Communicating for Development and Democratization in Ethiopia: Journalistic Practices and Challenges

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Introduction

In the contemporary world, to a greater extent than ever before, the mass communication media have increasingly become central to every aspect of human lives. With the immense power of the electronic media, enhanced by the advanced computer and satellite technologies, media have assumed key position in the political, economic and socio-cultural activities of a society, making media indispensable to governments and the public, principally in a democratic political setting where government power emanates from the people. Most importantly, in developing world, where majority of the citizenry suffer from undesirable socio-economic and political conditions, the media have long been recognized as engines of development (Melkote, 2001 and Murthy, 2006).

In Ethiopia, where poverty is a reality, for example, the FDRE government has adopted democratic developmental state political economy with the purpose to bring about socioeconomic and political transformation. Accordingly, the media are entrusted the role of promoting development, democracy and good governance and a new journalism model, i.e. development journalism has been embraced (FDRE, 1995 Constitution, Draft Media Policy Document, 2008). Indeed, media can play such desirable roles as witnessed by many developing countries, notably in Asia such as India, Taiwan and Philippines; however, it should be noted that the power of the media in accomplishing these responsibilities is subject to various determinant factors, including the feasibility of operating environment in various contexts.

Thus, acknowledging the adoption of development journalism model in Ethiopia in principle, this study has the objective to assess the practices of and challenges to the new journalism model in the Ethiopian media institutions from the perspectives of the practitioners, media managers, the publics and pertinent official documents and media products. To this end, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How is development journalism being practiced by media institutions in Ethiopia?
2. What are the challenges to the application of development journalism in the country?

Methods of the Study

The study employed descriptive design where by qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from relevant sources. The data were obtained from journalists and media managers of the federal and regional states media institutions and private press based in Addis Ababa as well as selected members of the public from Addis Ababa, Oromia, Amhara and SNNP regional states. Relevant documents pertinent to media activities in the country and media products were also used as sources of data in this study.
The data were partly drawn from the comprehensive research and was recently conducted on the role of media and communication for development and democratization in Ethiopia. Questionnaire, interview and observation of media practices were employed as data gathering tools. Moreover, data from my observation of the trends in development journalism in connection with the courses offer at the Graduate School of Journalism and Communication, AAU. Review of related literature was also considered to underpin the discussion and conclusions. The quantitative data underwent statistical computation by using SPSS and the qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Development Journalism: An Overview

With the period following the end of World War II marking the ‘era of development’ and independence from colonial rule, a new journalism model informed by development communication theories was introduced to the developing world, including Africa. However, there seems to be confusion about the meaning and scope of development journalism (Skjerdal 2009). According to Banda (2006), the concept of development journalism has been possessed by demons of all sorts of confusion and “deliberations about its validity and usefulness have been bogged down in arguments structured by Western notions of press freedom,” diverting attention from important questions pertinent to the role of journalism in promoting democracy and development. Thus, it is important to clarify the concept before delving into the practices of and challenges to the discipline in Ethiopia. This is best done by first interpreting development, one of the core component concepts.

Scholars in the dominant paradigm tent may understand development as modernization or westernization; however, communication scholars prefer to interpret it as “improving the living conditions of a society,” (Milkote 2001) which constitutes “increased living standards, improved wealth and well-beings for all, and the achievement of whatever is regarded as a general good for society at large” (Thomas, 2000). Development is also viewed as freedom from prison of economic poverty, political tyranny, sickness and disease, ignorance, and oppression and violence” (Tony Blair in Crown Copyright 2006). In other words, poverty is lack of choice, socioeconomic and political deprivation whereas development is a freedom from poverty or empowerment of the people (Amartaya Sen, 1981). Pant and Kumar (1995, p.50) also see development as a whole range of economic and social development which “carries with it, not only the idea of economic betterment but also of great human dignity, security, justice, and equality.” This means development is not merely economic growth but multidimensional process incorporating economic, socio-cultural and environmental transformation.

