DECODE: A Book Proposal

Working Summary of the Ten Themes, Draft for Editorial Review

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Introduction

Development communication research has a substantial body of scholarship behind it, tracing its roots back to the 1950s and 1960s. The field has produced major handbooks, journals, and university programs since then. Wilkins et al.'s (2014) Handbook of Development Communication and Social Change offers one clear marker of this maturity. It surveys sixty years of theory and practice across more than twenty chapters. Servaes (1999) did similar foundational work earlier, mapping the shift from modernization to more participatory paradigms. These texts remain standard references in graduate programs worldwide.

Nevertheless, this body of work carries real strengths. It has produced rigorous theory. It has produced detailed case studies across many regions. It has trained generations of scholars and practitioners. Its best work sets a genuine standard of excellence for the field. And yet development communication is rarely seen as the core, more often the periphery of development studies. A closer look reveals a persistent problem: Much of this excellent scholarship still concentrates in a narrow set of institutions. Most of it comes from North American and European universities. And most of it appears in journals based in the same regions, as Waisbord and Mellado (2014) documented directly. They show that communication scholarship elsewhere, in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, developed under very different political and academic conditions. That scholarship rarely gets the same visibility or citation. Universalistic claims built on a narrow set of Western cases keep circulating as if they applied everywhere. They often do not.

This gap is not just conceptual. It is also practical. Bringing Global South scholars fully into shared research and teaching takes real institutional access, not just good intentions. The Future Learning Lab at the University of Agder (UiA) offers part of that access. More correctly, our home department (IGUS) maintains extensive networks with scholars and institutions across Africa, Latin America, and Asia. These networks give the DECODE project a genuine route to frameworks, case knowledge, and colleagues. Accordingly, this book treats that network access as part of its contribution, not just a convenience.

A second gap sits inside university curricula. Most departments of development studies teach and research development itself. Economics, political science, planning and public policy still anchor most programs. Communication rarely gets equal standing in that mix. Manyozo (2012) makes this point directly. He argues the field needs its own identity, distinct from development studies, distinct from public policy and distinct from media studies alone. DECODE responds to that argument. It treats communication as a primary lens on development, noting as well that development studies and planning studies have more numerous overlaps with each other and with communication studies.

Diaspora theory illustrates a related problem. Early frameworks, built in the 1990s and early 2000s, treated diaspora media mostly as a way to preserve identity and homeland ties (Karim, 2003). Today's diasporas operate differently. They coordinate in real time across encrypted apps, social platforms, and remittance networks that barely existed twenty years ago. Candidatu et al. (2019) call for a more relational, less static understanding of digital diasporas. Older frameworks cannot fully explain today's diaspora politics, organizing, or identity work. This DECODE book takes that update seriously, rather than repeating theory built for a different technological moment.

New technical and political conditions add further urgency. Artificial intelligence now shapes what information reaches people, and how. Waisbord (2018) describes a post-truth condition in which journalism no longer holds a stable claim on shared facts. Generative AI intensifies that condition. It can produce convincing text, images, and video at very low cost. Development communication research has

barely begun to study what this means for public trust, misinformation, and civic life, especially in contexts with weaker media institutions and regulatory capacity.

The wider political environment for research has also shifted. Academic freedom has declined in many countries over the past decade, according to long-term global data (Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2023). Researchers and universities face growing pressure in both authoritarian and nominally democratic settings. At the same time, the world order that shaped the field's founding assumptions keeps changing. China's global investments now extend deep into media, telecommunications, and information infrastructure across Africa and beyond (Gagliardone, 2019). This shift is reshaping global communication flows once assumed to run mainly from the West to the rest (Thussu, 2018). A field that studies development communication cannot ignore these material and political conditions shaping the research itself.

A final condition shapes this book's urgency. Young people across many countries report deep pessimism about their own futures. A ten-country global survey found that most young respondents described the future as frightening, and many said governments were failing to act (Hickman et al., 2021). This distrust extends beyond climate change. It touches politics, institutions, and governments more broadly. Young people are protesting in growing numbers, from climate strikes to broader political movements, often without confidence that protest will change anything. Development communication research needs to take this generational mood seriously. It is not background noise. It is part of the communication environment this book's ten themes address.

