

STRETCHING THE FRONTIERS OF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN A DIGITAL ERA: EMERGING CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract

The study thrust is anchored on an overview of development communication studies with a view to highlighting its conspectus, dislocations occasioned by technology, and adaptations to the exigencies necessitated by technological advancements. Galvanized by scholarly reverberations, the study sought to contextualize the challenges and prospects of development communication studies in a digitized era. Premised on the technological determinism theory the study highlights how the introduction of every new technology changes society in unexpected ways. The ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions of the theory elucidate seamless adaptations to the inevitable changes in media forms and value formation necessitated by media use. Conventional library approaches and participant cluster observation underscored the study design. Inference was drawn from a compendium of secondary data. Findings showed that development communication studies, within the Nigerian space, takes into account the unique features of diverse cultures and designs culture specific programmes to ensure widespread mobilization. It was observed that since technology drives the present world, development communication propulsions cannot defer to this reality. With digital mapping and real time data analytics as core necessities in contemporary development communication studies, the study observed a systemic vacuum in epistemology and pedagogy. With this lacuna comes a dire need for digital integration, inclusivity, and adaptability. It was therefore recommended that there must be a multi-lateral synergy among interventionist agencies, development communication scholars, and media workers to mainstream consciousness on digital integration while growing in digital literacy and proficiency. By way of global impact this study holds great relevance in the light of SDGs 11 and 16.

**Key Words - * Development Communication * Digital Era *
Frontiers * Intervention * Technology**

The Background

The area of study known as Development Communication was borne out of a growing concern to transform traditional societies to modern societies, agrarian societies to industrialized systems. Above all, there was a need to create an enabling environment where people could optimize their God given potentials. Simply put, it is all about deploying the tools of communication to develop the society. It may also be seen as using communication to engender social change.

The field of Development Communication is very unique being that it is for the truly compassionate. It is for those who love to see development in their society. It is for those who love to see best practices enthroned in their immediate environment. It is not for the greedy or the selfish. The aptitude is the desire to see improvement in key household practices. Development may really not be all about skyscrapers but a renewing of the mind by upholding simple things like using an overhead footbridge, proper waste disposal, etc. Many people know the right things to do but often times we see even the educated do the contrary. Development Communication, being against those contraries, entails:

- i) Social mobilization
- ii) Behaviour change
- iii) Advocacy
- iv) Social marketing
- v) Multi-lateral integration – theatre, folklore, traditional institutions, Faith based organizations, etc.

Theoretical Framework

The thrust of this study is anchored on the Technological Determinism theory postulated by Marshall McLuhan in 1962. The theory explains that we learn and feel and think the way we do because of the messages we receive through the current technology that is available.

Rodman (2012) explains that “the introduction of every new technology changes society, sometimes in unexpected ways” (p. 60). Pavlik and McIntosh (2013) also affirm that “technology causes certain human behaviours” (p. 454).

The ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions of the theory elucidate seamless adaptation to the prevailing medium, inevitable changes in media forms and values formation as necessitated by media use. Predictably, the theory assumes that with every new system of media technology, society will change and adapt to that technology.

In realistic terms, the invention of the social media has tremendously changed the way we live. Life in contemporary climes is to a large extent dependent on technology. In other words, technology determines our socio-cultural pace. Kelly (2014) in the foregoing context notes that “most brands recognize the power of social media and understand it is not just a passing fad” (para. 1). It is therefore not in doubt that social media parameters are far reaching with wide spread acceptance,

As it relates to this study, since the theory underpins that technological dynamics could shape the outlook of development communication studies, pedagogical dimensions may indeed warrant an investigation into the modalities and situational exigencies of such technological mediation as expressed through the integration of technological reverberations and the deployment of artificial intelligence.

The Nexus of Ethnography

Development Communication is all about people and these people live in communities bound by cultural norms. Ethnography studies communication as wrapped around language and used within a cultural setting. Development Communication is all about being different things to different people. To mingle with people, it is expected that one would have a good understanding of their ways and lifestyle as expressed through language, culture and norms. Simply put, a thorough understanding of a communication environment is a prerequisite for KAP and this is the nexus between ethnography and development communication.

“...Heal the world, make it a better place, there are people dying ...make the world a place for the living ... the late Michael Jackson could not have condensed the essence of Development Communication better. Ours is to make the society a better place because we belong to one big and happy family known as the most compassionate stream in the conspectus of communication studies.

The Praxis

Development communication is all about intervention. Intervention in this regard finds expression in the adoption of key household practices, attitudinal conditioning in the area of behaviour change and the mainstreaming of consciousness on global practices like the SDGs.

