



Article

The Feminist Gaze on Communication for Social Change

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Abstract: A critical appraisal of the field of feminist approaches offers a valuable critical lens to help reshape our conceptualizations of development and the roles communication may play in constructive intervention. Development communication has shifted over time from ignoring and obscuring women to recognizing gendered differences in experiences. Development approaches have also brought participatory processes into focus. However, our strategic initiatives still fall short, both in effectiveness and in ethics. At this juncture, we need to take next steps more seriously in order to promote a more humanitarian approach that would guide institutional practices in programs and research. In this article, I aim to critique the discourse that celebrates digital technologies as tools to promote participatory governance, entrepreneurship, and collective activism through a feminist gaze that privileges the political and economic contexts that condition access to voice, the capacity to listen, and potential for dialog. This analysis builds on an understanding of mediated communication as a prism rather than as a projected mirror, structuring our potential as well as our challenges in creating constructive social change. We need to be accountable toward social justice, relying on our critical appraisals and informed dialogs to create paths to stronger and more impactful communication for social change.

Keywords: development; social change; communication; digital media; gender; feminist critique



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1. Introduction

Despite the well-intentioned and expertly crafted strategic communication interventions designed to resolve serious contemporary concerns, many development programs fail to achieve significant social change (Hornik 1988). While credible evaluation research on outcomes contributes to our ability to improve programs, we also need creative conceptualizations, based on critical analyses, to expand our assessments to include attention to processes and contexts. The purpose of this article is to offer a feminist critique that will contribute to constructive prescriptions to advance social justice.

Before moving to an argument stating that the field of development communication would benefit from revision, I articulate the study of social change in relation to development intervention and the role of communication within the planning, execution, and discourse of strategic intervention. Development represents a path toward social change enacted through the work of agencies and communities with strategic intent to promote public benefit through defined intervention. Reconceptualizing development means exploring how communication serves to support as well as limit strategic initiatives. In this discussion, I move from considering communication broadly, as a narrative as well as a process, to communication more specifically being mediated through digital technologies.

By focusing on gender within the broader field of development communication, development discourse has shifted its representation from an absence of women to a commodified and objectified portrayal, addressing relevant critiques that gendered differences contribute to the experiences that challenge social justice. In considering process, communication scholarship may have given credence to participatory approaches in social change, but without dialogic communication, our efforts fall short both in effectiveness and in ethics. In this article, I explore how a feminist gaze focusing on the potential as well as problems

of mediated communication brings into play dialogic approaches to communication for social change.

The critical appraisal offered is guided by a vision promoted through a feminist gaze, meant to light a humanitarian approach that is concerned with social justice. Feminist perspectives offer a valuable critical lens to help witness our world, articulate our approaches, and strengthen strategic intervention. The term “feminist gaze” subverts concern with what [Mulvey \(1975\)](#) identified as a “male gaze”, particularly relevant in discussions of media representation considering how characters and their characterizations are produced from a masculine, heteronormative perspective. Through a feminist gaze, then, we may begin to appropriate the conditions of media production to improve our contribution to strategic social change. Ultimately, we want to rely on our visions and our voices for expression; in addition, we want to mobilize collective engagement in the creation of mediated intervention to activate strategic social change.

A feminist gaze builds on a critical and humanitarian approach to guide institutional practices in development programs and communication research. I critique the discourse that celebrates digital technologies as tools to promote participatory governance, entrepreneurship, and collective activism through a feminist lens that accentuates the political and economic contexts that condition access to voice, the capacity to listen, and the potential for dialog. This analysis builds on an understanding of mediated communication as a prism rather than as a projected mirror, structuring our potential to create constructive social change. The framework of a mediated prism allows us to explore the complexities engaged in producing and reviewing the stories that are created to explain contemporary concerns and their proposed resolutions, relying on a metaphor that recognizes the prejudices that filter our fear and our understanding of the world ([Wilkins 2021](#)).

This critical appraisal concludes with suggestions for reconceptualizing the field of development communication. We need to be accountable toward social justice, relying on our critical analyses and informed dialogs to create paths to stronger and more impactful communication for social change.

