

Oscar Hemer and Thomas Tufte (Eds.), **Voice + Matter: Communication, Development and the Cultural Return**, Göteborg, Sweden: Nordicom, 2016, 266 pp., €32 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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The centrality of “voice” and “matter” is made clear by Oscar Hemer and Thomas Tufte, editors of **Voice + Matter: Communication, Development and the Cultural Return**. In the introduction of the book, the editors cite inspiration from the work of Nick Couldry. According to Couldry (2010), voice encompasses a “polyphony of concepts” (p. 11) such as participation, agency, activism, narrative, and artistic expression. While it is fundamentally important to democracy, voice by itself is not sufficient; rather, voice also requires, and is enhanced by, matter (i.e., material, substantive conditions). It is through both voice and matter that substantive improvements in human conditions (e.g., education, infrastructure, transportation, health services, etc.) can be effected, as well as aspired to. The key theoretical, methodological, and empirical contribution lies in giving voice to debates on how aspiration is conceptualized and realized and the role of agency, capabilities, and culture in this process.



Review of Chapters

Voice & Matter starts with a historical overview of communication for development (C4D) and communication for social change, also illustrating tensions and challenges in these intersecting disciplines. The book is subsequently structured into three sections: “Reframing Communication in Culture and Development” (Section I); “Ethnography and Agency at the Margins” (Section II); and “The Return of the Politics of Hope” (Section III). Section I is constituted of chapters that look at the (re-)production of cultural identities, particularly as engaged by marginalized groups within and across societies. Space is also devoted to scholarship that identifies how the voice of marginalized, subaltern groups manifests itself through art forms and physical bodies. Included also is a chapter that exclusively focuses on Stuart Hall (“Mediating Stuart Hall”), by way of a conversation on John Akomfrah’s film *The Stuart Hall Project*. The diversity of this section is reflected also by the presence of two chapters devoted to structural aspects of global development: the political economy of global development at the national and international level (Karin Gwinn Wilkins and Kyung Sun Lee) and the discourse of international volunteering for global development assistance (Susanne Schech).

Section II begins with a chapter by Jo Tacchi, dedicated to appreciating the complexities within, as well as problematizing, voice in development (“When and How Does Voice Matter? And How Do We Know?”). Two other chapters within this section also delve into the notion of voice: the chapter by Sheela Patel that looks at how a social movement of the urban poor engages in collective representation at different levels, thereby reflecting active agentic voice; another chapter by Sharath Srinivasan and Claudia Abreu Lopes (“Africa’s Voices Versus Big Data? The Value of Citizen Engagement through Interactive Radio”) investigates

the use of digital technologies and interactive broadcast media in the African context(s) for amplifying the voice of citizen engagement, thereby reappraising the roles of audiences and publics in mediated public spheres.

A common thread weaves through the other three chapters in this section, as they all focus on specific television or film projects. Andrea Cornwall problematizes the representation of female sex workers by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) across the world, revolving around an India-based film project (*Save us from Saviours*) that challenges the prevailing narratives of female sex workers as passive victims who do not, and cannot, exercise autonomy for themselves and in relationships with others. Faye Ginsburg similarly devotes her chapter to an analysis of an Australian television program called *Redfern Now*, highlighting its role in giving voice to a far greater diversity of Aboriginal experiences, with greater agency being exercised by actors, actresses, writers, directors, and producers of Aboriginal origin in Australia. Pegi Vail's chapter ("Gringo Trails, Gringo Tails; Storytelling, Destination Perspectives and Tourism Globalization") also explores the impact of a documentary film (*Gringo Trails*), critically engaging with the culture and practice of backpacker travel, with consideration to its impact on receiving communities.

Section III, the last section in the book, is titled "The Return of the Politics of Hope," where the debates on aspiration, capability, agency, and most saliently culture take place, in the form of a robust discussion involving Arjun Appadurai, Ronald Stade, Nigel Rapport, Gudrun Dahl, and Thomas Hylland Eriksen. Across the entire section, Appadurai's reflections on inequality, aspiration, and culture function as the points of engagement among these authors. Two chapters by Ronald Stade ("Debating the Politics of Hope: An Introduction" and "On the Capacity to Aspire: Conversation with Arjun Appadurai") delineate Appadurai's concept of the "capacity to aspire" and further unpack this concept in an interview with Appadurai. The capacity to aspire is constituted of four elements, each drawn from different theorists—capability (Amartya Sen), voice (Albert Hirschman), hope (Ernest Bloch) and culture of poverty (Oscar Lewis).

