

New-age journalism

The News 24-4-95

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The new information age is being intensively discussed world-wide by scientists, politicians, the media and the communications industry. More and more are saying it's a revolution happening right now. There are very few though who have noticed that one aspect is usually left out of this discussion, and that's the future of journalism.

At best you still hear some references to variety of opinion being threatened by media concentration. But very few publications have made the public aware that journalism is already being eroded - that the image of the profession is changing so drastically that those in it can sometimes hardly recognise themselves there.

Journalists - at least those in Europe - usually don't fancy writing about themselves, what they do and how they see their role in their societies. And so it's left to the specialised journals and scholarly publications to worry about these things. Which means that not much passes to the public at large.

But then, is there really anything to worry about? Isn't it just wonderful that there is no more stopping the free flow of information we all clamoured for, for so long? Isn't it just wonderful that there is practically no barrier left in the world able to stop television pictures coming in? That for the price of a personal computer and a modem anyone can become a member of a world brain by the name of Internet? Isn't the world getting more just, in fact more democratic, because of the new media and communication technologies, which are also giving the world's poor access to the information available internationally? Shouldn't we rejoice about the new industries and jobs all this is creating, also giving national economies in developing countries possibilities of taking part and prospering?

Of course it is wonderful. And we are allowed to rejoice about it. But there are issues that need to be tackled. By the old BBC definition, journalism has the task to inform and enlighten, has the task to make happenings transparent. And those functions make it indispensable to development.

Any society wanting to be a player in the international political and economic concert cannot do without the individual able to think for himself or herself and able to take part in decision-making. Under the premises of democratic self-determination, social justice and solidarity, international communication, understanding between nations and securing peace, there should be:

- journalistic practice to reflect pluralism and focus on the concerns of civil societies;
- state and media to accept the internationally

recognised ethical foundations of journalism;

- foundations of freedom and legality to be put in place for journalistic work at national level;

- training opportunities to be provided for professional journalism;

- international media cooperations to come about through which independent and pluralistic media are strengthened at national level;

- the societal importance that is its due to be given to the journalistic side of the media in economic and technological development; developing countries to be given equal access to the international free flow of information and the technical and professional resources to be able to make their own contributions to it;

- journalistic media to be aware of their legal possibilities and market opportunities.

There are areas in which the technical progress which is the focus here is opening up new opportunities and posing new challenges to journalism. First of all, there is the very great chance of journalistic work on issues now impacting on everyone around the world. Issues like destruction of the environment, ethnic and religious conflicts, violations of human rights, injustices in international trade, food deficits, overpopulation and any number of others. Using the technologies already available, journalists can exchange information globally and become more effective.

The second great chance for journalism lies in local and regional coverage. Not only are new newspapers being launched in this area all the time, but radio and television are going to play an immense part. And all that at further dropping costs.

It's here that the competition between the media is going to be greatest. And it's here that qualified journalism has its greatest chances. Chances of economic success, too. It's at this level that order policies will have to come into play. Licences will need to be issued. Broadcasting and press laws will need to be made. The aim will have to be a pluralistic media landscape. At this level it will pay every media entrepreneur to "buy in" good journalists and himself or herself to invest in basic and follow-on journalist training. Big media tycoons have already recognised that.

There's need for urgent political action at national level. There is much to gain. Action is needed to maintain and strengthen national journalistic units so as not to be steamrollered by transnational media. National cultivation of culture and national economic development are concerns and obligations of journalistic work. Digitisation will make it possible for us to use the media increasingly interactively. That, too, means new challenges and new opportunities for journalism in a third area. Especially for the individual journalist.

These investments will also pay off economi-

cally, and pretty soon at that. Every functioning modern state needs functioning media and highly qualified journalism, for political and economic reasons. Media pluralism and the competition between many media units that goes with it comprises a highly attractive economic factor.

Deregulation and privatisation in broadcasting and telecommunications are spawning pluralistic media structures. New communication technologies are newly driving social development even in poor countries. Whether the growing multiplicity will also add to journalistic multiplicity and journalistic quality, and through that is used meaningfully for social advancement, is a political decision that every country has to take for itself, and it demands political action.

Since industry and trade, tuning their pitch to target groups ever more finely, are influencing the medium and its contents, one probably has to call on those responsible for broadcasting to keep advertising out of journalistic products. In the periodicals field they already use the rule of thumb - at least in my country - that those who are not worth advertising for, are not worth writing for. If public broadcasting wants to keep its societal task and not merely to be transponder of advertising messages, it must allow itself to keep advertising out of journalistic products.

In sum journalism and journalistic media are not in danger of dying, but are changing in two directions. The one direction is towards entertainment. And that means the media are more and more shirking their responsibility of informing and enlightening people. It's not something we can prevent. On the other hand, journalism has big, new opportunities to play a major development-promoting and socio-economic role and overall to become more effective. It's this we need to draw attention to and foster.

The trend towards entertainment can be left to market mechanisms. But higher qualification of journalists is not likely to be driven by the market alone. For that, efforts by people and institutions are needed, people and institutions who take the positive development of human society seriously. The free flow of pictures and words round the globe is fine. The availability of unimaginable amounts of information in data banks and networks world-wide is fine. Many radio and TV channels is fine. But all that doesn't replace journalism that evaluates critically, that selects and processes for its public and that on the public's behalf asks the questions without which information is useless.

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