Development Journalism in Africa: Capitulation of the Fourth Estate?*

by Lewis O. Odhiambo**

Abstract

This paper traces the historical underpinnings of development journalism. It argues that, like the ideology of development which is its *raison d'etre*, development journalism, though a welcome departure from Western mass media paradigms, lacks organic relevance to make it a legitimate professional pursuit for sub-Saharan African journalists. This is because 'development' no longer evokes patriotism in the present socio-political environment of the region. The paper also postulates that historical factors, political and economic mismanagement, and international economic and ideological interests have played major roles in stultifying sub-Saharan Africa's development thereby (a) limiting the capacity of its journalists to play meaningful roles in society, and (b) hampering the development of mass media in the region.

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17

Journalisme de Developpement en Afrique

Résumé

Cet article retrace les bases historiques du journalisme de développement. Il affirme que, tout comme l'idéologie de développement qui constitue sa raison, d'être, le journalisme de développement, malgré qu'elle représente un éloignement bien accueilli des paradigmes des médias occidentaux, manque une pertinence fondamentale pour le transformer en activité professionelle valable pour les journalistes africains sud-sahariens.

Ceci est dû au fait que "développement" n'évoque plus patriotisme dans l'environement socio-politique actuel de la région.

L'article postule aussi que des facteurs historiques, mauvaise gestion politique et économique, et les intérêts internationaux économiques et idéologiques ont joué des rôles importants en abrutissant le développement de l'Afrique sud-saharienne et par conséquent (a)- ont diminué la capacité de ses journalistes de jouer des rôles importants dans la société, et (b)- ont entravé le développement des médias dans la région.

Introduction

Mass communication theory posits that one of the preconditions for the development of the mass media is the availability of a potential audience. The other preconditions are the development of symbolic language, technology, and evolution of freedom of expression (Hicks, 1977).

The criterion of availability of mass media audiences comprises six components: (a) population numbers and density for convenience and economy of distribution; (b) complex social organization such that individuals do not rely entirely on face-to-face sources of news, information, opinion and linguistic diversion to meet their 'copying' needs, i.e. existence of a high degree of specialization and functional interdependence; (c) shared interests and cultural orientation, for instance, in matters of literature, science, religion, aesthetics, economics, politics and ideology so that there is enough commonality to permit meaningful experience from standardized media content; (d) availability of leisure time that can be spent on the consumption and enjoyment of the mass media; (e) literacy and intellectual comprehension to enable appreciation, enjoyment and absorption of mass media content; and (f) discretionary income for the purchase of the mass media contents (Hicks, 1977).

It has been suggested that the mass media in Third World countries do not qualify as such by these criteria and have, therefore, received only parenthetic attention in academic discourse (Kunczik, 1988). Sub-Saharan Africa is often cited as having the lowest mass media consumption figures in the world.

However, measures using mass media consumption levels mask fundamental issues regarding the significance and role of the mass media in developing countries. They also mask the nature of relationships between journalists and established powers in such societies. Demographic, economic and social conditions may have seriously hampered the growth and profitability of mass communication in Third World countries. Yet this only partly explains the relationships between the mass media, established political power and social change, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where multilateral interventions to boost mass media development have floundered in the same way as have other socioeconomic policy and structural interventions.

A popular variant of Third World mass media theory is that which emphasizes functionalistic and normative attributes of the media institutions. It views the mass media institutions as both instruments for, and aspects of, wider socioeconomic development.

The theoretical foundations of this view of the mass media are in structural functionalism of the 1950s through to the 1970s propounded by Schramm (1964) and Rogers (1962, 1976). After many years of gestation and maturation in U.S. administrative and effects research, this perspective of the mass media was domiciled in Third World countries where it has become both an intellectual and

political philosophy. This new paradigm has come to be known variously as development journalism or development communication.

This paper sketches the historical basis of development journalism. It shows how the troubled socioeconomic realities of the region coupled with the prejudices and imperialist interests extant in global relations have marginalized the development and role of the mass media in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Ideology of Development

Gramsci (1979) makes a distinction between 'historically organic ideologies' and ideologies that 'are arbitrary, rationalistic and 'willed'. He argues that 'To the extent that the ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is 'psychological'; they organize human masses and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc. To the extent that they are arbitrary, they only create individual 'movements', polemics and so on' (p. 99).

We postulate that at independence 'development' had the attributes of an historically organic ideology in the Gramscian sense, but that later it was 'modified and denatured' (Gramsci's phrase) by established powers in sub-Saharan Africa thereby making it an arbitrary rhetoric. We argue further that at the beginning African politicians and journalists were seeing one big picture of the continent's future, but that later each party progressively focused on different areas thereby leading to the present conflictual situation.

