



Daniel Lerner and the Origins of Development Communication

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Abstract

Daniel Lerner’s 1958 book *Passing of Traditional Society* was a foundational text for mass media and modernization theory. The theory, in turn, was the basis for early approaches to development communication. Lerner’s ideas were embraced by some and challenged by others. Eventually, Lerner himself engaged in a series of revisions to his theory, leaving a distillation of ideas emphasizing (a) the universality of modernization and (b) faith in technology to solve social problems. These ideas continue, in important ways, to influence the field of development communication.

Keywords

Daniel Lerner · Development communication · Development-support communication · Modernization

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Introduction

While it might be an exaggeration to say that American political scientist Daniel Lerner is the father of development communication, there is a little doubt that Lerner's ideas about the role of mass media in modernization are a clear and direct antecedent of development communication. Lerner presented his ideas about mass media and modernization in a 1958 book, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Lerner 1958). Lerner's theory of modernization posited a model of societal transformation made possible by embracing western manufacturing technology, political structures, values, and systems of mass communication. As a policy initiative, modernization was the centerpiece of Cold War efforts to thwart the spread of Soviet communism in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. A package of western industrial organization, patterns of governance, and general lifestyles was conceived and offered up as an irresistible and obviously superior path to entering the modern postwar world.

Development communication is the art and science of using communication technology to inculcate promodernization values. As Shah (2011) notes, the phrase "development communication" largely replaced "mass media and modernization" by the 1970s. The field was further legitimized with the publication of the *Journal of Development Communication* beginning in 1990. The concept of development communication originally thought of messages as moving "top-down" – from west to non-west, elite to nonelite, expert to nonexpert, capital city to outlying areas. The purpose of these messages was to ensure a social and culture climate in which people would favorably receive ideas from outside their systems of thought.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of "development-support communication" was coined to capture new emphases, initiatives, and theoretical approaches to development that were rooted in concepts of participation and empowerment of people at the grass-roots. "Development-support communication" signaled the use of horizontally networked information flow (as opposed to top-down models) not simply as an input into modernization but as a way of supporting people's aspiration for control over their resources and basic needs (Shah 2011: 7). Development-support communication was not much different from development communication (Melkote and Steeves 2001). Shah (2008) further noted that development-support communication, while it was not top-down, was frequently "outside-in," meaning that western experts with particular values and institutional biases were still highly influential. In any case, several reviews of the literature have shown that some elements of Lerner's model remained touchstones for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners alike, albeit less and less frequently as time passed (Fair 1989; Fair and Shah 1997; Shah 2007).

The Production of *Passing of Traditional Society*

Since *Passing of Traditional Society* is central to the origins of development communication as a field of study, it is informative to examine origins of the book itself. The book was a "production," Shah (2011) notes, in the sense that it is an outcome of

a research process embedded in a particular postwar political and cultural economy. The specific methods, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical linkages described in the book, as well as the specific policy implications thereof, were possible – imaginable – only at *that* particular historical moment. However, the general idea that the west is superior to the “rest” can be traced much further back in history than 1958. The perspective that people outside the Euro-American fold are inferior goes back at least to the fifteenth century “voyages of discovery” undertaken by the sailing fleets from Portugal, Spain, and England. A discourse that counterpoised the superiority of Europeans and the inferiority of non-Europeans emerged during this time and justified conquest, plunder, and murder of peoples throughout Africa, Asia, and the “new world” of the Americas. This discourse, which Edward Said labeled “Orientalism,” persists to this day in many ways and continues to be employed to justify newer – and older – forms of western colonialism and imperialism (Said 1979).

During the Second World War, academics from a variety of disciplines served in various arms of government and military service (Cravens 2004; Rogers 1994; Smith 1994). They deployed their skills to address the problems associated with winning a war. They also formed social networks based on their shared intellectual interests. These networks transferred quite easily into civilian life after the war when the academics went back to their positions as professors and administrators at leading American universities. Some of these academics became heavily involved in discussions about crafting postwar foreign policy. Indeed, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a handful of these academics were central to the first articulations of a nascent modernization theory, which helped American leaders legitimize Cold War policies to compete geopolitically in strategic locations such as the Middle East. The intellectual network for modernization thinking was interdisciplinary, spanning a number of fields including sociology, political science, economics, psychology, anthropology, ethnic and racial studies, and mass communication. As modernization emerged as a theoretical construct from discussions in conferences, seminars, and consultancies, a scholarly consensus emerged over a relatively short period of time as to the meaning and relevance of the idea. The production of *Passing of Traditional Society* played a significant part in the formation of this consensus.

