Communication for Social Change: A powerful role for communication in crime prevention

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Introduction

There is a significant body of research on the role the media plays in influencing public perceptions about crime. While the public largely depends on the media such as newspapers and television for its information about crime and the criminal justice system, the information they receive can be affected by the limited sources used by journalists to create news stories (Graber 1980, Ericson et al 1991, Chermak 1994). Indeed, sensationalist reporting of violent crime by the media can often contribute to increasing feelings of insecurity among citizens and in turn, may affect their overall quality of life.

Following from this line of enquiry are responses which attempt to: increase media literacy among audiences, monitor media content, and change the nature of crime stories produced (see Barak 1999, 1994). Other responses have focused on ways to harness the media to support crime prevention through public service announcements, and public education and awareness campaigns or through civic journalism (Shaffer & Miller). While these responses are important to consider when investigating the role of the media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) in crime prevention, they represent only a part of this emerging area. Much less has been written about the use of ICTs and communication strategies in crime prevention and community safety beyond publicity, promotional activities, and surveillance measures (eg. CCTV).

This short reflection piece argues for a more inclusive role for communication within current policy, practice and research in crime prevention and community safety by focusing on an emerging field- communication for social change. It provides a general overview of the field including: its definition, principles, objectives, and challenges, and outlines several areas of concern and disagreement. It does not discuss some of the common mediums employed in the field, or provide a list of some well established practices. This will be covered in a more comprehensive report at a later date.

Definition of Communication for Social Change (CSC)

In comparison to other social science disciplines, the field of communications in general, and participatory communication\(^1\) in particular, is quite new. Given its infancy, and the variety of interests represented in the field, arriving at a definition for communication for social change is not easy. Similar to other disciplines, the field of communication for social change (CSC) covers a variety of concepts and strategies such as: communications for development, development communications, social marketing, “edutainment”, “infotainment” or enter-educate, participatory communication, etc.

\(^1\) Discussion on participatory communication among practitioners and academics became popular in the 1980’s, however it dates back to the late 1940’s in Latin America.
In recent years, several international meetings and events have taken place to bring together communication professionals, community organizers, NGO’s, practitioners, social change activists, broadcasters, and funders to help define the field, investigate theoretical frameworks, discuss new developments, and suggest new ways forward in the field.

The most notable are:

- The Communication and Social Change: Forging Strategies for a New Century Conference, Bellagio, Italy, April 1997. Sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. A series of action steps was agreed upon including: to convince others of the value of the CSC approach, to publicize writings about its effectiveness, and to continue to study prospects in the global community (Rockefeller Foundation 2001, p.8). Follow-up meetings were held in Cape Town, South Africa in 1998 and 2000. Following from the 1998 Cape Town meeting, the Rockefeller Foundation developed a concrete definition of Communication for Social Change: A process of public and private dialogue through which people define who they are, what they want and how they can get it. In addition, this event led to an outline of the skills and attributes needed to do work in the field, preliminary work on a practitioner’s toolkit, an agreement in measurement, and the establishment of several linking networks (Rockefeller Foundation 2001, pgs 8-9).

- The Third International Entertainment Education Conference for Social Change², Arnhem and Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2000 hosted by the Netherlands Entertainment-Education Foundation in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University Centre for Communication Programs. This event led to the adoption of the Entertainment Education (EE) declaration outlining seven vital positions for the sustainability of EE and sets out future work in the area. These are:

  1) The synergy of entertainment and education consists of deliberately combining the joy of entertainment with the empowering potential of education to achieve social progress for all.

  2) Ethics in the field of Entertainment-Education should encourage full and informed participation of all stakeholders, especially including audiences. Ethical practice is based on appropriate information and includes careful design and monitoring of implementation processes as well as societal consequences of Entertainment-Education.

  3) Theory and practice are based on inclusiveness, diversity, and a variety of genres, multidisciplinary theories, methods, formats and channels. Theory and practice incorporate intuitive and scientific modern and traditional approaches, including folk media, community broadcasting and emerging technologies. Theory and practice facilitate transcreational and locally adaptable formats, applicable to individuals and communities.

  4) We recognize the importance of conducting and sharing research to the development of the Entertainment-Education field. We encourage fine-tuning of current research methods

² Conference proceedings can be found at: [www.entertainment-education.nl](http://www.entertainment-education.nl)
and support new and more comprehensive approaches for formative, monitoring and evaluation. We will set a research agenda that includes study into the role of performing artists, their involvement in social subjects, and intended and unintended effects.

5) We will expand professional expertise through continuing pre-service and in-service training and education in related professional fields as well as the Entertainment-Education sector through academic and on-the-job training methods.

6) Entertainment-Education promotes sound business practices that will support sustainability, including branding and marketing, to optimize cost-effectiveness with a fair and equitable financial return to all participants.

7) We agree to develop a network of associates that will facilitate the exchange of information and materials and that will function as an advocate for Entertainment-Education. The three organizing parties of this event here commit to sustaining this network, establishing and coordinating a Web site developing a global distribution system for existing Entertainment-Education materials, and other initiatives. We will plan for future meetings amongst our organisations and with other interested parties; and establish awards to recognize excellence in the Entertainment-Education field (www.entertainment-education.nl).


