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# Making Meaning of Media Development Today

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## Making Meaning of Media Development Today

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This article aims to fill a gap in the academic literature on how employees at a media development intermediary construct meaning of their work. Based on in-depth interviews with 18 employees of *Internews*, this research shows that employees believe the organization has “evolved” from the past to include the entire “information ecosystem” today. Themes that emerged include a focus on information as a solution, an emphasis on local communities, the desire to give voice to marginalized communities, and a practice of listening. Interviewees strictly adhered to official narratives of their work and to contemporary development orthodoxy, perhaps because of group think and participant bias. Despite these narratives, we have to consider the ulterior motives of media development as a neocolonial project. Although some of the results may seem obvious, there is merit in documenting these findings to demystify media development work today.

*Keywords: information ecosystems, international development professionals, Internews, interviews, media development*

Within the context of modernization and development theories, this article aims to fill a gap in the literature on how employees at a media development intermediary construct meaning of their work today. The field of media development is shifting, especially with the introduction of the Internet and a focus on entire media ecosystems (Kalathil, 2017), so this article explores employee discourse about practices at one of the biggest intermediaries in the United States—*Internews*. While focusing on an organization in the United States, this work acknowledges the politics of postcolonialism (see Shome, 2016; Shome & Hegde, 2010) and dependency (Tietaah, Yeboah-Banin, Akrofi-Quarcoo, & Sesenu, 2018) as well as power differences between the Global North and Global South. Based on the existing literature, this article provides rich data obtained from 18 in-depth interviews conducted in 2016, both with *Internews* employees in Washington, DC, and overseas (through Skype). Although some of the results may seem “obvious” or “natural,” documenting these discourses has merit because it demystifies the work of media development agencies.

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## **Literature Review**

### ***Modernization and Development***

Modernization and development theories provide context to understand media development. Modernization is the idea that "traditional" societies need to change to become "modern." Although the ideology of modernization is typically seen as originating after the end of World War II (Melkote, 2003), with plans by the United States to rebuild Europe, Fair and Shah (1997) argue that it goes back much further. Based on the work of Luke (1990), they trace the history of modernization back to 16th-century Christianization and 18th-century Westernization. Modernization came after Westernization and promised a "vision of modern society and offered process that could bring 'primitive,' 'backward' people and societies into the modern present" (Fair & Shah, 1997, p. 5). According to Melkote (2003), modernization is based on Enlightenment ideas, including reasoning, rationality, and objectivity: "In modernization theories, the definition of a modern nation resembled Western industrialized nations in all areas of society, including political and economic behavior and institutions, attitudes toward technology and science and cultural mores" (p. 131). Fair and Shah (1997) write that evolution and functionalism form the basis for modernization. Scholars trace the use of the term "development" back to U.S. President Harry S. Truman's inaugural address on January 20, 1949, when he announced a program of development for the so-called underdeveloped areas of the world (Escobar, 1995; Fair & Shah, 1997; Sachs, 1992). In general, development can be seen as "improving the living conditions of society" (Melkote & Steeves, 2015, p. 15), but it is unclear exactly what improvement is and how it should be achieved. Development, then, is the "operational implementation of modernization ideology" (Fair & Shah, 1997, p. 3).

At least since the 1970s, scholars in Latin America and Asia have criticized ideas of modernization and development (Melkote, 2003). These scholars pointed out the impossibility of applying this Western framework onto the largest part of the world. According to Sachs (1992), development "meant nothing more than projecting the American model of society onto the rest of the world" (p. 5). Similarly, Escobar (1995) states that the intent was to replicate the characteristics of "advanced" societies across the world: "high levels of industrialization and urbanization, technicalization of agriculture, rapid growth of material production and living standards, and the widespread adoption of modern education and cultural values" (p. 4). Furthermore, development "justifies U.S. intervention in the Third World" (Fair & Shah, 1997, p. 6). Modernization, critics argue, is ethnocentric, perpetuates a negative view of culture, and has patriarchal assumptions (Melkote, 2003). Writing from a Marxist perspective, Manyozo (2012) points to development as "a site of conflict over resources and power between classes that drink tea and those who grow that tea" (p. 3).