Lerner’s book is a production in a second sense, also. As Lerner moved through life – as a college student, military officer, researcher, and esteemed Ivy League professor – he was shaped by a number of personal experiences and intellectual influences. For example, Lerner learned statistical methods, embraced comparative cross-national approaches, and identified Harold Lasswell and Talcott Parsons as his “theoretical heroes.” Lerner also found his gift for languages and literary analysis useful as he moved toward the opportunity that resulted in the writing of *Passing of Traditional Society*. The book is a product, Shah (2011) has shown, of a personal assemblage of specific research skills, disciplinary dogma, a system of values, and a vision of America’s superiority and liberal altruism.

The Reception to *Passing of Traditional Society*

Lerner's book received positive and negative reviews. On the one hand, the book was praised at the time of its publication for its "solid social science" (Badeau 1959) and its impact on all meaningful studies of the Middle East and other modernizing cultures as well (Berger 1958). Even more recently, the book has been called the "seminal work" (Posusney 2004) and the "locus classicus" (Levy and Banerjee 2008) in the field of development communication.

However, reviews of *Passing of Traditional Society* were not uniformly positive. Criticism came from many sides, as Shah (2011) notes. Conservative thinker Edward Banfield (1959) said some societies were fated to remain backward: "The American Indian, for example, has had extensive aid for decades, but he is still in most cases very far from belonging to the modern world." Another conservative thinker, Samuel Huntington (1965), thought that rather than promoting political stability, modernization could just as easily create instability in the postcolonial world, which was not in the interest of the United States. Rather than promoting modernization, Huntington argued, the United States ought to be preventing modernization. The sharpest criticisms came from scholars in the postcolonial world. In a representative comment, the Pakistani economist Inayatullah (1967: 100) said: "[Modernization] presupposes that because the 'traditional' societies have not risen to the higher level of technological development in comparison to the Western society, they are sterile, unproductive, uncreative, and hence worth liquidating."

Responding to criticism of *Passing of Traditional Society* and the course of historical events, Lerner made some minor and some not-so-minor adjustments to his theory. Following a military coup in Turkey in 1960, he acknowledged that too-rapid urbanization may lead to social and political instability in the form of a "revolution of rising frustration" in which aspirations outruns achievements (Lerner and Robinson 1960). Other revisions included revising the "traditional-modern" dichotomy (Shah 2011: 135), accepting that the modernization process was neither universal nor linear (Shah 2011: 135), and acknowledging that urbanization, the first step in his theory of modernization, could be counterproductive (Shah 2011: 140).

One quite important revision Lerner made in his thinking about modernization occurred in 1975. At a conference at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Lerner prepared a paper titled "Research in Group Communication: A Retrospective Note." In the paper, Lerner linked for the first time his theory of modernization to Tönnies's society (*Gessellschaft*) and community (*Gemeinschaft*) dichotomy. Lerner saw the connection between Tönnies' descriptions of the rural migrants who left their community behind, became urban industrial workers, changed their ways of life and became part of society, and the modernization-theory idea of traditional to transitional to modern transformation in postcolonial nations. "But," Lerner wrote, "Tönnies misled us. By focusing our concern on *Gessellschaft* . . . he diverted our attention away from the continuing life of the *Gemeinschaft*" (Lerner 1975). Lerner cited anthropologists Robert Redfield (1930) and Oscar Lewis (1951) to argue that it was clear now that "*Gemeinschaft* did not simply pass out of history." Community continued to exist with and even develop important new roles within the larger

society. Lerner's argument represented a most radical departure from his modernization theory. By acknowledging that community did not pass away, that the community survived *in* society, he was saying that traditional society *does not pass*. Lerner was directly undermining the very premise – and the title – of the book that put him on the modernization map.

Lerner's Influence on Development Communication Research

Twenty years after Lerner published *Passing of Traditional Society*, he still believed passionately that the western model of modernization was superior to all others and the western media and western experts could diffuse the model worldwide if only they could better communicate the virtues of western values and institutions. But as to the specific elements of his model, Lerner had revised his views, rethought central concepts, and refined variables not only to account for critiques from fellow academics but also the reality of rising frustration with and opposition to western-style modernization in postcolonial regions. How potent were the remaining ideas? How attractive have they been for social scientists still experimenting with social change in the postcolonial world? Partial answers were provided in a set of meta-research studies focused on the published research literature on development communication.