This is the gap the DECODE book addresses. It builds on the field's strong foundations. It does not discard them. It updates them for a genuinely international readership, one that includes MA students and their instructors across Africa, Latin America, Sri Lanka, and wider Asia. It draws on UiA's own networks to help close the distance between Northern and Southern scholarship. It treats communication as central to development, not secondary to it. It takes diaspora, AI, post-truth politics, academic freedom, a changing world order, and youth disillusionment as live parts of its subject matter, not footnotes. Excellence in this field has always meant rigorous theory and careful evidence. It should also mean scholarship written by, and genuinely useful to, the full range of people who study and practice development communication today. This book aims to meet both standards at once.

Purpose of the book and a first run at thematic organization

The DECODE book is designed for an international audience of research peers, educators and advanced students. The ten themes below serve this dual purpose. Each theme updates development communication as a research area. Each theme stays accessible to students, many of whom will meet these debates for the first time. The list of generative themes below has been confined to ten, for now. The idea is to seek out two contributions for each of these themes. If other themes come up that are convincingly relevant, the structure may change.

1. Status Update / Research (authored by the book editor(s))

Development communication took shape in the 1950s and 1960s. It grew out of modernization theory. The field then cycled through dependency and participatory paradigms. Many students still meet debates that are decades old. This theme sets the volume's baseline. It asks where the field stands today. It asks who defines development now. It tracks how research has kept pace with a multipolar world. That world differs sharply from the field's original, Western-centered one. The theme traces the shift from diffusion models to participatory ones. It traces the move toward rights-based and networked communication. It stays honest about how incomplete that shift remains. The theme covers the field's institutional history, including UNESCO, the World Bank, and university programs. That history still shapes today's funding and research agendas. For students across Kristiansand, Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, current context matters most. Students will apply these frameworks in new media and political settings. Those settings differ from the ones that produced the field. As the opening chapter, it sets shared vocabulary for the rest of the book. It sets a shared timeline too. It names the open research gaps that the other themes take up.

> *Key reference to build on: Wilkins, K.G., Tufte, T. & Obregon, R. (eds) (2014). The Handbook of Development Communication and Social Change. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.*

2. Technology / Change, Crisis and AI

Digital technology reshaped development communication. Radio and print gave way to mobile phones. Mobile phones gave way to social media. Now AI platforms enter the picture. Each wave reopens old questions about who benefits. ICT4D optimism peaked in the 2000s and 2010s. That optimism treated connectivity as almost equal to development. Evidence complicates that view. Digital divides persist. Platform dependency on foreign infrastructure persists too. Benefits often flow unevenly. This theme challenges techno-utopian narratives directly. Technologies built and owned in the Global North still shape whose problems get solved and whose data gets used. The theme should note real gains too. Mobile money expanded financial inclusion. Community radio moved online. Citizen journalism grew. These gains should not replace structural analysis. MA students will read this chapter from very different settings, from high-bandwidth Nordic classrooms to patchy connectivity in parts of Africa and Asia. The chapter should help all of them judge new tools critically. Access to a tool is not the same as a development outcome. Generative AI deserves close attention here. Its effects on information access are still unclear. Its effects on labor and misinformation in the Global South need more study. The theme asks what a reciprocal technology agenda looks like, one that differs from a one-way, diffusionist model.

> *Key reference to build on: Unwin, T. (2017). Reclaiming Information and Communication Technologies for Development. Oxford: Oxford University Press.*

3. The 'Big Paradigm' Debate and its Relevance Today

Development communication rests on one core dispute. Modernization theory faces off against participatory theory. Lerner, Schramm, and Rogers built the first camp. Participatory, or multiplicity, thinking replaced it from the 1970s on. This dispute still shapes how the field teaches itself. This theme revisits the debate as unfinished business. It resurfaces under new names. Top-down meets bottom-up. Expert-driven meets citizen-led. Universal metrics meet local meaning. The debate was never just academic. It reflected real stakes about whose knowledge counts and who gets to define progress. Those stakes persist in today's SDG indicators and donor evaluation frameworks. New currents have reframed the debate again. Decolonial theory plays a role. Indigenous knowledge systems play a role. Post-development critique plays a role too. An MA course reader should help students locate

themselves in this ongoing argument, not treat it as resolved. Readers in Africa, Latin America, and Asia can ground this debate in real cases. Some modernization-style projects failed there. Some participatory projects succeeded. The reverse happened too, in other cases. Nordic and European scholarship carries its own assumptions. Those assumptions deserve scrutiny, not neutral treatment. This theme shows how the volume's other nine themes each take a position within, or beyond, this long-running debate.

