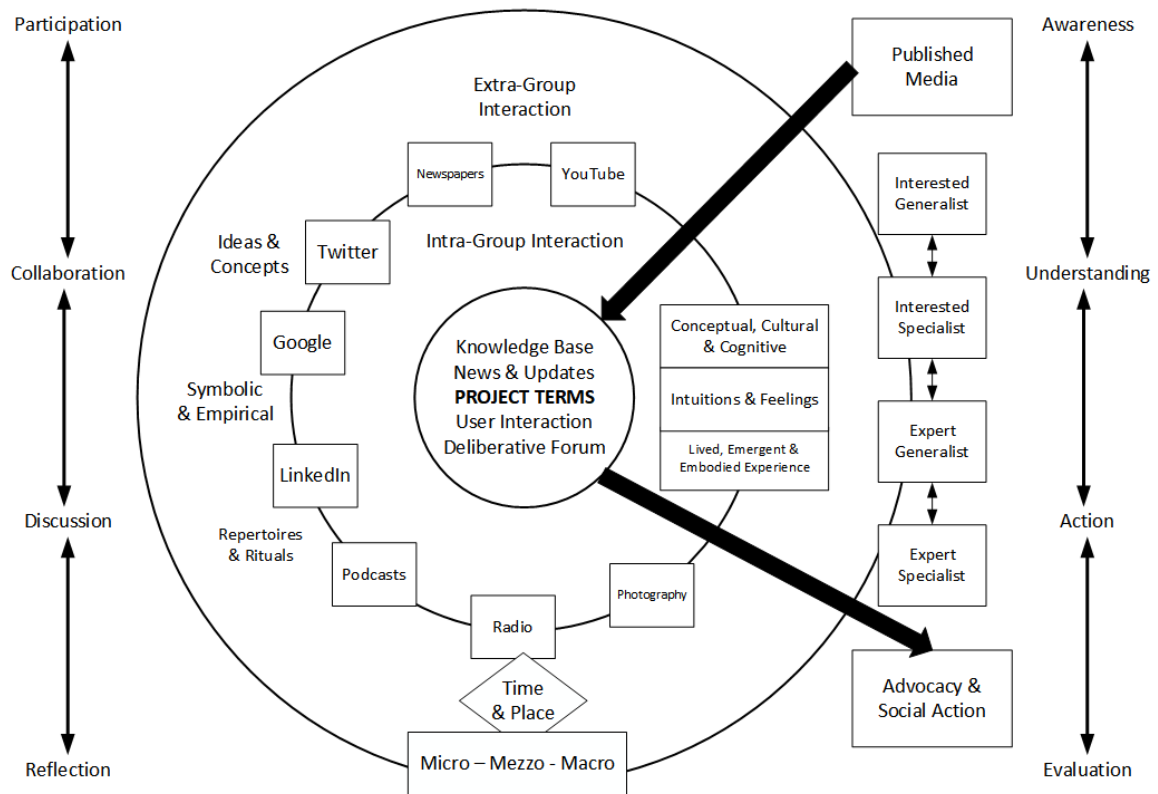**Decentered Media Community-Focussed Communications Model**

Rob Watson, Monday, 20 June 2022

1   Methodological Assumptions

Community-Focussed Communication (CFC) is a developmental approach that involves the use of media to integrate both individual and collective communication for the purpose of social change. Based on experience-driven precepts, such as those encountered through symbolic interaction, CFC prioritises emergent and practice-based principals and methodologies associated with, for example, Communication for Development (C4D) and Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) de-professionalised media, and DIY or alternative media (Howley, 2010; McKnight & Russell, 2018; UNICEF, 2019). CFC takes the idea of civic engagement and Social Responsibility (SR) as a potential site for developmental consciousness activity that can be both collectively and individually expanded. CFC seeks to understand how people experience a changing and renewed sense of meaningfulness in a shifting world (Anderson & Björkman, 2017; Freinacht, 2017).

