Electric media in rural development: Individual freedoms to choose versus politics of power and control.

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Preface and summary

Be realistic, demand the impossible
Ernesto Guevara de la Serna

The provocative words of the song *colour line* serve as a non-academic introduction to the discussion of this dissertation on rural development in developing countries and the role of electronic media to facilitate that development. I do not necessarily subscribe to the individual statements of the text and some may be more provocative than accurate, but the tendency of the words points at the issues I want to address in the dissertation: the politics of power, the lack of individual decision-making freedom, the resulting poverty and their respective interdependencies. These are all issues which confronted me during the periods of time I spent in West-Africa, South-East Asia and Latin-America and which, in my opinion, are being addressed in a rather round-about way in large parts of development discourse. In this first section of the dissertation I introduce some opinions that have helped shape the content of my theoretical argumentation and at the same time I provide a brief summary of the different issues the dissertation addresses.

Giovanna Procacci, in her essay on *Social Economy and the Government of Poverty*, addresses some of the issues mentioned in *colour line* in an academic way (Procacci, In: Burchell, Gordon and Miller (eds.), 1991: 151 – 168). She discusses the perceptions which political and social economists, according to her, have of poverty. In her opinion, poverty has over the years been perceived by political economists as the counterpart to wealth. Therefore, they focus only on the economic aspects of poverty. Essentially, political economists conceive of poverty as an undesirable state or condition, the mere existence of which serves as a justification for developing the classical economic theories and policies, which are mainly aimed at creating wealth or increasing abundance. The current globalization process is also increasingly characterized by the neo-liberal economic policies which feature many elements of classical economic theory. In my opinion, that tendency towards neo-liberalism illustrates the popularity of perceiving poverty as a state of indigence, although the concept of poverty has moved from the status of a counterpart to wealth to being the object of discourse. In development discourse, this shift led to discussions about poverty eradication, rather than wealth creation. Nevertheless, neo-liberal economic policies have, in a global context, been more effective at increasing abundance in wealthy parts of the world than at eradicating poverty in the poorer regions. Social economists, on the other hand, have long interpreted poverty as *pauperism* in an attempt to focus on the social, rather than the economic, aspects of poverty. According to Procacci, social economists claim that ‘pauperism is (...) poverty intensified to the level of *social danger*: the spectre of the mob; a collective, essentially urban phenomenon’ (Procacci, In: ibid, 1991: 158). However, the Maoist guerilla movement Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) in Peru showed that *rural poverty can also* rhetorically be converted into pauperism as a medium for political violence. Procacci continues, stating that in social economic theory pauperism is perceived as ‘insubordinate, hidden from the scrutinizing gaze of any government instance’. She suggests that the distinction between *pauperism* and *poverty* explains how ‘discourse on the elimination of the former, can go hand in hand with discourse on the conservation of the latter’ (Procacci, In: ibid, 1991: 158/159).

In my opinion, the essence of Procacci’s argument is that neither neo-liberal economic policies, nor socialist interventionist policies have been aimed at eradicating poverty as such. Neo-liberal economic policies focus on the creation of wealth, or the increase of abundance, of which some is then expected to *trickle down* to less economically fortunate parts of the population, whereas social economic policies aim at making poverty manageable for governments. The latter is, according to Procacci, directed at defusing potentially explosive elements of pauperism by providing social welfare

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1 A discourse can be defined as ‘a long and serious treatment of a subject in speech or writing’ (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 1995), ‘a general, often formal term for a talk, conversation, dialogue, lecture, sermon, or treatise’ (*The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992) or ‘a speech or lecture, a written treatise on a subject’ (*Oxford American Dictionary*, 1980). In line with these definitions, I conceive of a discourse as the public expressions and exchanges of opinions, ideas, theories and thoughts on a specific subject by two or more individuals in direct or indirect interaction with each other, either verbally or written.
in all its various aspects, but to stop short of allowing freedom and independence for economically poor people to choose for themselves whether or not, and in which ways, to improve on their condition of poverty. Finally, Procacci concludes that ‘it is not poverty as the stigma of inequality that is combated, but pauperism understood as a cluster of behaviours, a carrier of difference’ (Procacci, In: ibid, 1991: 164). In this sense, Procacci cynically perceives social economic government policies as aimed at creating dependencies in order to successfully maintain social order and to complete the social economic project of governments.

In development discourse, Arturo Escobar voices similar opinions on the subject of development perspectives and policies. In his book *Encountering Development, the making and unmaking of the third world* (1995), Escobar argues that in the Truman-doctrine, development is perceived as creating ‘the conditions necessary to replicating the world over the features that characterized the advanced societies of the time’ and he observes that ‘within a few years, the dream was universally embraced by those in power’ (Escobar, 1995: 4, italics added). Escobar also quotes Truman as saying that the ‘poverty [of people in underdeveloped countries] is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas’ (Escobar, 1995: 3). Therefore, poverty as conceived of in the early development discourse is rather similar to Procacci’s definition of pauperism. Over the years, the ensuing development discourse has produced different approaches, but development as an objective was not questioned any longer, even if development would involve drastic restructuring of the underdeveloped societies. Both Procacci and Escobar, albeit in different ways, point at the lack of room in development discourse for individual freedoms of people to make their own development related decisions.