2. Communication for Social Change

In this section, I offer an overview of communication for social change in order to advocate critical analysis and creative revisioning. Social change as an area of research and practice includes strategic intervention implemented through organizations and agencies and mobilized through collective social movements. Building from interdisciplinary approaches in the social sciences, scholars describe varied justifications and aspirations, enabled through different interventions, contexts, and communities. Whether orchestrated through formally defined organizations or informally motivated groups, these campaigns are strategic in intent, aiming toward achieving collective claims for public benefit.

While social change represents a comprehensive approach to the study of strategic intervention, whether produced through the work of development organizations or collectively mobilized communities, the goals pursued encompass a broad set of interests, ranging from individual behavior change, such as health practices, to social justice, considering the conditions that exacerbate inequities ([Gallagher 2011](#); [Sen 2000](#)). While attention to development focuses on programs engaged by formal bilateral and multilateral agencies, along with private and public agencies explicitly promoting defined interventions, scholars began to broaden this field to include the work of social movements and community programs, in addition to development work, under the broader heading of “social change” ([Wilkins et al. 2014](#)).

Communication becomes relevant to the practice and process of social change as a way of structuring movements and interventions, understanding contexts of problems, and targeting solutions. Communication helps achieve strategic social change in various ways, whether as a technology or platform to work toward development goals, as mediated content in cultural contexts, or as intervention mobilizing collective action or advocating for policy change.

Communication scholarship devoted to the service of institutional development programs informs an approach known as “development communication”, guiding the strategic use of communication to achieve development goals funded and implemented by formal development agencies. Within the field of development communication, research has contributed to the planning and assessment of program implementation, when communication is meant to be a tool “for” development. In this vein of scholarship, communication may be studied as an intentional text, such as a short-form video or lengthier entertainment–education program, through planned communication and mediated platforms. Goals may include creating strategic campaigns that are integral to a wide range of communities, inviting attention and, at times, attempting to inspire individual, normative, or institutional change.

In addition to strategies focusing on communication for development, critical scholars have raised attention about the way communication contributes to a discourse “about” development, referencing the implicit ways communication reinforces our social distinctions in comparison to the explicit ways communication may be designed to resolve social differences. Another way communication matters to the work of development references the explicit public relations designed to raise the visibility of programs and credibility of donors (Pamment and Wilkins 2018). These then represent explicit strategies not designed to reach communities that are meant to be engaged for social change, but instead, the publics and audiences aligned with donors, so that development agencies and agents may “look good” while “doing good” (Enghel and Noske-Turner 2018; Kogen 2018; Wilkins 2018). This strategic work to promote public appearance draws attention to agencies, celebrities, and donors championing social causes.

3. Dialogic Communication for Social Change

Communication then may work for development to support implementation for defined objectives or toward attempting to raise the reputation of donor agencies and individuals. The process of engaging development invites attention to the potential for participation in determining concerns, reserving resources, and directing response. Participatory approaches to development are designed to enhance the effectiveness of intervention as well as to build on ethical foundations for community engagement, raising attention to access and voice (Couldry 2010). Although participatory communication has been inspired by concerns with overly hierarchical and deterministic intervention, its potential has been challenged by the contexts of power in which it is engaged. Attention to dialogic communication recognizes the importance of power structures in affording but also limiting the potential for listening and conversing (Quarry and Ramirez 2009).

Scholars reviewing the literature demonstrate the problems of participatory approaches in reaching their promise. In their meta-analysis, Kim and Lee (2023) illustrate the dominance of technological determinism, focusing participation at levels of access rather than decision making, while romanticizing local concerns at the expense of recognizing global structural inequalities. Kogen’s (2022) review of communication for social change scholarship confirms Kim and Lee’s findings, adding that projects that claim to be participatory are comparatively less so than those published in other academic fields. She critiques communication for the literature on social change for posing vague conceptualizations of these key concepts, advocating instead for an approach that foregrounds communicative power, recognizing the access, capital, and competencies needed to engage public communities and policy makers.

The ability to participate becomes channeled through the ways in which we motivate and celebrate individual engagement in social causes. Noske-Turner (2023) describes a “new spirit” of “social changemaking”, building on a social entrepreneurial direction chronicled by McAnany (2012), privileging corporate agendas. These approaches laud heroic, charismatic leaders who present in optimistic parlance. Social injustice then becomes addressed through a trendy “spirit of capitalism” through the publicity of “celebrity entrepreneurs” (Noske-Turner 2023). The power to communicate is conditioned by the

structures that channel social and financial capital as well as the platforms prevalent in an increasingly mediated society.

