

THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Development journalism is perceived as alternative journalism that primarily focuses on national development especially in the third world countries. This paper examines the reasons for dissociation from the advancement perspective of the developed world, the challenges faced by development journalism and discusses the way the nation should go to attain her desire in the committee of nations Library research was used to generate secondary data for this paper. The writing is anchored on the theoretical proposition of development theory of the press which persuades the developing nations to engage in development journalism. The paper suggests that Nigeria press should generate and manage contents to help society build consensus for the needed changes and growth.

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An overview of Development Journalism

Development journalism may not be new but it is still a novelty in Nigerian setting since we are yet to embrace its potentialities. The importance of the media in any society cannot be over-emphasized and through the advent of technology the world has become a global village. The media perform the role of teaching, informing, educating and entertaining the public, in addition to encouraging socio-economic and political development in nations of the world Nigeria inclusive. It is not an overstatement that Nigerian media give prominence to politics and business issues while development reporting is scarcely covered therefore affecting the development and growth of the nation.

The relevance of media as a critical interface between the government and the people in democracy is almost gone while media reports are mostly, uni-polar, from the government to the people without feedback (Falobi, 2010). The role of the media is critical to the development of any nation. Development entails putting in place, together all the component parts a society needs to progress harmoniously. Rogers gives credence to this when he defines development "as a widely participatory process of social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement (including greater equity, freedom and other valued qualities) for the majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment" (Rogers: 1988, p.573). Taking from the explanation of Rogers, development journalism should take cursory look at news reportage in a way to foster the national development to the benefit of the greater masses in order to gain both social and mental control over their domain.

Certain types of news and issues though because of their negative nature have become stereotyped as developmental issues, while many others get ignored. Some examples of the former are suicides, rural poverty and those of the latter are urban housing problems, sanitation, education and literacy levels or children in urban slums and the likes. However, the rural issues merit serious attention so do issues affecting the less-privileged sectors in any part of society. It would be a misconception to believe that the "disadvantaged" constitutes only the poor farmers. The urban migrant population, slum dwellers, street children, HIV affected people, rural tribes all of these people would come under the tag of the disadvantaged. It is important to identify them thus, because they deserve the attention of the authorities concerned.

As communication revolution continues to shape the perspective of the society, the media industry is growing by leaps and bounds (long and energetic). This high and growth also gets reflected in the issues that are chosen for media coverage and the way in which this lappers. The growing urban-rural divide is evident in media reporting. Even at the urban level, most often, issues that affect the lowest common denominator in society are ignored. Power equations and commercial interests have taken over the commitment of the media. In the rural scenario, poverty and illiteracy dominate the media.

A modern society characterized by democracy, social and economic justice, national integration, social discipline and economic progress is possible only with the active and oriented help of mass media. As a result, there should be a sharp focus on people's initiatives and movements at the grassroots levels. Every media vehicle must devote time, energy and resources in bringing up such issues. Development journalism can be employed as a tool of empowerment for a nation, by standing its strengths and weaknesses and this throwing light on what needs to be done. A development journalist should critically examine the existing development programmes and projects with the actual task undertaken till date. This form of journalism should also motivate the active participation of the affected people and advocate for their interest, rather than glossing over the views of the policy makers and planners.

Development is a central social objective and the mass media play a decisive rule in this process. The assumptions of development communication concerning modernization and dependency is no longer fashionable in Nigeria. In his view, Kunczik (1995, p.55) notes that development journalism comprises the reporting on ideas, programmes, activities and events, which are related to an improvement of the living standard, mainly in the rural regions. He then assumes that journalism is able to influence the development process by reporting on development programmes and activities. Accordingly, it is the journalist's duty to critically examine and evaluate the relevance of a developing project to national and local needs: the difference between a planned scheme and its actual implementation, and the difference between its impact on people as claimed by government officials and as it actually is. Kunczik then asserts that reporting on national and international events is only desirable if they constructively contribute to the development of the living standard.

Purpose of the Paper

The paper is written with the aim at looking at the development journalism in Nigeria cum its attendant challenges. Though the converse now is for the developing countries to leave western form of journalism at it is and focuses on the alternative form of practice that will shoot up development for the people. The paper opines to critically examine and suggest the way forwards so Nigeria can be a place of pride.

Theoretical Framework

This work takes cue from the development theory of the press which is applicable to developing countries and Nigeria is one of them. To categorize countries as developing Folarin (2002, p.35) mentions some features that are apparent in the holistic structure of those counties as:

- (1) Relative lack of cultural production resources.
- (2) Relatively limited availability of media literate audience
- (3) Dependence on the developed world for technology, skill and cultural products hence shortage of communication infrastructure and professional skill.

As a result of imbalance in the information flow due to lack of balance in communication technologies, postulates like McQuail suggests development theory, while Hamelink advocates total departure from the use of foreign technologies and converses for indigenous technologies to develop third world countries hence, journalism in the third world countries should promote development journalism. Media controls and structure in the first world countries are elite based (though this view comes from the Marxist school) hence the theory of development seeks the less advanced countries to use the media carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy. It advocates that media in the developing nations should give priority to content and language of their national culture.

