Development Agencies and Mass Media: Part of the solution or part of the problem?

Introduction

Development agencies have repeatedly referenced mass media in developing countries as a "driver of change". They do so because of the central role the mass media can play in respect of supporting better information, advocacy and accountability. But are development agencies working appropriately to support mass media to drive change, or are they undermining this ambition? Are we, in development, part of the problem, or are we part of the solution?

The Problem

Kampala, Uganda 2012: A critically ill pregnant women walks into Mulago, the largest public hospital, and tries to admit herself for treatment. Unfortunately she had no money with her to pay for a registration form. She was turned away, walked from the hospital, sat down on the hospital steps and died.

The Ugandan media picked this tragic story. As public awareness increased, so did public anger and bewilderment – how could this happen? Who is to blame? How can it be stopped? The numerous phone-in shows buzzed with angry callers.

Two days later the news agenda had moved on and anger subsided.

This is a classic example of a media market that is only partially working. It is a media which can effectively tackle events (*information*) but does not focus on issues (*advocacy / accountability*). Why, in a country where there has been an explosive growth of radio over the last 15 years (the most powerful, popular and potentially pro-poor form of media) was this issue not picked up and scrutinised in more depth? Why were the issues not investigated and followed up, rather than reported and promptly forgotten?

Why is there a problem?

Liberalisation of media markets continues apace in many developing countries. But markets are young, immature, and suffer myriad institutional weaknesses. These skew incentives, delimit roles, and undermine capacity investments in media. But a central dysfunction is that the media in Africa sells its airtime to sponsors – a large proportion of these being donor funded organisations. The media, in effect, is handing over editorial control to whoever is willing to pay the highest price – and that is often us in development.

To illustrate the dysfunction, consider the Mulago Hospital story which we started with and consider the fact that Ugandan radio is abundant with health oriented programmes. Why did they not take the Mulago story from event coverage to focusing on the issues? It is because the large majority of these programmes are donor sponsored and therefore controlled by development agendas and priorities. Weak delivery of services in public medical facilities is not currently a key focal agenda for development agencies, while educating people about buying and using impregnated mosquito nets, for example, is. The media is controlled by the advertisers not by the real issues relevant to the audience. We are the media manipulators, paying the media to dance to our tune rather than responding to the interests and issues relevant to their audiences.

When ‘buying’ and manipulating media agendas for our own purposes, we find ourselves in cahoots not only with the good (well intentioned?) but also the bad and the ugly. We are doing the same as the East African brewery who paid journalists to not cover a pollution scandal, the parliamentary hopeful who pays for positive interview space despite his dodgy track record, and the confidence trickster who bought radio programming to promote a bogus micro finance bank and ran off with poor people’s hard earned investment – all real examples. We are all undermining the independence and therefore the integrity and credibility of media and are stifling its improvement. In doing this, we have some uncomfortable bed fellows.

One frequent response to these points is the view that these are just the realities of a commercial media sector – hence the need for a public oriented media. The nature of commercial media is that it plays what it is paid to. This could not be further from the truth.

The most commercially successful broadcasters in Africa, and elsewhere, are the ones who are most careful about allowing sponsors (commercial, development or government actors) to manipulate and control their content. This is not the result of being successful – it is the reason they are successful. They are aligning their content according to the interests of their audiences and they recognise the commercial reality that they are not in the business of selling airtime – but they are in the business of selling audience. Lose your audience and you have nothing to sell. Build your audience through focused and popular content, gain integrity and credibility and therefore win in the very competitive ratings world, and advertisers will be banging on your door.

This is well illustrated, in the negative, by a once popular radio station in Abuja, Nigeria which when asked why it had lost popularity and had a financial crisis said that ‘it is because of the evangelists’. A number of evangelistic preachers began buying airtime on the station and controlled large sections of programming. The audience grew tired of the content and switched channels. Soon the evangelists and other advertisers departed the failing station. Nevertheless, when asked if they had learnt a lesson from this, the station manager looked puzzled and said – “well we are a commercial station and selling airtime is what we do!” A classic example of a dysfunctional station – perhaps an interesting station for the media manipulators amongst us?!

<u>What should development do in response to the problem?</u>

Firstly, we need to acknowledge that we are a significant part of the problem. Media manipulation by donors through ‘pay to play’ behaviour is fundamentally against the ethos and ethics of a free and functioning media. Media content (outside of clearly differentiated advertising) should not be manipulated by advertisers. Us doing so opens the door and gives sanction to commercial and state manipulation of the media. It even opens the door to fraudsters and tricksters to use programming to con audiences.

Separating advertising from unbiased content is one of the basics of media ethics taught around the world in countries where the media is viewed as being part of civil society rather than an arm of government. So why do we in development feel we have the right to manipulate so directly? We have the means - the money, the opportunity, the weakness in the emerging media market - but why do we feel we have the right?

I believe that the answer to this one lies in our view that we are ‘the good guys’. We are engaging in this manipulation to help people and save lives. Implicit in this is the view that we have the right information and we are doing the right thing. We know what poor people need to know and learn. We don’t need media to ask difficult questions of us – that is just going to make it harder for us to do our good work. I personally think that this view is questionable and arrogant.

The solution to getting media markets to work for the poor is for development agencies to make some fundamental changes in the way they use and perceive local media industries. We need to recognise the damage we do and focus on making media markets work for the poor (not for us!). More concretely we should:

1) Support sustainable media content to emerge, which is audience led. This involves building the commercial incentives (popularity and profitability) around such programmes;
2) Work against pay to play and recognise it as a fundamental negative to a media market working effectively;
3) Therefore, use bought airtime only in clearly differentiated advertising and social marketing segments and not disguised as impartial or educational content;
4) Establish the capacity and incentives to promote development projects to disseminate information to the media in a newsworthy way. Persuade editors and journalists that the information we have is newsworthy rather than force our agendas with money;
5) Ensure that there is sufficient capacity and willingness of donor projects and their partners to respond and be interactive with the media in situations where there is both positive and negative coverage. That’s just good PR strategy anyway.

Ending as I started, I’m half wondering if Malago hospital in Kampala will soon be approaching benevolent funders seeking resources to buy radio air time so they can respond to last year’s negative publicity with a series showing how most people are actually very happy with their services. That will be following the usual mode of operation for development and it will be another negative impact on the credibility of the Ugandan media in the eyes of the public who know all to well the realities of Ugandan public health service delivery – good and bad.