DISCUSSION PAPERS

ZIMBABWE INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Communication Policies In The African Context: Towards An Operational and Conceptual Framework

Bornwell Chakaodza

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PREFACE

This paper is written as a contribution to an understanding of the position and nature of communication policies in Africa. Very few African countries have articulated clear-cut and definite media policies and the lack of such communication policies have bedeviled the development of the press on the African Continent.

There is no shortage of Government statements or ministerial speeches proclaiming African Governments' commitment to democratising information and communications but to translate that commitment into reality has always been a perennial problem.

There is therefore a pressing need to examine the constraints and to see what can be done to overcome some of the problems affecting the operation of the press on the continent.

It is in the nature of a Discussion paper that it is circulated to stimulate debate and discussion. It is to be hoped that some of the assertions in this paper will provoke responses and reactions from other researchers and journalists themselves so that we might enhance our understanding of the role and function of the press in the Third World.

INTRODUCTION

> Looking at the real situation of national communication policies in the Third World, nearly all nations' operational policies govern communication on an apparently ad hoc basis without any conceptual, organisational or structural framework.[1]

Central to the debates and discussions on the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) has been the issue of democratizing communication infrastructure both at the international and the national levels.[2] In most of these discussions, the emphasis has been placed on the international dimensions of the problem, i.e. the imbalance in the flow of news between the North and the South; the distortions in the news about the Third World; the de facto near-monopoly of the flow of international information by the five major transnational news agencies, the lack of a horizontal flow of news among the nations in the South. All these factors compel people in the developing Third World countries to see one another from the perspective of foreign correspondents whose value systems and even prejudices are often reflected in the reports; with all these factors culminating in a kind of media or cultural imperialism.

Without denying the importance of redressing the imbalance in the flow of news at the international level, one of the basic problems that needs to be tackled by political leaders, communication scholars and media practitioners in Southern Africa (and indeed in Africa) is the crucial issue of restructuring and democratizing communication systems within the individual countries in the region. There appears to have been a tendency to pay insufficient attention to the national or local aspects of the New Order.

The communication situation in each individual African country is a "microcosm" of the present world order and any major shift in the world information order should start within national boundaries.[3] As S.T. Kwame Boafo emphasizes:

> Thus, corresponding in significance to the need to evolve a new world information order is the need to search for and implement strategies and mechanisms to democratize communication systems in African countries, create opportunities for mass participation in the national communication process and, thereby, establish a new internal communication order.[4]

In Africa, it is indeed questionable whether the so-called mass media are in fact "mass" at all. Between 70 - 85 percent of the populations of these regions live in the rural areas without "modern" infrastructure. Over 60 percent of the people cannot read or write, a necessary skill for the success of newspapers as a medium of communication. In field of television technology, less than 5 percent of the people have access to a television receiver. While a fair number receive radio transmissions through the transistor radio, radio programming is not always suited to the working schedules of rural dwellers. Given the

1   Jan Servaes, "Communication Development Paradigms: An Overview" in *MEDIA ASIA* Vol. 13 No. 3,1986 p. **128**
2   Juan Somavia, 'The Democratization of Communication: From Minority Social Monopoly to Majority Social Representation" in *DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE,* 2,1981
3   Ekwelie Sylvanus, "African Nations Must Re-Direct Information Flow" in *MEDIA DEVELOPMENTXXXII,* 1, 1985
4   S.T. Kwame Boafo, "Democratizing Media Systems in African Societies: The Case of Ghana", Paper presented at the 5th Biennial Conference of the African Council Communication Education (ACCE), Harare, Zimbabwe, October 1986

disastrous economic situation of most African countries, even transistor batteries are fast becoming a luxury.

Nevertheless, it is the intention of this paper to analyse to what extent the existing national communication policies (if any) are characterised by fragmentation, and by unco-ordinated and sometimes contradictory objectives. To what extent can we develop a conceptual framework for diagnosing our communication problems clear of dogma and independent of the old colonial school uniform? The basic idea underlying this paper is, however, that there are neither single nor simple answers.

THE INTENTIONS

All countries in the Southern Pool have at least radio and print media facilities. Some of them have television. Each national government has outlined the role of the media as "to inform, to educate and to entertain".

