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Marginal Notes On Development Journalism
And Writing Development Stories

By

Virgilio S Labrador
Marginal Notes on Development Journalism
and Writing Development Stories
by Virgilio S. Labrador

The concept of development journalism can be likened to the practice during the pioneering days of journalism, when all journalism was a sort of advocacy journalism. Back then, there was no question about journalism having a stance—to be a journalist means to advocate certain causes. Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanack, which advocated the overthrow of the English regime in America, was representative of the journalism of that time.

Development journalism, however, is not advocacy journalism. Development journalism is a more exacting and scientific brand of journalism which draws heavily from the findings of research and development laboratories. Like all journalism, development journalism is biased. As Studs Terkel of the New York Times so aptly put it—there can be no objectivity whenever a journalist chooses to report ten facts out of a hundred. Development journalism is biased for the social and economic upliftment of the majority of humankind.

Virgilio S. Labrador is the Head, Seminars and Institutional Development Programme of AMIC. The views expressed in this paper, however, are not necessarily that of the organization he represents.
Development journalism is characterized by its purposiveness, pragmatism, relevance, scientific outlook and technical subject orientation (Jamias, 1991).

Development journalism as discipline is deeply rooted in development communication, which believes communication can be harnessed for national development goals. Perhaps one of the most compelling definitions of development communication is from Nora Quebral (1985):

Development communication is the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfilment of the human potential.

Development journalism is no different from conventional journalism. It adheres to the same standards of fairness, accuracy, balance and journalistic ethics. The difference is in the choice of subject matter and the action orientation.

Development journalism covers subjects that do not get as much media attention ie. an arcane scientific discovery like a new high-yielding rice variety or a grassroots initiative to develop community self-reliance projects. Development reporting is as legitimate a field as political, business, entertainment or sports reporting. There are many stories with a developmental angle clamouring to be written.

Developmental reporting also differs from conventional reporting in its action orientation. When writing a development story, the focus is on the purpose of the writing—not just to inform or interpret but to move people to action.
Consequently, in writing a development story, we always have to ask: For whom are we writing? To whom are we writing? for what purpose and why?

Because of the complexity of the subject matter characterizing development journalism, it is a more exacting field than any other, including scientific reporting. To be a development journalist one has to have a good grasp of sociology, politics, economics, psychology, science with some philosophy and art thrown in for good measure. This is because development stories do not merely narrate facts or rattle figures and statistics. They go deeper than the surface—giving flesh and blood to socio-economic and political problems. Development stories do not just tell the who, what where and when, but more importantly answers the question—why? Development journalism looks into the underlying causes of problems and even goes so far as to propose solution or courses of action. Because of these demands on the development journalist, a very good multi-disciplinary foundation is necessary. A little passion and commitment would not hurt either.

Since development journalism does not only aims to inform, analyze and interpret events and issues but move people to action, development stories must be able to captivate and arouse their target audience to act. The qualities of clarity, coherence and organization are doubly important in a development story. A development story must speak the language of its reader and must be able to translate of often complex and arcane technical information to layman's
terms. A development journalist must learn to coax in simple language, very complex problems and issues.

To bring the message home to the reader, always look into the human interest angle of every story. How does it affect the man on the street? For example, when doing a story on the textile industry—provide a good overview and background on the subject but also look into the effect on the common man.

It would also help if the story is amply illustrated with eye-catching graphics, especially if it involves a lot of statistical data. Use action photos and do not be afraid to experiment with more creative layouts.

In writing a development story, when in doubt, think HELP—which stands for Humanize, Energize, Localize and Personalize. And simplify, simplify, simplify.

By way of a parting shot, development journalism has come a long way since its inception in the late '60s. However, development reporting has not quite yet achieved the legitimacy of other fields of reporting. For example, very few of the larger metropolitan dailies in Asia have a development section. Very few of the journalism schools also offer development journalism courses. Clearly, development journalism has still a long way to go.

