



TV studio, Mozambique.

Eric Miller/Afrika

Mapping the Media Terrain in Southern Africa...

with Fernando Lima

Mozambican born Fernando Lima has worked in journalism for the last 30 years. He currently heads Mediacoop, Mozambique's first independent media group established after the country's switch to multiparty politics in 1990. He holds a Degree in Law and is preparing for his Masters thesis on the relationship between the Press and the Revolution in Mozambique during the 1975-1986 period. He completed several international post-graduate courses in political science, international relations and journalism. He was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, and attended the founding conference of the Windhoek Declaration in 1991. He was also founder and chairperson of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), a regional media freedom body headquartered in Windhoek, Namibia.

General

Q: You have been engaged with the media in Southern Africa for quite a while. How, would you summarise your experience thus far?

A: First, the region has gone through dramatic changes in the last 15 years; changes in the way we deal with the media and also in the sense that media practitioners were forced to adapt. As a whole, the region went through big-

ger political changes and the media was part of those changes. When we talk of civil society, the media was one of the sectors that took more seriously, the challenge of addressing these changing social realities. For example, whereas in the past, the state media was traditionally dominant, we increasingly saw an increase in the number of new publications, new radio stations and new television stations. This was a very big challenge in terms of the balance of power and the last 15 years were, in this sense, a dramatic period.

Q: Do you think the media should have a role to play in development processes, and if so, what should this role be?

A: We lived in a region of big changes, with very big political clashes that at one point were translated into violence and war. The media have played a key and critical role in terms of giving voice to various sectors of society, and playing the role of catalyst. So, the media have established bridges and roles of understanding when others cannot find those alternative ways. This has been the role of media, and they continue to play it in most of the countries of the region. The image of the media that I have is of this boiling kettle with a strong jet of steam, preventing the kettle from blowing up; the media is the steam of society.

Global processes and their impact on local media

Q: How, do you think global processes and the world economic and information order has affected the proper

functioning of the media in the region and how have the various media responded?

A: We went through the path and trend of the global process because of the role of media itself. The new communication process is the result of this radical transformation. I would not say whether this is good or bad. When you do things in this compulsory way you have problems because it is not your own momentum. We were forced to go into it because we did not have an alternative.

Q: But, how real is the “fear” or challenge of the development of a global culture, which some have referred to as the “Americanisation” of the world, due to the skewed flow of information and media content in the world?

A: Definitely, the challenges and dangers are there. The setting up of different agendas in our countries is an indication of how our countries have been hijacked by these global agendas. The voices of our intellectuals have not been as strong as they should be. It is the duty of our intellectuals to evaluate these challenges for our societies, but it seems the intellectual cream are still amazed by the technological gadgets that were brought in by the very rapid development. For example, they get very excited that a peasant or villager can answer a cell phone. But have we explored all the possibilities of that cell phone? There is some leadership missing in this very aggressive and fast lane development that we are going through.

Q: But, some scholars have observed and predicted a general resurgence of “the local” as opposed to “the global,” and a general tendency to take pride in localism. To what extent has this been reflected in the media in the region, if at all?

A: From the politicians, yes, there is already a response in that direction and we can talk into this; the issue of decentralisation – for example, the dismantling of borders and the creation of one region. We also need to emphasise “the district”, and what it represents in the global trend, but I do not think that the media have captured this.

International and regional instruments and frameworks for human rights and the media

Q: Do you think the existing international instruments on human rights sufficiently address the ideals of free expression, freedom of information and media freedom? Or, in your opinion, should there be any advocacy for better?

A: I think they are sufficient. This is one of the areas where we made a lot of progress, and this has created some suspicion by governments. Human aspirations are a universal value. There is a need to adjust, because our reality should be addressed in a specific manner. We cannot use tradition to justify conservatism, by not taking into account human dignity.

Q: How far have African countries in general, and Southern African in particular, adhered and responded to these instruments?

A: There is a dual perspective here. First, in general, people took these challenges seriously, in trying to make sensitive policies to accommodate these issues. Secondly, some of the decisions taken are not genuine, and have been made because of the element of conditionality. We live in a region where there are very strong conditionalities, and since such conditionalities are strong in the agendas of the foreign powers, they have very strong muscles in the region. Some of these reforms have been brought in, not because the powers that be believed in them, but because they were forced.

