

Beyond the Impasse Exploring New Thinking in Communication & Social Change

Conversation between Jo Tacchi and Silvio Waisbord¹

Jo Tacchi and Silvio Waisbord were invited guest speakers at the conference ‘Beyond the Impasse – Exploring New Thinking in Communication & Social Change’ that was held at The University of Queensland in January 2013. The key objective of the conference was to explore gaps in current thinking related to communication for social change – in particular gaps that have arisen out of what seems to be a global turn towards behavioural change communication at the expense of a critique of structures, processes and the dominant political economy of communication for social change. The organisers had suggested that Jo and Silvio have a ‘keynote conversation’ as it were, and the following text highlights some of the issues that they felt were of specific concern in the area of communication and social change. These include: Participation; Scale; Praxis; Policies; New technologies.

Participation

Jo:

Let me begin with the current thinking on participation and development and communication for development. How can we move the debate forward from where it is at the moment given that participation seems to be a very contested topic?

Silvio:

I think that the basic premise, the premise of the conference, if we are acknowledging an impasse, is the sense that what we know, the premises that have been made in the past may still be relevant but it is necessary that we think through some of the gaps that may exist. I think that the format of this conference, this idea and its emphasis not on talking of what we know, but on talking more as “we think” is a good idea, because it facilitates sharing ideas with each other, acknowledging that there are many things that we may not know in terms of future directions or understanding the limitations of some of the work that has been done by us and by others. In that spirit, what I want to suggest is that we sort out the things that I think that we could think about, not because I’m totally certain that that is the right way to go, but because we do need to deal with this impasse. An impasse is defined by the fact that we know certain things need to be revisited because things have changed or things have changed either because of the

conditions of which social change is practiced or recent thinking in social sciences or because communication is changing. So, in that spirit, I want to suggest in principle two ideas:

One idea is participation being an idea that is not unique to social change or communication, but an idea that is widely explored across the social sciences. Part of the question is what it is that we bring to that discussion about participation, that provides a unique communication perspective, and I assume that what you first can say is that communication can be explored from different vantage points and fields. So the very idea of participation would give rise to very different questions in the social sciences and the humanities. So, it's a question of how do we make ourselves relevant during a time in which participation has been at the centre of research across the social sciences and the humanities. What does communication contribute particularly since we have a rich history of participation in our field? So from that perspective, I think that one direction is: how do we try to think about points of conversion between participation and strategic politics. Traditionally, in the field of communication for social change, strategic thinking or strategic communication has been seen as the opposite of participation. Participation has been on the flip side of strategic communication. Strategic communication is what other people do, not what we do. Strategic communication has to do with persuasion, with influence, with effects, with all sorts of things associated with traditional communication research. And I wonder if that really is true, in the sense that there are some ideas about strategic politics that I think that are central to participatory policy, to participatory communication, in the way we think about change. Change doesn't just happen, change is planned. In my experience in the research that I've been involved in, participation as it relates to social change, always require some kind of strategy by different actors. In terms of identifying actors, opportunities, themes, positions, certain issues, competing issues within the community or the society, how different actors agree or disagree with a common set of goals, all that stuff of strategy, strategic politics or strategic communications.

There is need for broad explorations of the links between strategic communication and participation is necessary.

What do you think Jo?

Jo:

I'm interested in that because I think that as communication scholars, and communication for social change scholars, in particular, we need to, on the one hand, shift our focus a bit from the usual focus on evaluating change amongst recipients, communities or development activities to the people delivering the development. We need to start looking at how development agents are engaging with and participating with communities rather than having to focus all the time on communities themselves and what they are doing. So, what is the role of the strategic agendas of development agencies and actors and how do they respond through participation to the needs and the environment, and the context of the people they are trying to engage with. If we could change our focus and our research from how people change their behaviour to how agents and agencies adapt their behaviour, in an adaptive way, to what they find when they start engaging with communities. That would be really interesting, and... I think... just taking a step back a bit, there are two things about participation and methodologies or research, evaluation

and so forth. One is that we need to explain research related to participation and what we mean by it. There is a real danger that when we stop talking about doing research on participation, we end up trying to measure certain things that become indicators of participation, which then in turn become the targets for development activities so, for example, if more people voting is an indicator of greater participation, this then becomes the goal, the target for participation.

