22   Mass media

Overview of the debate

The mass media (radio, television, newspapers and magazines) are fundamental to development. They enable people to learn about issues and make their voices heard. They can exert a powerful influence, for good or for ill. Free, independent media are important to ensure freedom of speech (guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), promote democracy, good governance, peace and human rights, combat poverty and crime, inform people about issues and enable them to participate in public debate. Media are vital to ensure the public is involved in defining development strategies, and to attain widespread support for those strategies.

There are considerable differences in media among regions and countries, and between cities and rural areas. Community radio and privately owned press and TV have had a longer tradition in Latin America than in Asia and Africa. Rural areas receive less coverage than cities (reporting, broadcast coverage and print circulation).

The last decades have witnessed the following trends:
- A continued rise in the importance of the mass media with democratisation and fewer state controls, yet their continued misuse in some quarters – for instance by groups that divide rather than unite communities.
- The rising professionalism of media work, along with a need to balance journalistic freedoms with quality and responsibility (so-called 'peace journalism'), and increased self-censorship (since 11 Sept 2001).
- Privatisation of state-run broadcasters in many countries, yet the concentration of ownership into a few hands. This often results in improved technical quality but impoverished content, and particularly in the loss of cultural, educational and developmental content.
- Revived interest in radio: both community stations (local orientation and social agenda, often in local languages), and commercial FM stations (no social agenda, competing for audiences and broadcast rights).
- Attempts to use the media to promote democracy, community dialogue, and social/economic development.
- The rapid advance of information and communication technologies, and their influence on the acquisition, production, exchange and dissemination of information by the 'traditional' mass media.
- Further globalisation of the media, with a few dominant players based in the developed world, with little relevance to local cultures and conditions.

Key issues in decision making

Role of media   The media are sources of entertainment, news, public information, education, advocacy and dialogue, and function as a mirror of society. Audiences' demand for entertainment (and media organisations' need to make a profit) may compete for broadcast time and column-inches with development agencies' desire to use the media to provide education and promote development goals. **Social marketing** and 'edutainment' try to change audiences' behaviour in areas such as family planning, AIDS, public health and sanitation. They often use entertainment methods such as pop songs and soap operas. However, some see this as manipulative.

Despite their name, mass media still do not reach many people in remote rural areas. Many are under the influence of the state, and have often been used to disseminate information in top-down manner. But recent trends are towards **community dialogue** and bottom-up participation in public debate. Mechanisms include talk or call-in radio programmes, and community radio and newspapers.

Key questions include:
- What incentives might encourage private media to provide development programming on a sustainable basis – combining educational content with commercial success?
- How can the media provide opportunities for marginalised groups, particularly in rural areas, to voice their opinions and participate in the public debate? How can they help promote social goods and reduce the knowledge gap between rich and poor?
- Should support from development agencies focus on the media (i.e., geared towards organisations), or messages (geared towards content or programming), or perhaps a mixture of these?
- What type of regulation is necessary to promote balanced, reliable journalism? At a minimum, the existence of a self-regulating body appears to be a prerequisite.

Media freedom   Free media and an active civil society are mutually reinforcing. One cannot thrive without the other. The Western tradition of the media as the conduit through which information passes is different from the view held by many of those in power in developing countries, who see the media as a way to inform (and perhaps control) the masses. Media play a vital role in reinforcing democracy, and in turn rely on freedom from state control and censorship. Decades of restrictions are hard to overcome. State-run media in many countries still adulate those in power and allow little room for opposing views. Privatised media may also lack independence: they are often run by wealthy individuals or parrot the lines of political parties. Some governments still restrict their freedom by selective licensing, harassment or threats. Nevertheless, some form of regulation is necessary to avoid problems of (for example) libel, incitement to violence, and unethical journalism.

Questions include:
- How can free, balanced, effective and responsible media be developed? Should donors make funding conditional on media freedoms?

Key Sheets for Sustainable Livelihoods

➤ What is the appropriate role for public media, and what should be the balance between public and private media? How can legislation ensure that public media are independent despite their government financing?

➤ How can pluralism, media diversity and editorial independence be promoted in states that are still fragile?

➤ How can governments be made to understand and respect the role of the media in a democracy? What is the appropriate balance between media regulation and freedom? How can private media be encouraged to work in the public interest? How can 'praise journalism' and 'hate journalism' be avoided?

➤ How relevant are Western theories of media to cultures in developing countries?

Sustainability and accessibility   Privately owned media need to support themselves through advertising or (for print media) sales and subscriptions. But advertisers are scarce, and the poor buy few newspapers and magazines. As a result, coverage is largely confined to the urban middle classes and neglects rural areas and poorer urban areas. The lack of funds also affects media content. TV broadcasters cannot afford to invest in quality, locally produced programmes, so are forced to broadcast cheaper, often foreign, alternatives.

Sustainability also requires an enabling environment in terms of legislation, infrastructure, security and capacity. Newspapers demand both literacy and money to buy them. While the demand for printed media and TV is rising, radio remains the most promising medium in vast areas without electricity.

Questions include:

➤ How can the coverage and availability of media be improved and made more relevant to the illiterate and otherwise marginalised groups?

➤ How can production standards, services and independence be maintained in private media?

➤ How can community media maintain their democratic and development mandates in face of limited funds, personnel and facilities, and sometimes adverse regulatory regimes?

Capacity building   Professional capacity remains a common constraint, as also are facilities and equipment. In many countries, development broadcasting is still the responsibility of poorly trained staff in line ministries (agriculture, health, cooperatives, etc.). A more successful model is for professional staff in broadcasting organisations to take on this work, drawing on the line ministries as a resource.

Digital technologies have opened exciting possibilities for all types of media. These technologies lower the costs of entry to the industry, potentially increasing media diversity and the range of viewpoints. They also enable the media to become more interactive. Radio stations can now download and exchange music and information to use in programmes. Many media organisations need help to take advantage of these possibilities.

At the individual level, the training of managers, journalists, development communication professionals and technicians must be a priority. Editors and journalists – and government officials – need to learn the new 'rules of the game' in a free media (this includes responsibilities, standards and such ethics as balanced reporting); technicians need to keep pace with the new, digital technologies.

Questions include:

➤ How can the professionalism and quality of the media be improved?

➤ What is the appropriate division of responsibilities between broadcasting organisations and line ministries?

➤ How can journalists and other media professionals with appropriate skills be trained (this involves strengthening training organisations, curricula and materials)?

➤ How can media influences on audiences be monitored and evaluated?

➤ How can media councils and regulatory bodies be strengthened without risking fragile media freedoms?

➤ What other changes (policies, resources, approaches) are needed so that newly trained staff professionals can practise what they have learned?

Key literature

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