Old wine in a new bottle: Public versus developmental journalism in the US

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This paper argues that the emerging concept of public journalism in the United States is very similar to the concept of developmental journalism that the West denounced during the debate on the New World Information and Communication Order. Many of the ideas of the MacBride Commission (1980) have sneaked into the writings of those who advocate public journalism to rejuvenate American journalism that has failed to excite the readers. Scholars are now questioning the validity of the conventional news values and their relevance to changing consumer needs.

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Since the late 1980s, a public journalism movement in the United States has attempted to explain the faltering confidence in the mass media in terms of the media’s failure to connect the public with participatory democracy because of a dogged adherence to detachment. The movement has, inter alia, sought a redefinition of news values, questioned the value of objectivity and the ethics relating to it, pushed for greater involvement of journalists as active participants in the community, called on journalism to truly reflect the multicultural composition of the American society, and suggested that journalism should place itself within the discipline of communication. While the movement has the appearance of an intra-national development, the debate relating to it has clear international and global implications.

The background relating to the emergence of this movement pertains partly to the dwindling per capita circulation of daily newspapers. While the US population rose 82.1 percent from 1946 to 1993, the country’s daily newspaper circulation rose a mere 17.4 percent. Circulation has dropped from 38.2 copies per 100 people in 1946 to 23.3 in 1993 (Gunaratne 1996). The Yankelovich Monitor survey reported that between 1988 and 1993 people’s
confidence in television news dropped from 55 percent to 25 percent; in newspaper news from 50 to 20; and in magazine news from 38 to 12 (Merritt 1995a: xv). Commenting on this phenomenon, Merritt (1995a: 5) posits:

• Journalism in all its forms ignores its obligations to effective public life.
• That failure has been a major contributor to the resultant malaise in public life.
• Journalism should be, and can be, a primary force in the revitalization of public life. However, fundamental cultural and generational change in the profession is necessary for that to occur.

The public journalism movement generally associates itself with a wider movement in several walks of life to address the central question of what makes democracy work or fail. That wider movement mirrors the writings of Benjamin Barber (1984), the Harwood Group (1993), David Mathews (1994), Robert Putnam (1993) and others. However, the most influential among journalists was apparently the work of Daniel Yankelovich (1991), who shows "how insights into the way people make decisions can be turned into concrete newsroom goals for making those decisions easier" (Charity 1995: 3-4). Yankelovich outlines three steps that the public has to pass through to travel from mass opinion to public judgment (Charity 1995: 4-9):

• Consciousness raising: the stage in which the public learns about an issue and becomes aware of its existence and meaning. Journalists can help the public if they choose more judiciously where to focus public attention and presented them in user-friendly forms.
• Working through: the stage when people must abandon the passive-receptive mode (of the consciousness-raising stage) and get actively engaged and involved. Journalists can improve the chances of keeping the process on track by reducing issues to choices, plumbing to core values, spelling out the costs and consequences of each choice, bridging the expert-public gap, facilitating deliberation and promoting civility.
• Resolution: the stage that shows the successful end of "working through." Journalists can shore up people's motivation by prodding action on the public's choice.

The proponents of public journalism, however, have failed to connect their evolving concept to development journalism as
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espoused during the NWICO debates. Anglo-American interests have succeeded in associating developmental journalism with "government-say-so journalism" that violated the US constitution's First Amendment virtues. Under such hostility, the proponents of public journalism may have overlooked discussing the connections between public and developmental journalism.

This article will sort out the main features of the two concepts, both of which have no fixed definitions, to show that they have much in common though their practice may reflect cultural variations. Public journalism, as some proponents agree, is not a radical new idea. It is old wine in a new bottle.

Public Journalism

Scholars have used the terms public journalism, civic journalism and community journalism interchangeably. Lauterer (1995:184) says: "Call it whatever you will, community journalism, public journalism, relentlessly local coverage, it's not a new idea". He says that community journalism satisfies a basic human craving: "the affirmation of the sense of community, a positive and intimate reflection of the sense of place, a stroke for our usness, our extended family-ness and our profound and interlocking connectedness" (p. 9).