Development as multidimensional process also concerns democratization, i.e. “political change moving in a democratic direction” which is one aspect of political development (Potter 2000, p 368) and beyond multipartyism, “requires that the society, the economy, politics, the constitution of the state, the electoral system and the practice of government be democratized” (Newabueze, 1993, p. ix as cited in WorldViews, 1997). In Ethiopian context, for example, development is understood as empowerment of the people in every aspect of life and is inseparable from the process of democratization (Sen, 1999) as cited in Bahiru and Pausewang, 2002).
Moreover, the compatibility of holistic development with good governance is a plausible argument because equitable development cannot be achieved without establishing good governance—considered synonymous with sound development management and the capability of the state to perform its key functions in response to its citizens’ aspirations and needs—which aims at fighting corruption, upholding the rule of law, accountability, institutional pluralism, participation and the guarantees of the civil and human rights and effective participation among others (Potter 2000).

The meaning of development journalism, thus, springs from the understanding of development as discussed above and journalism as a socially responsible profession, serving the needs and interest of the society at large by creating the necessary intelligence they need to lead better lives. Informed by the ideals of participatory development communication, in terms of the general role entrusted to the media, development journalism upholds that the media have the responsibility “to contribute to overall socioeconomic development by assuming an active participatory role. The media thus collaborate with the larger development team as one of many agents” (Skjerdal, 2009). As implied in this explanation is participant journalism in which journalists consider their role as participant, advancing the view that news is the product of journalists’ “efforts to investigate and analyze what is going on” (Williams, 2003). In other words, development journalists have to be intellectually and professionally engaged so as to rally the people behind development efforts.

In a similar vein, Banda (2006) notes that development journalism is “an intellectual enterprise in which the journalist form a kind of free intelligence and should critically examine the aims of national development and the applicable instruments in a rational discourse and solve them by reasonable criteria free of social constraints.” To this effect, he further notes that development journalism has to:

- motivate the audience to actively cooperate in development; and
- defend the interests of those concerned.

For Wimmer and Wolf (2005) development journalism can be understood as “the reporting of ideas, programmes, activities and events, which are related to an improvement of the living standard,” implying that the essence of development journalism rests in journalistic principle with prior emphasis on promoting holistic development that equally benefits the people. According to Murthy (2006):

- Development journalism is the promoting of development process rather than events; development news covers the entire gamut of socio-economic and cultural development;
- In its treatment, development journalism is not different from investigative reporting.
- A development journalist should critically examine, evaluate and report the relevance of a development project to national and local needs, the difference between its impacts on people as claimed by the government officials and as it actually is. It is not synonymous with officially prepared handouts, so-called positive news.

Moreover, Murthy (2010) asserts that good development journalism is characterized by comprehensive coverage of important subjects in socioeconomic activities and “exposure of
incompetence and indifference of government officials while tackling corruption in
government can change polices, besides saving government money. Conversely, bad
journalism is misinformation which fails to report news or reporting depthless, inaccurate and
unfair news leaving people dangerously uninformed”. Similarly, Shah and Gayatri (1994) and
Rmaprassad (2002) emphasize that practitioners of development journalism have the
obligation to critically investigate development activities, their relevance and benefits to the
people.

Development journalism can also be explained in contrast to Western journalism model, i.e.
“a general type of libertarian fourth estate journalism” (Skjerdal, 2009). Western journalism
model is informed by a liberal or neoliberal political economy which makes media ownership
the prerogative of private businesses who value their own profit than the actual development
needs of the majority. In a sharp contrast to development journalism, Western journalism is
dominated by day-to-day events and tabloidization (Reeves 2006, p.180), implying that
Western journalism model promotes a different concept of news values. Campbel (2004)
illustrates the concept of tabloidization as:

First, in both print and broadcast journalism, tabloid news is distinct in its emphasis, which
can be summarized as the devoting of ‘relatively little attention to politics, economic, and
society and relatively much to diversions like sports, scandal and popular entertainment’ and
the devoting of ‘relatively much attention to the personal and private lives of people, both
celebrities and ordinary people, and relatively little to political process, economic
developments, and social changes’. Second, and slightly broader feature, is a shift in the
priorities within a given medium away from news and information towards emphasis on
entertainment”.

