

## INTERVIEW

### PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION: A Conversation with Everett M Rogers

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Professor Everett M Rogers is an internationally renowned scholar of communication and development. He presently teaches and conducts research at the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of New Mexico. His 1962 book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, along with Daniel Lerner's 1958 book, *The Passing of Traditional Society* and Wilbur Schramm's 1964 book, *Mass Media and National Development*, represent the three most influential books in the field of development communication. These three books helped get the field underway.

In the past 35 years, Professor Rogers' thinking has considerably evolved about the role of communication in development. In a 1993 interview conducted by Professor Arvind Singhal and Jerry Domatab, also published in *The Journal of Development Communication* (Volume Four, Number Two), Professor Rogers recounted the "over-enthusiasm" which laced the early days of development communi-

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cation in the late 1950s and early 1960s: "The field of development communication started off with a very big bang – a great deal of enthusiasm, over-enthusiasm..."

(Singhal and Domatab, 1993). In the 1970s, "realism began to set in. We began to see that development was a much more complicated and difficult process than we had thought" (Singhal and Domatab, 1993). In the 1990s, "we are better off today than we were in the first era, when we were over enthusiastic, and in the 1970s, when we were getting very pessimistic. Now we have a reasonable idea that development communication is not tomorrow and is not next year. We never should have thought otherwise" (Singhal and Domatab, 1993).

Rogers acknowledges that "the world is littered with expensive mistakes that we made through poor planning, and false expectations that could not be met" (Singhal and Domatab, 1993). However, he is thankful for where the field of development communication is today, and goads young scholars to carry on from where the old scholars left off.

On June 25, 1997, Professor Arvind Singhal of the College of Communication, Ohio University interviewed Professor Rogers in Toronto, Canada, asking him to reflect on the past, present, and the future of the field of development communication. In Toronto, they were attending a World Bank-sponsored conference on Global Knowledge for Sustainable Development. The interview reproduced below was conducted during a taxi ride between the conference site and the Toronto airport.

Singhal: What main lessons

have been learned to date about the role of communication in development?

Rogers: One of the main lessons learned is the *limiting* role of communication; that is, that communication by itself can't solve all problems. Few innovations or technologies consist of communication alone. Development communication intends to bring about behaviour change but behaviour change can seldom take place only with an input of communication. To promote a new kind of fertilizer or a family planning method or a means of AIDS prevention, communication alone is not enough. Some other infrastructure is essential. Perhaps agricultural credit is necessary to adopt the new fertilizer. So often there are other infrastructural factors in addition to communication, which are necessary for behaviour change to occur. However, there are a few innovations that are almost entirely communication, that is, they do not depend on much else. An example is the Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) campaigns of the past decade or two. The innovation is mostly information. The infrastructure is easily available in most village households - salt, sugar and water. The only missing factor was information on how to appropriately mix the ingredients, and that information was provided by the ORT campaigns. The high infant mortality rates previously caused by infectious diarrhoea

have dropped in almost every developing country.

The second lesson learned, which is the converse of the first, is that most development programmes demand communication as one integral aspect. I can't think of any development activity in which communication is not important, and often communication is crucial. In the past, some three decades ago, the important role of communication was not recognized; it had to be learned the hard way. Today I know of no one who argues that communication is not one of the essentials of development programmes. Whether it is agriculture or health or literacy or even industrial development, communication is an important aspect. Communication has gradually come to claim its rightful due. That's not to say we don't have much more to learn about the best way to use communication for development. At least it is recognised now that communication is essential to bring about social change, especially in the developing nations of Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

**Singhal:** In essence, you are saying that the role of communication in development can neither be underestimated nor overestimated; one must strike the right kind of balance.

In your opinion, what represents the single most important new idea, in the field of development communication in the past several decades?