- The IV International Conference on Communication: Perspectives on Communication for Social Change³, May 2003. Organized by the Universidad de Norte with the support of the Communication Initiative Latin America (CILA). This event provided an opportunity for academics, activists, experts and thinkers to reflect critically on the topic of communication for social change.

- Communication for Social Change Forum⁴, Ottawa Canada, May 2003. Hosted by South Asian Partnership Canada (SAP) and funded by Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), this event gathered academics, NGOs, development consultants, government officials and communication officers from 15 countries. Topics covered included: Definition of Communication for Social Change, Traditional Examples of CSC (eg. interactive theatre), Information Communication Technologies and Challenges and Possibilities. The most recent definition of CSC follows from this event.

³ A more detailed description of this event can be found at: www.uninorte.edu.co/eventos/conferencia_comunicacion/conference.html

⁴ A synthesis of the discussion is provided on the South Asian Partnership Canada website at: www.sapcanada.org
It is defined as: A process whereby internal or external groups intentionally send messages through various communication mediums into a targeted community or society with the intention that their message will be properly ingested to produce a change in behavior or action (McGrath, 2003, p.1).

The main underlying assumption of CSC work is that we can find effective ways to use the field of communication to make greater contributions to the pace of development (Rockefeller 2001, pg.5).

**Principles and Objectives of Communication for Social Change**

To inform the identification and selection of good practice in the field, the Rockefeller Foundation has identified the following principles of CSC (2001, p.33):

- it empowers individuals and communities
- it engages people in making decisions that enhance their lives
- it focuses on direct and many-to-many communications
- it relies on democratic ideals
- it allows previously unheard voices to be heard, and
- both the process of communications and the content of the messages are controlled by the receiving communities

While partners involved in a CSC initiative may have different objectives (eg. Donor specific, private interests, etc) some of the main objectives of the CSC process are to:

- inform, initiate and encourage people to engage in collective action;
- help people make better decisions for themselves;
- change specific behaviour where appropriate; and
- promote equitable access to resources and services (McGrath 2003).

**Challenges**

Similar to communication practitioners in general, and crime prevention practitioners in particular, CSC practitioners encounter the following challenges:

**Assessing Impact**: How to measure effectiveness beyond counting products produced (eg. number of messages disseminated) or net impressions received (eg. audience ratings). Other issues related to participatory evaluation are discussed in Making Waves: Stories of participatory communication for social change (Dagron 2001).

**Making Strategic links**: How to program communication for social change work on the micro community level and on the multinational level, often simultaneously.

**Knowledge Transfer**: How to transfer information, skills, tools, resources and training to those most in need and those who live in hard-to reach areas.
Language: How to ensure that the CSC philosophy and methodology is readily accessible to a wider audience (e.g. beyond communication practitioners).

Learning by Cases: Sharing Stories: How to ensure that case studies selected are those which capture the imagination of audiences and communities, yet are not overly simplistic (Adapted from Rockefeller Foundation, 2001, p.13-14).

Several of these issues have been discussed in the international meetings noted above, and in some cases, preliminary solutions have been suggested (see: SAP 2003, Rockefeller 2001).

Areas of Concern

A number of concerns and areas of disagreement can be identified in the field of communication for social change. Some are related to long-term standing issues in development work in general. Others are more recent, but in all cases they can help to inform and expand current thinking about the role of communication in crime prevention and community safety. They include concerns about the:

- extent to which beneficiaries are consulted throughout all stages of the development and implementation of community safety initiatives

- extent to which the cultural values of different community groups are considered in diagnosis, implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages.

- over-emphasis on internet-based tools for social change verses other mediums such as community radio, video, theatre, puppets, etc. This is especially important given the high illiteracy rates in developing countries (Dagron 2001).

- lack of access to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), though it is not clear if this access will contribute to social change, or act as fashionable gadget (Dagron 2001, p.29).


Despite these problems and areas of disagreement, there is compelling evidence to suggest that communication can wield great power in development (Dagron 2001, Soul City, Singhal 1999, Singhal et al 2002).

Moreover, while not a ‘cure-all’, communication for social change can contribute to improving the quality of life of citizens by establishing a dialogue with citizens throughout all stages of policy interventions.
Indeed, the crime prevention field has much to gain from moving beyond its traditional communication strategies and initiatives and recognizing communication as a full partner, rather than an “add on” to the crime prevention process.

**It poses some interesting questions for crime prevention practitioners:**

What are some of the ways to ensure that voices previously unheard get translated into policy and practice?

What are the benefits of using ICTs to “share stories” which include both successes and failures?

How can we ensure that a consistent dialogue is maintained with citizens in planning, implementation, and evaluation?

Given that many governments and NGOs are investing in ICTs to develop international networks, and construct a knowledge base in crime prevention (policy, best practices, tools, training, etc), what measures can be taken to ensure that those who do not have access to ICTs contribute to and benefit from this exchange?

We invite all those who have a strong interest in the area of communication and crime prevention to provide your comments. We would also like to hear from those organizations, researchers, and practitioners who are doing interesting work in the field.

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