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Development Journalism In The Information Age

By

Juan F. Jamias
DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Discussion paper presented by Dr Juan F Jamias at the Workshop on Editorial Management for Senior Women Journalists held at the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), Singapore, on 20 April, 1994.

Introduction

When the other week I browsed through the pages of the January/February 1994 issue of the Columbia Journalism Review, two impressions struck my attention. First, the CJR carried several advertisements of development journalism fellowships and reporting awards. I took these ads to mean that the U.S. press has already gone into development journalism.

Second was the Editor’s Note page. The editor, Suzanne Brau Levine, appeared writing about the same concerns that bothered executives in Asian journalism in the late 1960s when the concept of development journalism dawned on the Asian sky.

The fellowships or awards for journalism published in the Review included topics that have already made or could make the list of subjects covered in development journalism. The ads were for such topics as economics and business, land policy including urban policy and environmental policy, the law, health policy and public health, personal finance and reporting about bigotry and discrimination.

(Study Question: In your newspaper, what are the specialised reporting beats or topics covered?)

Ms Levine wrote: "Another part of our (CJR's) mission is to define and reaffirm common goals for practising a journalism that serves the public good. One of the most familiar complaints is that the press is chronically distracted from larger moral and civic issues by sound bites, gossip and horse races."

More than twenty years ago, an American scholar starkly portrayed the then wayward mass media in the Philippines (Lent 1970). He berated the newspapers and other media for playing "on sensationalism, making heroes of criminals while at the same time crusading against crime." On the whole, alternative stories that would tackle the developmental problems of the country lagged far behind news on partisan politics, crime and sex that then filled the print and broadcast media.

Development journalism was born to highlight such neglected stories not as a substitute to, but to complement conventional journalism. Development journalism, however, espouses too the values of accuracy, honesty and integrity of the latter.
Leaders in Asian journalism, most of whom were affiliated with the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia included Juan Mercado of the Philippines, Tarzie Vittachi of Sri Lanka, Amithabha Chowdhury of India and Alan Chalkley, a British economics journalist working in Hong Kong. Vittachi was the concept maker or theoretician in the group, Mercado and Chowdhury the implementors, and Chalkley the editorial specialist and stylist.

Chalkley spelled out the style for depth reporting of developmental news. He described it as "a new way of expressing news and analysis which would reach down further into the readership, be brighter, be rigorously honest and accurate, be pictorial and human." To Chalkley, three axioms render development journalism readable, interesting, colourful, informative, and have impact.

1. Simplify, translate horrible technical jargon into language which is more like ordinary speech. Use plenty of colourful phrases, swing the copy along to keep the reader's interest up, but do not lose accuracy.

2. Humanize the economic and social story. Remember that economics is not the prerogative of bankers and high treasury officials, or the people who draft those awful reports in the United Nations. Economics is trying to earn a living, by everyone, including housewives.

3. Illustrate stories more, use pictures and charts. One diagram is worth a thousand words.

These attributes of news reporting can be seen in such newspapers as the Financial Times of London and the Asian Wall Street Journal. However, they do not call their reporting development journalism but just journalism.

But if we look deeper into what has been said and written about development journalism, from Chalkley to Vittachi and their later colleagues in the craft, the new journalism, Asian style, may differ from conventional journalism in some ways.

(Project transparency "Development Journalism and Conventional Journalism Compared")

1. Development journalism is purposive while conventional journalism is non-purposive. This means that development news is not written for its own sake but for what it can do to improve the lot of people and communities.

(Project transparency "News")

Thus, development news is information that people need for making decisions about their lives and thus improve their lot. Broadly, development news aims to promote the goals of social, economic, political, cultural and moral development. The term applies to news published in both the print and electronic media.

(Study Question: What does the word "development" mean to you?)

(Project transparency "Development")
Purposiveness prompts the reporter to ask these questions when writing: What does he or she want to happen as a result of writing? In what way does he or she want the reader to be different after reading a story or stories? Actually, this approach comes from the methodology of teachers in the schools. For their lesson plans for the day, the teachers first write down their specific behavioral objectives.

