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Towards the Democratisation of Public Communication: The Need to Reconsider the Criteria for News

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The following reflections fall into the broad category of public philosophy of communication, or communication ethics. All philosophy and all ethics analyse phenomena, or reality, from the perspective of certain principles. The normative framework from which I proceed is the humanistic concept of the ultimate value and dignity of the human being, and therefore of the essential equality of all persons – not just before the law, but more fundamentally in their right to participate in the public realm.

The notions of human dignity, and of equality between people, do not contradict the roles, ranks and status, both ascribed and achieved, which regulate relationships in our communities and societies, and consequentially the patterns of behaviour, such as respect and social sanctions. The concept of equality in a structured community or society can, perhaps, best be explained by the attitude demanded in African societies

towards two age groups, the young and the old. Both these groups may be said to be dependent, often physically, and vulnerable. They therefore demand special attention, care, and, above all, respect. But it is not just your child or our child but any child which deserves protection. Likewise, any old woman or man is worthy of special recognition, reverence and respect.

Respect for human dignity and the principle of equality – regardless of sex, education, ethnicity, wealth, status, etc. – are the foundations of democracy. Democracy is a political and social principle which extends to many spheres of life, but particularly to public communication. Communication is at the heart of the process of democratisation, and to do this it must be democratised.

What do we mean by democratisation of communication? In the words of the MacBride Report (1980: 166):

Democratization (of communication) is the process whereby: (a) the individual becomes an active partner and not a mere object of communication; (b) the variety of messages exchanged increases; and (c) the extent and quality of social representation or participation in communication are augmented.

From the perspective of a public philosophy of communication, it is one of the roles of the media to be a catalyst in the democratic process of society. This presupposes the awareness that democracy in any society is never fully achieved. As an ideal it is never fully reached. It is therefore always a struggle. The Latin American experts' meeting in Embu, Brazil, in 1982 went a step further by saying:

Democracy is above all a fundamental human attitude, expressed in communication by abolishing authoritarian forms and relying on the conscious, organised and collective action of the oppressed. Pluralistic participation of social sectors should manifest itself in the different levels of communication process, particularly in the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural goods (Uranga, 1985: 16).

There would be a great deal to say about the 'conscious, organised and collective' communication actions of the oppressed, or peasants and workers, or women, which have emerged in many countries of the South. My contention now is that the mass media in general are, by and large, autocratic rather than democratic. They are primarily concerned with the interests of the elite rather than with the aspirations of those whom we disparagingly call 'ordinary people', or, in the terminology of the left, 'the masses', who have no face, no name, and presumably no will of their own.

To rectify this, a new approach to journalism is needed; in fact, a change in the professional culture of journalists and broadcasters; and this has often been overlooked in the discussion on the democratisation of public communication.

The conventional criteria of news – an obstacle of democratisation

The mass media are characterised by a set of conventional 'rules' which are applied to the selection and treatment of news in a fairly uniform way. These criteria for news have been made most explicit in North American and British journalism and are part of the pattern of most news agencies. They have also been adopted by the mass media in most countries of the South. The adherence to these conventional rules of the news media is part of the acceptance of a professional journalistic culture; but it also reflects the society in which we live and the role the news media have to maintain the dominance of the dominant sectors of society.

Here then is a critique of the conventional criteria for news – from the perspective of the 'ordinary people'.

The very concept of news is tied up with that of *timeliness*: how recently has something happened? Timeliness signifies an 'event' that has taken place yesterday, or last week, or, as we sometimes write, 'recently'. 'Recently' serves us well when we report on an accident that happened some time ago in a remote

rural area. But we tend to be lost when the reality we wish to describe is not an 'event' but a status quo, or, in the words of Johan Galtung, a 'permanent'. The difficulty or inability to determine the time frame of a process, or trend, or status quo, or 'permanent', makes us reject a great deal of news.

Witness the drought situation in some African countries years ago: for months it did not qualify as news, until some TV cameramen stumbled across some hunger victims and shot their pictures. Or what happens in factories, ports, railways, etc.? Unless a politician visits them and makes a speech, or unless an accident occurs, they go largely unreported. It is partly because of the rule of 'timeliness' as a criteria for news that rural reporting and people-centred industrial reporting are so difficult and take third or fifth place in the selection of news.

Another anti-democratic journalistic rule is *prominence*. How important is a person? Following this criterion of news, the mass media make people with power also socially prominent. Power, of course, is measured not only in terms of political responsibility, but also in terms of money and material possessions, in terms of the power play that goes on in politics and the economy. Add to this the prominence awarded by the mass media to the 'glamorous', the beauty queens and kings, and the heroes of our entertainment industry, and of sports, and the picture that emerges is that very few men or women truly qualify as the VIPs of the media, namely those who are either politically powerful or economically rich, or both, and those who have the looks or muscle power or a soft singing voice.