Sadly, too often, the media have failed to carry out any of these three functions. They simply tell the people what the ruling party wants them to know. There are numerous instances where communication facilities in most African countries have been utilised, in the words of Yaw Twumasi,

> as instruments for building personality cuJts, an enter- prise which does not necessarily **promote** development.[5]

We have to ask ourselves very seriously whether we do understand the demands of the mass media. Developmental journalism and constructive criticism - what do these phrases mean in our own perceptions of the African reality? Who determines constructive criticism? The truth of the matter is that the words "constructive criticism" have become a catchphrase, a parrot cry of African politicians. The other problem is the tendency on the part of African governments to be both judge and jury of what is in the national interest.

The content of mass media in many African countries tends to be heavily dominated by exhortation and command, speeches and pronouncements of national leaders rather than what the ordinary people are saying to each other and how different decisions are affecting them and their families. In the final analysis, the people cannot be blamed for feeling that from the media they learn very little and cannot relate to the real world.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF COMMUNICATION POLICY

Communication policies have been defined as a set of

> principles and norms established to guide the behaviour of communication systems. **Their** orientation is fundamental and long range, although they have implications of short-range significance. They are shaped in the context of society's general approach to communication.[6]

5   Yaw Twumasi, The Newspaper Press and Political Leadership in Developing Nations: **The Case** of Ghana: 1964-1978", *Gazette,* 26,1980, p. 13
6   *UNESCO:* Report of the Meeting of Experts on Communication Policies and Planning (Paris:UNESCO, 1981 p. 20).

Emanating from political ideologies, the social and economic conditions of the country and the values on which they are based, communication policies strive to relate these to the real needs for and the prospective opportunities of communication. Bcafo again:

> A national communication policy enunciates the goals, objectives and functions of communication systems and aims at dovetailing these with the overall socio-economic, political and cultural development goals of the society. It is carried out within the national environment and shaped by the socio-economic, cultural and political climate of the society.[7]

The point to stress here is that contrary to the claims, conventions and culture of the media, the "news" is not a neutral product. The much-quoted phrase about the "media being a mirror of society" is so inadequate as an explanation of the uses to which the mass media have been put by practitioners themselves throughout Africa. All knowledge about social reality implicitly or explicitly expresses certain ideological functions.

And when we say this we are not really saying anything new - we are merely banging an old drum. It is something that would have been recognised more than 70 years ago. It was Lippman who suggested more than half a century ago that

> the news is not a mirror of social conditions but the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself.[8]

So, the necessary link between communication policies and general development policies can be a major problem. Slogans such as self-reliance, participation, basic needs and democratization of communication are being mouthed with increasing frequency by institutions with quite divergent backgrounds and opinions such as the World Bank on the one hand and progressive African governments on the other. These are some of the inherent contradictions and problems that have to be faced straight on.

Communication policies exist in every society, though very often they may be latent and confused rather than clearly articulated and harmonized. They may be very general in the nature of desirable goals and principles, or they may be more specific and practically binding.

They may be incorporated in the constitution of a country, in overall national and development policies, in professional codes of ethics as well as in the operational rules of particular communicaiton institutions.

TOWARDS THE ELEMENTS OF A CONCEPTUAL AND OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Almost any publication dealing with communication policy emphasises the important link between the social structure and the development of communication systems. For example, the report of the International Commission for the Study of Communi-cation Problems led by Mr S. MacBride which was published under the title Many Voices, One World said that:

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7   S. T. Kwame Boafo, "Forumulating Comprehensive National Communication Policy for Development in African Countries" in *Africa Media Review,* Vol. 1, No. 1, 1986.
8   W. Lippman; Public Opinion, Free Press, New York, 1922

Development strategies should incorporate communication policies as an integral part in the diagnosis of needs and in the design and implementation of selected priorities.

The call by the MacBride Commission (whose membership included both representatives of the North and South) for a "New World Information and Communication Order" invests the report with an aura of dynamism and innovativeness which is quite misleading. A more careful examination of the Commission's membership shows that not "North" and "South" were represented in it but specific classes within "North" and "South" respectively whose mutual interests led to a "national" consensus on the organization of the world information order.

