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The Sleeping Dog Cannot Bark: Media and Mass Disempowerment of Civil Society in Africa

By Danladi Musa

Abstract

The concepts of media as the fourth estate and the society's watchdog are popular among communication scholars. However, a consideration of the actualization of this concept is indicative of the media's failing in playing these roles. Very often, the media marginalise and disempower the masses whose causes they ought to promote. If the media were to truly play the watchdog role as the fourth estate, then both the structure and ownership of the media must be reviewed with a view to redressing the imbalances that make them tools for the disempowerment of civil society in Africa.

Dr. Danladi Musa teaches at the Department of English, Communication and Media Studies, University of Zimbabwe.

Un Chien Dormant n'Aboit pas: Les Médias et le Passage du Pouvoir à la Société Civile en Afrique

Par Dr Danladi Musa

Résumé

Le concept que les médias constituent le quatrième quartier et le chien de garde de la société n'est rien de nouveau chez les spécialistes en communication. On remarque, cependant, que les choses se passent autrement en réalité, ce qui revient au même qu'accuser les médias de ne pas jouer leur rôle comme il faut. Il paraît qu'au fait les médias arrachent le pouvoir des masses populaires et marginalisent la société civile. Or le contraire aurait été plus souhaitable.

Dr Musa est de l'avis que cette situation est à revoir. Pourque les médias justifient leur nom de quatrième quartier et de chien de garde comme il se doit, cet auteur suggère qu'on fasse une revue critique des structures et de propreté des médias. La réorganisation de ce secteur devrait, avant tout, s'adresser au problème de l'inéquitabilité des sexes dans ce domaine. Car c'est là l'un des obstacles majeurs, qui empêchent le passage du pouvoir à la société civile en Afrique.

Dr Danladi Musa enseigne au Département de Communication en Anglais et d'Etudes des Médias, Université de Zimbabwe.

Introduction

That the media are the fourth estate of the realm carries an entrenched assumption that is often taken for granted. For not only is it made to appear as having a constitutional backing but also that our modern mass communication media as 'neutral' reporters and filters of news and information are an obvious necessity for democracy, a condition for the nurturing and sustenance of democracy.

A closer look at the modern communication media in a pluralist Nigeria however, reveals that certain professional and structural constraints have made the media anything but a fourth estate. Indeed General Mola's notion of a fifth column describing a force that undermines a regime or a state from within aptly describes most of our modern media relationship with democracy.

For while the fourth estate baptism given to our modern media carries a responsibility and obligation of a 'watchdog' function on the media, the reality about them as imposed by structural, professional and economic constraints shows them as relegating popular sentiments and in the final count playing a consensus-sustaining function.

Democracy, Freedom of Expression and the Right to be Heard

There has not been a concept as contentious in contemporary discourse as democracy. Some people and nations claim to be democratic, others aspire to be democratic. Indeed, the most dictatorial and authoritarian of leaders claim one form of democracy or the other. The new dispensation in Eastern Europe, the German Unification, the newly emergent scenario in South Africa are all said to be the democratic expression of people's will and power.

However, no matter how contentious democracy as a concept has become, one fact is clear, and that is, that it has to do with majority will and power as the humanly best way of bringing equity and fairness to a society. Such equity and fairness is desired in all areas of daily endeavour like distribution of wealth, shelter, education, information and choice of leadership etc.

In all these, the choice of leadership and distribution of wealth have become the most contentious areas, yet there is a consensus that for democratic expression to survive in these areas adequate quality information is

indispensable. Indeed adequate communication is very desirable for the survival of a democratic polity. For without free and open expression citizens will not have access to the quality information they need to arrive at a rational judgement on potential leaders, and distribution of resources.

UNESCO appreciates this fact and submitted in a declaration that journalists "must have freedom to report and the fullest possible facilities and access to information". This would provide a check on governments, in order to ensure the public's right to a diversity of "sources and means of information available to it". Article 11 of the declaration provides that:

The exercise of freedom of opinion, expression and information, recognized as an integral part of human rights, strengthening of peace and international understanding. Access by the public to information should be guaranteed by the diversity of the sources and media of information available to it, thus enabling each individual to check the accuracy of facts and to appraise events objectively. Similarly, it is important that Mass Media be responsive to concerns of peoples and individuals, thus promoting the participation of the public in the preparation of information. (Quoted in Nordenstreng & Hannikainen,) 1984, 401.

