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New Technologies And Economic Changes: Decline Of Journalism Or New Qualities?

By

Gunter Lehrke
The imminent new information age is being intensively discussed, worldwide, by industry, scientists, politicians, the media and the communications industry. More and more are saying it's a revolution, happening right now.

There are very few, though, who have noticed that one aspect is usually left out of this discussion, and that's the future of journalism.

At best you still hear some references to variety of opinion being threatened by media concentration.

But very few publications have made the public aware that journalism is already being eroded - that the image of the profession is changing so drastically that those in it can sometimes hardly recognise themselves there.

For the past few months, important weekly publications in Germany have been addressing these issues somewhat more intensively. One of their authors made this point last September:

"Just how badly journalism is eroding is shown by the discussion about the erosion of journalism. There isn't any."
Journalists - at least those in Europe - usually don't fancy writing about themselves, what they do and how they see their role in their societies. And so it's left to the specialised journals and scholarly publications to worry about these things. Which means that not much passes to the public at large.

But then, is there really anything to worry about?

Isn't it just wonderful that there is no more stopping the free flow of information we all clamoured for, for so long?

Isn't it just wonderful that there is practically no barrier left in the world able to stop television pictures coming in?

That for the price of a personal computer and a modem anyone can become a member of a world brain by the name of Internet, even though it's still somewhat muddled, but working nonetheless?

That very soon we can hear radio music in high fidelity quality in every corner of the globe?

Isn't it just wonderful that we'll soon be able everywhere to talk back to our TV screens and tailor our own programmes?

That the person seeking detailed information will no longer have to buy it at a kiosk or in a book shop in printed form, but pull it on the screen of their PC at work or at home, without also having to buy the ballast they don't want to read?

Isn't it wonderful that pictures of important happenings anywhere race round the globe in fractions of a second and reach people at home?

And isn't it wonderful to be able to choose from 200 television channels and 500 radio channels?

Doesn't it make us happy that enjoyment of media is getting cheaper all the time?

Isn't the world getting more just, in fact more democratic, because of the new media and communication technologies, which are also giving the world's poor access to the information available internationally?

Shouldn't we rejoice about the new industries and jobs all this is creating, also giving national economies in developing countries possibilities of taking part and prospering?

Yes, of course, it is wonderful. And we are allowed to rejoice about it.

But ...
But if one reviews developments in countries with media and communications development at a more advanced level, it's very, very questionable whether these developments lead to more participation and more just orders of society.

One may ask provocatively, whether journalism is still needed if everyone can access unimaginable amounts of information.

When camera operators or superficially trained lay people can gather news.

When news can supposedly be much better presented by show talents.

When advertising copy writers make better-selling periodicals.

Journalism still needed? What for?

We are already seeing worldwide:
infotainment instead of news,
headlines instead of articles,
show instead of analytical and enlightening reporting,
Reality TV instead of news,
entertainment instead of concern.
But we are also getting war, dying, starvation - live.

Pictures and stories race past us without really touching us. The TV viewer constantly has the feeling of being informed, but actually knows less and less.

Newspapers and weeklies are being infected by this speed and providing fast food for slow readers.

Happy new media world - and no more room for good old-fashioned journalism?

I see lots of reasons to be worried about the way things are developing, and reasons to fight to preserve journalism and journalistic quality - political, cultural and economic reasons.

Democrats, media scholars, industrialists and many journalists who have expressed themselves on these issues leave no doubt that something needs to be done to halt the decline of journalism and the loss of its quality.

There are many good, new opportunities for journalism. But they don't drop in your lap. They have to be worked for and sometimes fought for. Every democrat is called on to join that struggle.