The criterion of prominence does not only apply to people, but also to countries and towns. For a long time, Britain has been one of the elite countries that figured prominently in the press of Anglophone Africa, just as France continues to be the elite country for most of the media in Francophone Africa. But the elite country *par excellence* is now the United States of America, which tends to take precedence over the countries of Europe. And there are, of course, the elite towns within our own

countries, almost always the major cities. An editor seeing the word KweKwe, Zimbabwe, as dateline will scrutinise the item with special care. It is not a place on the journalistic map.

However, there is a problem with some elite persons residing in our elite towns. Are they, as our elected representatives or as ministers of government, not prominent in a way that the media have a duty to cover their travel and their speeches? Of course, they are. In the South, in particular, some political leaders stand for the unity of the nation, the sovereignty of its destiny, and the integrity of leadership. The more they embody these values, the more important they are for the lives of ordinary people. Every nation needs leaders who can inspire people, and when the force of inspiration wanes or even disappears, there is a crisis of confidence and national and social identity.

But even in the best of circumstances, the prominence of the prominent should not go at the expense of the ordinary men, women and children. The powerless are not just individuals but groups of peasants, organisations of workers, associations of women, young men and women, taking initiatives to build their nation as well as their lives.

In continuing the critique of the criteria for news, I shall deal with only two more, namely, 'conflict' and the 'unusual'.

Conflict. We have become so obsessed by this news value that we capitalise on any event that contains even the slightest element of it. A certain phrase of a politician can somehow be interpreted as aimed at his political rivals, and what started as an innocent statement now becomes the opening salvo of an alleged power struggle between politicians. Are we aware of the warlike language we use in political reporting, to keep up the element of conflict, and this not only during election time? 'Minister throws back challenge'; 'Government to fight to the last drop' (meaning it will reorient its economy) – these are typical conflict headlines. Worse than that, if there are no real conflicts to report on, they are created artificially as a form of media entertainment. Sports reporting uses a war-like language.

'Giants are ready to be slain' is the headline of a cricket report (*The Independent*, 22 May 1995).

In short, there is very little space or time in our mass media that can be devoted to problems and issues and achievements which cannot easily be framed in terms of conflict. This is another reason why the lives of ordinary men, women and children are to a large extent excluded from the mass media.

The unusual. The old and utterly ridiculous story of 'man bites dog' is still traded as an example of journalistic criteria. How odd, extraordinary and bizarre must an event appear to qualify as news? It's in this category of news, however, in which ordinary people are covered by the media. If they do something particularly unusual or bizarre, like standing on their heads for four hours, or drinking twenty bottles of beer, they suddenly become news makers. If they figure otherwise in our paper or on the air, then it's usually as victims of accidents and catastrophes.

The traditional criteria for news are only one side of the problem. The other is the media's definition of an 'event', which is equally problematic, and undemocratic.

What is a news event?

When people do something significant, or if something important is happening to them, and when what they are doing or what is happening is of interest to readers or listeners, it is a news event. This is the standard description of 'event' in most textbooks of journalism. Let's examine this definition.

Firstly, we notice that the operative words 'significant', 'important' and 'of interest to readers' are already predetermined by the criteria for news, some of which have just been outlined. 'Important event' really means important person. 'Readers' interest' is to a large extent covered by the criteria of conflict and the bizarre. In practice, therefore, events mean the speeches of the prominent, the controversies of the politicians, and the rituals of public life (like cutting ribbons, opening or closing meetings, etc.).

Secondly, the more 'complete' an event is, the more likely the news media will pick it up. The classical example of a complete event is the speech. Maybe this is the reason why speech reporting is so popular in the mass media. When the speaker says 'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen' and the audience applauds, the event is over and done with. In fact it is very rare that anything really happens during or after a speech. It is usually a public ritual that is complete in itself – no follow-up needed.

Another example of a preferred event is the accident. Two men killed at a construction site – when, where and how – and the event is complete. The significant question 'why?' is sometimes asked. But the follow-up of whether or not safety procedures at the site had improved is rarely done. This type of social construction of news events is particularly prevalent on radio and television. Newspapers are more accustomed to follow-up stories and interpretation of events. Once again, the status quo or the 'permanent' almost totally eludes our definition of news event.

A third aspect of the conventional news event is its need for legitimisation. Some years ago *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were scrutinised with regard to their news sources. The assumption was that these two prestige papers were likely to have a more independent stance on the news than most other American papers. The analysis shows that close to half of the two papers' news content was attributed to US government officials, and another 27 percent to 'foreign officials'. Less than 17 percent came from non-government sources, and only one percent of all news stories was based on the reporters' own observation and analysis. The media's need for attribution is so great that an event becomes a news event if and when it can be attributed to a high source. This has led one researcher to construct a theory of news which he calls the 'politics of illusion' (Lance Bennett, 1983).