The 1960s was a period of great hope and expectation in Africa. It was a time when many African countries were emerging from the dark ages of colonialism and, so to speak, entering the dawn of a new age, an age of glorious economic growth and intellectual emancipation.

Africa had 450 million population that was mostly young and growing; geographically it occupies 23 percent (11.7 million square miles) of the earth's land mass.

Historically, Africa could boast of being the cradle of mankind and origin of human civilization: 3-million-year-old fossils found by anthropologists Louis and Mary Leakey had established without equivocation that the evolution of man took place in East Africa – in a long swath of landmass from Djibouti to Zimbabwe; the Nok culture flourished in Nigeria in 500 B.C. against the backdrop of a burgeoning iron smelting technology; Benin exchanged ambassadors with Portugal in the mid-fifteenth century; the splendours of the Songhai empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it will be recalled, were legendary; and, now-priceless bronze busts were being cast in Nigeria's Ife State long before Columbus set sail for America.

Economically, Africa is to this day virgin, unexploited. As journalist David Lamb (1984) described it, Africa:

like a closet millionaire, hides the riches that the future generations on distant continents will need to prosper, produce and survive. It has 40 percent of the world's potential hydroelectric power supply, the bulk of the world's diamonds and chromium, 30 percent of the uranium in non-communist world, 50 percent of the world's gold, 90 percent of its cobalt, 50 percent of its phosphates, 40 percent of its platinum, 7.5 percent of its coal, 8 percent of its known petroleum reserves, 12 percent of its natural gas, 3 percent of its iron ores, and millions upon millions of acres of untilled farmland. There is not another continent blessed with such abundance and diversity.

So during that decade of the 1960s the path of Africa's bright future seemed clear and well-defined. The objective was to regain lost glory and enter a new age of restoration and cultural renaissance. At the cultural level, such novelists as Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nigeria's Chinua Achebe, and poets such as Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal and Okot p'Bitek of Uganda, composed epics about the crossroads situation in Africa – between the past and the present, and between bondage and freedom. These were quality literary works in English and French of unequivocal acclaim about the cultural ferment that erupted as pastoral Africa encountered technological Europe. They were cultural and ideological benchmarks for the inexorable changes that expectedly were to heave the massive continent forward.

But with hindsight, it is illuminating to recall the words of philosopher Joseph Mbiti (1971) who, exploring the notion of time found that African time was 'a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of immediate occurrence falls in the category of 'no time'. What is certain to occur, or what falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena, is in the category of *'potential time'* (p. 70). The question may therefore be posed: Is Africa a victim of this philosophy, of inane inability to project, to forecast?

Up to this point the continent's intellectual and political leadership was in agreement that its emancipation was predicated on rapid socioeconomic development. Thus socioeconomic development became the historically organic ideology, or the organizing principle, for social policy and programmes. Development was historically necessary given the prevailing structures of post-colonial backwardness and poverty.

Meanwhile, politically, Africa, like the rest of the world, was being divided along the east-west ideological divide and was becoming a playing field for cold war politics that were ranging at the time. Africa was split between communism and capitalism with their centrifugal epicentres in Europe and North America. To this extent contemporary political history of Africa is very much the history of east-west contentions. Therefore, if nineteenth century African history was the history of European activities in Africa, then twentieth century African history has been the history of African reaction to Europe (and its diaspora). As a result, for two centuries, Africa was largely a passive object of history. Come political

independence and Africa was craving to become an active player in the historical game.

Thus the 1960s was a period for the formulation of our own political philosophies that did not have the blemish of foreign origination, east or west. We came up with African socialism (Kenya), *undugu* or *ujamaa* (brotherhood or community, Tanzania), humanism (Zambia), and other variants of such terminologies that suited our temperament and sense of purpose. It was a period of political and cultural reification of the ideology of nationalism and natural identity. But it was also the time when we were entering the first stage of Gramsci's 'modification' and 'denaturing' of ideology, i.e. when ideology is 'identified as distinct from structure, and it is asserted that it is not ideology that changes the structure but vice versa' (Gramsci 1979:100).

In Kenya, the government published a policy paper entitled Sessional Paper No. 1 on African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya in 1965 which formed the benchmark for the country's mixed economy development model. The sessional paper eschewed political radicalism, allowed public and private sector participation in the economy, and emphasized government investment in health, education and rural infrastructure. Critics of the document dismissed it as a blueprint for capitalist development and its author as an agent of American capitalism. Such critics were, of course, similarly dismissed as communists.

