

# DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM

Development journalism basically centres around how much freedom the media should have i.e. should they be able to publish whatever they wish to publish, at any time, or should there be controls and limits on this? In particular, how should they treat the government of the country?

And, looking even more closely, how should they treat the government of a developing country?

In such a case the government may have a difficult development task to do, because of poverty and a shortage of different resources. Thus the support of the media may be important to them in performing this task.

Several theories have strongly influenced the way the press in Africa has responded to questions like the above.

We are going to look at the three theories that have dominated the press in Africa:

- Authoritarianism
- Social responsibility
- libertarian theory

And look briefly at the Development theory and how this has impacted on the other three.

Then look at advantages and disadvantages of developmental journalism for the media.

## The Authoritarian Theory

This has always been popular with colonial governments in Africa, also true in South Africa where it could be argued that the old Nationalist government did its best to put the authoritarian theory into practise.

This theory says:

**The media are in the service of the state and therefore subordinate to them. I.e. they should do nothing that could undermine established authority. Rather the media must support the interests of the state at all costs.**

Because the authoritarian view holds that the state is more important than the individual, it also says that the individual can only achieve his/her goals if he/she is under the state. However, different individuals within an authoritarian state have different status/importance. E.g. the leader of an authoritarian state may be one person or an elite group who dominate the society. This kind of leadership uses the mass media to help them dominate the rest of society, i.e.

The media are used as instruments of **social control**.

In an authoritarian society, truth is limited and not all individuals have access to it. Most people have to accept the “truth” of the dominant person or group and must conform to this “truth” in their thoughts and actions.

To stay in power, the leadership of an authoritarian state will use any means of persuading or forcing others that they consider necessary. At different times we have seen examples of this in Africa – in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nigeria. In this kind of society, the ruling elite uses the press as an educational and propaganda tool for controlling the people. They do not tolerate any criticism of the government. They do not see truth and objectivity/fairness as the most important principles guiding the media. Their view is that the interests of the state must come first, and they, the ruling class, must decide what these interests are.

## **Libertarian theory**

This theory says the press was not just an instrument of the state. Libertarians believe we are rational beings who are able to distinguish right from wrong. Furthermore, they believe that society should create a forum, a free market of ideas so that people could look at different ideas and then choose freely.

Thus the libertarians believe there should be no formal controls at all over what can be published in the press or other media.

Rather, they feel that where all ideas have an equal chance, truth will stand and win.

The spreading of these ideas led to the acceptance of basic human rights such as freedom of speech and of the press.

According to libertarianism anyone with enough money could start and publish a newspaper. But then people began to see that the media could use information not to inform the public but rather just to increase the circulation of the newspapers. So a new point of view developed which proposed that the press could no longer be allowed to function with total freedom.

## **Social Responsibility theory**

A new approach to the role of the media in society developed, namely the social responsibility theory. Here objectivity is vitally important. Supporters of this theory felt that it was closely linked to the libertarian theory. However, the social responsibility theory develops, changes and deepens certain libertarian ideas – especially after World War II.

Most English-language newspapers in South Africa have taken social responsibility as their guiding theory. During the apartheid era, various editors started to reject the strongly authoritarian control that the Nationalist Party exerted over the press, these editors began to feel that the social responsibility theory could be a better guide for them. Their group included editors of English-language newspapers and later editors of alternative newspapers and also some Afrikaans newspapers.

**Basically, this theory emphasises the responsibility that the media has towards society, more than it emphasises press freedom.**

It says the media should work within certain moral and ethical limitations that are like obligations they must accept. These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high or professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.

According to this theory the media must accept social responsibility and make sure that different attitudes and directions of thought all get fully and properly represented and heard. The media must see to it that the public has enough information to make necessary decisions.

At the same time, freedom is important in this theory.

It says the media must guard against possible interference by the state and by any other pressure groups which could threaten the media's freedom. Control of the media should not be the job of an elite group in government. Rather the journalists themselves must exercise this responsibility, working for newspapers that are mostly privately owned.

This theory rejects the way authoritarianism makes control actually lawful so that the media has no freedom of choice.

