TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEDIA IN A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION
IDEOLOGY, RACE, DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY.
WHAT ROLE FOR THE MEDIA?

By

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Introduction

On a day-to-day experience, a common feature of our continent is that, all of our communities appear to be caught up in a variety of transitions. We seem to be still reeling from the effects of the enormous forces that have shaped our destiny in the past so many centuries.

In recent decades, we have been beneficiaries of traumatic violent upheavals that have not only killed and maimed, but have uprooted and displaced whole communities, regions and territories. We have witnessed the sweeping away of institutions nurtured and established by our forebears over the centuries.

It will be improper, however, to suggest that it has all been lamentation. We have had occasion to celebrate the good harvest of our people's own blood, sweat and tears. The fall of apartheid is a joy that cannot be dimmed. And it signals to us to count our blessings all the time, however minor they may appear.

Two key processes of political transition have preoccupied our countries in the past nearly two decades.

In the first instance, there has been a remarkable popular striving to end authoritarian systems of government and build liberal democratic systems. Chequered and inconclusive as the results so far present, some movement forward has been made to build on. More importantly, there are a number of countries where we can point to as examples of liberal democratic states that are in the processes of consolidating the institutional structures.

In the second instance, we have seen in the past three or so years, the end or reversals in some of the more ghastly violent conflicts on our continent. Today, the brutalities in Darfur remain the only spot where the guns continue to blast. Though warlordism is far from over in Somalia, at least full-scale war has been absent for a few years now. That situation of no-peace-no-war characteristics Cote d'Ivoire too.

Indeed what is most remarkable in all this is that, the initiatives to end these fratricidal mayhem have been led by the African Union or its sub-regional affiliates such as the ECOWAS, and by the efforts of individual governments, notably those of South Africa, Nigeria and so on.

It is important to state also that this expression of solidarity and peace-making at the Pan-African scale is not new, but rather a continuation of a tradition since, and indeed before, the Organisation for African Unity or any of the sub-regional structures was founded in 1963 and later respectively.

The important instances of progress notwithstanding, the political conditions that define the states and governance are generally in complex processes of painful, tedious and protracted transition. Additionally, the socio-economic factors and conditions that of our societies present much more complex and intractable challenges. That these conditions remain on a large-scale impervious to change premised on externally driven policies, tend to aggravate the elements that frustrate Peacebuilding and democratization.

The media landscape in Africa

In the midst of this political complexity, Africa (except the Arab North) has seen phenomenal transformation of the media landscape in less than two decades. The multiplication of newspapers and radio stations in cities and rural districts provide a strong basis for strengthening and expanding free speech and free expression, that should support a healthy democratic culture, and promote also a sustained progress in cultural expression.

Indeed, we can assert with certitude that this phenomenal outburst of "many voices" has aided peace and the democratic strivings very well. It is on record that, in those countries where the media enjoy the most freedom, you also find more open and more stable liberal democratic governance systems: Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mali and Senegal in West Africa; Kenya and Tanzania in the East; Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia in Southern Africa; for example.

Press freedom may not be the determining condition for democratic governance. But that those countries in Africa show the greatest examples of political stability and more open democratic governance where the media also enjoy the least restrictions – legally and politically – cannot be a sheer coincidence.

It is also remarkable to note that, those countries that have experienced some of the most gruesome and destructive civil wars have also experienced phenomenal development of radio pluralism. In the midst of war, against the arson, murder and constant intimidation by warlords, radio has grown with unstoppable speed and expansion in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia. Most importantly, contrary to the Rwandan aberration where radio was made a megaphone for mass murder, in these countries, radio has become a source of useful information, an outlet for communal expression and solidarity, and a mouthpiece for peace.

Whereas this media revolution is primarily an African initiative, there is a global context that merits clarification. The boom in broadcast pluralism particularly has been facilitated by technological innovations that make it impossible and nonsensical for states to perpetuate their monopoly.

The same technological transformation, aided by the impetus and imperatives of the neoliberal economic drive on a global scale, has meant the rapid and near overwhelming expansion of global media oligopoly.

This means that, Africa's media pluralism has taken place in the shadow of the global behemoths.

