

WHY DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM IS ON THE DECLINE IN THE MULTIPARTY ERA?

By Baldwin Chiyamwaka

Malawi has experienced a general decline in the coverage of development news. Although no study has been conducted to establish the extent of the problem and its causes media practitioners, media publics (readers, viewers and sources of news) and other stakeholders in several media fora I have been, do accept that coverage of development news is on the decline. My personal historical perspective and timeline would mark the beginning of the decline since the dawn of multiparty democracy in 1994. Political news highly dominates media coverage than economic and development news. Some efforts to improve this situation have been taken but have not yielded desired results.

Some sections of the public, the civil society, donor community and government ministries have on several occasions at different fora expressed dissatisfaction in the way the media in Malawi cover development and economic issues. The media has been accused of concentrating on political news, which dominates front-page headlines in most newspapers and top stories on radios and television. This has often been attributed to inadequate training or even lack of training in the relevant disciplines among journalists.

The media has not denied these accusations and claims. They have accepted them but with reasons. They admit political news truly do dominate news coverage both in the print and electronic media. They equally observe that lack of training contributes to inadequate and dissatisfactory coverage of development and economic issues. But more interestingly they claim that political stories sustain high newspaper circulation and large listenership. This they strongly argue, in spite of lack of proper empirical evidence, keeps the newspapers in business. Without which low circulation would be a result, audience sizes would shrink, advertisers pull out and eventually for lack of profit newspapers would fold up and radio stations close down.

However, institutions and organisations in the development and economic industries still believe that news coverage of development issues are crucial to the development of Malawi particularly as a developing country and should therefore be given priority. In other words they believe that these issues are equally newsworthy and fairly rate highly on the continuum of news values. In some cases, media stakeholders including government have even called for the prioritising of development issues in news coverage.

According to Sonderling (2003: 206) the idea of development journalism was first envisaged in the 1960s at the Free Press Foundation of Asia in Manila. Development Journalism was to have been independent journalism that provided constructive criticism of government and development and informed readers about how development affected them. However, the Third World, took the idea of development journalism as a justification to control the mass media.

After independence, African leaders, Malawi inclusive, demanded a totally committed press and mass media because they did not want the African media to be a replica to of the West and reflect the ideology of the impartial and objective reporting Mytton (1983:143).

African leaders argued that given the continent's subservient position in the global economic system, its colonial legacy and the fragility of newly independent African countries, a free press of the Western – style could too easily lead to instability, hinder government functions and lead to internal chaos. Therefore, pres control so they said was necessary for national development and political stability (Ogbondah 1994:3).

The dawn of multiparty democracy, which was concomitant with media freedom and liberalism was seen as an emancipation of the media from government control which in many cases went to the extreme of becoming not only suppressive but also oppressive and coercive. Development Journalism therefore is perceived as synonymous to the pre-multiparty democracy government controlled media, which is absolutely antithetical to the spirit of freedom of expression and media freedom in a democracy. It rarely is allowed the prominence other news categories like political news enjoy in the media today even where it scores highly on the continuum of news values.

McQuail (1987: 121) lists the basic principles of development journalism as follows: the mass media should make a positive contribution to the national development process; the state or government should be able to restrict the freedom of journalists and the mass media.

The freedom of the media should be subordinated to their responsibility to contribute to nation-building, promote economic growth and the development needs of the society.

The mass media should give priority to information about national, cultural and language issues and encourage national autonomy.

The media should give priority to information about other developing countries and encourage solidarity among the underdeveloped or developing nations.

Journalists and other media practitioners have a responsibility to their countries in their news gathering and reporting tasks.

In the interest of national development, the state has the right to intervene in, or restrict media operations, impose censorship and use state subsidies to directly control the media.

Many journalists in Malawi like in many African nationalist states were committed to the ideals of development journalism. Some journalists, the fanatics of this ideology, suggested that bad news such as the failure of development projects should not be published. For example, a village settlement scheme that had failed very badly, involving large sums of money and villagers who had been brought to live at the settlement had left, should be ignored by the media.

Government-controlled development journalism provided “positive” news stories and information that promoted and reflected development. Development journalism was therefore “government positive development news”. Anything to the contrary negating government “development efforts”, or depicting failure of “government development work” was not newsworthy and in Malawi it was tantamount to sedition. Any journalist therefore writing and publishing such news was fit to be sent to the gallows. Of course there were few courageous ones who chose to be deviants and they fairly paid the price.

Development news and information usually consisted of stories such as the opening of a fertiliser factory, the graduation of a doctor from a remote and poor village and any reduction of illiteracy and infant mortality even if the figures were insignificant it still was news.

