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Media Development and Media Reform: Time for Change

Des Freedman and Jonathan A. Obar

The “Stickiness” of the Development Frame

Media development theory is plagued by definitional confusion. In what ways is it different to “media for development” and does it refer exclusively to structural rather than behavioral issues? To what extent should media development be understood in relation to external interventions to assist capacity-building in specific countries or to internal pressure to democratize media systems? Does it refer to a developmental process or to a desired state of development, an outcome or “as activities towards that outcome” (Berger 2010, 551)? Who sets the parameters for what is considered “developed” and does this apply to all countries that lack a fully independent and pluralistic media system underpinned by legal guarantees of freedom of expression (in which case we are talking about most countries in the world)? Little wonder that Martin Scott (2014, 75) argues that defining media development is like “nailing jelly to a wall” and that unless we resolve this conceptual turbulence, both the status and the effectiveness of the field will be undermined.

That may be true but we believe that it is nothing compared to a more fundamental problem: that media development remains intimately, and unhelpfully, associated with the modernizing paradigm in which it was originally conceived. This relates not just to how it is understood, but how it is practiced and it shapes the identity of the agents, methods, and objectives of the entire exercise. There is little argument that the field has moved on dramatically from the neo-colonialist mode of thought that marked its origins and now embraces an ethical commitment to participatory communication; there is, nevertheless, concern that discursive shifts

have not been accompanied by more material transformations in terms of agenda-setting, resource allocation, and accountability. So for Hemer and Tufte (2012, 234), “agency has largely remained in the institutions and organizations that have ‘invited’ citizens to participate, mobilize and to act” just as Arsenault and Powers (2010, 2), while noting that modernization theory is outdated, nevertheless argue that “the roots of this paradigm are still evident in much current thinking about media development and implementation of media development.” Thinking about media development may have changed, but *doing it* differently may be lagging behind.

In reality, media development continues to be dominated not by user communities, but by donor-led initiatives aiming to increase the capacity of journalists to fulfil their democratic role, to build sustainable media markets, and to nurture legal frameworks to guarantee media rights (Arnold 2010; CIMA n.d.). This is the universe of UNESCO, the United Nations Development Program, the World Bank and the international development wings of western governments. It is an environment in which “expertise” flows from North to South, while resources and capital continue to flow in the other direction: a deficit of some \$2 trillion worth of all goods and services in 2012 alone (Hickel 2017). While the motivations and alliances may be somewhat different than they were when Daniel Lerner first described the media as a “mobility multiplier” (1958, 52) that would usher developing nations into the modern age, the operating logic of contemporary media development seems rather similar to approaches to modernization that have been critiqued by, for example, Freire (1983/1970) and Escobar (1995) for reproducing existing structural imbalances. Peter Golding, in an early rejection of development frames, argues that they were a means through which “calibrated indices of underdevelopment can be constructed” (Golding 1974, 39)—indices that rely on quantitative instruments that even Everett Rogers, himself intimately associated with the modernizing “diffusion of innovations” approach, later

described as the “deceitful simplicity of measurement” (1993, 37). Yet how different to that dominant paradigm are today’s training programs or metrics such as UNESCO’s Media Development Indicators, IREX’s Media Sustainability Index, or the European Union’s Media Pluralism Monitor in their attempt both to acknowledge systemic inequality and to address these pernicious divisions through a recognition that “static societies are brought to life by outside influence, technical aid, knowledge, resources, and financial assistance” (Golding 1974, 43).

Some practitioners explicitly acknowledge the historic integration of media development programs into soft power exercises driven by foreign policy considerations. For example, Ricardo Trotti, the director of press freedom at the Interamerican Press Association, maps out in detail how development objectives have “generally followed the focus of U.S. and European foreign policy” (Trotti 2013, 2). Indeed, he attacks the attempts of populist left-wing governments in Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina and elsewhere to enact structural change and argues that democratization is explicitly tied only to *neoliberal* policies. “It is the freedom of the private sector, the market expansion, its needs and competition—with minimal state regulation—and the new technologies, which allows democratizing communication” (2012, 12). While this certainly doesn’t reflect the views of all media development theorists, Trotti nevertheless raises awkward questions about the extent to which international assistance—whatever the motivation—can be pursued independently of established relations of power.