### ***Development Communication***

The following section aims to clarify some of the key concepts in the field of development, communication, and media, as there is often confusion about these terms (see Arnold, 2010; Berger, 2010; Deane, 2011; Manyozo, 2012; Scott, 2014). Until the 1990s, development communication, also called communication for development (C4D), dominated the field of media and development (Peters, 2010). Development communication is broadly concerned with the role of "media and communication in directed social change" (Melkote & Steeves, 2015, p. 6). Originally, development communication referred to the delivery of information to audiences in the developing world through the mass media to bring about

empowerment. In the media for development (M4D) approach, the media act as a vehicle for providing content to the public. Development communication is rooted in discourses of modernization and development, discussed above, based in the belief that “undeveloped” countries can become “modern” through the introduction of mass communication (see Lerner, 1958; Schramm, 1964). Scholars have criticized development communication for its assumptions of strong media effects, its technological deterministic viewpoint, and its Western-centric assumptions of development. In recent years, approaches to development communication have changed from the so-called dominant discourse to include the voices of participants or receivers of development communication through participatory exchanges. For example, Scott (2014) cites a 2006 definition of C4D as “a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods. It is also about seeking change at different levels, including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change” (p. 2). Freire (2003), who wrote about the participation of the oppressed in their own liberation, initially influenced this approach. Scholars are also calling for a greater emphasis on “preserving and sustaining local cultures, as these constitute the ideological lens through which local communities structure their realities” (Melkote & Steeves, 2015, p. 19). Today, scholars and practitioners view participatory approaches to be the most effective in bringing about social change in communities.

### ***Media Development***

Defining media development can be tricky because it is often confused with development communication. In fact, Scott (2014) states that defining media development is like “nailing jelly to a wall” (p. 75). An overview of the literature shows that media development typically focuses on creating privately owned, independent media in transitional and developing countries through international interventions (Berger, 2010; Kaplan, 2012; Kumar, 2006; LaMay, 2009; Manyozo, 2012; Myers, 2008; Myers, Dietz, & Frere, 2014; Peters, 2010; Scott, 2014). In media development, the focus is on the development of the media themselves, and not on the message communicated through the media. Another component of media development is that it refers specifically to efforts that focus on “strengthening and expanding indigenous media systems” (Arsenault & Powers, 2010, p. 5). The creation of independent media should ideally build democracy and provide access and voice to citizens through journalism (Graves, 2007; LaMay, 2009; Norris & Zinnbauer, 2002; Peters, 2010; UNESCO, 2008). Some have called media development “media assistance,” but Berger (2010) argues that certain interventions are in fact “media manipulation” or “media meddling.” He proposes the term “media mobilization” to indicate “interventions that are meant to capacitate media” for a specific purpose (p. 550). As with development communication, media development practitioners and scholars point out that media assistance must respect local cultures and allow for local input: “The agendas of donors and implementers should be weighed against the needs of local partners and intended beneficiaries in order for projects to become sustainable reform efforts” (Arsenault & Powers, 2010, p. 2). Recently, Kalathil (2017) argued that the field is “beginning to reconcile itself with the need to support media ecosystems more broadly” (p. 2). From the review of existing literature, it is unclear to what extent media development organizations actually use participatory approaches or have shifted to work with the whole media ecosystem.

Not much peer-reviewed information is available about the early days of media development; however, some industry reports fill this gap (e.g., see Arsenault & Powers, 2010; Cauhape-Cazaux & Kalathil,

2015). LaMay (2009) traces U.S. efforts to promote press freedom overseas to failed efforts of the Associated Press to include open access to news in the Treaty of Versailles after World War I. Both Kumar (2006) and LaMay (2009) state that the first, modest media-assistance programs in the 1980s focused on Latin America. Media assistance then was a relatively small field, but it grew significantly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hume (2004) writes in a report titled "The Media Missionaries" that "hundreds of Americans then rushed to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics to spread the gospel of democracy. Among them were some of America's most altruistic journalists, who hoped to midwife a newly independent press" (p. 9). Torosyan and Starck (2006) similarly state that "after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western nations rushed to the 'rescue' of the media in the newly independent nations, using funds from various agencies like USIA and USAID, which saw their new, post-Cold War role in promoting principles of democracy and free-market economy" (p. 205). At that time, the focus of media development programs turned to the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Eurasia, but more recently the focus shifted to Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Hume, 2004; Kumar, 2006).

