Writing Development Stories

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Editorial Management for Women Journalists
Saturday, May 27, 0900-1030
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Virgilio has explained what Development Journalism means and what a development journalism story is. I agree with most of this, especially when he says it adheres to the same standards of fairness, accuracy, balance and journalism ethics as conventional journalism. That means it is in essence, no different from conventional journalism, if even that can be isolated or defined.

This means that writing a development journalism story should be no different from writing any worthwhile "conventional" journalism story, whether it is news or a feature. Yet to many people it is still different.

Before we start on how I believe you should go about writing development stories, some warnings about how the term Development Journalism has been used and abused. Some of you may already know.

The term was invented to describe a type of journalism which would help developing countries develop. Nothing wrong with that. The problems came when politicians, and not always elected ones, decided to make their own decisions on what was a development story and what was not. The journalists were deprived of their right to make decisions based on newsworthiness and obliged to write what a one-party or military government, too often a one-person dictatorship, decided was in the nation's interest. Too often it was not. It was journalism for the preservation of the government rather than the betterment of the nation.

This is what gave Development Journalism a bad name in the Western World. It is true that many of the critical journalists in the West saw only what they wanted to see and it was all bad. They too often overlooked the efforts of journalists in many countries to continue to make sure their journalism was good journalism as well as development journalism. The two are not exclusive. It is quite possible to be both.

The situation has changed since the collapse of most of the former one-party or dictatorial governments. They have gone from Europe, with the exception of Albania, though there is no guarantee some will not return if the capitalist-inspired multiparty system does not soon work more equitably. They have almost gone from black Africa, where Development Journalism was at its worst. And there are few such governments left in Asia, not that there were many in the first place. Asian governments, even the one-party ones, have had a less political approach to Development Journalism than elsewhere, though certainly not allowing the freedom journalists would like.

So this is the point at which we start to look at how to gather information and write a Development Journalism story. First, let's look at Development Journalism's acceptable rules:

1.) The story must stress the positive, not the negative.

2.) The story must encourage development not discourage it.

3.) The story must be in the national interest or the people's interests (the two are not necessarily the same thing in the short term).

Stressing the positive seems to fly in the face of what the West these days sees as economically successful journalism. Pick up most popular Western newspapers, especially those with massive circulation, and you find an emphasis on the negative. The news is all confrontation, dischord, violence and crime. Plenty of space is given to entertainment -- filmstars, sports and leisure persuits -- but the part of the paper which is called news is usually bad news.

This is allegedly because good news is not saleable news. People allegedly want to know what is going wrong, not what is going right. They want to know of disasters and scandals, not that no planes crashed today and that there were no nuclear holocausts. They don't wish to be told how well their politicians are doing. They don't trust politicians much, and in recent history who can blame them. So they want to know about corruption and scandals involving politicians and business leaders. Not a very constructive attitude for a society, though perhaps an understandable one.

It need not be so. Virgilio stresses Development Journalism covers subjects conventional journalism overlooks. He cites such things as arcane scientific discoveries which hold little interest for conventional journalists. If this is so we should be asking ourselves why, since if it good Development Journalism it should also be good conventional journalism. He also stresses that Development Journalism is supposed not only to inform but also to inspire readers to action. So does good journalism. So why is there a distinction?

Let's look at these supposed differences one at a time.

Subject matter:

Whether an arcane scientific discovery is newsworthy or not -- or any other subject that might be covered as Development Journalism but not as conventional journalism -- depends first on the ability of journalist writing the story to make it truly newsworthy, and secondly on the interest level of the audience in wanting to know about such subjects.

In our sub-editing session we already said it is the sub's job to help reporters make their stories as interesting, informative and clear as possible, and then to sell them to the public through good page make-up and display. The same applies in handling Development Journalism stories.

If we accept that the a journalist's concept of the nature of news is information that people want or need to know, then it follows that the measure of a good journalist is that he or she can make "need-to-know" subjects interesting enough for people to want

to read them. They will always read the "want-to-know" subjects, though these are seldom in the Development Journalism area.

And why are they not? Because most reports about arcane scientific discoveries, dam building, agricultural improvement or increased production are so dully written that they interest only those directly involved. So these Development Journalism stories are preaching to the converted. It doesn't matter that they are of significant social or national importance, if they are not written interestingly no one will read them.

