<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Rethinking development journalism: the promise and the challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Anita Anand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2937">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2937</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rights</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rethinking Development Journalism:
The Promise And The Challenge

By

Anita Anand
Rethinking Development Journalism: The Promise and the Challenge

Development

To begin to address development journalism, a good place to start is by defining developments. Words means different things to different people. And 'development' is no exception.

In this context development will mean change - social, political and economic - that is just, sustainable and ensures the participation of all class, race and gender groups.

Planned development has been going on for a long time. For most countries of the South, the history is a little shorter - approximately five decades. The United Nations, which is the one international organisation devoted to development issues, coined the term 'decades of development' and planned the work of this period accordingly. Nation states individually and collectively, set targets for themselves -- in terms of social, political and economic policies.

Development work is based on development theories or paradigms. These paradigms are influenced by value systems - the two basic ones dominated by capitalist and marxist thinking. The geopolitical developments of the last five years or so have been a period in which the predominantly Marxist nation states have moved towards a capitalist form of development.

Over the last few decades, both the capitalist and Marxist models of thinking and development have come in for some criticism, as not being just, equitable or sustainable. Alternative development models have been suggested and come into being, slowly evolving the way people have perceived and practiced development. Among the more forceful movements have been those focusing on women, the environment, and indigenous people.

While development, as used by the United Nations and development organisations refers usually to planned change, all change is not and cannot be planned. Since people and societies are evolutionary, some change is bound to be unplanned. This also falls into the category of development.

Coverage of events and processes of change has always made for interesting copy, but its placement in daily mainstream news and views has been difficult. Newspapers and electronic media have been reluctant to make space for such coverage. In many countries of the South, news media is dominated by reports of government
activity, Ministers, stars, and events that seem somewhat insignificant to the lives of most people. The topics, style and location of subjects in media is of low quality.

Development Journalism

Development journalism would then be reporting on development. But social, political and economic processes cover just about everything. Would development journalism then, not be that? In a sense yes. Whatever happening in society is development, and therefore, could qualify as news.

Development reporting is just a little more challenging than straight news reporting in that it requires more research, thought, and investigation. Often what has passed for development reporting is superficial or a critical overview of what is happening in development - a project, a dam or a village.

Most news media do an overkill on 'bad news' stories and this seems to true of development stories. While all that happens in development is not always good news, there seems to be an overwhelming trend towards the 'bad news'. This probably has something to do with the fact that development is often equated with a problem and unless there is a problem to be reported, journalists feel they are not doing justice to the issue.

The need to look for the good news and events in development reporting is essential. People tend to tire of the disasters, violence and the negative. So much so, that the BBC in UK has started a section at the end of their news which says 'and now the good news'. This would entail the positive and forward looking action that individuals and organisations are taking in making social change. It empowers the micro level and serves as a source of information and, informs public policy.

Development journalism is informed by policy and in turn informs policy. Since much of change is inevitably a result of some development policy, the writing as such is informed by policy. The writing in turn, informs policy. Good development journalism must focus on how development policy can be informed by building a constituency among policy makers. Recognising that policy is also made by individuals citizens and organisations, these too can serve as inputs for decision making.

The crux of development is process - the process of change. Development journalism then becomes reporting on processes. This often suggests that such reporting is not considered newsworthy, but a news peg should be sought and used to make the development more 'news' oriented. Journalists interested in development reporting often lament that their editors do not consider their writing important enough to give them space in the papers. A good way to counteract this is to ensure that the stories have news angles and can be used in non-feature slots.
Most development journalism tends to fall under the 'soft' category of reporting. This gives it lower status in the news media. Many journalists feel that despite their interest in the important social, political and economic issues, they are almost second class citizens in the world of 'hard' news reporting. And, since more and more professionals in the field of journalism and development reporting are women, they are particularly affected by this discrimination and double standard in media.

Under the circumstances, a theory and practice, as well as a strategy to merge the soft and hard of news reporting is needed to give a news orientation to development reporting, while maintaining the human interest angle of the stories.

Writing Development Stories

What then makes for a development story? Projects (income generation), processes (consciousness raising through dance and drama), events (the opening of a health centre, a local election), and people and organisations (profiles).

For development stories to be relevant for news media, they must have a news peg. For example a story on AIDS is a story on AIDS unless something new or different has happened for it to become topical, and therefore useable in media. If there is an AIDS conference, a breakthrough in a cure, or an element that moves the AIDS debate and concern along, then it is worth writing about.

In short the how, when, where, why in straight news reporting still need to kept in mind in formatting development stories for news media, and in any good writing.

Development stories usually focus on a problem. And while there is room for problem or 'bad news' stories, and media does use them (an sometimes even likes them!), a well thought out and focused story on the positive and negative aspects of a development situation is probably better in the long (and short) run.

Writing development stories is probably no different than writing other stories - in terms of an idea, angle, focus, report, research, the statistics, internal consistency, and self editing.

Colour, texture, feeling, context, description are also essentials of good writing along with analyses, statistics and research.

Where do development journalists gets their ideas from? From keeping a ear to the ground - listening to what people from a variety of backgrounds are saying about life, and then putting this in a broader context. Often, writing focusses on just a very
individual situation (micro). Or a macro situation (structural adjustment policy). Bringing the micro and macro situation together is important in development stories as they two are intrinsically connected and influence each other.

Objectivity and balance is essential. Even if the writer has a certain view of what they are writing about, other and opposite views need to be brought in, to make the writing credible.

Other news media often serve as story ideas. A small report can trigger an idea and can be followed up. For example, a small news report filed by a Reuter correspondent in Kenya triggered an idea for the Women’s Feature Service to commission an in-depth feature on a mass rape in that country. Similarly, a UN agency organising a peasant women’s meeting in Pakistan triggered an idea for story as well.

Areas and subjects in and of themselves should not often serve as ideas. Heath, education, women, tribals, children are not ideas, but large areas and subjects. If this approach is used it tends to produce an essay.

Timeliness is important. While it could be argued that process stories need not conform to a time line, they need to be, to get them into prime slots. Otherwise they will be considered 'soft' stories, relegated to the feature sections and the end of the papers.

Other aspects of writing development stories have been developed in various training manuals. The Women’s Feature Service has a style manual on development journalism, which covers these and other points with examples, which could be useful to the participants.

Editorial and Persuasive Writing

The function of editorials and persuasive writing is to get people to think and be convinced about issues. For this, a variety of readership needs have to be catered to. The most essential aspect of an editorial is that it should be thought-provoking. Arguments on a subject or a position need to be presented strongly, clearly and simply.

In the development context, ideas need to be introduced and developed, and for this a constituency has to be built. In many Asian countries, there are various kinds of government (democratic-autocratic), and public opinion has to be built by and through the media. This requires persuasive writing.
How is this best done? The first element is by choosing a compelling topic that will appeal to people. My mind often gets triggered by a speech, a quote - something provocative. I then think about what has made me react (usually strongly) by working on the positive or negative reaction I have to the comment. I work through the argument and ideas in my head, jot them down and then sift them out. I make the language simple and write from the gut. I make sure that I am not offending the person or their intention in saying what they did. I simply present my view, as persuasively as I can.

The language is tight and I do not write everything that comes to my mind on the topic, or even everything I would like to write. Brevity is essential.