Conventional news is written, as we learned from journalism school, without any ax to grind. The U.S. scholars MacLean and Westley called this non-purposive role of the news the communication role. Another communication function, they called the advocacy role, as this is done in public-relations.

With the advent of computers and other new communication technologies, news has been better known as information. In today’s information society, information is power that is fast supplanting the value of labour, capital and money which were salient in the preceding agricultural and industrial societies. Journalism is fast adjusting to this reality. Hence, these definitions of information or news.

(Project the transparencies with the following headings: Information, Information and News.)

2. Conventional journalism tends to highlight sensational or entertainment news. In the research literature, theory points to uses and gratifications from news. Conventional journalism typically promises immediate gratification or rewards.

Editor Levine of the CJR, further stated that (conventional) journalism has been further marginalised by the “increasing centralisation of media power in conglomerates that show more interest in the entertainment potential of their empires than in newsgathering possibilities.”

In contrast, development journalism lays its stake in publishing information with a consequence. In this connection, data from 67 countries showed that the three indispensable ingredients of news are interest, timeliness and clarity (Masterton, 1993). Development journalism puts the news value of relevance or consequence as an indispensable ingredient of the news. Development journalist advocates would even put this news value or news significance at the top of the list.

(Project transparency "4 Main News Values")

In fine, development journalism has a bias for information with a consequence. It is not even necessary to specify this attribute, for relevance or consequence is a given in the technical meaning of information in the so-called information age.

3. Development journalism stresses scientific or at least rational approach to the news. This attribute arises in large part from the fact that the overwhelming activities today are scientific and technological. Agriculture, economics, health and what have you have their foundations in the scientific culture. Science has even influenced the ways of gathering the news. Experiments and surveys, the latter using social science theory and methodology, have spawned precision journalism.
As to content, development communication students in the University of the Philippines Los Banos, take 24 units in agronomy, animal science, nutrition or any of the technical courses available on the campus. This is to be able to understand the stories or topics they are writing. In addition, to sharpen their insight about people, they are exposed to basic social science disciplines such as sociology, economics and research methods. In sum, science-oriented development journalism further invests into training on technical subject matter. Wilbur Schramm once emphasised that the new entrant to the profession of journalism "will need a specialty in which he is substantively trained and able to interpret professional findings for lay leaders."

(Study Question: What would you consider to be your technical subject matter specialty?)

The difference in the attributes of development journalism and conventional journalism has been described in more detail in "A Course Guide in Development Journalism" prepared by the Asian Institute of Journalism in Manila.

Conventional Journalist and Development Journalist Compared in Terms of Attitudes and Behaviour.

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<th>Development Journalist</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Information gathering</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. satisfied with one or two sources of information</td>
<td>a. uses several sources of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. satisfied with regular beats</td>
<td>b. tries or experiences unfamiliar beats</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. uses available materials from wire services, official releases, press releases</td>
<td>c. uses available materials but continues to establish more information links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. if broadcast journalist, usually relies on newspapers as primary source of news</td>
<td>d. broadcast journalist seeks out information from the community</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Information processing (analysis and organisation)</td>
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| a. uses criteria of balance, objectivity, accuracy | a. in addition to traditional criteria, weighs news against criteria of development (access,
3. Information transformation (actual writing and interpretation)

   a. concerned with writing an event but after a week or so, could not find much to write

   b. balance described in terms of neutrality, that is, the story is merely descriptive

   c. uses information to prime, motivate people to adapt to new requirements

   d. motivates people to adjust to new requirements

   e. favourite topic covers purely political and economic reporting

   f. reporter tells us what happened

3. Information transformation (actual writing and interpretation)

   a. concerned with follow-up for policy action and immediate decision

   b. balance described in terms of presenting various sides of a story but prescriptive in favour of development criteria and indicators

   c. provides information on various alternatives to development

   d. enables people to weigh opinions, to be more critical and reflective

   e. from purely economic and political reporting to broader socio-economic change

   f. reporter does not tell us what is happening (the what, and how of the process of events)

4. Information distribution

   a. distribution is hardware oriented (emphasis is on technology used)

   b. communication is one-way or source-oriented

4. Information distribution

   a. equal emphasis on hardware and software

   b. two-way flow of communication and user-oriented