meet the need of training high-level qualified communication strategists. This is why development organisations maintain a conservative and reductive vision of communication, limited—in the best scenario—to dissemination of information through campaigns, and in the worst scenario, conceived as an instrument of visibility and promotion.”

### **The Crossroads**

It is in the arena of social change that journalistic philosophies and communication change theories come face to face. Megwa (2001) invokes the “democratic necessities of participation and development” in his vision for journalism (p. 285). Kupe (2004) writes “It is time that critical debates about media and development are articulated with debates about media and democracy” (p. 364).

Disentangling the roles of journalism and communication in social change is however critical. While some journalistic philosophies advance journalism as an agent of social change, there is a distinction between using journalism for social change and using communication for social change. Social change may be implemented by the power of the well-informed journalistic word and its focus on important social/community issues critical to people’s welfare, which in turn motivate public involvement and action on pressing matters. It may also be implemented by the power of participatory communication for social change that creates change through ownership of the action itself. But the two are different, and they need to be kept distinct in curricula even though their practitioners may interface with each other, and journalism programs may raise journalists’ attention and skills to address social issues and strategic/dialogic



communication programs may raise these communicators' abilities to garner journalistic attention.

### **Considerations in Curriculum Development**

The imperative of transformation, whether articulated in journalistic philosophies or in communication for social change theories, is increasingly positioning community and society at centerpoint. Further, both practice and education are not in complete synchrony with these philosophies and theories for reasons of philosophical disagreement or practicality or even the belief that each theory/model has its own value depending on the circumstance. Given this scenario, this section of the paper provides three considerations for curriculum planners.

The first consideration is the need to infuse theory more systematically in the teaching of journalism and social change communication. A second consideration is that a course in journalistic philosophies and one in social change theories must be offered in both the journalism and social change communication curricula, at the same time keeping the two curriculums separate. While the infusion of theory and the cross-listing of the two courses in journalism and social change communication curricula might guarantee the inculcation in students of indigenous thought, indigeneity is important enough that it be separated out into a third consideration. This “‘decolonizing of the mind’ would entail an intellectual exercise..., which might in the end be a [sic] enriching—even liberating—experience....” (Botha and de Beer, 2006, p. 4).

The journalism theory course must include media content theory (theory of influences on media content and the resulting nature of news as meaning-maker, for example), various theories of journalism (peace journalism, for example), and media

effects theory. The communication for social change theory must include the various paradigms (from the diffusionist to the dialogic) as well as specific individual level behavior change theories (stages of change, for example). Thus, the various journalistic philosophies, despite their controversial nature, as well as the various social change communication theories, despite their debated status, must be part of the education in the two areas respectively.

The courses should cover these theories as proposed over time and across countries. They should cover their historical origins and philosophical underpinnings and their controversies and criticisms. But they should also translate the theories into practical guidelines for application. Many of these theories do provide translational guidance for use in practice. Where this is not available, or if such guidance is insufficient, the courses should attempt to do this. If theory is presented in this manner, as enabling practice, it is more likely to be seen as relevant, to be understood and practiced, and to be evaluated as useful or not. Apart from enabling students to practice their communication, these theories will provide students with a greater critical consciousness of their role in transforming society. Finally, the teaching of “enabling theory” is likely to lessen resistance to theory and improve practice.

## **Conclusions**

The standardization of journalism and communication education may not serve individual societies well. Recognizing the need for allowing indigeneity in the teaching and practice of journalism and social change communication, this paper recommends the inclusion of various theories journalism and social change communication theories that reflect Western liberal as well as alternative thought, and the cross listing of journalistic

philosophies and social change theories courses in the each track while at the same time keeping journalism for social change separate from strategic communication for social change.

This paper also argues that journalism and social change communication education should teach “enabling theory,” i.e., theory that provides specific guidance for practice. When theory is taught experientially, in line with the maxim that there is nothing as practical as a good theory, students are more likely to base their practice on theory.

Finally, this papers strongly and urgently recommends that more communication for social change programs be developed to overcome the scarcity of programs in face of the tremendous need for them.

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