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Everett M. Rogers and His Contributions to the Field of Communication and Social Change in Developing Countries

Srinivas R. Melkote

The death of Professor Everett M. Rogers in 2004 was a profound loss to the scholarly communications fraternity in general and the development communications community in particular. From the early 1960s up to his last days, Professor Rogers’ scholarly writings and research influenced the fields of development communication, diffusion of innovations, communication technology, research and theory, as well as five generations of scholars in these fields. In this article I summarize the literature and development in developing countries, highlighting Professor Rogers’ seminal contributions to the body of this work.

The passing away of Professor Everett Rogers has been a profound loss to the field of development communication. His contributions to diffusion of innovations, communication history, new media research and development communication have been legendary. The writing of this festschrift has reinforced the influence Ev’s work and mentoring has had on my intellectual growth from the time I was an undergraduate student of communications at Osmania University. In this article I wish to summarize the literature in communication and development in developing countries, highlighting Ev’s seminal contribution to the body of this work.

DOMINANT PARADIGM OF DEVELOPMENT

A dominant paradigm guided intellectual thinking and practice in the scholarly field of socio-economic development, which was influential in development communication theory and practice as well. Rogers (1976a: 121) noted that, ‘This concept of development grew out of certain historical events, such as the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the United States, the colonial experience in Latin America, Africa, and Asia; the quantitative empiricism of North American social science, and capitalistic economic/political philosophy.’ Actually, there was no single definition of the dominant paradigm, nor was there even a concise description
of this in the 1950s and the 1960s. It was Rogers (1976b) who first distilled the main elements in this model of development:

Economic growth and scientific values constituted key themes in development as a solution to underdevelopment. Many problems plaguing third world nations were diagnosed as economic in nature. As Rogers (ibid.) noted, economists were ultimately in charge of development plans. Five-year plans were launched in several countries to dovetail development activities and help bring about orderly economic progress. This was at the macro level. Problems were identified and solutions offered at the higher levels of government. Information and other inputs were then channelled down to local communities. Participatory or autonomous development by local communities was considered slow, inefficient and, more often than not, unlikely (Melkote and Steeves 2001).

Developing countries were encouraged to invest in a programme of industrialization such as big hydroelectric projects, steel industries and a diversity of manufacturing units, thus imitating the developed countries in North America and Europe. Development performance was measured by quantitative indicators such as gross national product (GNP) and per capita income. These indicators were considered objective and straightforward to measure, especially when compared with alternative concepts such as freedom, justice and human rights. They also related to the quantitative and empirical bias of North American social sciences (Nordenstreng 1968; Rogers 1976b).

The 1960s was a period of great optimism. The United Nations named it the First Development Decade and set goals for economic growth in developing countries. These goals represented key United Nations donor agencies, primarily the World Bank, and were largely consistent with the goals of the newly forming bilateral aid organizations. During the First Development Decade the emphasis was on technological transfer from the North to the South. It made unquestionable sense that people in the third world discard their traditional ways and adopt the technologies that had brought such extraordinary progress in the advanced countries of the North. Rogers (1976c) labelled this as a pro-innovation bias. It has held fast to this day, though the innovations have changed over time, and new themes and biases have emerged as well.

Modernization at the Micro Level

All modernization theories emphasizing social change were not necessarily at the macro level. While social and institutional evolution was considered necessary for modernization, some argued that this could not occur unless individuals changed first (Weiner 1966). The intellectual source for this school of thought was Weber’s (1964) thesis on the ‘Protestant ethic’ and the general trend in American sociology on value-normative complexes. These scholars posited that modernization of developing countries was dependent on changing the character of individuals living there to resemble more closely the attitudinal and value
characteristics of people in Western Europe and North America (Hagen 1962; Inkeles 1966; Lerner 1958; McClelland 1966). Ev Rogers in his book Modernization Among Peasants (1969) studied peasants and subsistence farmers in India, Nigeria and Colombia, as they constituted a majority of the rural population in these and other developing countries. Consistent with the prevailing theories at that time, he assumed that modernization could not occur unless peasants were individually and collectively persuaded to change their traditional ways of life. Rogers’ research indicated a subculture of peasantry that was characterized by 10 elements.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

