

Emile G. McAnany. *Saving the World: A Brief History of Communication for Development and Social Change.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. x + 181 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03677-4; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07844-6.



Reviewed by Noah Arceneaux (School of Media and Journalism Studies, San Diego State University)

Published on Jhistory (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek (Harvard)

Paradigms of Progress

Depending on the particular university or conference in question, the academic discipline of “communication” might denote a psychoanalytic dissection of an obscure foreign film, research into differing styles of conversation, or an analysis of the latest social media platform. *Saving the World* is an intellectual history of one strand within this dizzying array of communication studies; those studies intended to improve the lives of individuals in developing nations. Author Emile G. McAnany, a professor whose distinguished career has included stints at Stanford University, the University of Texas, and most recently Santa Clara University, has been immersed in the field for years and his work benefits from his firsthand experience.

The book begins by stressing the dramatic diffusion of communications technology over the past century. Despite this presumed advancement of technology in general, crushing poverty and conflict still persist. McAnany believes that there is an obligation to use modern technology to reduce such suffering. This noble ambition informs the entire work, and among other goals, McAnany

wants his study to influence those who make policy and design development projects. The abbreviation “C4D” is used consistently to describe “communications for development” research; another common term in academia for such work is “ICTD,” denoting “information and communication technologies.”

McAnany’s narrative spans the middle of the twentieth century through the first decade of the twenty-first century in a traditional chronological fashion. He classifies C4D studies into four paradigms. As is always the case with such endeavors, the boundaries of each paradigm are subjective, and McAnany acknowledges this fact. The work describes a number of specific development projects, though the goal is not a comprehensive history of such efforts. Instead, McAnany’s aim is to chronicle the evolution of C4D ideas. Of particular importance is the intersection of theory and practice, a fundamental concept that is drilled into the heads of graduate students in almost all disciplines. It can, however, be difficult for novice researchers to fully understand the implications of this concept. One of the strong points of

this book is the number of examples in which the reader sees how ideas influenced the structure of development projects, and conversely, how scholars refined their theories based on real-world results.

The beginnings of C4D are linked to three foundational texts: *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* by Daniel Lerner (1958); *Diffusion of Innovations* by Everett Rogers (1962); and *Mass Media and National Development: The Role of Information in Developing Countries* by Wilbur Schramm (1964). McAnany describes the initial "development theory" that was the dominant paradigm; according to these works, communications technologies had an implicit modernizing effect and functioned as "magic multipliers," spreading positive messages far and wide. This initial body of literature was then criticized for promoting a top-down message of change, with undue emphasis given to centralized institutions. The relationship between Schramm and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is particularly important in this regard. In McAnany's retelling, the centralized, top-down message of Schramm's work was no surprise given that the United Nations was the driving force behind his initial research.

The next era of C4D is categorized as the "dependency phase." In the 1960s and early 1970s, scholars from developing nations, particularly those in Latin America, called out the unspoken ethnocentric assumptions of the Western-driven research projects. Ariel Dorfman's classic text of cultural imperialism, *How to Read Donald Duck* (1971), is indicative of this phase. According to Dorfman, something as innocuous as a comic book could be understood as a tool of ideological oppression, promoting hollow capitalist values to developing nations.

By this point, the shortcomings of many international development projects had become apparent. Efforts that worked in a pilot project in one village, for example, failed when expanded to cover an entire nation, such as India. The result was the rise of a paradigm of "participatory communication." If centralized efforts from outside agencies did not work, the new goal was to enlist the local populace as integral change agents. This wave of development projects also faced obstacles, including the fact that local populations often lacked the resources or infrastructure to enact any kind of significant change.

One telling case study in this section is a video project implemented on Canada's Fogo Island in the late 1960s. Residents of this island, located off the northeast coast of Canada, made their living primarily through fishing. The

Canadian government wanted to relocate the residents, realizing that a growing commercial fishing industry was about to decimate the island's economy. Driven by ideas of "participatory communication," the government gave video cameras to residents and allowed them to tell their own stories on local television. The idea was to give residents a voice in their relocation. Much to the government's surprise, the residents rallied together and chose to stay. The Fogo video project has been heralded as triumph of participatory communication, though the end result can be debated. By 2008, the population of the island had been reduced by 90 percent and unemployment for those who remained was above 50 percent (p. 105). It is clear that the local populace must be enlisted in any kind of development project, but what if their decisions are not ultimately in their best interests?

The next, and contemporary paradigm, for development is dubbed "social entrepreneurship." McAnany notes that this term has not gained universal acceptance, nor is it clear how this paradigm is distinct from "participatory communication." This latest term is used to describe efforts that enlist locals in development with an emphasis on economic empowerment first. The efforts of the Grameen Bank stand out as an indicative example. Started by an economist from Bangladesh, Grameen Bank gives "micro-loans" to villagers who are otherwise outside the modern financial system. These micro-loans have funded an astonishing array of projects, such as "village phone ladies" who use the money to purchase mobile phones.

The book concludes with two chapters that could easily have been conflated: chapter 7 is called "Past, Present, and Future," while chapter 8 is titled "The Future: Some Final Thoughts." McAnany urges scholars and policymakers to curate the best ideas from the past, arguing that there are valuable lessons from all the paradigms. He also lays out a framework for evaluating development projects, a fundamental part of the process that has often been overlooked. In this regard, the new "social entrepreneurship" paradigm can be particularly beneficial. If development projects are measured by the same parameters used to judge business success, perhaps failures can be reduced.

The book is obviously most useful for those directly involved with C4D research, or involved with planning development projects. The clear, concise writing style also makes the work potentially valuable for graduate seminars in a variety of communication classes. McAnany introduces each chapter with a clear statement

of its goal, and summarizes the same in a conclusion. Given this writing style, individual chapters could easily be excerpted for use in a course reader. The intersection of theory and practice is a topic that applies to all areas of communication research, and even for those not focused on C4D research, *Saving the World* offers some instructive lessons.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Noah Arceneaux. Review of McAnany, Emile G., *Saving the World: A Brief History of Communication for Development and Social Change*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39248>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.