The basis of the sessional paper was faster economic development which has remained the official ideology to-date. The rationale of this policy is that as a young nation, all energies and resources should be pooled to achieve faster growth (A national rallying cry *harambee* (Kiswahili for pushing/pulling together) was coined to popularize the ideology of development.) The mass media put their weight behind the ideology of development.

The Kenyan example is not exactly typical, but it illustrates the basic assumptions, strategies and approaches which many African countries adopted for socioeconomic direction, although the more socialist leaders followed more overtly radical paths. As a rule, however, the path adopted determined the lens through which the particular country was viewed from the centres of investment capital and technical assistance. To a large degree, it also determined the level of militarization and the scale of civil turbulence experienced in each country since independence.

Having underpinned the normative and intellectual bases of the ideology of development, it is necessary to point out that subsequently the ideology ceased to be historically organic; it became arbitrary, rationalistic and willed. In other words, the ideology became perverted. For instance, 'national development' become an *excuse* for suspending individual liberties, the expansion and entrenchment of state capitalism, and for the growth of unwieldy bureaucracies fraught with corruption, nepotism and every variety of patronage. When, how and why this came about is beyond the scope of this discussion.

The Role of the Mass Media in National Development

Herman and Chomsky (1988) attribute to the mass media the role of inculcating individuals 'with values, beliefs and codes of conduct that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the large society.' They postulate that in societies which are characterized by major social conflicts and concentration of wealth, the mass media can fulfil this role only by systematic propaganda. They continue: 'In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of the dominant elite' (p. 1). Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model focuses on inequality of wealth and power and its effects on mass media interests and choices, and how these 'are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public' (p. 2).

Riegel (1977:63) cautions that 'the objective of governments in communications is not to promote 'world-mindedness' or education in the sense of increased understanding and appreciations of the ideas and cultures of other nations and peoples in a world community, but rather to preserve and strengthen the sense of nationality and the national status quo.'

Expropriation of the media of mass communication was a major feature of the newly-independent countries in Africa, even though these countries had neither a sense of nationhood to preserve, nor national institutional structures to which the mass media could integrate citizens. The disparate peoples in former European colonies that gained independence as African nations with full status at the United Nations had no consensual values in culture, politics, or economics, nor was there agreement on the mode of political leadership and how those leaders were to be chosen and changed. As Riegel (supra) says, 'Bringing emerging nations into the twentieth century in communications usually translated into providing governments with tools to combat differences and tribal and other fragmenting loyalties for the purpose of promoting national unity and discipline. Bluntly stated, this translates into turning nomadic Africans into soldiers' (p. 63).

Discounting Riegel's sarcasm and overstatement, he aptly captures the essence of the problem. Most African countries explicitly stated that it was the role of the mass media to create national unity and foster development. In fact this was deemed so important that many governments became the mass-media through nationalization. Journalists suddenly became civil servants and government spokespeople. Most journalists did not object to this development and actively supported government nationalization in the belief that this was being done for patriotic reasons, and that politicians would play their traditional role of leadership and leave journalist to play theirs of watchdog and sentinel. Some were effusive in their support. For instance, Tanzanian journalist Ng'wanakilala (1981) argued that what was crucial was whether the media were used for liberation or

oppression of the popular masses. He enthused: 'where a government is committed to the development of all the people, media takeover by the government is an act of liberation and emancipation.'

Others such as Kenyan editor and publisher Hilary Ng'weno (1969) were willing to accept a certain amount of limitation of press freedoms associated with democratic societies. He suggested that the media should impose limitations upon themselves rather than have the government impose censorship, and that such action was justified because:

> 'The challenge to the press in young countries is the challenge of laying down the foundations upon which future freedoms will thrive . . . Under some of the conditions (of poverty, illiteracy and disease) in which vast numbers of Asians, Africans and Latin Americans live, it would be sacrilegious to talk about press freedom, for freedom loses meaning when human survival is the operative principle upon which a people live . . . In such countries, the first duty of the press, as indeed of any other institutions or individual, is to encourage greater national unity.'

Some politicians like the late president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, a former journalist who used his paper to whip up support for his political party during the struggle for Ghana's independence, rejected the idea of an independent press. He argued that 'Within the competitive system of capitalism the press cannot function in accordance with strict regard to facts' (Nkrumah, 1965).