> *Key reference to build on: Servaes, J. (1999). Communication for Development: One World, Multiple Cultures. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.*

4. SDGs – UN: After 2030? A Case for Sustainable Communication

The 2030 Agenda gave development communication new institutional weight. The Sustainable Development Goals set that agenda. Research has not fully caught up. Communicating seventeen interlocking goals differs from sending a single message. This theme updates the field on that point. It looks at how UN agencies handle this task. It looks at national governments and civil society groups too. All three translate global targets into local practice. That translation sometimes breaks down. It gets contested too. The theme traces a clear line of institutional history. It starts with the 2006 World Congress on Communication for Development. It runs through the Rome Consensus. It reaches today's UN Country Team strategies. This shows both continuity and change. A critical stance matters here. SDG communication research risks becoming UN messaging in disguise. Independent scholarship should model something better. The theme should also flag a real tension. Universal SDG framing flattens local difference. This book's own purpose calls for local, specific communication instead. A single global indicator set cannot capture Africa, Latin America, and South Asia equally well. For MA students, this theme bridges theory and practice. Many will work in NGOs, ministries, or international bodies after graduation. This theme asks a sharp question: what does communication research add that economics or policy studies cannot?

> *Key reference to build on: World Congress on Communication for Development (2006/2007). The Rome Consensus: Communication for Development, A Major Pillar for Development and Change. Rome: FAO, World Bank & The Communication Initiative.*

5. A Changing World Order

Development communication has always tracked the wider geopolitical order. That order has shifted since the Cold War toward a genuinely multipolar world. China, India, the Gulf states, and regional African and Latin American powers all matter now. Most founding theory still assumes a Western-centered, one-way flow. Media, aid, and expertise moved from North to South in that model. That assumption no longer fits reality. South-South cooperation is real. Chinese media investment in Africa is real. Non-Western news agencies now compete globally. This theme maps how the new order reshapes funding. It reshapes whose theories travel and whose stay local. It should address soft power directly. Chinese, Gulf, Russian, and Western media compete in the same spaces. This is also where the book justifies its own ambition. A book for African, Latin American, and Asian readers is itself part of that shift. New centers of power do not guarantee more democratic communication, though. The chapter should note that risk clearly. It asks what research looks like without one fixed vantage point.

> *Key reference to build on: Thussu, D.K. (2018). A new global communication order for a multipolar world. Communication Research and Practice, 4(1), 1-12.*

6. Development Aid – Reflections on Remittances as Communication

Migrant remittances now exceed official aid in value for many countries. Communication research has lagged behind economics on this point. Remittances get treated as a financial flow, not a communication one. This theme corrects that gap. It looks at the information work behind remittances. Trust matters here. So does the relationship work migrants do across distance. Diaspora networks organize collective remittance projects too. The scholarly debate on this topic has swung like a pendulum. Early optimism claimed remittances could replace aid. Pessimism followed, focused on dependency and inequality. Today's view sits somewhere in between, shaped by context. A communication lens adds something economics misses. Everyday narratives shape how money and expectations move. Obligations shape that movement too. This theme connects to the diaspora theme, but still deserves separate treatment. Remittance communication involves its own dynamics. Financial literacy matters. Trust in formal versus informal transfer channels matters. Generational change matters too. Africa and Latin America have strong remittance economies. Those economies are well studied in economic terms. They remain under-theorized in communication terms. This theme asks a clear question: what does a communication-centered remittances agenda add that economics alone does not?

