

“Only the Secret is Seductive... the Secret is the Clue!”: how selective silence is employed and justified by the World Bank as a communication strategy to respond to citizens’ criticism of its policies and projects in Egypt

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Through in depth elite interviews with thirteen World Bank employees, the research critically examined the communication strategy of the World Bank in responding to citizens’ criticism of its policy and projects, a historical and contemporary phenomenon that is under-researched despite of crucial significance to development and communication practices. The findings indicated that selective silence is employed by the World Bank in Egypt as a communication tactic to respond to public criticism. Silence, which is contextually-bound, is justified by factors of project’s ownership, citizens’ profiling and Bank’s historically tainted image, which are anchored in issues of knowledge production and political economic contextualisation. The research probed into who is silent to whom and for what purpose. It challenged a conventional understanding of silence as the absence of communication and demonstrated how silence is a powerful communication tactic through which,

power play among multiple players is simultaneously absent and present. Findings highlighted how development and communication efforts are compromised when they silence and remain silent to local knowledge and voices. Selectively responding (or not) to citizens based on socio-economic profile undermines development’s efforts and communication’s mandate of being dialogical and inclusive. The research revealed that criticism’s root causes are not only communication-related; but more significantly, stem from adopting “one-size-fits-all” development approach, founded on economic theories that are classified as “the right recipe”. Hence, it is a call for Disrupting and Disordering the New World through challenging such pre-established economic theories and communication practices which, thus far, failed to address citizens’ dissatisfaction and development’s challenges.