So the first problem in Development Journalism, if it is to succeed in its laudable aim of aiding development, is to get enough facts to make the story truly newsworthy. Then it will be read.

What do we, as journalists, mean by newsworthy. Can the newsworthiness of a report be measured, to know whether readers will want to read it or not. I think it can, and because it may help you to make the same calculation, I digress for a moment to explain.

For my doctoral research I made a world-wide inquiry to find out what are the internationally accepted criteria of newsworthiness, in other words "What makes news news?" Why is it that some information is just information and some is news, and are the reasons the same everywhere. The answers, from nearly 3000 questionnaires to journalists, who responded from 67 countries, are that there are three essential elements which allow information to become news and six truly international criteria -- news values if you like -- which can be used to assess the level of newsworthiness of that information. Most importantly, they are the same everywhere. The Big Six, as I have termed them, are supported everywhere regardless of culture, politics, religion, economics, language, history and even colonialism and imperialism. There are other criteria as well, but they have only local or regional support and not international support.

My research findings show that these Big Six news values, and the three basic elements which must accompany them, are just as valid in Southeast Asia as anywhere else, are also just as valid for Development Journalism as for the conventional kind. Judge for yourself.

A simple explanation will make this more understandable. Information: I rose at 6:30 this morning, showered and breakfasted on toast, eggs and coffee. Is this information? Yes. Is it news? No. Why?

To be able to become news, information needs three basic elements to be present. They are:

Interest: which means the information must be of interest to a large number of people.

Timeliness: which means the information must be new or newly made known or released at a time which is relevant to receivers.

Clarity: which means that the information must be in a form which all receivers will clearly understand.

Refer to the breakfast example. It was clear enough. No one will fail to understand it. It might meet the Timeliness requirements, according to when it was made known. But it held no interest for anyone other than me. Two out of three of the basic elements is not enough. All three must be present for information to be able to become possible news.

After this come The Big Six which determine what level of news-worthiness there is in the information. In descending order of their level of international support, those Big Six are:

SIGNIFICANCE: which is measured by the number of people who are or will be affected by the content of the report. The more people affected, the greater the Significance. This is the most strongly supported of the six.

PROXIMITY: which means closeness, but not only geographically. There are also proximities of culture, language, economics, history and many other links. This is why ASEAN members like to read about each other more than about other countries, but Singaporeans have stronger emotional and language links with China than Malaysia or Indonesia and why Filipinos still feel an association and interest with the United States. Proximity was second, only fractionally ahead of

CONFLICT: which means any conflict, not only violent ones. It covers everything from a difference of opinion (in law, politics, scientific theories, any form of competition) to physical conflict (sport is an example) to violence (crime, war is the supreme example).

HUMAN INTEREST: which is difficult to define, but in general means reports which relate the activities of ordinary people. Its popularity is based on the universal human characteristic that people like to read about other people, not just celebrities and the prominent. This is often the journalism which stirs emotion in readers.

NOVELTY: can also be called the strange, odd-ball, bizarre, or "Gee-Whiz Journalism". This is where the Man-bites-dog item fits, or anything else which is reported because it is rare or unusual or not done before.

PROMINENCE: applies to items which are news because of who did it or said it rather than what they said or did. This accounts for the space given to Royalty, to entertainment stars and to sporting celebrities. What they do or say is seldom of interest in its own right.

All these apply just as much to development journalism as to conventional journalism, or any form of journalism. They can be seen to apply even in the world's most scandalous tabloids -- the papers which have given the word "tabloid" a pejorative meaning. To write their headlines and sell their newspapers they just reverse the list,

putting Prominence, Novelty and Human Interest ahead of the others. It is still the same six, though it may be intensified by regional flavours of Proximity and Conflict.

If Development Journalism is to be worthwhile journalism -- and it is a waste of time writing it if it is not -- then it must meet these same newsworthiness requirements. They do not conflict in any way with the basic principles of Development Journalism, though they conflict with some of what has become its sadder practices.

For instance, how do the Big Six relate to Development Journalism's "action orientation"? DJ is supposed to do more than inform people. It is supposed to inspire them to action. There are many news reports which already do this, perhaps not deliberately but often too well, by moving mobs to violent vengeance or by raising or lowering the public's support for an existing point of view, policy or situation. This was not the journalist's nor the newspaper's intention, though both must have been aware of the possible reaction to their accurate and factual reporting. It is certainly not Development Journalism.

