

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ADVOCACY JOURNALISM

3.1 ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF ADVOCACY JOURNALISM

The journalist model of “Advocacy” has been historically an integral part of the press. One could argue that until the ascendancy of ideals of objectivity and professional reporting, journalism was largely “Advocacy Journalism”, a propaganda tool for political organizations, a platform for press entrepreneurs with political ambitions, a path for political activism for reporters. This kind of Reporting is what Max Weber describes in his *Politics as Vocation*, when he observed that journalism “remains in all circumstances one of the most important avenues of professional political activity” (Gerth & Mills 1949).

According to Halin and Mancini (2004), advocacy journalism evolved through different paths on both sides of the Atlantic. Reasons are found in the different evolution of press systems and journalistic ideals. In established European democracies, advocacy journalism traditionally found room in newspapers and publication that openly embraced partisan positions particularly in pluralist and corporatist media system. Its evolution has been inseparable from the communication history of political parties. Because parties have historically held noticeable influence on the press, partisan viewpoints were often inseparable from news reporting. Editorial standings impregnated news coverage and the overall treatment of information. The structural linkages between parties and the press coupled with the existence of strong partisan in society at large underpinned the affirmation of journalistic identity strongly tied to partisan views. Across European democracies journalists typically approached news reporting as a way to get politically involved and to promote viewpoints generally associated with political parties.

In recent decades, the ascendancy of market forces in media systems coupled with the weakening of partisan identities has weakened the historical grip of parties on political communication. Although this process has happened across the region with different intensity and at different pace, political parties do not wield the same media power they once had. Studies, however, have found that the notion of advocacy remains a desirable journalistic ideal among European journalists (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996, Kocher 1986). Notwithstanding the gradual loosening of party-media connections, the notion of the “journalist as advocate” continues to capture the professional imagination of journalism (Hallin & Mancini 2004).

In the United States, the historical trajectory of advocacy journalism has been quite different. Between the mid-1800s and 1920s, the gradual demise of the partisan press and the concomitant rise of the commercial press set different conditions for advocacy journalism. The adoption of objectivity as the normative ideal of professional reporting displaced advocacy journalism to the margins of the press system. Unlike in European democracies, advocacy journalism was not strongly linked to organized parties. This was a byproduct of the perennial communication weakness of the two dominant political parties and the untrammelled power of the market. Instead, advocacy journalism has been historically associated with nineteenth century movements that promoted women’s voting, abolitionism and workers’ right and turn-of-the-century muckrakers who criticized political corruption and business practices (Ostertag 2006).

Advocacy Journalism remained marginal throughout the twentieth century as mainstream media organizations embraced the notion of objectivity, and neither major political party maintained organic relations with large media organizations. The most influential newspapers largely restricted advocacy journalism to editorials and op-ed pages. Alternative publications remained the flag-carriers of advocacy journalism such as the publication of anti-war, feminist, gay, environmental and ethnic rights movements, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. They broadly expressed the political views of a disparate array of social movements, opinion groups and activists-turned publishers.

Advocacy journalism historically found a more receptive environment in Western Europe than in the United States, in the latter, the adoption of the ideal of objectivity as the pre-eminent journalistic norm functioned as a bulwark against alternative views including the notion of “journalists as advocate”. Even today, a professional imaginary strongly attached to notions of objectivity and political detachment (Schudson 2001) continues to be the reference point to assess the merits of advocacy journalism.

Advocacy journalism historically has had a different presence in the mainstream press in the United States and Western Europe, questions about the desirability of advocacy journalism for public life and democratic rule received different answers. While advocacy journalism has found supporters among European publishers and journalists, it has been vigorously criticized by the mainstream US press. In the United States, publishers and journalists’ associations have remained strongly opposed to any alternatives to the ideal of objectivity and political detachment. In the early 1970s, for example, debates in newsrooms and academia about journalistic norms showed the reluctance of editors and academics to admit advocacy journalism into the newsroom. Leftist analysts argued that objectivity is not feasible when political-economic interests influence news coverage, questioned its appropriateness to produce comprehensive and critical news reports of powerful interests, and considered it as a mere discursive justification for professional legitimacy (Bagdikian). They considered that the norm of “objectivity” effectively functioned as a subterfuge for advocacy for status quo politics and ideologies. In contrast, scholars and practitioners who championed objectivity firmly believed that the latter was the best alternative to fend off advocacy journalism. For them, the latter was undistinguishable from propaganda, which they identified as contradictory with the essential values of the democratic press such as fairness and truth-telling. Furthermore, they found advocacy journalism problematic in a context of agitated and growing political distrust during the Vietnam War and Watergate Scandal. Janowitz (1975) argued that advocacy journalism fueled distrust of authority and undermined the professional status of journalism. Similar arguments were expressed during the recent controversy about civic journalism.