In conclusion, development journalism is one which prioritizes the actual development
problems of the people, i.e. pressing the socioeconomic, political and good governance
issues so as to bring about improved living condition for all.

Data Analysis and Discussion

As noted earlier this part examines the practices of and challenges to development
journalism in Ethiopia. The discussion has been drawn from the analysis of the quantitative
data computed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and qualitative
data through thematic approach. It is important to note that the detail statistical analysis has
not been presented here for the sake of brevity.

The Practices of Development Journalism in Ethiopia

Coverage of Development Issues and Limitations

Promoting Socioeconomic Development

Given the demanding situation of poverty, illiteracy and lack of good governance in Ethiopia
as late as the imperial era, attempts were made to address the actual socioeconomic and
political development issues of the people in the form of oral literature and books such as the
literary work by Kebede Michael entitled ‘Japan Indemin Seletenech’ meaning how did Japan
modernize as the immature mass media of were restricted from serving the interest of the
people, including fighting the unjust land tenure system. Currently, journalistic practices,
according to the finding, seem to have a good beginning in promoting socioeconomic
development basically by practitioners of the government owned media institutions where development journalism model has been officially embraced. As regards to coverage, they give relatively better emphasis to rural development issues than the private media do. The private media seem to give more coverage to political and good governance issues in a relatively critical tone, whereas government media cover more of socioeconomic development issues.

The study also showed that when compared to the other development contents, social development was relatively more emphasized. Programming related to education, health, HIV/AIDS and family planning were reported to have been given more coverage by the government media. The adequate coverage given to rural development issues by almost all government media institutions, federal and regional, print and broadcast, reflects that the practices of journalists working for the government media institutions are informed by the Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI) policy and is also responsive to the current Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP). Nevertheless, the study also indicated that there are still gaps in framing development issues and addressing the real problems of the community at the grassroots level.

**Promoting Good Governance and Democratization**

There are indicators of journalistic efforts in tackling good governance problems as part of development journalism. In almost all government media institutions at federal and regional levels there are programs devoted to address good governance issues. Best examples are from ERTA’s Aynachin/ Fittelef and special program on good governance issues in Oromia Radio and Television Organization, Amhara Mass Media Agency and Debub Mass Media Agency. These programs have the objectives of ensuring accountability of public officials in discharging their responsibilities. Moreover, related programs from some of the private press and radio such as Fana Broadcast Corporate’s ‘Teguaj Neqash’ are promising attempts worth mentioning.

However, when compared to other development contents, the journalistic practices in promoting good governance seem to be insignificant. In the Ethiopian context, issues related to urban land management, whether the people including farmers and the poor in urban areas are getting justice or in the contrary suffering at the hands of rent seeking government officials and corrupt private business elites ought to have been addressed as important content of development journalism. Moreover, the quality of education in Ethiopia and particularly in relation to the expanding government and private higher education institutions in the country appears to be a pressing good governance problem but it has not been given due emphasis by the media.

For instance, journalists were expected to be the first in investigating and exposing the recurring problem in urban land management in Addis Ababa and almost all big towns in the country where few corrupt officials managed to bulge their stomachs with the revenue from ‘urban land businesses’ which is constitutionally prohibited. Rather, it was the government which takes the courage to examine such practices and bring the criminals to justice. In other words, although the media, through their investigative reporting, were supposed to feed the government with the necessary information about urban land mismanagement, the media were seen reporting the information they received from the government pertinent to this
problem. It is important to note that promoting good governance does not mean merely telling people to behave well or be a good citizen, against corruption. It also means investigating mismanagement and abuses of power, disclosing corruption and scandals, enforcing transparency and accountability of the government officials so as to create conducive environment for development activities.

Moreover, promoting democratization has been considered as compatible with promoting development almost by all media institutions in the country, including privately owned ones although there are differences in their focus. This also might be informed by the current political economy of Ethiopia as developmental democratic state. However, practitioners and media managers admitted that although they have made efforts in raising public awareness about the democratic ideals their practice in promoting democratization is unsatisfactory. Some government media journalists seem to misunderstand promoting democratization as merely giving coverage to election process which happens once in every five years. Their practices lack important elements of demoralization such as upholding the rule of law, creating public forum for free debate and exchange of opinions, providing unbiased, quality, complete and timely information to the public.

