

VIEWPOINT

THE FIELD OF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION: An Appraisal

A Conversation with Professor Everett M Rogers

by: *Arvind Singhal and Jerry Domatob*

Professor Everett M Rogers, the internationally renowned scholar, on a visit to Ohio University, Athens, USA, was interviewed by Dr Arvind Singhal, Assistant Professor and Jerry Domatob, a Ph D Candidate, both attached to Ohio University, on the status of the field of development communication.

We are pleased to reproduce this 'Question and Answer' session, which was held in Athens, Ohio on 23 October, 1992.

Editor

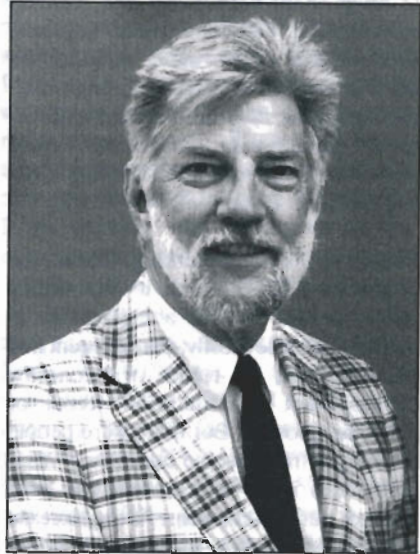
Singhal: *The first question I would like to ask you is on the status of the field of development communication. Is the field still alive in your opinion?*

Rogers: The field of development communication started off with a very big bang - a great deal of enthusiasm, over-enthusiasm - now in retrospect, in the years just after World War II. This was the era in which former colonies were getting their independence. It was a time of great expectation. It was a time of great efficacy on the part of the public - of the world. The world thought that science was the answer - that all human problems could be overcome. So the larger context in which the field of development communication started explains perhaps some of its initial over-enthusiasm.

In the seventies, or beginning in the seventies, realism began to set in. We began to see that development was a much more complicated and difficult process than we had thought. I think if the field of development communication

were dying, it would have been so around the mid-seventies. Maybe it had a renaissance - a rebirth of a more stable, long-lasting, sensible kind.

I am, of course, criticising myself



Professor Everett M Rogers

because I have lived through all these years with this field. So I think we are better off today than in the first era, when we were over-enthusiastic, and in the seventies, when we are getting very pessimistic. In the seventies, there was the term, "development weariness" which was commonly heard. We were weary of the difficulty of development. Today, I am optimistic in that I think we have probably got a reasonable idea that development communication is not tomorrow and is not next year. We never should have thought otherwise. We made a lot of mistakes. The world is littered with expensive mistakes that we made through poor planning, and false expectations that could not be fulfilled. I thank heavens for where we are today, and it is up to you people to carry on from where the old people left off. Maybe we will go through some more eras. But I think we are in a healthy era today.

Domatob: *Your definition of development as "a widely participatory process of directed social change in society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement including greater equality, freedom and other valued qualities for the majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment" gained wide acceptance. Have you revised that definition? If so, what is your new definition?*

Rogers: First, something about the definition. For its time it was slightly revolutionary. It was a big change in thinking because mostly, development had been defined in terms of economic development - actually in terms of economic growth. But there were people who asked troublesome questions. What good does it do to a country to have a higher per capita income, if the increase is spent on alcohol, for instance, or on other things that do not really add much to development. And what if the increase

in average income really is in the hands of a few families or small number of wealthy people who just get wealthier, and the average person is as poor as ever?

The definition I proposed was very much influenced by a Latin American communication scholar, Luis Ramiro Beltran. So if there is anyone who ought to be given credit for the definition, he should be the one. In any event, the definition dealt not just with the economic growth aspects of development, but also with such social aspects as how the money was spent. So the definition was heavily in terms of social development: increases in literacy levels, for instance, more years of education, lower infant death rates, longer life, more life expectancy, equality, and more press freedom. So that definition, I think, is still the main definition for development.