As with development communication, media development has its critics. One of the biggest criticisms of media development is that it imposes Western ideals and interferes with the local affairs of other countries for its own benefit (see Manyozo, 2012; Miller, 2009; Myers, 2008, 2018; Myers et al., 2014; Phiri & Fourie, 2011; Tietz et al., 2018). Berger (2010), for example, writes that media development refers to "interventionist projects, most of which are driven by an ulterior purpose and instrumentalist understanding of media" (p. 550). Paterson, Gadzekpo, and Wasserman (2018) ask, "Is media development an essentially neocolonial project or a vital component of peaceful and stable economic development?" (p. 6). Another criticism is the unidirectional assumption that societies will move to "modernity" through the introduction of media. As Arsenault and Powers (2010) write, "A side effect of this linear assumption was that theories about how to influence the media developed by researchers in the West, about the West, were applied in other locations with little alteration" (p. 20). They point out that a response to this criticism was a new focus on including "local, disadvantaged voices" in media development efforts (p. 20). Those in the development industry have also raised criticism, with calls for fundamental changes to current practices (Nelson & Susman-Peña, 2012). Despite the development of detailed media development indicators (UNESCO, 2008), evaluation of the success of programs remains a problem, with assessment often focusing on counting the number of persons trained (Becker & Vlad, 2005; Noske-Turner, 2015). Another concern is the emphasis on "independent" media supported by a free market, when this model is in crisis in the West (Higgins, 2014; Peters, 2010).

While many industry reports on media development exist and are available for download the Internet, there is not much scholarly or theoretical research in the area (Kalathil, 2017). Several academic studies have looked at media development in specific countries, but as Miller (2007, 2009) states, there is almost no research on NGOs and media assistance. It seems that only one in-depth study on a particular media development intermediary (*Internews*) has appeared in a scholarly journal. Torosyan and Starck (2006) studied the impact of Western journalistic conventions on an Armenian commercial radio news program, "Aniv." Torosyan and Starck found that trainers expected "Aniv" reporters to replicate American standards of objectivity, newsworthiness, and competition in their work. They argue that journalists in postcommunist countries "should avoid blind acceptance of assistance and expertise without examining the

ideological strings attached to foreign aid" (p. 215). Ultimately, they argue, local values and local problems should get more attention from Western media trainers.

### ***Research on International Development Professionals***

Similarly, the work of international development professionals has not received much scholarly attention, partly because the focus tends to be on the recipients of development aid instead of on aid workers themselves (Hindman & Fechter, 2011). Some anthropological research exists on what Mosse (2011) calls the "knowledge practices" (p. 1) of international development professionals (also see Roth, 2012). Mosse (2011) rightly points out that although much research has focused on the effects of development, little has been done on "the internal dynamics of development's 'regimes of truth' or of the production of professional identities" (p. 2). In a discussion of expert knowledge among development professionals, Mosse (2011) points out that they often lean toward "group think" and demonstrate "intellectual self-discipline of professionals of all kinds" (pp. 9–10). As a result, development professionals often provide official narratives of their work instead of dealing with complexities and contradictions in what they are doing. Kothari (2005) argues that although ideas about development may be interpreted in various ways, development experts "are conduits and translators of a meta-language reflecting a particular view of social change and the practice of development" (p. 437). Development discourse, Kothari (2005) argues, pretends to be universal but in fact privileges Western expertise. Other research in this area has focused on the lifestyles and values of development professionals (Fechter, 2012a, 2012b; Gunetilleke, De Silva, & Lokuge, 2011; Mowles, 2008). Of particular interest for this study is the work of Stirrat (2008), who states that our understanding of people working in the development industry and "their own views of what they are doing" is very limited (p. 413). Stirrat (2008) argues that some view NGO development workers as "missionaries" because of their commitment, enthusiasm, and sense of duty:

Their commitment is to the litany of contemporary development orthodoxy: participation, empowerment, "bottom-up" approaches, gender sensitivity and the importance of indigenous knowledge. These are the objectives of their development activities and act as a set of articles of faith. They exist as ultimate values, unquestionable and absolute. . . . The NGO missionaries are involved in the promulgation of these values and of liberating people from ignorance, poverty, marginalization, and injustice. (p. 414)

Although these studies are valuable in understanding the current work, none of them focused on media development professionals in particular, and scholars have not asked workers about their own perceptions of their work. As such, this article aims to fill a gap in research on media development workers and how they construct meaning of their work through a case study of *Internews*.

### ***Introducing Internews***

This section will provide information about the history and current philosophy of *Internews*. According to its website, *Internews*

empowers people worldwide with the trustworthy, high-quality news and information they need to make informed decisions, participate in their communities, and hold power to account. Our vision is to unleash human potential everywhere by turning on the bright light of information. ("About us," 2019, para 1)