The truism is that communication is central to all human activities. Communication is the conveyor belt of change. In the light of development communication, the major focus is on its strategic use to bring about change in a desired direction. It is not in doubt that change does not seamlessly flow without resistance. Development communication serves to whittle down this resistance. The beauty of development communication is that it takes into account the unique features of diverse cultures and designs culture specific programmes to ensure widespread mobilization.

Development communication serves to empower people -communities – to take the lead in matters that affect their overall well being. That is why

development communication uses synonyms like dialogic, participatory, multi-lateral and lots more. Development communication is not manipulative, it is integrative.

It must however be noted that development communication is not all about modernization, neither does it pave the way for cultural imperialism. It is all about giving the people a sense of belonging while optimizing their potentials and paving the way for self actualization. Development communication is the oxygen of the Humanities and Social Sciences because it animates the generality of human space.

Also noteworthy is the fact that the development communication expert may not necessarily be the innovator or the initiator of the intervention. His core focus is to design a communication strategy that conveys and facilitates the intervention. A key note intervention in the face of public health concerns may be “proper hand washing.” The question is, how do you get a man of 60 who does not understand the mechanics of proper hand washing to make it habitual seeing that adults hardly change.

For development communication, the rules of engagement are the same. The steps are the same but the applications may differ. To this end, a few simulations may suffice.

Step 1 – Communication Environment Analysis: This is indeed a key step in the face of any development intervention. As aptly described, a communication environment analysis is an assessment of the physical environment where communication takes place noting potential barriers and opportunities for effective communication engagement. Assessment usually assumes two dimensions:

- a. Physical (location, climatic factors and topography).
- b. Psychological – Attitudes, beliefs, values and cultural norms

The benefits include the ability to:

- i. Project and streamline barriers
- ii. Optimize communication
- iii. Guarantee efficiency and effectiveness

Step 2 – Advocacy visits on policy makers and key stakeholders

Step 3 – Delineation of demography and psychography

Step 4 – Identification of focal persons/CDAs/FBOs

Step 5 – Message conceptualization, delivery, reception, and adoption

Step 6 – Media parley and widespread sensitization

For every step of the way, the development communication expert sends out his reports to the situation room and the catchphrase at this point is *real time* – this actually reminds one of the BVAS and iRev.

An often neglected element in the development communication matrix is evaluation. Projects must be evaluated, schemes must be appraised. The essence is to avoid the mistakes of the past and to strategize for the future. A typical example for immunization interventions is the AEFI – adverse effects following immunization. Evaluation takes the process back to the first phase thereby making it a concentric cycle.

For the development communication expert, each phase is a learning curve. Meetings must be held, terminologies must be internalized because development communication is a world of abbreviations and acronyms. Below are a few examples:

KAP – Knowledge, Attitude and practice

WCBA – Women of child bearing age

EBF – Exclusive breastfeeding

PMTCT – Prevention of mother to child transmission.

The foregoing represents the optics of a conventional development communication matrix. Going by the foregoing projection, it may not always be as seamless as projected but the beauty of it all is the innate virtue of resilience which distinguishes the development communication expert. As a corollary, the development communication expert must be resourceful, creative, and imaginative over a wide range of issues.

Development communication in the light of resourcefulness is multi-faceted being that it deploys multiple channels of communication. The use of channels of communication ought to be intentional, strategic and tactical. This has been typified as communicating by objectives. The following objectives may suffice:

- i. Creating awareness

- ii. Projecting through discussions possible challenges and ways of overcoming them
- iii. Developing special ways of addressing issues such as customized approaches
- iv. Consolidating approaches through the use of testimonials

The Discourse: Stretching the Frontiers of Development Communication for Digital Inclusivity

We can no longer pretend we have entered the digital era. As a matter of fact, technology drives the present world. Reverberations in every sphere of life are galvanized by technology as expressed in digital forms. Interestingly, development communication propulsions cannot defer to this reality. Here comes the need for integration and adaptability.

In the face of digital imperatives, the conceptualization and overall outplay of development interventions begin with the condensation of a digital dashboard. This digital dashboard often features tasks that must be carried out and the time frame for accomplishment. It is digitally wired-with digital prompts and notifications.

Then comes the issue of digital mapping which serves to supplant the communication environment analysis. An online resource sees digital mapping as the process of compiling and storing data to create a virtual image of an area. It serves the analytical purpose of problem solving and decision making. Issues of demography and psychography can be compressed into digital mapping. The same benefits run for cyber ethnography.

Again the importance of real time data comes knocking in the face of digital inclusivity. Kejariwal and Orsini(2016) note that real time data are crucial in development communication for enabling immediate decision making, rapid response to changing conditions, improving operational efficiency, enhancing community engagement and ensuring that communication strategies remain relevant and effective in dynamic environments.

