

UNFOLDING MEDIA DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES ON THE CONTINENT: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

By

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1.0 Introduction

This is a largely descriptive account of the key media development initiatives underway in sub-Saharan Africa. In offering this description, I intend to point out some problems associated with the initiatives, and the prospects they hold for the future of media institutions on the continent.

2.0 Media development: the problem of definition

The very first problem confronting the initiatives I shall be looking at is the definition of 'media development'. To a very large extent, this has become a discursive matter, reflecting the institutional frameworks of such initiatives. For example, it is not clear if 'media development' must privilege 'private commercial media' over 'state/public media'. Certainly, initiatives originating in the United Kingdom seem to attach great importance to public media systems, largely given the fact that the tradition of public service broadcasting is strongest there. For example, on the one hand, the BBC World Service Trust's African Media Development Initiative seeks to 'mobilise a range of African and international stakeholders to significantly boost support for the development of the *state, public* and private sector media' (BBC WST 2006). (my italics). On the other hand, initiatives with a greater American influence (such as Internews brought to bear on the GFMD) seem to emphasise the aspect of 'independent' media. For example, the conference held by the Global Forum for Media Development threw up points of disagreement about whether 'media development' should concern itself with 'development of the media' or 'development communications.' A significant number of American participants felt that the media should not consider it their job to be social advocates and take up the agenda of development and Millennium

Development Goals (MDGs) (GFMD Report 2005). Even the term 'independent' media is not fully unpacked, but there are allusions to privately-owned commercial media as constituting 'independent' media. This would contrast somewhat with the BBC WST initiative's emphasis on public/state media systems.

Of course, my characterisation of the debates might overly simplify an otherwise complex debate, but it clearly illustrates some of the cultural and ideological issues that the label 'media development' conjures up, issues that will have to be faced up to in developing a donor support mechanism for media development.

Increasingly, however, as the African voice begins to be heard above these other 'foreign' voices, there is a movement towards a hybridity of media systems, such as those adumbrated in the 1991 Windhoek Declaration. I shall come back to this point later.

Having raised this preliminary ideo-definitional problem, let me move on to consider the media development initiatives that have emerged. I must start, however, by setting out some historical context.

3.0 Post-colonial Africa: the New Information and Communication Order (NWICO)

The promulgation of the New Information and Communication Order (NWICO) seems to have set the context for 'media development' in the Third World. With reference to Africa, there had always been a discontentment with the imbalanced information flows between the continent and the Western countries, as well as with what were seen as distortions of Africans portrayed in the major news agencies of the world (Bourgault 1994: 175). In the late 1970s, UNESCO took up the debate on behalf of the Third World. Within the

heated political context of the time, the Pan-African News Agency (PANA) was created by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1979. Unsurprisingly, PANA's aims were 'to rectify the distorted image of Africa created by the international news agencies and to let the voice of Africa be heard on the international news scene' (in Bourgault 1994: 175).

The NWICO has since been watered down, largely due to the overbearing influence of the USA (Fourie and Oosthuizen 2001:416). In fact, Western opposition to the ideology of 'group or solidarity rights' inherent in NWICO led the USA and Britain to withdraw their membership from UNESCO (Traber 1993). We could argue that the NWICO was, in part, an attempt at building international support for the Third World media. Are we, then, moving towards enunciating another 'information and communication order' in the age of globalisation? As already suggested, what ideologies will underpin it? Will these be in sync with those of Western interests? If not, what will happen? Are we headed for another failed 'order'? These questions must be posed, although we may not have the answers at this moment.

4.0 The African media context in the age of globalisation: from the 1990's onwards

At least within the specific context of Africa, it would not be far-fetched to argue that the beginnings of an international support mechanism for the media is traceable to Windhoek, Namibia. In 1991, UNESCO called for a gathering of media practitioners and press freedom organisations in Namibia on May 3. This conference culminated in the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press. The Declaration set the background for the proclamation by the UN General Assembly of May 3 as 'World Press Freedom Day' (Barker 2001:16). The Declaration repudiated state ownership of media institutions and justified the doctrine of media liberalisation and privatisation.

