Mass media roles in development

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## Abstract

This essay examines different conceptions of the role of the mass media in development and attempts to build a framework for understanding these different roles. The essay describes the existence of four distinct roles that the media can play, which are all present in the ‘First World’, namely: distributing information, controlling/promoting cohesion, giving people a voice and holding leaders to account. These roles correlate directly with the roles which have been theorised for the media to play in development. Thus, in principle, there exist no special roles for the media in development. The development of African countries should not require African media institutions to have a substantially different function to media organisations in other parts of the world, or for the media to have a special kind of stimulating, catalysing, or initiating role in achieving development.

The essay argues that all of the different roles for the media are important, because they achieve different developmental ends, for different people, and there needs to be a balance between them. This is based on the assumption that the ‘development’ of a country needs to be a process which is constantly contested and negotiated at different levels, rather than a single, simplified idea. If the media can support these different types of development in different ways, development is more likely to operate as a fundamentally democratic practise, which gives it its greatest legitimacy.

## Introduction

The development of African countries has been an important concern for international actors of various descriptions for many decades. Presumably, it is also a concern for many African actors. But by almost any measure, the majority of African countries can rank within the least developed places on the planet – relatively few positive developments take place within them. This essay tries to begin answering the question of what the role of the media (communications and journalism) should be in trying to do something about this.

It is generally accepted that in Europe, innovations in communications technology, beginning with the first use of the printing press in that part of the world in 1440, allowed for the appearance of what is now described as ‘modernity’, a period in the history of ‘Western Civilisation’ that included various economic, technological, scientific, political, religions, industrial and cultural revolutions and produced the highly sophisticated society that exists today in ‘The West’. Inventions such as the telephone, the radio and the internet have played essential roles in establishing our incredibly complex contemporary modern world, which, among other things, feeds and employs far more people than in the past, is more politically stable, and provides ‘ordinary’ people in many of its societies with enormous freedoms in how they live their lives. Communications technology did not create this world, but it could not have occurred without communications. In order to develop the way they have, human societies required advanced systems of communication.

Advanced communication technologies are available to African countries, and have been available for a long time now. So clearly it is about more than just technology. It is about the broader context in which that technology is used and it is also about *how* that technology is used. For example, the printing press was used in China and Korea long before Europe, but did not have the same catalysing effect as it did in Europe.

The role of communications media in ‘Third World’ countries (how the mass media are used) has become a topic of considerable debate at various times in the latter half of the 20th Century, with the key issue ultimately being how ‘development’ is to be understood. Different understandings of development have corresponding theories of what the role of the media should be in achieving a particular kind of development.

This essay will begin by mapping out debates in recent history around the relationship between development and the journalism/communications. This will be used to draw up a theoretical framework for understanding how development and journalism/communications can work together in African countries. Once the terms have been clarified, this framework will then be applied to understand some recent trends in African journalism/communications and development. It will look at ways in which the media is being developed to achieve development, and discuss successes and failures in terms of the framework that has been staked out.

## Initial clarification of terms of reference

Many of the developments which have produced our modern world may not be considered ‘positive’ by various people. ‘Development’ is a term which contains an inherent moral or politico-legal positioning by alluding in some way to what the ideal human society should look like. However Berger argues that “development should have a consistent general meaning across all situations and that crucial to this is the link between development and economics” (1992: 7).

While it may be necessary to accept certain broad limitations on what can be considered a ‘development’, it is clear that the exact terms of development can vary enormously from person to person within a nation, and particularly between different classes. For example, there may be more emphasis placed on having a functional, sustainable and stable economic environment than on having pure economic growth. The San people might not be very ‘rich’, but they (should) have a stable, sophisticated and well managed economy at the level of the family group. Different kinds of ‘development’ may often be at direct odds, for example, developing the economic power of a country in the global economy vs. developing the economic power of poor. The development of a country is also not a monolithic process, and there will always be many different development processes taking place within a country – different types of development, different paths to development, and different levels of success.

These inconsistencies need to be negotiated, and the mass media can play an important role in facilitating that negotiation, while at the same time being a powerful tool in achieving different kinds of development, as will be discussed in this essay. Ideally, the mass media can ensure that the ultimate course which a country takes in its development is accepted by those in whose name it takes place.

In summary, this essay accepts development as economic growth within a society, but with considerable margin for negotiation of what kind of growth takes place, and with greater value given to development which has been sanctioned by democratic engagement from a country’s population.