Whereas what we need to do is really understand what participation means, the politics of participation, strategies of participation, and strategies of non-participation. This reminds me of work that I did in a slum in Delhi some years ago now. Ethnographic work to understand what was happening in terms of the relationship between emerging technologies and poor communities. It was part of a big four-country study. My particular part of the study was in India. It was a slum cluster in Delhi, and one of the things that struck me was the relationship between social inclusion and exclusion, and the role that technologies may play in that. It brought to the fore the idea of participation, the fact that a lot of the people in the slum cluster were exposed to strategies of non-participation and were in danger of becoming captives to institutions. So paying attention to strategies for participation and non-participation, and what participation actually means, the politics of participation, the relationships and the power, and the different economic structures is really interesting.

Silvio:

You are talking about the multiple political dimensions of participation, at the level of the community and inside the agency, and that in some ways participation can be very different across these two different levels. Can you support, let's say, participatory research methods in agencies that are not organised around participatory principles? Because if you have an organisation that prioritises a different set of considerations related to participation, it looks very complicated, and the choice can result in a very different situation, of non-participation, and disengagement because of apathy, or because of past experiences.

It is a question of rethinking, not just as a methodology but in terms as a normative horizon, in very specific contexts: institutional context, community context, in which social change happens. It sounds funny to have a political understanding of participation, which is provocative, as participation is not always seen from a political perspective. The politics of organisations, the politics of the community. And that is something that is necessary, to go beyond current understandings of participation.

Jo:

The way that I've been exploring these issues over the past few years is through ideas of voice and listening, and listening is increasingly more important to focus on, I think. Nic Couldry talks about this in his book *Why Voice Matters*. He talks about voice as process and voice as value so the difference between people having access to the airways and being able to say something and voice being appreciated and recognised and taken into account. So the value in the voice is actually what I want to talk about in terms of listening, who is listening, and does it make any difference so I think that what we can do as researchers is to really look forward and try to unpack what participation is and the political aspects of it.

Silvio:

Traditionally participation in social change and communication is seen as a question primarily of who speaks and to me, if we are serious to rethink some of this, who speaks is only one dimension of the problem, because the question as to who listens and what happens when somebody speaks are equally important. Our present day context of digital ecology makes these questions intriguing. Really, who speaks is important but who listens and what impact the speaking does in all kinds of decisions and contexts that affect people's lives – this goes totally beyond the question of who's talking. What difference does it make? So, that is why context matters in terms of the issue of voice.

The other thing I was thinking in terms of rethinking participation is the value of comparative research. We are part of a field that is very rich in terms of case studies. There literally are hundreds of documented experiences and very serious thinking about how participation happens in particular cases, although there is very little comparative research in terms of what participation, as you mentioned earlier, happens or does not happen across communities. That's the comparative question that I think is important to pursue because solid theory building requires comparative research, no matter what methodology or approach you choose. How you think the result of the lessons from certain cases are applicable in other cases – and that's interesting given that our field is multidisciplinary, it's a global field, and yet the bulk of literature on participation seems to be very interesting thick descriptions of case studies rather than accounts of thinking across communities or programs. And that's, sometimes, where I see the problem in some of our conferences where case studies abound. There is an interesting participatory experience in community X, continent B and somewhere else, and yet not an ideal, so how do we think about this in a comparative way that generates theoretical propositions that make the field stronger in ways that you can test, you can prove, helps us understand that what happened with a community in Kenya is the same or different what happened with a community in Peru. May be exactly the same thing has happened, regardless of all kinds of other differences.