Q: What impact, if any, has the SADC protocol on information had in the performance of the media in the region? Do you think it is an instrument other regions could learn from? What are its weaknesses?

A: SADC [as a political body] came too late onto the media scene. When the media was already celebrating the Windhoek Declaration in 1991, SADC had not yet realised the potential of an independent media. Later, SADC had difficulties adapting to the new realities. So I think we are moving on different paths: SADC is going its own way, and the regional media are creating their own dynamics. The question to ask is: “Is SADC for the people, or for the governments?” As for whether other regions can learn from it... I think it is a bad example, because SADC has not been able to understand the media environment and this has been a big mistake. It came too late onto the scene and we [the media] were already doing things; for example, organising and mobilising through the Editors’ Forums.

Constitutional guarantees and provisions across the region

Q: Do you think the media sits well in our national constitutions in the region? Any best practices in this regard?

A: Yes, I think so. We should look at it case by case. The countries of the region have different systems of law. However, big progress has been made in the region. Of course, there are black sheep, such as the monarchy in Swaziland and the problems in Zimbabwe. But I am generally very happy with the dramatic progress that has strengthened and enshrined freedom of expression and the press in our legal systems. In terms of best practices, I can point to South Africa, which is, in this regard, and other aspects, the most sophisticated in the region.

Q: Given the important role of the media, as the fourth estate, and the challenges of constitutional reform in our region, do you think civil society should invest their ener-

gy in advocacy for constitutional reform to give more prominence and protection to media rights?

A: Definitely. Media rights and freedom are not issues that should be protected just by a few. These are global values that we all benefit from and all sectors of society should fight for. Through strengthening media freedom, you also guarantee other rights, such as land tenure rights, etc. It is a global thing, and includes principles of the right to know. Other imbalances cannot be addressed without real freedom of the press and freedom of expression. It touches every single issue in our society.

Laws and legal frameworks in the different countries and media ethics

Q: Quite a number of countries in the region have gone through law reform in the media sector. How much have these reforms improved the quality and performance of the media?

A: I think it is too early to evaluate quality changes in the media based on those legal reforms. We are still enjoying the euphoria. The present trend, as I can see, is that legal reforms are now trying to adjust and address the present context of media freedom. We have reached a stage where we are now trying to frame the changes. Euphoria and emotions can compromise quality.

Q: In terms of legal frameworks, what countries in the region would you say have best practices?

A: South Africa, Mozambique and Namibia.

Q: But, where does one draw the line between “responsible journalism” and self censorship and maintain a balance between these two and respect the public’s right to know?

A: It is easy if your bottom line is the people. If you take out the particular interests of a particular group, as well as the interests of the media sectors, and concentrate on the interests of the people, it becomes easier. But the fact that we are not immune to pressure and that we operate within a particular context complicates the equation. We do not live in a limbo. What to publish and what not to publish becomes the big question. But if we follow the principle of the peoples’ right to know, we will be quite comfortable with what we decide should go into the paper.

Q: Would you say the media in the region practice “responsible journalism” or self-censorship? Do you think this is because of the laws and legal frameworks put in place in the various countries?

A: You have both cases, and those issues happen in both cases. You cannot also draw a fine line between the state and private media. Self-censorship can be seen across political lines, religious lines, etc. You will also see good journalism across the board. Sensationalism and “tabloidism”

will not help quality journalism. Self-censorship and responsible journalism are defined by the political context. For example, if you have a repressive environment, you tend to adhere to self-censorship, and vice versa.

Q: Some have argued that defamation laws in most countries in the region tend to favour and protect individual public officials and politicians at the expense of freedom of expression and the public’s right to know. Would you agree?

A: I cannot agree more. And in some of our countries, defamation is a criminal offence, and because offenders are jailed, this prevents journalists from exploiting all the angles of certain issues.

Media and democracy: the challenges

Q: The media, as an institution, is generally seen as occupying that space between the state and the citizens. How do you see the media in Southern Africa fitting in this space?