**Rogers:** It is the idea of enter-

tainment-education, that is, putting educational messages subtly and strategically in entertainment messages (Singhal and Rogers, in preparation). There are many advantages to this development communication strategy. First, it is a very flexible strategy. The entertainment-education strategy can be applied very broadly in various media to address various development topics (Kincaid and others, 1993). Almost without exception, the evaluations of the effects of entertainment-education programmes show them to be quite effective, and in some cases almost unbelievably powerful (Rogers and others, 1997). If the strategy is implemented correctly, the time is right, entertainment-education can bring about a tremendous amount of behavioural change. It incorporates several communication and other theories of behavioural change, which I think give it power. Entertainment-education has been subject to a great deal of research, and gradually, especially in recent years, the research has enabled us to know how entertainment-education actually changes human behaviour, not just an individual's knowledge and attitude (Singhal, Rogers, and Brown, 1993; Singhal, Obregon, and Rogers, 1994; Singhal and Rogers, in preparation). So I think entertainment-education is a very powerful and promising tool for development.

There are resistances to the entertainment-education strategy. The main resistance is from people who perhaps do not

completely understand entertainment-education and who say 'What! You think I am going to use poetry, song or street theatre, that have nothing to do with agriculture or the environment or adult literacy or women's equality or AIDS prevention, to bring about behavioural change?' They fear they will be criticised for using entertainment for development purposes. So this strategy has a long way to go to overcome the strong resistances to it. In the next five to ten years, as we learn more about how entertainment-education has its effects on human behaviour, I think that we will see more and more use of it. A few enlightened individuals, a few risk-takers, a few champions think of entertainment-education as a useful strategy. So the day of entertainment-education will come. Soon.

**Singhal:** You've been conducting research on "*Twende na Wakati*" ("Let's Go with the Times"), a highly popular radio soap opera in Tanzania, which has been broadcast for the past four years. Your research represents a showcase or "best practice" in terms of the research design. Also, "*Twende na Wakati*" represents a programmatic showcase. Given the growing influence of the entertainment-education strategy in the field of development communication, could you tell us more about "*Twende na Wakati*"'s research design and the programme itself?

**Rogers:** "*Twende na Wakati*" is

Swahili for "Let's Go with the Times". Literally it means "Let's Be Modern". This radio soap opera is broadcast twice a week, by Radio Tanzania, the national government radio system in Tanzania. The half-hour shows are commercially sponsored by the Pepsi Cola company, and previously by the East Africa Foam Mattress Company. The radio programme began broadcasting in mid-1993, and it will end four and half years run in December, 1997. In the first two years, 1993-1995, the programme was broadcast in all of Tanzania except for a central area, Dodoma. The radio station in Dodoma broadcast other programming at the time that "*Twende na Wakati*" was broadcast. So we had a field experimental design in which we could remove the effects of contemporaneous changes that were happening in Dodoma. The radio soap opera affected family planning, adoption and HIV/AIDS prevention. In the rest of the nation, other than Dodoma, some of our findings are almost unbelievable (Rogers and others, 1997). At the end of two years, 52 percent of all adults in Tanzania were listening to it. Only about three-fourths of all adults of Tanzania are in the radio audience (i.e. have access to a radio so as to be able to listen). So about two-thirds of the possible radio audience were listening to at least one of the two episodes broadcast each week. During the third year of broadcasting until mid-1996, the percentage of listenership increased

to about 55 percent of all adult Tanzanians. Of the approximately four and half million listeners, some 23 percent said they adopted family planning as a result of listening to "*Twende na Wakati*" (Rogers and others, 1997). The radio programme provided them information about family planning methods and with a motivation to adopt these methods by showing negative role-models who had large families and who suffered for it, and positive role-models who adopted family planning methods and were rewarded for their choice. Two of the positive role-models, a husband and a wife have one child, they prosper, the child gets a good education, etc. Our findings about adoption by 23 percent of listeners were supported by data we gathered from 20 percent of all new family planning adopters at 79 family planning clinics. Some 23 percent said they adopted because of listening to "*Twende na Wakati*". So our annual survey results and the clinic data agreed as to the family planning effects of the radio soap opera.

The most unbelievable behavioural change resulted at the end of the first two years of the broadcast of "*Twende na Wakati*" with respect to HIV/AIDS prevention. Some 82 percent of the programme's listeners, about half of all adults in Tanzania, said they adopted HIV/AIDS prevention because of listening to "*Twende na Wakati*" (Rogers and others, 1997). The problems associated with this epidemic were heavily emphasized by the

character of a truck driver, Mkwaju, who is promiscuous, does not practice safe sex, contracts AIDS, and eventually dies from AIDS. In the soap, Mkwaju loses his wife, his job, and he becomes alcoholic. So he is punished in the storyline for his anti-social behaviour.

