

2009

Introduction to Section II [Making Our Media: Global Initiatives Toward a Democratic Public Sphere (Vol. 1)]

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Recommended Citation

Kidd, D. (2009) Introduction to Section II. In C. Rodríguez, D. Kidd and L. Stein (eds.) *Making Our Media: Global Initiatives Toward a Democratic Public Sphere (Vol. 1)*, (pp. 90-93). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

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SECTION II
Communications
for Social Change Projects

INTRODUCTION TO SECTION II

Dorothy Kidd

All three chapters in this section examine the contribution of community-based media projects to social change in rural communities of the global south, in Zimbabwe, India, and Colombia, respectively. They share a common framework, in which change is linked to *participation*, in all stages of communication, of and by groups that have been historically and persistently marginalized by the mainstream media, national governments, and international development. Participation has become such a commonplace and so plastic, stretched to describe the dynamics of every kind of communication, from those of the alternative and citizens' media to the social networks of the commercial Internet, that it is particularly worth re-examining some of the theoretical and practical distinctions between frameworks and what these chapters can illuminate about the value of popular participation in communication and in social change.

The framework of *participatory communication* and *social change* traces back to the international debates about the democratization of communication of the 1970s and 1980s [see Introduction to this volume]. Although the larger political project of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was defeated at UNESCO, several of its arguments began to echo in the very different quarters of national governments, multilateral institutions, commercial media industries, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and social justice movements. Although each spoke of a common intent to actively involve "people who were the subjects of development in shaping the process," this was where the similarity ended, marking a turn towards "a diversity of differences" and "numerous unresolved disagreements" (Yoon, 2006: 799).

In her 1994 review of women and grassroots communication, Pilar Riaño argued that participatory communication had been mainstreamed. The more powerful state and multilateral institutions took the concept on board because it could provide better ways to engage constituencies to support their programs and to fortify consent. All the major approaches of that period that attracted international funding—diffusion of innovations, social marketing, and entertainment-education—placed a greater emphasis on community input and the use of indigenous communications networks. However, local people were primarily consulted only in the early stages of development project designs and were not involved in defining the problem and the overall goals or in producing the programming (Riaño, 1994:5).

The small-scale media projects championed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements went further in their attempts to deepen the engagement of local people in all stages of communication, from the initial "needs assessment through media production to final evaluation and effectiveness" (Riaño, 1994: 5). Nevertheless, many of these projects failed to account for the multitude of differences of power and control of resources within populations and for the larger structural conditions of "dependency and domination of Third World societies" (Riaño, 1994: 5). Riaño called for moving the debate beyond institutional agendas concerned with state-related policies and towards a practice of democratization rooted in the "active and dynamic interaction of the people,

the social movements, the institutions and the cultural industries" (Riaño, 1994: 3). She argued that the way forward was already being demonstrated by the emerging praxis of women's communication groups, in which the production practice and the programming content derived from the cultural repertoires, knowledges, lived experiences, and felt needs raised from the grassroots.

This is where these accounts come in. All three of the chapters in this section derive from this contest over the meaning and practice of *participatory communication* projects. Chido Matewa describes a series of videos produced by the Women Filmmakers Trust (AWFT) of Zimbabwe from the mid 1990s to the early 2000s. Critical of the exclusion of rural women from pre- and post-Independence development programs, the AWFT set out to remedy this through participatory video. However, they had little prior knowledge or experience. In her self-reflexive account, she notes how this NGO moved away from a top-down model to instead work more closely with local women and men and inventively create production and exhibition practices that emerged directly from local cultural, economic, and political needs and knowledges. Drawing on strong narrative traditions of song and drama, the AWFT collaboratively scripted video dramas that allowed participants to play with different dimensions of a problem and to collectively act out solutions. Based on the needs of particular communities, the AWFT developed a number of different video series that dealt with the entrenched challenges of economic survival and structural adjustment policies, the social and economic discrimination of girls and women, HIV-AIDs, local systems of governance, and pre- and postindependence legacies of violence.

Through a longitudinal study of AWFT's work, the chapter provides a coherent representation of two distinct approaches to participatory media. AFWT shifted from an initial orientation based on the 'epidemiology' approach, which focuses on 'messaging' and in which effectiveness is measured via changes in audience behavior and attitudes (Rodríguez, 2004). Instead, they began to adopt what Rodríguez calls the 'social fabric' approach, facilitating the opening of local communication spaces, which allowed for more complex and multidirectional social interactions (2004). Matewa describes a wide variety of changes in social solidarities and power relations, from the smallest unit of the family to the national political sphere.

