5.

The Panoptic View: A Discourse Approach to Communication and Development

Sujatha Sosale
Georgia State University

A great deal of scholarly inquiry has addressed the ways in which development would enable worldwide democratic communications. Conversely, many modern communications media were, in themselves, considered to be indicators of development. Communication and development have been viewed as closely intertwined phenomena, where one is believed to guarantee the other. In this chapter, I explore the constructed nature of communication and development from a discourse perspective that encompasses democratic communications as both cause and effect of development. Here, “communication and development” is treated as a discourse that dominated (and in altered but still-recognizable ways continues to dominate) the global space today.

Specifically in this study, I examine the strategy of framing employed by agents and institutions historically in a position to establish the dominant meanings of communication and development. By agents and institutions of power I refer to two sets of actors—first, there are the critical policy-making groups, media owners, and others from the developed world invested in the advancement of the development project. Secondly, the decision-making élite and other supporters of the mainstream
notions of development in developing regions also participated in the construction of the dominant discourse of communication and development. These groups, from their vantage points of power, “enframed” regions that were seen to be needy of developmental aid (Escobar, 1995). Framing involves creation of a defined space and placement of objects within for full visibility and scrutiny by the viewer positioned outside the frame. Fundamental to this inside/outside relationship is the naturalizing of the objects within the enframed space and the viewer on the outside.

This notion of the frame, or the politics of the gaze, translates to the viewing position of those in power and the object position of the (relatively) powerless who are viewed. In the context of the recent history of communication and development, the agents and institutions involved in defining dominant meanings of the idea of development use discursive devices (or strategies) to make the object of study - the developing regions - transparent. The argument is that full knowledge of such regions is required to be able to aid them along certain paths towards certain definitions of material and cultural progress. Exercising this strategy of power that shapes the relations between developed and developing nations is not necessarily intentional (this is the naturalizing power of the ideology); however, a particular ideological bent is evident in the language, meanings, institutions, and social practices that constituted the discourse of communication and development.

From the standpoint of the present era of high globalization, international development constitutes a period of time in recent world history. International hierarchies that emerged from this period endure. The study of communication and development is important in that globalization, for many regions of the world, has exacerbated the economic differences that obtained during a
period when concerns about world development occupied center stage in national and supranational deliberations. A study of the historical legacy of communication and development from a discourse perspective provides insights into the knowledge and power nexus that facilitated the establishment of a powerful signifier such as development, a signifier that continues to mark differences in the global arena.

Two caveats need to be made. First, it is acknowledged that any discursive construction is not an assemblage of events and instances that come together to assert certain meanings of phenomena like development. Rather, contestation of the dominant meanings and practices is equally constitutive of the discourse. The dominant signifier of communication and development has been amply challenged and continues to be challenged by scholars and activists worldwide (refer, for example, Hamelink’s contributions, particularly in the 1980s; the publications of Nordenstreng in the 1970s when debates about democracy and development were at their peak; the corpus of works by Schiller; the Third World Journalists’ Seminar Report, 1975. Contemporary cases in point include the emerging robust literature on participatory communication, gender issues in development and social change, and more recently, human rights and new social movements in relation to development communication). Negotiations of meanings about implications for media practices have also taken place (as documents on the NWICO debate suggest). Given this larger configuration of the discourse, to impose some scope on the chapter, the focus is retained mainly on strategies of visibility used to construct dominant meanings in the international arena. Secondly, the discourse of communication and development does possess a
genealogy of at least half a century, starting in the 1950s. This chapter does not offer a survey of the entire period; rather, it focuses on the 1970s and early 1980s when the debates about democracy and development were pursued most seriously by several nations and a key supranational institution - the UNESCO - in a quest for a new world communication order. The debates demonstrate the configuration of the discourse of communication and development from dominant, contestatory and negotiating viewpoints and this decade is being examined in a larger research project from which this chapter is an excerpt.

I begin with an explanation of a discourse approach to communication and development, followed by two sections that examine the panoptic view, or the politics of the gaze, at work. I conclude with a note on resistant and negotiating moves in the critical responses to communication and development and the status of communication and development in relation to globalization.