Nevertheless the federal government media institutions’ editorial policy, underlines that the media “have the obligation to broaden public understanding of democratic principles, rights and freedom, promote public participation in democracy, check whether government officials perform their duties in accordance with democratic principle and let the public know about it, expose corruption, promote transparency and accountability.”

Promoting Peace and National Consensus

In this study, peace and national consensus building has been considered as important element of development journalism. The finding showed that promoting peace and national consensus, as journalistic practices reinforcing development and democratization, was relatively well practiced. Regardless of their media ownership, employer organization and medium type, the journalists confirmed that peace and national consensus issues were given emphasis in their practices. This might be because the government usually appeals to peace and national consensus in order to win the hearts and minds of the people and rally them behind the new socioeconomic and political development plan.

The priority given to peace and stability is evidently appropriate and has to be sustained because even our past legacy teaches us that instability and lack of peace and national consensus is the root cause of underdevelopment in Ethiopia. Nogogo (1986) asserts that “For a society to develop its productive forces and for social progress to take place that society must, at least for a reasonable period of time, enjoy marginal peace. No society can develop in a situation of war, destruction, pillage, etc.” Studies affirm that realization of peace and stability helps a country to focus all the human capital and finance on development activities than spending much on military imputes. For African Economist (2005) “Investing in development is investing in peace” and in Adedeji’s (1993) view, “Political stability, the pursuit of economic activities, recovery and transformation are all impossible without peace and security.”
Reporting Approaches

Information Dissemination

With regard to approaches used in promoting development, the study found that the major activity of the media was informing the public about government achievements in development to increase public awareness about the seriousness of underdevelopment and how to overcome the problems. In this respect, the best examples are programs related to environmental degradation, its causes and how it affects sustainable development and the role of farmers in afforestation and soil conservation; the use of fertilizers and improved seeds in increasing productivity, market information and how to access them to get better price for their products. The information dissemination also concerns promoting development through good governance and democracy. In this respect, emphasis has been given to teaching the public and officials to be good citizens free of corruption. In fact, rising public awareness level about development problems and mobilizing efforts in finding solutions is at the center of development journalism (Murthy, 2006). However, there are also limitations in adhering only to such approach because the mere dissemination of information at the absence of enforcing accountability cannot bring about the desired effect.

Predominantly Success-Oriented

It was found out that success stories mainly originated from government sources were given more emphasis in development reporting. The success stories are basically economic in nature and are framed from the government officials’ perspectives. Though there are attempts to set development agenda through wider and frequent coverage of development contents, they are presented mainly from government angles. This is partly because the information predominantly comes from government authorities and government news agencies than directly from the public who were supposed to be the major sources of information. The result of this study revealed that 85% of the practitioners depend on government information for their development reporting. Media portrayal of the government as the champion of development and good governance and the selective presentation of only success stories equated the practices of government media journalists to image building exercise. On the other hand, the finding indicated that practice related to investigating problems in development and good governance activities was found to be unsatisfactory. The government media journalists in principle perceive their role as being developmental but were found to be less confident about the effectiveness of their practices.

Promoting achievements or success is part of development journalism; however, relaying on only success stories may damage the credibility of the media and limits the impact of the message. It may also lead to public apathy and dislike of the media and stereotyping journalists and the government. As can be understood from the finding, the majority of Ethiopian journalists are aware that they have low status among the society. The study revealed that the government media’s emphasis on success stories encouraged the construction of a stereotyped image of government media by the public, particularly those who are relatively well educated, as the willing mouthpieces of the government. The surveyed academics and university students stated that such practice made them expect only biased stories from the Ethiopian government media as a result of which they were forced to favor other media like the VOA and German Radio broadcast in Ethiopian languages and even the BBC and Al Jazeera than their own media. Some also dared to
criticize ETV as a channel which failed to present the real life that most Ethiopians are leading.