While its defenders called journalists to act as facilitators of community dialogue, critics considered that civic journalism mistakenly assigned journalists the role of community advocates (Mc. Davitt 2003; Ryan 2001).

Advocacy Journalism has recently found a home in the main stream media, as expressed in the strident conservative views of Fox News the outspoken partisan positions of cable news anchors and commentators and the editorializing of news content in some tabloids. Journalists and news organizations with right-wing sympathies, rather than progressive reporters as Janowitz and other press scholars feared in the 1970s have sneaked advocacy journalism into the corporate press. Unlike the advocacy journalism practiced by the alternative press, advocacy journalists are ubiquitous in news organizations that do not challenge basic premises of the current political-economic system, but unequivocally champion some of its central ideological underpinnings. In summary, advocacy journalism remains visible in mainstream news organizations with clear right-wing editorial sympathies, as well as in progressive publications that continue the tradition of alternative and radical news.

Reasons for the persistence of the “journalist” model of advocacy journalism are found in the political economy of the press. As long as governments and politicians continue to wield substantial power on press economics news organizations are likely to act as a vehicles for promoting their political interests. The basic arrangements remain largely unchanged even when globalization and market forces have refashioned media systems in the past decades. Government and personal funds are still in the life blood of media finances in many countries across the globe. Access to government monies, party coffers and individual fortunes are crucial to maintain news organizations running. Often, the weakness of market and public funding concedes tremendous power to government officials, politicians and large business to affect news coverage. The fact that governments and political financiers continue to wield power in press finances coupled with the inclination of governments to bulldoze any signs of press independence continues to favour advocacy journalism. The collapse of military dictatorships and one-party regimes opened opportunities to re-define journalistic norms.

The recent literature on journalistic norms shows that professional identities and roles are in transition in Asia, Africa and America's consensus on journalism norms is still lacking. (*Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Gross, 2003; Hanitzsch, 2005; Hasty, 2005; Hughes, 2006; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Pan & Chan, 2003; Ramaprasad, 2001; Ramaprasad & Hamdy, 2006; Rampal, 1996; Richstad, 2000*). Neither objectivity nor partisanism holds a tight grip. Just as objectivity remains a troubling and contested norm, old-fashioned advocacy journalism is constrained by editorial politics (Mano, 2005; Mwesige, 2004; Waisbord, 2000). Reporters remain skeptical about the applicability of objectivity as well as the notion of "journalists as social mobilisers." More than impartial reporters of reality or passionate political advocates, journalists often perform balancing acts between personal politics and newsroom real politic, clutching to professional principles and observing editorial expectations. When the norm of impartiality does not command strong allegiances among journalists nor is expected enforced in daily practice, advocacy journalism has fewer restrictions.

3.2 THE PRACTICE OF ADVOCACY JOURNALISM

Many news organizations are concerned with social issues that either are not covered regularly or have only been recently included in news beats, they often find it difficult to make news. Because they often challenge powerful political and economic actors, they are likely to confront timid newsrooms, and at times, outright opposition" (Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994). Advocacy Journalism signals a different sensibility among organizations engaged in social change. It reflects the realization that is central to advance political causes in an age of "mediated" politics. It expresses the decision to approach the mainstream media as a potential "strategically" in the struggle to promote changes, and the realization that communication strategies need to integrate conventional news biases. Unlike oppositional movements that radically question the prevailing order (Cullinan, 2003). While aiming to promote social changes advocacy journalism strictly adheres to standard reporting practices and codes. Rather than pushing to revolutionize journalism. It follows conventional news routines and norms to raise media attention.

The “institutionalization” of media advocacy among mobilized publics reflects the acceptance of established news-gathering routines and news conventions such as dramatic, conflict-driven, sensationalist, event-centered and celebrity news. Such characteristics of media coverage have increasingly become wide spread in newsrooms across the south (Natarajan & Hao, 2003; Ryfe, 2006; Tomaselli, 1996).