Berger argues that development and democracy do not have to be coupled, citing countries in South East Asia which demonstrate economic (and related social) development without democracy, and many African countries which have not turned democracy into development (1995: 87). This could illustrate the point that there may often be a direct tension between having developmental progress and having democratic engagement with the process. This essay describes how the media, in playing many very different roles, can be instrumental in navigating this tension.

The South East Asian countries’ development, while being very impressive, loses some of its value for not necessarily being the will of its people. However there is a sense in which this is made up for by how successful the development has been. These countries illustrate one way in which the developmental negotiation can work itself out.

## The Great Debate – modernisation vs dependency

Discussions around the role of media in development first became prominent during a series of Unesco-sponsored conferences in the 1970s. The conferences were used as a platform to promote a development paradigm that was in direct opposition to the ‘modernisation’ understanding of development that was dominant at the time (and continues to be dominant).

The ‘modernisation’ paradigm imagines that all states follow a similar inevitable linear process of modernisation and economic growth. ‘Development’ is understood as being how much progress has been made along this path, with differences between states being understood as arising from how far they have advanced. In its crudest form ‘development’ is understood as simply being the acquisition of the attributes of developed countries by the undeveloped countries. It is assumed that all countries will go through the same stages of development at some point and so it is thus technically possible for undeveloped, lagging states to ‘fast-forward’ this process and catch up with more developed states.

Under the modernisation paradigm, the role of the media in development is as “‘mobility multipliers’, ‘movers’, or ‘innovators’ of change and development” (Servaes, 1986: 206). The media is thus a tool for development and encourages “the adoption and diffusion of cultural innovation” (*Ibid*.). In this sense, it is the essential vehicle for passing the knowledge of the developed world to the undeveloped world so the developed world can be more readily emulated.

The ‘dependistas’ who opposed the modernisation paradigm saw the media more as a problem than a solution. According to their theory of ‘Dependency and Underdevelopment’, the obstacles to development were not internal but rooted in the external world capitalist system. This system causes ‘underdevelopment’ at the periphery of the world economic system, which is understood as the ‘other side of the coin’ to development at the ‘core’. Peripheral economies could be understood as ‘appendages’ of core economies, and constrained by their own extroverted economies and global monopolies (Berger, 1992: 65). The international media system was seen to be a part of this structural inequality, by supporting the system and facilitating cultural imperialism. (Servaes 1986: 210). To counteract this power, delegates at Unesco conferences advocated measures to increase the South-North flow of information (through, for example, a ‘third-world news pool’, see Lent, 1977), and to restrict the North-South flow of information.

In order to achieve this, the dependistas advocated government control of the media. They also made a link between the unequal international system and freedom of the press, which was seen as a Western construct.

“The notions of free press and the free flow of information, like the analogous arguments for free trade, presuppose a system whose members participate in equal opportunity and power....The rhetoric of the free press and the free flow of information is ideologically congruent with the interests of its proponents, and is a persuasive rationalisation for the continued satisfaction of these interests.” (Elliot and Golding, 1974, quoted in Harris, 1977: 29)

They argued that fragile ‘Third World’ nations needed to protect themselves at a critical point in their development by minimising criticism of the state. In addition to these ‘negative’, constraining directives, the dependistas advocated a ‘positive’, promotional strategy of social cohesion, directed in a ‘total process’ by a ‘single voice’ (Lent, 1977, 22).

“Media must cooperate, according to this guided press concept, by stressing positive, development-inspired news, by ignoring negative societal or oppositionist characteristics and by supporting governmental ideologies and plans.” (Lent, 1977: 18)

The promotion of these ideas drew severe recrimation from international media organisations for its restriction of fundamental freedoms. Much of this criticism has since been powerfully justified.

“In Latin America, the mother continent of the dependency paradigm, the process of capitalistic state intervention brought into power authoritarian, generally military governments which have tried to centralise the decision-making and opinion formation. These governments control the production and distribution of communication and use the media for their own legitimation purposes. Participation and politicisation of the population is countered by every possible means.” (Servaes, 1986: 221)

In Africa, the evidence is similarly powerful. Something which was usually ignored is the clear evidence that many ‘Third World’ governments have little or no interest in development outside of their own immediate sphere, and their control of the media for alleged developmental expediency is simply an excuse to maintain power.