What is development seeking to bring about or increase? Today, it is certainly much more than just money. It is these other social benefits that can come along but do not necessarily come along with higher incomes. And so I think that definition is still the prevalent definition. I think we do see, however, some different weights attached to the component parts of it. Today certainly *empowerment* is a much more important part of the definition of development programmes. We pay more attention to the underdogs of all kinds: the socio-economic underdog, the racial/ethnic underdog, and putting their share of power in their hands.

So some dimensions of the definition are getting much more important. Sustainability is much more important. What good does a development programme do if it is not going to be there tomorrow or ten years from now, or if the benefits will disappear in the next few years? So I think these are wise tune-ups of the definition.

Singhal: *Your name is synonymous with*

research on the diffusion of innovations. You wrote a book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, which has been revised several times. A second edition came out in 1971 and a third one in 1983, and I know you are presently writing a fourth edition. What is the role of diffusion research in developing nations?

Rogers: By around 1960, the diffusion model had already been worked out in Europe and the United States. But the question was whether it was different or was basically the same thing in the developing countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa.

The first diffusion studies were done in Colombia, Brazil, India, Pakistan (and what is now Bangladesh), and in Nigeria in West Africa. The answers which emerged suggested that with some modifications, the diffusion process is similar. Looking back at development programmes based on the diffusion model, the main emphasis was on technological innovations.

These were improvements in farming methods or improvements in health or family planning. These early diffusion studies were mainly on the technology aspects of development. We thought that the introduction of the new technologies was at the heart of development in those days, rather than the development of human capabilities that we talked about a few minutes ago: equality, empowerment and justice. So the way we used the diffusion model was unduly limited, I feel.

However, in retrospect, I think technology did play an important role - and that it still plays an important role in development.

But there is much more to development than just technologies of the kind we used to study with the diffusion model in developing countries. Diffusion investigations continue worldwide, especially in countries like the United States, with very few of them

now in the developing countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia. We see more studies of the diffusion of social ideas, such as in projects in which you (Singhal) and I are involved; for example the diffusion of dairy co-operatives for women dairy farmers in India. We are not really studying a technology. We are studying the idea of dairying as a social institution for empowering millions of poor women in India. Quite a contrast to our earlier studies in India. In the late 1960's, I conducted earlier studies of the diffusion of high-yielding rice varieties in South India.

In summary, I think the diffusion of innovations model continues to be useful. I guess I would have to say that while I am writing a fourth edition of the book on diffusion. Though, I think the applications of the diffusion model are quite different today. Appropriately quite different!

Domatob: *What development communication projects are you presently working on?*

Rogers: Let me start with what kept me up last night. Right now, I am working on what Arvind Singhal and I call the entertainment-education strategy in television soap operas or in radio soap operas. These are entertainment programmes with an educational message embedded in them. Specifically, I am working with colleagues to see how entertainment-education soap operas in India and in other developing countries can bring about social change. In this case, empowerment of women, decreasing female inequality, etc. I also direct an evaluation of the effects of a radio soap opera in Tanzania that promotes family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention (a male character in "Twende Na Wakati" contracts AIDS, and dies from it, thus providing a negative role model for the listening audience). With Arvind Singhal, I am working with Indian women dairy

farmers and their empowerment through dairy cooperatives. So, in a general sense, I try to work on action and research projects that exemplify the new emphasis in the definition of development. These are positive attempts to do something about what I was critical of, regarding the earlier applications of the diffusion model. My main interests still center around the development problems of Latin American, African and Asian countries. In fact, one of the main reasons for my move to the University of New Mexico in January, 1993, is because it is a department which focuses especially on problems of intercultural communication, and increasingly on international communication. I guess you could say I am doing the same thing, but it is somewhat different from what I was doing in the past.

Singhal: *Now that the Cold War has ended, what do you envisage the New World Communication Order to be? Do you foresee a new era of research on international, intercultural and development communication?*

Rogers: I think the end of the Cold War allows us all, wherever we are in the world, to now sleep in peace. Who would want that to be any other way? The Cold War ended in a surprisingly swift and rather unbelievable way. It, however, does pose some problems for our field.