In 2016, its slogan was "Local Voices. Global Change," but more recently this changed to "Information Changes Lives" ("Information Changes Lives," 2019). Since its founding in 1982, *Internews* has worked in more than 100 countries, and it has offices in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and North America ("About us," 2019). *Internews* has active projects in 40 to 50 countries, with a total worldwide staff of around 600 people (L. Lindamood, personal communication, February 22, 2016). Kim Spencer, a documentary film producer, Evelyn Messinger, a video artist, and David Hoffman, a political organizer, founded *Internews* in July 1982 in San Francisco (L. Lindamood, personal communication, February 22, 2016). According to the *Internews* website, its first project was to "compile archives of films, TV shows, and documentaries about nuclear war" ("Our History," 2019). Indeed, Meier (1995) describes *Internews* as a

little known, low-budget nonprofit formed by a trio of eco-activists who found each other and an enduring mission in the throes of the "no nukes" crusade. Its founders came together from across the United States in a union of politics and technology: David Hoffman, a Zen-inspired unionizer with a Midas touch for fundraising, joined forces with Evelyn Messinger and Kim Spencer, a pair of video crusaders who'd devoted themselves to alternative energy. (para 12)

Hoffman (2013) writes that two years earlier, in 1980, he, Messinger, and Spencer had produced "the first live television broadcast using communications satellites in an experimental interactive program for PBS" (p. 9). According to Hoffman, *Internews* began producing a series of experimental "spacebridges" (televised satellite exchanges) with Russia in 1982, leading to a "citizens' summit," in which Russian and American citizens interacted freely with each other (p. 10). That was later followed (1987–1990) by a series of conversations, called Capital to Capital, between "members of the U.S. Congress and deputies of the Supreme Soviet" moderated by Peter Jennings (L. Lindamood, personal communication, February 22, 2016). In 1990, after the collapse of the USSR, *Internews* started focusing on the "hundreds of small, non-governmental TV and radio stations springing up in East Europe and the former Soviet republics" (L. Lindamood, personal communication, February 22, 2016); also see Cummings, 1996; Messinger, 1999). Meier (1995) writes that the credit for the development of independent local television stations in Russia had to go to the "unorthodox zealots" and "free-media missionaries" at *Internews*: "Through an odd mixture of grant-gathering and commercial ambition, this anomalous collection of idealists is exploiting every angle it can find to steer the course of TV in Russia" (para. 5). According to Meier (1995), *Internews* attracted more American money, including multimillion-dollar contracts from the Agency for International Development (USAID), to develop post-Soviet media than any other organization.

Today, *Internews* positions itself strategically as an organization for the future. A planning document (*Internews*, 2016) states:

We have expanded our mission beyond “media development” to fully embrace work at the nexus of media, information and development. We are working with information in all its forms: professional media, citizen-generated information, sensor and systems-driven data, crowd-sourced content, and more. The technology and behaviors of how information is shared and used is fundamentally different than in the past. This expansion of scope challenges us to consider the full “information ecosystem.” (p. 12)

The same document states the core purpose of *Internews* is “to ensure all people are fully empowered with the information they need to have a voice in their future and to make informed choices for their families and communities” (p. 12). This document also shows that a total of 80% of *Internews*’s funding comes from the U.S. government, but the organization will be working to reduce this to 66% in the next five years. In the context of this literature review, I asked the following research question: How do *Internews* employees construct meaning of their work in media development?

### Method

This research used naturalistic inquiry to study how employees construct meaning of their work in media development. Naturalistic inquiry, in contrast to the positivist paradigm, is constructivist in its belief that realities are multiple and constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The case study approach, in particular, is useful to describe “multiple realities encountered at any given site” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 41). A researcher uses case study research when they want “to know how a program works or why a program has been carried out in a particular way” (Putney, 2010, p. 3). It is especially useful to understand processes within their local contexts, and it helps the researcher “understand the complexity of a program or a policy, as well as its implementation and effects on the participants” (Putney, 2010, p. 3). According to Baxter and Jack (2008), an advantage of case study research is “the close collaboration between the researcher and the participant, while enabling participants to tell their stories. . . . Through these stories the participants are able to describe their views of reality and this enables the researcher to understand participants’ actions better” (p. 545). This study uses an instrumental case study, in contrast to an intrinsic case study, to understand an issue “beyond the case itself” (Putney, 2010, p. 3). As such, the instrumental case study is not generalizable, but it aims to “identify patterns and themes and compare them with other cases” (Grandy, 2010, p. 2). In this case, the goal is to understand how media development workers construct meaning of their work for possible comparison to how other media development workers understand their work in the future.