Advocacy Journalism is also considered as a follower of established journalistic routines and norms such as the preference for the official, dramatic, conflict-laden, sensationalist and celebrity/event triggered coverage. As such standard media logic is still very much present in advocacy journalism stories. But the advocacy journalism attempts to introduce breakthroughs and cuts a creative edge to the stories (Waisbord 2009). Advocacy Journalism presumes that media as a whole will always chase special interest stories and therefore, it is important to find opportunities in shaping media content. Through advocacy journalism civic entities can influence news making for the benefit of societies greater good including programmes for the disadvantaged sector such as food banks for the poor and projects for the disabled (Waisbord 2009). In terms of media forms, the journalistic quality of advocacy journalism reports is quite similar to the style and form used in typical media reports. Moreover, these works are considered as advocacy journalism primarily because of the theme and emphasis of the stories and not the form on which it was written. Media content may vary and change depending on the relations between news organizations and external factors. The challenge lies on how to recognize prospects, identity strategies and opportunities for content diversification. Opportunities for a good coverage may be reporting the human side of certain stories such as scientific breakthroughs, judicial decisions or findings fresh angles in high profile speeches, congressional debates or commemorations. To sustain the efforts of civil society groups in bringing the media into the fold of social causes, they provide trainings to familiarize journalists with social and civic issues and bring the journalists in contact with social development experts and other information sources. (Waisbord, 2009)

There are local situations that are more favourable to the practice of civic advocacy journalism than others such as in localities where international development organizations and civil society groups are already active. The presence of the groups may be quite limited or even restricted in other geographical areas and this situation may not favour advocacy journalism practice.

Finally, advocacy journalism focused on societal reforms and engages collaboration with civil society groups but it is not similar or can be equated to critical and activism-oriented media movement within the dominant media. As advocacy journalism is not premised on a radical critique of the dominant media nor is it antagonistic with other industry groups and practitioners.

Advocacy journalism contributes to widening news coverage by spotlighting issues and featuring voices that are typically ignored in the mainstream media. In doing so, it makes positive contributions to democratic debate. It neither aims to overthrow the current news order nor opt out to set up independent media. Instead, it introduces important innovations by bringing the voices of actors who are typically excluded or misrepresented, challenging powerful sources, and offering alternative news frames (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Around the world the major goals have achieved through advocacy journalism. The mobilization of people living with HIV/AIDS across the globe is perhaps one of the best illustrations of this process. The news media pay serious attention to this issues including policies, treatment cost and prevention programmes. (Robins 2004, Stein 2002, Traquina 2004)

Advocacy reporters of environmental movements are opposing whale-hunting, nuclear plants, and deforestation (Anderson 2003), and the Treatment Action Campaign and the Sexual Rights Campaign in South Africa (Msimang, 2003).

The past two decades have witnessed a conscious push away from the traditional journalistic value of objectivity, often deeming it an impossible goal. Calls for advocacy journalism have taken a variety forms including public journalism, citizen journalism and peace journalism. Scholars have noted that advocacy journalism promotes societal change. Thus it tends to advocate more for “leftist” causes, serving as a progressive counterweight to the intrinsically conservative nature of objectivity. And advocacy journalism as a whole including much “rightist” activity is growing.

Advocacy journalism certainly fulfils an important function in highlighting issues, and attempting to bring about change. In doing so however, the ideal of objectivity in journalism might be seen as compromised to some extent. However, as noted by Mc Nair (1998), “the best journalism of the new millennium will be that which acknowledges the limitations of objectivity and finds new ways to bypass those limitations while preserving the believability of journalistic discourse”.

In sum, advocacy journalism evolved through different paths on both sides of the Atlantic. Its evolution has been inseparable from the communication history .In the United States; the historical trajectory of advocacy journalism has been quite different. Between the mid-1800s and 1920s, the gradual demise of the partisan press and the concomitant rise of the commercial press set different conditions for advocacy journalism. Advocacy journalism historically found a more receptive environment in Western Europe than in the United States, but today the scenario of advocacy journalism has been changed. Now a day’s advocacy journalism remains visible in mainstream news organizations with clear right-wing editorial sympathies, as well as in progressive publications.