



Orecomm Festival Address

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Communications for Development: an emerging role after a decade of conflict and technological change

Introduction

This is a sombre day: the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the USA.

It is also an appropriate moment to consider what communication challenges have emerged as a result of 9/11 and the subsequent world events that flowed from it; how media was used to counter these challenges – to counter violent extremism, to support good governance and to help build peace; and how communications for development principles – particularly from health communication – have influenced these media initiatives in the post 9/11 world.

I am talking here about mass communication – the media’s role in influencing attitudes and practices of large numbers of people, which is very much at the edge of ethical practice. That makes it interesting - and challenging. And also important because people in conflicts are particularly vulnerable, and the media – if used sensitively – can have a considerable impact.

There have been some successes, but all too often this story has been one of missed opportunities. I would like to examine why these opportunities were lost and to assess whether, even at this late stage 10 years after 9/11, lessons are belatedly being learned from the field of communications for development.

First, let’s look at the challenge: in his appraisal of the security challenges 10 years on, the Executive Director of the 9/11 Commission set up by the Bush Administration, Philip Zelikow, made some perceptive points:

- The security threat is coming from remote and “failing” states – not from industrial heartlands as in the 20th century.
- In Afghanistan: “Americans can be effective militarily. They also wield influence as a source of aid and enrichment. But they are a heavy noisy presence. Culturally, they are utterly alien.”

- Over the next 10 years: "...the US can't police all the wilderness areas of the world.....[what is] needed now is a policy.....that can take the offensive against the most dangerous groups, rely principally on local allies, and have regional strategies to shape conditions and contain dangers where partners falter."
- He said: "Outsiders can frame choices without trying to steer them. They can also influence choices, at the margin...but outsiders should not put themselves at the centre of those choices. They should avoid being cast as saviours or scapegoats."¹

This is a reiteration of T. E. Lawrence's dictum of 80 years ago:

"Better to let them [the Arabs] do it imperfectly than to do it perfectly yourself, for it is their country, their way and your time is short."

Zelikow makes the point that this approach applies as much to Western engagement with the emerging Arab democracies as it does to containing terrorism.

So what exactly is the role of the media in this new world of subtle influencing? As a former public service broadcaster with the BBC, the approach I would favour – and which appears to gel with Zelikow's ideas – is to facilitate the provision of safe spaces that allow people to discuss issues of importance to them and make their own choices.

There is a new dimension that is full of possibilities – two-way communication reaching down to some of the poorest and most marginalised. In Afghanistan there are an estimated 15 million mobile phones; latest figures suggest 55 million mobile phone owners in Pakistan and far more simcards are in use; in Nigeria there are around 80 million mobile phone users. In all these countries, the media is being deregulated. Combine local radio with mobiles in phone-in programmes that also stimulate text-messaging responses from listeners – and you have interaction on a national scale. Potentially, a new era is just beginning in which *national* conversations can take place on *issues of key importance*.

And this could prove to be a vital tool in a world where American – and Western – influence is viewed with increasing resentment and suspicion, as Zelikow was at pains to point out. How we undertake the work of *facilitating communications*, and how we package information, are key: but this is what we do as a profession – communicate. Many definitions of communication exist: one I like was coined by Thomas Tufte from Roskilde University:

"Successful communication articulates trust, promotes feelings of security and belonging, and leads to reflection and action."

Let's look at two notable long-term media initiatives that made a difference in two very different areas of instability, and which exemplify 'successful communication':

¹ Philip Zelikow, "The Twilight War," *Prospect Magazine*, no. 186, September 2011.

Radio for Peace-building in DRC²

In 2001, the Democratic Republic of Congo – DRC – was in chaos. Foreign armies fought over mineral resources, the remnants of Rwanda’s *Interahamwe* genocidaires were running amok, and the government was weak and ineffectual. Basic services were minimal. Thousands were being killed or dying from preventable diseases. A UN mission – MONUC – with limited peace-keeping forces, tried to bring stability to an area the size of Europe. In 2001, peace talks were about to begin.

One plan was to start a radio station – run locally but with national reach – which could provide high quality news and social programming, as well as entertainment, to the information-starved population. Thus *Radio Okapi* was born, and ten years later it is still on the air, with 27 local radio partners, and an estimated 25 million regular listeners.

