

By RONEL SCHEFFER

DEVELOPMENT journalism is essentially critical and adversarial, according to Graeme Addison, head of journalism at the Natal Technikon. In a paper on the 'watchdog role' of development journalism, Addison argues that development journalists should identify with the grassroots and maintain an adversarial relationship with authority and a critical distance from development planners.

He draws a distinction – by no means cut-and-dried though – between 'journalism' and 'media work', the former being associated with the mass media, while media work finds its place in development organisations.

Why the media must love to be hated

'Development journalism entails a process of social auditing. It reports on development projects, assesses them, and reflects their value for those whom they are supposed to serve.'

Addison notes the dilemma created for community media, many of which originated in the struggle against apartheid, by this critical function of development journalism and media work.

'It is a difficult transition from revolutionary rhetoric to the actual business of government. Will a critical inheritance translate into a lively culture of criticism in the future? One hopes so, and the issue is in the forefront of many minds in the media.'

Addison stresses that if 'the people' are to be served by the media, the 'people's voice' cannot be confused with the voice of government. 'An oppositional frame of mind – even if this does not translate into direct political opposition – is the best guarantee that social transformation will be carried out in the interests of the people.'

Development communications at large need to be critically driven, says Addison, although it is not always easy to ask plain questions, and extracting straight answers is almost certain to upset people in the project hierarchy.

'Time and again in the context of projects, media workers encounter evidence of confusion, lack of consultation, delays, losses, mismanagement, corruption and plain abuses of power. A critical input is needed to alert the communities, organisations, managements and sponsors to the signs of misdirection and malfeasance.

'It is often difficult for people working with organisations to air constructive criticisms. Their own ideology may inhibit them, but also the organisation may suppress information and debate.'

Addison says recent revelations about the large-scale corruption in the Department of Development Aid suggest that development is one of those areas where the press needs to be especially vigilant. With the coming of a majority government committed to social

spending, the risks of mismanagement and corruption are ever greater.

Addison says modern liberation movements have tended to mix the media worker's role with that of the journalist. The journalist as media worker is expected to mobilise, organise, activate and teach the masses.

'This remains controversial because it departs from the paradigm of journalistic objectivity. But, clearly, development journalism must spring from this approach.'

The creed of objectivity, Addison points out, grew up with the world's news agencies, which aimed to sell their stories to newspapers ranging across the political spectrum – so objectivity has an instrumental value rather than being a philosophical absolute.

In South Africa the Newspaper Press Union's code of conduct (rejected by professional unions) endowed the major newspapers with the role of common carriers of news, putatively free of bias or sectional interest.

'It was not so, of course,' says Addison. 'The corporate media elaborated a racially fragmented system of news and views in which sensitive items were either self-censored or "balanced" with the responses of state spokespersons.'

In the final analysis, says Addison, all communication personnel have journalistic responsibilities, while the social responsibilities of journalism imply some commitment to democratic values and social upliftment.

'The connecting link is the idea that communication serves the right of all people to know, especially to know about things that affect their lives directly – as development programmes are indeed designed to do.'

Addison concludes that the mass media have an important role to play in both mobilising support for programmes and in drawing attention to their shortcomings.

He uses as an example the *Sowetan*, which has been committed by editor Aggrey Klaaste to 'nation-building'. This commitment entails both support for liberation and a critical attitude towards the conduct of movements.

AT A conference on media and development at Rhodes University in April, there was an air of resignation about the contribution that the mass media could be expected to make towards development in South Africa in the immediate future.

It seemed that, at best, we can hope to influence the media to become 'development sensitive' and to gear itself for playing a greater role in this field in future.

The conference was arranged around the theme of 'Making media work for Southern Africa's development'. If this theme reflected elements of a rigid 'development brief for the media, it quickly became clear in the discussions that this was neither feasible nor desirable and that it would probably be resisted at most levels of the industry.

In fact, throughout the conference, which was hosted by the journalism department and AIA (Africa Information Afrique) news agency, there were voices protesting against a narrow instrumentalist view of the mass media, particularly as blatant agents for specific political programmes.