Nkrumah believed in activist journalism, insisting that journalistic practice involves choice of topics and arrangements of facts in a way that fits in with the preferences of the owners. He argued that, in privately-owned media, the journalist often 'finds himself rejecting or distorting facts that do not coincide with the outlook and interest of his employer or the medium's advertisers. Under the pressure of competition for advertising revenue, trivialities are blown up, the vulgar emphasized, ethics forgotten, the important trimmed to the class outlook. Enmities are fanned and peace is perverted.'

Nkrumah believed that a journalist should have high ideals, be a political activist and party member, and 'His newspaper a collective organizer, a collective instrument of mobilization and a collective educator, a weapon first and foremost for the overthrow of colonialism and imperialism and to assist total African independence and unity. The true African journalist often works for the organ of the political party to which he himself belongs and in whose purpose he believes. He works to serve a society moving in the direction of his aspirations.'

Ng'weno and Nkrumah's arguments remain the two most powerful inspirations and justifications for African's mass media policy. They also provide the utilitarian underpinnings of development journalism as an occupational self-perception and a theory of the press.

In the decade of the 1960s, arguments such as these provided the rationality for government action. Radio and television stations were nationalized where they existed because, after all, they had been mouthpieces of colonial authorities.

The broadcast facilities were required, so the argument went, for the education of the masses, creation of a sense of national identity, and to unify the new nations.

In some countries such as Tanzania, for instance, not only was the broadcast system put under the powerful ministry of information, but newspapers were also nationalized and turned over to the ruling party. In others, such as Kenya, only the broadcast networks were nationalized and made a part of government bureaucracy; some independent (foreign-owned) newspapers remained. But many governments or the political parties in power established their own newspapers as well. Kenya's first Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Ramogi Achieng Oneko, justified government involvement in newspaper publication on egalitarian grounds. He said the government would establish rural newspapers because 'commercial newspapers aim primarily at making profits, so they are not likely to undertake the publication of newspapers for small linguistic groups' (quoted in Mytton, 1983).

Oneko's reasoning makes sound social policy and business sense. But it should also be borne in mind that the political strengths of a vast majority of African politicians are in their rural homes where they return every election time for votes, not in the cities where they live. More importantly, the other thing Oneko did not say was that the government aimed to fill the vacuum left by private investors with newspapers through which government officials could talk down to the small linguistic groups. Through UNESCO support, the Kenya government has established a network of rural newspapers which, by and large, have become just another voice of the government whose information officers publish them.

It is hard to argue against the principles behind government participation and control of the mass media in Africa given the fact that in some of these countries the only newspapers present were those established by government, there being no able individuals or private sector interests that could invest in newspapers, leave alone broadcast systems. There were no models for co-operative ownership of mass media, and this has not been encouraged to-date.

As Ng'weno (1969) put it, the need for self-restraint by the mass media in fragile democracies will always be there given the forces at play in their politico-economic arenas. But such arguments ring hollow in an environment of flagrant neglect of responsibility by the people in power. It is a truism that a cowed and subservient press has served African dictators superbly and no politician or soldier in power would wish to change the status quo. It can no longer be legitimate to urge restraint by journalists who daily witness wanton profligacy from government officials and politicians some of whose only qualification to leadership is that they bombed their way into power. And neither is it legitimate to ask the media to look the other way when some elected leaders betray their vows to defend the constitution and instead tinker with it constantly.

Bagdikian (1983: 213) says that there are moments in history when all established power becomes uneasy. He says such are usually 'times of social change when those in control are operating with an obsolete picture of the world

and are alarmed at suggestions of flaws in the system they govern. (But) their hostility at such times may be directed at what they most need to recognize.'

Most of the established powers in Africa today are operating with obsolete pictures of the world. Here's the most salient picture they see: constant threats to their governments from armed bandits lurking to seize power on behalf of some hostile foreign government; for this they blame everyone else but their own policies and actions. The rest of the world, on the other hand, sees this: Sudan = hunger, war; Liberia = mass murder, breakdown of civil society; Mozambique and Angola = civil war, communist threat; Kenya = corruption, tribalism; Tanzania = benign neglect of economy, communism; Nigeria = military dictatorship, tribalism; Zaire = corruption, political thuggery, tribalism; and just outright medieval societies in many parts of Africa.

These pictures may be distorted. But consider these other pictures that are not seen: the linkage between the endemic political instability in Third World nations and their poverty; the linkage between poverty and the integration of the global economy; and the linkage between an integrated global economy and the history and perpetuation of empire.

