

VIEWPOINT

THE ADVANTAGES AND LIMITS OF A “FULL-SPECTRUM” APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT (C4D)

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Abstract

This Viewpoint essay is dedicated to communication practitioners across the globe, and to my former doctoral-student self, who once-upon-a-time sought clear definitions and descriptions of communication for development (C4D), but found clarity only after consulting multiple resources. I never found a short summary resource, which is what I have endeavored to provide here. I present in this essay a “full-spectrum” approach to communication for development in order to synthesise, complement, and in some cases challenge what has been documented elsewhere. I propose additional analytical categories and concepts to illustrate the benefits and challenges of a full-spectrum approach. My aim is to invite reflection and discussion about what it means to go broader and deeper when we communicate to inspire action and promote positive social change in communities. It is my hope that the concepts and domains presented as the “full-spectrum” approach might be useful (and used), by the designers, implementers and researchers of communication interventions.

What is a “Full-spectrum” approach and why do we need it?

The last thing communicators working in development and social change need is a new name for what we do. New approaches? Sure. New ways to measure? Definitely. But a new name for something that already exists, and which has already been re-branded multiple re-times? This is less helpful.

Over the past twenty years, we have seen various names and definitions for the use of communication to promote positive social change. Communication as a term represents an ever-evolving and diverse range of techniques, channels, and tools. In fact, the term communication means so many things to so many people that it requires some qualification to be useful in the context of development and social change.

Most in the United Nations use the term Communication for Development (C4D), which has been defined as:

...a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods. It seeks change at different levels, including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change. It is not public relations or corporate communications (Rome consensus, 2007; McCall, 2011).

Other development practitioners highlight the distinction between individual and community-level change through their use of the term *Social and Behaviour Change Communication* (SBCC). I've recently noted a trend to drop the word communication altogether, favouring instead *social and behaviour change* — full stop.

Regardless of the term you might prefer or use in your own social change work, chances are good that your term of choice covers the following approaches:

1. *Communication for action* (also called “*behaviour change communication*”) which aims to promote behaviour change or inspire individual-level actions. Smoking is a behaviour many seek to prevent or change. Registering a child's birth, voting and recycling are actions we often promote.
2. *Social mobilisation* (also called *community mobilisation*) which is a process of bringing together multiple partners and allies to support a particular development objective. An example of social mobilisation is when government agencies, associations, and community members collaborate in a mass effort (thousands of people) to go house by house to communicate with parents and vaccinate children against polio (Obregon & Waisbord, 2010).
3. *Advocacy* is the act of communicating with leaders and decision-makers to attempt to influence their decision towards committing resources or political and social leadership on a given issue. The Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa used a combination of advocacy and social mobilisation (public protest) to pressure the government to increase access to anti-retroviral medications for people living with HIV/AIDS¹ (Heywood, 2009).

On occasion, descriptions of communication for development/social change include a fourth approach:

4. *Strengthening media capacity*. A fourth strategy, described by United Nations agencies, seeks to build an enabling media and communication environment

¹ For more information on the Treatment Action Campaign, see : <https://tac.org.za/>. About the combining of approaches, see also, C-Change (2011) C-Modules: A Learning Package for Social and Behaviour Change Communication. Washington, DC: FHI 360/C-Change, Module 0, p. 22: <https://c-changeprogram.org/focus-areas/capacity-strengthening/sbcc-modules>.

by increasing the capacity and accountability of communication/media professionals through training and strengthening institutional infrastructure and capacity. An “enabling environment” has been described as a “prerequisite” for effective Communication for Development (McCall, 2011, p. 8).

One or more of the above four approaches can also be combined, as is illustrated with the Treatment Action Campaign example from South Africa where social mobilisation and advocacy were used together to pressure the government to commit resources and adopt new policies to support people living with HIV.

One of the most-common ways to visually display C4D approaches is through the socio-ecological model of psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977), who popularised the notion that individual behaviour and action are influenced by environmental and societal forces. The socio-ecological model reminds C4D intervention designers and implementers to always view individuals and communities in context, and in relationship with one another.