In the previous paragraphs I introduced, through the words of Procacci and Escobar, many of my opinions on development discourse concerning development as poverty eradication. In this dissertation, I have used those opinions, together with Amartya Sen’s conception of development as freedom, to argue for increased autonomy and self-empowerment of people as a basis for rural development. According to Sen, ‘freedom is concerned with processes of decision-making as well as opportunities to achieve valued outcomes’ (Sen, 1999: 291). In his book *Development as Freedom* (1999), Sen focuses on five individual freedoms, of which individual political, social and economic freedoms are discussed in this dissertation in relation to rural development. I argue that the extent of individual freedoms defines the limits of autonomous development spheres of self-empowerment. Sen primarily addresses the importance of the individual freedoms in relation to development in general, but also points at the importance of public discussion, the role of mass media in information exchanges, the formation of values, popular political participation and the identification of development needs in particular. More implicitly, Sen stresses the importance of information dissemination by highlighting the importance of education and health care to increase individual political, social and economic freedoms.

Electronic media in general, and networked electronic media (telephone, computer and radio networks) in particular, provide opportunities for people to participate in information dissemination, which could evolve into participatory decision-making processes. Independent electronic media, such as local radio and television stations, can play a *social actor* role in rural development, e.g., by interacting with individual people and government. I do not consider popular participation in rural development related decision-making processes as a means to, or an end of, rural development, but the ‘emergence and consolidation of [basic political and civil] rights [should] be seen as being constitutive of the process of development’ (Sen, 1999: 288). This immediately implicates that democracy should not just be a result of development, nor should it only be instrumental to development, but that it should be conceived of as

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2 I interpret social actor in the context of what De Jager and Mok label a functionalist approach to sociological research. According to De Jager and Mok, a functionalist approach does not take the entire society as an object of research, but only specific elements, groups or events in society, whereby specific attention is paid to the role of specific groups in changing some aspects of society or their respective contributions to the processes related to those changes (De Jager and Mok, 1983: 206). Essentially, I am interested in rural development as a process, or event, and the role of electronic media, as a group in society, in that process. I conceive of a social actor role for electronic media as contributing to a mobilization of opinion and a creation of awareness of possible social change. De Jager and Mok mention general doubts with respect to the functionalist assumption that the cumulative knowledge, resulting from partial studies, leads to insight into the functioning of society as a whole. However, in this dissertation I do not presume such an assumption and only intend to describe the potential influence of electronic media on the capabilities of individual people to choose alternative lifestyles. In chapter four, I make a further distinction between social, political and economic actor role (4.3n15).
a central aspect of development. I discuss different conceptions of democracy, as well as the requirement of democratic settings for electronic media in chapter five. Participation in political, social and economic decision-making processes is about sharing power, whereby the extent of that power sharing is determined by the nature of the participatory process. In my opinion, free and independent information dissemination through electronic media is crucial for popular participation on an equal basis with the current decision-makers in power. This focus on electronic media in information dissemination raises the issue of politics of power in relation to electronic media and information dissemination, an issue which I discuss in some detail in chapter six. Together, chapters five and six address the importance of a democratic setting for independent electronically mediated rural networks.

As a whole, the theoretical argumentation of chapters three to six discusses development as freedom of choice and the role of electronic media in that conception of development. The argumentation provides a conception of development aimed at achieving social change by using electronic media in improving rural information dissemination. In addition, the conception conceives of electronic media as social actors. The argumentation also raises additional questions: what is social change? why should social change be such an important objective, or rather a constitutive element of development? what contribution can electronic media make to social change? how do we determine whether the socio-political and economic context of a nation-state is conducive to social change and to the role of electronic media in that process? Perhaps Procacci is correct in her essay by cynically suggesting that governments are only interested in social change that leads to social order without the dangers of pauperism and with manageable poverty levels. What is the importance of democracy in achieving social change and which arrangements of society are most favorable to social change aimed at more popular participation in decision making processes and at equality through expansion of an individual’s capabilities?

Social change is often perceived as structural change in society. Instead of defining structural social change in general, my focus on electronic media restricts the concept here to a change in what I have labeled the information and communication power structure. Therefore, chapter six introduces the analytical concept of information traffic patterns (Bordewijk and Van Kaam, 1982). This concept helps to expose the underlying power structure of information provision and exchange by means of analyzing information flow patterns which characterize the different electronic media. In my opinion, the fact that underdevelopment in rural areas of developing countries arose and persists under existing arrangements of societies in developing countries is in itself sufficient to claim a constitutive importance for structural social change to development. The use of the concept of information traffic patterns will not only allow me to expose the power structure, but will also provide insights into which patterns facilitate or favor both structural and individual social change. Moreover, applying the concept will provide insight into which combinations of electronic media are most suited for the purpose of social change.