This, however, does not imply that development journalism should be similar to bad-news-mongering. The implication is that balance in reporting has to be maintained in the Ethiopian media practices. It is important to note that the public does not like both extremes, i.e. only positive or only negative stories, but balance. Development journalism should not be misunderstood as accentuation of success stories produced by government agents or any source. It has to go to the people at the grassroots, reveal the real urban and rural life, and disclose the injustice besides promoting exemplary achievements from which others can draw lessons.

**Top-Down Approach**

Development journalism encourages two-way communication with sufficient opportunity for the public to be in the news by way of interacting with journalists pertinent to development activities. In other words the public is not mere passive recipient of message but also source of information. However, the communication approach pursued, as the study depicted, was top-down, i.e. gathering information from government sources and addressing the same to the public without investigation. This is evident from media institutions’ source selection practices. In this regard 85% of the journalists reported that they always or most of the time depend on the government and the ruling party and 50% on the government owned news agency for information, whereas less than 30% reported that they also use the public as sources of information. The qualitative finding, however, showed that journalists rarely contact the public, and if they happen to meet them they cover only positive stories about the government. Even in their limited access to the public, the media are blamed for not being able penetrate through the remote villages for gathering information and are rather limited to areas near the capital city or big towns, mainly those villages situated along the high ways.

**Event-Oriented**

As noted earlier development is continuous process and consequently development journalism should also deal more with the process—from the planning stage throughout the implementation to the end of the development activities, including related good governance issues- than focusing on day-to-day events. However, the study showed that the Ethiopian journalists, irrespective of media ownership, medium type emphasize events rather than process in covering development issues. The surveyed journalists indicated that although they are well aware of process reporting, they are obliged to emphasize event reporting mainly because the media managers prefer wider coverage of successful events which has become a norm guiding assignment of reporters in government media. Similarly, the media managers justified that events are given more coverage than the process because the former is relatively less costly and more time-effective. The study by Dejene (2010) on Addis Zemen’s development reporting practices and Dheressa (2012) on ETV’s framing of development news also endorses this finding. Whatever the justification given by media institutions may be, however, claiming effective practice of development journalism and emphasizing event reporting seem to be contradictory and indicates prevalent limitations in the practices.
Challenges to the Practice of Development Journalism in Ethiopia

In any country, journalism affects the economy, politics and socio-cultural conditions of the land and is in turn influenced by these factors in various ways. In Ethiopia, too, journalistic practices are subject to both internal and external challenges of different sorts. The major internal and external challenges to the practices of development journalism in Ethiopia are discussed briefly as follows.

**Internal Influences**

**Socioeconomic Constraints**

The result of the present study depicted that economic factor is the most serious challenge to the practices of development journalism in Ethiopia. This challenge manifests its influence on the media practices in different ways: lack of sufficient financial support for journalistic activities, poor media infrastructure, and limitation of material resources, low salary for practitioners, less investment in the media sector because of economic reasons, and the public’s lack of exposure to media. In this respect, both the quantitative and qualitative data obtained from journalists working for the government and private media as well as the academics rated economic related constraints as the most serious. For nearly 90% of the journalists, economic influence was a very serious constraint. The journalists emphasized that the root cause of poor quality journalism in Ethiopia is poverty. It is evident that journalists’ low economic status coupled with their family responsibility can have a bearing on their confidence in discharging their responsibility.

Media managers of the surveyed institutions also indicated that they often overlook newsworthy events due to shortage of finance, reporters, vehicles, cameras and poor infrastructures. However, development reporting, in its nature, is different from covering easily accessible events and ongoing political process at the capital of the country and or in the nearby urban areas merely to fill the available airtime or newspaper space. Development reporters have to go to the people, get the facts from the people and also take the facts to the people (Pant and Kumar, 1995).

