

Development Journalism: what's new?

Ahmad Murad Merican*

Introduction

Journalism has become one of the manifestations of development, and an indicator of modernization in non-Western societies. Over the last two decades, these societies, in response to the perceived needs and demands of development, i.e., "in catching up with the West," have come to develop what is called "development journalism." The notion of the current thinking in development is basic to the perceived concept and practice of this "new" kind of journalism.

The idea of development journalism, conceived in the 1980s, was premised upon the belief that national development must be based on economic growth. Therefore, its proponents suggested that there should be better trained and informed economic specialists among journalists to cover and report the problems of a "developing" nation. Currently, there seems to be no final definition on development, so also on development journalism. Consequently, by implication, it is difficult to find individual cases of national media systems in the so-called newly independent nations that clearly exemplify the "development media theory". Generally however, that can be discerned from the concept is that the media is to serve national development goals of economic development and political integration (Hachten, 1981; McQuail, 1984).

Even so, despite some common perceptions, both the proponents, and critics of development journalism are not always clear about its concept, and method of application to any particular setting. Both sides have contradictory perspectives on the idea. Even its proponents could not come to an agreement on what the concept actually is (or should be). Why the ambiguity to what seems rhetorical to some, and variably, realistic, to others?

* Lecturer, MARA Institute of Technology

It seems that both the proponents, and critics have missed a salient point, an insight of which is crucial, within the last two decades -- that of the idea, and nature of "development" itself. Development journalism, albeit ambiguously conceptualized, is in fact, a by-product of the orthodoxy of development. It implies the use of this form of communication, for a "better understanding of development," through what can be called development news. It implies the process of development that must inevitably lead to the state of modernity which is largely successful in the West, notably, in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Some interpretations of the concept

One can discern various interpretations of the concept made explicit over the years. Aggarwala, a prominent critic of international communication, and one of the leading proponents who sees development journalism as a partial solution toward a new world information order, defines the "new" journalism as the reporting of development processes rather than events. He observes that in the international debate on the role of the mass media, one of the most frequently heard phrases is "development news" - the reportage of processes. Non-Western societies indignantly decry the lack of development news in both the national and the international media; while the West denounces development news as a camouflage for government control or management of the news. In the process, development news and development journalism, a relatively "new genre" of new reporting, has received underserved mauling (Aggarwala, 1980).

According to Aggarwala (1979), development journalism can deal with development issues at both macro and micro levels in critically examining, evaluating and reporting the relevance of development projects to national and local needs. Even the emphasis in development news is not on events, on what happens at a particular moment or on a given day; but on what is happening over a period of time.

A development journalist looks at a development process, stops the clock, and takes a look backward and forward to convey to the reader the continuing and long term nature of the process of economic and social change. In this approach, development news is significantly different from so-called spot or action news (Aggarwala, 1980).

At this point, it is pertinent to present two examples of problems that are thought to fit into the reporting of development processes. It was generally agreed that a subject such as population cannot fairly or responsibly be treated in the "event" fashion. The population story is a continually unfolding one, never complete, never finished. Apart from the census figures, it produces no specific events as such. Yet it must be covered and what the media must do is to make sense out of the apparent confusion to help the public to be reasonably well-informed about a subject of immediate and very direct importance. The journalist in this case, must apply his skills, both reportorial and investigative (S.M. Ali, 1980). Another issue that would come under the conventional thinking in development journalism is industrialization. The newly-independent states, especially in Asia and Africa, are "racing" among themselves to build factories, and develop export-based economies emphasizing on manufactured products to be indicated and categorized as developed nations. Therefore, industrialization policies were devised. This involve foreign investments, employment, and the building of infrastructures. The journalist in this case, would be expected to report on such issues as the success, or failure of the implementation of such policies, as it affects the creation of employment, for instance.

Industrialization is seen as a process -- a logical outgrowth within the conventional framework of development, not an event.

Contrary to Aggarawala, Chalkley (1980), who says that many people can claim to have invented the phrase "development journalism", describes it not as a new kind of journalism at all -- but a new attitude towards the treatment of certain subjects on the part of governments, the press, radio, television, international institutions; and sources of news and analysis from the private sector such as banks, companies in all economic fields and private research organizations.

Another view of development journalism was provided by Hachten (1981). He observes that the developmental concept is an amorphous and curious mixture of ideas, rhetoric, influences and grievances. There are aspects straight out of the Leninist and communist concept of the press. Perhaps of the greater importance are the influences of Western social scientists who have posited a major role for mass communication in the process of nation building in the newly independent states. American academics such as Schramm, Lerner, and Pye, all libertarians at heart, have shown how the communication process is central to the achievement of national integration and economic development. In doing so, they have unintentionally provided a rationale for autocratic press controls.

Other more radical academics such as Smythe, Nordenstreng, and Schiller, have echoed Marxist views and added a strong touch of anti-Americanism to the concept. To them, the concept is to some extent a critique of a reaction against the West and its transnational media. It also reflects the frustrations and anger of non-Western societies (Hachten, 1981).