In other words, we have many tiny voices – which is good for several reasons; but hardly do we have big voices in the global airwaves.

Further, whereas indeed we do now have outlets for local news, events and other forms of expression, we have hardly made any progress in developing African sources of reporting and recording global events for African audiences. In fact, the dependency on non-African sources

for news and information other African countries and on the external world appears to have grown in this same period.

In most countries both the state-owned public broadcasting and a host of small private stations compete to rebroadcast or transmit news and other programmes from the international media – notably the BBC, the VOA, RFI, the Deutsche Welle, and so on. We will revisit the possible significance of this development later.

Pluralism and democracy

Multiplication of media sources, channels and ownership is inevitable and unstoppable in the world of rapidly advancing technology. It severely limits the possibilities of controlling access, or in imposing uniformity of media access and therefore also media content.

We all acknowledge that this also creates vast possibilities for meeting the information and cultural needs and demands of vastly different local communities; or for satisfying the particular interests of groups in our multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-cultural societies.

At the same time the potential of pluralism heightens the competition for relevance. Of course the potential for heightening competition for the frivolous and diversionary is already with us.

What is of even more significance for our discussion is that, the reality of pluralism compels us to define clearly and precisely the particular kind of media we focus our discussion on . for, it is not easy or desirable to prescribe the same objectives for all media in a pluralistic condition beyond the basic demands of technical professional requirements.

That is not to say that there are no universal principles that are applicable to all media in a state of pluralism. Unless media are set up strictly for narrow sectarian and specifically partisan self-serving purposes, they ought to be bound by some principles and standards, of performance that are universally valid and applicable.

More than half a century ago, that is in 1947, in the US, a Commission on Freedom of the Press convened by Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* magazine, and chaired by the chancellor of the Chicago University, Robert Hutchins, presented on of the most lucid summaries of the social responsibilities of the mass media in a democracy. The Hutchins Commission reported:

> *"Today our society needs, first, a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning; second, a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism; third, a means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in the society to one another; fourth, a method of presenting and clarifying the goals and values of the society; and fifth, a way of reaching every member of the society by the currents of information, thought, and feeling which the press supplies."*

Public service

This seems to me to be a set of objectives that all media may be expected to try to meet, regardless of their ownership character, unless they have declared themselves as opposition to the very democratic conditions that ensure and protect their existence.

Even moreso, this seems to me to be most appropriate for public service systems to be founded on. And the truth is that they are included in the canons that organisations such as SABC are bound by.

Further, they must be the object of all processes of media transformation in societies in transition to democratic governance and social organisation. The legal, regulatory, and structural reforms of media ought to aim at enhancing the media's capacity and active yearning to serve these social responsibilities.

But what concretely do these objectives consist in, as the media in our transitional societies operate from day to day? What are the demands in the societies that the media must meet or respond to or provide directions about? In other words, what do our societies in transition demand from the media? Better still, what do the societies want for themselves that, therefore, they require the media to assist in attaining?

Media functions are conditioned and determined by the historical demands of the times they find themselves in. These objectives we keep citing are fulfilled according to the practical historical demands of the society. The relevance of media is therefore measured by how media respond to the needs and demands of the times they find themselves in. These objectives we keep citing are fulfilled according to the practical historical demands of the society. The relevance of media is therefore measured by how media respond to the needs and demands of the times.

The needs and demands of the times, too, are not usually the same for all the social forces that may find themselves confronting particular historical conditions. The media, therefore, are also always compelled to make clear choices according to the social objects at stake. Ultimately, however, the demands on the media have tended always to be to seek social justice, to be on the weak, for those values that propel humanity forward into peace and improved social conditions of life, equality and greater enlightenment.

So, what are the questions, needs and demands of our societies that our media must address? And what are the challenges the media must confront in order to address these questions in the best interests of our societies?

For our discussion, we choose to focus on the public service media because they are set up with the mandate to directly respond to the needs of the public.

First of all, let us draw attention to a number of constraints that hinder the capacity of most of the public service media in our countries to perform. In the first instance, the legal frameworks most operate on continue to maintain strict government controls. A public service system without editorial independence cannot fulfill the objectives of representing fairly all sections of society,

of providing reliable, useful information, and of serving as a forum for healthy exchange of ideas.