> *Key reference to build on: de Haas, H. (2010). Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective. International Migration Review, 44(1), 227-264.*

7. Media

Media systems research often generalizes from a few Western cases. Those generalizations travel poorly to most of this book's readers. This theme shifts the frame toward the Global South. It looks at ownership concentration there. It looks at state-media relationships there. It looks at press freedom struggles there too. These get treated as normal cases, not exceptions to a Western rule. The chapter covers real structural pressures. Commercialization affects media everywhere. Platform dependency affects media everywhere. Disinformation affects media everywhere. These pressures hit differently where regulation is weaker or press freedom more constrained. The chapter takes media's democratic role seriously, without romanticizing it. Ownership and state capture often undermine that role in practice. This theme connects closely to the democracy theme. The two chapters should sit next to each other. Together they cover media structure and media's political function. For MA students worldwide, this offers real comparative material. Students can place their own national media systems in a global frame. The theme asks a final question: what does international media-development support get right, and wrong, against local media theory?

> *Key reference to build on: Wasserman, H. (2018). Media, Geopolitics, and Power: A View from the Global South. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.*

8. Diaspora

Diaspora communities now shape development in their own right. They use media to keep transnational ties alive. They use media to mobilize resources. They use media to shape political debate back home. Communication research has often folded diaspora into migration studies. It deserves its own theoretical space instead. This theme puts diaspora media practices at the center. Radio matters. Satellite television matters. Diaspora press matters. Social media matters most today. These practices connect diaspora members to home. They also reshape home-country politics from a distance. Origin-country governments sometimes welcome this. They sometimes resist it too. The idea of a diasporic mediascape helps explain this dynamic. The chapter should also question the idea of diaspora as one imagined community. Diaspora groups hold real internal divisions. Belonging within them stays contested. This theme connects directly to the remittances theme. Diaspora media often lay the

groundwork for remittance trust. This theme asks what comes next for diaspora-media research. It should treat diaspora communication as central to development, not a side note to migration.

Key reference to build on: Karim, K.H. (ed.) (2003). The Media of Diaspora: Mapping the Globe. London: Routledge.

9. Education

This theme carries two jobs at once. It analyzes communication's role in educational development. It also reflects on this book's own teaching purpose. As analysis, it covers access to education. It covers media and information literacy. It covers how schools now depend on digital platforms. AI tools now enter this picture too. Access differs sharply across the regions covered by this book. This theme moves past a narrow view of technology in classrooms. It takes a structural view instead. Educational communication can widen inequality. It can also challenge inequality. Institutions in different regions have unequal power to shape their own digital tools. Many simply adopt tools built elsewhere. As pedagogy, this chapter should model good practice. It should treat MA students as active readers, not passive recipients. This matters for the book's stated goal. The book must work for MA students and instructors in Africa, Latin America, Sri Lanka, and wider Asia. Educational communication itself varies across these places. The chapter should reflect on what makes a text teachable across such different classrooms. It links back to the book's larger argument. Development communication scholarship must be produced and used internationally, not written in one place and consumed elsewhere.

Key reference to build on: Tufte, T. (2017). Communication and Social Change: A Citizen Perspective. Cambridge: Polity Press.

10. Democracy: A Challenge for the Future

Media and democratization research often assumes one liberal, Western template. Other democracies get measured against that template. They often come up short in that comparison. This theme challenges that assumption directly. It looks at how media support democratic practice. It looks at how media undermine it too. Many contexts mix multi-party democracy with communal and customary political structures. Western frameworks tend to miss those structures. This theme engages a sharp claim. Liberal democracy's institutional model can deepen democratic deficits when it ignores local political and cultural realities. That claim matters directly for media-development programs across much of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The chapter covers informal communication channels too. Rumor counts. Humor counts. Alternative and community media count. These channels have long carried accountability and voice that formal press-freedom indices miss. This theme connects tightly to the media theme. Together the two chapters cover media structure and media's political purpose. MA students in this book's target regions gain real tools here. They can analyze their own media-democracy relationship without a borrowed deficit framing. The chapter covers disinformation too. It covers platform-driven polarization. Both count as global democratic challenges, not just Western ones. This theme asks what a locally grounded research agenda on media and democracy would look like.

Key reference to build on: Nyamnjoh, F.B. (2005). Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging. London: Zed Books.

Note: Theme leads are recorded internally for coordination. They are left out of this draft's chapter text. This is pending Oddgeir's introductory chapter and further contextualization.

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