**A Discourse Approach to Communication and Development**

The modern idea of “development” is not an innocent term, condition, or state of society (Banuri, 1990; Escobar, 1995; Mohanty, 1991; Shohat & Stam, 1994). It entails a relatively narrow geo-history of construction and contestation. That “developmentized democracy” (Escobar, 1995) is a product of the European and the Euro-colonial historical experience is widely acknowledged now. A discourse approach to studying communication and development would allow us to see the constructed nature of what has come to be considered a “natural,” universally applied historical and social evolution and its
consequences for democracy in the international sphere. The workings of power become evident in discursive strategies used by those providing dominant definitions of communication and development. The aim here is to examine, in albeit a limited way, the mechanics of such power.

When referring to a discourse of communication and development, I refer to the larger and more visible reality that has been constructed in an overarching discourse, to the meanings and practices that define communication and development and the links between the two concepts in the context of this study. As Doty, in her work on representation in international relations, explains it, “[A discourse] is a structured, relational totality.... A discourse delineates the terms of intelligibility whereby a particular reality can be known and acted upon” (1996:6). Discursive formations are effectively understood by examining the strategies that enable this formation in the first place.

The chapter rests on the premise that the ideological hold of communication and development is expressed in discourse. A dominant discourse labors continuously to suppress the “other” (or multiple others) (Hall, 1985). In the process, a center emerges from which power is exercised through various means (Beechey & Donald, 1985). I refer to these means as discursive strategies, intelligible in the process of articulating an ideology. A dominant discourse emerges from the power to define meanings, create institutions to reproduce and sustain these meanings (and practices) and create a “corpus of...statements” which would be “already formulated” for the Third World (Ferguson, 1994). This corpus of already formulated statements would chart a certain path for social change for all regions of the world to pursue.
Recently, scholars have drawn on Foucault’s analysis of the metaphor and the politics of the gaze to understand what Escobar has termed as “the production of the social.” Foucault employs the concept of the panopticon to explain uneven social power relations. A type of architecture used for institutions of discipline and correction, the panopticon is conceived of as a technology of power, and as Spurr (1993:16) explains it, “has bearing on any occasion where the superior and invulnerable position of the observer coincides with the role of affirming the political order that makes that position possible” (also Foucault, 1980). Originally the eighteenth century legal scholar Jeremy Bentham’s creation, the panopticon was designed for penal institutions where inmates housed in cells along the inner perimeter of the construction were “visible” to the supervisor located in the central watch tower, but were denied the right to return the supervisor’s gaze due to the architectural design. The individual occupying the position of power thus remained “invisible” to the inmates. Thus the “exercise of power and, simultaneously, *the registration of knowledge* of the prison inmates’ actions occurred through the gaze (Foucault 1972:148)—literal in the case of Bentham’s panopticon; metaphorical in its adaptation to critically analyze other domains such as colonialism or development. With the aid of this metaphor, we see that in the domain of communication and development, developing nations are rendered transparent on many fronts—economic, social, cultural and so on—through the deployment of media, technologies, and the production of certain types of knowledge through certain strains of communication research. Simultaneously, those who assess or devise modes and methods of assessment reserve for themselves the privilege of invisibility from the occupants of the lower spaces in the international/global
arrangement by naturalizing the discourse of communication and development and hence rendering their presence and actions as a given.

The panoptic view enables scrutiny of regions and nations within a “field of visibility” (Escobar, 1995:196). Communications media, at times, are used as tools for surveillance, and at other times, media technologies constitute an index of “development.” Thus, communications media become both the object of the gaze as well as the instruments facilitating the gaze. At the same time, the panoptic view is designed to ensure that the viewer is placed beyond the gaze of the observed, thus reducing or denying opportunities to return the gaze. A history of self-placement outside the enframed space has rendered the viewer’s position as “natural.” The panoptic view demonstrates the vertical arrangement of nations, economies, and cultures in the world system. An examination of communication and development through this lens would yield some insights into how a certain broad “mainstream” idea of development through communication came to be inscribed in the social imaginary (Tomlinson, 1991) of various publics.

To demonstrate the shaping of the discourse through the panoptic view, I provide a critical and interpretive reading of a few texts as detailed examples. This chapter is an excerpt from a larger study; texts for the larger study were selected from the following sources: (a) an extensive bibliography on the contributions to the NWICO debate from multiple perspectives published by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library (1984), (b) the reports compiled by the MacBride Commission report and related studies, and (c) the NAMEDIA conference reports (1983). Specific texts were selected on the basis of their relationship to the themes of communication
and development, such as social development, culture and development, communications technology for development, and so on.