The loudest protests came from delegates from neighbouring countries, editors and academics who cautioned against what was referred to as 'majority phobia journalism' – reporting to please a perceived majority audience. 'Unless we tell the truth we do not give democracy a chance to thrive,' one of these delegates warned.

It was generally agreed that the mainstream media were trapped by outdated news agendas and that their journalists and managements still had to discover what role they could play in development, however broadly or narrowly one defines the concept.

Unrepresentative of the wider community and with low levels of specialisation and a poor investigative culture, the present body of journalists also seems hopelessly ill-equipped to make a meaningful contribution at this stage, even if only to tell the story of the development challenges facing the country. The conference heard, for example, that not a single corporate newspaper had a journalist deployed on the development beat, nor is there any sign of plans to do so.

This thoroughly gloomy picture was lightened somewhat by Shaun Johnson, political editor of *The Star*, who remarked that the flaws of the mainstream media were so well documented that people were overlooking and not taking advantage of the opportunities that had opened up in this sector of the media in the last few years.

Johnson argued that the interests of the



AIA editor Geoffrey Nyarota and Hein Marais of *Work in Progress*

A new(s) angle on development

media bosses and the majority of people were beginning to converge – and that it was therefore not unrealistic to assume that newspapers would become more relevant as development tools in the near future. 'The white-centric, Eurocentric gatekeeper is on the ropes and being overtaken by history,' he said.

Support for the latter contention came from Doret Jansen, group editor of *Klerksdorp Record*, the flagship of a network of freesheets serving towns – and now also townships – in that region. She said the transition to a more inclusive readership was not resisted by Perskor, or even the traditional readers, and the papers were showing steady growth in circulation.

Kumi Naidoo, director of education with Sached Trust, said the efforts of the commercial press in education, although probably well-meaning, had not yielded high educational value. He said Sached had recently been approached to take over the three educational pages that appear daily in the Africa edition of *The Star*.

'If newspapers throughout the country

begin carrying high quality, relevant educational supplements which address marginalised constituencies, then the education movement as a whole will also have a vested interest in supporting such newspapers,' said Naidoo.

The conference – mercifully perhaps – did not spend much time debating definitions of development. Some contributions did however indicate that horizons have been extended around what constitutes development, and how it could be achieved.

Addressing himself to the left of the political spectrum, Hein Marais, assistant editor of *Work in Progress*, said media on the left had yet to come to understand that development is not simply about housing, clinics, roads, wells, literacy, civics and so on.

'Fundamentally it's about enabling South Africans to live up to their potentials, to live their lives extensively.

'It means recognising that the disco every Saturday night might carry as much importance – development – as keeping the clinic on the go.

'The left's aversion to popular culture is

more than an embarrassment, more than an albatross around its proud neck – it's a basically authoritarian posture towards the mass out there, and the lives it lives.'

Marais said the left should be exploring the appeal of popular entertainment like soap operas and learn from this when addressing itself to the community. 'Why aren't we writing soaps that project the values we aspire towards, that we know the audience of Kwakhala Nonini aspires towards?' he asked.

Speaking on development priorities in the southern African region and realities that evade the media, Vivienne Taylor of the University of the Western Cape, said in many instances the gap between the media as agents of change and the people's concrete reality seemed to be increasing.

The media, she said, showed a tendency to look at the number and range of social problems rather than the intensity, the root causes and also those who are the most vulnerable. Rural areas, informal settlements, children and youth and women were among those priority areas that were not given enough attention, said Taylor.

She argued that quite often the importance of media in promoting social change was misconceived. 'The media, in part because of how it operates and the function it performs does not play a critical role in putting forward the origins, the root causes of social problems.'

However, as the southern African region attempts to promote regional integration and economic and social co-operation to address the development crisis, the media needs to determine the extent to which it can be a catalyst for change.

'News should not be only a collection of raw facts about the world, reflecting events with debatable but empirically determinable accuracy.

'It is an important part of the cultural system of modern society, particularly concerned with providing, in a preliminary fashion, frameworks for handling new and recurring problems of and for society.'

Whether the media could help to provide frameworks for new and old problems was an important part of the challenge. 'It calls for the directing of attention in a responsible manner towards some types and aspects of conflict and change,' said Taylor.

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