Nasser (1983), on the other hand, does not view the emergence of development journalism as a reaction against the Western media domination. The rationale, he says, is to restrict Western-style investigative reporting. Non-Western societies are too fragile to stand much probing into the failures of government. They argue that in societies where the state lacks established institutions and the majority of the people are illiterate and more loyal to racial, religious or tribal groups, the concept of a free press and investigative reporting are not suitable.

Perhaps, rightly or wrongly put, Sussman (1976), a leading advocate for a free press, argues that development journalism is a "backward idea whose time has come". He says that development journalism is an increasing threat to the existing free press (a diminishing minority in the world); and in the Third World itself, a bar to the development of free political as well as journalistic systems. He observes:

For development journalism, like deferred political liberty, presupposes -- erroneously, we must assume -- that citizens of developing nations cannot be trusted to examine competing viewpoints, but must hear only a single voice (1976).

Finally, Ogan (1982), defines development journalism to mean the critical examination, evaluation and report of the relevance, enactment and impact of development programs. Under the definition, she implies that the mass media be independent of government.

Origins

To conceive a somewhat "objective" picture of development journalism amid the array of "confusion," it would be prudent at this juncture, to note briefly the climate surrounding its origin. Originally conceived in Asia in the 1960s -- more specifically in the Philippines -- through the efforts of Juan Mercado, Alan Chalkley and Erskine Childers, working with the Philippine Press Institute, development-oriented seminars were then conducted for journalists. At the same time, the then the Philippine News Services was encouraged to report news about development (Lent, 1977).

Elsewhere in Asia, others such as Chanchal Sarkar, director of the Press Institute of India; Amitabha Chowdhury, head of the Asian Program of the International Press Institute, and Mokhtar Lubis, editor of Indonesia Raya, recognized that new

directions were necessary in reporting Asia because of the "cumulative effect of the growth of national economies, changes in the character and profile of the audience and above all, the result of people's experiments and frustrations with new political systems". The result was the Press Foundation of Asia, an organization endowed by Asian newspapers and the Ford Foundation, which since its inception in March 1967, was dedicated to promoting development journalism. According to Lent, the term was coined in 1968 by the foundation following the completion of the first long-term training program for economic writers.

Evidence of its practice

There are evidence that what can be discerned as development journalism is being practiced in some Asian and African countries through the print media. In a study in Malaysia devoted to 24 issues of the national dailies of Utusan Malaysia, Utusan Melayu and the New Straits Times in 1974, one researcher showed that 52.3, 52.4 and 32.4 percent of their news content was on national development projects. In a 1976 study of two months of Malaysian National News Agency (Bernama) copies and contents of three major dailies, it was found that all carried between 54.5 and 67.0 percent government news (Lent, 1982). In another study, this time of the editorials of two Bahasa Malaysia dailies of Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian, for a period of one month in 1981, it was found that 55.8 and 59.6 percent of their editorial writing was centered on socio-economic issues (Merican et al., 1981).

In Indonesia, six national dailies were analyzed to find how often and in which ways the newspapers support development programs outlined in the government's Guidelines for State Policy and Development. The research concluded that the newspapers used more development than non-development news and that each newspaper had a different view about which development issue was most deserving attention (Ogan and Fair, 1984).

In Africa, the amount of development news covered in two national dailies and the Ghanaian wire service were studied. In a comparison of the newspapers and wire service, it was found that the proportion of total development news content, as measured in standardized column inches, was statistically greater in the Ghanaian News Agency than the two newspapers (Ibid.)

In another study, this time of government-controlled presses of Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast, Saudi Arabia and Nigeria; and the privately owned newspapers in South Africa, Lebanon, Israel and Mexico, Ogan found that not all development news is necessarily good news. Negative or critical coverage, while not predominant, was found in 18.1 percent of the stories. A distinctly positive tone was found in 34.0 percent of the stories. In conclusion, she found that what is needed is greater use of critical sources, extensive or even medium-range analysis of development topics and less dependence on government for the sole source of information.

Conclusion

It would be worthwhile noting that the results of the above studies reflect to a broad extent, the constraints of the media in practicing what is called development journalism. It seems that development journalism still conforms to the dominant culture of journalism, one of which is the dependence on the government as the credible source of information. Could this be interpreted that non-Western governments fear the disclosure of failures of economic programs? Do they fear that they would not be able to keep up with the expectations?

Could it be that economic progress, viz-a-viz non-Western societies results in a more constrained press as compared to those in the West? In this regard applying to Asia, Pye makes a pertinent observation on the relationship between economic success and freedom. Say he:

The complex relationship between freedom and economic prosperity persists in Asia. Economic success haven't ensured the spread of freedom, yet they have constrained governments to some extent (Pye, 1986).

Clearly, development journalism, economic progress and press freedom in non-Western societies, do not mix for the prosperity of the powers that be.

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