Two strategies of power are apparent in the panoptic view. One is the power to survey, and the other is the power to remain invisible. The two have been artificially separated for analysis purposes and are termed as surveillance and invisibility. The themes most apparent in the strategy of surveillance pertained to the production of knowledge of a certain kind about Third World communications, knowledge yielded by satellite technology and specific types of communication research. The strategy of invisibility manifested itself in the economically powerful nations’ efforts to “guide” development through communication, in their self-appointed role as parent, and as having reached a stage of maturity in modern communication. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that the First World’s historical role in the colonial economies of the developing world has also contributed to naturalizing its presence outside the frame imposed by the panoptic view.

**Surveillance**

The use of satellite technologies to survey geographical areas and national resources and compile databanks from these surveys is one manifestation of the panoptic view at work. Rhetoric on satellite communication and its uses for development worked to make Third World economies appear transparent. Discussions on satellite technology and communications focused on making geographical terrain in the Third World as completely visible as the technology would allow it, for determining natural resources.
Prominent among the discussions of satellite technology are the reports on the UN seminars held in Addis Ababa and Buenos Aires. In the seminar in Addis Ababa, scientists and development specialists from both developed and developing regions detailed the ways in which satellites would aid in detecting natural resources because “space platforms... [can] provide us with a unique capability to see and interact with large parts of the earth simultaneously” (United Nations, 1981, Addis Ababa, A/AC.105/290:4). Remote sensing for targeted surveillance areas of the economy such as agriculture, rural demography, economic geology, forestry, livestock, and water resources would prove beneficial.

Forms of visual communication such as air photos, radar imagery, and satellite pictures produced by various technologies were compared for costs, versatility, accuracy, and extent of information they could yield about resources of a given nation/region/continent. Superior technology for image enhancement and expertise in reading the subtler shades of images procured by such technology were pivotal to surveillance through remote sensing. To enable the use of satellite imagery in cartographic surveys and thematic maps, strategic pieces of visual communication on a nation’s natural resources that have profound influences on its economy are first secured and then converted to data; the data then constitute a type of “manufactured” resource. Since this type of resource production requires large investments (possible, for the most part, for economically advanced countries), the poorer countries found themselves in the position of purchasing knowledge about their own resources from foreign sources. The confluence of power and visibility (Escobar, 1987) is evident in the
conversion of such images to strategic knowledge made available for sale.

Two remote-sensing centers were established for agricultural (in Rome) and non-agricultural satellite data (in New York). These centers were intended to serve as archives for collecting, storing, and dispensing (selling) data. Thus, full visibility of many strategic resources would be available to the centers located in areas of the globe designated as developed. The centers would catalogue, store and interpret remote sensing data, circulate information, provide advice and assistance to projects, and organize special training courses for users and decision-makers in developing regions. The costs incurred by many Third World countries in purchasing this data have been a thorny issue with client nations and in the NWICO debates.

The vocabulary used in relation to modern satellite communication apparatuses in general was also extended to traditional media by the state in developing regions. Traditional media are transformed from cultural practices (which may serve functional or aesthetic/creative purposes, or both, something determined by the practitioners as well as the local communities using the media) into vehicles of development. In one instance, traditional folk songs with newly inserted development themes intended for rural populations were scrutinized, evaluated, and checked by the central government wing that was devoted to maintaining the cultural heritage of such media and simultaneously, in this case, utilizing them for development purposes (Malik, 1982).

Similarly, in the case of Egypt, a study commissioned by the UNESCO generated a report describing the entry points available with traditional media for promoting development (Hussein, 1980).
Parallels were drawn between traditional and modern media to enable understanding of the use of traditional media also for development purposes. Source credibility (for example, religious leaders presiding over numerous folk and rural media programs) and opportunities for inserting subliminal messages in certain traditional folk forms capable of inducing mind-altering states in group situations were identified. Traditional media thus constituted a field of visibility where their functional value for development purposes could be examined.

The question may arise as to what other means one would use to address the information needs of rural populations. The discursive strategy of surveillance operates largely under the assumption that rural populations and communities do not possess the capacity to survey and commandeer their own cultural expressions for needs they might consider a priority. The urgency apparent in documents that address the powerful role of traditional media in mainstream development tend to marginalize the possibility of other modes of and reasons for existence of these indigenous media.