A fourth characteristic of 'event' lies in its repetition. News is very repetitive. The reason is that the type of things which qualify as events are already predetermined, the agenda of news

is set, it's all in the news diary. New issues hardly emerge from the reality of people's lives. American researchers have pointed out that most of the problems concerning the environment, particularly the pollution of water, still do not figure on the public agenda of the American media and are therefore largely unreported.

One reason for this is what can be called the corporate journalistic culture. In spite of all the assurances of being servants of the public, most journalists don't really write for the public but what the media expect them to write about. In that you don't want to be an outsider, in spite of the high value attributed to 'scoops.' The media of information are, in many ways, one body, with few dissenting voices.

In the early months of 1980 I happened to be a part-time reporter on the Zimbabwe elections for a European radio network. One day I got a phone call from the editor, telling me that my services had been terminated. I asked why. He told me that what I was saying was entirely different from what the other media reported. I had apparently been grossly out of tune with the rest of redundant messages from Harare, hardly any of which predicted (as I had done) that Robert Mugabe would win by a large margin.

In conclusion, media events, being largely ceremonial, are also repetitive, if not entirely predictable. The result of all this is that the media inevitably create some kind of surface to the social reality we live in, which has very little to do with the real world of ordinary people. To capture that world, we need to develop alternative criteria of news and redefine the meaning of 'event'.

Alternative criteria of news

There are some newspapers, many magazines and some radio and television stations which welcome reports on the problems and issues of ordinary people. Some media managers even wish to have more reports and in-depth stories from rural areas. Such

stories are increasingly acceptable to the established media, provided they are written in the conventional forms (genres) of journalism, i.e. mainly in the forms of news and feature articles. Some papers have introduced new types of features for precisely this purpose, like 'Letter from..', 'Village Voice', 'Life in the day of..', etc. In effect, the rules of journalism are changing. Alternative stories now co-exist in the media with conventional news stories.

But we need to go a step further. Alternative criteria of news should be established, and practised, and taught; and they are to a large extent a reversal of the news values of conventional journalism. What is needed, first and foremost, are *alternative social actors*, or the redefinition of the criterion of prominence. Social actors are those persons or groups of persons who, almost as a matter of right, are covered by the media and can speak through them. If the media make a conscious effort to report on, and, in fact, give preferential treatment to, the manual labourers, and their agricultural and industrial organisations, to the women and their groups, to youth and children and to the forgotten minorities, these persons and groups do in fact become social actors who can speak to the public at large and thus get a place in the public sphere. This may be at the expense of the established social actors, or at least some of them. But it's a price worth paying.

The second rule that needs to be changed is the *framework of time*, and thus the definition of the *event*. Journalists should not only deal with what happened yesterday or last week, but with what is a status quo or a development, none of which can be meaningfully measured in daily or weekly intervals. Thus most of the reports on alternative social actors can be carried by the media this week or next, or even the week after.

The third requirement is *alternative language*. Much of the journalist's training is devoted to story construction, which was developed by Anglo-American journalism and news agencies reporters. It is often referred to as the 'inverted pyramid' method. There is much value in this, particularly for providing

a quick summary of the news. But it also has its limitations. It is almost useless for rural reporting. The story form seldom fits alternative social actors. A new type of narrative must therefore be developed. It is much more demanding of the journalist than our usual language of news. The wave of what some 15 years ago was called 'new journalism' soon discovered that only the best writers can do such observation and participation features. But where 'new journalism' failed, a new type of storytelling might succeed: stories from the bottom up can only be told in feature form.

A fourth criterion for democratic journalism is *empathy*, or *affinity*, which to some extent replaces the news value of 'conflict'. The journalist's empathy for, and affinity with, people and their daily lives and aspirations are at the core of alternative journalism. This, however, requires patient listening rather than quick interviewing. It has sometimes been described as 'barefoot journalism'.

When I said that empathy and affinity would to some extent replace the criterion of conflict, I did not mean that conflicts should be eliminated. What needs to be changed is conflict for conflict's sake, or for the sake of sensationalism. Naturally, the ordinary people live in situations of conflict. Their struggles should figure foremost in reporting. But they struggle to have their conflicts resolved, rather than be treated as some sort of political entertainment.

Some 15 years ago I could not have written this piece on democratisation of public communication or alternative journalism. Now I know that they can be done, and can be taught. But it is demanding. It requires, above all, a commitment. It also requires higher skills than conventional journalism, and finally presupposes the evolution of new genres and new formats of journalistic writing and broadcasting.

This approach to news is part of the new information and communication order, which the non-aligned nations of the South have long demanded. We all know that the NWICO, as proclaimed in 1980, will not be implemented for a long time

on the international level. But if it were implemented on national or local levels, newspapers and news services and news broadcasts would look and sound very different from what they are today.

Yet the concept of a new order is not enough. Nor is the vision of the media as the champions of the people sufficient. What is needed, in addition, is a new type of journalism, a new professional culture and, above all, an ever new commitment to the ideas and ideals of genuine democracy.

References

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