How could a radio soap opera achieve such a high rate of behavioural change? These behavioural changes were prevention-oriented, that is, a decrease in the number of sexual partners (monogamy), an increase in condom use, and not sharing of needles and razor blades (the three main ways HIV/AIDS is transmitted in Tanzania). Before the broadcasts began in mid-1993, a high percentage of Tanzanians knew there was an AIDS epidemic in their country, knew that they were at risk, and understood the means of AIDS transmission. So the pre-existing problem was not knowledge; it was motivational. The timing of the radio soap was just right. Many people personally know someone who died of AIDS or who is dying. That is a powerful motivational force to do something about HIV/AIDS prevention. The soap opera stressed that something could be done about the epidemic, that is, an individual could take efficacious actions to decrease the likelihood of getting AIDS (Bandura, 1997). So "*Twende na Wakati*" was broadcast at the right time with the right message for those people who were at risk and who needed a nudge to change their behaviour.

As you said, "*Twende na*

*Wakati*" represents a sort of "gold standard" in investigating the effects of an entertainment-education programme, one which had the strongest effects of an entertainment-education programme of all the studies carried out to date.

Singhal: You and I are presently involved in the evaluation of a radio soap opera in India "*Tinka Tinka Sukh*" ("Happiness Lies in Small Things") which promotes gender equality, community harmony, small family size, and HIV/AIDS prevention (Sood, Singhal and Law, 1997). The research design we have in place for "*Tinka Tinka Sukh*" resembles in many respects the research design for "*Twende na Wakati*". Given that Tanzania and India are very different countries, what else, in your opinion, can we learn in India about the entertainment-education strategy that we did not, or could not have, learned in the Tanzania study?

Rogers: India is so much larger in population and in size than Tanzania which has a population of about 30 million (making it the second largest sub-Saharan country). India has a population of almost a billion people, representing about 20 percent of the world's population. "*Tinka Tinka Sukh*" was broadcast in north India, in the Hindi Belt, and modest estimates of listenership run to about 50 million adults. So the audience in India is huge compared to Tanzania. It is also quite different from the Tanzania population. I would describe

Tanzanian adults, at the time of "*Twende na Wakati*"'s broadcast, as being very receptive to family planning. Only a small percent (8-9 percent) had adopted but a very high percent had favourable attitudes toward family planning adoption. They represented a "KAP gap". In the Hindi-speaking Belt of North India, the situation is very different. India was the first nation in the world to launch a national family planning programme in 1951. By 1996, every possible means of promoting family planning had been used in India generally with very disappointing results. So if an entertainment-education programme like "*Tinka Tinka Sukh*" could convince some people in the Hindi-speaking Belt to adopt family planning, the strategy could potentially work in other "easier" conditions. So the Indian radio soap opera "*Tinka Tinka Sukh*" is a crucial test of the power of the entertainment-education strategy. Perhaps the greatest effect of the Tanzania research was to help create some of the conditions and research methodologies for the Indian soap opera "*Tinka Tinka Sukh*". If the Indian radio soap opera has strong effects, then I think most of the world's policy makers will be more easily convinced that entertainment-education programmes can be effective.

Singhal: You identified entertainment-education programmes as one of the bright spots in the field of development communication today. On a cautionary note, is there a downside to entertain-

ment-education? Are there limitations or caveats that researchers and practitioners of entertainment-education should realise?

**Rogers:** The entertainment-education strategy has to be applied in an appropriate way. Unfortunately, we have a few examples where the strategy has done more harm than good. In one country in East Africa, the very first episode of a television soap opera showed some very risqué sexual behaviour (regarding "sugar daddies"). There were public protests, government officials rose in arms against the programme, and further episodes were not broadcast. The soap crossed the line for that country's culture in what could be appropriately shown in a television soap opera. That mistake makes us wiser about how to proceed with caution. Entertainment-education programmes have to be pre-tested with the intended audience, and they have to be based on an understanding of where the audience is at with respect to the educational issues, what they are receptive to, and what they are not receptive to. If the entertainment-education strategy does not attract a large audience week after week, it cannot have strong effects. So entertainment-education programmes are not a panacea. They have to be done right. They must compete with all kinds of other, purely entertaining messages. Entertainment-education strategy requires repeated exposure by the audience over

time for it to have strong effects on behaviour change. Generally, I am optimistic about the potential of entertainment-education strategies if such programmes are done well.

