



# The “Development Media” Model and Its Role in the Implementation of South Asia’s Developmental Policies Led by the Government

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## Introduction

The press in South Asia may best be described by the concept of developmental journalism, a concept developed later to supplement the four theories, as the development of communities and giving voice to the underprivileged are major goals of many of the local media in the region. The development press is popular in the region perhaps because South Asia is the least economically developed region on the continent. More than half of the world’s underweight children lived in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, said a recent UNICEF report on the global progress on children’s issues (“Forty-seven percent,” 2006). In India, approximately 47% of the under-five population was underweight. The report found that South Asia was the only region that showed a gender bias with regard to child nourishment, with girls more likely to be underweight than boys. The issue of undernourishment points to the problems of poverty, lack of education, and inequality in the region. In India, communication not only means the transfer of information, but also includes the participation in the society and in the community.

## Content Analysis

The Indian brand of development journalism “focuses on the needs of the poor, the deprived, and the marginalized and emphasizes their effective participation in developmental planning”. It motivates the participation of the people and advocates for their interests instead of the views of the policy makers and the planners. And it promotes social justice for all. Journalists in the country believe that the media should not only carry stories about health campaigns like the one against AIDS but also discuss issues that are important for a civil society because only the mass media can reach the vast rural population and give them a voice in debates affecting their lives. The mass media can also play a crucial role in social progress, as any transitional society will encounter new attitudes, a new mindset, and a new value system. Development journalism enthusiasts in India conducted workshops for social activists to train them to write stories about development issues and workshops for local editors and journalists to familiarize them with realities and issues in local

communities. Commercial newspapers also play a role in development journalism. The Jharkhand-based Prabhat Khabar had been doing development journalism by giving people information on science, Information technology, economics and the comparative financial progress of different states. The paper also conducted “reader’s courts”, where readers could interact with journalists and discuss ways of improving the quality of the paper, much like the role of focus groups in civic or public journalism in the United States.

Radio plays a special role in development journalism in South Asia because of its easy and wide reach in the vast rural areas, where literacy rate is still relatively low. The Indian communications NGO (non-government organization) had been highlighting the importance of community radio in India for over half a decade and called for the extension of community broadcasting. In India, awards are given to mentors of development journalism for encouraging and nurturing journalists to investigate and write on development issues and for supporting journalism initiatives towards “a common social good” [1]. Journalists and media researchers in India and Pakistan criticized some of the mainstream media for their elitist approach, focusing on the prominent while ignoring the plight of the underprivileged in rural communities by following Western news values. The degree of press freedom in South Asia, however, varies considerably from country to country. Once the largest colony in the world, India today is the largest democracy in the world. Only under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was an attempt made to curtail press freedom by declaring a political emergency to suspend civil rights. The government of Narasimha Rao tried to prevent exposes of government corruption under the pretext of protection of privacy. Despite such government attempts at control, the press in India has largely remained private, free, and vibrant. Cushrow R Irani, editor-in-chief and managing director of The Statesman, said that India’s press today is as free as it chooses to be. Chekkutty, editor of Media Focus, wrote, “The Indian media works in an atmosphere of freedom. We are the purveyors of free thoughts and opinions. We do reflect the freedom of expression the Constitution guarantees to our citizens, and we, therefore, are the epitome of a free, liberal society” [2].

With the freedom it enjoys, the press in India often plays its watchdog role seriously. "Newspapers in India are completely free, as free as the newspapers in the United States, as they are privately owned and free of censorship". It is the newspapers that have exposed corruption in India, though some journalists are attacked for their investigative reporting. The Indian press has always been vigilant about protecting its freedom and aggressive in reporting ("Journalism" 2001). Free as it may be as the press in the United States, the Indian press clearly differs from the Western libertarian press system in the perception of its mission. For its social role, the Indian press may be closer to the civic or public journalism in America, which also prescribes an advocacy role for the press. However, in India development journalism represents the aspirations of many journalists, while in America the ethical implications of civic and public journalism are still being debated.

In India, press freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution and the independent court system, which is very similar to the situation in neighboring Pakistan, formerly a part of India before its independence. Behind India, which has a relatively low literacy rate of 65%, Pakistan's literacy rate is even lower at 38%, which limits the growth of its press industry. There are about 1,330 newspapers in print in Pakistan, but only 1% of the population buys a newspaper. The press in Pakistan is independent of the government and mostly privately owned. Major public issues are debated in the press, which has become an instrument for change. In Pakistan no law governs the registration of publications. In recent years, Pakistan has been moving toward greater press freedom, and its press is among the most outspoken in South Asia. In both India and Pakistan when the government tries to crack down on critical press coverage of the government, the courts often strike down government charges in support of press freedom. There are exceptions to the constitutional guarantees of the freedom of speech and of the press in Pakistan, the most important of which is the "reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam" [3]. The Constitution prohibits the ridicule of Islam, of the armed forces, or of the judiciary.