A plethora of research projects and initiatives for development were generated to aid or hasten development in the Third World. Evaluations of project successes and failures, and recommendations to create stronger projects in the future have also been offered (for example, Hornik, 1988; Stevenson, 1988). Knowledge about communications in the developing world-infrastructure, capabilities, potential, target populations-have been discovered, measured, analyzed, and evaluated through systematic research. This vein of research contributed substantially to constructions of “development” and a frame within which to compare various regions using external standardized criteria that could not necessarily produce an accurate description of a
particular socio-cultural communication system. Empirical criteria derived from the social scientific method served as accurate devices for evaluating social systems. The contributory value of the knowledge and insights about diverse social systems gained from these criteria and method are not in question. However, elevating these criteria to international benchmarks for measuring the degree of development of a given nation legitimated the production of certain types of knowledge about that society. In the process, the discursive effects of such tools on constructing an image of world imbalances were not considered; the mainstream notions of development that emerged out of such practices have been questioned (see for example Jacobson, 1996). Communications capacities in developing regions thus constituted a field of visibility. Research activities and execution of these projects designed to generate knowledge about developing regions find an analogy in Spurr’s explanation of “non-corporeal” power in the panoptic principle.

An example would be the communication indicators of socio-economic development developed in the late nineteen seventies (O’Brien et al, 1979). About 103 indicators of development were identified, including communications, education, urbanization, income distribution, industrialization, technology, growth potential, and demography.

Measurements of communications included newspaper circulation per capita, newsprint consumption per capita, telephones per 100,000 population, radio receivers and television sets per 1000 population, and so on. While such data indeed contribute to understanding the communications picture of various nations and regions, the underlying universal nature of communications as a developmental resource, and secondly, the assumption of
comparability of regions within these established categories reflecting the Eurocentric history of industrialization serve to mainstream certain notions of communication and development. Comparability of indices of development was constructed in two ways. First, the construction pertained to the criteria set by the developed countries against which the degree of development would be measured. Secondly, such criteria not only set a universal standard for comparison, but they also served to make countries within developing regions comparable with one another. Thus, communications research projects carried out by development agencies enabled constructions of frames within which communications resources of developing regions were rendered visible to subsequently allow mapping, planning, monitoring, and mobilizing prescribed types of social change.

Other recommendations to integrate communications into the development project included the treatment of communications as a resource, thereby integrating communications with economics (Jussawalla & Lamberton, 1980). A call for “a better conceptualization and measurement of the communications sector as a macro input for development” indicates that communication was primarily an economic resource rather than a practice. As with all resources, full knowledge of communications capacities, technologies, and output was required. This knowledge constitutes a field of visibility, particularly in the context of the development project in the global system.

1 For the parallels between economics and development, and indeed, one substituting for the other, see Sachs, 1992.
Invisibility: Outside the Frame

Leaders and other members of the development machinery acquired a “parent” mentality from their positions as administrators, experts and other power-conferring roles. In this family analogy, the parents are naturalized into positions of power and they exert authority over the children. The parents possessed the privilege of inspecting and examining various dimensions of communications in developing regions, for development and development policy purposes.

Extending Spurr’s analysis of the politics of the gaze in colonial discourse to the discourse of communication and development, we see that looking without being looked back creates an “economy of uneven exchange” with the object of the gaze (Spurr, 1993:13). Critics of the mainstream idea of development have pointed out that the treatment of the developing countries as children in this forced economy of uneven exchange has perpetuated the idea that an ideal developed society signifies adulthood; in this stage, people and institutions are facile users of modern media and new technologies. Whatever the combination of elements respective countries could select to “arrive,” a need was seen to naturalize and orchestrate the efforts for helping nations enter adulthood. The collective social agreement prevalent in most cultures that parents know best and that they possess the authority to check, scrutinize and admonish is extended to the domain of communication and development.

A conference report on satellite communications emphasized the need for space education by pointing out that this was the “ongoing practice in all the countries that are developing any measure of capability in the area of space science and technology”
(United Nations, 1981, Addis Ababa, A/AC.105/289:5) and that Africa should follow. The problem of capital outlay for such operations was not the main concern; instead, African countries were warned that it was not a question of not being able to afford the technology, but not being able to afford going without it. Skills for survival in the technological (world) order were needed to be taught. In such instances, other knowledges that might have had their own beneficial outcomes for non-western societies were denied existence; pre-modern knowledge also was rendered obsolete by this discourse.