Jo:

I think this is where all the methods or methodology questions are key because I've been struggling with this for some time. I am interested in people's ideas about how to approach this. I even wrote a funding application that was going to explore this but it didn't get very far because they couldn't understand what I was saying. I'm not sure if I'm communicating it here but it seems to me that as much as I dislike the idea of such an indicator, I think we need some kind of indicators or measure of participation and the only way to do that is if we have a really clear idea about what we actually understand as the "problem of meaningful participation". So, how do we do that cross-cultural comparative analysis of participation until we define and have some way of talking about what participation is, the kind of meaningful participation that we are looking for. That is an aspect of the methodological and theoretical challenge.

I think now it's the time to take that on within communication for social change because we should be well placed to do it, because we are all multidisciplinary, and have that sort of relationship to practice. We can trial things and test things. We could have, potentially, a network of researchers thinking about this. May be it's not the focus of what they do but thinking about what participation looks like in that particular site of study

or site of work. Because, to me, it's a crucial methodological question and the problem with measures and indicators is that, as I said earlier, that can become the target and focus and that's not the point of this. The point is to try to understand what in location A constitutes voice and what it means to value voice. So, may be, a community radio station in India demonstrates something really interesting that we would like to share about, not just giving people the access to the airways, but actually something more meaningful in terms of participation and if we can collect those kind of examples, they could look very, very different but the essence of them is "meaningful participation", whatever that is.

Scale

Silvio:

I think it is a question about what gaps in participatory theory would be cool to wrestle with. We need to begin with a debate of theory, as a way to understand the theoretical gaps and understanding the most interesting methodological approaches to deal with some of key question. One of these has to do with a question of scale because we have heard the story many times, that participation works best at a small scale. And I wonder if we have a way of understanding scale and what it would take to 'Scale up' from a participatory perspective. I don't have an answer to that as yet. I don't know if we have the evidence to make the argument about how that works. I think one of the question is in whose interest is Scaling up. I don't think it's a theoretical question, I think that it's more a question related to programs, donors, who have seen a number of relatively successful programs or interventions, something that only works at a very small scale and believe that it can become large scale. Unfortunately, I think we have as researchers, academics, been sort of stuck with the language from the industry around Scaling up. Instead of thinking about it as a theoretical question or a methodological question we are often overwhelmed with the industry question about how to replicate, scale up, how what worked in one community can be applied to ten communities in a district, region or in a country. I'm not sure how to approach that. My instinct as a sociologist is to look at networks in which anything that happens in a community can have ripple effects elsewhere. You can have an array of networks from communication networks to political networks and social movements ... where ideas are borrowed and applied. I'm not sure that we as theorists have wrestled with the question of scaling up, partially because it's not a question that comes from us, it's a question that comes from outside our field of enquiry and it is driven by very specific agency concerns about how we show bigger results and basically, bigger impact. It comes from people who need to show parliament how the money invested, reaches thousands of people rather than hundreds. But, that's not a theoretical or methodological question.

What do you think of the question of scale and methodology?

Jo:

I agree, I think it's sort of a development economics question, the scalability one. If you look at the work that has been done on mobile phones and mobile money, for example, mobile finances, you see very clearly that you can't just take one thing that works phenomenally well in one place and take it and place it somewhere else. There have been plenty of examples in the past of how that doesn't quite work. But the mobile money

thing probably is a really good example because they tend to be very different in different places. And the model cannot be taken from one place and placed elsewhere and have the same results, it does not work that way. But if you did it slightly differently it may work just as well so and there are plenty of examples of this. I think because I'm into ethnographic work that I appreciate that comparative dimension. I think you can learn from what we were talking about, this sort of examples of case studies or in depth understanding of something happening in one place and if you compare them across a lot of places you can actually learn from that and you can understand principles and processes that work, so it's about processes more than products, I guess. And I would also say that it's about listening or what Quarry and Ramirez talked about, seekers and learners.