Just how influential radio is, is always difficult to measure scientifically. But *Radio Okapi* is now widely credited for having helped unify the country, smoothed the political transition, and contributed substantially to free and fair elections. In 2006 a major study revealed that almost 36% of voters said that it was *Radio Okapi* that had prompted them to vote in the elections that year.³

This is very important: getting people to participate in a democratic process is the first stage in creating accountable government, which was the immense challenge facing the DRC.

And there have been a significant number of spin-off media activities involving the 27 local radio partners, and a host of other media players, which have also contributed. It has cost a lot of money. But funders – including SIDA and DFID, have remained loyal – so far.

So why was Radio Okapi so successful:

- 1) A UN – NGO partnership in which each side played to its strengths; the UN providing security and logistical support, while the NGO (the *Fondation Hirondelle*) provided station management, editorial expertise and journalism training;
- 2) The clear need for mass access to reliable news in local languages to counter damaging rumours and fill an information void;
- 3) The fund of talent from local journalists;
- 4) The potential for *Radio Okapi* to build on development communication approaches in the health and other sectors.

² Mary Myers, “Why Radio Matters”, paper for Developing Radio Partners, 2010, available from http://developingradio.org/files/Why_Radio_Matters_Mary_Myers_DRP.pdf

³ Immar Research and Consultancy, *Etude Médias en RDC*, Fondation Hirondelle: Lausanne, 2006, cited in Myers, *ibid.*

This was a traditional top-down approach – public service broadcasting by Congolese with editorial guidance from experienced European journalists from *Fondation Hironnelle* based in Switzerland. *Radio Okapi's* next challenge will be to respond to the new era of mass cellphone ownership, and to develop a more participatory approach.

Phone-in radio in Northern Ireland

So what about a bottom-up, participatory approach to media use in conflict areas? A number of examples exist, ranging from community video in South Africa to community radio in Colombia: all are interesting, and the organisation *Search for Common Ground* has done impressive work in many areas, but the one that I want to focus on today comes again from the pre-9/11 era – during the 1980s and 1990's when the conflict in Northern Ireland was at its height. During this troubled time when the sectarian divide was at its deepest, the BBC ran a daily two-hour phone-in programme called *Talkback*. Here the objective was to find areas of agreement between callers who often held passionate and opposing views. Instead of creating conflict for the sake of a lively entertaining programme, the presenter David Dunseith rightly saw that listeners had seen quite enough of real conflict and they wanted signs of rapprochement.

Its listenership was impressive – one third of the population of Ulster listened regularly, and one programme at a time of particular crisis received 11,500 calls – 1% of the population. *Talkback* was important - in the words of Martin McLoone of Queen's University Belfast:

“At the basis of intercommunal strife..... there lies a conflict over identity and for better or worse, *communications play a central role in the formation of identity*. Broadcasting, in particular, is crucial in mediating and sustaining a sense of collective consciousness.”⁴

And its lasting importance was assessed by Stephen Coleman of the LSE:

“This was the first occasion in history that a radio phone-in programme provided a forum within which a civil conflict/war could be concluded with direct reference to the mood of the people rather than simply the detached negotiations of their leaders.”⁵

Talkback was aired at the critical time when negotiations for a peace settlement that led to the Good Friday Agreement were being held. And it was all in the pre-mobile phone era.

There are also many well-known examples of how the media can help save lives – particularly in the field of health. One example: some recently published results from

⁴ Martin McLoone, ed., *Culture, Identity and Broadcasting in Ireland: Local Issues, Global Perspectives*. (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, 1991).

⁵ Stephen Coleman, “BBC Radio Ulster's Talkback phone-in: public feedback in a divided public space,” *The Republic*, Vol. 5, no. 2, (1998).



Soul City, the multi-media project in South Africa, has found that regular listeners and viewers were three times more likely to be tested for HIV than non-listeners⁶. I was involved in a radio drama project in Botswana - *Makgabaneng* - that achieved similar results six years ago.⁷ What is also significant about both these projects is that they appear to have had a positive impact on stigma – on changing people’s attitudes towards those who are living with HIV. Regular consumers of the programmes are much less likely to view HIV as ‘sinful’, more prepared to marry an HIV-positive person and allow their children to mix with children of HIV-positive parents, etc.