Shah (2011) reviewed three separate meta-research projects, collectively spanning from 1958 to 2006, on development communication. The first of the three projects examined 224 studies published between 1958 and 1986 (Fair 1989); the second focused on 140 items published between 1987 and 1996 (Fair and Shah 1997); and the third examined 183 studies published between 1997 and 2006 (Shah 2007). Each of the three projects focused on English-language books, book chapters, and academic journal articles that dealt with the role of radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and new communication technology in the process of development (primarily social and economic improvement, broadly conceived). Though the three time periods are not equivalent and the historical contexts each study covers are different, the data and analyses in these papers speak to the question about the extent to which and the way in which Lerner's ideas have been used by scholars in the area of development communication since the publication of *Passing of Traditional Society*. Presented below are some of the relevant results from the three research projects and some discussion of their significance.

Table 1 shows how researchers defined development in two time periods (no data was available on this topic for the 1958–1986 time period). In the 1987–1996 period, we see what may be the influence of Lerner's theory, as more than 55% of the studies defined development in terms of being or becoming "modern." In the 1997–2006 time period, there are more definitions of development and only about one-quarter of the studies refer directly to becoming "modern," though raising living standards and democratic development might well be considered consistent with Lerner's ideas of economic participation and political participation.

Table 2 shows the extent to which Lerner's theory is used to think about mass media impact on development. Lerner's modernization model was used in nearly

Table 1 Conceptual definitions of development

1987–1996 (<i>n</i> = 126)		1997–2006 (<i>n</i> = 115)	
Traditional-to-modern transformation	34.1%	Raise living standards	28.7%
Modern attitudes	22.2	Modern attitudes	20.9
Meeting basic needs	15.9	Health education	13.0
Self-reliance	15.1	Social change	7.8
Raise living standards	6.3	Democratic development	6.1
National integration	6.3	Meeting basic needs	5.2
		Traditional-to modern transformation	3.4
		Self-reliance	3.4
		National integration	3.4

Totals add up to more than 100% because of rounding

Table 2 Media theories about media impact on development

1958–1986 (<i>n</i> = 80)		1987–1996 (<i>n</i> = 58)		1997–2006 (<i>n</i> = 86)	
Lerner model	30.8%	Participatory communication	37.8%	Participatory communication	20.9
Indirect effect	16.9	Information environment	11.1	Social Learning	19.7
Knowledge gap	16.9	Indirect effects	6.7	Lerner model	13.9
Uses and gratifications	13.8	Knowledge gap	6.7	Conscientization	9.3
Two-step flow	13.8	Agenda setting	6.7	Public sphere	6.9
		Uses and gratifications	4.4	Digital divide	6.9
		Social learning	4.4	Hegemony	6.9
		Cultivation	2.2	Knowledge gap	4.6
		Direct effects	2.2	Media imperialism	4.6
		Feminist	2.2	Dependency	3.5
		Public sphere	2.2		

Totals add up to more than 100% because of multiple coding

one-third of the studies conducted between 1958 and 1986, and in about 14% of the studies conducted between 1997 and 2006. In the middle time period, Lerner's theory did not receive any attention, at least by direct reference. It is conceivable, however, that "agenda-setting" or "social learning" may have been in reference to the empathy process. The clear trend, however, is that Lerner's modernization model per se is invoked less frequently over time as alternative models of thinking about modernization or development had been formulated. In the second edition of *Passing of Traditional Society*, Lerner hoped new models would render his model obsolete. One wonders, though, to what extent Lerner would have welcomed theoretical models arising (in the 1997–2006 time period) from a neo-Marxist

Table 3 Mediating variables included in development communication research

1958–1986 (<i>n</i> = 224)		1987–1996 (<i>n</i> = 129)		1997–2006 (<i>n</i> = 80)	
Interpersonal communication	21.7%	Interpersonal communication	13.1%	Gender	25.6%
Literacy	21.6	Government policies	12.1	Local culture	21.2
Educational level	10.2	Political economy	8.5	Infrastructure	10.6
Socioeconomic status	7.4	Local culture	7.2	Literacy	6.2
Gender	3.5	Message credibility	6.9	Media access	6.2
Infrastructure	2.4	Infrastructure	6.2	Interpersonal communication	5.3
Cost of media	2.0	Media access	6.2	Spirituality	3.5
		Literacy	5.2	Race and ethnicity	3.5
		Socioeconomic status	4.3	Local politics	3.5
		Capitalism	3.9	Language	2.7
		Educational level	3.0	Cost of media	1.8
		Gender	1.0	Technology	1.8
				Socioeconomic status	1.8

Totals add up to more than 100% because of multiple coding

tradition (hegemony, media imperialism, and dependency) and from various critical perspectives (such as participatory communication, conscientization, public sphere, and digital divide).

As time passed, researchers examined more and more mediating variables in their studies of modernization, including those that had been suggested by Lerner in his writings after *Passing of Traditional Society*. Table 3 shows the increasing number of mediating variables considered by these researchers even as literacy, socioeconomic status, and media-related variables, which were the core of Lerner's original model, continue to be included in later studies.