So, looking for what works and then trying to understand why it works and what the process is, what successful processes are. Again, I am sort of thinking about some research that I've done in recent years. I've done some work on women and mobile phones in India and one of the things that works is the relationship between mobile phones and development and the emphasis on mobile phone research and development economics, whereas mobile phones research in other contexts is all about social networking and how people feel and relationships...

Silvio:

By economics, you mean the cost of access?

Jo:

No, so mobiles phone and ICT4D literature emphasizes how it helps economic development. On the one hand, when we look at mobiles phones in places like Australia and the US we concentrate on how people feel, relationships, social networking. When we look mobile phones in other contexts, will it help them to earn more money and get out of poverty. So, in terms of how we approach the methodologies for doing this research, there is a bit of an issue there for a start. Because we know and communication for social change knows that development is much more than economic growth, it's about participation, voice and being listened to, and recognized and having some kind of strong social and community network, and so forth. So, there is an issue with how we do research around communication and technologies in different places. But, the work that I did on women in India also taught me, which I think is one of the points that I read in your paper on strategy and participation, that if you look at women and how mobiles phones are sort of transforming their lives, what you actually find if you look closely is that their lives are transforming through broader processes and other things that are happening; and the mobile phones can extend and magnify that and be used for good. It can also be used for bad, it can have negative effects. So, we need to have that closer understanding of what's working. If we look on the surface: so one example is a woman in India, part of the Self-Employed Women Association. So, she set up her own business, she helped other women set up their business, she used to have to go to the fields at five o'clock in the mornings, stayed there until noon and then spend the rest of the day going to the markets trying to sell her crops.

With the mobile phones, she can phone up and find out where the markets were, everything became easier. She was able to set up a new business. So, on the surface that looks like mobile phones equal development or economic development; but if you

look more closely, it's actually her involvement in the Self-Employed Women Association over a number of years and the training that they were given, the support that this membership-based organization has given her, that has put her in this position in the first place. And, actually, the mobile phone is really just a communication tool.

So, we are talking about scale, I haven't forgotten that. But, you have to look a little bit deeper.

Silvio:

Well, but in what you just said, there are two ways in which it does relate to scale, which goes back to what I was mentioning earlier in terms of network. You have organisations as networks, because basically what they do is that they network people in communities, in a district or sometimes nationally. So, that's the way of thinking about why there are ripple effects in mobile networks. So, that's why I think that the idea of network is attractive because it helps understand how people are connected in ways that what happens in one place can have effects elsewhere.... that sort of perspective.

So, we always go back to the question of network, defined broadly: organisation networks, technological networks and political networks as well. Your example, I think it is very interesting because it reminds me of what used to be one of the major findings ten or twelve years ago during the first wave of information, technologies and development that when people got access to the Internet, basically they tried to use it for already felt needs rather to find out a solution to needs that they never had. So, in that case, it fits needs that women have in terms of finding out market prices for their products rather than... now that I have access to this technology I have different needs. That is something that shows that when you are talking about technology the problem that needs to be understood is people's need rather than isn't it technology beautiful because it allows you to do all kinds of things.

I think that it is extraordinary that we also fail to acknowledge as researchers that communication and media have become the ultimate commodities and there is a major market in developing countries in selling mobile communication and phones. So, there is something really tricky going on there when we tell the story of a mobile phone being the key for economic development in the community. That brings together the problem of politics and the problem of state. If we, as researchers, fail to understand what it is that the mobile phone is used for. The story that Jo described is of this woman with the capability to use this tool to adapt it to her needs. So, we have something here that we have to look at a bit more closely.