So given the clear influencing power of the media, and the added potential of mass ownership of cellphones, plus increased access to social media – how can this ‘soft power’ be harnessed to counter violent extremism and help peace building?

In 2008, colleagues and I working in Afghanistan drew on this experience to develop for DFID an approach we called *Crisis State Communication* – a local media development approach which rests on five core principles:

- Strengthen local initiatives rather than introduce new ones;
- Ensure projects are locally fronted and run with international capacity building in the background: *locals talking to locals*;
- Promote engagement with the population through local radio linking up with the huge number of cellphone users;
- Train local broadcasters in the specific skills needed to maintain live radio discipline – e.g., phone-in show hosts who are able to handle on-air debates;
- Train local journalists in ‘conflict-sensitive’ news reporting, providing context with analysis.⁸

This was welcomed; we received good reviews from the donor and others. It also was very much in step with military counter-insurgency theory, which acknowledges the importance of strategic communication. But ‘stratcom’, as it is often known, is essentially managing the message to persuade populations of the disseminator’s point of view. It is not usually seen as a participatory process of facilitating information flows, promoting engagement between citizens.

Yet top military thinkers believe a ‘non-kinetic’ (non-violent) approach is vital in counter-insurgency. David Kilcullen in *The Accidental Guerrilla* (2009) states that: “...insurgencies in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia will be won through

⁶ Soul City Institute, *Demonstrating Impact on Social and Behaviour Change*, 2011, available from <http://www.comminit.com/africa/node/9280330>

⁷ Katina Pappas-DeLuca, Joan Marie Kraft, Christine Galavotti et al, “Entertainment-education radio serial drama and outcomes related to HIV testing in Botswana,” *Global Health Sciences Literature Digest* (2009) available from <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite?page=jl-45-02> ; and Anne K. Sebert Kuhlman, Joan Marie Kraft, Christine Galavotti et al, “Radio Role Models for the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV and HIV Testing Among Pregnant Women in Botswana,” *Health Promotion International* (2008), available from <http://heapro.oxfordjournals.org/content/23/3/260.full.pdf+html>

⁸ Gordon Adam and Emrys Schoemaker, “The Art of Conversation: Revising Strategic Communications” *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 155, No. 4, (August 2010), available from: <http://www.imediaassociates.org>

'the decisive battle ...for people's minds' rather than by combat alone".⁹ And the former commander of international forces in Afghanistan, General Stan McChrystal, said: "...think of [stabilisation] as an argument to earn the support of the people"¹⁰. All this is very much in line with the US Army's *Field Manual 3-07* (2008) on counter-insurgency, heavily influenced by Kilcullen, which makes the point that access to information by the population is a vital building block for lasting peace. But what the military has difficulty with is the development of *local media* as an integral part of stability operations. And local media development is the cornerstone of *Crisis State Communication*.

The reasons for this reluctance are essentially threefold:

- Fear of loss of what the military perceives as control over the 'message' and concerns over the protection of their forces. The irony is that – in Afghanistan and elsewhere – the military have never controlled the message. The insurgents have done so, through a variety of social media.
- Distrust of local journalists, who they fear may be influenced by insurgents.
- Frequent troop rotations – usually of 6–12 months - do not permit the military to understand the complex dynamics of the local society in which they are operating.

Another reason why *Crisis State Communication* was never acted on was confusion within government over which department is responsible for the communications component of countering violent extremism. In both the UK and the US the departments responsible for development cooperation – DFID and USAID – have relinquished control to the countries' respective foreign ministries. In the case of two studies on Afghanistan and Pakistan, the British Foreign Office had no ownership of these studies and has not acted on them. The US State Department, however, appear to have been influenced by some of these ideas and is currently funding a number of media development projects in Afghanistan.

A further reason why there is reluctance in some quarters to push a communications for development approach in countering violent extremism concerns evaluation – and particularly the difficulties over establishing a causal link between communication and peace-building, and improved governance. Being in a conflict area is itself a problem for the evaluators: 40% of DFID evaluations in conflict areas were disrupted according to a recent National Audit Office report.¹¹ There is also a preference by government for quick fixes – 'quick wins' as they are usually termed - which does not fit well with a participative communications approach that requires time for change to occur. This is an indication of short-term thinking by government, which is an increasing problem. According to the former head of USAID, Andrew Natsios, 20 years ago an average USAID development programme lasted 10 years,

⁹ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Cited in Adam and Schoemaker.