Beyond the Windhoek Declaration, there is clear evidence of more African *ideological* engagement with the discourse of media development in various documents. For example, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, in Article 9, echoes the rights in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has elaborated this in its Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa. The declaration is important because it elaborates in considerable detail what is meant by freedom of expression. This includes a number of other points of particular relevance for the development of broadcasting services in Africa, such as (i) the need to encourage the development of private broadcasting, (ii) the need to transform state or government broadcasters into genuine public broadcasters, and (iii) the need for independent broadcasting regulatory bodies. These points are, in turn, reinforced by the African Charter on Broadcasting, adopted in 2001 on the tenth anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration (Article 19 2006).

5. Media development initiatives

5.1 The global context for media development

The establishment of the Commission for Africa (CFA) in early 2004 by the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, marked a milestone in British engagement with Africa. Although the Commission's preoccupation was with much more than media issues, it was clear that there was some attention paid to the potential role of media in the development of the continent. While there is, in some quarters, unrelenting criticism of the Commission's 11 March 2005 report, my concern with it here is that it ignited much of the debate we are having about creating international support for the development of the media in Africa. Out of that have emerged a number of initiatives that are performing specific tasks to keep alive the discourse of media development. I shall make mention of some of these initiatives, without providing much detail, partly because they are just unfolding, and partly because I am not privy to much data about them.

5.1.1 The Global Forum for Media Development

The American based Internews, in conjunction with several media-support organisations in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia, organised the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) held in Amman, Jordan, towards the end of 2005. The gathering was attended by many of the well-established media support organisations in Africa, including some media owners and practitioners. One of the main aims of the GFMD as a media development implementers' collaboration body was a parallel movement by media development donors to share information among themselves about best practices, present priorities, and ways of measuring success – what we might characterise as donors' 'bureaucratic' ideology of harmonising their support to the media sector.

Apart from this, the goals of the GFMD are to:

- Attract the broad but currently disparate community of media assistance organisations and share experiences and information across the media aid sector;
- Improve the quality of technical assistance of the sector and develop common monitoring and evaluation methodologies;
- Offer an extensive web-based platform of resources for media professionals;
- Disseminate research on the role of the media in economic growth democratisation and institutional reform process;
- Establish an ongoing donor-implementer dialogue that would enable media assistance organisations to contribute to the formulation of media development policies that enhance the impact of the media assistance sector and the long-term sustainability of independent media; and
- Advocate for the higher-level, strategic policy linkages between media support and existing human and economic development instruments and frameworks (e.g. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs); Millennium Development Goals) (GFMD 2006).

One particularly relevant recommendation emerging from the Amman conference was the possible formation of an African Forum for Media Development (GFMD). While the principle of a continental forum was generally welcome, at least this was evident during the STREAM consultative workshop held in June 2006 in Johannesburg, there was some uncertainty about its workability.

The point to underscore is that the GFMD is serving to further animate the notion of a global or international support mechanism for media in the Third World.

5.1.2 The African Media Development Initiative (AMDI)

The AMDI was instigated by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service Trust, in association with three African universities, including Rhodes University of South Africa and Amadu Bello University of Nigeria. The main activity underpinning the initiative was a research project aimed at (i) collecting media statistics in 17 African countries in order to determine what changes have occurred in the media landscape between 2000 and 2005; and (ii) conducting in-depth interviews with key informants (media owners, government officials, NGO leaders, religious authorities, etc.) about their perceptions of media development in each of the 17 countries.

To take the example of Zambia, where I was involved as an AMDI researcher, a review of media development initiatives between 2000 and 2005 reveals the following:

- There is a diversity of media development initiatives in Zambia -- some of these are originated and financially supported by the media themselves while others are a partnership between media support organisations and donors.
- There is a need for the involvement of multiple actors in any media development initiative, as evidenced in the success of a multi-

stakeholder campaign for legislative reforms and the withdrawal of value added tax (VAT) on the cover price of newspapers and magazines.

- Media development activities need to have an inbuilt sustainability plan in order to have a lasting impact.
- Donor support needs to have less conditionality and promote the recipient's independence and innovativeness.
- Culture must be built into any media development initiative for such an initiative to have resonance among the beneficiaries.
- Commercial interests are increasingly seen as an important part of any media development initiative, particularly if they can be persuaded to invest in the media sector (Banda 2006).

As findings from across Africa are being integrated, it is becoming increasingly clear that the AMDI research project will prove to be an invaluable part of any argument for developing the media in Africa.

