

13. Talking the talk

Navigating frameworks of development communication

Abstract: Journalism in Melanesia faces many challenges. Journalists strive for independence and objectivity while carefully navigating the needs and demands of communities, fragile states, and increasingly repressive governments. Personal safety is a concern in some places and there seems to be no abate to the growing encroachments on press freedom. There are also more insidious pressures. The influence of the global aid industry means that Melanesian journalists may find themselves under pressure to conform to dominant narratives of development in order to appease donors and training providers. This can result in journalism that paints a misleading picture of the way things are, instead showing donors and international interests what they want to see. This article offers a critical review of the approaches to development communication that may impact on the ways in which Melanesian journalists are able to work within this pervasive development discourse.

Keywords: communication for development, development, development communication, journalism, media for development, media development, Melanesia, Melanesia Media Freedom Forum

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Introduction

THE IMPORTANCE of a free and independent press cannot be overstated. There have recently been a number of direct challenges, even attacks, on press freedom in Melanesia levelled by governments and other powerful groups (Robie, 2018). The focus of this article though lies with a more insidious subversion of press freedom in the form of the development industry. The development industry has a significant impact upon the way journalists are able to do their jobs. While development journalism has significant potential to contribute to the media landscape in Melanesia (Robie, 2013), the influence of the development industry seems to overpower the benefits. Papoutsaki observed this directly in a 2008 review of development reporting in the South Pacific:

In most cases, journalists based in capitals get their material from press conferences and duly report on how AusAID, NZAID, EU, JICA, UNESCO,

UNDP and other aid and development agencies have spent or plan to spend their aid funds on development programmes. (Papoutsaki, 2008, p. 27)

This represents a key problem with some models of development journalism that is broadly symptomatic of the broader influence of the development industry. This article presents a critical exploration of the dominant models of communication for development and social change, and discusses the impacts they may have on reporting in Melanesia.

The development juggernaut

Development is big business. It is a multibillion-dollar industry, involving every country in the world either as a donor or a recipient or, increasingly, both (Ramalingam, 2013). Hobart reminds us that though ‘the prevailing rhetoric is of altruistic concern for the less fortunate, it is wise to remember that development is big business’ (2002, p. 2). Indeed, while development should lead to human progress, this is not necessarily always the case (Robie, 2008). Powell and Seddon go so far as to refer to the development industry as ‘a monstrous multinational alliance of global corporations, a kind of juggernaut’ (1997, p. 3). Much like other big businesses, not only does the development industry respond to global demand, but it finds ways of shaping demand to suit its own interests (Powell & Seddon, 1997). These interests are not explicit but are pervasively shaped by a framework of beliefs and assumptions about systems, problems, human agency, social structures, and the nature of change itself; beliefs that guide the way the development juggernaut learns, makes decisions, relates to external actors, and assesses itself (Ramalingam, 2013, p. 125). Manyozo refers to this phenomenon as an ‘organised systemic discourse’, that sees oppression operate through these ‘structured, orderly and symbolic set of structures and processes and systems’ (2017, p. 35). Both symptomatic and supportive of these structures are the institutions—local and international NGOs, donors, foreign governments, financial lenders—institutional oppression is essential to holding this ‘regime of rules, regulations and arbitrary considerations’ together (Manyozo, 2017, p. 23). These institutions, supported by a systemic discourse, serve to support the dominance of the development industry around the world. The robustness of the development industry has stood the test of time and seems impervious to critique. Despite the extensive and high-profile critiques levelled at the development and aid industries on the basis of inefficacy and economics (Easterly, 2006; Moyo, 2009; Ramalingam, 2013, among many others), the juggernaut rolls on. The reason for this could be attributed to the robust system of beliefs underpinning the sectors that serves as self-reinforcement and acts as somewhat of a shield against these incisive criticisms. Manyozo terms this phenomenon ‘the spectacle of development’ which involves the ‘production, exchange and utilisation’ of imaginaries that are based

on stereotypes, fail to acknowledge difference, and silence the voices of marginalised groups (2017, p. 14). Considering development as a performative spectacle provides a useful frame for understanding the insidious ways in which development and, subsequently communication for development, shapes the lives of so-called ‘beneficiaries’.