Development programmes were sold by countries like the United States and many of the wealthy countries of Europe as part of the Cold War. Development activities were justified as one part of the giving countries' international policies, for political purposes. They never really were purely development programmes. So this was a false sale of a good product.

Unfortunately now, we have to pay for this false advertising. The United States Congress today, as an example,

is much less willing to pay some of the costs of the United Nations' development activities. Congress feels that the United States does not need to provide development assistance anymore. The United States no longer has a world enemy. Congress asks, "Why are we trying to facilitate development in Latin America, Asia, and so on? We no longer desperately need the votes of those countries in the United Nations as we used to." So some of the political reasons for development are gone. Well, they never were correct in the first place!

Unfortunately, the sudden arrival of world peace in the past few years creates some problems of transition. So political leaders, and ultimately, scholars, have to rethink why development is being done. Why should wealthy countries at least try to facilitate development in Latin America, Africa and Asia? I have faith that ultimately such rethinking will happen. But the problems of transition are grave.

On the good side, however, the end of the Cold War frees resources which were previously wasted. About 20 percent of the United States national budget was directly tied to the Cold War. That was a tremendous sum of money. Those monies are now available, as they never have been before in the past fifty years, to be used for all kinds of social welfare programmes rather than for warfare. This can be a much more constructive use of resources. Again, there are problems of transition in that these funds, which one might imagine would be immediately available, are not turning out to be used for programmes of education, improved health, and so on.

Now humankind, at least, is rid of one of the great distractions, the Cold War. The real purpose of humankind at this time on this earth is development. So I hope we may be able to do a better job with the greater resources that are now becoming

available. Whether that kind of happy scenario occurs, or not, or the degree to which it occurs, depends upon we academic people, and also on political leaders. It changes the ball game very suddenly. How well we learn this new ball game is yet to be determined.



Dr Everett M Rogers is currently Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of New Mexico, USA. Rogers who earned his Doctorate in Sociology from Iowa State University in 1957, is well-known internationally for his work on the diffusion of innovations, mass communication and national development and the social impacts of new communication technologies. He has authored or edited about 25 books.



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This issue of *The Journal of Development Communication* is sponsored by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation. The Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung (FNSt), as is its genuine German name, was founded in 1958 by the then President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Theodor Heuss. Its name is reminiscent of Friedrich Naumann (1860-1919), a leading liberal politician and thinker of his time, who had been a political teacher to Theodor Heuss. The FNSt is connected with the liberal Free Democratic Party in Germany.

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Some Notes by the Sponsor

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation has over the years sponsored many media projects all over the world. The interest we are showing in this field derives from our endeavour to promote freedom of opinion and freedom of the press. To have an opinion and being allowed to express it without hindrance is a basic precondition for the development of a democratic culture. The media have to be enabled also in practical terms to play their part in this process. This is, as I understand it, the main objective of this journal. That we sponsor this particular issue does neither mean that the Friedrich Naumann Foundation endorses everything that is written in the various articles, nor that Aidcom or its editorial board necessarily go along with everything I am writing. But that is part of a healthy exchange of views, which, to my mind, is necessary to promote development in all fields.

In the discussion about a New World Information Order proposals were made to establish mechanisms worldwide, which should control the publication of information in order to safeguard a fairer and more just reporting. This idea is something that, according to my opinion, should not be pursued.

First: Where in the world is the objective formula that tells us what 'fair' and 'just' is? *Second:* Having travelled to and lived in many different countries, my experience is as follows: Where the flow of information is widely unrestricted, alongside good journalism you find a lot of distorted reporting and commenting, causing anger among those who know better as well as pain and sometimes damage to those who are the targets.

On the other hand: In countries where the media are controlled and more or less officially obliged to follow the ideas of promoting development through positive journalism, you still find distorted reporting with all its negative effects, though the targets may be different from elsewhere. However, good journalism is much rarer to be found and, because there is no counterbalance by media products with different tendencies, the negative effects of distorted reporting tend to be even worse. That these media products normally are also quite boring, should be mentioned just incidentally.