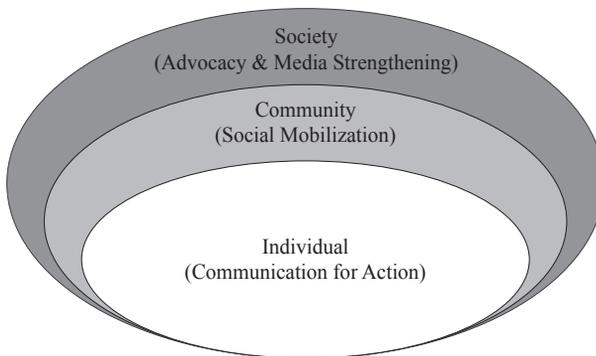


Figure 1: A Socio-ecological Approach to Communication for Development

The socio-ecological model has been adopted and adapted by C4D practitioners with the various communication approaches grafted onto the different layers of society. It happens this way: behaviour change communication, or “communication for action,” occurring at the individual level, social mobilisation at the neighborhood or community level, and media strengthening and advocacy happening at the national or societal level. These pairings are not set in stone, however, as one might strengthen the capacity of staff at a local radio station (community level), and one might also seek to “change the behaviour” of a corrupt government official at the national level. As with any theory or conceptual framework, the socio-ecological model is best seen and used as an adaptable guide, rather than a set of rigid categories and rules.

To complement the socio-ecological model as a conceptual framework and planning tool that can be used in the design of C4D interventions, the “full-spectrum” approach presents a set of domains that can help designers and implementers in the analysis and planning stages of their work.

Why a “Full-spectrum” Approach?

The full-spectrum approach is an analysis and planning tool that I have used and adapted during my 15 years as a researcher and implementer working in communication for development in a number of contexts and countries. As part of the communication team working in polio eradication for UNICEF in Chad and Pakistan, I found that I needed a way to capture the range of tools at our disposal, and to also describe the domains where we intervened, and were consistently challenged. I was also seeking new ways to describe C4D interventions that used and/or combined new technologies, including social media and mobile-phone based tools (SMS, WhatsApp, etc.).

To illustrate the domains of the full-spectrum approach to C4D, I will use an example from recent work colleagues from Equal Access International and I have been involved in while partnering with community radio stations in the Sahel to shed light on how these domains can be useful for designing, planning and implementing C4D interventions.

The Six Domains of Full-spectrum Approach

A full-spectrum approach to communication for development is one that makes use of one or more “vertical domains” (ground, air and cloud), while operating within one or more “horizontal domains”: (material, service, action).

The vertical domains represent ways to describe how we communicate, the techniques and tools we use, ranging from interpersonal and small-group communication (ground), to mass media (air), and new web-based media and tools (cloud).

The horizontal domains represent ways to describe *where* we communicate, within material spaces such as health centres and radio stations, within the service domain, which includes work and capacity strengthening for service-sector staff and volunteers, whether health centre personnel or pro-bono radio presenters, and within the action domain, which is where we aim to inspire dialogue and action (or new/changed “behaviour,” to use a more reductive term).

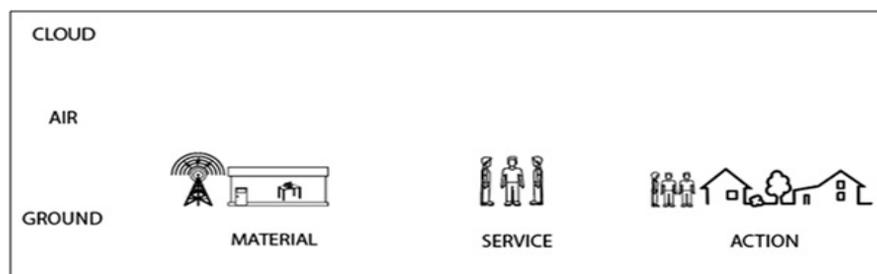


Figure 2: The Six Domains of the Full-spectrum Approach

I used the image above in a recent workshop for community reporters in Northern Cameroon. As service-side actors working for social change, the community reporters described challenges they found particularly difficult within the material domain of their work. They said they were often disappointed when a transmitter was broken, or when there was no electricity, because the radio programmes they had helped create through their interviews with community members could not be broadcast.

Jean Michel N'diaye, former Representative of UNICEF Cameroon, helped me understand the three horizontal domains of communication for development through an analogy he developed to describe the challenges of routine immunization. "Imagine a restaurant that has great food, but terrible service," he began. "Clients may come at first, but eventually they will stay away because no one likes rude or incompetent service".

He continued: "And if you have great service but your food is spoiled because your refrigeration system isn't working, you will also fail to attract clients". He went on to say that what is true for restaurants is also true in the realm of vaccination. Without vaccines, or a cold-chain to keep them protected, there can be no vaccination. If vaccinators are rude, incompetent or poorly trained, vaccination efforts will suffer. And if there is not community demand, no client, the presences of vaccines and good service are wasted. In communication for development we always need to ensure that there are sufficient supplies and services for the client-side demand we aim to generate.

When there are problems within the service or material domains, we can either address them through capacity strengthening and material procurement, or we can decide to shift our communication efforts to areas with sufficient supplies and service to meet demand. In my work with Equal Access International, a non-profit organisation working in media and community engagement, we often support radio stations both materially and technically so that they can produce their own programmes, and also broadcast the social change programmes we co-create with communities with the help of community reporters.