Most of them nowadays are so starved of resources that they are incapable of performing adequately the basic duties of public information. Both this problem of resources and a drive to be commercial, appear to have induced in many a poor vision of their future or their roles, or a confusion of their objectives.

A common challenge for the public service media continues to be the question of independence. There are two sources of this challenge. The first is the pressure and propensity of the governments to interfere, or even to dictate the editorial direction of the public service media. It should be stated that the intensity of this may vary drastically, or more or less, from country to country. In countries with greater levels of press freedom, this tendency appears to be quite minimal or not at all essentially.

The other source of the difficulty is the subjective partisan tendencies of the men and women who manage these public service media. At one level, there are those who have not been able to assert their independence even when the legal and political conditions demand so and protect them. In this case, it is usually a case of people who have not 'liberated' themselves from the old shackles of government control.

At another level, there are also those who, by free choice, feel committed to the ideals and objectives of the political and social agenda of the new political dispensation, and therefore act in ways that tend, in the end, to weaken their independence vis-à-vis the government or even political party in charge.

For the last example of people placed in charge of the public service media, particularly following the exit of an undemocratic regime, there are sometimes real dilemmas that are not simply a desire to be partisan or to sacrifice independence. As so often happens, every new political system confronts real threats to its existence from elements of the old regime. The test of the independence of the decision-makers of the public service system in these circumstances is how to manage, quite often, the subtle or the complex confusion between defence of the principles of the new order, or the political state or institution to which one might legitimately have sympathies for.

Obviously, the business of the public service is independence from government and all forces in society. It has neither friend nor foe, except the promotion and defence of the people's rights and interests and the values and ideals of the democratic system the society desires to attain.

All said and done, societies in transition in Africa have democratic governance as their political objective in which to manage peaceably the complex relationships and interests of our multi-ethnic, multi-racial societies. The political objective also assumes that it is in a democratic context that the social economic demands and interests may be more humanely managed without a descent into disorder, violence and mayhem.

What ideology for the media?

We may conclude the discussion with an observation of three inter-related challenges for the media in our transitional processes.

The first concerns the media, and the challenge of poverty;

The second is about the media, the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy;

The third has to do with the media and the expansion of freedom of expression;

And lastly the media and the assertion and the elevation of the dignity of the African personality.

For Africans, as universally it is for all other peoples, democracy is empty, it has a terribly weak foundation and future if it does not also lead to the fulfillment of people's basic social and economic needs. There will be nothing for the people to defend and die for if it remains only an abstract theoretical ideal. Sooner than later, it will turn into a cynical object if democracy does not respond to the very basic material, survival yearnings of the people.

The suffocating, indeed indescribably subversive levels of poverty in Africa is one condition that demeans all what is good in our collective well-being and existence. In the global media today, Africa, is nearly now a synonym for poverty.

It is not the media that works or fashions the policies to fight poverty. But it is the media's responsibility to pursue some causes that could contribute to governments pursuing policies and actions that help to end poverty.

The media has a mission to relentlessly expose and condemn corruption – by governments or private business.

The media have the eyes and ears to alert the public and government of to economic practices and institutions that create conditions for impoverishing our communities.

These are day-to-day responsibilities that require no lecturing from anybody. The challenge includes how public service media can play this role assiduously and so independently that their work compels officials to either change policy or initiate new ones that promote improvements in the social conditions of people.

It requires facilitating the kind of forum and debate that supports critical challenge of policy trends that subvert our independence and that perpetuate the status quo but come in recycled verbiage and packaging.

The defence, promotion and protection of human rights ought to be one of the cardinal objectives of all media in Africa. This must be self-evident; self-evident not only because human rights are universal principles, but for the simple reason that, as a people, as a race of people, our very history is one of unmitigated humiliation and abuse of our rights. There is not any form or kind

of violation our people have not experienced. There is not an abuse our women have not faced; there is not a threat to life our children have not faced; and there is not an attack to dehumanize that our men have not suffered.

It is even more an imperative when we consider that rulers from our own communities have often perpetuated the trampling on our rights.