I used semistructured in-depth interviews to gather information. Berger (2000) states that an interview is a “conversation between a researcher (someone who wishes to gain information about a subject) and an informant (someone who presumably has information of interest on the subject)” (p. 111). The goal of interviews is to give voice to research participants (see DeVault & Gross 2007). As Reinharz (1992) points out, interviewing “offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (p. 19). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe the qualitative interview as “an event in which one person (the interviewer) encourages others to freely articulate their interests and experiences” (p. 170). Interviews allow the researcher to “hear new languages, some of which is the language of the interview situation, and some of which are dialogues drifting in from remembrances of other lived experiences” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 207). Interviews are particularly appropriate for this study, as they



allowed participants to share their understanding and perceptions of their work. Although interviews can elicit detailed information from participants, they also have limitations. For example, Berger (2000) states that people do not always tell the truth, people do not always remember things correctly, and people do not always have useful information. Further, Berger points out that participants sometimes tell the researcher what they think she wants to hear to be helpful or to impress the researcher. This phenomenon is called participant bias or response bias. A final limitation that Berger mentions is that the "meaning received or gained by the interviewer may be different from the meaning intended by the interviewee" (p. 124).

Through networking, I gained access to a key employee at *Internews* in 2015, and this contact suggested potential participants at the Washington, DC, office as well as potential Skype participants overseas. A snowball method helped to obtain additional interviews. In total, I conducted 18 in-depth, semistructured interviews. The first set of interviews (11) took place at the *Internews* head office in Washington, DC, from February 8–12, 2016 (Participants 1–11). I conducted an additional seven Skype interviews with *Internews* employees in seven countries (Participants 12–18) between May and July 2016. The locations of overseas participants were Afghanistan (1), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1), Kyrgyzstan (1), Liberia (1), South Africa (1), South Sudan (1), and Ukraine (1). As part of the Human Subjects approval process of the Institutional Review Board, I promised participants confidentiality and that their names would not appear as part of the research. Interviews were an average of 46 minutes per interview, and a professional transcriber transcribed a total of 13 hours of interviews. In total, I interviewed four males (three at the head office and one through Skype) and 14 females (eight at the head office and six through Skype).

I used an inductive process to code transcripts for recurring topics. Each discussion of a topic was considered to be a "unit," and all units were recorded in a spreadsheet. A total of 199 "units" were recorded in 20 categories. Most of these 199 "units" came from interviews conducted in Washington, DC (132), with 67 from interviews with employees overseas. Examples of these categories are "mission," "history," "what is media development," and "minorities." After the initial round of open coding, I collapsed these categories into 14 umbrella categories. Several of the initial categories contained multiple "units" and remained separate as final categories. In writing this article, I returned to the "units" and categories as indicated in the spreadsheet to create a coherent narrative.

## Results

### ***An "Evolution": From Media Development to Information Ecosystems***

Participants described the original focus of the organization as its work with newly independent radio and television stations in the former Soviet Union by the end of the 1980s. One participant said,

A country like Russia had maybe 300 all state-run TV and radio companies, and that was it. And then, in a pretty short space of time, they had over 1,000, because these small, local TV and radio stations started springing up . . . because all of a sudden it was legal to be a founder of a media company; whereas before, you had to be in the state, a part of a state institution to create a media company. And it became free for anybody to do it. (Participant 8, personal communication, February 11, 2016)

Another participant mentioned how she first met *Internews* in Moscow in 1988–89, when she saw these “young guys with cameras running around.” She inquired about who they were and learned that they were from *Internews* (Participant 17, personal communication, July 1, 2016). As many of these stations still acted as mouthpieces of the state, *Internews* stepped in to support journalists and freedom of expression. The emphasis was on democracy and governance:

*Internews* really started off . . . helping media in the then Soviet Bloc kind of like strengthen its role and helping it to understand how the media is best able to speak for citizens and speak for the liberalization of laws and so on. (Participant 18, personal communication, July 8, 2016)

In addition to providing support for freedom of the press, *Internews* helped to provide infrastructure for these stations. Participant 8 (personal communication, February 11, 2016) said that “in the early days, it was all about giving people TV and radio equipment. I mean, some people were literally making antennas themselves.” Participants explained that the focus was on television and radio because these media were relevant at that time and in that context: “People went to their TVs for their information. . . . TV stations emerged as independent and for independent voices and communities” (Participant 1, personal communication, February 8, 2016).