Another factor illustrating the discursive strategy of invisibility is the mystique surrounding the idea of a “developed” society for the large rural and poor populations in developing regions. Hints at unlimited progress characteristic of the tone and aspirations of modernity suggested infinite advancement towards a relatively unknown end, and the idea that progress breeds further progress also formed a subtext. For example, Pelton (1983) described a futuristic picture of the global telnet, the telecity. Attractive though this idea may seem, for national policy-makers in the developing countries a global telecity on a large scale benefiting their vast populations and ensuring appropriate literacy and access to participate in the telecity lifestyle painted a destination that is yet to be reached with full success even in the technologically advanced nations.

As a strategy, invisibility serves to “[embed] the universals of the discourse” of communication and development (Escobar, 1995:160). Capturing a vantage point to see and maintain a shielded presence while scrutinizing, at the same time escaping scrutiny in return enables the viewer to map the terrain of
communications in the Third World, a space and place that constitutes the object of that scrutiny.

**Conclusion**

It has been argued that to figure in the discourse itself is a form of visibility. Deconstructing frames of visibility is a step that enables us to see the construction of a discourse. Here the chapter has not addressed the negotiation/resistance side of the equation in the construction of the discourse of communication and development. However, through the tropes of both surveillance and invisibility we can see that communication and development, in the form of research and intervention projects, policy debates, seminars, and studies renders communications in all its dimensions a field of visibility in the dominant discourse. Both tropes work together to create a global space where the dependent status of Third World countries was reiterated and the role of the economically powerful nations as providers, adults and/or guides acquired a natural authority.

Communication and development has constituted a composite running theme in the history of international communications until the recent past, when the contours of this theme changed to one of globalization and the culture industries. Noticeable was a new extension of concerns that went beyond many aspects of the materiality evident in the discourse of communication and development to the symbolic aspects of what Appadurai (1993) has termed a global cultural economy. Critical reactions to the exacerbated chasm between developed and developing regions because of globalization include assertions of identity in symbolic arenas. The work on new social movements and the increasing dominance of the local, the popular, the everyday (Escobar, 1992;
Huesca, 1994; Melucci, 1990) are cases in point. However, questions pertaining to communication and development have not disappeared; instead, they have dispersed into various domains, but continue their interplay. For example, questions about intellectual property rights over software constitute part of the agenda for the World Trade Organization meetings and policies (Braman, 1990). Such questions tacitly assume the existence of certain types of development—primarily technological and economic—among all participants of the debate (with the premise “all else being equal” driving the information market), or speak primarily to those nations in full possession and significant control of such developments.

A critical tension continues to exist between guided social change through policy, and alternate possibilities that might fall outside the realm of policy or are at best located at its fringes. Increasingly, an emergent alternate literature and documentation at both the theoretical and activist levels bring to our attention the workings of such alternate communications situations, with a focus on the local and the popular. Alternate visions continue to grapple with problems related to democracy and development raised in the last few decades in international communication.

Economics and technology, once part of the overall practice of conducting social life, have acquired a centrality around which meanings and practices of development revolve (Sachs, 1992). Critiques of development are often addressed to this centrality of technology or economics or a combination of both as the dominant definitions of “development”. Social change is planned, interpreted,
and intervened upon from the perspectives of technology and/or economics. The dominant discourse in the domain of communication also reflects this centrality. Alternate “development” discourses suggested by scholars and activists such as authors of the Development Dictionary Collective (1992) and Marglin and others (1990, 1996) do not preclude the possibility of social change. A complete return to the pre-modern is neither realistic, nor in most instances, possible, nor even desirable. Rather, the source from which an articulation of the need for change emerges becomes central. Transformed definitions of development and change within local contexts and histories, and ecologically sympathetic and compatible processes and types of social change are pointed out as the more fruitful paths to consider.

References


2 Huesca’s (1994) research on Bolivian tin miners and participatory radio, and a film (Drishti, 1996) documenting the successful outcome of a state-wide rural women’s movement in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India are examples.
DRISHTI MEDIA GROUP (1997). 
http://home.dti.net/foil/resources/drishti.htm


