



BRIDGING THE MEDIA/COMMUNICATION GAP

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Tony Blair reformed the British Labour party from within and called it New Labour. Swedish prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt is trying to reform his formerly neoliberal Conservative party into Sweden's "new labour party". The apparent result – apart from the confusion among the electorate, especially those who voted the new government into power – is an almost complete political consensus around the basic principles of social democracy.

There are however some areas where the views differ. Development cooperation is one. Even if the new government's policy follows the outlines of the Policy for Global Development (PGD) adopted by the Swedish Parliament in 2003¹, there are some significant adjustments: The number of partners for bilateral development cooperation will be radically reduced, and confined to countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The stronger emphasis on Democracy and Human Rights as main objectives, along with the over-arching goal of poverty reduction, may be a matter of nuance -but potentially it could also imply a long-needed recognition and support for media and communications as means for democratization and social change processes.

When the newly assigned "Democracy Ambassador" -former head of the Swedish Liberal Party Maria Leissner- called to the first in a series of consultative seminars in September 2007, the theme was *How media can contribute to democratic development*. All the major Swedish actors in the field of media support were represented, along with three international speakers.

Kabul Budiono, from Radio Republik Indonesia, talked about the transformation of the former tool for state propaganda into a modern public service company – an ongoing process initiated through cooperation with Swedish Radio's Media Development Office. Kim Maung Win, representing Democratic Voice of Burma, based in exile in Oslo, gave an insider's report of the early phase of the recent upheaval in Burma and underscored the media's crucial role in the process. Lem van Eupen, general manager of the Radio Nederland Training Centre (RNTC), one of

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the major European actors in media support along with BBC World Trust and Deutsche Welle, made the seemingly obvious but still controversial statement that 'media for development' and 'development of media' are actually two sides of the same coin.

Conventionally, media support has been defined in a quite narrow sense, merely as 'development of media'. Media, in turn, have been defined as traditional media organizations - newspapers and radio/TV. Journalist training and the exportation of (Western) media legislation have been the main media support objectives. Deliberately or not, such a focus has drawn a clear distinction between media support on the one hand and communication for development on the other, sometimes even leading to both being regarded as conflicting strategies. Among journalists, to date communication for development is commonly associated with top-down information and persuasion campaigns (propaganda), as opposed to free and independent media.

The naïve faith in media freedom and independence notwithstanding, this is a view based on an obsolete understanding of the rapidly changing conditions of media production and consumption. Jan Peterson, former head of Swedish Radio's MDO, and now strategic director of the Swedish Television, pointed to the ongoing democratization of both production and distribution, using Al Gore's Emmy award-winning "Current TV"² as an example of the completely transformed media landscape.

The seminar made it quite clear that media support policies need a radical revision in order to keep pace with global media development. First of all, the very notion of 'media' needs redefinition in order to comprise not only traditional media but also the Internet and other ICTs as well as the multitude of combinations of old and new media.

Secondly, media should not only be regarded from a nation-state perspective. In Sweden, as in most European countries, the public sphere has historically had the same extension as the nation-state. This former correlation is being blurred with globalization, making transnational communication an increasingly important part of the global mediascape. Bilateral development cooperation builds, however, on a state-to-state relationship, and tends, understandably, to reproduce the nation-state frame of understanding. Transnational advocacy networks, TANs, with their great potential for inducing democratic change, fall between the chairs.

Thirdly, a subsequent redefinition of the profession is required. Journalists should not be the only target group for media support. The media are more than means for communication. From a democracy

perspective, it's the communication process itself that is essential. Journalist training is important, but there is also need for communicators -advocates and agents for participatory communication. Differences of perspective or at times even conflicts of interest notwithstanding, the roles are not mutually exclusive. They ought in fact to be mutually supportive.

ComDev is and should be an intrinsic part of media support. This may seem self-evident for those of us who work in the academic interdisciplinary field of communication for development and social change, as well as for all those practitioners who almost daily are confronted with this rigid division, and often obstructed in their ambition to bridge it.

Last but not least: Media support needs a stronger research base, which in its turn requires higher education – at both Master and PhD levels. Giving students and professionals from developing countries the opportunity to deepen their knowledge and undertake research in their own profession is just as important as providing basic journalist training in local communities. And again, these objectives are not contradictory or conflicting; they go perfectly well hand in hand.

The expanding global network around Malmö University's ComDev Master has accumulated considerable knowledge and experience in this field over the years and shall gladly contribute to the reassessment of media and communication in democracy and social change processes.

1 <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/3428/a/24520;jsessionid=a6hwJzXSALbg>

2 An independent cable and satellite TV network launched in August of 2005 in the US, and in the UK and Ireland in March of 2007. See <http://current.com/> for more information.