As media technologies and media habits of people have changed dramatically since the 1980s, participants said *Internews* has adapted (or “evolved,” as several employees said) and today embraces new Internet technologies. Participant 1 said,

So when we talk about media now and relevant media, and media the people use, and media where people find their voice, and media which is able to serve as . . . [the] Fourth Estate, it’s no longer TV. It’s in a range of places, often online. But in the lower tech environment, it could be as simple as a radio speaker hooked on the side of a donkey that walks through a refugee camp. (personal communication, February 8, 2016)

Similarly, one participant said that the organization was not “going to be putting up radio towers for the rest of *Internews*’s existence, even though that was a major part of our work for a very long time” (Participant 6, personal communication, February 11, 2016). This participant emphasized the need to be constantly innovative, as the media field is rapidly changing. Indeed, he said *Internews* has “evolved with the changes in the media sectors around the world and with the technology and most especially with the role of what access to the Internet and access to mobile can do” (personal communication, February 11, 2016). Even though technologies have changed, an interviewee said that *Internews* continues to bring the media and audiences together: “I guess a lot of the work that we do now is moving toward convergence and multimedia production. . . . So I guess we really focus on what we essentially always wanted to do, which is create stronger connections between media and their audiences” (Participant 8, personal communication, February 11, 2016). One participant explained the change in the following way: “It’s gone from being a one-way form of communication to very much two-way communication, because the audience has a voice and the audience’s voice is heard in many different ways” (Participant 9, personal communication, February 12, 2016).

As stated in the *Internews* strategic document of January 2016 (*Internews*, 2016), the organization has expanded its mission beyond “media development.” The field of media development has changed so much over the years, some participants said, that *Internews* does not see itself as a traditional “media development” organization any more. For example, Participant 5 (personal communication, February 11, 2016) said she knew that media development was the primary mission of the organization when it started, but that *Internews* has “evolved” over time. Participant 4 (personal communication, February 10, 2016) said that as a result, *Internews* does not see itself as only a media development organization today:

It feels a little bit more narrow [and] because the media and information space has changed so much. We certainly for most of our life as an organization would have called ourselves a media development organization. We are still a media development organization, but we sort of go beyond that as well, just because the information space has changed so dramatically, and our interlocutors aren’t all traditional media. I like to use the word “media” in its purest form—that in fact it’s sort of any type of information flows, but other people have a different image in their heads. So sometimes when you say media development, they think of only traditional media, and we’re not just in a traditional media space.

Two participants described changes in technology and in the media development field in general as a “revolution.” For example, Participant 11 (personal communication, February 12, 2016) said,

I think when I found *Internews* and when many people find *Internews*, they will think of it most classically as an organization that trains journalists . . . but, in fact, it’s much more than that. And it has become even more than that because of the kind of democratization of technology and the fact that everybody can now be a media provider, creator, as well as a consumer. You know, the whole information technology “revolution” has really changed our modes of working and expanded them onto many new platforms.

Similarly, Participant 9 (personal communication, February 12, 2016) pointed out that the definition of media development has expanded:

The definition and how information flows and who is a producer and who is a consumer has all changed, but you’re still talking about media and information. . . . What’s happened is there’s been “revolution” under our feet and in our space over the past 10 years.

One participant said the broadening of its horizons helped *Internews* to find “different niches, especially in humanitarian aid and emergency and crisis situations, because information is critical” (Participant 17, personal communication, July 1, 2016).

Participants explained the changes at *Internews* as a shift from talking about traditional “media development” to talking about “information ecosystems,” as pointed out by Kalathil (2017). For example, Participant 4 (personal communication, February 10, 2016) said that “[media development] did change so much around the world that we’re actually broader than that. We talk about working in an information

ecosystem now.” Participant 10 (personal communication, February 12, 2016) explained that the basic theory of information ecosystems is that “healthy information flows through communities help make for healthy and safe communities.” In essence, she said, societies cannot be healthy if people cannot connect and communicate independently and freely. This participant felt that the new media environment has created many opportunities:

I think we’re in a very exciting and also very challenging time. And one of the reasons for that is that the ability for people to connect, to communicate, to tell their own stories, and to do that also in a high-quality and detailed way, has never been better. The trajectory is for more and more people to be connected to each other every day. And the role of journalists, of content creators, of media makers, of communicators in that space, has never been bigger or more profound or more important. (Participant 10, personal communication, February 12, 2016)

### ***Making Meaning of Media Development at Internews***

In addition to the shift to a broader definition of media development to incorporate online media and information ecosystems discussed in the previous section, several key themes emerged as to how *Internews* employees understand their philosophy and mission today. These themes include a focus on information as a solution, an emphasis on local communities, the desire to give voice to marginalized communities, and a practice of listening. These categories also intersected as these themes were interweaved in responses of participants.

One of the ways that participants articulated the work of *Internews* is that the organization focuses on information as a solution to problems. In describing the mission of *Internews*, Participant 7 (personal communication, February 11, 2016) said,

It’s making sure that people have the information they need to make the decisions that they need to make with regard to improving their communities. It’s about creating the fora in which people in that community can share that information and develop a common understanding of what the problems are, what the priority of those problems are, and also come to a group solution, and agree on “solutions” of those problems. That’s what information can do.