Dependency theory can also be criticised on a theoretical level for containing many of the same premises as the modernisation paradigm it challenged. In dependency theory ‘development’ is still understood in purely economic terms, except with the added premise that economic development is a zero-sum game which needs to be wrested from the First World. They are both elitist, in that they both focus on the comparative influence of powerful groups in the North or the South (Servaes, 1986: 222), and both assume that populations are passive absorbers of information in the media. At the end of the day, the dependency model often just replaced one form of domination with another.

But although what the dependistas were advocating was often used to very destructive effect, this does not necessarily mean that it was bad in principle. And even domination may not necessarily be a bad thing for economic development. It has been clearly demonstrated on numerous occasions that government control of the media can be an extremely effective part of a unified governmental development drive. Possibly the most significant recent examples of this are Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia and communist China. All of these have made use of extensive propaganda and careful control of dissident voices to achieve extremely impressive economic results, if the deplorable socio-political environment is ignored. In this view, dependency theory is just a more nuanced, broader-picture elaboration on modernisation theory: it suggests that developing states should adopt a model of communication that Western states have made use of in the past, but since transcended. It is simply a case of needing different approaches at different stages on the road to economic power.

The modernisation theorists’ understanding of the media’s role should also not be dismissed: in principle, there should not be anything wrong with learning from the successes (and failures) of others.

## Alternative perspectives on development media

The Modernisation and the Dependency paradigms provide two roles for the media. Respectively, the media can be providers of developmentally important information (which is acknowledged to be generated in the ‘First World’) or they can be tools for social control (with the assumption that this control will be used to positive or benevolent effect). They are both premised on the idea that the media needed to play a new or different role in a context which was fundamentally different to that in the ‘First World’, and both assumed a very passive, neutral role for media workers such as journalists, and audiences interpreting what they view, instead ceding hegemonic power and influence to either foreign institutions or the state.

However there have also existed other, less polarised, perspectives on the role of the media in development. The ‘development journalism’ which was debated at Unesco was originally conceived as an unambitious elaboration on conventional journalistic practice as it took place in the ‘First World’. In the 1960s Philippine journalists formed national (and then later larger Asian organisations) to ensure that “there should be better trained and informed economics specialists among journalists, to cover and report fully, impartially and simply the myriad problems of a developing nation” (Lent, 1977, 17). They worked independently of government, particularly through press institutes and organisations. In this understanding of development journalism, “The development journalist’s relationship with his government was, if anything, an adversary one, where the journalist offered criticism of development plans and the exercise of such plans.” (Ogan, 1982: 6).

This kind of critical, independent journalism has been termed ‘development journalism’ by Freedom House, in comparison to ‘development*al* journalism’, the term used to refer to government-controlled communication (Ogan, 1982: 7). It has been described by many different theorists, where it is usually denotes a broadly defined shift to a more principled, responsible attitude in the practise of journalism. Banda writes that development journalism, “has the following tasks: (i) to motivate the audience to actively cooperate in development; and (ii) to defend the interests of those concerned.” (2006: 5). Kasoma writes that it is

about portraying developmental issues in reporting news. It raises issues that make a difference in people's lives when they are attended to. A development journalist strives, through reporting, to make the world a better place than it is. He or she is, therefore, critical of what exists. There is no room in development journalism for ‘praise journalism’ which African governments are so fond of and is practised mainly by the government controlled mass media. (2002: 163).

But development journalism can mean something a little bit more than this as well. Servaes, in dismissing the modernisation and dependency paradigms, nevertheless clings to the idea of a distinctive perspective on development and the media. His ‘third way’ is to argue for a ‘multidimensional, public-orientated approach’ to the media, where “the hierarchical, bureaucratic and sender-orientated communication model has been replaced by a more horizontal, participative and receiver-orientated approach. The emphasis is now placed on communication as a process, that is, on the exchange of meanings.” (Servaes, 1986: 215). Kasoma describes how, “in the 1980s, experts had realised the importance of knowledge sharing on a co-equal basis between senders and receivers. This was the time when the basic right to communicate, which every human should enjoy, started to be an issue.” (2002: 143). Under this approach, the media aim to facilitate public engagement, particularly at a grassroots level. It calls for a rejection of “uniform, centralised, ‘expensive’, professional and institutionalised media” and argues for “multidimensionality, horizontality, de-professionalization and diachronic communication exchange” (Servaes, 1986: 215). It is immediately clear how this approach led directly to an interest in community-owned radio stations in Africa:

“The use of ‘small media’ at the community level was seen as being more effective in promoting development than the ‘big media’ whose messages were less specific and geared to answering the needs of specific communities. The ‘small media’ were seen as key to promoting people’s participation in development. The development of rural areas was particularly emphasised.” (Kasoma, 2002: 144)

This approach understands development to be a context-specific process and aim because, “there is no universal development model, development is an integral, multidimensional and dialectic process that can differ from society to society” (Servaes, 1986: 211). It thus wholeheartedly rejects the economic focus of the modernisation and dependency paradigms.