By some inexplicable conjuncture of bad luck and sheer circumstance, we are often told, the private interests of local and international political economic elites so merged that Africa's development must now be negotiated with endogenous multilateral and bilateral agencies. This is hardly surprising given the fact that colonial structures in government and the economy remained largely intact at independence 'for stability and continuity.' But where 'revolutionary' governments undertook measures to alter neocolonial superstructures, the result was often military take-over of government, drying up of economic aid coupled with a blitz of negative foreign media propaganda and, invariably, very well financed and armed 'liberation' wars. Against this backdrop is a vast majority of African people who feel that the trust which they placed on their politicians had been betrayed.

Thus, lacking popular support, many African governments have fallen; others have resorted to increasingly authoritarian methods to contain all stripes of criticism, often interpreted as dissent. Even patriotic journalists like Ng'weno (1969:4) began to grumble that the trouble with most African countries is that 'governments tend to treat themselves as the sole judges of what constitutes the national interest.' Many independent journalists have been hounded out of town, arrested, tortured, or jailed to reveal 'their foreign paymasters.' Many of the remaining journalists have been cowed through the calculus of survival and economic necessity.

Another conjecture of local and international opinion in the 1980s held that there was need for change in Africa. The international media had just 'discovered' that millions of people were dying in Ethiopia and Sudan as a result of drought and civil war. Suddenly philanthropists in the west were at hand to marshall aid for the victims. Pressures for structural changes of African economies were also

stepped up and the international media began to report atrocities of African governments and guerrillas engaged in bush combat as though these were new. Yet most African civil wars have been fought since the early 1970s!

'The root process of peaceful change begins with the right of the aggrieved to be heard, thus presenting the best evidence of the need for change,' says Bagdikian (supra). 'And the voice of the aggrieved, being heard by the general citizenry, can create consensus for a remedy. The media are crucial to this process.'

It may be argued that in an integrated world such as we have today, the role of the mass media in social change is an international co-operative effort, and that reporting Africa's developmental problems requires resources which its media institutions cannot afford. Moreover, as we have seen, governments are the mass media in many African countries and this does not allow for the necessary critiquing that governments require for the development of democratic institutions. Regrettably, however, the narrow ideologism of international media would seem to make them unlikely supporters of popular structural and democratic change in Africa. In addition, there is little likelihood that they will shed in a hurry their cold-war approach to news gathering so well documented by Herman and Chomsky (1988) and Aronson (1990).

Moreover, Bagdikian (1990) tells of 'private ministries of information and culture' in western industrial democracies. He says these private ministries are media monopolies, endless mass media chains which manufacture public information as industrial by-products for sale worldwide. We are told that money from such sales finance the purchase of oil, mineral and agricultural concessions throughout the world; the media chains also have interests in the armaments industry and reap hefty profits from fratricidal wars in Africa and the Middle East.

We are also told by Aronson (1990) that these private ministries of information played a leading role in fuelling the hysteria that came to be known as the cold war through disinformation and propaganda, that same cold war which has transfixed Africa in a dance of hunger unto death, and in a macabre ritual of fratricide.

We see many such 'objective' reports about African hunger, African inhumanity to fellow Africans, and African corruption. What we don't see are the causes of such miseries and the linkages between these things and the events that have shaped the destiny of Africa throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Africa played no active role in the events of this century. It might all together become invisible at 'the end of history' as the rest of the world simply becomes too ashamed to acknowledge its existence. The capitulation of African journalism to local bullying and international calumny is the more regrettable because there is no one that will be sentinel and watchdog of this unhappy continent; no one to amplify 'the voice of the aggrieved.'[2] Hence there are reduced chances for peaceful social change in the continent.

Conclusion

This discussion has explored the role of the mass media in socioeconomic and political development. We have provided historical underpinnings of development journalism as it relates to the sub-Saharan African environment and how it has failed to fulfil its avowed objectives. Like the ideology of development which underpins its theoretical foundations, development journalism lacks organic relevance that would make it a legitimate professional pursuit for African journalists. This is not because it is no longer relevant, nor is it because there is no philosophical basis for it. It has become illegitimate because 'development' has become an idea that does not evoke patriotism in the present socio-political environment of Africa.

This discussion has also surveyed the constraints of journalism in Africa with its unstable political and economic realities. It has postulated that historical factors, political mismanagement, and international economic and ideological interests have all played major roles in stunting Africa's development thereby limiting the capacity of African journalists to play any meaningful role in their societies.

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Political Communication: Press and Politics in Nigeria's Second Republic?

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Abstract