Economic challenge also manifests itself by limiting public’s access to media messages. The finding indicated that a large proportion of the rural population lack access to the media even to radio which is believed to be the medium for the poor. The respondents attributed this limitation mainly to the widespread poverty, illiteracy and limited circulation of newspapers. In support of this study, literature on public media use in Ethiopia shows that only insignificant proportion of the public has access to the media. Panos (2007) documented that the area coverage of Ethiopia radio is estimated to 70% and ETV to about 50% of the total geographical area. However, only about 25% of the population listens to radio. A study conducted by Ethiopian Economic Association (2006) also showed that of the farmers surveyed on their access to media messages related to agricultural development “only 5% are able to read leaflets and manuals, around 75% of the farmers do not listen to any radio program, and only 1% of the farmers have access to television. Thus limited access to media was a major cause for the low level of utilization of available agricultural information. Television use is limited to the major urban areas where electricity is available, few people can afford to buy television sets and only one percent of 80 million population read newspaper on regular basis in Ethiopia and the daily circulation of newspapers is less than 50,000 (Skjerdal, 2009 & Lishan, 2004), though it seems that the situation is now improving.
Political Influence

The government media and private media journalists and the academics who participated in this study indicated that media practices in Ethiopia are not free of political influence. They rated political challenge as the second serious constraints to the practice of development journalism. They argued that the government uses different mechanisms to interfere in media activities. The mechanisms they mentioned include government’s dominance of media ownership, maintaining monopoly on the important sources of information, overriding media management by appointing media managers and editors who are members of the ruling party and imposing restrictive media laws and pro-government judicial practices among others.

This, according to the finding, forced practitioners, particularly government media journalists to conform to the government position and emphasize success stories in their practices. The participants indicated that deviation from serving the government’s interest would cause unfavorable consequences. The major consequences they mentioned include: editors reject stories critical of the government; journalists with strong position to balance their stories would be accused of having conspired with the opposition; media managers issue formal and informal warning in connection to national security, public safety, peace and order and threaten journalists with possibility of losing job and facing detention. They also stated that fear of facing the consequences force journalists to strictly practice self-censorship and overlook investigative reporting.

Most of the federal state media reporters and private media journalists blame political interference for lack of investigative reporting in their practices. For example, a reporter from one of the regional states media said: “The risk of investigating corruption or mismanagement is too high for a journalist to bear. We attempted to report on problems of good governance but we faced lots of challenges and learnt that exposing corruption is so harmful to journalists. Politically, some government leaders harass you.” A journalist from another regional state media added, “Corruption is interlinked with many people and it is difficult to do unless backed by government. Once, we started corruption investigating project and found out that corruption has prevailed as if there were no government, but we were forced to interrupt the program because the program appeared to damage the image of the government. Corruption is expanding to the extent of being considered as a normal ‘help me to help you’ business.”

Though, in a developmental democratic state, the government and media work together to promote development, democratization and good governance, it is important to note that if political influence on journalistic practices prevails, that is totally unacceptable because it contradicts the Constitution and democratic principles.

Journalists-associated problems

a) Professional Constraints

It was found out that low professional competency of practitioners in the Ethiopian mass media institutions are among the challenges to journalistic practices in promoting development and democratization though it was perceived as relatively less serious. By professional constraint is meant journalists’ lack of relevant training in journalism and communication in general development journalism in particular. The journalists’ lack of appropriate training in journalism and communication is manifested in their practices and can be attributed mainly to the reasons outlined below.
• Limitation of institutions offering journalism and communication training and research in the country until very recently
• Shortage of well-trained educators in the area of journalism and communication
• Absence of collaboration between media institutions and the available journalism and communication training institutes (media practices are not supported by research and training from universities)

According to Wondwosen (2009) training can make a difference because only journalists with high professional competency can genuinely serve the public interest.

Lack of collaboration between media institutions and journalism training institutions adds up to professional constraint. The media institutions admitted that they have not established formal link with universities offering journalism and communication. Some media organizations revealed that they rarely attempted to use educators from universities for training journalists. What is more, as journalistic practices are not guided by research findings, journalists repeat the same mistake in reporting development issues. Nevertheless, given the expansion of public universities offering training in journalism and communication currently, this problem may not continue to be serious constraints.

b) Lack of Shared Journalistic Value:
Journalistic practices in government media and private press institutions in Ethiopia are mainly contrasting with each other in terms of contents, angles of story and emphasis in reporting. In addition, practitioners in the two media houses hardly view each other as professionals; rather each tends to portray those in their own group as heroes, and the others as villains. The present study revealed that the government media and most of the private media journalists tend to approach their professional practices on the basis of contrasting ideologies of different political parties and consequently, the two media seem to set completely different agenda for the same public with the same problems as if they were serving two different nations.

