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Ground-Air-Cloud

Designing for maximum reach and dialogue in communication for development/social change.

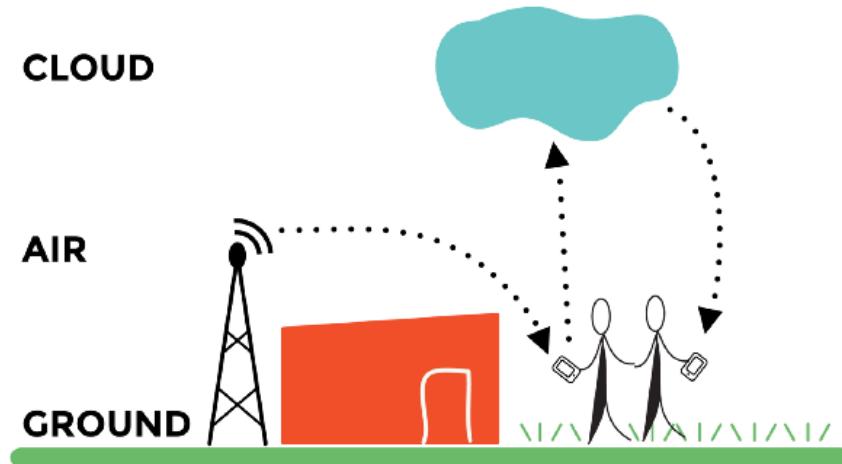With contributions from Andrew Carlson, Associate Professor, Metropolitan State University.

Image: Belen Marco, Visual designer and Communication for Development specialist

With fellow colleagues working internationally in communication for social change, we've been discussing the "Ground-Air-Cloud" model as a way to talk about three different realms of communication and how they can be productively combined or "layered."

We're not describing here convergence or trans-media storytelling, the promotion of a brand or narrative across multiple communication platforms simultaneously. We're focused instead on three realms of Communication for Development, as the United Nations calls it, or "Social and Behavior Change Communication," (SBCC), the term U.S.-based international development organizations tend to use.

About 10 years back, there was a great article by Professor Arvind Singhal and colleagues, outlining how boots-on-the-ground interpersonal communication, and the provision of health services, can be combined with mass media to promote behavior and social change. The article used the terms "ground mobilization" and "air cover" to describe this coordinated approach. In rural India, a mass-media educational radio soap opera called "Taru," with 20 million listeners across 4 states, was combined with participatory theater and improvements to health service delivery to significantly improve community members' knowledge and attitudes about family planning and birth spacing.

More evolutionary than revolutionary, the Ground Air Cloud model provides a vocabulary for describing the fruitful combination of different communication approaches, harnessed for social and/or behavior change objectives.

In our work consulting for UNICEF, Andrew and I found impressive, multi-layered communication for development approaches, which resulted in the addition of the online realm—the "cloud"—to the ground mobilization air cover model. The online realm is often neglected in communication for development/social change approaches, except when using social media to communicate about communities, rather than communicating with them, and typically for a Northern/Western audience (i.e., donors or potential donors).

The multi-layered communication initiative "Te Toca" (It's your turn) designed and implemented by UNICEF Guatemala in 2010-2011 to increase awareness and discussion on child protection issues, is a good example of ground, air and cloud communication used in coordinated but diverse ways.

In the cloud: A series of YouTube advocacy videos produced by UNICEF Guatemala

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 journalists.

When combining all three realms of communication, the audience needn't be the same. In the case of Te Toca, live events and mass media were designed to increase awareness with community members, whereas cloud-based communication materials were designed for journalists who could access Te Toca materials online and incorporate them into their existing programming. Cloud-based communication in this instance allowed for distributed agency, with journalists voluntarily serving as multipliers in their communities.

Jorge Mario, a journalist in Guastatoya, Guatemala, used Te Toca materials to generate dialogue in his community

It isn't always easy for intervention designers to use the Ground, Air and Cloud at the same time. We'll share one more example, from a research conducted at Ohio University, removing the academic language (Ground Air Cloud is more digestible than "Action, Mediation and Remediation"). This example comes courtesy of the Billionaires for Bush, a group of active satirists (satiric activists?) who operated during the 2000 and 2004 elections.

Of course, members of the group were neither billionaires, nor for George W. Bush, but they were extremely savvy about using creative, playful actions on the ground—like Billionaire ball-room dancing in New York's Grand Central Train Station—to get extensive media attention (Air). Media coverage by high-circulation outlets like the New York Times pointed readers to the Billionaires' website (Cloud), where

a suite of self-organizing tools awaited, ready to help would-be-Billionaires create their own groups.

Once in the Cloud, interested parties could find printable signs, a Be-A-Billionaire manual, and even a "Billionaire name generator," allowing them to find a cheeky name to rival Phil T. Rich and Iona Yacht, the names of two prolific Billionaire members. The playful, media-ready actions on the ground, and cloud-based tools, resulted in dozens of new Billionaire groups emerged across the U.S. during the 2004 election. This example shows how a Ground Air Cloud combination can help citizens self-organize.

Image courtesy of Andrew Boyd, co-founders of Billionaires for Bush (B4B)

Experienced designers and implementers of social change initiatives know that there is no "magic bullet" for effectively reaching everyone, every time. Yet while there are no fool-proof recipes for social change, there *are* ways to combine different tools and approaches, with the layering of ground, air and cloud as one communication approach among many. The key is to not be dogmatic about following one specific approach, but rather to design approaches that are as nuanced

and complex as the community members they are intended to engage and inspire.

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