The work and words of another personal mentor influenced the development of the vertical domain of the full-spectrum approach, ground-air-cloud. While I was at Ohio University, Arvind Singhal shared with me his research on entertainment education² radio dramas in India, where he described how mass media and interpersonal communication were both essential to shift gender-related social norms in India. He described how both the "air cover" of the radio drama and the "ground mobilisation" of both service delivery and interpersonal communication were effectively combined to influence and positively shift gender norms related to education, women's health and early marriage (Singhal et al., 2003 & Singhal, 2010).

² Entertainment-education is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change the overt behavior of individuals and communities (Singhal, 2010, p. 2).

To complement the ground and air domains already described in Singhal's work, I added the cloud domain in 2011 together with Parisa Nabili, of UNICEF Guatemala, who had led the impressive "Te Toca" (it's your turn) child-protection initiative. The "Te Toca" initiative layered multiple realms of communication in Guatemala to reach community members across the entire country, and to reach them in a deeper way than a mass-media-only approach would allow.

- GROUND: Live events and community dialogues.
- AIR: Mass media coverage, through radio and television.
- CLOUD: Online resources for communities, journalists and policy makers.

"Te Toca" was designed to invite reflection, dialogue and action on multiple child protection issues ranging from child-labour, sexual exploitation and the use of violence to discipline children in school. Adding the "cloud" realm through web-based resources for journalists allowed the media to access resources which increased and improved their coverage of child protection issues (Greiner, 2017). Unlike "transmedia" campaigns, or "community engagement" efforts in the commercial sector, where the web is a place to continue to communicate and market TO others, the cloud domain in communication for development is used as a means for community actors to access resources and/or create new content that complements, but does not replicate, what is being communicated through mass media and on-the-ground through interpersonal communication.

Cloud-based mass media materials allowed Te Toca resources to be accessed by a wide range of individuals, including concerned community members who wanted to act (and to view the materials at the time/place of their choosing), communication professionals who were willing to serve as multipliers, and influential decision-makers who were seeking up-to-date information on social and child protection issues.

In Northern Cameroon, the community reporters mentioned previously have begun supplementing their efforts to promote peace and democracy through radio by using Facebook Live to stream broadcasts of themselves conducting live call-in shows with radio listeners. Through their efforts, these innovative community reporters have extended the geographic and demographic reach of the radio programmes and they have converted radio, a traditionally one-way broadcast medium, into a two-way dialogue thanks to the surprising number of young people who have been willing to use their precious mobile phone credit and data to call and comment online on the issues they find relevant in the radio programmes (Grady & Chapman, 2005).

Conclusion

Communication for Development (C4D) is a discipline that for more than 50 years has been attending to the action and behaviour side of efforts to improve health and development outcomes in communities across the world (Mefalopulos, 2008).

By considering the service and material domains, which in some cases are required to make action possible, C4D intervention designers can use the full-spectrum approach to inform their analysis and planning processes. The “ground-air-cloud” vocabulary illustrated through the full-spectrum’s vertical domain can help C4D implementers make better and more-strategic use of the tools at their disposal. And before assuming that young people in low-resource settings have no access to the web, I would invite you visit Northern Cameroon, in-person or virtually, so you can witness how resourceful young people are creatively discussing issues of peace, tolerance and democracy in ways that go further and deeper than traditional radio, and in ways that are more participatory than the initial C4D intervention designers had planned or foreseen.

Experienced communication for development practitioners know that there is no “magic recipe” and no guaranteed set of tools and techniques for reaching communities and inspiring positive social change. Every medium has its strengths and limitations. In communities with no electricity or internet, a cloud-based intervention is clearly not the way to go. Where there is no cold-chain or vaccine supply, the best communication intervention in the world will not improve immunisation rates in a community.

The full-spectrum approach to communication for development is a planning and analysis tool rather than a guaranteed and concrete path to positive outcomes. To paraphrase the philosopher Alfred Korzybski, it is the map, not the territory. As a map for designing communication for development interventions, the full-spectrum approach offers a way of thinking, which can affect how we mobilise and use resources, both human and capital. There are infinite combinations one can employ to design and implement creative and inclusive communication for development interventions.

The next time you are assessing what assets you might be able to put into play, or partner with, to promote positive social change, consider whether you have fully analysed *where* you will work (material, service and/or action domain?), *how* you will work (ground, air and/or cloud?) and *why* you are working (to inspire action, to mobilise communities and/or to advocate for new policies and resources?). If you have the resources to go “full-spectrum,” (or fuller-spectrum than previously planned), you are likely to see an increased return on investment. The more communities are engaged and inspired, the more likely they are to contribute to change in their own communities, and the more sustainable those changes are likely to be.

References

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