This is also clear from Skjerdal’s (2009) observation that there is a great divide in opinion between journalists of the government media and private, where the former is perceived as pro-government and the later as pro-opposition parties in their practices, implying tense relations between journalists working for the government media and private media. It is, thus, safe to conclude that lack of national journalistic harmony towards achieving common goals is another impediment to development journalism practices in Ethiopia.

c) Lack of Confidence
The result of the study showed that journalists themselves are to blame for lack confidence to address the actual development issues of the people. Respondents who hold this position argued that Ethiopian government media journalists in particular prefer to serve as willing mouthpieces of the establishment only because they are not bold enough to practice the profession as expected of them, not because they were forced by the government in any way. Some of the journalists and almost all the media managers who participated in this study indicated that the great challenge to their practices is not government’s restriction of journalistic freedom but journalists’ lack of confidence to practice their profession. They underlined that most journalists tend to read unwritten laws and mistrust their media
managers and the government even when the managers encourage them to maintain balance and produce stories critical of the government when necessary rather than always hunting success stories.

d) Conspiring With Corrupt Elites

Fighting corruption is part of development journalism because corruption in its different forms impedes development efforts. This implies that journalists determined to champion the socioeconomic and political transformation of their country are required not only to disclose corruptors but also to be free from conspiring with them. However, it is not unusual to observe some journalists failing into the trap of corruption. The finding revealed that such practices exist in Ethiopian media institutions to some degree. Some journalists from both the federal and regional government media and one reporter from the private media hold the view that journalists are part of the problem of good governance. They stated that, “Let alone investigating corruption, journalists themselves have actively involved in corruption by conspiring with corrupt officials and businesspersons.”

A well experienced editor from one of the regional government media also said, “Even the journalists are not free from corruption. As they earn low salary, they are easily deceived by whatever benefit they get. When they go for reporting their daily allowance is not sufficient; they do not reject when government leaders and NGOs offer them extra benefits in exchange of favorable reporting. In such circumstances, how can they investigate corruption? When journalists attempt to investigate corruption, after they conduct the first interview with an official, the journalist will be granted a plot of land for own house construction. Some journalists take land from different cities and towns.” A reporter from another regional state media similarly raised the issue of journalists involving in the “urban land business.” Some practitioners, however, tended to justify such practice, nicknaming it as ‘buche’ or ‘bucheqa’, which they regarded as a normal compensation for their efforts rather than corruption.

e) Low Status of the Profession

Credibility is the biggest asset for any media institution. In other words, if the media have credibility, they can influence the public to have trust in the media, prefer that particular media and depend on it for information, which means that the media can set agenda for the public. Among Mozambican society, for example, media institutions have become the most trustworthy ones and the society has increasingly become dependent on their media because they understood that the media serve their interest through investigating corruptions and promoting accountability (Ronning, 2009).

Nevertheless, media malpractices and/or misconceptions may erode media credibility. In the case of Ethiopia, the present study revealed that the media in general and journalism in particular has been stereotyped as rumor disseminating machine, mouthpieces of the government or the opposition political parties. Such perception can be an impediment to development journalism practices as it affects public’s acceptance of media messages and also damages the practitioners’ reputation. Moreover, given the past legacy of the century-old repressive monarchical and military governance in Ethiopia, associating journalists with the mouthpieces of the government carries negative connotation for the profession and the journalists. Indeed, the finding indicted that the public, particularly the educated ones, attribute low status or poor image to journalism profession and journalists in Ethiopia.
External Influences

Influences emanating from external sources are serious but are indirect and often unnoticed. These challenges are basically enforced by Western governments, international institutions, Western media journalists and academia. As Ndlela (2009) denotes, the influences manifest themselves through various practices:

- Pro-Western style journalism campaign by Western governments and media;
- Trainings to journalists from developing countries in Western universities;
- Western-based international media outlets such as the BBC, the CNN, and VOA;
- Western-originated journalism books disseminated throughout developing world;
- Western media managers, editors, technical experts and educators working for media institutions in developing countries;
- International news agencies and the networks of international information flow;
- Advanced information and communication technology and globalization.