Media, communication and development

The use of communication within development agendas is a complex area of research; any research within this field must engage with literature in the fields of both development and communication, as well as countless intersecting fields such as media and audience research, behavioural studies, economics and political theory to name just a few. The terminology in itself also defies simple definition. Terms describing the phenomenon of using communication in development have undergone many re-inventions and paradigm shifts. A number of scholars and practitioners have extensively deconstructed the history and movement of paradigms and definitions around development and communication (Dagron & Tufte, 2006; McAnany, 2012; Servaes, 2008). Rather than engage in what Mansell (1982) calls ‘superficial revisionism’ by reiterating these arguments, this research opts to use Manyozo’s (2012) suggested terminology of ‘media, communication and development’. The use of this term clearly demarcates the distinctive but interrelated aspects of the field without assigning overt value or meaning to any one in particular. The emphasis here is on approaches rather than an overarching term, approaches that question the concepts of development communication, communication for development, and communication for development and social change as one homogenous field of study (*ibid.*). Grounding enquiry through these approaches or subdisciplines also contributes to mainstreaming the field and provides a solid foundation from which to operate (Lie & Servaes, 2015)

Media, communication and development (MCD), and the definition of development, as they have been employed in this article, are intentionally broad. Specific definitions can be limiting and can fail to take into account the diversity of development communication projects. Manyozo explains that ‘the different approaches that characterise the study and practice of the field of MCD makes it very impractical to develop a single theory or model that may attempt to explain the heterogeneous field’ (2012, p. 52). The success of these approaches is heavily dependent on context and which approach is more appropriate of the cultural, political and social environment in which it takes place (Servaes, 2008). Similarly, Lie and Servaes write of framing the field within a ‘communication for development and social change’, in terms of subdisciplines as a way of moving from ‘an emphasis on homogeneity toward an emphasis on differences’ (2015, p. 252). As such, rather than offering a single, prescriptive theory for development

communication or definition of development, it is more useful to examine the predominant approach to media, communication and development. Scott (2014) identifies three intersections of development studies and media studies as C4D (communication for development), media development and media representations of development. The latter of which refers mostly to the work of advertising, marketing and public relations in shaping the perceptions of audiences in the global North around the global South and development activities. While Scott writes of the importance of these activities in a holistic approach to development, they fall outside the scope of this article.

Media for development

Media for development (M4D) is a form of C4D intervention and refers to the use of media as a tool to influence the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of a public for development purposes. M4D may include diverse forms of media such as traditional advertising and marketing campaigns, development journalism, and education-entertainment in the form of soap operas. In this approach, the perceived development problem is a lack of information, therefore the solution to that problem is to simply provide that information (Scott, 2014). M4D draws its theoretical underpinnings from the modernisation paradigm of early C4D theory (Scott, 2014). Based on the work of several key scholars, namely Lerner, Rogers and Schramm, modernisation suggested that developmental problems were the result of traditional cultures and could be addressed simply by introducing modern values and technologies. This paradigm was characterised by top-down, centralised approaches towards development with Schramm (1964) going so far as to imply that development activities should be entirely government-run. The primary failing of this perspective was the assumption that a Western model for capitalistic, economic growth was applicable everywhere (Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Scott, 2014). Imperialist overtones aside, an additional criticism of the modernisation paradigm was its simplistic, prescriptive approach which can be summarised through one of the more prominent theories of the paradigm. Everett Rogers' (1995) diffusion of innovations theory detailed the stages that individuals work through in order to adopt innovations, which were assumed to facilitate development. As 'awareness' and 'knowledge' were the two initial stages, the diffusion theory made use of mass media to achieve these steps, engaging in a one-way transfer of information (McAnany, 2012; Scott, 2014). Both the diffusion theory and modernisation more broadly were reflective of communication theory at the time, which assumed the communication process was linear and predictable (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). An apt example of the modernisation paradigm, its problems and its historical connection with M4D was a failed programme in Samoa, in which lessons in schools were delivered via television programmes. It was

posthumously summarised by the American project advisers who were asked ‘primarily whether television was feasible, not whether it was best’ (Schramm, Nelson, & Betham, 1981, p. 193). Despite these apparent failings, modernisation continues to influence development initiatives such as M4D. Waisbord (2005) observes that, while the diffusion/modernisation paradigm is widely regarded as outdated, no single paradigm has replaced it. In fact, these early C4D paradigms still seem to inform practice and policy (Tacchi, 2013). Though it is far from the preferred method of affecting development initiatives, there remains a place for top-down, modernisation-style approaches. Hence the prolific nature of the M4D approach. This research will build on the literature to date by exploring the listening practices of community radio stations. Understanding these practices has implications for future M4D interventions: a more thorough understanding of the ways in which stations and their audiences interact can assist in the development of more holistic M4D interventions that engage with audiences in a more relevant way.