Good conventional journalism also duplicates the specific aim of Development Journalism in exploring the socio-economic and political backgrounds to stories, and to detail the "why" or "whys" of the story by exposing the underlying causes and problems. Conventional journalism does not do this often enough, mainly because truly investigative journalism has become too expensive. Development Journalism is supposed to suggest possible solutions and even the means to achieve those solutions. Only in this very last aspect does Development Journalism go beyond the conventional.

Conventional journalism tells people what and why. If it is good journalism it gives complete and understandable backgrounds so the readers can assess the importance of the story to themselves, their region or their nation. It can suggest a range of solutions, but it will be careful not to take a political stance in supporting one approach over another. I can't say this impartiality always happens, because it doesn't. Newspapers and the journalists who work for them too often lapse into pushing their own opinions on what should happen in politics and government, especially in developmental projects, since they usually cost such vast sums of money.

Another of the Development Journalism basic guidelines says journalists should explore how every development story will affect the man in the street or on the land -- the ordinary man. This is also part of conventional journalism when it is done properly. Good journalism requires that you make the story as relevant as possible to your readers -- to the ordinary person.

The suggestion that Development Journalism is represented by the word HELPS is great acronym construction but not necessarily very helpful. It stands for Humanize, Energize, Localize, Personalize and Simplify. They are all part of good conventional journalism. Humanizing and Personalizing are both parts of Human Interest reporting. Localizing is no more than using the news-worthiness that exists in Proximity. Simplifying should need no explanation, since it is an obligatory part of all journalism. Which leaves only Energize -- a suggestion that journalism should be a partisan activity, since whom do we energize and why?

All this sounds as if Development Journalism is unnecessary and a waste of time, but this is not true. It was devised to help journalists in the Third World understand how they could best help achieve development in their own developing countries and to help counter the then-deficient reporting of the Third World by the developed world's international news agencies. Despite the admirable aims of the inventors of Development Journalism -- if such a thing is invented -- the design concealed the seeds of its own eventual destruction.

It was the instruction to Energize the audience that gave politicians the excuse to intervene in the media and the news agencies. In too many cases they accused the journalists of not doing their job properly because they did not always support what the government of the day considered to be "development". Worse still the political masters re-invented the word "responsible" to mean a press which was responsible only to the masters of the day.

This meant Development Journalism found no practical support in the so-called Free-Press World. Thinking journalists agreed that many of the criticisms of the reporting of the Third World by the West and by Western agencies were correct. Since the agitation for a New World Information Order reached its heighth the agencies have made determined efforts to report the Third World more completely and in a more balanced manner, but there has not been a huge change in the West's coverage of the rest of the world.

There is one, straightforward reason why this is so. Readers read only those stories in which they are interested and they are not interested in development stories which do not directly affect them, their families or their future. In other words they won't bother to read reports which have no Consequence for them. This is equally true of Third World readers. They are interested in reports, whether they are development stories or anything else, which originate in their own country or their own region, but rarely from elsewhere.

Even though many of them know this only too well, well-meaning editors, under instructions or otherwise, have continued to publish Development Journalism reports, which are now delivered by the wire services, and found that they have wasted their paper's time and space. Without Consequence, or others of the Big Six news values, such reports are not news, anywhere. It is doubtful if they are information which can be considered as newsworthy, since most have no Timeliness and other than where they originated they have low reader interest. In spite of this, Development Journalism still exists, is still a laudable aim and is still worth pursuing. But the journalists involved must recognise it for what it is -- a rare and admirable form of conventional journalism and probably the most difficult form of reporting to complete with success.

The major hurdle is that the reporter has to make what is usually a dull subject, even a boring one, so interesting that people will want to read it. It can and has been done, but it demands the very highest of journalism skills.

For the purpose of this example let us assume that the development story to be written occurs locally and will be written for a local newspaper. Using the Big Six criteria, it has Consequence, Proximity, perhaps Conflict (since someone may well disagree), and an as yet unknown amount of Human Interest, Novelty or Prominence. It certainly has newsworthiness on its side.

The reporter first has to get all the facts, which will vary with the type of story. Since there are always at least two sides to every story, including development ones, getting all the facts may not be easy.