So, media development is indeed a fraught and contested field. Reflecting on this gap between the theory and practice of media development, many critical theorists argue that we need to “refocus our attention” (Hemer and Tufte 2012, 235) and to “change the lens” (Raboy in this volume). However, they appear to want to achieve this *within* the field of media development, rather than to accept that its compromised history may suggest that we need a

rather more radical break. Jan Servaes, one of the pioneers of the participatory communication approach, argues that while social change will involve the redistribution of power, “many communication experts agree that structural change should occur first in order to establish participatory communication policies” (Servaes 2008, 27). If this is true, then to what extent is media development, with its roots in modernization discourse and its connections to existing centers of power, an effective means with which to pursue structural change? And if development frames remain trapped in a paternalistic mode of operation, can media reform movements—with a reputation for more localized and activist forms of organizing—provide either inspiration or a potential solution to this dilemma?

Media Reform to the Rescue?

Given that contemporary iterations of media development are so often preoccupied with questions of pluralism, governance, independence and funding—precisely the areas of policy and regulation with which media reform movements are involved—it is often hard to see a conceptual difference between the two spheres. And yet, there is a sense in which the two communities are quite distinct: the former tied to agencies in the North working on behalf of communities in the South, while the latter is more likely to be seen in terms of struggles that take place exclusively in the North; the former is linked to top-down strategies developed outside the frame of conflict, while the latter is viewed in relation to initiatives developed and executed by grass-roots movements (Segura and Waisbord 2016).

This would be a huge over-simplification, not simply because it dismisses the contradictions inherent in development campaigns, but also because it exaggerates the organic, bottom-up character of media reform. Indeed, a substantial amount of media reform work—from net neutrality to anti-monopoly campaigns—is carried out by “experts,” lobbyists and

professional NGOs with battlegrounds in law courts and parliaments that are well outside the everyday realm of user communities. There is, therefore, a “developmental” character to media reform just as there is a “reforming” character to media development; media reform movements are far from immune from paternalistic and pragmatic assumptions while development campaigns can be shaped by the activities on the ground of communities who are supposed to be the recipients of the development.

While we believe that there are similar tensions within both approaches and that dialogue between the two communities is likely to be productive for both, it may be easier to open up these contradictions inside reform, rather than development environments because of the former’s *relative* distance from elite groups and their connections to other democracy movements. This is precisely what we believe is necessary: to shift the debate within the theory and practice of media reform better to focus on activities that are developed and implemented by publics rather than on behalf of publics, and to engage in struggles that confront power rather than seeking simply to ameliorate its effects.

We have previously argued that media reform movements “are a response to expressions of concentrated media power and develop in the context of ongoing struggles over the distribution of communicative resources” (Freedman and Obar 2016, 25). We ought to have said that movements are at their most effective when they relate to, and draw on, wider social struggles for redistribution and that it is these struggles that can help to discipline and orientate media reform campaigns along productive, participatory lines. Of course, this is just as appropriate to media development projects—that, for example, literacy campaigns, training projects for journalists and efforts to amend legislation to increase pluralism, will be all the more effective when they are directly connected to ongoing democracy and social justice

movements—but it may be these connections are more difficult to foster given the structural constraints placed on development projects by funders.

Indeed, many media reform efforts can be placed on a spectrum between media development efforts that perpetuate a “modernizing” paradigm, and a normative ideal of autonomous, independent, bottom-up groundswells. The fact that many well-meaning media reform efforts struggle with the constraints of the former and the impossibility of realizing the latter should come as no surprise as many such efforts, especially in the West, are organized by activists wielding traditional tactics for influencing policy and policymakers. Guo and Saxton (2010) identify eleven such tactics that include: direct lobbying, research, public events and direct action, media advocacy, judicial advocacy, coalition building, administrative lobbying, expert testimony, public education, voter registration, and grassroots lobbying. Many of these tactics, especially those that aim to influence technocratic decision-making, emphasize reliance on experts, think tanks, donors, public relations professionals, and political operatives.

Sometimes, the distinction between media reform and media development strategies is blurred. For example, in Qatar, the non-profit Doha Centre for Media Freedom organizes media and information literacy training programs designed to train journalists and media producers with the goal of “defending media freedom in the Arab world” (Townson 2016, 312). Specific emphasis is placed on supporting journalists in the Middle East who are persecuted for their dissent while also developing future media professionals who value critical thinking. The ideal is that such efforts may foster media systems that “promote quality journalism and guarantee access to impartial information” (2016, 316).