Weichelt (1995) says that public journalism has two goals: to make news organizations listen more closely to their audiences; and to make them play more active roles in their communities. Parisi (1995) says that public journalism advances understanding of news as a coherent narrative of the world that serves certain interests, rather than as a mirror image of truth; and he suggests that public journalism can best develop by acknowledging more public news narratives as its center, drawing on the insights of media criticism and addressing creatively the limitations of objectivity as a narrative framework for serving the public interest.

Rosen, an early promoter of the concept, says that "public journalism worries about becoming properly attached" and "getting the connections right" unlike traditional journalism that values detachment. While traditional journalism seeks to inform and act as a watchdog over government, public journalism "tries to strengthen the community's capacity to recognize itself, to converse well, and make choices. The guiding image behind public journalism is "a vision of the well-connected community, where everything that should connect does connect ... where everyone who should be talking is, in fact, talking" (quoted in Charity 1995: 159).
Rosen (1992:9) asserts that the terms "objectivity," "fairness," "balance" and "accuracy" have left journalists bereft of any philosophy of action; and that journalists should present themselves as advocates for the kind of serious talk a mature polity requires (p. 24). The identifying features of public journalism include: a willingness to break with old routines; a desire to "reconnect" with citizens and their true concerns; an emphasis on serious discussion as the primary activity in democratic politics; and a focus on citizens as actors within, rather than spectators to, the public drama (p.376).

Despite the ongoing debate on public journalism since the beginning of this decade, no standard definition of the concept has emerged. Merritt (1995a:p.114) says that "for any one editor or institution to define public journalism concretely would also mean limiting the possibilities."

Merritt (1995b:127) clarifies: "Public journalism seeks to define and learn a different set of reflexes, one that has a purpose beyond telling the news. It seeks to break away from the concept of One Journalism, with its idea that the rules and conventions of the profession are pervasive and inflexible". He says that public journalism "seeks to define another set of five Ws and H... public life, according to the values of public journalism, requires shared information and shared deliberation; people participate in answering democracy's fundamental question of "What shall we do?" (p.131).

Charity (1995:151) says that public journalism arose out of the conviction that something essential was lacking in American life right now: rational talk, community-based approaches, participatory discussions, communal glue, a proper emphasis on activity; and, unlike "most forms of self-styled newer, better journalism," public journalism provided what economists would call added value: the ability to help the audience conduct an ongoing conversation in depth (pp.157-158).

Public journalism, he says, "is nothing more than the conviction that journalism's business is about making citizenship work" (p. 9). Three interlocking metaphors describe who public journalists are: they are "experts in public life," civic capitalists" and "full-time citizens"; they are not "radicals departing from the canons of their profession, but traditionalists attempting a return to first principles" (pp 11-12).

Developmental journalism has its roots in development communication, which goes back to the work of agricultural
extension carried out by large land-grant state universities in the United States (Stevenson 1994: 232).

Eventually, it developed into a coherent doctrine, and a 1964 seminar convened by the East West Center in Honolulu formalized the concept (Jayaweera and Amunugama, 1987). Journalists became a part of the picture simply because of their crucial role in communication. The term "developmental journalism" goes back to the Philippines in the 1960s (Stevenson 1994: 239). The Thomson Foundation sponsored a course called The Economic Writers' Training Course, Aug. 14 to Sept. 5, 1968, when the seminar chairman Alan Chalkley coined the term "developmental journalist."

Chalkley (1968) explained that a journalist's main task was to inform and give his or readers the facts. His or her secondary task was to interpret, to put the facts in their framework and, where possible, to draw conclusions. Chalkley said that these were the tasks of political journalists, as well as of crime reporters, society-page writers, human story writers and every other journalist. The development journalist,

Chalkley said, had a third task, a positive one that one might call "promotion": not only to give the facts of economic life and to interpret those facts, but also to promote them and bring them home to the readers. "You must get your readers to realize how serious the development problem is, to think about the problem, to open their eyes to the possible solutions -- to punch that hole in the vicious circle," Chalkley said giving his initial definition of developmental journalism. No concrete definition of the concept has emerged since then although scholars and practitioners have presented their different visions.