The report is singularly lacking in the role of the people - people seizing their own communication power for development. The problem is that information, like education, is usually a top-down affair. Students have little say over what they are being taught. Likewise viewers and listeners rarely influence the content of information or entertainment except when they make their own programmes.

In fact, this has been the trouble with all models of development. Somebody always knew what was best. No wonder, therefore, that the word "development" is now mainly mentioned in jokes - the jokes of the poor of Africa. Along with this, the people can and do express their cynicism, suspicions and thoughts through humour. They can distinguish between rhetoric and reality. The so-called simple people are not that simple at all. The voiceless masses do have voices, but they have been silenced and will remain silent until they seize their own communication power.

Democratization of communication is the process whereby the individual becomes an active partner and not a mere object of communication. The majority of the population of Africa live in the rural areas and they depend extensively on traditional forms of communication rather than on modern technologies for information transmission and reception. Oral and traditional communication methods such as interpersonal networks, drama, dance, folk tales and song have to be integrated with the "modern" communication systems if a meaningful communication policy is to be devised. There is an unfortunate tendency in some circles to regard mass media as just print and electronic (radio and television) media ignoring indigenous forms of communication. Mass media include not only print and electronic channels but also traditional systems, film, theatre, telecommunications, etc.

At present, the orientation of what is news is not indigenous to the majority of our people. We need to redefine news within the African context. We tend to lack a clear-cut definition of our problems. It is necessary to begin to shift the assemblage point of enquiry on the role of the mass media in our region away from the expectations of our colonial masters to one encompassing the political, economic and social needs of the African people. The task is one of divesting the enquiry of all tinges of cultural imperialism.

The African mass media are by and large autocratic rather than democratic. They are principally concerned with the interests of the elites rather than with the aspirations of what we disparagingly call "ordinary people" or, in leftist parlance, "the masses." A regular reading of articles and editorials in our newspapers bears this out. Many stories in our

9 S. MacBride (ed) *Many Voices, One World, Report of the Internationa! Commission for the Stiuiy of Communication Problems,* UNESCO, Paris, 1980.

newspapers are not really about events but merely reports or rewrites of speeches made by leading politicians at events. The context of the event and the event itself often go unreported. There is always an obsession with leading political personalities that in our media passes for debate.

Local news tends to be dull and repetitive as the following typical example shows:

> The Minister of State has called for hard work among the people and also urged them to work co-operatively to achieve self-sufficiency in political, social, economic development...

The above familiar quotation is the nature of the media throughout sub-Saharan Africa. There appears to be a shortage of determined, energetic and independent-minded newsmen and women in Africa. A spirit of enquiry is sadly lacking. Our journalists rarely investigate, tending to report only the words and actions (and in many instances, unimportant acts) of powerful political and business leaders. This, however, is not entirely the result of political pressures or control.

Information has become a powerful instrument in international relations and diplomacy and also a very important tool for cultural domination. The relationship between the Third World and the developed world is an unequal one in which the rich, mainly Western nations, dominate the media both in terms of technology and content. Few African countries have the resources or expertise necessary to design, establish or maintain communication systems which would present a true and appropriate reflection of their own culture.

As a result of this kind of poverty, cheap foreign merchandise becomes irresistible. We are made to rely not only on the advanced technology of the West but also on its films, television programmes, gramophone records, syndicated newspaper material and the international news agencies.

The mass media of the Third World have little choice ... or do they have a choice in this kind of situation? Though the technology is inappropriate, it is often all that is available. Technology is almost wholly controlled by the United States and the Soviet Union and the parking space for the Third World is extremely limited. This will become increasingly true as the development gap widens, and with inappropriate technology come inappropriate attitudes of mind, values and ideology. For it must not be forgotten that technology is not ideologically innocent and value free. As one writer puts it:

> The marketing system developed to sell industry's out-pouring of (largely **unauthentic)** consumer goods is now applied as well to selling global ideas, tastes, preferences **and beliefs. In** fact, in advanced capitalism's present stage, the production and dissemination of **what it likes** to term "information" become major and indispensable activities, by any measure, **in the overall** system. Made in-America messages, imagery, lifestyles and information techniques **are being** internationally circulated and - equally important - globally initiated ... Today multinational corporations are the global organizers of the world economy; and information **and** communications are vital components in the system of administration and control.