Jo:

And I think the capability that she developed over a number of years was helped with the mobile phone. This was just a tool, but the real story actually, is about her learning and realizing that she has the pride, that she can speak and she can expect people to listen. We heard lots of stories in the research that we did around this particular topic. We heard a lot of stories of women who talked about the fact, that it was only in the last few years that they became involved in SEWA, and got the courage to speak their own name in public other than their husband's name. This has all to do with the purpose of SEWA, which is about capabilities and sense of self and their ability to set up enterprises, all the training in that, to be self-sufficient and help each other. So, networking there is very,

very important. It's a membership based organization. It's a very interesting example of a very successful development initiative that supports itself because it's a network. So, scalability has so many different layers when you think about it. In terms of program, program A is very successful in one location and if we are keen to scale it, we need to understand a bit more about why it's successful, what it is that makes it successful, and understand the components of the process. As academics, that's all we can offer because it's not going to come from development agencies themselves.

Praxis

Silvio:

Even though, they are asking for magic solutions to answer the question of scaling up. Now, about practice, what do you think are the interesting questions around methodology and practice?

Jo:

The challenge is trying to innovate specially in monitoring and evaluation because of the dominant drivers and paradigms within development. June and I did this consultation with an UN interagency group about monitoring and evaluation for communication for development. One of the memorable things that we got from speaking to some of them in the UN system was that the thinking not only about communication for development, but about methods and approaches to evaluation were ten years ahead of their practice. They cannot seem to close that gap. So, I think there is an issue here about how you close that gap and it's quite complicated. Because, on the one hand there is obviously the pragmatics of the situation, and on the other hand there is a desire to innovate and experiment. There is huge pressure to deliver results within the results driven agenda and then, there is this expectation to be participatory. So, there is a tension here and I think that, methodologically, there are a few things that we need to do: one is to demonstrate that participatory approaches are rigorous and so often in what my work is trying to do in the last three or four years. Along with that the big issue is capacity development, people's ability to monitor and evaluate in a way that is meaningful to the things that are happening on the ground rather than the desires of result-based program leaders, I guess.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't have a result-based focus but we need to be able to influence what those results are and how they might be changed or re-adapted. We need more adaptable approaches and we need to somehow bring together...

Silvio:

By adaptable, you mean flexible to different set of considerations and methodology?

Jo:

And adaptive, you know, as situations change. So, at the beginning of the program you have certain goals and a traditional linear approach. You set up all items, you set up an indicator, so more adaptive approaches would revisit those. So, I think we still need to have the idea that there is a goal for these activities to achieve something but on the other hand we need to accept that we may change our opinion on what those goals are or they might change because of a change in circumstances.

So, the methodological issue is how to bring thinking around theory and methodology together with practice and build capacity. Building capacity is key, in my opinion, to this.

Policy

Silvio:

When we think about practice, our field is quite unique in communication studies in trying to unite theory and practice. When I talk to friends in colleges, working in journalism and political communication, really there is a huge distance between what they do and what's happening in the actual newsroom or election campaigns or whatever would be the equivalent of praxis in those fields. We have always been in the middle. In terms of work, we do work with agencies that are outside of academia. To me the question is that for a long time in academia we had a discussion about theory. Well, actually, the discussion should have been not about theory per se but about the uses of theory in practical contexts. We have had discussions on this divide between information and participatory approaches without really placing it in the context in which decisions are made about what kind of approach communication for social change is prioritized by different agencies.

That's why, and I think the work that Florencia Enghel is doing is very important, looking at the institutional context of political economy of communication for social change. In some ways it is sort of a low hanging fruit because all of us know somebody or something that have done work in donor organizations that make decisions about what communication approach should be prioritized, where the funding should go, what should be the indicators of success. There is a huge opportunity to understand better how institutions work, how institutions incorporate ideas from academia, how institutions make decisions about what arguments make sense, especially in the field that has been so much driven by money put by agencies ... That's all fine but we have to be aware and understand how it actually happens.

If you talk to most people who work in agencies in the aid industry, no one would say anything against participation, everybody is for it. It's like apple pie. You cannot say in a room that participation is very difficult to implement. Nice idea, come back later when you have better ideas. You can't say that participation is the new tyranny. It is the social norm in the aid world today. But that's not the problem; the problem is that we have organizations organized around bureaucratic premises providing money every six months, every year and having indicators of change defined by, I don't know, a number of kids enrolled at the school. However that and participatory thinking do not always go hand in hand, so the question that we are dealing with, with the participatory philosophy is why it's embraced by everybody in an agency world ...