¹¹ DFID, "Working Effectively in Conflict-Affected and Fragile Situations Briefing Paper I: Monitoring and Evaluation," *A DFID Practice Paper, March 2010*, available from <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/governance/building-peaceful-states-I.pdf>

now they are planned to run for a single year. Media development needs much more time than that to be effective.

In an article published in 2010, Natsios noted that USAID development officers focus on what they can measure because the counter-bureaucracy (US-based officials who demand accountability for foreign aid funding) demands it. In practice this means more funding for those development sectors grounded in the hard sciences, such as public health and medicine, and less to those with roots in the soft sciences such as democracy and governance programmes. In the United States, funding for health (which includes all USAID and State Department programmes) constituted approximately six percent of the foreign aid budget in 1995 and increased to nearly 30 percent in 2008.¹²

This pre-occupation with numbers does not work well with a participatory communication approach towards countering violent extremism. Policy makers would do well to heed wise words attributed to Albert Einstein: *“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.”*

The Future – signs of change?

There are several new trends in thinking about development cooperation, which could spawn a communications for development-style participatory approach if they were to influence policy and funding. An important article published in 2010 by the Institute for Development Studies at Sussex University - *An Upside Down View of Governance* – contains some far-reaching suggestions:

“Donors cannot make significant progress in improving development outcomes and aid effectiveness without changing their mental models of how development happens...taking such questions seriously implies a change in how donors see their role – from being experts with responsibility for ‘delivering’ on the millennium development goals, to at best being effective facilitators of local political processes.”¹³

The article concludes that the donors should:

“...show less concern with micromanaging aid, and much more with the political dynamics that influence its effectiveness.” In other words, donors should be facilitating sustainable institution building.

Natsios supports this:

¹² Andrew Natsios, “The clash of the counter-bureaucracy and development.” Centre for Global Development Essay (USA: July 2010), available from <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1424271>

¹³ The Centre for the Future State, *An Upside Down View of Governance*, (Brighton: IDS, 2010), available from <http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=1159>



“All construction or service delivery projects should be subordinate to the larger institution-building task. The counter-bureaucracy, with its elaborate control mechanisms, misunderstands this central development doctrine and thus misapplies a domestic management lens to aid programs by turning the means into an end.”

This is very much the locally led approach that *Crisis State Communication* favours. And it is in line with the ‘T. E. Lawrence approach’ endorsed by Philip Zelikow.

But there remains a credibility gap in using communications for development approaches, particularly in conflict areas, which are so difficult to evaluate. In December 2010, a group of communication for development practitioners led by the *United States Institute for Peace*, the *Annenberg School of Communication*, *Internews* and *Fondation Hirondelle*, came together in the Swiss village of Caux to analyse the issues and hammer out agreed principles under which they would operate and which they would present to funders and policy makers. Key action points to emerge were:

- engage in greater collaboration and dialogue about evaluation
- expand financial support for evaluation
- encourage realistic and honest assessments of project successes and failures
- foster the development and effective application of media-specific conflict indicators
- utilize conflict sensitive approaches, and engage with local researchers
- integrate evaluation into the entire project lifecycle and after its conclusion.¹⁴

These principles, endorsed by some 20 influential organisations in the field, could help reassure donors and policy makers that participatory communication practitioners have grasped the evaluation nettle, and are keen to establish causality and verifiable results. The importance of action being locally led was graphically illustrated by the communications activities underpinning the Arab Spring in 2011. Fast-moving developments in technology have made communications an ever more central part not only of development, but also of the struggle for improved governance and peace building. More rather than less attention needs to be given to this field by policy makers. Thanks to work done in the field and by academics represented here at the Orecomm conference, the arguments are stacking up. And I hope that 10 years after 9/11 policy makers and donors are listening to them. Now is the time for sustained programmes of participatory communication to counter violent extremism and help build peace.

¹⁴ Amelie Arsenault, Sheldon Himelfarb and Susan Abbott, *Evaluating Media Interventions in Conflict Countries*, Peaceworks, no.77 (Washington: USIP, 2011) available from <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/PW77.pdf>