A: The media is playing a very crucial role in this particular respect. With all the shortcomings, the media is a democratic instrument, enlarging democratic space and entitling citizens to their own rights, and it is through the media that this is happening.

Q: And, would you say that the media in the region has developed to a level where it promotes and sustains democratic institutions? Where are the challenges in this regard?

A: There is interaction between civil society and media because the media helps the development of civil society.

Q: But, do you think the citizenry in Southern Africa have sufficient media literacy to demand better of their media? And has the region invested enough in media literacy, and if not, whose responsibility should it be?

A: The picture that I have is of many colours. We have different levels of development and the majority of the people are still rural-based and, unfortunately, they do not yet have the benefits of media, for good or bad. They also do not have the global exposure. The exposure depends on institutional development and also on media development, and those things go hand in hand. Regarding investment in media literacy... I think we can do much better. One of the characteristics of our region is the imbalance.

Q: The media is regarded as a watchdog, promoting and protecting human rights. In this regard, it is seen as the fourth estate, after the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. Do you think the media in Southern Africa is playing this role well? What are the challenges?

A: With all the difficulties, this is one of the relevant features of our media in the region, and the role and power of

the media is now being better recognised. Challenges... the dog that keeps barking does not bite! We need to refrain from just barking, and focus on biting. Most times, we have too much bark and not enough bite. You can face the danger of being superficial and not delving deep into the issues, and therefore you run the risk of losing credibility.

Q: For instance, to what extent has the media monitored the abuse of public funds and public office by governments in the region?

A: One of the common features in the region is almost the absence of enshrining the right to know. In our region, this right is made out of the courage of lonely warriors. In that context, it is very difficult to expose those stories of potential abuse by covering all the angles because you do not have access to documents, and when you rely on rumours and anonymous sources, there is a resultant loss of credibility.

Media economics in the context of Southern Africa

Q: Can you comment on the patterns of media ownership in the region? What are the implications for diversity and quality of content?

A: When the media explosion happened in the early '90s, we had already benefited from other experiences. Issues related to sustainability have for a long time been in the minds of the people involved in the media. Economics plays a very big role in the survival of the media. Radio and television are still under very strong government control. The space should be opened up. Not that everything should go private, but state media should become public, and a legal framework to enable this to happen is needed.

Q: It is quite notable that not many women own or even manage media in the region... any signs or prospects of this changing any time soon?

A: No. I do not see any change soon. This is not an issue of media, but of society as a whole. Women are still deprived of basic rights and basic things like equal pay for equal work.

Q: In terms of the public – private media dichotomy: how would you say the two have been differently affected by funding and resources, and how has this affected the content?

A: There is a lot of hypocrisy in that regard. This is true for almost all countries, except South Africa. In other countries the private sector thinks if they are seen to be in sympathy with private media it can bounce back and have detrimental effects.

Q: Some people have argued that no media can ever be really independent? What's your comment on that?

A: Eventually, it is hard to achieve, but it is always important to have that as your final objective.

Q: How would you assess media independence patterns in Southern Africa?

A: We can clearly identify patterns according to the Windhoek Declaration, such as the need for media to be independent from governments, from political parties and economic powers. Media independence goes along with the sophistication of the region and the different levels of development. The media sector should be powered by what it has achieved in terms of true media independence.

Q: Some have blamed the generally poor quality of reporting in the region's media on poor remuneration for journalists. Is this a valid assessment?

A: Yes. Because everything is upside down. Someone who, for example, has been spotted as a good HIV and AIDS reporter will be hired by a communications company as a communications officer for HIV. This deprives the media of a skilled person, only because the communications company has a lot of money from the Bill Gates Foundation or from other funders, and they can pay better salaries than the media.

Professionalism and skills training

Q: Does Southern Africa have what it takes to train world-class journalists? What have been the challenges and opportunities?

A: Yes. We have the capacity. We have the human resources and we have the references. Also, in the world of exchanges and networks, it is not very difficult to expose our journalists to global best practices.

Q: Would you agree with the analysis that the region's media has not paced itself to effectively respond to new challenges such as reporting HIV and AIDS, reporting gender and women's rights, among other such specialised fields? What do you think needs to be done?

