

2013

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Recommended Citation

Higgins, Daire, "The Evolution of Media Development: the Media Development Model in a Changing World" (2013). *Articles*. 78.

<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschmedart/78>

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The Evolution of Media Development:

The Media Development model in a changing world

By Daire Higgins

Abstract

The origins of Media Development can be found in Post WW2 Europe and the industry grew as a more significant aspect of international aid work in the 1980s and the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the former Soviet Union. It was hoped that exporting the concept of a free and independent press would foster democracy in post-communist and transitional countries. While it is debated on how successful these projects were, questions are now being asked about the relevance of media development model itself, the liberal press ideology behind the training projects and what place these now have in the new media landscape.

Media Development is an area of the aid industry not well known by the general public. This type of development work is directed at the media industry to lay the foundation for a media sector free of state control. The idea behind these projects is to protect freedom of expression and media freedoms by developing a free, diverse, and professional media landscape and help citizens develop alternatives to authoritarian regimes and to overcome state domination. Of the \$129 billion that was spent by international donors on overseas aid in 2010, about 0.5% was

specifically targeted at the media. This comes to approximately \$650 million spent on media development in that year.

Any activity designed to create a better quality, freer, more independent press through journalism training, training of managers and editors, business management training, or working with the legislative and regulatory policy of a country, is considered media development.

These projects are funded in the main by governmental agencies, and the bi-lateral development agencies such as the World Bank, UN and UNDP. The NGO's who implement these plans manage many diverse projects; from developing the capacity of local and national media to developing health and education campaigns reaching millions of people.

The origins of this type of media development work are to be found in post- World War II Europe. The U.S. government joined forces with European agencies and other institutions in the reconstruction effort and they believed that reinventing the news media was a critical component of the reconstruction. Anne Nelson described how in Germany

U.S. occupation authorities took a hands-on approach to building politically independent media institutions, installing politically mixed editorial boards in the newly constituted newspapers. They took the same approach with broadcasters and broke the monolithic Reich broadcasting system into regional entities. Local journalists were trained in Western news practices, and a model newspaper was created to exemplify (in the words of Dwight Eisenhower) objective reporting [strict separation of news and comment], its respect for the truth, and its high journalistic standard. Within a decade, the West German news media was noted

for both quantity and quality, and the United States discovered media development as a tool for democratization.¹

Media development then grew as a more significant aspect of international aid work in the 1980s and the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

When the Communist barricades collapsed in 1989, hundreds of Americans rushed to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics to spread the gospel of democracy. Among them were some of America's most altruistic journalists, who hoped to midwife a newly independent press.²

These 'media missionaries' were convinced of the democractising power of a free press. From the perspective of the media assistance donors, journalism in the East could and would become like the West's. This achievement was central to "fashioning a new, post-Cold War world order central to which would be the widespread adoption of Western democracy".³ Western Media Assistance Donors believed the work was "a kind of supra-political, even altruistic technology transfer. Exporting Western journalism as a means of establishing democracy, from this point of view, is hardly contentious; it is, instead, a gift, from the developed West to the 'transitional' or developing Rest".⁴

Earlier media development projects tended to be pure training of journalists, usually in post-communist Europe and Russia, but over time as the industry grew the projects became more global and multi-faceted.

¹ Anne Nelson, PBS Media Shift May, 2012

² Ellen Hume, *Media Missionaries*, 2004

³ James Miller, *NGOs and 'modernization' and 'democratization' of media: Situating Media Assistance*, 2009: 13

⁴ Ibid :10

Projects have now morphed into large scale training and communication plans. Some projects can provide information in emergency situations, say in a famine, or improve various health issues, such as sexual and reproductive health, child and maternal health and prevent infectious diseases. Many of these projects contain training components, with local journalists being trained in production and journalistic values, and going on to themselves make the programmes with media messages containing health and education information for local audiences.

Does it work?