Two further perspectives have now been outlined (to add to the dependency and modernisation perspectives): ‘development journalism’ which is a slight variation on the traditional ‘Fourth Estate’ role of the press, and a ‘public journalism’ that actively facilitates citizens’ engagement in the construction of knowledge.

## What’s new??

These four approaches (and variations on them) have all been posited by theorists as ‘The Way’ that the media should function in developing countries. But unless further alternatives are proposed, the way ‘Third World’ countries’ media function is not going to be much different from media in ‘First World’ countries. The main difference would be that the media are likely to play a more limited range of different roles, dictated by a lack of capacity and small markets for independent or commercial media.

It has already been argued that the government-controlled ‘communication for social/national cohesion’ argued for by the dependistas has been very evident in ‘First World’ nations in the past, and in many cases still exists in some form today. That is to say, ‘First World’ countries also practise ‘developmental journalism’. It is also clear that the imperative to pump knowledge into ‘Third World’ countries under the modernisation paradigm is similarly evident in the need for ‘First World’ countries to educate their own citizens, although there may be more alternatives to the press and broadcast media. There is clearly an important and valuable role to be played by media in disseminating information, or, at least, being a resource from which knowledge can be drawn.

Regarding the second two models which have been discussed, a number of writers have pointed out that there is nothing particularly new about them either – they fit very neatly into the ‘social responsibility of the press’ and the ‘public service broadcasting’ approaches, which have been important normative models in ‘First World’ nations for a long time. As regards the social responsibility theory of the press, Ogan explains, “depending on one’s definition of this ‘new’ concept, development journalism belongs either to the authoritarian or the social responsibility theory of the press. It is just another example of new wine in old bottles.” (Ogan, 1982: 11). Banda, in comparing the facilitative, citizen-engaging model of development journalism to public service broadcasting, makes consistent, explicit links to support a powerful argument that, “the very definition of development journalism, in the tradition of participatory communication, chimes with the philosophical foundations of public service broadcasting.” (2006: 10). In addition to this there is the relatively recent trend for ‘public journalism’ which seeks to involve readers in the production of news, particularly in print media newsrooms seeking to re-engage readers. This approach to journalism has become very popular in ‘First World’ media, where it is seen to sometimes be a more profitable approach for the press to take than the standard ‘Fourth Estate’ role.

The four different roles also correspond directly to Dennis McQuail’s ‘Four Theories of the Press’, which he theorised as the four roles that the press can take in any society. As he describes them, they are the ‘informational role’ (equivalent to the modernisation approach to communications), the ‘collaborative role’ (equivalent to the dependency theory approach to communications), the critical role (equivalent to the original ‘development journalism), and the facilitative role (Servaes’ multidimensional approach, like ‘public journalism’) (McQuail, 2006, 56).

Thus, so far, this essay has shown that all of the roles described for the media in ‘developing countries’ are present in the ‘developed countries’ of the world. There thus seems to exist no fundamentally distinctive ‘role for the media in development’, except insofar as all states are ‘in development’ and require the media to play a role in this development. It will now be argued that all of the roles described are useful and important, especially where they exist together with other media functions. Ultimately, it is clear that media in all countries should be playing all these roles, with the important dynamics being ‘everything in moderation’, and maintaining a country-specific focus that takes into account existing realities, as will be further discussed.

## An African Mass media & Development Matrix

The following four roles for the mass media in development have been identified:

* Communications to *provide information* for development.
* Supported by the modernisation theory paradigm.
* *Foreign states* are the source of knowledge (with the national state as an intermediary).
* Communications to build national cohesion and coordination through *government control*.
* This is ‘developmental journalism’, supported by the dependency theory paradigm.
* *The national state* is the source of knowledge.
* Communications to guide development through *accountability*.
* This is the reformed ‘development journalism’.
* *The press* as the ‘watchdog’ ‘Fourth Estate’ is the source of knowledge.
* Communication to facilitate *public involvement*, engagement and discussion with development.
* This is supported by Servaes’ ‘multi-dimensional’ approach to development.
* *Citizens* are the source of knowledge.

