

Media Development – a ten year perspective

By Gordon Adam¹

The past ten years have seen rapid developments in terms of media practice, technological advance and the role of the donor agencies. What follows is my brief personal overview of these changes in terms of journalism in fragile states, which are the focus for increasing amounts of development funding.

The overarching goal of conflict sensitive communication training has been to change the way journalists practice their craft: in the past it has often been a mouthpiece of state propaganda or a means of making money. The aim now is putting the interests of people at the heart of their work.

Given the chance, journalists quickly embrace the concept of working for positive change even in sensitive situations. With sustained training and mentoring as in the case of the [DFID funded Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme \(NSRP\)](#), most quickly realise that poor journalism can contribute to violence, whilst accurate reporting and providing platforms for well researched debate can help defuse tensions in society. NSRP is DFID's biggest peace-building programme, and it partners with government, civil society and the media in a number of initiatives aimed at tackling drivers of violence in the country.

Following the recent peaceful Nigerian elections, I was impressed by one radio programme controller who listened to ads from different political parties and politely returned all that he thought might incite violence, suggesting a rewording - despite the risk of losing airtime revenue. Another programme controller in the volatile northern city of Kano ran a comprehensive campaign that broadcast the slogan "Election violence: count me out!" over 16,000 times over three months, obtaining endorsements from celebrities and political and religious leaders.

In Myanmar (Burma), newspaper journalists trained by Internews have rapidly shifted from being partisan reporters to understanding other points of view in the myriad ethnic disputes in the country, and reflecting them in their writing. This feeds into the ongoing peace process, where the attitude of journalists towards realising the need for compromise is key.

In Kenya, relationships between the local language radio station staff and civil society organisations (CSOs) have been transformed through another Internews project. At the heart of the change is (1) an understanding of the broadcasters' role in the 2007 election violence, which was not repeated in 2013; and (2) a move away from the money-led relationship in which CSOs paid in order to put their point across on radio. In Eldoret, the centre of violence in 2007, this has been replaced by a symbiotic relationship where the journalists consult CSO experts in different fields, and the CSOs know how to package their "messages" in order to put across stories of public interest. News reporting is thus more accurate and less biased, and programmes reflect issues of public concern to a much greater extent. In addition, the public express their opinions more frequently and effectively thanks to texting and social media.

These are just a few examples – there are many others that show that public interest journalism is practiced with enthusiasm with the help of appropriate training and supportive media owners. But here is the rub: training has to be long term, and supported by follow-up mentoring in the workplace – there is ample evidence that short term journalism training workshops are ineffective in changing working practices.

Then there is the issue of money: public interest journalism is not cheap, so it has to be subsidised by increased advertising sales in order to convince media owners to invest in it. Advertisers and sponsors are impressed by numbers of readers, listeners or viewers - so the public interest programmes or articles have to attract new audiences. Evidence from the Advertising and Media Product Surveys (AMPS) in Uganda and Nigeria indicate that this has in fact happened, and as a result at least two radio stations in Nigeria have received additional sponsorship.

Much more work needs to be done regarding how radio in particular is financed: the business model of selling airtime “pay to play” should be replaced by selling the media’s ability to reach people – its audiences. This is not a criticism of advertising – far from it, advertising is key to sustainable public interest journalism.

At present, poorly paid journalists are routinely rewarded to cover press events favourably, and to conduct “soft” interviews. Donors pay to have large chunks of airtime set aside for specific agendas: this can range from well-meaning health and farming advice to promotional programmes for political parties and businesses.

This is bad for two main reasons: first, the information is not being subjected to journalistic scrutiny; worryingly, a growing trend has been to promote bogus cures for conditions such as HIV/AIDS through popular radio in Uganda. Secondly, even if the programmes are well researched, they are often produced by third parties funded by donor agencies and the media house staff are not involved. As a result, when donor funds run out, the programmes cease and there are no trained journalists with the interest or commitment to continue the work.

The international donors such as DFID, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the European Union have an important role to play here: over the past ten years, the media has been increasingly seen as an important means of helping to deliver development targets, and more and more money has been made available for media components in projects. But all too often it is spent on “pay and play”.

This fits in well with the target driven approach which is currently (and it appears increasingly) driving donor programmes: it supports paying for and controlling projects and makes the more sustainable, locally owned and locally managed approaches riskier and less attractive. Direct impact at the end of projects is easier to “prove”, and evaluations looking at whether this is sustained over the longer term are very rare.

Persuading donors to prescribe interacting with the media in a more sustainable way is an uphill struggle. Preoccupied as they are with spending unprecedented amounts of funding DFID staff, for instance, are increasingly becoming fund managers rather than experts in the nitty-gritty of development work, something that the UK’s parliamentary watchdog on international development noted with concern in [its most recent report](#).

Ironically, it is almost exactly ten years since DFID's Information and Communication for Development (ICD) unit was closed down. During its brief lifetime, the Unit commissioned media development work and provided a widely respected source of expertise on how the fast moving media technologies could best be deployed. A new ICD unit is needed which can provide funding for innovative media initiatives, monitor the results and promote good practice within DFID and internationally. The past decade may have seen the media "mainstreamed" in development, but it has a long way to go before it becomes a sustainable resource.

¹ Gordon Adam is a Director of iMedia Associates and has worked in media development for over 20 years. Previously he worked at BBC World Service Radio as a current affairs producer, writer and later manager of the BBC Pashto Section, where he initiated a number of development communication projects for Afghanistan. For 9 years he led an annual module on Media and Conflict for the Master's programme in Communication for Development at Malmö University. E-mail: gordon@imediaassociates.org