After 20 years of media development work in particular in Eastern Europe many have questioned the value and impact of the millions spent and the efforts contributed. It is now generally agreed that for a variety of reasons much of media development work did not succeed in achieving its goals of improving standards of journalism and creating an independent, plural and impartial media in this region.

While there is acknowledgement of the power and importance of media's role in development and good governance, the wider industry is still trying to produce conclusive evidence of the impact of these projects. Western donors want to know their money is being well spent and implementers want to learn from past mistakes. So, by now, almost all projects have some element of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) but they use varying measures and methods making consensus difficult.

Despite the relentless rise in the significance of the media and communications sector in economic and cultural terms, the media development field lacks a clear evidence base that illustrates the impact and significance of its activities, training programs, and advocacy work ... That media matter is not such a hard case to support, but exactly how it matters and what it actually does, in the context of development, whether by

contributing to the health of the economy, polity, or society, has been the focus of considerable debate.⁵

To date a large proportion of the evaluation and assessment of media development has been done through studies of transitional countries, in particular the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe. Kumar claims that “the former Soviet Union and its satellites served as laboratories wherein the international community and its local partners refined different media development strategies and programs”.⁶

There are interesting findings.

“The feeling that ‘things haven’t come out as they should’ emanates from many studies or essays dedicated to post-communism”.⁷

De Smaele (1991) described how

When the communist world collapsed, the corresponding media model was declared history as well. At first sight, it was fully replaced by the western model in the same way as the society was reorganized according to western principles. On a closer look, however, western influence seems to be restricted primarily to the market area. The reshaping of the media system into a pluralist and independent Fourth Estate, the transformation of the journalistic community into an autonomous professional group dedicated to a public service ideal and the redefinition of the audience into a group of citizens all failed to occur.⁸

⁵ Mosher, *Good, but how Good*, 2009: 7

⁶ Krishna Kumar, *Promoting Independent Media*, 2006

⁷ Karol Jakubowicz, *Post-Communist Media development in Perspective*, 2005

⁸ De Smaele, *The Applicability of Western Media Models on the Russian Media System*, 1999:1

Gross (2003) confirmed this view: “Media power is derived from the trust the audience put in them, from their ability to reach audiences, and from media independence and societal respect for freedom of the press. All three of these elements of power are missing or only partially present in the societies of post-Communist Eastern Europe”.⁹

So, twenty years later it is generally agreed by scholars and media practitioners that media development in post-communist Europe was a failure. What went wrong?

In most of these evaluations the authors had touched on an important issue with Western media development projects: the model of journalism. A large part of media development work has focused on providing support to train journalists in the developing world in “western standards of journalism” and create privately owned, independent media. The rationale of donor organisations has been that having many different private media companies operating in any one country is the best way to build democracy and to provide access and voice to citizens.

The training projects were teaching what is known as the Western journalistic model, which has been described as “a mix of *New York Times* and BBC”. But the opinion is now growing that “when journalism trainers talk of democratic journalism, Western standards or the Anglo Saxon model, it is increasingly the case that no one knows what they mean anymore”.¹⁰

It has been suggested that these projects are misguided in trying to replicate an Anglo-saxon model of journalism and Western Media systems in their programs. “Media developers often tried to sell a U.S. “liberal” model of journalism - based on impartiality and facts - that went against the European traditions of commentary and partisanship”.¹¹

⁹ Peter Gross, *New relationships: Eastern European media and the post-communist political world*, 2003: 87)

¹⁰ Michael Foley, *The Press and Democracy Building*, 2009

¹¹ Ellen Hume, *Caught in the middle; Central and Eastern European Journalism at a crossroads*, 2011

Colin Sparks observed that while media trainers attempted to create newspapers like the *New York Times* and broadcasters like the BBC in Eastern Europe, what emerged mostly were newspapers that were highly partisan and broadcasters remained more aligned with the state than the people. There was significant continuity in personnel between the old regime and the new, and the shift to a market economy was a “highly political process.”¹²

Estonian journalism professor Epp Lauk tells us the expectations that post-Communist countries would follow the Anglo-American journalism paradigm have not come true for several reasons: The Media in the west have developed in a process that has taken centuries and is a product of their own particular Anglo-Saxon histories and in the United States, the law of freedom of the press, developed over 200 years, has been respected by power elites and the public.

