“A friend in need is a real friend indeed.”

A study about the Sveriges Radio Media Development Office (SR MDO) and the perception of a post-colonial impact

An Analysis of qualitative Interviews

Thesis for the Degree of a Master in Media and Communication Studies (M.A.)

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Abstract

Free Media is an essential part of democracy, a goal Sveriges Radio’s Development Program is aiming for. Existing since 1996 based on tax-financing, it offers its long experiences of public broadcasting and its ideal of serving democracy to other countries. The partaking Sveriges Radio journalists provide the countries with assistance for training in management, journalism and technical issues in both broadcasting, print and online media. The present research investigates based on the interviewees’ perceptions to what extent Swedish democracy and Swedish journalistic identity is transmitted during their media (radio) development projects, using post-colonial theory as a guiding theoretical approach. The study is based on interviews with Swedish and foreign journalists who have been involved in radio development projects. The study shows that despite common understandings of democracy and professional aims, differences occur based on the perception of the participants. These cannot be separated from the context and progress outcome of the projects. The study furthermore shows that there exists an ambivalence between the post-colonial awareness among participants.

Keywords: Post-Colonialism, Radio, Development Work, Identity, Journalism, Sweden
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1. Introduction

“A friend in need is a real friend indeed” this study is named after a Mongolian proverb, mentioned by the Mongolian participant during the interview. It also characterizes the relation, work and effort of Sveriges Radio Media Development Office (SR MDO) in their projects and vis-à-vis their partners around the globe.

“The mission of Sveriges Radio Media Development Office (SR MDO) is to cooperate in democratic development, poverty reduction and processes of social change through assistance in the development of free media.” (SR Media Development Office)

The idea is to provide a journalistic practice with the mission to have an impact on democracy and social change at the basis of an equal trainer-trainee relation in the receiving country. Yet the superior part is possessed by the Swedish part when entering the project offering journalistic knowledge embedded and grown in a well-established public service broadcaster. The critical point of the journalistic practice exchange during the projects is that the Swedish participants are not over-ruling their foreign colleagues with the point of view of practicing and therefore providing the “right” journalistic practice, which would indicate a colonizing impact. Nevertheless the study tries to achieve the perception of the participants on the critical point of this journalistic practice and their view and thoughts on a possible impact of post-colonialism within their cooperation.

Yet SR Media Development Office is a fairly unrecognized part of Sveriges Radio, which was established in 1996 as an independent department, working on media projects in developing countries. It cooperates with development organizations such as Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs)\(^1\). The office aims to establish Radio stations throughout the world, based on the basic principles of Sveriges Radio as public service broadcasting and emphasizing the value of free speech and democratic development. The self-definition of Sveriges Radio with respect to its aims in Sweden applies to its foreign broadcasting, as well:

“Sveriges Radio is a non-commercial, independent public service radio broadcaster. Its mission is to provide high-quality programs for the Swedish population. Swedish Radio’s primary aim is to provide enriching programs for all Swedes, wherever they live and regardless of their age, gender, and cultural background. Swedish Radio’s comprehensive range of programming should offer something valuable and indispensable for everyone.”

Embedded in this structure Sveriges Radio Media Development Department (SR MDO) aims for radio development around the world, offering knowledge and support as requested by the recipient.

This work focuses on two major projects carried out by SR MDO in cooperation with the Mongolian Radio “Implementing Public Service Radio as an important tool for the development of the Mongolian democracy” and with Radio Botswana “Capacity Building for Public Service Broadcasting in Botswana”, mainly financed by SIDA. In the Western part of the world we take it often for granted that we have easy access to information, because we are in the lucky position to grow up in a working media system. Many, therefore, regard it as essential to help other countries to develop their own working system, because a well established media system is regarded as a tool for a working democracy:

“The right to communicate and to have affordable access to the means of communication is increasingly being acknowledged throughout the world as a fundamental human right. (...) There was also focus on education and training to enable people to develop their own media and communication skills.” (Pavarala; Kanchan, 2007: 20)

Radio is a very important tool in terms of access to communication, due to the fact that it is a very affordable medium, when it comes to production, management, reception and it has the big advantage that it can reach people, who do not have the possibility to use stationary phones or electricity. Media is also used to educate the public, and with this, Radio fulfils another very important purpose: It reaches people with no reading or writing skills, in very poor parts of the community, and it is therefore more suitable for cultures which are based

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2 http://sverigesradio.se/sida/default.aspx?programid=2438
on orality. Furthermore, Radio is the so called people’s medium and has a ‘proven track record of being a catalyst for social change’ (Pavarala; Kanchan, 2007:17).