Similarly Section 364 of the Nigerian Constitution also recognised the importance of free expression as a fundamental right by providing that;

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression including the right to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference.

Mass Media: Agenda Setting and Empowerment

That the mass media are central in modern political process and activities by making information available to the voter to make value judgement carries a corresponding truism: This is that there is a corresponding relationship between importance attached to an issue and its coverage by the media. In other words, the media can help in attaching importance or unimportance to an issue by the frequency with which the issue is covered by the media. In this light, when citizens ask and offer explanations as to why Nigeria's experimentations with democracy are failing while the elite ask and offer

explanations as to why the experimentations are failing and the media choose the latter for continued mention in the bulletin or headlines, it is this point of view, this perspective about the reality (or unreality) of our polity that will gain ground. The explanation offered by the majority of the citizens especially the rural populace who constitute over 70% of the population is erased or marginalised.

The worrisome aspect of this development for the democratization process in Nigeria lies in the fact that it empowers the already strong voices in society and by so doing disempowers the less strong voices. It is a dialectical process that does not respond to simplistic conspirational analogy. There is neither a crude conspiracy nor a simple one in this process.

Most public commentators on the dynamics of mass media especially as they concern the issue of empowering the minority and disempowering the majority get stagnated on the issue of ownership of the media and its direct relationship with media messages as advanced by Karl Marx in the mid 18th century. Unfortunately, Marx did not live long enough to complete his work on the media beyond his submission on ruling ideas as postulated in the German ideology. Scholars and commentators have often become fixated by over privileged ownership of the media in trying to seek explanation to the outcome of media endeavours such as news, information and entertainment.

Important as the issue of media ownership is, it is not capable of providing explanation to media attitude in times of peace. For instance, *Concord Press* may be identified with Abiola's agendum of June 12th but what was the focus of the *Concord* before the declaration of presidential ambition by its proprietor and why? One could still ask another question as to why there is sameness of position between the *New Nigerian* editorial and that of the *Champion* and the *Guardian* on worker's strikes and their "destructive" capacity on the economy.

None of these papers, in spite of the differences in their ownership (*New Nigerian* is Government while both *Champion* and *Guardian* are private), speak of strikes as the genuine expression of worker's desire for better welfare which is essential for productivity and economic growth.

We shall be attempting to trace the constraints to majority empowerment by the media by looking at key structural areas: deadline, routine professional practices, profitability and survival.

A close look at the routine structure of news production will reveal to us how the media come to reproduce the points of views as well as definitions of the already powerful (official definition) in the society even when there is no coercion from the proprietor. Stuart Hall (1974) has observed that the media produce the words and images they are producing because journalists are under practical pressures of constantly working against the clock, leading to coverage of pre-scheduled events.

Added to this is the fact that media reporting is guided by professional notion of "impartiality" and "objectivity". In this way comes the need for clear differentiation between "fact" and "opinion" which has led to the situation that wherever possible media statements are grounded in objective and authoritative statements from "accredited" sources, which means constantly turning to accredited representatives of major social institutions such as parliamentarians for political issues, Agriculture Minister and Commissioners on farming matters, leaders of employer organizations and trade unions for industrial matters etc.

These institutional representatives are accredited because of their institutional power and position as well as their representative status. The majority of citizens on the other hand, the workers and peasants of this country are not accredited and cannot therefore be authoritative enough to be reported or covered by the media. The audience on the other hand are so accustomed to having issues, events and anything newsworthy expounded to them by these accredited representatives that most of them would be left unconvinced if the media did not turn to such accredited representatives to give their views on explanations or the issue in question.