Post-Communist development has lasted only two decades, and the Western “liberal” model of fact-based, impartial journalism competes with other styles of journalism for the public’s attention. These countries are “in permanent flux, simultaneously fighting legacies of the past and searching for successful ways of building up the states based on the rule of law, as well as civil societies”¹³

As Craig LaMay (2007) had purported, attempts to universalise the experience of Britain and the United states, as if these affluent, stable democracies with their protestant histories and imperial conquests are representative of the world would seem to be a mistake and he questioned whether exporting press freedom, the premise for media development, is possible at all.

While American journalism can be the best in the world, it would be misleading to export this model around the globe without acknowledging that the media in the U.S.

¹² Colin Sparks, *Communism, Capitalism and the Mass Media*, 1998, Sage, London

¹³ Epp Lauk, *Finding the right place on the Map*, 2008

today has shortcomings. A decline in media standards has coincided with the growth of large media-based global business conglomerates who may not have concern for journalistic quality.

The effect of the Murdoch phone hacking scandal and the Levenson enquiry has raised wider questions about the ethics in the world of journalism. If we cannot display high journalistic standards in the West, where we have a supportive 'enabling environment' and public support for fact and impartiality, we certainly cannot demand it in our media projects elsewhere in the developing world.

New Media, New Model?

In addition to the pressures on journalistic quality, the traditional business model is in trouble. Traditional media no longer control the advertising market but have to compete with newer and more efficient means for advertising. The traditional advertising revenue model has come to an end and New and digital media and citizen journalism add to this pressure:

The problem for American journalism isn't just that revenues are collapsing; the entire context in which traditional institutions operated is being altered. ..The most talked-about change in the old triangle is the relationship between newspapers and their audiences. The proliferation of the Web means that every publicly available source is now available to every member of the public. Even if digital distribution changed nothing else, that thousand-fold increase in competition would forever alter the news ecosystem.

Digital media also erodes audience habits. Publishers and salespeople often sold advertisers on the loyalty of their readers, but we readers have never actually been loyal. We're just lazy. Prior to the Web, when options were scarcer, lazy meant continuity: We got the same paper we got yesterday; we read another article in that

paper rather than searching out alternatives. Today, lazy means serendipity. We read what our friends send us, from wherever they got it. (Their friends, probably.)¹⁴

Thus, as advertising income dwindles in the West for traditional media, naturally question arises whether promoting this business model in the developing world also is the right way forward. Anne Nelson, a media development consultant asserts:

Today, the traditional model of media development is facing an array of practical and political challenges that are transforming its functions and its mandate. Part of the problem is that American journalism has lost its mojo. For generations, the U.S. model of journalism was based on the premise that advertising revenues will support politically independent professional news production. In the United States and many other markets, that model is struggling to survive, making it more difficult to export.¹⁵

Recent advancements in online media and mobile technology are also changing the make-up of media development projects. As we are aware, new technologies are completely changing the media models in both the developed and developing world. “There are wide swaths of people who get their information from their telephones.... The business model isn’t clear yet, but we know that we can reach people without investments in expensive infrastructure. This is a period of experimentation and a news revolution that is extremely exciting”.¹⁶

The policy focus of media development funders has also now moved strategically and geographically to new regions. It seems to be that international media donors have all

¹⁴ Clay Shirky, *Failing Geometry*, Columbia Journalism Review, 2012

¹⁵ Anne Nelson, *The Digital Age and the Changing face of Media development*, PBS Media Shift, May 2012

¹⁶ Joyce Barnathan, president of the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) in *Empowering Independent Media*, Centre for International Media Assistance, 2012

but abandoned Eastern Europe for the possibly more lucrative and oil rich Middle East and Africa.