In Table 4, we see that the consequences of development communication are somewhat in line with Lerner's predictions – that is, media activate the modernization process, raise knowledge levels, and create a more participatory society. These three outcomes of development communication account for significant proportions of consequences mentioned in all three time periods, indicating that researchers were thinking about the impact of development communication in ways consistent with Lerner's general ideas about mass media and modernization. It should be noted also that the two other consequences listed are associated with views critical of modernization – that media create development problems and that media benefit certain classes. The rate with which these negative consequences are mentioned increased dramatically over time, indicating recognition among researchers of the complexity and ambivalence of the modernization process, which Lerner also acknowledged though he likely would not have framed the problem in the language of class conflict.

Table 4 Consequences of development communication

	1958–1986 (<i>n</i> = 224)	1987–1996 (<i>n</i> = 140)	1997–2006 (<i>n</i> = 148)
Media activate modernization	36.4%	27.4%	44.0%
Media raise knowledge and awareness	–	25.0	41.9
Media create participatory society	–	10.7	27.8
Media create development problems	13.3	15.5	23.0
Media benefit only certain classes	15.4	31.0	21.0

Totals add up to more than 100% because of multiple coding

Shah (2011) summarized the meta-research projects as follows: “The[y] show that the study of development communication is much more conceptually and theoretically complex than when Lerner contemplated writing *Passing of Traditional Society* and Lerner’s ideas about a broadly universal and teleological model of societal change based on western history were no longer widely supported in development communication research. And yet, some of the variables, descriptions, vocabulary related to Lerner’s modernization theory continue to persist in more recent studies.”

Why Does “Lerner” Persist?

By the end of his life, Lerner had revised his theory to the extent that only the basic propositions remained intact: that modernization was a psychosocial system of change, that the core variables were literacy, mass media, and participation (urbanization had diminished in importance) and that western media could help change the lifeways of traditional societies. The linear mechanism of modernization that Lerner had precisely outlined had given way to multiple paths and the explanatory power of the concepts “modern” and “traditional” had diminished considerably. However, Lerner remained fairly confident in his view that the Western model of democratic capitalist society was superior to any other system. Thus, when we say Lerner persists, we ought to say “Lerner” persists, to indicate that it was a certain distillation of his thought that continues to appear in development communication research and remains influential in some ways on the field of development communication. Though it would be a stretch to say “Lerner” *is* modernization, his ideas certainly were foundational to the growing literature on modernization from the 1960s onward.

One reason “Lerner” persists is because it helps modernizers define themselves first, as exceptional and special and, second, as benevolent and altruistic. How is this self-conception sustained, Gilbert Rist (1997) has asked, in the face of heavy criticism of modernization theory and evidence that the modernization in practice

only occasionally followed the anticipated singular path? It is because, said Rist, for modernizers, modernization is the truth and “the Truth cannot lie.” Thus, when failings are acknowledged they are always attributed to faulty implementations (e.g., the postcolonial countries urbanized too fast), human failings (e.g., some people in the postcolonial world do not have sufficient capacity to empathize), or lack of information (e.g., we were not good enough at communicating how to avoid a revolution of rising frustration). Most postwar American development communication specialists viewed their message as correct. The core of that message was the “Truth” that American values and institutions were the epitome of postwar modernity. As Lerner (1965) put it, American modernity was the new Enlightenment, rescued from the horrors of world wars, concentration camps, and atomic bombs. American modernizers stood ready to teach backward people how to become modern. That mass media would take a central role in this tutelage is not surprising given that Lerner worked as a propaganda specialist during World War II.

For the true believers, the obstacles to modernization resided in the realm of technique and technology, not in the realm of ideas, and even less in the realm of ideology. In *Passing of Traditional Society*, Lerner identified radio and cinema as key vehicles for teaching people to be modern. As new technologies of communication emerged and diffused around the world – television, satellites, computers – Lerner was confident that they could revitalize modernization theory and practice. Lerner’s faith in technology to solve a social problem places him in a long line of scholars who “all think that the imperfections of human interchange can be redressed by improved technology or techniques” (Peters 1999: 11).

The reason Lerner’s dictum that mass communication is a key input into the modernization process continues to have such power, it seems, is that despite the somewhat limited explanatory power of modernization theory, development communicators have faith that if technical problems are solved – if more people can be reached, if access can be improved, if connectivity can be enhanced, if service can be provided for longer periods of time, – then mass media can surely, eventually, fulfill its potential as a multiplier of predicted economic, social, and political benefits of modernization. And this vision is also seductively open ended; a fact that ensures continued innovation and experimentation in the technique and technology of message delivery alongside an unshakable Lernerian confidence in the message itself.

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