Chalkley (1968) also pointed out at the outset that developmental journalism was not for the elite but for the ordinary people. Therefore, the task of a development journalist was to use simple terms and to avoid jargon.

Gunaratne (1978) described developmental journalism as an integral part of a new journalism that involved "analytical interpretation, subtle investigation, constructive criticism and sincere association with the grass-roots (rather than with the elite)." He argued that developmental journalism was not compatible with either the libertarian concept, which defined the function of the mass media as providing information and entertainment, or the authoritarian concept, which stifled "criticism of political machinery and the officials in power" and imposed a "top-down approach to problem solving."

Aggarwala (1978) also noted that Western critics had erroneously equated development-oriented news with
government-controlled news. He argued that the development newsbeat involved reporting on the relevance of a development project of national and local needs; the difference between a planned scheme and its actual implementation; and the difference between its impact on people as claimed by government officials and its actual impact.

Ogan (1982: 10) identified developmental journalism as the critical examination, evaluation and reporting of the relevance, enactment and impact of development programs by a mass media independent of the government. Fair (1988) conceptualized developmental journalism as news that related to the primary, secondary or tertiary needs of a country's population; news that satisfied the needs of a country's population and contributed to self-reliance; and news that related to development or to social, economic or political problems.

Despite such analyses of the concept early on, contemporary conservative scholars (e.g., Stevenson 1994) have gone out of their way to debunk developmental journalism as an adjunct to authoritarian and communist concepts of the press in their eagerness to prove the victory of the so-called Western concept in the 90s. They have ignored the thrust of developmental journalism embodied in scholarly analyses or as practised by alternative news services such as Inter Press Service, Depthnews, Gemini and South-North News. As Ali (1996: 30) points out: "The concept of developmental journalism is good, and always was, so it is a pity it became embroiled in the acrimonious debate surrounding the New World Information Order."

Because of the negative connotations associated with the term developmental journalism, Shah (1996: 144-146) has suggested its replacement with the term emancipatory journalism to facilitate recognizing "a role for journalists as participants in a process of progressive social change." He makes this point in the context that "communication can contribute to participatory democracy, security, peace, and other humanistic principles that are at the core of the discourse on modernity." Emancipatory journalism "requires not only provision of socially relevant information but also journalistic activism in challenging and changing oppressive structures"; gives individuals in communities marginalized by modernization "a means of voicing critique and articulating alternative visions of society"; and encourages "journalists to abandon the role of neutral observer while reporting in a manner that is thorough, deeply researched, and historically and culturally grounded, and that promotes social change in favor of the dispossessed."
If one were to conceptualize a contemporary framework for developmental journalism, taking into consideration the discussion that has gone on for well over a quarter century, one might consider Galtung's and Vincent's (1992) point that the task of the journalist is to unravel the threads of the development drama that takes place both in the Center and the Periphery, pick them out of the intricate web of relationships, "hold them up in the sunlight, and demonstrate the connections to readers, listeners and viewers" as IPS attempts to do at present (p. 146). They point out the inherent drama in development, democracy and participation, all of which are interconnected (See Galtung and Vincent, 1992:151-166). "The problem, however, is that when this drama is written out, the underlying text tends to be about the same in all cases: imperialism, exploitation and other leftist themes" (p. 150). Is it any wonder, then, that Anglo-American conservative scholars tend to debunk developmental journalism?