The major critique associated with M4D is the assumption that the provision of information is enough to solve development problems. Thomas (2008, p. 35) conceptualises this phenomenon as ‘poverty as a lack of access’: theoretically, providing information should act as a catalyst for access to other services but in reality there is a disconnect. Simply disseminating information is not enough to effect long-term behavioural changes (Dagron & Bleck, 2001; Scott, 2014; Servaes, 2008). M4D approaches can fail to take into account complex social, cultural, economic and environmental constraints, and can be limited by a narrow definition of development. The Western-centric roots of M4D can sometimes lie close to the surface through assumptions that modern ideas are superior to cultural practices and traditions. In terms of community radio, Pavarala (2015) concedes that M4D is a ‘legitimate idea’ but that using media as simply a way of disseminating ‘development’ is a legacy of a postcolonial nation-building paradigm in which audiences are seen as merely passive recipients of information. Though in some circumstances, particularly in regards to health issues, there is unquestionable value in using the media to promote modern technologies, however there are many grey areas: discussions around family sizes, for example. As Waisbord (2005, p. 89) considers, ‘Who had the right to determine which cultural practices are desirable and need to be preserved?’

In addition to cultural norms and values, M4D sometimes fails to consider the economic and environmental constraints facing audiences, and the fundamental sources of these issues. Manyozo (2012) goes so far as to argue that M4D projects are worthless if they do nothing to address the root causes of inequality. Scott (2014) elaborates:

You may know that certain healthcare services have recently become free, and you may even have changed your attitude towards the efficacy of non-

traditional healthcare, but if you live 50 kilometres from the nearest health centre, such knowledge and attitude cannot easily translate into changes in behaviour. (Scott, 2014, p. 28)

The issue lies not in awareness but in infrastructure and access to services, problems that cannot be solved through communication interventions alone. Assuming that information is the only barrier to solving development problems is simplistic at best. Within this criticism of M4D also lies the assumption that audiences are passive, predictable and will accept media messages without question. Disregarding audience agency reveals the problematic behaviour models used by many M4D interventions (*ibid.*). In this respect, M4D is reminiscent of the banking model of education, so strongly critiqued by Freire (2000), in which teachers simply make ‘deposits’ of information that students passively receive, file and store. This is deeply problematic as Appadurai (2004, p. 63) writes that a lack of agency or voice is one of the ‘gravest lacks’ of the poor.

Participatory communication

Participatory communication is a C4D-driven approach and focuses on a dialogical approach to communication rather than the more linear model seen in M4D. Local participation and collective decision-making are involved throughout the development process, from identifying the issues to taking action. Participatory communication also places emphasis on indigenous knowledge and experiences, which are understood to be essential to understanding and addressing local problems (Jacobson, 2003). This approach holds a lot of potential with Servaes and Malikhao (2005) suggesting that participatory communication could represent a new paradigm in development communication.

The participatory communication approach can trace its origins back to the work of Paulo Freire and the Latin American school of thought on development communication (Manyozo, 2012). Emerging independently from Western development thinking, early participatory communication projects yielded success stories like Radio Sutatenza in Colombia and the miners’ radio stations in Bolivia (Gumucio-Dagron, 2005; Manyozo, 2009, 2012). Freire played an instrumental role in the evolution of participatory communication and its role in development. Though his work was developed for an education setting, it has been widely applied to development communication (Scott, 2014). Freire advocated for active participation through dialogue with a goal of empowerment or ‘*conscientização*’—action-oriented awareness (Freire, 2000; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). Freire also emphasises the importance of dialogue, a sentiment echoed by Servaes and Malikhao who refer to dialogue as ‘inherent in participation’ (2008, p. 170). Dialogue is a recurrent theme throughout the literature on participatory communication. Scott (2014, p. 49) defines dialogue as an ‘ongoing, inclusive

and multidirectional exchange between equals'. The importance of dialogue and participatory communication were formally recognised when, in the MacBride report, UNESCO advocated for employing participatory communication as a way of supporting development from below. The report placed particular emphasis on dialogical 'communication between men' (MacBride, 1980, p. 205). Waisbord (2014) suggests that, in a participatory model, communication is understood in terms of dialogue. Furthermore, Jacobson (2016) suggests that dialogue plays a key role in how participatory communication supports Amartya Sen's aforementioned argument for the use of a capabilities approach as a way of understanding development. He explains that participatory communication, through public dialogue, shares an emphasis on citizen agency with the capabilities approach. Dialogue and participatory communication allow for the comparison of different realities and perceptions while building trust among stakeholders, which plays a crucial role in identifying and solving collective problems (Mefalopulos, 2005). Participatory communication represents a way of approaching media, communication and development that highlights the importance of agency and dialogue in facilitating inclusive, grassroots development.

