Chapter 8

When the History Turns Stronger than the Rhetoric: The Journalistic Culture Drives over Democracy Ideals in Namibia and Tanzania

Ullamaija Kivikuru
University of Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

The 1990s brought radical changes to Sub-Saharan Africa. In the rhetoric, the ownership mode appeared as a crucial marker of freedom. However, neither the access to the media nor the media content has changed much. The media mode, inherited from previous phases of social history, seems to change slowly. Old modes reproduce themselves in new media titles disregarding ownership mode. In this chapter, empirical evidence is sought from Namibia and Tanzania. The empirical evidence is based on two sets of one-week samples (2007, 2010) of all four papers. In this material, a government paper and a private paper from one particular country resemble each other more than when ownership modes are compared. Bearers of the journalistic culture seem to be to a certain extent media professionals moving from one editorial office to another, but the more decisive factors are the ideals set for journalism. The “first definition of journalism” reflects old times.

INTRODUCTION

The 1990s brought radical changes to Sub-Saharan African mediascapes. Countries governed by a one-party system with state-controlled media changed to a multi-party system, and the media started to expound a strong rhetoric of freedom. Private media emerged everywhere and easily found foreign support—radio stations and small-circulation publications most frequently called “independent” instead of “private” or “commercial” as they would have been called in Europe. The Windhoek Declaration (1991) became a symbol of a new era in Sub-Saharan Africa, placing democracy and freedom of expression entirely in the sphere of private “independent” media.
Today, the rhetoric of freedom has calmed down, but it still sells well, among both foreign donors and media professionals. Governments and media companies struggle to find a new balance among growing popular expectations, new legislation, media councils, and the status and educational standards of journalists (Ramaprasand, 2002).

As usual, legislation lags behind, although the field of broadcasting seems to have made more progress (Berger, 2007; Ndela, 2007). So far, governments have viewed legislation and policy actions as decisive tools for strengthening democracy, but seem to find it difficult to strike a balance between freedom and responsibility (Rioba, 2009; So, This is Democracy, 2009, p. 72).

Another area of struggle is the formation of media councils. Governments all over Sub-Saharan Africa frequently try to establish government-run media councils for “self-regulation” of the media. Most recently, Namibia attempted to establish a media council in April 2009 and Zambia tried in May 2009. So far, all such attempts have failed. In contrast to government-run councils, Namibia recently established a Press Ombudsman system that opens a path towards self-regulation and an independently-formed Media Council of Tanzania (MCT) has operated effectively for years in Tanzania.

Despite the changed rhetoric, the role of the media in African societies has not changed much. The number of newspapers and TV channels has multiplied, but circulation and viewers have not grown proportionately. The media still tend to concentrate in capital cities and major financial centres, while in several areas access to the media by rural populations has worsened significantly (Kivikuru, 2000, pp. 93-101).

Further, to a large extent the media are still in the hands of dominant political parties or big businesses; community-based media have succeeded properly only in South Africa (Teer-Tomaselli & Mjwacu, 2003; Kivikuru, 2006), Ghana and Mozambique (Jallov, 2011). There is much talk about web-based media, but so far their use is limited.

The journalistic culture of Sub-Saharan Africa has been merely an intervening factor in this twisted situation. In journalism, the initial news report defining a phenomenon is often decisive, because it tends to frame the succeeding reporting. On a systems level, the media mode inherited from previous phases of social history changes slowly. The old mode reproduces itself in new media titles, even though these titles claim to follow a different logic. Consequently, the form the media have taken while emerging in the media terrain can be decisive.

This claim is by no means new in the literature. In the 1970s, several researchers discussed the phenomenon, although from a somewhat different point of view:

A dependency relationship refers to the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressures from the media interest of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected. (Boyd-Barrett, 1977, p. 117)

Boyd-Barrett and others (Golding, 1977; Hamelink, 1983; Senghaas, 1985) refer to dependency relationships, in which a lack of reciprocity is a crucial element. The end product is “mainstreaming” or “synchronisation”: the dominant culture or a transnational company sets the dependent party’s standards. Boyd-Barrett (1977) talks about how the communication vehicle in a dependent society easily adopts the mode of the communication vehicle in the dominant culture.

This research tradition does not necessarily deny space for peripheral autonomy, or as Senghaas (1985, p. 223-228) phrases it, “autocentric development,” Senghaas points out that the most salient determinants for auto-centric development are the differentiated capacity for independent self-control and the freedom to self-steer one’s politics, society, economy, and culture. Senghaas