The external challenges to development journalism gaining momentum goes back to the mid-1970s when Western governments led by the USA sharply opposed New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), the move by the non-aligned movement to halt the unjust global information flow and media use. Gradually, as developing countries proceeded with their preferred journalism model, the Western capitalist nations and their multinational institutions and media continued weakening any practice that deviates from their own model. The West, through international agencies and under the banner of free flow information doctrine, advanced the interest to spread their values, particularly liberal and/or neo-liberal democracy earlier to halt the spread of the contending Communism and later to promote their hegemony in every aspect. As part of this effort is the spreading of Anglo-American journalism models throughout the developing world (Reeves, 1993; Abrahamsen, 2000 and Ndlela, 2009). According to Ndlela, “The experience in Africa has so far shown that media and journalism education has been shaped, and continues to be shaped, by developments in trendsetting countries, mainly North America and Western Europe”.

In the case of Ethiopia, in addition to the earlier influence on media practices by British and American expertise during the Imperial era where they worked as editors of Ethiopian media houses, is the recent case of MA program in Journalism and communication, founded by support of Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). According to Skjerdal (2009), the NORAD support came to Ethiopia guided by the recently redirected mission of enhancing Western style democracy, human rights and good governance. As he clearly puts, “In line with the donor’s sharpened emphasis on free media, a curriculum was designed with particular focus on democracy and human rights”, disregarding the pressing issues of socioeconomic development.

The cumulative effect of external influence on development journalism practice is reflected by the ‘Third World’ journalists’ and publics’ tendency to praise Western style journalism without scrutiny. Practices, life style, politics, etc. in the West, seem to be accepted as symbol of perfection coming from ‘above’. Some think that whatever comes from the West is superior and should be accepted or adopted with no objection. In this regard, the analysis of the data obtained from selected media users or academics in the present study has interesting
implications. To the question about which media they prefer to get information about Ethiopia, 66.4% of the respondents stated that they prefer international media such as the BBC and VOA, claiming that these media are more credible, which may be a ‘constructed reality’ or image deliberately imposed by the international media to alienate audiences in developing countries from their own media.

Conclusion

Media’s role in effecting change is evident but citizens benefit only if journalism is practiced properly. “If journalism of convenience prevails, chances of improving life in much of the world will be slim… Doing good is possible. News coverage can influence public opinion, which in turn can nudge the policymaking process. At the end of this chain- sometimes- is progress. The hungry might be fed, the sick might be treated, the besieged might be rescued. Reaching this end is one challenge facing today’s journalists” (Seib, 2002). In a context where people are afflicted by poverty, illiteracy and injustice, journalists cannot take pleasure in practicing convenient journalism, but are expected to comfort the afflicted by creating the necessary intelligence that can emancipate them from the prison of poverty and injustice. The media with their power to reach the mass, ability to set public agenda and influence government policy, have big responsibility in Ethiopia where poverty is a biggest threat. The challenges identified in this study have to be overcome with determination, effective leadership, appropriate training and research and sufficient financial support for journalistic activities and Ethiopia has to strengthen journalism responsive and accountable to its people.

If at all there has to be ‘partisanship’ in journalistic practices, it has to be in favour of the people by ensuring loyalty to the citizens through promoting peace, justice, equitable and holistic development, genuine democracy and good governance. Overcoming the curse of polarized stance of public media and private media by way of increasing the level of interaction between journalists working for the two news media through seminars, research conferences and vibrant professional associations, Ethiopian journalism, whether practiced by public or private media journalists, needs to have shared values in order to address the real development and governance problems of the people. Ethiopian journalism has to serve the right purpose in the right context and should never operate as ‘hired guns’. To this end, we have to decolonize our mindset from adoring irrelevant journalistic perspectives and promote our own ways of thinking, solving problems and also embrace relevant models from elsewhere so as to deal effectively with the pressing problems of our country.

References


