BOOK REVIEW
Development Communication: Reframing the Role of the Media
THOMAS L. MCPHAIL, Edited
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“Development Communication: Reframing the Role of the Media” explores the current state of development scholarship, reliance, and implementation of the mass media as a strategic tool for modernizing. While recognizing the failures of the concept, the authors did a good job adding new voices and subjects in an attempt to suggest ways the promise of using the mass media to promote modernizing could be achieved.

For about thirty-five years, the viability of the concept of development communication as a vehicle for promoting socioeconomic development in the developing world has been a subject of intense debate. Credited with helping the transformation of Europeans’ economies following World War II as the United Stated undertook the Marshall Plan --- the success in the Northern Hemisphere prompted its proponents to transfer it to the developing countries in Africa and Asia as they emerged from colonial domination. It was also introduced in Latin America.

Like Europe, the introduction was aimed at transforming economies and promoting political pluralism in the Southern Hemisphere. As a modernization concept, proponents contended that development could be used as an instrument or vehicle to educate traditional people to compel them to move from their cultural, political, and socioeconomic practices and backwardness by embracing western pluralism. More than three decades after its introduction in the developing world, the concept came under attack. The attack stems from its “top down” approach and failure to deliver on the promise of enhancing socioeconomic welfare of
Southerners as its Northern proponents predicted. Most of these countries retrogressed economically instead of making progress. Rather than assisting with the socioeconomic and political development in the new nations, the concept, which was propelled by U.S. foreign aid, was blamed for being tainted with political ideology and imperialistic bent. Southerners viewed it as political tool because it became increasingly entangled with foreign aid that Western allies used as a buffer against communism. Critics alleged that the concept was to institute corrupt authoritarianism as long as such regimes opposed communism. Its “top-down” approach was also attacked for dictating to Southerners and undermining traditional culture and ideologies through the promotion of Western values via superior media technologies and artifacts.

Detractors called for the reconstruction of the development communication concept by undertaking corrective measures. The corrective measures include the recognition of local cultures, values, and instituting “bottom up” approach that make room for the participation of the residents of the Third World; critics underscored the need to engage traditional practices and values instead of the West’s. The critics of mainly economic-oriented modernization theories pointed out if traditional values and cultures are involved it will inculcate that those involved in development have more control of their destinies. Despite these criticisms and calls for reframing, Northerners approach reigned supreme a result of political pressure; aided with the fact the West controlled the purse strings. Northern proponents implied the problem did not lie with the concept but its implementation and lack of infrastructures in the developing world. This opposing stance is the subject of introspection, Development communication: Reframing the role of the media, edited by Thomas McPhail’s, which redefined development communication as “the process of intervening in a systematic or strategic manner with either media (print, radio, telephony, video, and the Internet), or education (training, literacy, schooling) for the purpose of positive social change. The change could be economic, personal, as in spiritual, social, cultural or political,” (McPhail, 2009, p. 3).

Consisting of a preface and eleven chapters, it offers a historical background of economic modernization and liberation theories tied to development communication. The book explored cultural imperialism, participatory communication, and education-entertainment developed in the South to replace economically driven western theories of modernization. As agent of spreading the concept of economic
development, the book explored the role of the United Nations and its specialized foundations, donor-and-recipient governments, as well as non-government organizations (NGOs).

With the rise of information and communication technologies and growing impact on world trade and socioeconomic development, the book conceptualized the role of information and communication technologies, while addressing the current digital divide that exist within and across nations. Chapter 8 dealt the role of women in development through the lens of feminism. Two case studies: India’s Sonagachi Project (Chapter 9) and Roma Project (Chapter 10) represented a key strength of text. The Indian study explored HIV/AIDS education and prevention, while the Roma Project dealt ways of incorporating one of Europe’s most marginalized people into European economic mainstream. Both case studies relied on participatory communication and other reframed forms of development communication. While both registered some degree of success and promises, the key problem of determining overall effectiveness remained elusive.

Drawing from the previous chapters, the eleventh offered several suggestions for the future. These include increased participation of marginalized people, understanding their values instead of imposing western ideologies, eschewing politics from development projects, enhancing the role of United Nations and its agencies, addressing environmental concerns and working to develop economic infrastructures including media technologies. Speaking of the development of infrastructure such as those concerned with information and communication technologies, the book’s effort to re-conceptualize the role of technology and the impact of digital divide was found wanting considering its failure to fully address the concept of “communications development.” Communications development as a concept deals with policies and efforts undertaken by Third World governments to acquire and maintain communication facilities (Moemeka, 1994; Alozie, 2005). Despite these shortcomings, the book did a good job of adding new voices to the debate, considering the role of feminism, taking an apolitical tone, shedding light on the role of religion in development and relying on case studies to explore the effectiveness of the reframed concepts of development communication.

McPhail should be thanked for editing this volume by using simple and understandable language instead of falling in the trap of relying on technical academic language. That effort makes the text accessible to non-academics.
such as diplomats, government officials and aid workers. The book will be of great use to scholars, undergraduate, and graduate students who are interested in economic development of the developing world in an increasingly interconnected global economy where there is an increased need to control limited resources to enhance human welfare.

REFERENCES