**Singhal:** Any strategy of development communication, emerging or existing, has to be viewed in an ethical context. Are there any ethical dimensions surrounding entertainment-education programmes especially if the education message is subtly woven into the entertainment framework?

**Rogers:** Yes, ethical aspects of entertainment education programmes are very important. For any communication strategy that is powerful and that brings about strong effects, one must immediately worry about unintended consequences and other ethical aspects. First, there are special ethical aspects in quasi-experimental research designs which includes a control area in which people are not getting the benefits of the treatment intervention. One must consider these people's rights and how one is disadvantaging them. In the case of the Tanzania field experiment, we disadvantaged their personal health for two years (1993-1995) until "*Twende na Wakati*" was broadcast in the Dodoma control area. So there are grave ethical aspects. Consider an entertainment-education programme on greater equality for women. Most of us think that it would be a good thing if there were greater equality between the two genders.

But the husband of one of the women being empowered by an entertainment-education programme might view gender equality quite differently. So there are many ethical aspects when one considers a strategy that has potentially powerful effects (Brown and Singhal, 1993; Brown and Singhal, 1990). Or when one is considering a field experiment research design.

**Singhal:** A recurring theme at the World Bank-sponsored *Global Knowledge 97* conference in Toronto, which we recently attended, was the potential of new communication technologies such as CD-ROMS, multimedia, satellites, and others in fostering development. What promise or peril do the new communication technologies hold for development practice?

**Rogers:** New communication technologies have great promise in that they provide the means to connect the world in ways that it was never connected before. That has obvious advantages for people in developed countries who live at a distance, who are remote, and who are at the periphery, rather than at the center. So the promise of making freer, easier communication, and removing the effects of distance (physical and social) represent a tremendous potential of the new communication technologies.

The problem is that the new communication technologies are, at the present time, relatively expensive, and they rest on infrastructures like good telephone

connections and access to computers. These problems mean that the new technologies are presently widening the gaps between the information-rich and the information poor. This gap may be a temporary phase, for a decade or two. Then, as these communication technologies get cheaper, they will be more widely available. So think of public computer booths (like telephone booths), which are now available in a few places in the world today. New communication technologies are connecting the middle-class and upper middle-class professionals in developing countries with the world community; which has benefits for the people that these professionals serve. One can imagine a medical doctor in an urban clinic in a developing country now having improved access to technical information by means of the Internet. This benefits each of the patients that the doctor serves. Hopefully the future will write itself in directions that will benefit the information-poor as well as the information-rich.

**Singhal:** You spoke about knowledge-gaps, the promise and perils with respect to new technologies, and at this conference that we attended in Toronto, there was much talk about providing the poor with "equal access" to the new technologies. Learning from champions of the poor such as Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, or more recently, Mohammed Yunus (who established the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh), what in your opinion represents the challenges



in providing a more equal access for those who are unequal?

Rogers: In fact, we have mainly paid lip service to the idea of "equal access" until now. The two main barriers are cost, which is a very difficult barrier to remove, and policy. The march of communication technologies can make these technologies cheaper. But by that time, yet newer technologies will emerge. So it is not clear that this problem will solve itself. Cost is a big factor. The policies through which these technologies are made available is also important. If one is to follow a strict capitalistic path, one would want to sell the new technologies to as many people as possible for the highest price. Market forces are one part of the capitalistic system, which long term, should decrease the cost of the new technologies to improve competition. Whether or not

government policy encourages or discourages public access, some private companies in certain countries are setting up public computer booths by making computers available for a fee. No one is making computer use free - that would be the ultimate in equal access. The PEN project in Santa Monica, California, started in the early 1990s, was made available to the very poor and their participation greatly enriched the government and public understanding of local issues. Society benefited by having public terminals available which the homeless used. Whether we have public access policies depends on how committed we are in providing access to the poor.

Singhal: Thank you for enriching our understanding about past and present issues in development communication.

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