Chapter 1

Media, Democracy, and Political Change in Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT

The introductory chapter undertakes a detailed discussion of the political influence of media in developing countries. Communication scholars and researchers often discuss what the media needs to do in the process of driving political change, however, this is often done without a real consideration of the challenges facing the media and political journalists in developing countries. There is therefore need to lay emphasis on drawing reference from experiences as narrated by the media, researchers and political interest groups based in developing countries. This book seeks to document research carried out by communication researchers, scholars and media practitioners based in various developing countries. The authors draw from their varied experiences in developing countries to undertake interesting discussions on how the media operates in the developing world, and the subsequent challenges facing the media and political journalists.

INTRODUCTION

As the focus of citizens and governments in Africa shifts to politics and governance, the media in Africa and the developing world is getting more attention. Consequently, media reports on politics now form the substance of much public discourse in developing countries (Okolo, 1994). Today, newspapers, television and radio, are distributing news to a mass audience in Africa at unprecedented levels, and engaging overtly in political communication (Leighley, 2004). The media has thus, come to represent for most people in Africa, their primary source of political information (McNair, 2007), and has largely replaced formal representative institutions, such as assemblies, parliaments and local councils, as arenas for political dialogue and deliberations that are the very stuff of democratic politics (Heywood, 2007).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9613-6.ch001
The media acts as a watchdog of the government (Ferguson & Patten, 1993) and its capacity to provide a civic forum in which meaningful and serious political debate can take place is often viewed as the key democratic role of the mass media and journalists (Heywood, 2007). In addition, the press is a significant mechanism for circulating and exchanging information, which is vital for the functioning of democracy (Wanyama, 2000). Therefore political journalists in Africa are under constant pressure to facilitate the formation of “public opinion”, and feed that opinion back to the public (McNair, 2007:19). This includes the provision of space for the expression of dissent, without which the notion of democratic consensus would be meaningless (McNair, 2007). The media, therefore, has an obligation to provide the audience with information upon which to base political decisions and further, fight any attempts by the government to do the public’s business behind closed doors (Ferguson and Patten, 1993). However, the story of politics and governments especially in the developing countries presents the news media with one of their greatest challenges (Agba, 1994). The media is critically important to government and politics (Leighley, 2004), and part of the reason why many discredited regimes in Africa have succeeded in clinging to power, is their ability to manipulate the media and mislead the public (Okolo, 1994). In addition, public service broadcasters and government controlled media have been used to legitimise what are often ruthless dictatorships in Africa (Mwesige & Kalinaki, 2007).

The justification of this book is based on the fact that, it can be argued that, if the mass media has come to occupy an important place in our national life; if whole nations have come to depend on it to set the agenda to generate enlightened mass political discussion, then due attention must be given to how political news reports are selected and packaged by the media (Okolo, 1994) and the subsequent political influence of the media in the developing world. Therefore, this book focuses on four main themes, namely: media democracy and political transitions; media, participation and political debates in developing countries; new media technologies and politics; and lastly gender, media and politics.

COMPETING INTERESTS IN THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

It has been argued that the mass media in the developing world is a politically conservative force, aligned to the interests of economic and social elites (Heywood, 2007). This argument assumes that the chief purpose of the mass media is to support and advance the interests of those in positions of power (Leighley, 2004). It further assumes that the existence of the mass media provides opportunities for special interest groups such as political parties or governments to use the media to affect public opinion (Petrova, 2008). For instance, many African politicians have established newspapers and broadcasting houses to further their interests; however, it is the duty of the journalist to balance the interests of his/her employer with that of the public (Okolo, 1994). However, there are other several interest groups in the society such as the youth, community based organisations, ethnic minority groups, and the civil society. As a result, these interest groups, in conjunction with the governments, political parties and private commercial entities and the civil society each relate to the media in different ways, seeing opportunities and threats to their own objectives (Buckley, Duer, Mendel & Socor, 2008). They all strive to use it to advance their own interests, often resulting in political news being distorted by filters such as business interests of owner companies; views and concerns of advertisers and sponsors; sourcing of news of government agents; pressure and threats of legal action against journalists; and lastly, market competition and consumer capitalism (Chomsky & Herman, 1988; Quoted in Heywood, 2007).