CFC operates in contrast to 'outcome' or 'transaction' models of development and engagement, particularly those that focus on skills and individual function within an economy. CFC recognises that it is possible to account for both functional and symbolic transformation as an integrated phenomenon

of enhanced agency through participation (Kegan, 1982). CFC also recognises that without a specific consideration of the symbolic mode of meaning generation, the process of social transformation often plays out as sterile and inert (Kenney, 2010). While instrumental models of social engagement purport to be able to measure and distinguish social transformations, based on the way that they are materially defined in relation to processes and outcomes, CFC instead recognises that meaning-focused methodologies are less tangible and definable, despite their longer-lasting and deeper-rooted potential. As such, CFC prioritises what is meaningfully experienced by people in a dynamic and fluid manner, over and above ways in which this experience can be described (Bourdieu, 1991).

CFC, then, is both an individual and a collective process that attempts to illuminate how social change and transformation is anticipated through societal, community and cultural symbolic mechanisms, combining the model of Depth Psychology (Neumann, 1990) with ethnographic sociological empirical approaches, such as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). As a developmental process, CFC anticipates that people move from an inherited modes of awareness, through a process of disequilibrium which challenges their sense of conventional understanding, and purposefully leads them to a point of renewed and transformed equilibrium that has incorporated both action and reflection (Wenger, 1998). The objective of the CFC process, then, is to encourage reflection and reflexive participation in the process of social and personal orientation, i.e. by focussing on agency, which leads to more effective community capacity building (Wilhelm & Jung, 2014).

This approach prioritises a synthetic rather than an analytic approach, and recognises that the process of changing and expanding personal consciousness is better characterised as a specific set of dynamics, or archetypal patterns, that run parallel with both symbolic and material concerns. As Carl Jung points out, this process is enantiodromic, in that it regulates and transcends opposites, and is articulated over time through participation, collaboration, discussion and reflection (Jung, 2017). CFC seeks, therefore, to understand and facilitate the contributing factors that assist the expansion of awareness, by developing a meta-process whereby an interested generalist can transition through multiple stages of engagement, up to and including being an expert specialist (Severan, 2021). Not everyone wants to achieve this distinction, however, because to reach this stage people tend become detached from the customary social dynamics that they find familiar and comfortable. CFC, and all forms of community development practice, therefore run the risk of introducing destabilising elements, which on the one hand note expertise as a contributory factor in the regulation of social and personal development, while on the other hand recognise that unchanging social dynamics may become inert and moribund.

CFC recognises that the processes at play in the social field operate at both an individual and a cultural level, and as a result they need to be accounted for both materially and symbolically in the interactions between group members (Bourdieu, 1984). Typically these occur in intra-group modes of interaction, and additionally through extra-group modes of interaction (Kelly & Westoby, 2018). Expertise of intra-group dynamics does not, however, automatically confer social viability in other domains, and does not necessarily translate into expertise between agents engaged in extra-group activities, and vice-versa. Skills in the domain of civic understanding will vary, therefore, according to the relative position of the social group within the wider field of social relations. Similarly, some comprehension of the interplay between intermediate stages of development will be useful in understanding how these community and social dynamics play out. The micro, mezzo and macro relationships are often left undifferentiated in an assessment of social and community interaction, regardless of the extent to which they can play a contributory role in the developmental interplay of identity formation, in-grouping, out-grouping, and the management of relationships between different people and groups (Stein, 2019). There is significant experience to be drawn from the process of bildung that has been well established in many Nordic countries (Anderson & Björkman, 2017; Freinacht, 2019).

As these interactions are mapped, it should be possible to make observations from both practice and testimony, if we follow the 'lines of entry' into the social field, which is empirically led (Blumer, 1966). However, it is also necessary to attend to the conceptual and symbolic realm, whereby people demonstrate that they hold certain understandings in relation to their sense of who they are, where they feel they belong, and what they expect they are able to achieve. This generally manifests in the symbolic realm, as perceived endorsements of relative social positions, and is demonstrated in the form of ad-hoc and tacit rituals and routines articulated in the group's collective cultural repertoire. Symbolic reinforcement of material differences works both to maintain power and to diffuse power (Blumer, 1990).

All of this, furthermore, is situated in both time and place. Hence the only way that we can discern differences is by marking and accounting for the variations and distinctions that are expressed at different times, in different places, and through different modes of articulation and communication, i.e. through culture. By bringing together an analysis of integrated communication practices that goes beyond functional manifestations of information management, and introduces symbolic, aesthetic and creative modes of communication, we can potentially synthesise a developmental model of being that is relevant to each situation, and thereby bring forward proposals that anticipate how these practices may develop in the future (Sparks, 2017).