Indeed, communications has become very big business both in terms of dollars and personnel employed. The movement of this information on satellite stations is so rapid

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10   **H.** Schiller; Communication and Cultural Domination, New York, 1976.

that the world has been rightfully described as "a global village". But as has been pointed out above, this rapid development of the infrastructure of information technology has taken place in the developed countries, and lagged far behind in the Third World.

According to a paper presented to the South-South Co-operation Conference [11] by the Zimbabwe Minister of Information, Posts and Telecommunications, Comrade Nathan Shamuyarira, daily Press circulation in North America is 280 copies per 1 000 inhabitants, whilst in Asia it is 64 copies, in Africa 14 copies, and in Latin America 70 copies. Some eight African countries and three Arab countries do not have a daily newspaper for their citizens.

In the sphere of telecommunications, out of a total of 600 million telephones in the world, 75 percent are located in nine developed countries. There are more telephones in Japan than in all of Africa. The telephone services in several Third World countries are poor, inefficient and inadequate. Indeed, in many of the rural and more remote areas there are no services. Obviously, this kind of media situation in the developing countries has social implications.

As most of Africa remains rural, what sort of communication technology should be developed to meet local needs and conditions? Should we encourage the production of local and appropriate communication technology in order to reduce the continent's dependence on imported communication hardware and software? Or is it a question of if you cannot beat them, join them? Given the cheaper sources of programme material that are readily available in Western Europe, what can be done to protect African cultural, moral and political values which are at presently adversely influenced by the mass media, especially television and Western films?

In Zimbabwe, the Government is committed to the establishment and transformation of society along socialist lines but the various sectors and activities of communication in the country are seldom co-ordinated and often at variance with the proposed national road to socialism. The media practitioners themselves are failing to address the real problem concerning the mass media in the transition process. There appears to be a lack of a well-defined sense of the journalist's role and motivation for operational effectiveness.

The struggle in Zimbabwe for a journalist is to find methods to democratize the ability of the "ordinary people" to utilise the information and facts about the changing material environment. The object of criticism in this is not about personalities but criticism itself should always take the form of an evaluation of an on-going process. Democratization of communication and democratization of society are, of course, interdependent. They are variables of the same reality. To democratize communication, therefore, means to democratize society and vice-versa.

A more comprehensive and coherent national communication policy must not only define goals and objectives toward which proposed changes are oriented but also specify the strategy and tactics by means of which the transformation is effected. It needs also to examine comprehensively the totality of global relations in the present scenario including class relations, economic domination, subordination and interdependencies. Indeed to be comprehensive, such a policy should cover the print media, radio and television

11   N. Shamuyarira; "Information and Communication". Paper presented at the South-South Co-operalion Conference, Harare, Zimbabwe, November 1985.

broadcasting, film, traditional forms of communication, news agencies, telecommunication services, and the mushrooming video culture.

Talking about the new communication technology such as video cassette recorders, a national communication policy would want to bring about a situation in which dangers to the moral fabric of society are minimised and benefits maximised. Benefits might include exploring possibilities of using video systems to assist and promote rural development rather than our accustomed use of it for entertainment purposes.

As we are gathered here for the PANA Southern Pool Seminar, one point which needs to be understood is the credibility of our news agencies. News agencies in this part of the world have to be reactivated. The problem is that they have acted like a classroom where handouts are merely dished out.

We have very serious problems in this regard. Because of the excessive controls and the poor record of media independence existing in a number of African countries, neither the electronic media, nor the news agencies nor indeed the newspapers have much credibility, and that is why the African elite resort to foreign newspapers and broadcasting stations to find out the truth about what is happening in their own countries. And that is why rumours become a medium of communication both among the ordinary people and the elites. And once rumours become a factor in poli tics, then this is a sign of the distrust of the government of the day and in the final analysis you have a media which nobody believes.