4. Digital Media in Strategic Communication for Social Change

In an increasingly mediated society, social change and development programs are saturated with digital technologies as tools for change, and they are more celebrated than cautioned against. Communication technologies have the potential to mobilize collective action, promote advocacy, and strengthen voice (Wilkins 2024). For example, the fifth Sustainability Development goal to promote gender equality incorporates a target to “enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women” (United Nations (UN) 2016). Many development agencies promote these technologies as ways to support market participation, economic investment, and entrepreneurship serving instrumentalist goals (Wilkins 2019; Wilkins and Kim 2021).

Digital media serve social movements as well as development agencies, underscored by Cammaerts (2021) in articulating how our “hypermediated and datafied” society promotes and challenges the work of social movements. Referencing Castells’ (2012) analysis of “new” social movements as being less hierarchical and more decentralized than those previously studied, Cammaerts recognizes the possibilities of social media in offering continuity in areas such as fostering collective identity and discontinuity, given more open ideological and fluid identities. Given weak organizational structures and distanced social ties, social movements enabled by social media may be more open to a variety of participants, although not consistently activated, as well as divergent interpretations. Considering the social change aspired by Danish youths, Hemming Pedersen (2022) confirms the potential for mediatization to liberate possibilities as well to increase dependencies, as an increasingly datafied world enhances inclusion as well as extends individualization.

Although digital media enhance the potential to engage participants across national boundaries, we need to recognize the value as well as challenges of mobilizing through these channels as well as a dialectic of assertion and resistance. Cammaerts (2021) cautions us from “not uncritically embrac(ing) the technological deterministic claim that changes in the ontology of social movements are primarily driven and determined by the internet and social media” (p. 18). What has been critiqued elsewhere (Dutta 2011) as a problematic neoliberal approach to development is relevant to this concern that reliance on digital platforms may run counter to more collectivist and collaborative intentions. In essence, we need to be more cautious and more curious (Waisbord 2025) when considering the potential for communication technologies, emerging and legacy, in motivating and activating global social change.

The key to this characterization of connecting through access to digital platforms is that these networks may transcend some limitations in embodied physical locations when enabling online mobilization. While territorial boundaries certainly circumscribe our physical mobility, through restrictions in policies and resource capital, social movements activated through hypermediated communities may take on a transnational attribution, privileging the global context (Cammaerts 2021), which is particularly prominent in feminist advocacy (Mukherjee et al. 2023; Van Bauwel and Krijnen 2021). Next, I turn to the ways that feminist critiques inform our interest in reconceptualizing the field.

5. Feminist Critique and Aspiration

In this section, I turn a feminist gaze toward a critical analysis of development communication. Feminist critique informs how we understand global development attention to women and gender (Matos 2023) and how digital media, as a tool and as text, raise opportunities as well as challenges in our quests toward social justice.

Beginning with a historic view of development discourse, we see how women have moved from relative invisibility to visibility without voice, to being constructed as more actively engaged participants in social change and leaning more toward leading development

and social change (Steeves 1993; Wilkins 2016). The UN Decade for Women (1975–1985) gained superficial recognition in public discourse, while the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing highlighted the endurance of concerns raised years earlier. Since then, development agencies have strengthened their attention to women and gender, though at times diluting their efforts through their projected “mainstreaming” of these issues. Critical feminists remind us of the challenges in practice in working to direct resources and programs that recognize gender inequities (Matos 2023).

Gender references not only social categories, but also intersecting contexts of power and oppression relevant to class, ethnicity, and other distinctions (Dutta 2011; Steeves 1993). Privileging attention to gender aligns our analyses of power with these social identities, asserting gender as a social construction distinct from biological determinism. Some feminist scholars of development focusing on women as a primary community raise concerns that, in doing so, we lose sight of the gendered dynamics that contribute to problematic social, economic, and political conditions (Matos 2023; Steeves 1993; Wilkins 2016).

6. Power and Problems of Digital Media

Critical feminist scholars have contributed to our understanding of the power of digital engagement as well as the constraints embedded within political contexts that structure resources and access. Research exploring the digital production of news and information across cases demonstrate the promise of strategic intentions designed to advocate feminist goals (Dosekun 2023; Mohammed 2023; Navarro and Gómez-Bernal 2022; Pain 2020). As evidenced in these studies, gender represents one dimension of power, but given its integration, it contributes toward complicated processes of representation and engagement (Mohammed 2023; Van Bauwel and Krijnen 2021). Moreover, these public digital spaces may become venues for online harassment, problematizing a rosy projection of potential (Kurasawa et al. 2021).

