

SOMETHING HAS TO BE DONE

*There are no neutral counters in the media game, writes **GRAEME ADDISON**. Every aspect of technology, language, folk media, publishing and broadcasting forms part of the terrain under contention between conflicting groups*

IT can be agreed that literacy and access to media are "human rights". It can also be agreed that the media can and do play a role in development, but it remains difficult to define this role.

While all media may be involved in upliftment or nation-building, not all media are specialised as "development media".

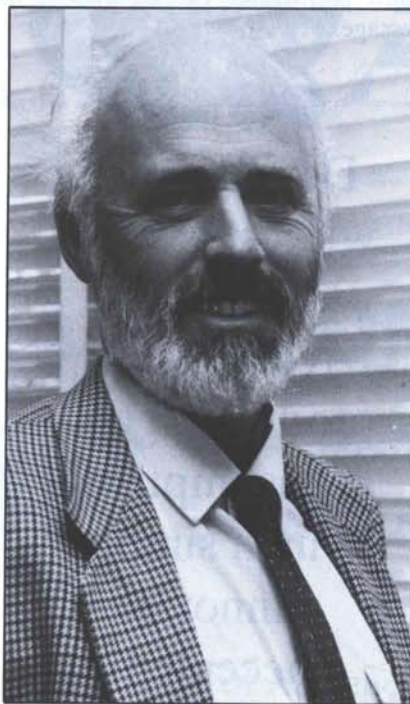
Development media tend to be "small media", but clearly in any broad programme of social upliftment, massive resources are needed. Government broadcasting systems and big privately-owned newspaper companies are not "development media", but they can become vehicles for development.

The allocation of resources and the setting of development goals are politically contentious matters. For this reason, critical theory attacks the assumption that the media, or any other tools, can be neutrally applied to development. There are no neutral counters in the game. Every aspect of technology, language, folk media, publishing and broadcasting forms part of the terrain under contention between conflicting groups.

Functions

In terms of a "functional" model, the media has a number of functions in development. The media may:

- raise awareness;
- impart knowledge and skills;
- act as a check on official abuses;
- perform as two-way channels of communication between government and people.



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This list of functions can be extended and made far more detailed in a field such as literacy.

To begin to understand the role of "media in development", one has to confront the facile assumptions that make it so easy for elites and aid-givers to justify their behaviour in terms of the nation's interests. Large-scale injustices, corruption, inefficiencies and losses are the natural outcome of programmes over which the people have no real input and no way of knowing how decisions are taken at the higher levels.

The biggest danger of functional approaches is that they accept structures as given and therefore do not apply a critical perspective to the goals and interests served by these structures.

This is not mere theory. In harsh reality, "development" has often served the purposes of elites in Third World societies, and in many cases "foreign aid" has taken the form of loans or trading agreements which extend the economic power of already-empowered groups. Lip service is usually paid to "participation" by the people, shared decision-making and two-way communication, but the actual forms that development take may run counter to the rhetoric.

Harsh reality

According to a World Bank Report on Sub-Saharan Africa, published in July 1990, developing countries in 1986 spent five times as much on armaments as they received in foreign aid. The bank blamed these governments for spending most of their health care and educational budgets in ways that had nothing to do with reducing poverty – such as building "lavish cathedrals in the desert". In 1986, more than 110 million children in the Third World – over one in five – received no primary education, and about 15 million died every year from causes that are not usually fatal in developed countries.

Several roles

In any society, the mass media perform in various roles:

- as observers, or reporters of events and issues;

- as watchdogs on abuses of power;
- as crusaders on issues of concern;
- as educators;
- as mobilisers for social actions;
- as facilitators of communication.

The emphasis in different societies falls on different roles. In developing societies, education, mobilisation and facilitation are regarded as very important and are endorsed by most governments under the terms of the New World Information Order.

The media in most Third World countries are not independent enough to be effective watchdogs or crusaders, and they often lack the skills and resources to be good, reliable observers.

In fact, the Western news agencies have made themselves unpopular because their correspondents in Third World countries have assumed the roles of observers, watchdogs and crusaders – protected by their foreign status, supported by the power and money of their agencies, and driven by “news values” which emphasise First World viewpoints.

This has brought a lot of criticism from countries in the developing world, who feel they have been unfairly treated and judged by wrong standards.

Democratisation of the media in these societies remains, too often, a distant ideal. Their history has been shaped by colonialism and by the interests of dominant elites. They are subservient to governments, and not accessible to or accountable to the masses. Whether they are in public or private hands, Third World media are seldom big or powerful enough to challenge powerful interest groups or the State. Their freedom may be severely restricted by censorship or laws affecting free inquiry and comment.

Social relations

The debate over the role of the media in developing countries thus draws attention to various shortcomings and problems. There is not one role, there are several, and it is questionable whether the Third World's media are in a position to function fully or effectively for national development. They cannot be merely subservient to governments and planners, because this would abrogate their other roles as observers, watchdogs and crusaders.

Critical theory asks the questions: Development – what for? Who benefits

and how? Critical theory questions the strictly functional approach because it takes for granted that certain structures exist within which the activities of the media will take place.

In any real situation, “development” will carry in its train certain relations of production and consumption which simply cannot be accepted uncritically.

Take the case of radio broadcasting. Radio is often regarded as the most potent tool of development communications in illiterate, rural societies. The spread of radios to people who have not previously been exposed to modernisation will presuppose the manufacture or importation of radios. In other words, a mass-produced commodity is distributed, and while the rationale is “development”, radios proliferate. The medium is the message.

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As more radios are sold, certain practical gains will flow to industrialists either at home or abroad. Broadcasting, too, may carry advertising, and even if it doesn't, the content of many programmes will suggest new patterns of consumption behaviour to the rural masses. The extension of the market prompts people to work for money and so creates a pool of potential wage-earners.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with the growth of the money economy,

but the example of radio does highlight how development involves – and may reinforce – certain prior patterns of productive relations.

The functional model completely ignores this background. Functional approaches to the media are very good when they specify tasks and measure performance, but a measure of critical theory is needed to grasp the deeper implications of “development”.

Implications

These implications need to be carefully explored in the South African case. Too little has been said about the “adversary role” of media in relation to governments and other powerful interest groups. This encompasses the observer/watchdog/crusader functions, and we should take care that in any “new” South Africa the media do not become simply educators/mobilisers/facilitators on behalf of official programmes.

There is nothing wrong with these functions – they are common and legitimate functions of media – but in themselves they are not sufficient to bring about democratisation and development.

The media must be strong financially and organisationally, which means having skills and resources for reporting and free commentary, and being able to fight to protect media independence.

Today's privately owned media monopolies do have resources but their performance is open to criticism.

I tend to share in these criticisms but I do not know what other forms of media structure and control would result in equal, or greater, media independence. Perhaps powerful independent trade unions and co-operatives could be the basis for future “big” media.

Clearly the structure of social relations within which our media functions is badly skewed towards the interests of the already-empowered. Something has to be done about this, and the forms of new media should embody more diversity and better representation of mass interests.

Turning to practical contributions that the media could make, we need to spell out how, say, in the field of literacy, practical training can be advanced through the media. Many schemes are working already, and several organisations such as Sached have built up considerable experience in this field. ●