Appadurai's capacity to aspire partly draws on insights generated by the illustrative case study of Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), a global network of community organizations advocating for the urban poor around the world (p. 208). This concept is an effort to parlay the participatory, agentic ethos of citizenship supported throughout the book into a framework for civic action, specifically so that poor people and communities can operate as the agents of change, with one outcome being overcoming poverty itself. In this vein, the fact that Lewis's concept of the culture of poverty is included initiates subsequent debates and disagreements about the relevance of culture to not only articulating the impact of poverty, but also overcoming it (p. 208). Aspiring to different, better, more empowered futures necessitates a specific capacity, namely a cultural one (p. 212); while a Western framework of political rights, responsibilities, and procedures assures a minimum of humanity, Appadurai argues that the cultural dimension is "indispensable" to achieving full humanity (p. 213).

In the subsequent chapter, Rapport challenges the assumptions of Appadurai's argument; according to Rapport, said Western framework can be appreciated as empowering individuals to make their own cultural choices (p. 219). It is not the case that Rapport denies per se the public manifestation of cultural membership; however, he emphasizes that the *meaning* of culture [*italics in original*] is private and

idiosyncratic (p. 220). Undergirding Rapport's argument is an understanding of culture as a fluid process (p. 223), which he contrasts with what he sees as Appadurai's willingness to focus exclusively on particular, fixed cultural orientations and environments.

This critique of Appadurai is also found in contestations over the meanings of *aspiration* and *futures*, provided by Dahl in her chapter. Dahl interprets Appadurai as being too wedded to thinking about the future within particular cultural settings (p. 226). While Rapport's logic is more explicitly based on the role played by individual variation and agency, Dahl's critique is posed somewhat differently, as she interrogates whether "Appadurai's version of 'the capacity to aspire' . . . is an individual or a collective one" (p. 233). Appadurai's interest in the poor acquiring the capacity to overcome poverty has laudable intentions to affirm the politics of recognition (i.e., of poor people achieving it on their own terms); that said, Dahl points out that the real-world implications would be reduced to a mere, simplistic acknowledgment of the lack of aspiration among those who are experiencing poverty (p. 237).

Eriksen's chapter closes the book, presenting itself as a "slightly oblique comment to Arjun Appadurai" (p. 241). Fittingly for a book where the notion of aspiration is given much attention, this chapter offers the hope of a radically different approach toward development, albeit paired with the warning that vastly improved material conditions shared by many in a "global middle class" cannot "last forever" (p. 242). He then concludes with a chapter with a nod toward "more equitable communication" (p. 248) making possible a shift in focus toward reduced consumption and enhanced sustainability.

Discussion

To a large degree, this book deserves praise for giving voice to a wide array of interrogations into what is necessary to achieve and aspire to equitable conditions that make such communication possible. The debates in Section III, in particular, provide a venue for polyphonous perspectives on the intersectionality of agency, capacity, recognition, and aspiration. The connection made between "more equitable communication" and changes in perceived priorities with respect to what Eriksen himself identifies as "the good life" ought to be analogous between voice and matter.

A clue may be found in Dahl's reference to attribution theory (i.e., overvaluing disposition- or personality-based explanations when interpreting the behavior of others, but doing the same for situational explanations when talking about oneself; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Regan & Totten, 1975; p. 238). Dahl appears to advocate that being aware, and correcting, this form of bias ought to encourage taking perspectives of others with due regard for their specific situations and contexts (p. 239). Given that anthropology is articulated as an appreciation of the mobility of individuals and cultures (p. 31), it may be the case that mobility in perspective-taking is also understood as an aspired, desired goal.

The focus on the possibility of mobility evokes, and aligns with, the call for shifts in perspective and priorities; there is thus considerable utility for social and media psychologists. The debates on culture and the degree to which an individual can define culture for oneself also speak to critiques raised by Glenn Adams and Sara Estrada-Villalta (2017), namely of how individualist assumptions about modernity and development perpetuate legitimation and acceptance of inequality, particularly in terms of how the Global

North views the Global South. Media coverage of inequality and poverty is still skewed in favor of episodic, individualistic accounts of poverty; researchers argue for a considerably greater shift toward thematic accounts that emphasize the benefits of active policy interventions, such as redistribution, to combat these issues (Grisold & Preston, 2017; Grisold & Theine, 2017).

The case studies of media projects around the world and critical debates around the Appaduraiian notion of culturally-situated aspiration identified are likely to be a constructive influence on those who seek to radically alter dominant, taken-for-granted ways of generating, and interpreting, not only statistics but also stories on poverty and inequality. In so doing, the "politics of statistics and stories" (Peters, 2001) on poverty and inequality can be transformed, with both voice and matter influencing each other in the process.

References

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