The power of digital media is manifest in the potential to raise visibility and to enhance social connection and capital. Against this potential, we recognize concerns with excluding participants, inspiring resistance, raising burdens of labor, and obscuring broader political contexts. In her study of advocacy journalism in Argentina, Cabas-Mijares (2023) explores the politics of knowledge produced by feminist communities. Access to knowledge production becomes a central concern across case studies (Kurasawa et al. 2021). These dynamics serve to remind us that digital media need to be understood within particular contexts as integrated into human production rather than foregrounded through technological determinism. Arguing in separate studies that the literature does not do justice to the context of communities in the African region, Wildermuth (2021) and Ackah (2023) offer illustrations in which digital inclusion does not necessarily lead to democratic governance, social justice, or economic gain.

On the side of potential, digital media have raised visibility for feminist interests, with more inclusive voices and, in some instances, with more far-reaching activism (Chidgey 2021; Navarro and Gómez-Bernal 2022; Van Bauwel and Krijnen 2021). Although the rise of celebrity activism in social change has enhanced visibility and strengthened networks, this trend resonates with privileging individualized consumption as a preferred path of participation. While celebrity status attracts public attention, the entrance of commodified female capital into a world of strategic philanthropy raises many questions, particularly if we aspire to assert social justice in both private and public spheres.

Although mediated representations of gender roles in the U.S. have shifted slightly and slowly over time, sentiments toward responsibilities have supported more gendered equity in public and professional domains, but much less so in private spheres. Through a comprehensive, longitudinal analysis documenting television representation in conjunction with attitudes toward gendered roles, Hermann et al. (2022) chronicle the painfully slow rate of change in media representation as well as the particularly narrow focus of normative change. They conclude that this resistance to gender equity may be inspired by the relative gains accrued by women in professional domains. Flood et al. (2021) confirm this concern,

demonstrating that public assertions in support of gender equity are met with denial and disavowal, apathy, and appeasement. Recognizing a dialectic of progress and pause, movement toward gender justice is neither immediate nor linear, but punctuated frequently through varied forms of resistance (Van Bauwel and Krijnen 2021).

Although there may be potential for digital media to advance social change, studies of feminist movements illustrate how inclusive participation can be challenged without adequate access or resources. Several case studies show that activists relying on digital platforms are more likely to be among the elite than those in marginalized conditions (Dosekun 2023; Mohammed 2023; Navarro and Gómez-Bernal 2022; Pain 2020). It is not just access to technologies and time, but also the exhaustion of social movement work that contributes to this exclusion (Engel 2025). In contrast, to be included in mediated activism, one becomes subject to the celebration of individual performance and consumption (Navarro and Gómez-Bernal 2022) at the expense of political context (Wilkins 2020).

7. Feminist Aspirations for Global Social Change

Given serious critique, how then might feminist aspirations strengthen our approaches to global social change? Communication for development is well versed in technologically deterministic attention to mediated platforms, persuasive texts designed to motivate individual change, and in public relations meant to elevate the status of donors and agencies. Feminist critiques draw attention to how we can position development within contexts relevant to dimensions such as economic conditions, regulatory policies, and climate sustainability.

A critical feminist approach centers power as conditioning the potential for strategic work to contribute to social justice (Gallagher and Montiel 2023). Reconceptualizing the role of digital media means considering the power to create and circulate mediated narratives. Digital media represent more than technologies and platforms, structuring how narratives are composed, shared, and interpreted in the enactment of programs and practices. Development narratives contribute to the discourse that guides institutional practice and intervention (Cornwall 2007; Dutta 2011; Thomas and Van de Fliert 2015) through justifying strategies based on framing social problems and solutions. This discourse implicates particular models of social change, inscribing problems and possibilities as well as highlighting participants and processes (Wilkins 2016).

Development narratives follow similarly gendered tropes as found in other genres, such as news, popular culture, and education (Wilkins 2016). The gendered narrative of women requiring rescue, with development agencies as saviors, relies on problematic plots that project women as passive and in despair. When women are projected as having agency, development discourse highlights their individual potential and accomplishments in episodic framing rather than enduring trends and collective achievements.