Two participants mentioned information as a “root solution” to solving problems. For example, Participant 2 (personal communication, February 10, 2016) said she felt like

information and communication in media can be a “root solution” to so many of our problems in the world. With better information systems, and stronger, more robust local media, people immediately have more access to information about health care, about education, about environmental issues, climate change issues.

Similarly, Participant 4 (personal communication, February 10, 2016) said she felt like media and information is a “root solution to solving some of the world’s most difficult problems.” Although these participants described media and information as a solution to the world’s problems, another stated that “information saves lives” (Participant 13, personal communication, May 4, 2016). This belief in information as a solution to problems reflects the earlier approach to development communication that assumed strong, linear media effects.

A second theme that emerged was a focus on information for local communities. Interviewees emphasized that *Internews* works hand in hand with local communities and local partners to provide local solutions. One participant said what sets *Internews* aside from other organizations is “that it’s the local voice. Like, that’s the main focus, is making sure that the voice of the people at the local level is heard” (Participant 5, personal communication, February 11, 2016). Similarly, Participant 1 (personal communication, February 8, 2016) said,

The approach always has been to go local. . . . We try to get into those hardest to reach areas and focus locally. . . . Oftentimes, we do in-depth local analysis, and we tend to work very closely with local partners to get that more perfect on-the-ground knowledge for an approach. There really is an understanding that every country, [and] every province of every country is unique, and that there’s no real uniform, cookie-cutter approach to every area. . . . So, really, being a good partner in support of our local partners . . . is a really key part of the approach.

Another participant emphasized that *Internews* has always been “very locally focused. . . . Our focus has always been on finding existing outlets . . . and working with them to give them the capacity to . . . be able to respond responsibly” (Participant 7, personal communication, February 11, 2016). Participant 2 said media development means to her “working to build the capacity of local media outlets to make sure that people in those communities have access to accurate, relevant, trusted information” (personal communication, February 9, 2016). Another participant called the local approach the “fingertips-in-the ground” approach: “We like to keep our fingertips in the ground in all these different places to make sure that we have the relationships in the communities there” (Participant 6, personal communication, February 11, 2016). A focus on the local also means reaching people in their own languages:

We provide a wide range of information and content that in all cases reaches people at very local levels, preferably in their own languages, through the sources of media that they trust, and that information is really geared to enable people to understand better their worlds and to give them the information they need to make decisions about their lives. (Participant 11, personal communication, February 12, 2016)

An emphasis on the local relates to what Stirrat (2008) calls contemporary “development orthodoxy,” with a focus on participation, bottom-up approaches, and the importance of indigenous knowledge. However, Stirrat points out that despite rhetoric of respect for local cultures, development is a “universalizing force” that inevitably brings new values and ways of thinking to communities (p. 415).

The third theme that emerged was that participants believe *Internews* works to give voice to people, especially those from vulnerable or “at risk” populations. Participants frequently expressed the idea of giving voice to people through their work. A participant summed up the mission of *Internews* by saying that

*Internews* is focused on ensuring that people have a “voice” in their community, ways to hold their government, their community, accountable, and are part of a conversation about their lives and their future. And we do this through traditional media, but also through new media, through civil society organizations, and then we’re looking at everything that’s wrapped up in it. (Participant 9, personal communication, February 12, 2016)

In addition to a political function of voice in holding the government accountable, another participant emphasized that *Internews* works to empower citizens “with ‘voice’ and access to the tools to make their voices heard” (Participant 1, personal communication, February 8, 2016). Participant 7 (personal communication, February 11, 2016) focused on giving people information to be able to have an informed voice: “If you give that ‘voice,’ give that individual the information that they need to really understand what are the problems? What are the complexities of problems that their communities are facing? So an informed ‘voice,’ that’s the voice that, for me, is most important.” Not only is “voice” for citizens important, but participants frequently brought up giving voice to marginalized or “at risk” communities and minorities instead of elites. *Internews* works with refugees and people in conflict zones. *Internews* works in countries with authoritarian regimes and in some of the areas in the world that are most difficult to reach. Participant 9 (personal communication, February 12, 2016), for example, said,

So we are more likely than not . . . focusing in on people with disabilities or women or ethnic minorities working in vernacular languages as opposed to national languages. And that’s our bias, because we’re looking at all these issues, but we also want to ensure that the voices in the conversation reflect the community, and they often don’t. They often reflect the elite.