The problem is that the initiators of what they call "developments" all too often have a financial or political stake in their successful outcome. They are then not anxious to have their projects examined too closely, by journalists or anyone else. So facts other than supporting ones may be hard to gather and even harder to publish. Prejudiced promoters quickly label criticism, especially from a relevant expert or a political opponent, as "negative" reporting.

Not only this, but powerful promotors of development projects or advocates of development issues are often in a position to seek vengeance on journalists who are determined to tell the whole story by making sure that in future they are denied access to information from any or all the sources the promoters can influence. They have even influenced editors to get rid of reporters who are too keen to expose doubtful development deals.

This can apply equally outside the area of development journalism. Promoters of any kind do not like journalists who ask questions which have awkward answers. This is one of the ways in which governments and political parties in power took over the press (they already had the broadcasting under control) in too many Third World countries, especially in Africa.

The problem with Development Journalism in almost all the African developing counties is not that it wasn't there. There were many good and brave journalists who tried, and still try in difficult circumstances, to tell the whole story. But there were not enough of them and there was too much political control, so the Development Journalism just wasn't good enough. Because the politicians usurped the journalists' right to decide what was news and to present it honestly, development journalism became sycophantic journalism, publishing only what the government wanted published.

Martin Ochs, a researcher and journalism academic at the American University in Cairo, reported in his 1986 doctoral research book *The African Press* that in the whole continent (except South Africa) only four newspapers survived to the mid-'80s with bigger circulations than they had before independence. They were the only ones which governments or political parties had failed to dominate, so they retained credibility as purveyors of news rather than propaganda. The others relied on government subsidies to prop up failing circulations, or they had failed, some of them long since. Africa has fewer newspapers today than it had before independence and the main reason is that the politicians hi-jacked Development Journalism as part of their program to control the media.

One of the side effects of political intervention in the news business is still evident around the world, and not only in those countries where control was absolute rather than subtle. It is what is derisively referred to as "protocol journalism". By any measurement of newsworthiness, and certainly by the Big Six, protocol reports are rarely news and should seldom be published.

What do we mean by "protocol journalism"? Kenya is perhaps the most extreme example. Every news bulletin on government-controlled radio and television begins with precisely the same words: "The President, His Excellency Daniel Arap Moy, today ..." And if President Moy did not do anything today, then the headline will be what he will do tomorrow, or next Monday.

More frequently, and in Asia as well as in Africa, protocol journalism shows in the long television coverage of the visit a minor cabinet minister from some overseas country, meeting and shaking hands with a dozen or more local dignitaries. It is shown out of political protocol respect for the visitors, not out of any sense of interest or newsworthiness shown by the viewers. And it need not be visitors. Government activities are over-reported, especially on radio and television, since they are usually under closer government control than the press. But it shows in the press as well.

The damaging part of this is that the public knows what is going on and loses its respect for the journalists involved and grants little credibility to the news which is so obviously under strong official influence. The American publishers Freedom House cited this aspect of government influence or control when earlier this month it downgraded Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia from countries with an almost free press to countries with a controlled press. The accuracy of Freedom House assessments has been questioned in the past and will probably be questioned in the future, but only last week it was reinforced by the same criticism from the prestigious International Press Institute (IPI).

So where does this leave Development Journalism today? In practice, it is probably in a much healthier state than it has ever been, since there are more competent journalists willing to spend the time and energy to do the job properly, and fewer governments determined to control what is published.

The surprising aspect is that the Western World, which has for so long scorned the very name "Development Journalism" has come to realise that it needs some of the same tonic itself. In the West, where news is equated with bad news, people think or say "Why should I watch or read the news? It's always bad." According to Western theories, reports of things going wrong are more newsworthy than reports of things going right, but the one-sidedness of it has become far too obvious. Newspaper editors and those who control broadcasting news services are at last making effors to balance the bad with a bit of good news, and the best good news with any Consequence is Development news.

So Development Journalism is returning to the West, but not under that name. It is still too early for the West to admit that what it scorned so derisively was right all the time, even though more in its theory than its practice. It is back under the name of good

journalism, usually a type of investigative journalism, which explains what is to happen and why. But to be good journalism and to earn the public respect such reporting deserves it must always tell the whole story -- both sides -- whether the promoters like it or not.