The defence of human rights, I will submit, perhaps must come before every other duty. Because it concerns our very survival as a people.

Freedom of expression

Critical public debate or forum that promotes new and workable directions for social improvements assumes conditions of freedom of expression for all of society. The media's own existence and their capacity to perform their roles appropriately are conditioned on this situation.

The particular circumstances and history of our societies require conditions that encourage the linguistic, artistic, and intellectual creativity and development in our multi-ethnic and multi-racial societies. But freedom of expression as a condition for cultural creativity and progress, ought to be actively engendered by the public service media.

In some of our countries policies are required to charge the public service media to play this role as a conscious mandate. Where such policies already exist, perhaps there is a strong need for regular review to monitor practical implementation and the direction of such policies.

Whether there are or there are no such policies; or whether they are or are not implemented, may have to do with several factors including, importantly, the social and ideological attitudes of policy markers and media managers toward the development of cultural questions. We are aware that so many among our so-called elites have either very negative attitudes or outright disrespect for things African. This is very manifest in the attitudes of so many to the use and development of our languages.

So, whichever direction we take it, it is an imperative for the public service media to promote policies for cultural development.

It seems to me that one of the critical but complex challenges that face the media in Africa, is how to confront the age-old problem of our dignity as a people. That is, what can or must the media do to help Africans recover our self-image as a people with respect and dignity?

We do not need to shout out too loudly that practically all the other races of humans on earth consider or have considered themselves more superior to the Africa. All skin colours have looked down on, and may still look down on, the "black skin". This cultural and ideological construct has become the burden of the African.

Obviously there have been tremendous progress in the world, and today only the most grossly backward of people would openly and publicly express such sentiments.

The burden, now, is how Africans themselves "exorcise" from our own being this ideological spirit that manifests in so many debilitating forms. So, what can or must the media do to assist Africans to assert their believe in themselves as capable of building their lives themselves and to the highest levels possible by humanity?

Dignity is not an abstract reality at all. It is the untrammelled realization of a people's cultural worth. And it is realisable when a people fully enjoy their human rights, and have full control of their freedom of expression. It is impossible to live a life of dignity without the right and the opportunity for freedom of expression in all of its manifestations: freedom of speech; of thought; of worship; of inquiry, and so on.

Language and communication are the heart of free expression. To debase language is to subvert freedom of expression.

The specific place of the media involves principally the creation and representation of images and symbols. To create, produce, reproduce and represent an image of the African that recovers the downgraded image and perception is the essence of this challenge to the media. It is a practical, though an ideological question.

All over Africa today television is no more a medium for the elite. It is the most important medium in this particular context. But as we noted earlier, the opening up of the media landscape also means a dwarfing of the African media by the global media oligopolies whose primary functions and mandate are to project other images.

It is rare – of cause sometimes just subtle-nowadays to find images that obviously and deliberately set out to demean the African image. That is not the point.

The point really is: how can we fill the screen, the airwaves and the rages with an African image created and produced by Africans for Africans?

The SABC announced recently that it was going to introduce a French language channel. Indeed, we should hope that it will have one day a Hausa, Kiswahili, Wolof, Fulani and other such channels.

But whose image will that be?

Obviously this gigantic question demands more than the media's particular role. Indeed we must not complain if we do not work to create and present to ourselves our own image. The presence of other people's images is not anymore a conspiracy against us. It is the natural order of things, so to say.

To create and have our image the way we want it, it must be produced. It requires that our writers write; our sculptors carve; our dramatist recreate our realities; our film makers produce.

It requires that our media utilise the creative and intellectual works that build this image in an active, promoting way. To have our image as everybody does in their media, and in their literature, we must project our history, its glories and bitterest lessons. Everybody does it.

The demand on the media cannot be sustained without comparable demands for accelerated development in education, in publishing, and in the performing and fine arts.

That is the responsibility of governments, the business communities and other sections of society.

The media's role is to create conditions and facilities to be ready and supportive outlets for the creative and intellectual productions in the society. But the media must consciously develop the mandate, policy and responsibility to support the recover of the new image for the African.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, for the media to be relevant, and for society to be able to demand the best, the media must be free and independent. And the media must feel bound by the values, interests and aspirations of the people.

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