Methodology

Library research was used to generate secondary data for this paper.

Development Journalism vis-a-vis Western Style

Development journalism should help to create awareness about problems of the society. Equally diligent efforts need to be made to publicize developmental work, so that others may know about it and in the best case scenario draw inspiration from it. Without gainsaying, globalization has impacted tremendously on the media and one important implication of this development is the revolution in information dissemination. With the new wave of democratization witnessed in Nigeria (as being claimed by Nigerian government) the press have become active participant in the tasks of promoting, projecting and supporting the activities of government. However, the predominant concern of this paper bothers on development journalism and its challenges.

Development journalism is perceived as the alternative journalism primarily focused on national development – agriculture, family planning, health and rural development cum projecting to the forefront the plight of the poor masses. Development journalism is primarily community oriented journalism as against the western style of journalism which has failed to show concerns such as bridging the gap between the centre and the periphery. Though, it is acknowledged that the Nigeria style of journalism was handed to us by the west, it is expedient to revisit such style in order to capture the mood and needs of Nigerian citizens. Western style journalism is primarily investigative and entertaining and not so much concerned with advocacy.

There is difference between the western model and Nigerian brand of development journalism hence, the diffusion approach, had not worked with Nigeria because of existing social and economic disparities that hamper not only the flow of information but also an adequate understanding of what is disseminated.

Misconceptions

Mainstream media do not give development reporting the place that it warrants in our society. It is often relegated to niche columns, magazines and journals. The few positive issues and developmental projects that are undertaken by the mainstream media are not highlighted enough. The mainstream media pretend to have incorporated development journalism into their daily duties by reporting government projects and statements and view of policy makers in their publications but this is far from it.

Development journalism should help to create awareness about problems plaguing the society. Equally, diligent efforts need to be made to publicize development work so others who may not know about it and in the best case scenario, draw inspiration from it.

Different forms of Development Journalism

Investigative Development Journalism

The first form as classified by Kunczik (1995, p.84) is comparable to a western style investigative journalism. It comprises reporting which critically examines development projects on the one hand and controls government activities on the other hand. For this form to be effective freedom of the press will be a basic requirement.

Benevolent Authoritarian Development Journalism

The other form of development journalism can be classified as benevolent authoritarian. This allows systematic manipulation of information in favour of a subtle development serving the common welfare. Journalists in this milieu form a kind of free intelligence and critically examine the aims of national development and the applicable instruments in a rational discourse via reasonable criteria free of social constraints.

Socio-technological Development Journalism

What seems to be a pragmatic solution for the mentioned descriptive and normative views is offered by the so-called socio-technological development journalism. The approach strictly adheres to the needs of the population and supports the (normative) perception that the people concerned should participate in the development projects. The tasks of journalism from this view include motivating the audience to actively cooperate and on the other hand, defending the interests of those concerned. Interaction of population and journalists is required so audience will be

involved in the decision making process. To achieve this journalist must be capable of distinguishing the crucial points and of comprehensibly pointing up every social process for the recipients as complex as it may be. Assistance for interpretation has to be provided for decision making. Also, journalists have to be committed to finding solutions while it is equally important to show success stories achieved by single citizens, which can serve as role models for the audience. Since development is considered as solution to social problems in general development journalism is no longer exclusively limited to rural areas. Development news should refer to the needs, of people, which may vary from region to region but generally include primary needs, such as food, housing, and employment, while secondary needs such as transportation, energy sources and electricity and tertiary needs such as cultural diversity, recognition and dignity are also involved. Mass communication theory posits that one of the preconditions for the development journalism is the availability of a potential audience (Odhiambo, 1991, p.18). The other preconditions are the development of symbolic language technology and evolution of freedom of expression. Peters (2010) succinctly summarizes that media development is sacrosanct to development journalism as a result; it will encompass a wide range of work which can be generally defined as actions in support of:

- ✍ A system of media regulation and administration that ensures freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity.
- ✍ Strengthening media capacity to inform people on issues that shape their lives.
- ✍ Plurality and diversity of media, transparent and equal market conditions and full transparency of ownership.
- ✍ Media as a platform for democratic discourse within a climate or respect for journalism that represents professional independence and diversity of views and interests in society.
- ✍ Professional capacity building and supporting institutions for advocacy and development of media freedom, independence, pluralism and diversity.
- ✍ Professional training and skills development and for the media sector as a whole to be both monitored and supported by professional associations and civil society organizations.
- ✍ Infrastructural capacity that is sufficient to support independent and pluralistic media so that the media sector is characterized by high or rising levels of public access; efficient use of technology to gather and distribute news information (GFMO World Conference, 2007).

The theory of development sees the press as an instrument of social justice and a tool for achieving beneficial social changes. In other words, the media should carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy.