The first two roles could be described as supporting an *autocratic* relationship between the state and citizens, while the second two support a *democratic* relationship between citizens and the state. This is a function of the place of the media itself in relation to the state in the different roles: in the first two the media function together with or from within the state, while in the second two, particularly the third, the media are to some extent independent of the state. The first two roles have a focus on economic development (both are premised on development models which see development in economic terms), while the second two allow for political engagement with and regulation of development (assuming a democratic political norm, they both facilitate criticism of the party in power). Thus the first two roles can be seen as tools for supporting economic development, while the second two enable the democratic guidance of development.

The two types of roles described are very different, however, it is easy to see that they should be mutually supportive rather than mutually exclusive; ideally they should function together. The state, being the actor that (usually) takes a lead role development, can use the media as a powerful and essential ‘tool for development’ (as can institutions like international NGOs which may assume many of the state’s functions). But assuming that developmental initiatives (which should include most of the state’s functions) are designed to benefit the citizens of a country, the democratic functions of the media play an equally essential role in ensuring that development remains a citizen-focused process. According to the definition for development which has been described in this essay, the wider accepted benefit of citizens is what makes development legitimate. These different roles for the media thus serve to ensure the media’s role in development is balanced, and that development itself is a balanced process, in terms of the needs of citizens. Similarly, while it is important that the state not be so strong that it can ignore the needs of its citizens, it must also not be too weak, as this weakness is likely to manifest in repressive strong-arm tactics. The mass media should be able to give the state the power to achieve its goals without having to resort to this sort of behaviour.

Beyond this, another important division in the media’s roles can be described: their different class focus. In African countries there exist two distinct and separate media spheres: the sphere which deals with the small educated elite, and the sphere which deals with ‘grassroots’ communities. I would argue that while the distinction between the ‘elite’ and ‘grassroots’ spheres may be too simplistic in many parts of the world, it is more acceptable in African states which are characterised by a massive gap between rich and poor and high levels of illiteracy at a grassroots level. The development needs and priorities of these two spheres may be very different, and even at odds. At a grassroots level, primary concern may be with basic food, health and welfare needs that are not being fulfilled. Among the elite, the focus might rather be on things like infrastructure, political freedoms or economic policies, although these are not hard and fast distinctions. This is effectively the same political class-struggle to define the limits of the state’s role which has been fought in various forms since nation-state’s first emerged.

In the roles described, the modernisation approach to development communications and the facilitative approach to development communications both have a ‘grassroots’ focus – they aim to educate and engage citizens at a community level. In a mutually supportive relationship between the two ‘grassroots-focused’ roles, education can become a dialogue where information is solicited and debated – ensuring (a) it is more likely to be the sort of information which communities need and (b) it is more likely to take root in society, given that it has been engaged with.

The fourth estate role and the consensus and control role are both more likely to be the concern of elites, in that these groups have the education and political literacy to engage with and be engaged by the media in these roles. And only a relatively wealthy elite can support the costs of the independent media organisations necessary to play the watchdog/fourth estate role. These two roles also conform closest to conventional Western understandings of the role of the mass media, and require citizens to be schooled in the norms and practices of a Western-modelled society in which the mass media play these roles. With these two roles, journalism for the elite can contain a balance between positive, ‘developmental journalism’ (sometimes called ‘sunshine journalism’, or government say-so journalism), and more confrontational ‘development journalism’ which holds leaders to account.

Like the balance between the media’s support of political development (which empowers citizens) and economic development (which empowers the state), there also needs to be a balance between the media’s support of elite and grassroots priorities. The normative content of ‘development’ in a country is, above all else, going to be a struggle between different class interests (although there may be various incarnations of this, such as a division between urban and rural priorities), and the state may align itself with either of these groups. In addition to this, strengthening each of the four roles gives power to each of the different actors whose knowledge is privileged in each role. Strengthening the fourth estate role of the media gives power to ‘the press’, strengthening the ‘developmental journalism’ role of the media strengthens the state, strengthening the facilitative role of the media strengthens citizens (particularly those who are normally marginalised), and strengthening the ‘modernising’ role of the media gives power to foreign states. All of these outcomes are necessary, but clearly, must be achieved in balanced moderation.