While widely accepted at the theoretical and policy level, as evidenced through the aforementioned literature, there remain questions about how participatory communication works in practice. Tacchi explains that although dialogue means 'valuing voice, recognition and respect, we are still fundamentally lacking an understanding of the information and communication needs and aspirations of people living in poverty' (2012, pp. 661–662). This encapsulates one of the aims of this research, which will focus on how media can explore these communication needs necessary for meaningful participatory communication.

Many of the critiques associated with participatory communication relate to balancing meaningful, participatory activities with the demands of funding bodies and reporting requirements. Slater captures the essence of the problem in his blunt assessment: 'You get repeat funding if you can demonstrate social outcomes and outputs directly or potentially attributable to your media intervention' (2013, p. 28). In reality, particularly in regards to participatory communication projects, drawing conclusions and distilling 'social outcomes and outputs' into something measurable and comparable is a complex, difficult task. This leads to some of the primary critiques of participatory communication. Thomas (2014, p. 10) provides a scathing assessment in this sense arguing that there has been an 'evisceration of meaning' and that participation is now more important for funding and report-writing than a tool to build the capacity of local communities. Participation could easily be accused of being just a buzzword, one that has been superficially co-opted to redeem or salvage the dominant (modernisation) paradigm (Huesca, 2008). There is, however, ambiguity in the term participation; it has been described as a continuum ranging from manipulation and passive

participation to empowerment (Arnstein, 1969; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). The broadness of that definition is somewhat unsatisfying in terms of a concrete definition of participatory communication that could be used to preserve the essence of the approach from being co-opted. Scott (2014) recognises the elusive nature of a strict definition of participatory communication and suggests that participatory and diffusion models may be complementary rather than contradictory. An example of this could be public health crises or emergencies when fast, centralised decision-making is necessary in the first instance (Waisbord, 2001). Slower, participatory programmes could still be useful in this example but perhaps in reflective, preventative roles once the immediate crises are resolved. While aspects of participatory communication may have been co-opted, or incorporated, into programs that align with the dominant paradigm, there remains scope for the two approaches to complement one another and employ different levels of participation to achieve their goals.

While many of the critiques around participatory communication relate to reporting and the difficulties associated with quantifying the results of participatory projects for funding bodies, research itself also presents issues. Much of the research on participatory communication is not reflective of what is happening on the ground. As Slater (2013, p. 3) puts it: ‘the North provides the theory; the South provides the data’. Aside from the cultural and linguistic barriers this presents, many participatory communication projects remain invisible to those outside the community as they are not promoted, funded or associated with major development bodies (Gumucio-Dagron, 2008). Thomas (2014) concurs, making the observation that, while large-scale, highly visible projects struggle with integrating true participation, small-scale projects are much more likely to embrace an all-encompassing approach to participation. Participation though is a term laden with different values, a further key critique of the participatory communication movement. Who is able to participate and how, represents a fundamental challenge of participatory communication (Backhaus, 2019).

Media development

The final approach within media, communication and development to be examined is media development. This refers to building the capacity of the media in order to achieve and support a free, plural, professional and sustainable press (Deane, 2014). Building media capacity may refer to physical infrastructure and advocacy work to improve government policies, media ownership and training opportunities (Manyozo, 2012). As opposed to the C4D approaches that will be discussed in upcoming sections, media development in its purest form is focussed on the support of journalism and democracy rather than achieving specific development goals or agendas (Deane, 2014). Despite what traditional media development dictates, UNESCO has unequivocally linked

media development with human development in an International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) report (Peña-López, 2008). Behind this link is the understanding that a free and open media is a necessary condition for human development. This is in accordance with Sen's (1999) aforementioned assertion of development as freedom in that the expansion of freedom of expression can be seen as a means of development itself. By building the infrastructure necessary for a free and independent press, media development as an approach also aligns with Sen's capabilities approach. Both media development and participatory communication 'can be directly equated with capabilities that communities may choose to prefer in greater or lesser amounts' (Jacobson, 2016, p. 16). How exactly this occurs and the relationship between media and development is also extensively discussed by Scott. He cites a number of empirical studies that illustrate a link between media and development (see Armah & Amoah, 2010; Norris & Zinnbauer, 2002, in Scott 2014). Assuming that this is indeed the case, there are a number of different forms of media development activities. Manyozo (2012) classifies these activities into two strands: good governance and community development.