These two aspects of news production constitute serious constraints; the practical pressure of constantly working against the clock and the professional demand for impartiality and objectivity combine to produce a "systematically structured" over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions thus legitimising by amplifying, their point of view as the dominant perspective in our society. And in this way the media consolidate the prevailing social order in society. It is because of this structured preference given in the media to the opinion of the powerful that the elite become the primary definers of issues in society.

Thus, the opinion of the powerful then sets the limit for all subsequent discussion; it sets the terms of reference within which all further coverage or

discourse take place. The implication of this is that arguments against this primary interpretation especially by the less powerful, are forced to insert themselves into its definition; they are forced to begin from this framework of interpretation as their starting point. It is in this framework that all subsequent discussions are labeled "relevant" or "irrelevant". Once established, according to Hall (1974), this interpretative framework becomes difficult to alter fundamentally and any contribution or behavior that differs from the established framework is exposed to the barking of the watchdog, that "it is not addressing the problem". In this way the media help in marginalising opposition views and create the impression that those holding such views are simply disrupting "established peace" or causing chaos. In this way, impartiality and objectivity stop at the point where dominant political consent itself begins.

With this professional constraint, the media become part of the structure of marginalisation and oppression. The constraint becomes a sedative that incapacitates the media from barking at the powerful. And as we noted earlier, the less powerful living outside the established framework constitute over 70% of the population and if the watchdog can be barking at this large population and promoting and reinforcing the point of view of the elite can they really be promoting democracy? Or is it really genuine democracy when the less powerful are further disempowered by the structure of society as well as by dominant institutions such as the media. These are serious questions posed to the "watchdog" concept, a concept that is undermined by constraints within the journalism profession itself.

A third pressure however exists which exacerbates the limitations of the media as "fourth estate" or as "watchdog". This has to do with the search for profitability or revenue as an essential means of survival. This commercial pressure whether in press or broadcasting has made the media to adhere to formats (words and images, themes and orientation and general focus) that are already accepted by the widest range of potential readers and viewers. This necessarily makes the media to draw most heavily, on the official and dominant perspective and on reactionary populism since these are the best publicised and most pervasive perspectives. If NTA, BRTV, *Guardian* or *New Nigeria* continue to be "relevant" to their target audience, the advertiser will be convinced to put his money so as to reach the big buyers whose perspective

incidentally is the perspective mostly covered by the media in their bid to be "objective" and "authoritative". It is this revenue more than the cover price of newspapers and magazines that ensures their sustenance and continuous existence. The new commercialization policy in government broadcast media where entry into the news bulletin is now a monetary function is a testimony to the official backing given to the media to disempower the weak in society.

Since modern media are the conduit pipe through which we get information about situations and events outside our immediate environment and experience the exclusion of the unpaying (usually financially weak) sector of the society means excluding from our sensibilities as well as from national discourse a large segment of the society. This is so because there is a general acceptance of the view that publicity given to an issue in the media can give it more objective status as a valid issue of public discourse or concern than would have been the case had the issue not been picked up by the media. Thus media as public sphere have been commodotised with a disempowering effect on the financially weak actors in society. Such concentrated media attention confers the status of high public concern on issues which are highlighted. In reality, this public sphere has been effectively transformed into a sphere for elite discourse. Issues that receive little or no media mention on the other hand are conferred in this way, with the status of unimportance and irrelevance. So, issues become understood by everyone as the pressing issues of the day. The "Better Life for Rural Women" or "Family Support" programmes as genuine ways of empowering women in Nigeria is a typical media spectacle of agenda setting role of the "fourth estate".

Apart from highlighting issues, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters, play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers are not only learning about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue based on the amount of information in a news story and its position. By constantly focusing on certain issues rather than others, the media are deciding for the wider public what issue or individuals they should know about, think about and have feelings about. And operating within the constraints we noted earlier, the media are most likely to lead people to think in a conformist or dominant perspective.