While scholars and policy makers were making macro-level arguments and funding experiments on the role of the media in supporting modernization, the diffusion of innovations theory gradually evolved as the local-level framework to guide communications planning for modernization. Diffusion of innovations also had important theoretical links with communication effects research. The emphasis was on particular communication effects, especially the ability of media messages and opinion leaders to create knowledge of new practices and ideas, and persuade the target to adopt the exogenously introduced innovations.
The notion of exogenously induced change permeated assumptions of fundamental concepts in diffusion research. The earliest definition of development was a type of social change in which new ideas are introduced into a social system in order to produce higher per capita incomes and levels of living through more modern production methods and improved social organization (Rogers 1969: 18). Modernization, or the ‘development’ of the individual, was seen as ‘the process by which individuals change from a traditional way of life to a more complex, technologically advanced, and rapidly changing style of life’ (ibid.: 48). The necessary route for this change from a traditional to a modern person was understood as the communication and acceptance of new ideas from sources external to the social system (Fjes 1976). In the dominant paradigm communication was visualized as the central link through which exogenous ideas entered local communities that were considered as closed systems by diffusion scholars. Diffusion of innovations then emphasized the nature and role of communication in facilitating further dissemination within local communities. In sum, the diffusion of innovations research established the importance of communication in the modernization process at the local level.

Rogers’ work has been central in this area. He identified the following main elements in any analysis of diffusion of an idea or innovation: innovation, its communication through certain channels, among members of a social system, over time (Rogers with Shoemaker 1971). The year 1960 was a watershed in the export of diffusion studies from the West to developing nations. This period saw a sharp increase in the number of diffusion studies globally. Rogers posited that diffusion research and practice that investigated the flow of technological innovations in third world communities immensely helped planners and other local officials as the research findings yielded both a theoretical framework as well as an evaluation methodology for development agencies (Rogers and Adhikarya 1979). Another factor for the significant rise in the popularity of diffusion studies in many developing countries was the importance of diffusing innovations in the area of family planning. Overpopulation and rising birth rates in the third world were considered as serious obstacles to development. So, surveys of knowledge, attitudes and adoption of family planning innovations peaked during the 1960s and the early 1970s. By 1973 these surveys provided much-needed evaluations of family planning communication campaigns in 72 nations (Rogers 1973).

Over time the diffusion theory proved to be inadequate as a guide for communications planning in development campaigns. In many areas it has now been replaced by the principles and methodology of social marketing, which provides a model for the strategic, scientific determination of message and message strategies to promote social causes (Kotler 1984; Piotrow et al. 1997). In the third world context, major themes have included family planning, equal status for women, responsible sexual relationships, adult literacy, responsible parenthood, and HIV/AIDS prevention and control (see Singhal and Rogers 1999).
By the 1970s it became increasingly clear in Asia and in Latin America that socio-economic structural constraints greatly diminished the power of mass media in overcoming problems of development (Beltran 1976; Rogers 1976a). The process of development was not as straightforward and clear-cut as conceptualized earlier. And the mass media, far from being an independent variable in the change process, were themselves affected by many extraneous factors. Much of the earlier communication research with its exaggerated emphasis on the individual blame causal hypothesis regarding underdevelopment obfuscated the social-structural, political and institutional constraints acting against the individual’s efforts to change. Scholars contended that there was a benign neglect of social-structural and political constraints on development because ‘alien premises, objects, and methods’ (Beltran 1976) influenced the field of communication research. The mass media in particular were criticized for: (a) their trivial and irrelevant content (Shore 1980); (b) giving rise to a revolution of rising frustrations (Lerner 1958) in developing nations; and (c) increasing the knowledge gap (Tichenor et al. 1970) between the advantaged and disadvantaged sectors of a population.

Starting in the mid-1970s, ferment in the field of development and the role of communications/media in the development process led to disenchantment with the dominant paradigm. While Ev Rogers had played an important role in strengthening the postulates of the dominant paradigm through his work in modernization of developing societies and the diffusion of innovations, he was one of the first to admit to significant problems with the earlier models and theories in development and communication. First, he redefined the meaning of development, moving away from the earlier technocratic, overly materialistic and deterministic models. Rogers defined the ‘new’ development as ‘a widely participatory process of social change in a 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’ (Rogers 1976c).