In summary, the following table can be drawn up to function as model in framing the different roles the mass media can play in a society where development is taking place:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Political/Democratic role in development* | *Economic role in development* |
| Elite focus – conventional mass media roles | **Watchdog role*** ‘Development journalism’
* Elaboration on conventional liberal-pluralist press role
 | **Tool for cohesion and control*** ‘Developmental journalism’
* Dependency paradigm
 |
| Grassroots focus | **Facilitative platform role*** ‘Public journalism’
* ‘Multi-dimensional’ approach to development
 | **Tool for providing information*** ‘Public service information’
* ‘Modernisation paradigm’
 |
|  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Decreasing level of ‘journalism’ involved* |  |  |  |

An important distinction also needs to be made between ‘journalism’ and ‘mass media communication’ in the roles played by the media. ‘Journalism’ is the production of news content – gathering, writing and reporting it –, while communication is simply the transfer of information. Communication can be seen as a tool for development, whereas journalism, as a process or practise, produces its own content. This means its content is unpredictable, and its practise requires some independence from the actors being dealt with in its content. Journalism is also a fundamentally important part of a democratic system of government, in that it generates the information needed by the public to exercise their democratic rights. However journalism in Africa is also often a very elitist practise, in that it requires some certain levels of literacy, and a particular kind of political understanding, as mentioned earlier. Journalism, in its democratic function, is linked to notions of a ‘public sphere’, first theorised by Habermas, and retains some of the elitism of its original conception, where it excluded women and the poor.

The watchdog role of the press is the most fundamentally journalistic, in that in this role the press is completely independent. But there is still journalism involved in ‘developmental journalism’ and ‘public journalism’, which both refer to ‘journalism’ in their names. ‘Developmental journalism’ produces journalism in the sense that positive, filtered news is still news, although propaganda is not news. ‘Public journalism’ produces journalism in the sense that news may well be brought to light and discussed, although there is some likelihood that its content will be meaningless, one-sided or overly localised or personalised.

It can also be observed that the latter two roles for the media (which fit between ‘pure journalism’ and ‘pure mass communication’) are directly involved in building the social capital of the media’s target communities. ‘Developmental journalism’ does this by enhancing confidence in the value of the nation in which it operates, and deliberately co-opting citizens to participate in and contribute to this imagined community, for example by engaging in public service. ‘Public journalism’ allows people to engage in a community of audience-members or readers, which may create a loyalty and social bond with other members of this community. Putnam describes ‘social capital’ as “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1993: 1). Putnam argues that it

“enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital…Social capital is coming to be seen as a vital ingredient in economic development around the world. Scores of studies of rural development have shown that a vigorous network of indigenous grassroots associations can be as essential to growth as physical investment, appropriate technology, or ‘getting prices right.’” (Putnam, 1993: 3)

## Contemporary Media Aid: understanding the limits

This essay has shown how the mass media can operate on several very different ‘levels’ in development. Primary distinctions have been made between ‘grassroots’ and elite development and media spheres, and between economic and political roles of the media in development. The four roles described involve differing levels of journalism in their content, and each have a particular source of knowledge: the state, foreign states, citizens, or the press itself. It has been argued that all these different roles and spheres need to be used and dealt with, in order to ensure a balanced, democratic and representative developmental process. Some of these roles can be done together (within the same media text), but some are opposing and should be done apart.

How are the mass media actually being used in development? On a broad level, they appear to be being used more than in the past. Myers cites reports indicating that “Western donor support for media development has been growing in recent years. In 2004 it was estimated to be about $1 billion annually, and it has probably increased since.” (2008: 99). International aid organisations are developing media for development. In one sense though, this trend is more about a shift in focus. While in the past the media were seen to a tool for disseminating information (under a modernisation and growth paradigm) international aid organisations have now become concerned with using the media for political development. The United Nations Development Programme’s Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, the principal author of the UNDP’s 2002 Human Development Report has said that, “Politics is as important to successful development as economics” (quoted in Hudock, 2008: 1). Berger argues that “Donor investment in media development overall has often become a means to encourage democracy as a substitute to the totalitarian and socialist beliefs that posed a threat of democratic backsliding in newly emerging post-conflict states” (Berger, 2008b: 23). The idea is that “enhancement of the media environment (such as promoting press freedom laws) and improving access to the media will facilitate democratic participation and socio-economic development (as opposed to leaving these processes to autocrats, experts or the market).” (*Ibid.*: 11).