I acknowledge the importance of structural social change, but the dissertation emphasizes individual social change. In my perception, individual social change refers to Sen’s interpretation of development as a ‘person’s increased freedom to choose from possible livings’ (Sen, 1992: 40). Although Sen distinguishes between five freedoms, I will focus on three of those individual freedoms: political, social and economic freedoms. I acknowledge that an increase in individual freedoms requires structural social change in the socio-political and economic context of a nation-state. However, by prioritizing the individual perspective, I intend to ignore pragmatic considerations of feasible structural change and to focus instead on desirable individual social change. I use generally accepted notions of human rights as a reference point for what is desirable with respect to individual freedom. Therefore, the argumentation focuses on electronic media’s contribution to increased individual freedoms in rural areas, as well as on the impact those freedoms have on capabilities of individuals to benefit from

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3 Arguably the most widely accepted reference point for individual human rights is the United Nations charter on human rights, although this charter may reflect perceptions of the dominant Western cultures more than those of other, non-Western, cultures. However, it has been signed and ratified by most UN member countries, of which the majority is non-Western. In the context of this dissertation, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is of particular relevance, since it states that everyone has the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas. This article is of crucial importance to Article 21 of the same Declaration, which contains the right to genuine elections.
information dissemination and a social actor role by electronic media. Finally, I acknowledge the need for a conducive socio-political and economic context, which allows electronic media to contribute in the way I envisage.

The importance attached to the conduciveness of the socio-political and economic context to social change requires a qualitative description of such a context. I assume that development is best served by a devolution of authority and power, popular sovereignty instead of sovereignty of the State, decentralized administrative structures and participatory decision-making processes and power sharing, all of which are facilitated by a conditions creating policy framework which is aimed at a conception of development as freedom of choice. Chapter five discusses the theoretical aspects of the conduciveness of socio-political and economic context. In the case studies, the aspects of the socio-political and economic contexts of nation-states will be assessed on their conduciveness to development as an increased freedom to choose. I assume that the extent of the freedom of the press, both in a legal sense and in reality, is an indicator of the possible role electronic media are allowed to play in rural development. The case studies of chapter eight, nine and ten provide illustrative material on the socio-political and economic contexts of Vietnam, Indonesia and Peru, as well as on the influence of the contexts on people’s individual freedoms and on the position of electronic media.

Chapters eleven and twelve address the influence of the information and communication power structure on electronic media’s contribution to information dissemination in rural areas, as well as the effect of increased individual freedoms on the impact information dissemination can have on the lives of people in rural areas. In my opinion, socio-political and economic contexts of nation-states, particularly the information and communication power structures, determine the nature and content of electronically mediated information flows. Based on cases on Vietnam, Indonesia and Peru, I suggest a relation between the conduciveness to social change of the socio-political and economic context of a nation-state and a preference for specific ideal-types of electronically mediated information flows.

Finally, I argue that the socio-political and economic context of a nation-state, as well as the status of the individual freedoms of people in that context, determine the impact of electronic media in rural areas, irrespective of the intrinsic features of electronic media. This means that, in my opinion, the technological features of electronic media are far less relevant than the extent to which those features can be used and the extent to which individual people have the individual freedoms, or capabilities, to seize the opportunities offered by electronic media. This also means that I reject the theoretical position of the advocates of communication technology determinism, Innis, McLuhan and Rogers, amongst others, who claim that changes in the technological aspects of communication technology may well be the single-most, and mostly positive, important factors of structural social change in society. The neoliberal contention that, because of this relation, the mechanisms of the free market are best suited to spread the benefits of the information society to rural areas of developing countries in the form of a communication revolution is essentially what I attempt to refute with the comparisons, analyses and conclusions of chapters eleven and twelve. At the same time, I also reject the negative interpretation of technological determinism, as presented by Herbert Marcuse in his book One-Dimensional Man (1964)\(^4\). Therefore, the overall conclusion of this dissertation is that the information age is not about technology as such, not in a negative nor in a positive technological deterministic way, but about the capabilities of people to use technology in order to increase their freedoms to choose alternative lifestyles. Independent community radio stations may very well be more suited for that purpose than high-tech communication centers. The dissertation is an academic exercise, but I hope that my findings, analyses and conclusions will contribute to both the academic discourse and to discussions at more practical levels.

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\(^4\) Marcuse discusses technological determinism at a rather more abstract theoretical level and in a broader field than Innis, McLuhan and Rogers. However, his perception that the technical rationality of the socio-political and economic systems of the advanced industrial societies (capitalist, as well as communist) would, amongst others, lead to conformity in thought, restrictions on the freedoms of individuals and, therewith, automatically to a containment of social change has proven to be too deterministic and, rather ironically, too one-dimensional. Marcuse denied the opportunity for qualitative social change, as a result of the numbing effect of the advanced industrial society’s quantitative social change. Although I do not want to refute Marcuse’s entire argumentation, it does seem as if, very much like Marx, his analysis is far more interesting and relevant than his prediction of the future developments in society based on that analysis.