However, in reality things have not worked out in line with this theory. In Nigerian there has been pressure on journalists to ally themselves with the political forces, but in doing so they have lost their independence. In this way, journalists can be severely hampered from reporting fully, fairly and independently so we cannot be certain that development does get advanced in such situation.

Trend Journalism a Barrier to Development

There is today a democratic government in power in this country unlike at any other time in the past; a new climate of understanding exists in which creative journalism can flourish in the country. A creative press should be proactive. It should set goals for the national and give direction to development. It is expected to seek and report news and events to increase the understanding of the country by both itself and foreigners. But without development content in local and global issues, the media cannot build the consensus among government, civil society, the private sector and the international community. International issues mentioned here bothers on issues that relate to awareness, participatory democracy and self development. For instance, international debate on the growing of cocoa will enhance the local production. The press in Nigeria today is expected to act as catalyst for sustainable and equitable changes; then, it has to offer itself as a serious platform for the alliance of common interests.

Attraction of Development Journalism

Development journalism has a lot of attraction for developing countries. In countries where poverty is the norm, the government of the day wants and need as much support as it can get. Government can probably have to take decisions which are based on the common good but which harm individual liberties. These decisions may be highly unpopular but they have to be taken, and a hostile press can hold back government's progress while a supportive press can help the government push these policies ahead. This follows one of the definitions or the duty of a journalist reporting on development 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, and the difference between its impact on people as claimed by government officials and as it actually is. Ability to nation building is an important function of development journalism.

Pitfalls

The pitfalls in development approach can be viewed in different perspectives. In the actual facts, the press becomes far less critical and eventually is forced to give up its "watchdog" role in society. As it continually panders to the government, the media loses its critical edge and becomes nothing more than another government mouthpiece. When this happens, it paves the way for a virulent underground or alternative press with a strong anti-government approach. This happens most via an opposition party establishing an opposition medium to criticize the government. As the press tries to promote the government and the common good, it can start to lose sight of the individual and the individual's human rights. If critically examined, it will be discovered that development journalism can be equated with one in which the government exercises tight control and prevents freedom of expression, all in the name of noble ends

Challenges of Development Journalism

Odugberi and Norri have said development journalism often faces obstacles in the form of low professional journalistic standards, a lack of financial resources, work technical skills, fragmented legal frameworks and an undemocratic political system. Also, there is risk of patronage - the media may not be able to break free from its political constraints and may operate according to clientelism or be captured by private interests.

Nigeria journalism is today being faced with numerous challenges and these challenges are impediments to development journalism among which are:

- (1) The digital age has made it difficult to defining the role of the professional journalist vis-à-vis the citizen journalists (the receiver who is at the same time the producer of news). If professional journalists tailor their duty towards development journalism in the growing pervasiveness of digital technology, online journalism is a threat that lives in the subliminal of the press – fear of losing their job is conspicuous.
- (2) Mediated global challenges such as climate change, cultural and resource conflict among others are paramount to elites believes; the interest which the mass media serve and depend for economic survival.
- (3) Ownership pattern is a pertinent issue. Business moguls who are publishers are not interested in development journalism because they have created a class fashioned after global trend for themselves. As such, editors and reporters stick to the mission and vision of the publisher to retain their job.
- (4) Lack of modern equipment to reach those who lack the wherewithal to contact the mass media and make news is a serious problem. The Marxist ideologists have submitted that he who owns the means of production also controls the media.
- (5) The need to beat deadlines is also a major constraint to development journalism. Journalists' natural competition to have their by-lines perpetually often robs the poor masses the chances of making news. Since mass media is an elite means of communication journalists scout for news considered to be prominent. "Prominence" in this sense connotes maintaining the status quo which is of the western style, maintaining

- the interest of the elites. Hence, a means must be devised to reverse this ugly trend so developmental issues and issues of ordinary masses can be of importance.
- (6) Commercialization of news hampers development journalism. News of less importance filters into the public consumption as a result of news commercialization whereas other developmental issues are left unattended to. It is high time journalists digress from cash and carry journalism in order to serve both the rich and poor alike if the word “mass” has to be meaningful else, media will continue to promote the gap between the haves and have-nots. McQuail rightly quoted Picard, (2004) that the primary content of the media today is commercialized news designed to appeal to broad audience, to entertain, to be cost effective and whose attention can be sold to advertisers. The result is that stories that may offend elite minorities are ignored in favour of those more acceptable and entertaining to a larger member of readers. Stories that are costly to cover are downplayed or ignored; such stories that create financial risks are ignored and the effect leads to homogenization of media content in coverage of media issues (McQuail, 2005, p.125).
- (7) (8) Total dependence on the press releases which characterizes the present day journalism in Nigeria is not good for this part of the world. The implication is that ordinary citizen will be absolutely out of news. Of course, news releases are tailored to further the interest of the public figure that issued it so instead of our media becoming development journalism it has become “envelopment” journalism.
- (8) Apathy for reading and research by journalists covering development issues is a critical challenge.

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