Some of this is not just criticism. For example if you look at the work that Bill Gates has done around economic development. It's not a problem of who has the better economy theory to explain development or under development. His argument is that good economic ideas are not adopted by the World Bank or whatever aid industry organization for their own institutional reasons. So, it's not a matter of who has the better theoretical argument, it's what the expectations are and the priorities of aid agencies. That, to me, is a fertile ground to explore, to criticize and hopefully to make changes. "Oh that's a nice idea but it works for 100 people, we need to show to parliament that we are able to immunize thousands of thousands of kids in the country. That's what we

really care about. I don't care if we can work with mothers to understand the values of immunization or to discuss the value of immunization". That's rarely what these agencies care about because of their own institutional mandates and missions and expectations and everything else.

It's a very interesting area for critical thinking, for institutional thinking. And a sort of push needs to be there. Otherwise we are having a purely academic debate about better theories or better concepts for that discussion in many cases is ultimately decided by bureaucrats and some of my best friends are bureaucrats, who have very specific annual indicators and that's what really matters to them. Eventually, that affects much of the work and discussion that we have.

Jo:

We sort of moved into the policy in a sense. I think it's linked back to our initial discussion, that we really need to understand what participation means, what is the value of participation and be able to talk about that in our research and share it in ways that actually makes sense to institutions and agencies. And that links with how we communicate our research to policy makers or anyone else for that matter. We really want policy makers and program designers to listen to what we have to say. How do we communicate better to them? And what kind of research and methodologies do we use in order to do that? So, I think that on one hand we need to do serious research, we need to pull our research about communication and participation, what they actually mean, what we mean by those terms when we talk about communication for development, communication for social change. So, what constitutes valuable, meaningful participation? So, that's one thing.

We need to demonstrate the rigor and validity of alternative, participative approaches to research and evaluating development, including visual methodology, which Pradip talked a little bit.

Silvio:

Do you think that policy circles are responsive to those kinds of approaches?

Jo:

No, this is a big issue so I'm not sure what the way forward is but we may come to that in the next topic. I really think we need to move beyond a bifurcated model of development, where there is the dominant paradigm and there is the alternative paradigm; the results based and the participatory. Because, essentially, we work in the middle and we need to move beyond the polarization and make things work better.

Silvio:

But, also because after a while it gets very uninteresting to keep deliberating those debates about divides in the field and we need to move forward. We have all kinds of interesting documented cases about effectiveness of participation and collective action around social change, but it seems to me that we need to move on and deal with policy issues, with social mobilization and advocacy, particularly from a comparative perspective.

How do we think about participatory communication that effectively changes or fails to change policy decisions? How mobilized communities have changed policy

issues on certain problems. The first battle is how the problem is framed and defined because that leads to debate and discussion, and policy decisions around budgets and all kinds of stuff. That is something we should be probably paying more attention to, the link between participation and policy. There is a lot of valuable research about participation and voice, participation and local decision making; not as much around effective policies. We should be engaging with research around policy making, development issues, development agencies, governments, that I think, there is much to be learned from there.

In the book that Rafael Obregon edited about Global health communication, there is a very interesting chapter on mobilization around health insurance in India, from a participatory approach and social mobilization, way beyond from local community to influence policy that affected millions of people. That's one area we should pay more attention around: policy.

In the experience that I have and that I have read around mobile health, one of the key challenges has been to partner with mobile providers, around a variety of health and development issues. Without deciding to work with the government, which ultimately has the authority over licenses and regulations of telecommunications, so, basically you are begging a private mobile provider to work with you around social issues, instead of seeing how you can work in partnership with decision makers or policy makers on how you can put pressure on providers to work around social change issues. That's a way of thinking about policy.