Among narratives supporting guided social change, empowerment stories of individual triumph dominate, while contextually embedded stories of justice compete (Wilkins 2016). Within the empowerment narrative, serving the liberal framing of development, individual women are not only responsible for their success, but also for their failure, should they find themselves unable to secure employment, a safe haven, or avenues for participation. In contrast, narratives privileging social justice draw attention to gender inequities, which are exacerbated by economic globalization. In each case, constructed problems impose a direction on the strategic interventions that are posed as solutions.

The gendered nature of these narratives surfaces when heroes are male, women succeed through masculine characteristics, or female victims are objectified as distant and not capable of their own rescue (Cloud 2004; McAlister 2005; Wilkins 2016). The conscription of villainy and the narrative of rescue contribute to the gendered discourse that guides the work of strategic social change. Designating those accountable for social change resonates with narratives ascribing evil, incompetence, and corruption to villains, whose acts cause harm to victims, typically asserted as women and children, paving the way for masculine heroes to engage in rescue.

Situating development as a gendered concern also facilitates movement away from victimizing, infantilizing, and objectifying women (Shome 1996). Attention to gender dynamics reminds us that our communities host complexity as well as diversity, and they are able to mobilize and contribute to collective rescue. Problematic narratives highlighting women's value as entrepreneurial, as maternal, and as consumers avoid recognizing the material and normative conditions that limit potential and progress. Programs that elevate entrepreneurs require credit and capital. Programs that accentuate consumption are predicated not only on immediately available resources, but also on systems of credit and interest, as well as the supply of products and regulated safety for their use. Our abilities to care, to create, and to consume have value, but they must be understood not as individual acts of heroism but as acts structured through material and policy conditions.

Feminist analysis raises critical questions that position development concerns within a framework of global social justice (Gallagher 2011). Women's collective action, through social movements as well as contributions through professional and political work, becomes part of this process. The distinction is not necessarily a juxtaposition of passive against active roles, but the way in which agency becomes articulated, whether as an individual or as collective processes and outcomes.

8. Mediating Dialogic Communication for Global Social Change

Witnessing our world through a feminist gaze privileges the political and economic contexts that condition access to voice, the capacity to listen, and the potential for dialog. By conceptualizing mediated communication as a prism that channels and changes narratives, we may consider how to create a different kind of program. The institutional production of knowledge, whether serving the industries of news or of strategic social change, engages explicit politics as well as implicit sentiments through this projected prism in ways that serve political elites and perpetuate inequities (Wilkins 2021). We need to be accountable toward social justice, relying on our critical appraisals and informed dialogs to create paths to stronger and more impactful communication not squarely in the realm of formal development, but extending to effective and ethical paths toward social justice (Cornwall 2007; Enghel and Noske-Turner 2018).

In the interest of considering reconceptualizing the field of development communication, I explore how a feminist gaze would inform how we practice and study communication for social justice, recognizing the hypermediated conditions that structure mediated prisms. Specifically, we need to consider how to recognize the importance of narrative in normative change; to reckon with the serious challenges as well as opportunities for advocacy; and to reward accountability that engages dialog toward responsibility.

Feminist approaches to strategic social change need to support the composition of narratives that move our conversations from the plight of individual women with heart-breaking stories to the ways communities work together to forge new territories for collaboration and growth. We need to shift our narrative frames from relying on heroic, masculine narratives to those that center feminist agency and collective action. Defiance and anger may become sources of strength (Pain 2020), respecting the vulnerability with this assertion without falling prey to manipulation. Subverting dominant norms takes time and must be addressed across genre and platform, requiring collective effort and modulating against dialectics of progress and resistance.

It is this collective work that enables advocacy, representing not individual stories but the weight of shared experience. Advocacy requires more than voice; it also requires public listening and, moreover, dialogic communication enabled through structure and normative practice (Dutta 2011). When advocating social justice, we need to situate gender equality within the contexts in which norms emerge yet may also be subverted. And we need to understand the industries in which communication, as well as development, structure resources toward the potential for social justice.

Dialogic communication contributes to processes of mobilization as well as promises of accountability (Wilkins 2020). The praxis of social change demands that action be integrated

with reflection such that paths for social change may adjust as contextual conditions change over time and differ across communities and issues. A critical feminist gaze centers humanity within our attempts to leverage and learn through communication technologies to promote social justice.

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