Rogers (ibid.) outlined alternative approaches to development that indicated several new goals for meaningful and real development in the third world: (a) equity in distribution of information and other benefits of development; (b) active participation of people at the grassroots, (c) independence of local communities (or nations) to tailor development projects to their own objectives; and (d) integration of old and new ideas, traditional and modern systems, endogenous and exogenous elements, to constitute a unique blend suited to the needs of a particular community. Rogers (ibid.: 141) summarized the chief roles of communication in self-development efforts. He suggested that they:

1. provide technical information about development problems and possibilities, and about appropriate innovations, in response to local requests; and
2. circulate information about the self-development accomplishments of local groups so that other such groups may profit from the experience and perhaps be challenged to achieve a similar performance.

The role of mass media, then, in self-development efforts was of a catalyst in change rather than serving as the prime mover. In these approaches, the role and place of communication in social and behavioural change was radically different from the postulates of the modernization paradigm.

Participatory Communication Strategies

As indicated earlier, many scholars and practitioners over the past three decades have favoured active participation of the people at the grassroots. On the surface, these signalled a positive departure from the earlier overly top-down and prescriptive approaches. However, the structure of elite domination was not disturbed. Diaz-Bordenave (1980) noted that in these new approaches, the participation that was expected was often directed by the sources and change agents. In these so-called bottom-up approaches to development, people were induced to participate in self-help activities, but the basic solutions to local problems were already selected by the external development agencies. Critics argue that true participation should encourage social and political action by the people at all levels.

Participatory communication models have suffered from a lack of a theory of participation. Some scholars have posited that Habermas’s theory of communicative action (Habermas 1984, 1989) provides an analytical approach to the problems of definition and scale of participatory activities including communication (see Jacobson 2003). Jacobson argues that Habermas’ theory of social action provides a framework for distinguishing between different types of communication in social change utilizing the theory’s typology of action types.

EMPOWERMENT AS AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Although the practice of participatory communication has stressed collaboration and co-equal knowledge sharing between the people and experts, and a local context and cultural proximity, the outcome in most cases has not been true empowerment of the people, but the attainment of some indicator of development as articulated in the modernization paradigm. Thus, participatory approaches have been encouraged, though the design and control of messages and development agendas usually have remained with experts. Also, issues of power and control by the authorities, structures of dependency, and power inequities have not been addressed adequately within third world settings (Wilkins 1999). Thus, most approaches, including the participatory model, have been essentially old wine in new bottles.
The post-modernist deconstruction of the participatory development paradigm puts the focus squarely on the contemporary power relations in society and the structures of inequities that they create and strengthen. For ‘real’ social change for individuals and groups trapped in the margins, the search is for development communication models and analytical tools that can address and overcome these systemic barriers. Two areas/concepts that look fruitful in this endeavor are participatory action research (PAR) and empowerment strategies.

Participatory Action Research

PAR encompasses an experiential methodology. In this process the people on their own develop methods of consciousness raising or critical awareness of their existential situation; the knowledge that is generated or resuscitated is by collective and democratic means; and this is followed by reflection and critical self-evaluation, leading to endogenous participatory social action. This in essence forms the praxis (Rahman 1991). PAR has emerged as a forceful methodology-cum-action approach, principally as a reaction to the degradation of the economic and social conditions of poor and marginalized groups. PAR is dedicated to resuscitating both the power of marginalized people and their popular knowledge. The knowledge that PAR attempts to generate is specific, local, non-Western and non-positivist. Importantly, it is used to initiate collaborative social action to empower local knowledge and wrest social power inherent in knowledge away from the privileged (Friesen 1999).