New Technology

Jo:

We talked about the importance of deep understanding of location; we talked about the added value of looking comparatively at experiences of participation at a number of locations. I think it's really important to think about how we can locate local examples or experiences within a global social order. So, it's relevant to policy but also to new technologies. We need to look at all sorts of levels: local, national, regional, global. We can't just look at the local situation. I think new technologies may be able to help us to bring together these different examples and make them available to policy makers or make them appealing to policy makers to understand and see that.

On the one hand technology has the capacity to allow better communication of the research that we are all doing and it allows us to talk about failure, as well as successes, which is a big issue in development generally.... I'm quite interested in Fail Fair, an organization with a website, where people can bring their failures and talk about it. And I think that that is something that is missing in development because we may be able to learn from successes but we can learn a whole lot from failures.

Silvio:

I think it requires a great deal of modesty and humility to accept the limitations of anything. It's rethinking applied work and intellectual work as well, recognizing the lessons from failure more than successes. To me, it's a problem of framing, you don't have to frame it as failure, you have to frame it differently to understand the value of whatever it is that didn't seem to work according to expectations or what theories had predicted.

Well, if you are asking for money, you have to choose success. “We fail but we learned many things that everybody should know

On new technologies there are two points. First point is that everyone these days are working around technologies, it’s not something around social change or development only. My question to this is what is it that we bring that is unique, that is different from what people coming from computer sciences, political sciences or anthropology are doing. Not just to preserve some kind of disciplinary identity. It’s in terms of understanding what insight we bring.....

When I read about recent discussions about collective action, social change, the uses of technologies, looking from outside of our field, it is like we reinvented the wheel. I’ve had discussions as if we were on the 1960’s, about the wow factor of digital technologies changing society. We’ve had waves of that discussion so many times in our field. It’s boring to see other fields going through the same phase. We have had that discussion so many times and we have contributed much to that debate.

The second point is that when people have studied social change and technology outside of our field, typically what has prevailed is the protest paradigm, how people mobilize against something: a decision, an institution, policies. How technologies help people to organize better, typically, against a decision or an organization. And, actually, it’s seems to me that in our field we have looked at questions way beyond the protest paradigm and looked at questions around discussion and policy making. I remember that all the research in the 1970’s was about grassroots radio, it was not really about protesting, it was about how you bring communities around similar ideas, how you figure out problems and priorities, how you mobilize. That is very different to the question, that it’s seems to me political scientists are concerned with, organizing without organizations, particularly in western democracies. In our field we have a lot to offer, to basically ask different questions around digital technology because our field for the last 50, 60 years has been dealing with the same questions.

Jo:

There is one thing about the new communication environment, new technology, new participatory communication environment that is important for communication for social change and for development more broadly, and that’s the way that the new technologies, the new communication environment does open up a more horizontal way to people to communicate and mobilize. On one the hand that holds a lot of promises for development, of course. But, on the other hand it’s challenging to development because there is a lack of control, so the traditional sender- receiver model of old school development communication are severely challenge by this and the idea of experts and experts knowledge is incredibly challenged. And I think that’s another area that we can really explore: What constitutes knowledge and what constitutes expert knowledge in this new environment.

Jo:

It’s crucial to understand what is happening and why it is happening, and asking the follow- up questions and qualitative research around things like mobile phones uses... it’s really important. Having a solid set of comparative research on that would be really useful. The role of the state is absolutely crucial and using the example of mobile

phones again, if you look at the way mobile phones took off in India, it happened when the government changed the legislation around it and opened it up for competition. The state has a big role to play in these sorts of things. Another big jump happened when you could do the prepaid mobile phone connection rather than postpaid. So, in the slums that I've been connected with, a lot of people only started to get mobile phones when that happened because of the state. The state has a huge role to play and it's very different in different places.