The good governance, or dominant, stream of media development focuses more on facilitating broader systemic changes to support media environments. Key aspects of this stream include supporting plurality and diversity of media, professional capacity-building, creating and maintaining an enabling environment, developing infrastructure, and building media literacy in audiences (Manyozo, 2012; Peña-López, 2008; Scott, 2014). The good governance stream of media development derives from political theory and the assumption that because a pluralistic and independent press has contributed to democracy in the West, it will do the same in the global South (Manyozo, 2012). This assumption is supported broadly: Pavarala and Malik make specific reference to the importance of plurality of the media in the current global media environment. Rather than the misuse of state power, they believe that the biggest threat to media freedom is the unchecked evolution of media organisations into multinational conglomerates controlled by a handful of wealthy, powerful owners (Pavarala & Malik, 2007). A large part of this stream, what Scott cites as 'the most common and indeed the most well-funded of media development overall', is journalism training (2014, p. 80). While generally considered important, questions have been raised over the widespread emphasis on this aspect of media development. Javuru (2012) observes that all journalists, well-trained or not, work within the constraints of the system. Even a generous training budget does little to counteract a stifling regulatory environment and limited freedom of the press. Rather than broad, sweeping priorities, decisions about which aspects of media development to focus on should be based on the prevailing local circumstances (Scott, 2014). While work in the good governance stream is vital for media development, a

balance needs to be struck between broad regulatory change and specialised, local interventions.

The second stream, the ‘community development’ stream, focusses more on small-scale, local interventions with an emphasis on participation and indigenous knowledge communication systems (IKCS). The primary work of this stream involves increasing citizen access and participation in local media by working within, rather than in opposition to, traditional governance systems (Manyozo, 2012). Participation and equal access forms a major part of this stream of media development. A major influence is Habermas’ classic theory of the media as a public sphere, a space where public opinion can be formed through open access to information and respectful, deliberative debate (1991). At a local level, IKCS are essential to creating and maintaining the local public sphere and therefore facilitating gossip, discussion and dialogue on relevant issues. The work of media development activities in this space focus more on developing communication processes within the community (Manyozo, 2012). This stream of media development illustrates the broadness of the field: from small-scale community media interventions to high-level regulatory negotiations, media development encompasses a vast range of activities.

The primary critique of media development activities is that they represent a Western-centric, modernisation approach to development that focuses on external interventions rather than local knowledge. Like many aspects of modern development communication, media development has roots in the modernisation work of Lerner and Schramm, and later UNESCO (Manyozo, 2012). These roots can still be seen through the many interventionist-based media development activities. Indeed, Berger notes that media development discourse generally is narrow in its definitions: media development is considered as ‘externally originating proactive steps to “develop” the media ... between North–South developers and “developees”’ while more organic, local growth is not perceived as a form of media development (2010, 550). The formation of news network Al Jazeera is a high-profile example of this double standard: significant for the perceived ‘development’ of Qatar’s media landscape, yet rarely considered an example of media development (*ibid.*). Scott (2014, 96) provides a succinct summary of this critique:

Focusing on media development as an external intervention is problematic because it obscures the central role of internal or indigenous developments within the media. This is important because the most successful examples of media development are widely agreed to be those driven by local governments and people, rather than donors.

Media development programmes focus on establishing and supporting a pluralistic media environment. Though there is undeniable value in projects of this

nature, locally-driven media development projects have enjoyed more success than interventionist approaches.

Conclusion

It is clear that the field of media, communication and development is complex and that the dominant approaches within this field come with a range of critiques. Engaging with these critiques and understanding the dominant approaches is essential to finding ways that journalists can exploit this industry rather than be exploited. There is a complex and powerful system at play that aims to influence the ways in which journalism is conducted in the Global South. These dominant approaches to communication for development also fail to capture discussions around the role of development journalism in fragile and fledgling nations. Indeed, Berger argues for ‘unbundling’ media development and looking at sub-categories such as ‘journalism development’ to allow for the integration of new media and the practices that come with it (Berger, 2010).

Further, what was central to the critiques of these dominant approaches is the danger of top-down media, communication and development projects managed by external interests. Clumsy, external interventions, as well-intentioned as they may be, can do more harm than good. As Bohane (2006, p. 4) observes, much political and journalistic discourse fails to recognise the catalysing role of ‘*kastom* and so-called “cult” movements’. Interventionist approaches are ineffective, true change and support for media and journalists must be driven by the grassroots. As Robie (2013, p. 105; 2014) argues, it is not just development but ‘deliberative and critical development journalism’ that have an essential role to play in the future of Melanesia. The unique blend of Western, democratic standards of journalism and Pacific development media must be defended (Cass, 2004). Gatherings like the Melanesia Media Freedom Forum (MMFF) offer essential opportunities to create communities of practice among Melanesian journalists and media workers. Knowledge sharing among those directly impacted by external communication for development interventions is essential if journalists are to be able to do their jobs.

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