We have to underline with double lines the importance of news agencies not becoming mere purveyors of government propaganda in our region. We should not forget the evidence of one's own eyes. If the national news agencies are to earn such professional respect that their stories could be used both in Africa and outside, then it is absolutely crucial that their operations are demonstrably seen to be independent of any vested political interests. By suppressing the national media, African governments do not suppress news. As Altaf Gauhar emphasises:

> By suppressing news, governments only make it easier for foreign news agencies to report news to their people with much greater impact. In a controlled area everything becomes news. The External Services of the BBC have built up a large audience in the Third World. How? Not by acquiring some special insight into the problems of developing countries, but by just reporting news which is not allowed to be published or broadcast nationally.[12]"

Gauhar, in his devastating logic, further emphasises:

> By suppressing the national Press, Third World governments have made their people easier targets of domination by the western mass media. [13]

A national communication policy must also deal with communication training and research as well as advertising and public relations. Communication training is so crucial to communication development that policymakers should handle it with absolute care.

Much of the African journalist's training is devoted to story construction which was developed by Anglo-American journalism and it is almost useless for rural reporting. In the field of communication research, the agenda has been defined and dominated by researchers from the West. As Hamelik puts it:

12 Altaf Gauhar, "Free Flow of Information: Myths and Shibbolets", *Third World Foundation Monograph 5* p. 24.
13   Ibid.

Questions about methodology, cultural differentiations and the validity of research schemes and models are often posed by scientists from the West.

Training of media practitioners has taken three forms: the attachment of media experts from the Western countries to media institutions in Africa; courses and attachments of African journalists in the Western countries; and courses and training institutions in Africa. Such courses ostensibly emphasise the technique or craftsmanship of journalism and steer delicately clear of political sensitivities. But, as Golding writes:

The very avoidance of discussing objectives leaves a vacuum in which imported assumptions and conventions become the standards by which achievements or professional competence are measured.[14]

Such an assessment belongs to the general problem of what some writers call "the intellectual pillage of the Third World". Indeed, the transfer of the ideology of professionalism that Golding talks about runs parallel to the transfer of technology which can be alternatively understood as the problem of technological dependence. Discussing the Nigerian situation, Golding has written:

'Syllabuses were transplanted wholesale, as at the American- instigated Jackson College of Journalism established at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1961 with virtually a complete North American style school of journalism curriculum, including heavy doses of advertising, public relations and so on ...'

Although the situation has somewhat improved since 1961, we still conduct our research and training programmes from a Eurocentric perspective rather than from an African perspective. The result of all this is that the media create some kind of surface to the social reality we live in, which has very little to do with the real world of ordinary people. To capture that world, we need to develop a conceptual framework of alternative criteria of news and redefine the meaning of "politics" and "media event". The majority of Africans live in a rural setting and in line with this, emphasis in our training institutions ought to be put on rural communication systems such as rural broadcasting, rural Press, greater utilization of non-projected aids and traditional media. In this regard we note the efforts that are being made by the Zimbabwe Institute of Mass Communication (ZIMCO) to marry the theory and craftsmanship of journalism with courses designed to equip Zimbabwean journalists with a basic understanding of rural development, political science, sociology, history, economics, etc. This kind of situation effectively prevents knowledge being fragmented and at the same time ensures issues in Zimbabwean society are seen in their totality, in their wholeness.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to identify a few general factors which have to be considered in formulating national communication policies within the African context. The central argument of this paper has been that there is a great deal wrong with the way news is collected and defined both at the national and international levels. Existing African media

14 Peter Golding, "Media Professionalism in the Third World The Transfer of an Ideology" in *Mass Communication and Society* p. 297.

15 Ibid.

systems are poorly and inadequately structured to serve the needs of the so-called mas-ses who are considered to have neither the face nor the will of their own. For the majority of our people, life is a daily struggle but their struggles do not figure in our reporting. But they struggle to have their problems and difficulties resolved rather than be treated as some sort of political entertainment. A Zimbabwean journalist's right to report and analyse freely from China is not as fundamental or urgent as his right to report and analyse freely within Zimbabwe itself.

If this seminar can look at some of the issues posed here and attempt to provide answers, theif the search for a New World Information and Communication Order shall have truly begun. For it is only when Africa begins to define her own problems, and find her own solutions to those problems, that a genuine new order of information and communication shall come about.