Participation is embedded in donors' and agencies' policies, you have to write participation in the proposals but how participation is understood is very different on how we understand it and I think if you have to evaluate it, you have to identify what kind of participation it is. It means something different for everybody. What I have noticed is that participation in donor agency jargon is not the kind of participation that I know. The proposal won't get accepted if we don't write their kind of participation. To implement on the field is the skills things that you were mentioning, build skills. You can do a training, you see a lot of government institutions, in South East Asia, they do massive training on participatory rural appraisals but the system does not allow participation to be really implemented, there is no funding, they are not given the time to do it properly. So, it's a huge dilemma between capacity and capacity building...

Silvio:

In my experience I've seen a number of agencies from UNICEF, USAID, inclined to include participation in the so called formative research stage. They have a number of wonderful ideas of programs in a participatory fashion, using all kinds of methodologies, but they have a problem with implementation and commitment to a participatory idea. Who's going to do what? Who is going to decide indicators? Who is going to decide the timeline, how will success be measured? It gets really problematic because the agency has its own already predetermined answers to all of these questions. It doesn't have the answer to the question of understanding how the community perceives a given problem around education or malaria control but they do have a very clear indicator of what is needed to be done.

That's why understanding the place of participation within institutions is fundamental, because, again, I don't have the idea to back this up but in my observations, these institutions are more receptive to earlier stages of problem definition rather than in the phase of program implementation, evaluation, etc. And that is something that we need to know much better. You can do a lot of capacity strengthening but if the strengths are already pulled somewhere else, basically what you are building is frustrated people rather than an effective, sense of accomplishment and ownership and everything else if the results are already predetermined before anybody said anything. That is one of the contradictions in the aid industry.

Let me go back to the issue of technology. We know in the social history of technology that the use of technology was determined by institutional context rather than based on an understanding of the capabilities of technology itself. I have just completed a book on Media populism in Latin America and they have used mobile technologies and new platforms in the way you can use television, radio, in the old fashioned way. Why? Because of political interest. The technology can be used in different ways but they are limited by institutional interest. This is not a new argument for any of us because

we know what happened with previous technologies. And yet that lesson sometimes is forgotten. The cases where technologies have participatory capabilities but are not used in that way are extremely interesting to analyse. Why don't we compare successful and less than successful experiences of using digital technologies to promote participatory communication.

Jo:

There is a really nice and interesting issue on New Media and Society of mobile phone use in developing countries; you get to see exactly what you were talking about earlier, that comparison of case studies in different places, with different issues and opportunities. And what they conclude is that the enormous growth of mobile offers a huge potential but it happens differently in different places, even within these places. Another research I've been involved in doing is in a slum settlement in India which tries to deal with the complexity of connectivity as being a positive thing for development, and it is based on the examples of three women. One of the women was a wife and mother and became a widow and became a matriarch, and the study dealt with her interaction with land line communication and then mobile phone and how she used it and her purposes for using them. And in the same area, a young, quite well educated woman, whose family is helping her to become educated because they see that that is important to her future, and how she has a mobile phone and how she uses it and she really uses it for social media and communication, and her family doesn't know this because they are not literate. She doesn't have to work, she is protected. And then compared again with a third woman, who is just a little bit older, who has been married and separated and has lived with another man and has been a sex worker and supports her whole extended family because she is the only one who brings income and all her family lives up in the village.

So, three different uses of mobile phones and in some cases the land line, so it's not only the comparative focus on different countries but really digging down to understand the complexity of these spaces for use.

Note

1. This conversation on issues related to participation, scale, praxis, policy and new technology provided a framework for the paper presentations and discussions that followed. This conversation, as a presentation format proved to be engaging and enabled creativity because the two conversationists were not bound by a text but by key concepts that they were free to pursue and explain based on their many years of experience working in the area of communication for social change. A positive outcome from this conversation and others at the conference was the establishment of the series – Palgrave Studies in Communication for Social Change edited by Pradip Ninan Thomas & Elske van de Fliert. Their co-authored book in this series, *Interrogating the Theory and Practice of Communication for Social Change: The Basis for a Renewal*, attempts to continue this conversation related to gaps in the field.