Black (1996) notest that pubhc journalism is designed to:

- "Invite ordinary citizens back into public life by making their concerns the starting point of the debate."
Developmental journalism tries to achieve a similar objective by making known the concerns of the large majority of underprivileged people in the backwoods of developing nations to their national leaders and the world.
- "Overcome journalistic cynicism and acknowledge the possibility that citizens working together might be able to solve some of society's problems." This happens to be the crux of developmental journalism as well. The mass media can and should play an active role in encouraging citizens to work together to solve their rural or urban problems.
- "Modify the rules of detachment by accepting that journalists have an interest in and responsibility for raising the level of public discourse and helping society find solutions to its problems." Again, this looks like the model development journalist. Detachment cannot achieve the objectives of developmental journalism. The journalists have to play a catalytic role to stir up people into being active participants in nation building.

Merritt (1995a: pp. 113-114)) says that public journalism involves at least five mental shifts on the part of the
conventional journalist:
• Moving "beyond the limited mission of telling the news to a broader mission of helping public life to go well, and acts out that imperative." This is exactly true of the development journalist.
• Moving "from detachment to being a fair-minded participant in public life." As already mentioned, the development journalist cannot be detached.
• Moving "from worrying about proper separations to concerns with proper connections." The development journalist cannot afford the luxury of worrying about the separation of the 'Fourth Estate' from the three arms of the government or from the community in his or her attempt to connect with the public and project their concerns into national, or even international, attention.
• Moving "beyond only describing what is 'going wrong' to also imagining what 'going right' would be like." Similarly, the development journalist has the commitment to report civic successes.
• Moving "from people as consumers ... to seeing them as a public, as potential actors in arriving at democratic solutions to public problems." The development journalist also goes well beyond looking at news as a commodity that enables the generation of maximum profit. Rather, he or she is more concerned with engaging the public in finding solutions to a variety of social problems.
Lambeth (1994: 51) summarizes that the new forms of civic journalism constitute some combination of the following:
• Careful, timely and sensitive listening to public needs.
• Systematic consultation of the public by means of polls and focus groups.
• Journalist-organized dialogue with panels of resource specialists chosen for their differing expertise and perspectives.
• Media-sponsored public fora designed to deliberate on key issues.
• Continuity of in-depth reporting on issues chosen independently by journalists for their fidelity to citizen concerns.
• Occasional cooperative projects by newspapers, radio and/or television newsrooms.
While some of these techniques pertain to the practices in
an advanced society, the development journalist may as well use them depending on the degree of sophistication a particular society has reached.

Just as much as public journalism is concerned with community building within the framework of democratic ideals, developmental journalism is concerned with public participation in nation building within the same framework. Developmental journalism also envisioned a rational self-interest of doing well in political environments that ranged from authoritarianism to varying degrees of democracy.

Public journalism has encountered much skepticism with reactions such as: it endangers the credibility of newspapers because it repudiates the principles of objectivity and fairness that have been a lodestar of American journalism for half a century; it compromises enterprising, sustained, independent reporting; it gets reader committees to decide what goes into the paper thereby replacing objectivity with advocacy (Zang 1995). One may recall similar accusations against developmental journalism, particularly associating it with the manipulations of authoritarian or communist governments.

Conclusion

The foregoing review confirms that public journalism is clearly a younger cousin of developmental journalism. The two seem to have separate identities because the term developmental journalism doesn't fit the cultural terminology applicable to advanced countries. However, both concepts aim to accomplish similar goals in dissimilar socio-cultural environments. Despite pretenses, both have much to do with the ideas that were part of the erstwhile NWICO debate.

Stevenson (1994) has taken the view that "like the communist theory, the development concept lost legitimacy in the 1980s" (p. 231) resulting in the victory of Western (Anglo-American?) journalism. His opposition to developmental journalism or development news is based on the grounds that "it became more blatantly identified with the regime" thereby excluding "criticism and negative information" (p. 239). The examples of "development journalism" he gives are from China Daily and Pyongyang Times. Thus he implies that developmental journalism and communist journalism are identical.

Stevenson is able to engage in this condemnation because there is no concrete definition of developmental journalism, which is much more grounded in the social responsibility theory of the press that he no longer seems to accept. If Western journalism (in
the sense of a "free and independent press" of the libertarian type) has won, why has the public journalism movement arisen in the 1990s?

References


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