

3 Ways Journalism is Transforming Aid and International Development

By Casimir Marschall, August 2016

Journalism has gotten something of a bad reputation in the United States and other developed countries. Much has been written about how today journalism is [sub-par](#); that tabloids undermine journalist ethics and political commentators hold their own agendas above the supposed objectivity and reverence of the truth journalists are supposed to hold dear in their hearts.

There is less written about how traditional news is losing [assets, revenue, and equity](#). News organizations have been consistent losers on the stock market and a journalism degree is one of the lowest paying degrees. While journalism in the developed world is stumbling through a tough period, the rest of the world is crying out for credible information from trusted sources delivered without disruption. I conducted interviews at the international development organization, [Internews](#), to find out what journalism does overseas, and how it can be a form of aid itself.

Method 1: Humanitarian Aid and Journalism

An often underappreciated impact of journalism is its immediate effects during a time of crisis. During an emergency, citizens in developed countries get bombarded with information out of every screen and speaker with information of immediate use. A single television station may have a meteorologist, reporters on the ground with cameras and microphones, and professional newscasters who can clearly deliver expert information and urge calm. In the developing world, the media is [deficient in providing professional newscasters](#) and keeping cellular and broadcast networks operating. Rumors abound and misinformation during a crisis is sometimes more dangerous than no information at all. Creating a professional newsroom is important to managing a humanitarian crisis, and making sure people know how to react.

- [Young Journalists in Sri Lanka Excel in Reporting on Deadly Landslides](#)
- [Information in the Midst of Crisis](#)

However, blaring information at the people-with-problems during a humanitarian crisis isn't the only use of journalism. Going into the disaster-struck areas and reporting on the situation, as well as finding out what exactly the people there need, what they have, and what will not be useful to them. This was described to me as the evolution of humanitarian aid from a "top-down" approach to a "two-way communication" approach. Disasters disrupts normal communication, so it is the journalist's role to act as an intermediary between the people on the ground and the officials in aid organizations and government agencies.

Method 2: Journalism and Conflict

The role of journalism during a conflict is an integral piece of culture in the developed world. From WW1-WW2 era news reels of soldiers and tanks and planes fighting each other in monochromatic real-life dramas, to Iraq war correspondents on the ground in their Kevlar vests and sunglasses surrounded by sand. War journalism has been one of the most visceral elements of the field. While pictures of conflict and hospital beds filled with the sick and injured are important, in the developing world, journalism takes on a whole new role. The goal of journalism in conflict is to resolve conflicts and prevent them from

breaking out in the first place using sensitivity, honesty, and perspective. These efforts are some of the most difficult and rewarding in the field of journalism itself.

The common cause of so many ethnic wars and outbreaks of communal violence is lack of information or the spread of disinformation. A vacuum of knowledge, or one filled with rumors or propaganda, is detrimental to peace. The goal of a journalist in these situations is key to pushing back the lies which create tensions among groups. The role of a journalist in conflict involves the mending of differences through understanding and facts. By getting local leaders on the air to call for peace, by conducting investigations into spark incidents, and by being sensitive to the moods of the two sides of the conflict, trained journalists can put out a fire before it starts and help hold a lasting peace.

- [Building Peace through Information and Communications Technologies](#)
- [Universal Newsreels](#)

Method 3: Journalism and Government

The effect of journalism on corruption and authoritarianism is seemingly underappreciated, despite the celebrated successes of investigative journalists in the not-very-distant past of the developed world. From the muckrakers of the early 20th century to the Watergate scandal to the recent release of documents linked to the functions of the NSA, investigative journalism is a force for transparency, which in turn improves the practices of government. Government corruption is hugely widespread in the developing world, practiced by some governments as a matter of course. The ability of governments to hide corruption hinges on their ability to shield their practices from public exposure; likening them to vampires avoiding the gaze of sunlight. Journalism's ability to pull back the curtain is important in identifying the problem and rallying public support for a solution.

- [Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*: Muckraking the Meat-Packing Industry](#)
- [Showing Corruption from the Skies](#)
- [Business People: Investigative Journalism Best Against Corruption](#)

The effect of journalism inside an autocratic government was discussed during my interview with Alison Campbell, Internews' Vice President for Global Initiatives. We discussed the Burmese school of journalism, which was a compound located south of the Myanmar border in Thailand. Over the course of 10 years, 100's of journalists were trained and sent back into Myanmar, now equipped with expertise to perform honest and professional journalism. This school transformed the landscape of Burmese journalism over the course of a decade. It no doubt accelerated the progress of democratization that took place during that time, and today the press continues the fight for liberty and transparency. The end goal of international development is to spread the freedom and prosperity of the developed world to the non-developed world; an effort to equalize living standards in the nations which got left behind by the rapid development of the 19th and 20th century.

So What Does This Mean?

Many bemoan how Generation Y & Z don't respect true journalism anymore. They note the decline of respectable news sources like the New York Times. They point to [statistics](#) which show that many more Americans get their news from sites such as Facebook and BuzzFeed. We need good journalism; every society needs good journalism. So is journalism in trouble? Are we in trouble? I spoke with Myles Smith, Senior Director of Program Support at Internews, if journalism was dying or evolving:

“...the transition now, and where we’re going, nobody really knows when it ends, what it looks like, and it causes a lot of anxiety and disruption in the information marketplace. But I don’t think, it can die- because people want it. It’s just a matter of, how they’re going to...who’s going to create what they want.”

And he’s right. As time has shown, people are constantly marching towards understanding and knowledge. I cannot imagine a society not curious enough to seek out information. By looking at the young media in developing countries around the globe, we are reminded just how important good, honest, accurate and timely news is to a fair society.