5.1.3 The STREAM (Strengthening African Media) Consultative Process

Another process underway is the STREAM consultation which emerged with a meeting in March 2006 of some experts in Addis Ababa at the invitation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). This process, like the AMDI research, was supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). UNECA was seen as a 'neutral' broker of the dialogue that would ensure among media players in Africa, and would, given its strategic position, provide the best route possible for recommendations to reach the Africa Union.

The key recommendation emerging out of the Addis Ababa meeting was to 'root' the consultation process within the different geographic and linguistic regions of Africa. To that end, four (4) consultations were planned. The first such consultative forum was held in June 2006 in South Africa under the auspices of the Media Institute for Southern Africa (MISA).

The STREAM process reinforced most of the findings of the AMDI research about the arguments for media development. For example, media owners were agreed on the centrality of the following issues:

- Africa's constitutional and legal regimes are generally not supportive of media development, although there are signs of change for the better in some countries.
- There is continuing state interest in the performance of private-sector media (e.g. the closing down of *The Swazi Observer*, etc.).
- There is also advertiser influence on the editorial content of private media, with the result that the quality of editorial content stands compromised, in some cases (from both private and state business concerns).
- There is increased competition for the existing small media markets in most of the sub-region.
- There is also increased competition for the available government advertising (while this is a growing problem for some countries, such as Swaziland, it does not appear to be so for other countries, such as Botswana).
- There is a lack of training for journalists, with the result that reporting of specialised issues, such as gender, HIV/AIDS, etc. suffers from a lack of depth.
- There is also a high turn-over of staff, given the fact that the media institutions do not generally remunerate them well.
- There is a tendency towards profit-maximisation by the private-sector media.
- The increasing 'commercialisation'/'corporatisation' of state/public media is posing undue competition for the private media.
- There is a transnationalisation of South African media moguls throughout Africa, such as MultiChoice Africa, posing a challenge for local media (MISA 2006).

This Johannesburg gathering agreed upon a loosely structured network – the Southern Media Development Network. This network is mandated to continue

the process of consultation, apart from clarifying some of the recommendations of the Johannesburg process itself, in conjunction with the Task Team set up during the UNECA meeting in Addis Ababa.

6 Implications for media assistance practice

From what I have discussed, it is clear that this is the most propitious moment for harnessing international support for media development.

At the international level, at least within the context of the Commission for Africa, there is an ideological commitment to supporting the media in Africa. There is also 'bureaucratic' commitment to furthering this ideological agenda of the Tony Blair administration. This is evident in DFID's engagement with UNECA, the BBC WST and other actors.

Over and above these opportunities, there is evidence of organic African movements which can serve as a fulcrum around which to create further international support for the development of the media in Africa. Examples of such movements are the Media Institute for Southern Africa (MISA), the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), etc. These organisations are already part of the unfolding regional and continental media development processes.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to recommend the following:

1. Recognition and further articulation of the complementarities of the unfolding media development initiatives, regardless of who is the initiator;
2. Coalescing these initiatives, at some point, into an identifiably African-driven and led media development initiative (for instance, the research findings of the AMDI, once made public, must now be incorporated into the consultative processes unfolding under the aegis of UNECA; and
3. Establishing a partnership with any global media development initiative, without, however, sacrificing the 'individuality' of the African initiative.

I think that regional donor partners can help in this process. To this, they, among other things, would need to:

- Firmly assert their support for the current consultative process in general, while recognising the difficulties involved in building true regional, let alone continental, consensus on the form and content that any final media development initiative will take.
- Firmly endorse the facilitative role being played by UNECA in this process and, in so doing, send a message that the consultative process is intended to pursue workable solutions.
- Recognise and support the role of national and regional media organisations in this process, such as MISA and its partners. To elaborate on this point, country-level media organisations need to feel that the process truly represents them and that they will benefit from it. Donor partners, at that level, can reinforce the reality of this.
- Earmark more funds for this process of consultation, and for the outcome(s) of the consultation. I have already noted how important the Commission for Africa is to this whole process. With the impending departure of Tony Blair from the premiership, what guarantees are there that there will be continuity? It is for this reason that donor partners within the region need to endorse the generality of this consultative process, and earmark funding for the specificity of its outcomes.

It is clear that the emerging media development initiatives can only add depth to our common understanding and solutions of the problems confronting the media in Africa. Although things do not appear patently clear yet, the mere fact that these initiatives represent an *inclusive process* to some *foreseeable end* is commendable. More significant is the fact that this is a truly pan-African process, largely driven by the media players themselves on the continent.

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