And huge changes have taken place in these new regions in the recent past. The growth of both mobile and digital technology has moved to these parts of the world where the lack of effective communications infrastructure has traditionally been one of the biggest obstacles to growth. Mobile phone networks are proliferating throughout the region and digital technologies are altering the way individuals' access news.

Africa is the continent with the fastest growth. Penetration has soared from just one in 50 people at the beginning of this decade to about one in three today and the continent has been transformed by the increase in connectivity and mobile phone subscriptions. "People might not have shoes, but they have a cellphone," said Brian Richardson, chief executive of Wizzit, a small start-up that pioneered cellphone banking in South Africa.

Kenya, and more particularly Nairobi, has become the regional centre for technology and innovation in Africa. In 2011, Time magazine dubbed Kenya 'Silicon Savanna' due to the country's ICT revolution. ¹⁷ As described by a journalist on a recent trip to Kibera, in the slums of Nairobi:

“...step inside, and it feels as if you've been transported to a Silicon Valley startup. Dozens of twenty-somethings toil away on laptops; a few blow off steam at a foosball table; Pete's coffee bar doles out cappuccinos, milk shakes, and slabs of banana bread. This is a business incubator called iHub, the fruit of a homegrown information technology culture”¹⁸

James Deane (2005) detailed the impact of technology on developing countries:

¹⁷ Time Magazine, *Mobile Phones Transform Africa*, June 2011

¹⁸ MIT Technology Review, *Kenyas Startup boom*, Feb 2012

<http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/426983/kenyas-startup-boom/>

Information and communication have become impossible to control, and many countries where information used to be subject to absolute government control have seen unprecedented public debate and the arguable emergence of a fresh kind of public sphere. New spaces have been formed, independent of government..... Habermas originally argued that a public sphere, independent of the reigning governments, was established out of a space carved out in the coffee houses of enlightenment Europe. The radio revolution in many developing countries can arguably be seen as a similar phenomenon, where public debate over radio meshes with the billions of informal and interconnecting conversations enabled by the new technologies of mobile telephony and the Internet. ¹⁹

The combination of radio and mobile phone are being hailed by some as the new dynamic in media and communications, particularly in Africa, where radio is king. American media scholar, blogger and internet activist Ethan Zuckerman tells us “the only technology that compares to the mobile phone in terms of pervasiveness and accessibility in the developing world is the radio. Indeed, considered together, radios and mobile phones can serve as a broad-distribution, participatory media network with some of the same citizen-media dynamics of the Internet, but accessible to a much wider, and non-literate audience”. ²⁰

The number of radio stations in Africa has increased massively over the past ten years, creating a very competitive segment and now they are increasingly shifting from a one-way broadcast to media that reach audiences by integrating interaction with listeners into programming through mobile calls and SMS:

A common application is for broadcasters to invite listeners to send text messages in response to questions posed on the programme, submit direct concerns, and share

¹⁹ James Deane, *Media and Glocal Change*, Chapter 10, *Media Democracy and the Public Sphere*, 2005: 5-6

²⁰ Ethan Zuckerman, *Mobile Phones and Activism*, 2007

commentary. In Zambia, Breeze FM radio uses SMS to communicate with journalists. After gathering news tips received from the general public, the radio station organizes the evidence, sends SMS to journalists who may be out in the field, encouraging them to verify the facts and report. In Chad, during youth radio show “Chabab Al Haye” (Youth Alive) people could ask questions and give comments, which helped others in the most remote regions to feel included in discussions about issues such as grievances, tolerance and livelihoods. ²¹

Mobile technology is now being embraced by NGO’s like the Red Cross and Oxfam to enhance health, education and governance programs. Within governance, mobile technologies can offer new means for empowering citizens by opening democratic processes and mechanisms (UNDP, 2012). M-governance initiatives, such as *MySociety*, in the UK have expanded access to information channels and are creating new venues for people’s participation and these websites are now being used in developing countries. Information that was once in the domain of official or large private, corporate media channels is now in the hands of anyone with a mobile or an Internet connection.