For development communication to hold relevance in the present scheme there must be digital inclusivity because it is not in doubt that digital technology has the tendency to transform development communication

by making it faster, more efficient and globally accessible noting the tools of the internet, smart phones, and video conferencing.

It is not in doubt also that digital technology in the face of development communication enables immediate and real time interaction such as instant messaging, video calls and live chats. The beauty of digital inclusivity lies on the breaking of geographic and spatial boundaries. The beauty here is increased knowledge sharing and innovation.

In the face of new media integrations, development communication can also witness a boost especially in the area of behaviour change and social mobilization. If an ideological stretch of the Diffusion of Innovations theory is to be made, social media buzz using known influencers can fast track the shift from adopters to early and late majority adopters while stemming the tide of laggards.

The digital space allows for instant monitoring and evaluation. From the interplay, the development communication expert can tell exposure, likes, dislikes and adoptions. Conventional social media metrics may suffice here.

We have all witnessed the indispensable role of theatre for development in development communication. As a matter of fact, T4D is the pendulum swift in development communication interventions. Essien (2020) carried out a study titled theatre for development in contemporary Nigeria: Problems and prospects. This study notes that T4D runs on a process of conscientization. With a reference on Yola, Essien (2020) avers that:

The use of T4D to curb the incidence of HIV/AIDS was experimented in Yola. This project was carried out in Yola by the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA) in conjunction with the Adamawa State AIDS Control Committee. The exercise was predicated on the fact that in spite of the frightening statistics there was a trenchant defiance among the sexually active demographics. The use of T4D provided very rich insights by projecting to the people the stark realities of the situation. In doing so the state witnessed a sharp drop in the incidence of HIV/AIDS (para.4).

In the scheme of digital inclusivity, *T4D productions such as skits* can be up on several *YouTube channels* with widespread visibility and

actionability. This is the case of one chasing a thousand in a non-digital era and two chasing ten thousands in a digital era.

The tools of development communication are also borne on the wings of advocacy and social mobilization as expressed through features, advertorials, editorials and docu-series. With the realization that the present times seem to be galvanized by artificial intelligence there is therefore the need to empower advocacy towards enhancing development communication interventions using Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven initiatives. The core focus is on pitches and media content.

By way of advocacy, the deployment of AI can significantly enhance efficiency, effectiveness and content delivery through the deployment of speech-to-text and text-to-speech technologies. What this means is that the use of AI will definitely create a platform for technology to merge with human creativity. The benefits of AI in development communication initiatives are truly overwhelming. They include but not limited to:

- i. Content personalization in line with demographics
- ii. Guaranteed audience engagement through interactive content
- iii. Fact checking
- iv. Voice generation and transcript.

A typical example as described by Prato (2024) is the integration of *Klara Indernach*, an advanced AI system into the *Express de newsroom*. According to him:

Klara is not just a tool; she is positioned as a digital colleague, a humanized avatar that journalists interact with daily... Klara's capabilities include structuring texts, conducting extensive research and summarizing vast information swiftly. This significantly improves the efficiency of content creation and ensures the delivery of high quality, accurate articles tailored to audience preferences (para. 4)

It is not in doubt that if we as development communication scholars engage the shift in digital inclusivity posterity will irrevocably position us as scholars who dared the odds to make a difference in the affairs of men.

The good news is that this convocation is timely bearing in mind the underlying data:

- i. Internet(broadband) penetration in Nigeria is 48.81%
- ii. Internet subscription in Nigeria stands at 142 million
- iii. Internet use growth rate in Nigeria is 21.75%

(Source – *The Punch* -14/07/2025)

The inference is that we are ripe for digital inclusivity. Our task therefore is to ensure that everyone regardless of background, ability or location begins to equitably and safely access, use, and benefit from digital technologies in most development communication encounters. This simply entails the mainstreaming of consciousness towards global best practices. Posterity truly beckons and we as scholars need to urgently engage in the sail.

The Way Forward

1. There must be multi-lateral synergy among interventionist agencies, development, communication scholars, media workers and society to mainstream consciousness on digital integration in the sensitization and adoption of key household practices as well as other development communication interventions.
2. Communication educators and development communication experts must make concerted efforts to grow in digital literacy and proficiency.
3. Theatre for development and educational broadcast programmes that address development initiatives can going forward be tailored to align with digital configurations.

Post Script

Knowledge is power and an empowered society using the instrumentality of knowledge is one that is configured on the path of sustainability where the web of ignorance is broken and the mind liberated with assurances for the optimization of human potentials. We are by the gains of this conference stepping into a new world order where the contextualization of development communication studies in the digital era as a web of

abstractions will be systematically relegated to the micro-dots of footnote punctuations – that world beckons even as our discourses evolve.

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