But it must also be appreciated that the media are not haphazard in the way they select their news items even from among statements by the elite. Each paper for example has its own areas of interest depending on its

organization and technical framework and its target audience. Such differences are what produce the different social personalities of newspapers. The question that may arise is how newspapers come to cover the same stories in their pages. One of the answers to this lies in the issue of economic survival highlighted earlier. For a medium to maintain steady revenue or make profit it needs to maximise reach to ensure increase in circulation. It is for this that production tends to minimize risks by avoiding unfamiliar areas capable of driving away readers and therefore advertisers. Attention will be on the familiar and the tested media content known to be capable of retaining the audience. Often these are areas and issues well entrenched and familiar to our sensibilities. Deviation from such areas and issues could raise unfamiliarity thus risking audience attention hence affecting profitability.

Mass Media Transformation and the Process of Disempowerment

What we have tried to highlight above is the mundane character, the dynamics of media in Nigeria viz-a-viz their ascribed role as “fourth estate” or “watchdog” of the society. Recent years however, have witnessed some developments that have led to a transformation in the media industry. These developments are also very significant in the capacity of the media as watchdogs of the society.

First there is the excessive concern relating media to content and to ownership, as well as the growth of entrepreneurship in the media sector as could be seen in Decree 38 of 1992 establishing private broadcasting in Nigeria.

Commentators have welcomed the development as it will end government monopoly in broadcasting which they say is undesirable and dysfunctional to objectivity and to the watchdog role of the media. For with multiplicity of channels and stations, it is assumed that citizens will have room for choice and therefore will be better informed. The basis of this argument stems from an assumed dichotomy between government-owned and privately-owned media. Our submission here is that the dichotomy is a false one for the reason that the pressure or constraints facing the government-owned media will also constraint the newly emerging private stations. In any case the government-owned media as well as those on cable and satellite channels have established

a broadcasting culture that is known to be audience capturing. The new private media will want to avoid risks and therefore will focus on the tested format of programming. When this happens, we shall merely be having multiplicity of channels broadcasting programmes that do not offer any fundamental choice. Indeed, Hamelink observes that,

In the cultural/information field chances cannot be left to market and state. As the corporations take more and more control of forms of public expression in the performing arts, the museums, the mass media, and the shopping malls, public space needs to be defended against both commercial raiders and the state. (Hamelink 1994,147)

Other African countries like Zimbabwe that recently announced plans to open up the airwaves must draw some lessons from this.

The growth of entrepreneurship in the media sector among others is what gave rise to the concept of information economy where information is becoming more and more central in the flow of capital, domestic and international. For this reason, modern media are teaming up with specialised packages aimed specifically at the corporate elite. In Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) for instance, there is the weekly Business News, in the press there are Business Concord, Financial Guardian, Financial Times, Property News, Stock Exchange columns in national dailies etc. In this information, there is shift from information as a public good to information as a commodity processed and packaged like soap or automobile and sold to the affording few. The common man is excluded from access to such information either by the high cost or by the highly technical language used which is usually only relevant to the target audience of the corporate elite in banking and finance industries. Such media messages become inaccessible because the common man lacks what Pierre Bourdieu calls the "cultural capital" to use the messages. With the arrival on the scene of these specialised packages, what is left in the daily and weekly publications as well as bulletins are mundane, general and event oriented news whereby activities of elites are glorified, scandals and disappointments of the common man are laughed away as comic and his bold violent resistance and rejection of present arrangements through demonstration and picketing are portrayed as criminal and capable of disrupting "peace and order" and therefore deserving of our condemnation.

Mention also needs to be made about the increasing proliferation of the entertainment media or what one would call the 'palliative media.' In the press there is the growing number of publications that aim to entertain their readers; such publications like *Ikebe*, *Prime People*, *Hints*, etc. are openly patronised by adolescents, senior public officers and members of the business class.

These "junk" publications as they are referred to are not very different in the sense that their output is equally spiced with ideological connotations of a more or less definite kind.

Their excessive glamourisation of sex, scandal, gossip etc. depicts the inner life pattern of our privileged class who find it fanciful to read about one another in such publications. To ladies and youths, it is exciting to imagine that such a life pattern characterises the elite in our society.

Radio and television fictional programmes also fall in this category. Programmes such as *Ripples* and *Supple Blues* tend to reproduce official definition and interpretation of society. For these programmes to attract mass audience, they need to work with images of potential viewers. As a result of this, they tend to draw most heavily on the official perspective and on reactionary populism since these are the best publicised and most pervasive perspectives.