Empowerment

It is usually futile and may be even unethical for communications and human service professionals to help solve minor and/or immediate problems while ignoring the systemic barriers erected by societies that permit or perpetuate inequalities among citizens. Certainly sustainable change is not possible unless we deal with the crucial problem of lack of economic and social power among individuals at the grassroots. Over 30 years ago Latin American communication scholars such as Beltran (1976) and Diaz-Bordenave (1976), among others, observed the oppressive social, political and economic structures that exist in developing countries and that constitute barriers to progressive social change. Yet most of the models and strategies that followed have failed to address these constraints directly. Individuals are impoverished or sick or are often slow to adopt useful practices, not because they lack knowledge or reason, but because they do not have access to appropriate or sustainable opportunities to improve their lives. This is an issue of power. Unless we are willing to recognize this and act on it, our work will either be ineffective or superficial, functioning as temporary band-aids for far larger problems. If development communication is to continue to play an effective role in social change processes, researchers and practitioners must address fundamental problems of unequal power relations.
The importance of organizing for social change that facilitates empowerment, especially at the grassroots, has gained ground in the last two decades and promises a bright future for the emerging area in communication for empowerment. Arvind Singhal and Ev Rogers (2003) summarize the objectives of this theoretical approach as combining elements of organizational communication and development communication in order to understand the process through which a group of disempowered individuals gain control of their future (p. 73). One of the earliest documented examples of an effective local organization concerns the mothers in the Korean village of Oryu Li (Rogers and Kincaid 1981). The group of women progressed to larger self-help projects buoyed by the success of their initial attempts to organize. In the long run some of the power held by males shifted to others in the community, leading to empowerment of marginalized groups, especially women. A more recent success story concerns women dairy farmers in Gujarat, India. This project in leadership training and organization building led to an increasing sense of empowerment among marginalized women farmers, more effective dairy cooperatives and greater milk production. Another frequently cited case study is the Grameen Rural Bank in Bangladesh organized by Mohammed Yunus that significantly empowered poor women and concomitantly brought positive development to the communities (see Singhal and Rogers 2003).

The implication for development support communication (DSC), then, is a reconceptualization of its role. Greater importance will need to be directed to the organizational value of communication and the role of communicative efforts in empowering citizens. In essence, what I am advocating for DSC is a move away from effecting ‘development’ (as articulated by the dominant paradigm and the helping professions) to assisting in the process of empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Empowerment may take a long time to mature and achieve significant results. The individuals and communities at the periphery of the social, economic, political or cultural spectrum of a society should, at a minimum, have the capacity to: (a) perceive and articulate their social, historical, economic and political realities; (b) operationalize their needs; (c) identify resources they need; (d) identify, articulate and operationalize possible solution alternatives; (e) identify and gain access to individuals, agencies or organizations that are crucial to meeting their needs or solving their problems; (f) build communication skills such as presenting issues cogently; (g) gain skills in conflict resolution, negotiation and arbitration; and finally (h) be able to organize and lead. These skills are unevenly distributed among people in a society, with individuals at the margins worse off. This provides a useful niche to development support.
communication workers and scholars to assist as facilitators or enablers in the empowerment process.

Achieving empowerment is not an easy task. It not only requires dealing with enclaves of power and influence that are deeply anchored in global and national structures, but also the active participation of individuals and communities in intervention efforts affecting their welfare. However, it is the right thing to do if we are truly interested in appropriate and sustainable social change.

EPILOGUE

Ev Rogers played a big part in my intellectual development as a critical scholar. As an undergraduate student of communication in the early 1970s, I was introduced for the first time to the writings of Rogers (1962, 1969, 1971 [with Shoe Mater]). To an undergraduate student still not sure about his academic area of interest, these readings helped develop a strong interest in the field of development communication; I was even motivated to go to a postgraduate school and hone my knowledge of communication and development theory as well as my research skills in empirical methods. Both in the M.A. and later in the M.Phil. programmes in India, I delved deeper into this field and used Rogers’ books and other writings as my guide to theory, methodology and practice. Family planning studies were very popular in India at that time and I did a KAP survey for my M.Phil. thesis using Rogers’ Communication Strategies for Family Planning (1973) as my personal guide. In 1980 I travelled to Ev’s home state of Iowa to specialize in communication and development. As a graduate student at the University of Iowa, I wrote a thesis that critically evaluated the contribution of diffusion of innovations research to development communication theory. I was fascinated by Ev’s phenomenal contribution to this body of research.

Ev Rogers was intellectually active until his very last days. His thirst for new knowledge and his commitment to the field of communication and social change was legendary. He will remain an inspiration to me and, hopefully, to all other scholars and students in our field.

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