An significant indicator of this trend has been the replacement of the World Bank’s ‘Structural Adjustment Programmes’ (SAPs) with ‘Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers’ (PRSPs), which insist on widespread citizen participation in policy discussions (Hudock, 2008: 1). An important motivation of this was the failure of SAPs, as well as numerous other development programs, because they lacked support from within populations. Echoing the standard wisdom, Gerard explains that, “the history of development aid is strewn with the carcasses of ‘white elephants’, massive projects that failed because they did not adequately consult with local communities” (2003: 7). Kupe argues that this problem goes beyond the efforts of external actors to include the way ‘Third World’ governments approach all development:

The tendency with Africa’s development initiatives and public policy in general is that the elites and the leadership are the initiators but there are no attempts to be inclusive thereafter. Then the lack of ‘ownership’ of the policy by all stakeholders becomes an issue and contributes to the ultimate failure of the policy. Debate and discussion are seen as unnecessary because the elites have made the decision – all that is left to do is to implement those decisions. (2005: 200)

At its best, the idea is that there needs to more grassroots consultation in the formation of development plans, to ensure that what is proposed will indeed serve a useful purpose for people. If the right development plans are initiated, people will be more likely to support them, and to hold government and agencies to account in ensuring they do what they want them to do. In a more cynical, mechanistic approach, people are more likely to support a project that they have been given a nominal ‘voice’ in, and they can then be encouraged to monitor its implementation. In practise the latter attitude seems to be more predominant, with public awareness and consultation campaigns around PRSPs consistently failing to engage populations, who, like local media, often regard them with scepticism (Mozammel, M. & Odugbemi, S., 2005). These campaigns may also be undertaken half-heartedly, as little more than a ‘rubber stamp exercise’. A recent World Bank report acknowledges some of these accusations:

Some have accused donors of having low standards, and ignoring inadequacies in the participative process. Kruse, for example, claimed that the international financial institutions and donor community have ignored the repression and suspension of constitutional rights that occurred in parallel to the National Dialogue. He claims that government and donors were working together to keep problems in the process away from public attention. (*Ibid.*:90)

The problem here seems to be that the promotion of the media’s democratic role is being done in a mechanistic, expedient way. It is not aimed at increasing the media’s general capacity, but rather aims to achieve a narrow set of goals linked to the donor’s agenda. As has been discussed, while the media function as tools for development in some of their roles (the first two of the four described), the media’s democracy-enhancing roles require it to function with some degree of independence. Berger argues that donors have a very significant lack of ‘neutrality’, in that

“Generally, the economic imperative for donor support, including media assistance, to the Third World has been analysed as being to encourage the modelling of political-economic systems in their own likeness, and – in the case of the United States – to open the way for transnational corporations” (*Ibid.*: 20)

These donor-sponsored campaigns also fail to take into account different media spheres. They operate on a national scale and, for example, it is also not clear if they are looking at grassroots or elite audiences. They fail to tap into existing grassroots institutions, such as community radio or other types of local networks, and instead maintain the mass information dissemination tactics favoured by a modernisation approach to communications – they aim to educate people about democratic participation rather than facilitate it. This approach might be adequate for certain particular ends (such as raising awareness), but it is not designed to stimulate or facilitate audience engagement. There is also a failure to recognise the importance of elite media as a separate sphere of public debate, which might be much more capable and interested in engaging with policy issues. Thus, it could be argued that the role of communications in these ‘public engagement’ campaigns has not been adequately considered, especially given the frameworks that have been outlined in this essay.

These attempts at political development have been aimed at promoting the mass media’s role in facilitating political engagement. But there have also been attempts to enhance the other democratic role of the mass media: the watchdog role. For example, there have been extensive programs to train Tanzanian journalists in economic journalism, so they are better equipped to report on economic development issues. This is very similar to the strategy taken in the Philippians in the 1960s when the idea of ‘development journalism’ was first discussed, except that in that case, the strategy was promoted and undertaken by the press itself. However, as Kariethi describes, the economic journalism in Tanzania has actively declined and “some trained and experienced journalists are now abandoning seldom-read business and financial journalism for the ‘gutter press’ to earn a living.” (2005: 129). The problem is that the market is very small. However this is not to say that there is no market at all. Kariethi describes how, across the continent, economics and business journalism, has seen erratic growth, despite concerted efforts to develop its capacity:

“The development of economics and business journalism appears to be generally correlated with the size of a country’s private economic sector, with economics journalism being more developed in countries with a large and flourishing private sector. This explains the dearth of economics reporting in many sub-Saharan African countries, and especially those with low levels of private sector development. In such countries, the government dominates economic activity through a large public sector that lacks the resources and lustre to support strong business growth and a robust economics media.” (Kariethi, 2005: xi).