If the media are truly the society's watchdog and if the numerical strength of these media including the entertainment media is anything to go by, then perhaps ours would have been one of the most highly watched and guarded societies in the world.

Conclusion: Mass Empowerment and the Role of Media

That information is power is no longer in contention and that is why liberal democracy places emphasis on the media to arm citizens with adequate quality information so that they can make rational choice in exercising their franchise. And it is precisely because of this expected role that the media are labeled the watchdog of the society: The fourth estate of the realm.

In an inegalitarian society such as ours however, we have observed that certain constraints which are both structural and institutional, such as ownership and control, commitment to professional ethics, economic logic and profitability etc have contributed in sedating the dog so that the media

largely fulfill the task of sustaining the prevailing social order that has empowered few and disempowered the majority. In this situation the media have remained a conduit pipe for dissemination of ideas and values which confirm and not challenge existing patterns of power and privilege.

For us to have relevant media, there must be a radical transformation of media ownership in this country so that communities will come to have their own newspapers. Instead of government funding some national or state newspapers the funds should go directly to such communities to run their newspapers. Of course, this can only be possible with proper political education that will provide for democratic set ups in the communities otherwise the publication will again be hijacked and used against the interest of the people. Impediments to the ownership of newspapers as imposed by the Newspaper Registration Board must be removed otherwise ownership of the press will continue to follow the pattern of wealth distribution in society.

In broadcasting we must redefine and return to the concept of public services broadcasting. Social movements and organizations and communities with membership of over a certain size once democratically organised must have air time and newspaper space allotted to them in their indigenous or chosen languages.

More importantly however, there must be a redefinition of the concept of journalism, and the very values that guide the practice of the profession as it is now disempowering. For as Graham observes,

“the incompatibility between the commercial and political functions of the media is not just a question of ownership and control, important as such questions are: It is even more a question of the value system and set of social relations within which commercial media must operate and which they serve to reinforce. For it is these that are inimical, not just to one political interest group or another, but to the very process of democratic politics itself.” (1986,47).

Our failure to appreciate this reality and act decisively has left the media and their activities highly functional to the process of empowering the elite in society, while as a watchdog the media bark most ferociously at the weak who are often portrayed as the society's criminals, as those whose points of view are inconsequential, as those whose activities must be carefully policed so that they don't disrupt normal peace and order.

However, changing the value system of media practice necessarily means that the journalism curriculum in our training institutions must be radically redefined so as to impart the relevant skill and competence to the trainees. Those already in the field must undergo a rigorous retraining programme that must aim at purging them of the old conformist perspective that currently guides the practice of journalism. But as Hamelink observes, the process of empowerment does not come by a voluntary submission from state or corporate capital in media activity but by civil empowerment.

In the process of self empowerment the disempowered participate in their own empowerment. They no longer leave decisions to others. They arrive independently at conclusions and create their own space, define themselves and create chances for unfolding their identities. They demand accountability of those who claim power over them and refuse to see themselves as "beings for others", i.e, as mere buyers or voters. (Ibid., 142)

As communication scholars we must strive to be allies in the empowerment of civil society and not those who are out to disempower civil society. For any claim to capacity of empowering civil society will merely re-invent the wheel of reproducing the social relations of dominance and in the final analysis members of civil society become subjected as beings for others and not "beings for themselves".

As allies in the process of empowering civil society we must understand the theoretical limitations that undermine the New World Information and Communication Order(NWICO) struggle. That limitation is creating a global space first in the struggle for NWICO both in theory and in practice thereby neglecting domestic dimension of the information order. And in this, members of civil society could not see or identify with the NWICO struggle at a desired level because their lot within the domestic or local information structure has remained disadvantaged and unaddressed. The struggle for the empowerment of civil society must create a local space from which to launch the struggle for empowerment of civil society. Cognisant of the extent of incorporation of African societies within the disproportionate global framework, the struggle must move from the local space to the global, i.e., from the specific to the general.

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