

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA TO DEVELOPMENT

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In the immediate post independence period most ruling African leaders consolidated and perpetuated power in the name of development journalism. Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, used the media as a revolutionary tool of African liberation from colonialism and imperialism. Underdeveloped Africa could only hope to develop if the mass media, adopted a revolutionary mission, Nkrumah claimed. Nkrumah defined "the true African newspaper" as "a collective educator - a weapon, first and foremost, to overthrow colonialism and imperialism, and to assist total African independence and unity.

But the concept of development journalism is much more basic and at the same time broader, than what Nkrumah seemed to have been articulating, it is predicated on assumptions that the media have the capacity and power to promote positive change. Development journalism recognizes the reality of underdevelopment and the fact that development is a valid social goal that the media must actively pursue.. Thus the main characteristic of development journalism is the deliberate and active role of the media in pressing for change (Kariithi 1994: 28). It is geared towards mobilizing the people for national development. News about development is important in stimulating further development.

For communication specialists such as Bourgault (1995) the goals of development journalism are to "promote grassroots, non-violent, socially responsible, ecologically sensitive, personally empowering, democratic, dialogical and humanistic forms of communication".

So what is required of development journalists; journalists who recognize the importance of the media to development are committed to using their profession to impart knowledge and skills that will contribute to the development of the country?

Our countries have myriad problems of development not least of all are: poverty, poor education and health, inadequate agricultural practices, lack of adequate infrastructure, poor social services, a lack of political maturity and accountability, conflicts, gender inequality, etc.

At the same time we have had a poor history of political mobilization around these issues and that is why the idea of using the mass media to mobilize around poverty and development issues has always been considered attractive. The media have the potential for reaching huge audiences (Ngugi 1995: 5). Thus journalists must assume an educational role.

But before you can do that you need first and foremost to be informed about the issues yourself. You need to be knowledgeable and be in a position to understand what development means, how people are affected by government development policies and assess the merits and demerits of development policies.

Secondly, you need to reach the people most affected by development processes and to understand what their issues are. The rural area makes up by far the greatest portion of Africa, and is the least developed. To make development journalism meaningful we need to focus on the needs and aspirations of the rural poor.

The reality however is that this constituency is unattractive to journalists. Journalists report the rural area from the safety and comfort of the town, making periodic forays into the rural area to cover specific events at which top politicians or government officials are the main attraction. Urban mass media content in developing countries reflects and appeals to the needs and interests of the urban elite and especially of the government. Yet, the most basic and challenging aspects of the development problem is centered on the portion of the population that is least directly reached by urban mass media – those in our rural areas.

Development journalism has had a reputation as a euphemism for government propaganda and journalists who claim to practice development journalism are seen as having been co-opted to promote state programs and policies, in the name of mobilizing economic growth.

How can we change that?

The new development paradigm requires that the development process is democratized, transparent, and participatory.

Democratization and participation mean that the people who are affected by development programs, ought to have their voice heard, ought to be consulted, ought to have ownership in whatever is being designed for them, in order to ensure success.

Transparency means we need to know that is going on. Transparency ensures accountability. If we know what is going on, then we can monitor and evaluate and hold those in charge accountable.

The journalist has multiplicity of roles to play in this process. The journalist is the link between government/policy makers and the people. You are the means through which people can communicate with government and government can communicate with people. Not the only means, of course, but an important means of the kind of two-way communication that is required for effective development to take place.

This means that journalists must increase coverage of development news in ways that facilitate this two-way communication.. To do that it is important to listen to those who matter most – the rural people you purport to be covering. Giving voice to the voiceless. Journalists, including those who purport to be practicing development journalism are reluctant to use unofficial sources and therefore rarely listen and quote those whose cause they claim to be championing.

Were I to ask you what you think the most important role of the media is, you would mention holding government accountable – The watchdog role. No question, but what does it mean to be a good watchdog? What are some of the effective ways to hold governments accountable?

An effective, albeit often overlooked way is to provide information that will empower audiences/readers, that is the vast majority of citizens, to act. I also think that transformational change is possible if a responsible media serves the informational, educational and knowledge needs of the society, as well as acts as a watchdog, compelling accountability and acting as a check on arbitrary power.

A good starting point is to empower people with information: economic information, as well as information about the ordinary; information that highlights innovation, information that will help the public monitor and evaluate government programs and policies; information that enables us to determine whether public pronouncements are translated into public actions, information that provides us with a sense of cause and effect, information that makes it possible for the public to participate meaningfully in discussions and debates on development issues etc.

Rather than focusing on the social significance of news, there is a tendency on the part of the media to personalize, politicize, infantilize, trivialize and dramatize social processes by fragmenting them and by failing to link policies, processes and actions, with events, happenings, outcomes and consequences.

If we look through newspaper pages and listen to your airwaves, today we will no doubt find information that does some of the things I am suggesting, certainly development news. State media is particularly good at providing news that could be classified as such.

But we need to ask the following. How well are we:

1. Monitoring and evaluating government programs and policies
2. Following up stories to ensure that the public pronouncements of our politicians and public officials are translated into public actions
3. Providing a sense of cause and effect, mostly because many stories lack background and context. Very few stories are able to bring out the impact that various policies, programs and actions have on ordinary Ghanaians
4. Highlighting innovation and success stories that will motivate people and inspire change.
5. Empowering the citizenry with information that could help them make informed choices and decisions. Presenting people with the various development options and letting them understand the pros and cons of these options.
6. Giving voice to the voiceless
7. Signalling that development issues are important through placement and enhancement.

What agenda are the media setting for development? For those of you gathered here if you get a chance to work in the media. What will your development agenda be?

Related to setting the agenda is what criteria are used for selecting news? Do the criteria of news selection assist in informing citizens about government policies, and development goals? Does the news that is generated in our newspapers or on our airwaves enable Ghanaians to make informed choices, exercise their options, take the right decisions, take advantage of opportunities and discharge their responsibilities? Does it give voice to the powerless or to the powerful? Does it cloud the issues or illuminate the issues? What kind of picture are we giving to our audience? – Fragmented, Fuzzy or Full?

A development journalist must give the facts, interpret them and draw conclusions, which must then be promoted, that is, brought home to the people in a way they will understand.

It is the responsibility of journalists to critically examine, evaluate and report the relevance of a development project to national and local needs, the difference between a planned scheme and its actual implementation, the difference between its impact on people as claimed by the government and as it actually happened. So development journalism "is not reporting about events, but processes, and not reporting about personalities but issues."

Before I rest my case, I will say a word or two also about the promotional role of journalism. This role is not to promote government or political parties we like but to promote social change through, for example, promoting ethnic tolerance, women's rights, health, education and, the dissemination of healthy political ideas. I think that is very important.