With their work, SR MDO aims exactly for this social change. SR MDO wants to introduce a working Radio so that it can fulfill its purposes for democracy. Sweden finds itself in the donor or teaching position within the projects; therefore, Swedish values, like journalistic identity and democracy, could easily be transported to the project countries during the cooperative work between the journalists. Such a transmission of identity and democracy has attracted academic research interests for a long time.

1.1. Research Interest and Aims
Meeting one of the journalists who worked for the media development office during a lecture two years ago was the starting point of the idea to write a master thesis about the topic media development based on radio. The lecture about the work as a journalist in a different media environment close to foreign colleagues was so inspiring that I started to look for academic research on this topic just to find out how rare it is.

Even less has been researched on the link between media development programs and the (direct or indirect) transmission of journalistic identity and democracy with focus on the participating journalists. The topic has several dimensions: There are the sending and the receiving countries and their respective broadcasting and development agencies; there are specific projects with similar or different aims; and there are the participating journalists from both countries. Each of these dimensions needs to be considered if we want to explore the relationship between media development projects, their democratic aims and the journalist identity based on the experience and viewpoints of the interviewed journalists.

The aim of this study is to explore this relationship and to see whether there are (explicit and implicit) colonialist aspects acknowledged by the participating journalists in the projects, the work, and the identity of the journalists involved. The guiding questions of the study are:

1. The particular understanding of journalistic identity and democracy is embedded and grown in completely different circumstances for the different participating journalists. Therefore, what is their perception, shortly highlighting the Swedish, about journalistic identity and democracy, with a possibility of accordances and clashes?
2. As what kind of journalists (SR MDO employees) do they experiencing themselves when mediating journalistic identity and democracy to their foreign colleagues, dividing them in three possible categories, Orientalists, reflected Post-Colonialists or neutral?

3. Media development is according to the interviewed journalists within the two chosen project an aid devoted to exchange knowledge. Therefore, what is in their opinion so special about media development; especially that radio development still needs to be offered nowadays and question which guidelines are established for such projects?

1.2. Methodology
This study is based on qualitative interviews. They provide a suitable methodological tool to gain more insight into the topic. I carried out 10 interviews with journalists of Sveriges Radio and of the receiving countries Botswana and Mongolia. The interview partners were chosen because they “had particular experiences or [were] members of specific groups whose rules, traditions, and values [were] of interest” to this study. (Rubin & Rubin, 2005:37) The interviews were based on guidelines which served as a “compass” to assure that all necessary issues were covered in the interview. The main focus was on the transmission of journalistic identity and democracy in radio development projects through the participating journalists. Therefore, ‘the interviewees [were] of less interest as a (whole) person than their capacities of being an expert for a certain field of activity.’ (Meuser and Nagel in Flick, 2002:165) Despite the guidelines and the expert focus the interviews were open enough to allow for freedom of exchange and to recognize both, interviewee and interviewer, as ‘individuals with emotions, biases, and interests.’ (Rubin & Rubin, 2005:17) The interview parts presented in this study outline personal opinions about journalistic identity and democracy of each individual participant, and they have been put together by the author to achieve new insights into the media development process.

1.3. Outlook
The existence of development programs show and reflect a specific social status quo; there is still a media based west to east knowledge flow. The qualitative interviews reveal a deeper understanding for journalistic development work and its conceptions, but also how much the context can be converted into the praxis. They furthermore show what kind of difficulties journalists face, in light of their understanding of democracy and their work ethics. They also reveal that democracy is context related and a very individual state of
mind, even if the ideals are seemingly the same. Moreover, the study hopes to shed light on Swedish journalistic identity and its ethics – especially of radio journalism with respect to democracy. It also reflects on the homogeneousness of journalistic identity between the teaching and receiving journalists, the importance of openness and awareness for each other and how reflection can improve future projects.

1.4. Structure

After this short introduction a background section is provided followed by the theory part. The background consists of an overview of radio broadcasting in general and of radio broadcasting in Sweden. This is followed by a short description of SR MDO, its major partner, SIDA, and their development projects. Following the study’s main focus, the literature focuses on post-colonialist theory, with reference to media, democracy, and journalist identity. The empirical part of the study starts with a description of the methodology, the recruitment of the interview partners, the interview and the analysis technique. This is followed by the presentation of the results. Discussion and conclusion summarize the findings.