Clemencia Rodríguez's chapter takes this process of participatory communication one step further; the communicators themselves participate in the evaluation. Based on the model of community radio researcher Jo Tacchi,¹ processes of social and cultural change at the local level were evaluated within three concentric circles: the people directly working or participating in media production; all the grassroots organizations, collectives, and social movements that use the medium to engage with the public sphere; and finally, the listeners. This chapter is a multiperspectival report from the most innermost circle, the participatory evaluation carried out by the radio producers from the network of community stations in the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia, working with Rodríguez and other Colombian communication scholars.

Using Pilar Riaño's memory workshop methodology, the evaluation team mapped the impact of the radio station's work on the local social and political ecology of this resource-rich but conflicted region where civilians are often cornered by guerrilla organizations, paramilitary groups, and drug traffickers. Many of the producers played key roles in mediating conflict between factions within their communities, among local political figures, and with armed groups. Moreover, Rodríguez concludes that the real contribution of the stations was not the broadcasting of messages *per se*, but rather the facilitation of communications spaces in which local people could express their identities, reflect on their differences, and practice nonviolent ways of relating to one another and dealing with conflict.

Pavarala and Malik also compare the three concentric circles of participation in community radio projects directed by nongovernmental organizations in four rural villages in India that are not well served by either the commercial or state-operated broadcasting systems. Their study shows that social change was greatest among the inner circle of women radio producers. Largely illiterate and from the poorest of castes, their professional skills and their community standing among other women and men grew immensely. Radiating outwards, the women members of local self-help organizations, the principal program contributors and audiences in three of the four projects, witnessed a greater recognition of their social and political concerns, as well as increased confidence and ability to negotiate, among male relatives, village leaders, and government officials. However, the women listeners of the third circle were often unable to listen to the programming because of intense work-loads and family constraints, and this circle realized far fewer social benefits. Pavarala and Malik conclude that significant social changes will only result from the integration of poor women throughout the entire circuit from production to listening. Moreover, they argue that the parameters of participation must also include women's leadership in directing and managing community radios, independent of state or corporate entities.

These projects provide a much different profile of participatory communications than the more celebrated web-based social networks. First, the face of many of the participants is poor, female, and rural, in contrast to the largely professional, male, and urban web 2.0 users. Secondly, although many of the initiators, as in the Indian example, are middle class, poor women from the most excluded castes are beginning to take leadership roles. Finally, in both the Indian and Zimbabwean cases, the strong participation of women has introduced new concerns into the public sphere, from the more intimate dimensions of personal health, to the gendered inequalities of inheritance, water distribution and political representation.

The inclusion of people whose knowledges and perspectives tend to be marginalized also required a different approach to the choice and design of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Media such as radio and video, which reinforce collective processes of media production and reception and respond to the economic resources, cultural backgrounds, languages, aesthetics,

and narratives of grassroots groups, are chosen over those that privilege a minority of well-off early adopters, or the individualized production and reception of consumer content. In these case studies, participatory production is a core goal of each project, and not just a way to produce cheaper content, or a more efficient means of attracting and delivering audiences to advertisers and marketers. In addition, the authors underscore the necessity for social and political solutions, and the consideration of means by which persistently marginalized groups can be actively involved in governance, decision making, and operations at all stages of communication.

These three chapters can also provide lessons about the relationship between participatory communication and social change. They document a complexity of individual and collective changes in the communities most directly involved, with repercussions outward to the national stage. They also provide examples of more robust democracies fed by complex and multivocal public spheres that continue to expand the social imaginary, even in communities beset by tense social and political conflict. Facilitating the engagement of these local sets of social actors may not lead directly to the national and international level policy reforms covered by mainstream media; nevertheless, the growing circuits of distribution of these kinds of locally originated media is beginning to weave a much more dynamic and stronger social fabric.

NOTES

1. Writing about the participatory dynamics in public art, Suzanne Lacy developed a similar evaluative model of six circles, which grow in size as they reach a greater number of people. Starting from the inside, the circle includes: "origination and responsibility, collaboration and co-development, volunteers and performers, immediate audience, media audience, and audience of myth and memory" (Lacy, 1995; 178). Thanks to Megan Petersen for drawing my attention to this.

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