Only the other hand, it also rejects a situation where there are no principles to limit and guide what the media can publish, that is, where they publish whatever they like and make the most money.

This theory has been criticised quite a lot for example as being far too vague. However, it has value for the working journalist in that it gives journos a positive feeling that they are working in the public interest, and doing a public service. It also frees journos from writing only material that will sell well.

## **Development journalism**

Development theory became popular in the Third World for fairly obvious reasons – but there are some problems with the idea.

The terms *Third World*, *undeveloped nations* and *developing nations* all imply inferiority and something less than the best.

I.e. seem to rate the Third World's industry, commerce and political life against that of the world's great nations.

Some academics thus prefer the term “advancing journalism”.

**This theory sees the press as an instrument of social justice and a tool for achieving beneficial social change.**

In other words, the media should carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy.

However, in reality things have not worked out in line with this theory. In Africa generally there has been pressure on journalists to ally themselves with the political forces, but in doing so they have lost their independence.

**The most problematical part of this theory is the principle that the state can interfere with the media and use methods like censorship, state subsidies or direct control and restriction if it does so in order to advance development.**

In this way journalists can be severely hampered from reporting fully, fairly and independently. Also, we cannot be certain that development DOES get advanced in such situations.

Obviously, a new government in a developing country may well wish to adopt the development model. It leaves control of the media in the hands of government if required and yet the media must still take responsibility. If the government decides that the media are not meeting its wishes or that they are challenging the state, it can intervene and apply whatever censure or control it deems necessary.

Zimbabwe is a good example of a government seeking to use the press with some degree of compulsion to advance government policies, especially on economic and racial/ethnic issues.

Editors who accept this approach must give up some editorial autonomy to government officials and in doing so, they give up their constitutional right to freedom of the press. Journalists in South Africa have had a very unhappy experience with government authoritarianism in the past. Therefore, they will not easily trust any government uncritically or risk their autonomy in the way that the developmental approach requires.

Their fears about doing so are based on what they may have seen elsewhere.

Thus while the developmental system may offer benefits, journalists feel that it extracts too high a price.

Finally, developmental journalism promotes mass rights over those of the individual. It is rooted in the notion of doing what is right for the common good.

South Africans have fought hard for their new constitution that protects the rights of the individual and therefore it will be hard for the government to promote the virtues of developmental journalism.

However, that does not of course prevent the government of the day doing its best to get the press to report in a developmental way.

## **Advantages of developmental journalism**

Development journalism has a lot of attraction for developing countries. First, in countries where poverty is the norm, the government of the day wants and needs as much support as it can get. A press that reports government inefficiencies is therefore not welcome.

Also the government will probably have to take decisions which are based on the common good but which harm individual liberties. These decisions may be highly unpopular but they have to be taken, and a hostile press can hold back government's progress while a supportive press can help the government push these policies ahead.

One definition of the duty of a journalist reporting on development is to:

“critically examine, evaluate and report the relevance of a development project to 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 as it actually is.”

The most important function of development journalism is its ability to **nation build**. However, many political leaders see journalists who do not follow this approach as traitors – and as for example in Kenya, they are charged.

## **Disadvantages of Development Journalism**

The pitfalls of the development approach are many.

First, the press becomes far less critical and eventually is forced to give up its “watchdog” role in society.

As it continually panders to the government, the media loses its critical edge and becomes nothing more than another government mouthpiece. When this happens, it paves the way for a virulent underground or alternative press with a strong anti-government approach.

The most dangerous pitfall is the fact that the press gives up its right to question and demand accountability from the government of the day. As the press tries to promote the government and the common good, it can start to lose sight of the individual and the individual’s human rights.

In other words, a developmental press has come to be equated with one in which the government exercises tight control and prevents freedom of expression, all in the name of noble ends.

Government censorship does only happen in Africa and South America. In 1975 Gandhi imposed strict censorship in India. But despite this censorship, many Indian journalists sneaked into their news columns words, phrases and even sentences and paragraphs that escaped the attention of the censors and that conveyed concealed meanings to knowledgeable readers.

Overall, the message for any government is that it will have to struggle to keep up control of the media for very long and will need huge resources to police the system. What starts out as a good idea to promote development may end up a nightmare.