(I am not out to spark a democracy debate in this context. What I mean is simply that every modern society has to have people able to think for themselves, to share responsibility and to contribute to developing society.)
On this, another quote from the Germany weekly "Die Zeit". Its editor in chief wrote in December:

"By classical definition, democracy is government by discussion. Its lifeblood is public reasoning, is intelligent discourse. Both require objective information, deep analysis and serious clash of views on directions: enlightenment, not infotainment; publicistic principles, not just marketing strategies; the will to shape opinion, not just the urge to entertain the public. But anyone who merely addresses the citizen as a consumer of politics, rather than the carrier of politics, is putting the axe to the root of democracy."

I add that this is no German concern, but an international one. Any state needs the decision-making citizen.

By the old BBC definition, journalism has the task to inform and enlighten, has the task to make happenings transparent. And those functions make it indispensable to development.

Any society wanting to be a player in the international political and economic concert cannot do without the individual able to think for himself or herself and able to take part in decision-making. In short, the citizen confident that he or she has a role to play and the right to play it.

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation I represent, cooperating worldwide with governments, with organised sectors of the civil society, with scholars and the media in creating and preserving democratic structures, regards the journalistic side of media promotion as an integral part of its work.

Under the premises of democratic self-determination, social justice and solidarity, international communication, understanding between nations and securing peace, we want

- journalistic practice to reflect pluralism and focus on the concerns of civil societies;
- state and media to accept the internationally recognised ethical foundations of journalism;
- foundations of freedom and legality to be put in place for journalistic work at national level;
- training opportunities to be provided for professional journalism;
- international media cooperations to come about through which independent and pluralistic media are strengthened at national level;
- the societal importance that is its due to be given to the journalistic side of the media in economic and technological development;
developing countries to be given equal access to the international free flow of information and the technical and professional resources to be able to make their own contributions to it;

- journalistic media to be aware of their legal possibilities and market opportunities.

That's what we at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation want, and it's what we try to support within our limited means - in cooperation with partner institutions in the Southern hemisphere and for the benefit of less developed countries.

Our worry about qualified journalistic work continuing is due first and foremost to there being the danger that an institution is losing strength and significance which on the citizen's behalf and in his and her interest asks questions, critical questions, and draws citizen's and politician's attention to problems and issues needing to be addressed. An institution which enlightens people and which explains complex concerns to them.

In short: we could lose one of the "checks and balances" as the Americans call it, without which, being what we are, we could live together peacefully and justly in modern industrial society.

Let me now restore a direct connection to what this conference is about.

There are areas in which the technical progress which is the focus here is opening up new opportunities and posing new challenges to journalism. For people to see them and respond to them, awareness has to be created and action taken.

First of all, there is the very great chance of journalistic work on issues now impacting on everyone around the world. Issues like destruction of the environment, ethnic and religious conflicts, violations of human rights, injustices in international trade, food deficits, overpopulation and any number of others.

Using the technologies already available, journalists can exchange information globally and become more effective.

For example: the IPS Third World News Agency, recognising this, at the beginning of this year drew up an action plan aimed at making the journalists affiliated with it absolutely mobile and, what's more, saving a lot of money in the process.
The second great chance for journalism lies in local and regional coverage. Not only are new newspapers being launched in this area all the time, but radio and television are going to play an immense part. And all that at further dropping costs.

It's here that the competition between the media is going to be greatest. And it's here that qualified journalism has its greatest chances. Chances of economic success, too.

It's at this level that order policies will have to come into play. Licences will need to be issued. Broadcasting and press laws will need to be made. The aim will have to be a pluralistic media landscape.

At this level it will pay every media entrepreneur to "buy in" good journalists and himself or herself to invest in basic and follow-on journalist training. Big media tycoons have already recognised that.

I repeat, especially at local and regional levels there will always be demand for journalism and journalism will always blaze its trail to meet that demand. Sometimes the drive won't even come from journalists but from initiatives of civil society. Rural newspapers, community radio and community TV are examples.

There's need for urgent political action at national level. There is much to gain. Action is needed to maintain and strengthen national journalistic units so as not to be steamrollered by trans-national media. National cultivation of culture and national economic development are concerns and obligations of journalistic work.