The events of the Arab Spring also highlighted the potential of both new and social media to transform countries, even though debates over the extent of social media’s influence on these events are widespread: “Clearly people have made revolution without [social media]. But in repressive regimes ... Facebook provides a space where silence and fear are broken and trust can be built, where social networks can turn political, and where home and Diaspora can come together. Whatever the intentions of their developers, social media are being used to provide news and information; to plan and coordinate action; and to tell the world what is going on”.²²

²¹ Russell Southwood, *Africa: Frontline SMS Bring a Free, Innovative Solution to African Broadcasters*, 2012

<http://allafrica.com/stories/201209030367.html>

²² Annabelle Sreberny, BBC World Service Trust Blog, May 2011

In a recent report by BBC Media Action it confirmed that “online and mobile spaces are vital outlets for individual expression, for organised protest and for the truth to come out about closed societies. There are burgeoning young communities ... that are using new technologies to overcome some of the restrictions and traditions of old media. As a result, bloggers, Twitter users and online activists are growing in status, citizen journalism is coming of age and the digital divide is clearly narrowing.”²³

Some have suggested that with the advance of new media, citizen journalism and new ways of accessing news that developing countries may “leapfrog” certain developmental stages in the context of media development. Whatever the extent of their influence, social media and mobile phones have radically altered the field. “The speed with which populations in the developing world are adopting mobile phone and internet technology and finding innovative uses for new communications is far outstripping the levels of understanding of these new trends in the aid world”.²⁴

As well as the changes posed by new media, there are other flaws with the media development model coming to light. British academic Colin Sparks claims that countries like China are breaking the old models of media freedom and development. China’s economy has boomed despite limited press freedoms and widespread censorship and governmental controls, which contradicts the Western liberal model of the press many old projects were based on. Sparks noted that “the majority of scholars appear to work with a more or less unrevised set of ideas inherited from the depths of the Cold War, whose contemporary relevance is open to serious questioning”.²⁵

²³ BBC Media Action, *What Works and Why*, 2012: 11

²⁴ BBC Media Action, *Left in the dark*, 2008: 7

²⁵ Colin Sparks, *Media Theory after the Fall of European Communism: Why the Old Models from East and West Won't Do Any More*. 2000: 35-49

This echoes the feelings of Prof James Miller that “the large-scale exportation of mainstream Western journalistic ethics and practices today brings to mind Marshall McLuhan's famous admonition against driving into the future while looking in the rear-view mirror”.²⁶

Estonian scholar Epp Lauk speculated that in the future, altruistic journalism developers might have to take “very different directions” to accommodate the different cultures of the countries they are trying to help. “Digitisation may provide the unifying influence for journalists that the Anglo-American model failed to be”, she suggested, “not because of global standards about journalism and technology, but because of the Internet’s ubiquity and speed”.²⁷

It would appear that the traditional media development model may be becoming entirely irrelevant in the face of new media’s growth, where the medium itself is owned by individuals, and the content is created by the “citizen journalist”. Whether this is a good or bad thing for quality journalism remains to be seen but it is nonetheless occurring all over the world.

Where the traditional objectives of media development were Democracy and Participation, Access to information and Governance, these are no longer the domain of traditional media. These objectives can now be achieved through websites and mobile phones and traditional media are being bypassed. Digital media has shifted the balance from a model of “top-down” publication to user-generated content. Citizens can now access information previously unavailable to them, and participate in debate on several platforms at once.

Despite all the discussion of the changing landscape for media development, it would seem that new media may offer new possibilities. If audiences are accessing, and

²⁶ James Miller, *Questioning the Western Approach to Training*, Nieman Reports, Spring 2011

²⁷ Epp Lauk, “How Will it All Unfold” in *Finding the Right Place on the Map*, 2008

creating, news in myriad and modern ways, perhaps new technology offers media development a fresh start. What individuals still need, whether in Western Europe, North America, Egypt or Kenya is reliable information and quality news from a trusted source and this is what may be lost in the global proliferation of technology. This is of course what the media development industry has always tried to achieve; and it now has new tools to reach the same goal.

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