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Book Review

Foreign Aid and Journalism in the Global South: A Mouthpiece for Truth

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In eight concisely written and tightly argued chapters, Jairo Lugo-Ocando invites his readers to rethink the formation of journalism across the globe by investigating the role of foreign aid for media development in the Global South. He puts forward a thorough investigation of how foreign aid for media development influenced the fostering of particular roles, practices and norms in journalism in the Global South.

In the first chapter Lugo-Ocando considers journalism in the Global South as a “colonial and postcolonial enterprise” (p. 4, 5). He reviews “enduring myth[s]” (p. 5) that “the North ‘invented’ journalism” (p. 5) and that the “dissemination of journalism norms and values was part of bringing modernity upon existing forms of communicating news in the South” (p. 5). Lugo-Ocando argues that the dissemination of particular journalistic norms and practices was used to channel them into “particular mainstream models that help to underpin hegemonic power” (p. 5).

A key term within the second chapter is the notion of “common sense”. In this context, Lugo-Ocando describes “how the news media in the West came to embrace the language of common sense as a defining discursive regime of the news” (p. 25). He uses the term of “common sense” to explain the reproduction of hegemonic news cultures in the Global South and argues that news values such as objectivity, balance, and fairness came to be at the core of this regime. Lugo-Ocando states that foreign aid in media development helped to spread this notion of “common sense” as a “core value in the newsroom across the globe” (p. 51). By looking back in past centuries, he gives a capable historical account on how this notion evolved to be “the theoretical explanatory framework to interpret the world” (p. 41). However, he does not forget to connect those historical considerations with recent developments and brings up the debate around “alternative facts” and a so-called “post-truth” era (p. 51).

The third chapter contextualizes the discussion about normative aspirations within the “projection of power and extension of the markets” (p. 25). For this purpose, Lugo-Ocando takes a thorough look at journalistic objectivity in particular. On the one hand, he argues that the spread of objectivity as a journalistic norm was not only an effort to establish ethical standards, but also a “a way of producing news content as a commodity [...] that could be easily exchanged and sold to standardized and universally accessible markets” (p. 63). On the other hand, he broadly discusses the role of class struggles during the 20th century in putting forward specific ways of doing journalism.

The link between foreign aid and media development in the context of colonialism and post colonialism is the main focus of the fourth chapter. Lugo-Ocando discusses hegemonic and colonial approaches that according to him played a central role in establishing the “groundwork for existing media system and [...] news cultures” (p. 102) in the Global South. He convincingly argues that colonial powers had a direct impact upon the evolution of reporting practices and news cultures in those countries. He depicts the process of colonial institution building “not in terms of developing a democratic framework where governments and individuals could deal fairly

in the transactions of power and rely on the rule of law [...] but as a wider process of hegemonic settlement to consolidate colonial power” (p. 97). However, he also addresses postcolonial contexts: Lugo-Ocando pertinently observes that – with the end of World War II and the rise of independence movements – foreign aid for journalism development “started to be substantially directed at disseminating a particular model of journalism practice and education that is aligned with the interests of the wealthy, industrialized northern donor nations” (p. 99). Lugo-Ocando claims that media development often became a “tool for the different powers to support or deny regime change” (p. 101) – an effort that is, as he does not forget to mention, not restricted to political actors, but also to many private donors.

The notion of objectivity is at the core of the fifth chapter. Lugo-Ocando argues that the idea of journalistic objectivity originated during the 19th century from the idea of scientific rationalism and is deeply rooted in the notion of modern science. Thereupon, he delves into the history of journalistic objectivity. In this context, Lugo-Ocando discusses the news agency AP (Associated Press) in detail (p. 108). He argues that AP played a central role in establishing journalistic styles and norms around the globe and that AP contributed to the professionalization and standardization of journalism worldwide. He claims that objectivity not only came to define Western journalism, but became a “key cultural export” (p. 109) and a “transnational norm” (p. 111) that spread in colonial and postcolonial regions of the Global South, too.

In the sixth chapter, Lugo-Ocando draws attention to journalism education. He critically assesses that journalism education and training are essential parts of foreign aid and one of the “most important and enduring channels” (p. 119) when it comes to disseminating Western norms and values in journalism like objectivity or impartiality. In this context, he addresses broadcasters such as the BBC or Deutsche Welle, news agencies such as Reuters, NGOs like George Soros’ Open Society Foundation (United States), the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Germany), the Fundación Carolina (Spain) or the Toda Peace Institute (Japan). He argues that many of those initiatives have focused on disseminating Western reporting standards by replicating professional deontological practices and values in the Global South. Lugo-Ocando offers a critical perspective on many of those efforts. For instance, he discusses the curricula initiatives by the UNESCO and asks: “How many scholars from the Global South were able to see or provide feedback to a ‘universal’ curriculum model as that proposed by the UNESCO? How many can afford to travel and participate in meeting in Geneva, New York, Washington or Paris” (p. 133)? Lugo-Ocando offers a well-argued and critical perspective as he states that many of those initiatives hinder “the potential of a homegrown understanding of what journalism should be” (p. 134) and inhibit the development of “independent and indigenous journalistic practices and normative frameworks” (p. 134).

The seventh chapter elaborates the relationship between foreign aid and media development in the digital age. Firstly, Lugo-Ocando addresses the current role of

foreign aid in nation building and claims that it is still used to “foster both capabilities and institutions that underpin democracy and by default promoting the free market economy” (p. 145). Secondly, he looks at the normative function of media assistance to promote media diversity. He argues that media assistance was used to support media diversity, pluralism, and a healthy democratic debate in the past. However, he rightly states that with today’s “overload of information and widespread access to it” (p. 147), this becomes more complex for donor institutions.

In the last chapter, Lugo-Ocando provides a comprehensive summary of his considerations. He ends the book with a powerful plea: “[T]he challenge now for all of us is to start reconciling the ethical impositions of standardization from the West with the deontological needs and realities on the ground in each and every one of the very own distinctive constituencies of the Global South [...]” (p. 168).

In summary, the book examines the way in which foreign aid has influenced professional ideologies of journalism in the Global South. Lugo-Ocando argues that foreign aid for media development and media assistance is historically rooted in colonialism and market expansion. He offers insights into central characteristics of journalism cultures worldwide and argues that the history of journalism in the Global South was not a linear process of hegemonic dissemination or cultural imposition, but rather a “process in which current values were forged by the heat of contradiction, conflict, and resistance” (p. 116). By providing a critical perspective, the book complements the corpus of literature on the topic of media development and foreign aid gainfully.