Digitisation will make it possible for us to use the media increasingly interactively. That, too, means new challenges and new opportunities for journalism in a third area. Especially for the individual journalist.

If the media user has the option of no longer buying journalistic products in a package, but is able to select, he or she will prefer certain authors and demand "trade name" products. Not just print products, but products from the "electronic kiosk" as well. The journalist gets new chances of developing into a specialist writer or political author. A chance, and by no means an unimportant one, of becoming popular.

I have named three major areas which have become or are becoming possible mainly because of new technologies and ever cheaper equipment. It's not self-evident that these opportunities will be used - craft-wise, contentually, qualitatively and politically.

What's needed more than anything else at this point, and needed very soon if not sooner, are massive new efforts at journalistic training, basic and advanced.

I am absolutely convinced that these investments will also pay off economically, and pretty soon at that. If we don't want to leave the field altogether to Time Warner, Mr. Murdoch and their kind, we have to call loudly, incessantly, tirelessly for national and international action. In a word: to get on the nerves of the decision-makers.
Every functioning modern state needs functioning media and highly qualified journalism, for political and economic reasons. Media pluralism and the competition between many media units that goes with it comprises a highly attractive economic factor.

Deregulation and privatisation in broadcasting and telecommunications are spawning pluralistic media structures. New communication technologies are newly driving social development even in poor countries.

Whether the growing multiplicity will also add to journalistic multiplicity and journalistic quality, and through that is used meaningfully for social advancement, is a political decision that every country has to take for itself. And: it demands political action.

Since industry and trade, tuning their pitch to target groups ever more finely, are influencing the medium and its contents, one probably has to call on those responsible for broadcasting to keep advertising out of journalistic products. In the periodicals field they already use the rule of thumb - at least in my country - that those who are not worth advertising for, are not worth writing for. If public broadcasting wants to keep its societal task and not merely to be transponder of advertising messages, it must allow itself to keep advertising out of journalistic product.

I am certain that the scope for political and organisational action in these fields is even greater in developing countries than, say, in central Europa.

We in Germany are now seeing the electronic media, especially television, shedding more and more of their journalistic function and increasingly becoming entertainment media. In developing countries, where illiteracy is widespread and education systems are still underdeveloped, one must not allow such a trend to happen. In these countries, radio and television have a crucial role, an indispensable role, to promote social development and provide information and education.

In summary, I would like to note that journalism and journalistic media are not in danger of dying, but are changing in two directions. The one direction is towards entertainment. And that means the media are more and more shirking their responsibility of informing and enlightening people. It's not something we can prevent.

On the other hand, journalism has big, new opportunities to play a major development-promoting and socio-economic role and overall to become more effective. It's this we need to draw attention to and to foster.

The trend towards entertainment can be left to market mechanisms. But higher qualification of journalists is not likely to be driven by the market alone. For that, efforts by people and institutions are needed, people and institutions who take the positive development of human society seriously.
I would like you to perceive what I am saying as a call not to forget the role of journalism in the debate about new economic and technological developments in the communication sector.

The free flow of pictures and words round the globe is fine. The availability of unimaginable amounts of information in data banks and networks worldwide is fine. Many radio and TV channels is fine. But all that doesn’t replace journalism that evaluates critically, that selects and processes for its public and that on the public’s behalf asks the questions without which information is useless.

And as a PS I would like to address those strongly involved in media development in Asia.

In connection with the growing variety of media units and possibilities of media usage I am also thinking of our Japanese friends. Japan earns a vast amount of money selling media equipment and because of that is naturally interested in as many media units as possible coming into being. Japan is a big donor of development aid.

Dear friends from Japan, help financially weak countries to improve their chances to develop good journalism. The humble institution I speak for is prepared to do something together with you and this is already happening in some fields. Together with the Hoso-Bunka Foundation we have identified shared objectives and cooperated in the training sector.

Let’s keep working together to generate good journalism, to preserve it and to improve it.

Thank you.