The problem, then, is that the ‘elite sphere’ is often not very big. And if it is as big as it can be, there is no point in efforts to expand the media’s roles within this sphere, and efforts must be diverted to the media’s other roles, in other spheres. Because the watchdog role of the press is only one part of what the media can do in development.

## Understanding successes

The slow growth of more mainstream ‘development journalism’ can be compared to the two widely celebrated successes in African media/communications in recent years: community radio and cell-phone use. Their success seems to be based on their building upon existing grassroots and social networks, rather than an externally motivated imperative that aims to build systems and structures ‘from scratch’. Kasoma describes successful community radio stations as being “like a village square or central meeting place to the local community. It is where people meet both physically and psychologically, to share ideas and discuss problems with a view to finding solutions to them.” (2002: 174). Cellphones can be considered ‘mass media’, in that they allow large-scale national dissemination of SMS messages through informal social networks, which have been used to great effect in many examples, particularly the Zimbabwean elections.

Community radio and cellphone use should be understood as communication for development rather than journalism. They thus fill the roles of ‘disseminating information’ and ‘facilitating public engagement’. Although they may also involve elite communities, they can be classified as ‘grassroots’ communication because they are not part of ‘mainstream’ media and are more accessible to a wider proportion of the population. Importantly, the vast majority of the populations of African countries are outside of the ‘elite’ media sphere, which explains why the role of the media at a ‘grassroots’ level is so important, and has been so successful. According to the framework developed, these two media have been successful because they are accurately aligned with the realities of existing social spheres. However it is important to note that they fulfil only some parts of the media’s role in an African country, although these particular roles are very clearly defined in terms of the existing reality.

In contrast to this, there is the extensive hype around ICTs (usually synonymous with Internet access) in development. The assumption is that the internet will contribute to development by undermining asymmetry in access to information between rich and poor. There is also sometimes reference to it providing a platform for greater media pluralism and political engagement.

The dominant thrust of attacking information asymetry is a clear return to the modernisation paradigm: modern technology, graciously provided by international aid agencies, will allow people to access “a wealth of knowledge and information” (Girard, 2003: 10) and “the truth about development and the information that will enlighten them to take, on their own, the steps that will improve their condition” (Dagron, 2003: 26). It ignores the fact that technology is not ‘neutral’ – it benefits the rich, educated and privileged more – and the fact that the internet is not neutral – its content is almost entirely Western-based. It is thus important that the internet be understood as fulfilling a very particular role: it is an elite medium, and its most important roles are in contributing to economic development (rather than political development), because it provides information, and allows for communication and coordination. Thus, the internet must be understood to provide a very particular *kind* of development, and for very particular people. It is also understood that “ICTs are neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for development....ICTs are not inherently necessary or beneficial” (Gomez and Martinez, 2001 in Dagron, 29).

However it could also be argued that the internet is an extremely flexible medium. So, for example, it could transcend class boundaries by reaching marginalised rural ‘grassroots’ communities through their cellphones, or be used by community radio stations, to provide access to useful information which the radio stations can then distribute. The internet can also play a democratic role in facilitating political engagement and debate in online ‘public journalism’, for example in blogs, online forums, or citizen journalism websites. These sorts of possibilities are particularly useful where alternative forums are not available because of, for example, difficulty in access, or where the press is unable to practise its fourth estate watchdog role properly.

The lessons from earlier examples seem to be that it is very important for the role of a mass medium to be clearly understood in relation to the socio-economic reality of a country. A focus on developing the internet as a mass medium should not come at the expense of other media support, such as watchdog and community radio, and it should be very clear why the promotion of internet access is taking place; it should not be turned into fulfilling a role which is unrealistic, or which can be better achieved by other means.

## The case for media development

Overall, this essay argues that there is no particular need for ‘development journalism’, but simply the development of the media such that, like in ‘First World’ countries, it can play a variety of extremely important roles. However the development of these different media roles should take place with an understanding of local realities, and the extent to which these roles are required. In many cases, the media landscape may not need to be fundamentally altered. For example, if elite media fulfilling a watchdog role are minimal, it may be because the elite market that these media serve is small, and it is pointless to expect the media to fulfil this role more extensively. Instead, there are other roles which the media can play which also achieve democratic input in the developmental process, particularly, the facilitative role at a grassroots level. This pragmatic approach to media development also implies that the development of the media should be seen as an end in itself – where larger agendas are being pursued, it is easy to lose sight of what the media actually can do and is doing. As Berger writes, “media development...is better understood as an *end* which in turn *may* serve as a means to yet further goals” (Berger, 2008: 5, my emphasis).

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