Because the media in most third world countries were under strict control, news about development was often manipulated to provide a kind of public relations for the doings of governments and state officials and mobilise support for the ruling political party (Stevenson 1993: 145). The later is such a big irony because at that time most regimes were under one party rule with implied or explicit life

presidency as such votes were not as a precious commodity as they are in this dispensation.

Because of such bias development journalism did not enjoy credibility among the people. And when freedom of expression was embraced with the dawn of 'multipartism' development journalism had to go with the one-party, autocratic era because in it was the spirit of dictatorship, suppression and oppression.

However, it is important to reaffirm that development journalism as was originally intended was supposed to be independent journalism that provided constructive criticism of government and development and inform readers, listeners and viewers about how development in their local and wider communities affected them.

Seen in this light, development journalism is relevant today and perhaps the more reason why we need to rethink about it and promote it. Development journalism could make a positive contribution to the development of Malawi and the rest of Africa.

However, the media can play its role of facilitating development (economic and social transformation) if the following is done: Media practitioners should operate independently of any powers that would be. They should establish their independence from any form of political party politics. Any form of direct control including government control of the media leads to biased and ideological messages being communicated and development messages are usually rejected as mere propaganda. If an independent media validates government's development efforts the government truly becomes credible in the real sense of the word credible and the masses rally behind it.

Media practitioners need to acquire specialised knowledge about development. Development journalism demands that journalists explain the aims of development, mobilise support and act as channels of communication between the development practitioners whether in government departments or nongovernmental organisations on one hand and people on the other.

Development journalism could be emancipatory when journalists report critically and analytically about development, provide relevant information, become activists and challenge and help change oppressive social structures even those that exist within organisations that facilitates development among the poor masses.

Democracy and freedom of the press should be guaranteed and development journalists should strive to be independent observers, critics and advisers not only of government development programmes but also private nongovernmental development agencies who must be seen to really be working for the poor. Unravel their systems, work procedures, and assess whether their presence in an area truly benefit the poor families. This supervisory and surveillance role of the media in development would encourage transparency and accountability among development practitioners and ensure that change really does take place.

The media need to be accessible to the masses. The development role of the media would fail if large numbers of people did not have access to the media. In many cases access to the media is expensive and the less privileged cannot afford it. The media industry and media training institutions should be creative in their efforts for a more plural media and innovative in their search for alternative media (channels) for communicating development issues.

The second reason why development journalism is on the decline is because of global economic and political changes. Economic trends such as commercialisation, liberalisation and privatisation among others have had a great impact on the media as a business. Although these trends have been around time in memorial and that they are marks (characteristics) of capitalism they have intensified over the past decades Fourie (2001:112). The spread of democracy seem to have been a great catalyst of these economic trends.

From an economic perspective the purpose of the media business is to make a profit. The economic trends mentioned above are transforming the media more into a business in the contemporary Malawi than a service as they were in the pre-multiparty nationalistic Malawi.

Liberalisation of the media has meant a proliferation of the media initially in 1994 the increase in newspapers and later the multiplicity of radios. Privatisation has afforded individuals with capital to own private media businesses for a profit. Commercialisation has resulted in competing for access to audiences (to sell media products) and competing access to advertisers (selling audiences to advertisers). This competition is both direct among same medium like newspapers and indirect between different media such as radio, television and newspapers.

Coupled with these economic trends, globalisation, increased consumerism and the development of information and communication technology (ICT), which are making photography, graphic designing, printing, video production, broadcasting and telecommunication easier and perhaps cheaper have created a favourable environment for media business.

In general, this environment is characterised by a shift in emphasis **from providing quality** (the quality of information and entertainment) **to providing quantity** (the quantity of information and entertainment); from **providing a service to the public to selling a product**; on accessing the biggest possible audience (readers, viewers, listeners), even in the case of growing niche markets, that is, special groups like the youth with special music programmes.

Briefly, the argument is that media content, being product and audience centred instead of content and quality centred have nothing more than a consumer product with apparent limited value.

The implication of this on development journalism is that development programmes are usually offered as a service and not as a product for sale. The focus is on quality than quantity, and on value than popularity. This kind of media production does not favour commercialisation, which focuses on selling media products to audiences and audiences to advertisers; privatisation, which is geared at making profits at least for the majority of private media owners. Perhaps liberalisation might be an exceptional economic trend. For example, community radios especially in the context of Malawi and most countries in Southern Africa have a development dimension to their purpose for broadcasting.