The challenge of this reflexive modality is most acute, however, when we try to identify and account for the mode of 'agency' that is demonstrated by different participants at different stages of their individual or collective engagement. The process of going from the *disindividuated* person to the *individuated* person is not easy to pinpoint, based as it is in an awareness of *self* in both an embodied and embedded form. The transformational potential of this approach, however, can be contrasted with the mode of media passivity whereby we are engaged in a process of information delivery and consumption - remember the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1993). When considered from an active mode of communication and generative innovation, however, sensemaking and imaginative potential come to the fore in ways that are creative, independent and sustainable. This social action model prioritises inclusivity, social democratic pluralism, and ecological sustainability, because these are necessary preparations for future responsibilities. We must be able to anticipate and deal with ecological, social, technological, economic and spiritual challenges in preparation for the generations that will follow us. Put simply, the dynamic of our social life is constantly changing, so if we fail to invest in people's capacity to anticipate and deal with these changes, then we will continue to recoil from our responsibilities and will remain embedded within a lesser level of awareness, at a more primal level of consciousness and social capacity. Consciousness changes slowly, but the circumstances in which consciousness is called upon for application may transform suddenly. We must nurture the skills to anticipate and deal with this.

2   Evaluation Model

The community-focussed communication (CFC) model anticipates change that is:

- Future focussed
- Inclusive
- Participative
- Ecological
- Developmental (person/social)

In undertaking media related activities, the CFC model focuses sensemaking and meaningful experience as a point through which change is encountered and enacted. Each situation calls on a different set of activities that suit the place, the people involved, their history, the economic challenges they face, and the social and civic infrastructure that supports them.

CFC employs evaluation techniques that blend techniques from different traditions, including community development (i.e. voice empowerment and civic capacity building); ABCD (i.e. using the tacit and implicit strengths of a community); C4D (i.e. using communication to bring forward matters of

concern through mediatisation), and personal development (i.e. using depth or analytic psychology approaches to define interpersonal relationships through storytelling, myth and symbols).

Using media capture, editing and sharing tools, the CFC approach aims to facilitate and support individuals to use media as a reflexive tool for self-examination and critical thinking. Learning the skill of collecting media in which oneself is the subject, is challenging. To articulate a narrative by compiling this media into presentable forms requires the development of purposeful self-awareness and reflexivity that displaces participants from their immediate experience and redesignates their thoughts and feelings into an externalised and objectified narrative.

At all times this must be practiced in a way that removes barriers for engagement, such as professional and technical proficiency, or expectations of social status and persona projection. The aim is to value the contributions for their own character, and appreciate how participants in the projects have responded to the challenges of sensemaking. Sharing experiences in the form of storytelling works well as a model of change when those involved are able to identify with the protagonist, and situate themselves within similar narrative dynamics and symbolic experiences.

Some of the media techniques include:

- Audio diaries
- Soundwalks
- Community reports
- Object-oriented memory work
- Roundtable discussion

There is an advantage gained by working in an audio mode first, in that using sounds alone displace the expectations of the participants to situate a third party within the world being evoked. Sound is a sense that is taken for granted, and its less likely that the curator of a sound story would assume that the sounds speak for themselves in the same way that pictures do. The process of gathering audio material can also be broken into accessible bites, as audio recording is less intrusive than visual recording techniques, and relies on a lesser level of active participation as people do not need to perform, and can be more relaxed.

The challenge of engagement and capture in a situation can be considerable, as most people are either in participation or capture mode, and do not do both simultaneously. Therefore, support and assistance is vital in making the dual model familiar in practical experience. In addition this process is iterative and requires multiple reflexive sessions that focus on self-awareness and self-consciousness

in the process of gathering material, which is the opposite of activities that prioritise the development of persona and personality.

Reflection and self/group development comes from breaking the link with immediate experience, and anticipating that we are capable of forming an objectified or abstract externalisation of our experience. This can lead to either an affirmation or a rejection of our established operating mode, which then forces change when synthetised with what our projected future skills, personal assets and capabilities might be.

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