The New America Foundation (NAF) presents another interesting example of an organization heavily involved in various aspects of media reform, while clearly maintaining

connections to aspects of the media development paradigm. Its Open Technology Institute “works at the intersection of technology and policy to ensure that every community has equitable access to digital technology and its benefits” (OTI n.d.). Initiatives address common media reform themes such as international efforts to promote universal access to secure and private broadband technologies (including community broadband efforts), advocacy in support of network neutrality and modernization of the U.S. universal service fund, as well as advocacy in opposition to media mergers. At the same time, in 2016–2017 the organization received funding from a variety of large corporations and corporate owners, some with vested interests in the current media landscape. The New America Foundation received more than \$1 million in funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Google, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Eric and Wendy Schmidt and others, as well as between \$250,000 and \$999,999 from Bloomberg, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, JP Morgan Chase & Co., Microsoft, the Rockefeller Foundation and others. The current board of directors for the Foundation includes individuals with connections to established industry and politics, including Reihan Salam, executive editor of the National Review, David Bradley, chairman of Atlantic Media, Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University, Fareed Zakaria, a host on CNN and columnist for the *Washington Post* and various individuals involved in financial management and real estate businesses. Indeed, the New America Foundation exemplifies an organization working to reform the media system at the same time as being heavily implicated in corporate agendas and networks of influence. The scandal in which Barry Lynn, head of NAF’s Open Markets initiative was ousted after making critical comments about Google, one of NAF’s funders, is just one such example of these tensions (Vogel 2017).

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On the other hand, media reform promotes mobilizations beyond traditional policy-making institutions and seeks to foster activities implemented by publics, rather than on behalf of publics. For example, in 2012 the activation of a digitally-mediated Fifth Estate was instrumental in halting the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) in the United States (Reitman 2016) while in 2013, similar efforts by Open Media's Stop Online Spying Coalition temporarily stopped the cyber-surveillance Bill C-30 in Canada (Obar and Shade 2016). In 2014, a massive mobilization, coordinated by Free Press, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and others helped achieve a victory for net neutrality in the United States. Indeed, approximately four million public comments were submitted to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) net neutrality docket, the most submitted to any proceeding in the Commission's history (Sohn 2014). When the FCC decided at the conclusion of the 2014 review to strengthen net neutrality protections, FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler referred to the digital mobilization, noting "a shout out to four million Americans who took their time to share with us their views" (Stuart 2015). According to Wheeler: "Your participation has made this the most open process in FCC history. We listened and we learned" (Rushe 2015). In each of these cases, massive online mobilizations confronted institutional power structures. Whilst these examples do reflect significant moments of popular participation, each campaign was, of course, shaped and facilitated in part by established media reform organizations as opposed to publics alone. In the case of the 2014 net neutrality battle, the use of digital form letters as a primary method of online mobilization suggests that only a semblance of the public's voice was directly connected to the deliberations (Obar 2016). While this shouldn't minimize the public interest victory, it does problematize the normative ideal of activities being developed and implemented by publics themselves as distinct from qualified intermediaries.

Other media reform efforts aim to mobilize autonomous publics by involving them in social movements that are directly connected to the pursuit of a more democratic communications environment. These are the “media movements” analyzed by Segura and Waisbord (2016, 3)—the “networks of citizens and associations that aim to achieve social transformations through collective actions such as advocacy, education and protest”—that have been so influential in recent years in Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico, and Uruguay. We can also point to efforts by community radio broadcasters that provide alternative examples of bottom-up reform. Unauthorized community stations aiming to strengthen Indigenous rights and opportunities in Guatemala (Camp 2016), and pirate broadcasters in the 1990s responding to U.S. markets dominated by ownership consolidation (Sassaman and Tridish 2016), provide unique examples of media reformers working with local communities to establish popular communication resources.

Policy-hacking efforts in Germany, Iceland, and Argentina provide examples of reform groups and their publics developing regulatory agendas and frames with the aim of influencing not only the topics being addressed by policymakers but the ordering of importance and framing of those topics (Hintz 2016). Similarly, the Internet Rights and Principles Coalition (IPRC), which worked to develop a Charter of Human Rights and Principles for the Internet, did so through coalition-building and then sought to influence internet policy throughout the world (Franklin 2016).

While the distinction between media reform and development may sometimes be blurred, this should not prevent advocates of democratic media from either camp from maximizing the involvement of publics themselves in both agenda-setting and campaigning exercises. There is no pure version of media reform in which publics spontaneously and independently come

together to demand communication rights, but a focus on building media movements that are aimed at citizen participation and resource redistribution is surely the most effective route to meaningful change.

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