Similarly, Participant 1 (personal communication, February 8, 2016) said,

It just seems to go part and parcel with our mission, not necessarily to create platforms and media for the elite. . . . Vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected by their lack, both of access to necessary information, which they really need for their lives, but also being a part of that information system that will take into account their voices as well.

Related to the theme of a giving voice, the fourth theme that emerged was that interviewees believe *Internews* listens to communities. This approach is in line with more recent participatory approaches in media development and is facilitated by new media technologies. For example, one of the participants said, “I am increasingly interested in the degree to which our work is driven by ‘listening’ and tapping directly into the community for all our work. . . . Every project we have, more and more, we should have a ‘listening’ component now, because we can” (Participant 11, personal communication, February 12, 2016). Another participant said,

One of the things that drew me to this organization is that *Internews* really focuses on 'listening' to, you know, local communities about what their needs are and about what are the best ways of resolving those needs. . . . We don't go in and necessarily start putting together the content and broadcasting it and having an *Internews* station. This is really about supporting local stations. (Participant 7, personal communication, February 11, 2016)

This approach is also true when *Internews* solicits input from local partners about projects they would like to participate in:

We don't go and tell activists, "This is what we want to fund you to do." It's true that we have like an overall goal, like the project is there to build the capacity of local advocates to engage Internet freedom issues, but we don't go with like a specific program design. We tell them, "This is the general goal. If you can come up with three or four activities that fit within the overall goal of the project, we will fund you." (Participant 5, personal communication, February 11, 2016)

By listening, *Internews* makes sure that "implementations that we have in different regions are appropriate and designed there as opposed to having the *Internews* corporate, kind of like, imposing" (Participant 6, personal communication, February 11, 2016).

### Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this project was to find out how employees at *Internews* construct meaning of their work in media development. This research found that employees at *Internews* see the organization as changing with the times. From its early days as a media development organization working in the Soviet Union, *Internews* has "evolved" to an organization that understands new media technologies and people's new media habits. The information revolution that unfolded with the introduction of the Internet changed people from mere recipients of one-way communication to active participants in two-way communication in which they can express themselves. This shift has resulted in some employees not considering *Internews* as simply a media development organization anymore, but as something much broader. From "putting up radio towers" in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, *Internews* now works with "information ecosystems," which one of their publications describes as "borrowed from environmental studies . . . to describe how local communities exist and evolve within particular information and communication systems" ("Why Information Matters," 2015, p. 11).

Critics of media development have voiced their concern about the assumption that societies will necessarily move to modernity through the introduction of media. *Internews* employees still seem to believe in strong media effects. Information, participants said, is the solution to many problems in communities. Another criticism of media development focused on the lack of attention to the needs of local communities. In this case, participants insisted that they focus on what these communities need. One participant said there is not a "uniform, cookie-cutter approach" to finding solutions in different areas. *Internews*, they believe, work with local communities to find local solutions to local problems. Instead of imposing, *Internews* employees believe they listen to communities about their needs. This

indicates a participatory approach, as advocated by experts and scholars in this field. *Internews* employees also believe that they give "voice" to populations, especially those they consider to be vulnerable or "at risk."

Interview data show, perhaps unsurprisingly, that participants in this research project provided "official narratives" and avoided addressing complexities and contradictions in their work, as Mosse (2011) found in his work on expert knowledge among development professionals. This may be the result of what Mosse (2011) called "group think" and "intellectual self-discipline" (pp. 9–10). Further, participants aligned themselves very closely to what Stirrat (2008) called "contemporary development orthodoxy" in their understanding of their approach to media development, and these values seemed to be "unquestionable and absolute" (p. 414). Participants also unanimously demonstrated characteristics of development "missionaries" through their sense of mission, commitment, and enthusiasm. As Berger (2000) points out, participant bias likely contributed to the uniform, official responses of interviewees in addition to their adherence to "development orthodoxy."

Even as employees see their work as beneficial to recipients on a micro level, *Internews* is still embedded in global power relations as an American organization on a macro level. Indeed, as 80% of *Internews*'s funding comes from the U.S. government, one has to consider what Berger (2010) has called the "ulterior purpose" of media development (p. 550). Despite what participants believe, the promotion of democracy and a free-market economy in developing countries clearly projects the "American model of society onto the rest of the world" (Sachs, 1992, p. 5). This takes place even as the free-market model that supports journalism in the United States is in crisis (Peters, 2010).

The results of this study are limited to this specific case study and are not generalizable. Future studies could explore how employees at other media development organizations construct meaning of their work, as to provide a comparison with this study of *Internews*. Other studies could also look at how recipients of media development understand their relationships with this and other media development intermediaries.

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