A: It is very difficult to fully address these issues when those same issues are not fully part of our local agenda setting. For example, you still have people who do not believe in gender equality. Some of our politicians are also not completely clear on issues such as HIV and AIDS. The media does not act as an island, and is influenced in some ways, by these wider realities. We must work deeper in our societies for a better understanding of these issues in order to address them correctly. You cannot tell a rural community that they should not consider lions as enemies if the community does not understand the benefits of nature conservation. They will perceive that this preservation (of lions) is white man talk, and has no benefits for them. So, sometimes the media engages in these battles as

loudspeakers, and not as social scientists working with our own reality.

Q: Some people have observed that because of cheap news from such agencies as CNN, AFP etc, there has been an adverse effect on training standards, with reduced training budgets and even some journalist training facilities shutting down. Do you think this is a positive trend?

A: The point about training is that for many years it has been used as a bargaining issue. At the same time, there is a lot of cheap training. We should seriously reflect on the package of training and have the courage to refuse tokenism and cheap training.

Gender and the media

Q: This seems to be one area where civil society organisations have put in a lot of effort in terms of training journalists and media practitioners; do you think these efforts have made any difference in the quality of coverage we see in our media? If not, where are the NGOs missing the mark?

A: In order to attract women to the media we need to change the environment in society because what we have seen is that women have been attracted on a quota basis. This is a mistake. The women will face the same harassment in newsrooms. Gender imbalance and inequality should be addressed not in a simple quantitative short-term manner, such as how many women MPs there are, how many women ministers, managers, etc. This whole issue should be seen in a more global and holistic manner.

Q: Some media practitioners have argued that women's and gender issues "do not sell." Do you believe this?

A: If these are short-sighted articles, yes, because they are stereotyped and people are tired of these and they do not sell. But if you have valuable stories with real issues, it brings a difference. There are different ways of coverage, and not just by the criteria of women being at the centre of the story. For instance, if it is a good poultry farm or a good business, it is not because it is run by a woman, but it just happens to be run by a woman.

Q: Do you think that investing in establishing women's media is a smart option to the marginalisation of women's issues in the mainstream media?

A: No. I do not believe this. But I think that what is a smart move is to mobilise more and more media into those issues that are crucial. So you need to involve women. The issue will not be better addressed because women control the media.

Alternative and new forms of media

Q: Alternative media are generally regarded as one way to respond to global pressures and local political and eco-

nomical challenges. How far has the region used this option and in which countries has this been most effective?

A: There are some pilot niches of success whereby villagers are producing their own content. This has also been a successful method of fighting oppression and spreading messages that traditional media would have more difficulty in spreading. There are good examples in Zimbabwe, Swaziland, South Africa, Mozambique and Angola, but these are not massive mass media developments.

Q: There has been a proliferation of new forms of media across the globe? What real opportunities do you see in these, for Southern Africa? Any threats?

A: Well, we should see both sides of the coin. There are threats and opportunities. If we can combine clean water, electricity and computers in schools, then we should not be afraid of those elements of modernity because they are coming from outside. We should explore them. Schools are always good arenas for promoting change because they provide the light of knowledge.

Media monitoring

Q: Do you think the current media monitoring initiatives in the region are effective? Any thoughts on how these can be improved?

A: It depends and it varies. There are well-conceived projects and there are cheap projects. I have seen serious results of media monitoring in the region and I have also seen examples of poor quality work. So you have the good and the bad. Serious institutions can help by recruiting good professionals, by introducing permanent tests on the credibility of the monitoring, and by avoiding politicisation of the monitoring.

Q: If you were to broadly rate the performance of the media in Southern Africa at a scale of 1-10, what score would you give it? (1 being very poor performance and 10 excellent). Why?

A: In general 6. Just slightly above average; because we are in transition. So you have some good examples and you have first-world journalism, combined with the worst level of sensationalisation and lack of professionalism.

Conclusion

Q: Any lessons that you can highlight for countries in transition, such as Angola, DRC and others in the region?

A: First, taking care of sustainability and working hard in the introduction of a legal environment that will allow new media to work independently. This is very important. ■

The interview was conducted by John Mukela, Executive Director – Southern African Media Training Trust (NSJ) www.nsjtraining.org on behalf of OPENSPACE.