These times, however, are the most exciting times to be a development journalist. Dramatic changes are underway in the global political and economic arena. The Asia-Pacific region, is at the forefront of these changes. The dragon economies of Asia are growing at a faster rate than any part of the world. All of these changes have profound effects on people's lives
and their future. Development journalism plays a very important role in shedding light on the issues arising out of these changes.
Select Bibliography


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CHARACTERISTICS OF DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM

PURPOSIVE

PROCESS-ORIENTED

SUBJECT PERSPECTIVE

CHOICE OF SUBJECTS
Primary Development Dimension

Development Goal

Economic

1. Hunger, malnutrition, and starvation
2. Rapid population growth
3. Low productivity per unit of land, labor
4. Low level of living
5. Shortage of development capital
6. Overdependence on imports
7. Economic domination by foreigners

Adequacy of food production and distribution
Reduction of birth rate
Modernization, transfer of technology, erosion control
Adequacy of effective income* for procurement of necessities and some amenities
Efficient exploitation of endogenous resources for internal use or export; procurement of long-term aid or loans
Self-sufficiency in basic commodities, especially food, fuel
Economic nationalism,** equitable, or even compensatory, terms of trade and access to technology

Social

8. Extreme maldistribution of wealth and income
9. Widespread illiteracy; inadequately educated
10. High unemployment; great waste of human capital, human resources
11. High morbidity and mortality rates
12. Class distinctions, elitism (e.g. by wealth, education or caste)
13. Cultural barriers to cooperation in interregional and transnational projects

Major redistribution of income and wealth
Sufficient general and vocational education; literacy in a national language
Low unemployment; human abilities better matched to the demands of necessary tasks
Adequate nutrition, sanitation, and health care
Elimination of class barriers and elitism
Cross-cultural educational programs to foster understanding and tolerance of neighboring peoples and win recognition of mutual need

Political

14. Colonial or neo-colonial status
15. Vulnerability to external threats
16. Narrow-based national decision-making
17. Unresolved questions of rights to resources

National self-determination
Improved national defense; improved international peace-keeping mechanisms
Greater public participation in planning and decision-making
Establishment and enforcement of international standards concerning resource exploitation (e.g. fishing and mining rights in coastal and deep-ocean waters)

Environmental

18. High susceptibility to natural catastrophes (e.g. earthquakes, floods, droughts)
19. Pollution of air, water, and landscape
20. Soil erosion
21. Resource depletion
22. Ecosystem overload; disruption of major natural cycles (e.g. nitrogen cycle, carbon cycle, carbon-dioxide cycle)

Safe siting and construction of homes and work places; improved dikes and levee systems; better water management, including storage
Establishment and enforcement of environmental quality standards; minimization of use of long-lasting pollutants (e.g. DDT, lead, mercury and radio-isotopes)
Better land management practices, especially relative to agriculture, logging, mining, and construction
Slower rate of resource use; more efficient use of non-renewable resources; development of renewable resources
Leveling off of scale of economic activity, including use of energy, harvesting of biological species, and use of massive topography-modifying projects
"Development communication is the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfilment of the human potential."
THE EVOLUTION OF DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM

Late 60s - early 70s
"IN YOUR FACE" JOURNALISM PHASE

Mid 70s - early 80s
"GOVERNMENT-SAYS-SO" JOURNALISM PHASE

Mid 80s - present
"RENAISSANCE" OF DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM

Sometime in the future
"REDUNDANCE" OF DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM
(No more need for Development Journalism)
ACCURACY

FAIRNESS

BALANCE

ADHERENCE TO THE TRUTH

ETHICAL CONDUCT
Humanize

Energize

Localize

Personalize

Simplify
Pitfalls to Avoid in Development Journalism

- "Snake oil" discoveries
- jargon, technical terms and ideological positions
- Being too involved in the subject
- Unprofessionalism
SUMMARY

- Development journalism is alive and well

- The need for development journalism is greater than ever

- Development journalism does not have to be called development journalism to be development journalism