Development journalism is perhaps less developed in Pakistan than in India. Circulation of newspapers in the rural areas of the country is one of the lowest in the world because of the urban orientation of the papers and the cost of subscription in addition to a low literacy rate. The rural market is largely untapped [3]. The dramatic increase in the number of publications in recent years is not supported with trained staff. Many journalists, especially rural ones, lack the basic skills to cover the complex issues important to their communities. However, electoral politics has increased the importance of rural centers in the emerging democracy of Pakistan. Supporting development journalism, the Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) was established to help raise the standards of journalism, particularly of the vernacular and regional press, and to promote greater awareness of social and development issues through the media. In 1999, PPF restarted the rural journalists' skills development project. By 2002 hundreds of Pakistani rural journalists have attended the workshops ("Improving" 2002). The emphasis of the workshops is on improving basic skills of newsgathering and news writing, as

participants are given exercises using actual issues, such as violence against women, environmental issues, child labor, bonded labor, and crime rates. The end of monopoly of the electronic media in Pakistan provides new hopes of reaching a rural audience as radio is acknowledged to be a more suitable and affordable means of providing local communities with a voice of their own. It is more interactive and more suitable for community development. In less than six years, between 2000 and 2006, the broadcast sector completely changed the monolithic landscape that existed for about fifty-three years. But the proliferation of radio stations has created the co-existence of robust liberty and open lawlessness, and commercial interests dominate the airwaves while development journalism still needs time to take hold. Research on the topic, however, is several steps ahead of the media industry. Development journalism is regarded as an Asian model of journalism, stemming from the dissatisfaction with the Western news values that do not serve the cause of national development [4]. Western news values of timeliness, prominence, proximity, conflict, and the bizarre exclude the ordinary people in the news unless they are involved in accidents, violence, or catastrophes. Development journalism, on the other hand, should focus on the educational function of the news, stories about social needs, self-help projects, and obstacles to development. In the exploration of the development journalism model by Asian media researchers, the watchdog role of the media was emphasized, and the media were urged to remain vigilant against government involvement [4]. In Sri Lanka, three newspaper groups dominate the island's newspaper scene - the ANCL, the Upali Newspapers Ltd. and the Wijeya Newspapers Ltd. The ANCL has been under government control since 1973, while the other two are privately owned but have close family connections to political parties.

In the broadcasting sector, Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon) was perhaps the first British colony to introduce radio broadcasting a few years after its inauguration in Europe in 1920s. The country liberalized its radio and TV sectors ahead of the rest of Asia. It permitted the establishment of more commercial radio stations than any other country in the region and put the state-controlled Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation under considerable competitive pressure. It also allowed private radio stations to broadcast news and current affairs, unlike some of its neighboring countries. Efforts at setting up community radio have never stopped in Sri Lanka. Universities in Sri Lanka and UNESCO played host to regional workshops on community radio for participants from South Asian countries. The goal of such workshops was to make community radio a reality in South Asia and encourage cooperation among community radio advocates in the region. Radio still is a popular medium in South Asia, particularly in rural areas. In Sri Lanka telephone boxes, where a radio station button is installed, allow listeners to contact a station without paying a fee. The system makes it easier for listeners to participate in the programs and solve problems in the communities. The mass media in Sri Lanka also play a role in environmental education. Most people in both urban and rural areas use different media outlets as their primary source of

environmental education, especially the print media. Television is the next major source of information for the urban population, while radio for the rural population. The media cover environmental issues in the form of news, editorials, investigative stories, entertainment, and educational programs. Development journalism in the country can have a bigger potential if the government allows even greater participation by the public in media discussions, which is often limited when there is an increase in guerrilla warfare in the country. It is evident from the above discussions that the degree of press freedom under the development concept varies from country to country, and that is where the controversy with the concept lies. While one scholar describes it as “the pursuit of cultural and informational autonomy” and “support for democracy” among other goals, another scholar criticizes it as “a rationale for autocratic press control” and “guided press”. Where do all the discussions about the press systems in Asia leave us theoretically? When theories encounter major difficulties in serving as a guide to the understanding of the realities they are supposed to describe, new paradigms are needed.

## Conclusion

So are the criteria of the Freedom House for assessing global press freedom and civil liberties when their rankings fail to reflect changing realities. Obviously, more factors should be taken into consideration than the current criteria. The Last Rights concluded that the four theories were a “durable” but now “questionable” map and that a “more adequate” map is needed. The book presented inspiring criticism of the four press theories but stopped short of proposing a new paradigm.

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