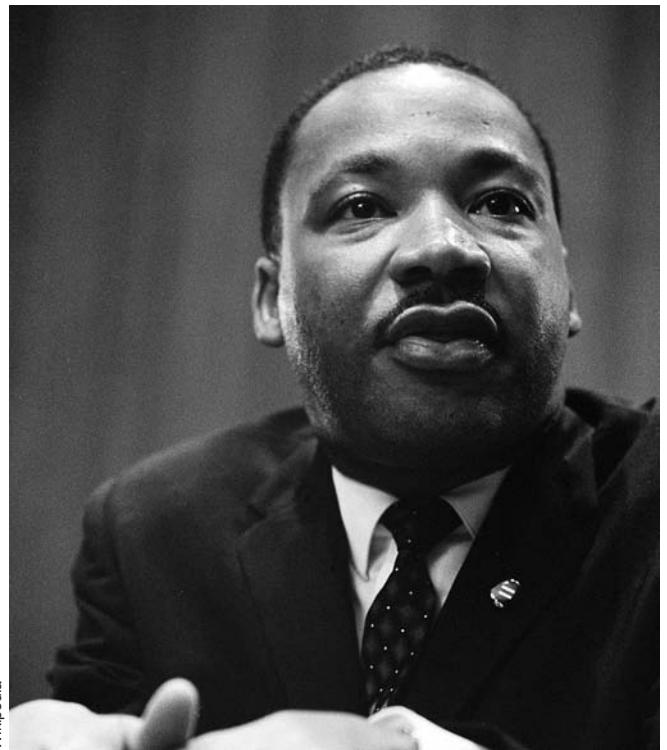


Media in Southern Africa and the Grave of the New World Information and Communication Order

By Eno Akpabio

There is an African proverb that says when the rich are conferring and a poor person claims he has an idea to contribute to the discussion, such an individual is told in no uncertain terms to carry their poverty-infested idea elsewhere. That realistically defines the world we live in. The rich and the powerful are celebrated all over the world, whether it is individuals or nation states. That is why many are ready to sell their soul to the devil because of filthy lucre. The same reasoning informs the respect that nationals of medium and rich countries get at entry and exit points of less developed countries (LDCs) – no need to detain such persons and subject them to grueling questions about their business in traveling. Rather, they are received with open arms as potential investors and valued contributors to national development.

So when a group of LDCs have ideas of a New World Economic Order and a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) that would put in place a level playing field in the economic and communication domain, one would be living in a fool's paradise to think that the rich and the powerful would gladly give up their advantages in order to please this cloutless bunch. All through history, one does not get respect by asking for favours and tokenism; one has to fight to be noticed, and only then would the oppressor sit up and pay attention. This need not detain us here, but the Mau Mau, back then,



Wikipedia

Dr Martin Luther King Jr

drove the imperialist from Kenya, the Nigerian Press harangued the British out of their territory and the feminist and gay movements are so vocal and vociferous in their contestations that one would realise that it is best to keep one's distance from arousing their ire, no matter how strongly one feels about their disposition and position.

Fatalistic acceptance of the present economic and communication arrangement or the blame game of putting at the feet of the West the underdevelopment of African societies as in "*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*" will not change things for the better. While it is true that an historical perspective is useful – so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past – action is demanded in correcting these ills. It is not the tokenism of an African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) that is best suited to change things. The Asian Tigers have achieved a lot, not because they were spoonfed, but by sheer hard work and creativity, so much that the derision in which their manufactures were held has now turned to appreciation and patronage even in the West.

And, especially in the media field, Africa will not achieve respect by calling for better images other than conflict and wars, HIV and AIDS, corruption in high places etc. – which seem to define the continent, going by the slant of western media reporting – but by putting its house in order and making its voice heard in the international flow of news. Of course this looks like a daunting challenge. Where do we start in challenging Reuters,

Associated Press (AP), Agence France Press (AFP), Cable News Network (CNN), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)? Like Neil Armstrong was reported to have said, it will be one small step for Southern Africa that will lead to a giant step for Africa. Every journey begins with a small step. The rest of the paper will examine the changing media landscape and discuss observations on some Southern Africa media (especially their involvement in perpetuating the skewed information order), as well as chart a way forward for a better scenario.

The changing face of journalism and the media

Any view of the media as neutral agents in their relaying of news belongs in the realm of theory. The reality is that the media are subject to countervailing pressures from various directions. So it is useful to familiarise journalism students with the news judgment criteria, the inverted pyramid style of news reporting, balanced reporting and other journalistic jargons, but the media world out there is changing at a rapid pace and some of the changes have turned time-tested journalistic conventions on their head. The inroad of big business into the media landscape and the concern of the new media moguls for returns on their investments have broken down the boundaries between news and commercial interests (Croteau and Hoynes 2001: 164; Akpabio 2003b: 33) so much so that the undiscerning audience member may not know that they are being taken for a ride.

Even more disturbing is the fact that many still look up to the media as sources of the truth, even though the media has changed its traditional colouration. Implicit confidence in the media is demonstrated, so much that disturbing facts are confirmed by media coverage. In other words, one may doubt some information but as soon as one swears by the media – “I read/ heard/ saw it in...” all doubts then dissolve! Even the rumour in the street is confirmed by attending to the media and if the media has it, then it must be true. No wonder then that in some parts of Africa public figures and media personalities with the means to coerce, do not subscribe to the niceties of writing rejoinders and issuing press statements. They simply seize the reporter of the offending piece and in extreme cases close down media houses. No wonder the rise in the practice of *Afghanism* by the media in repressive environments – so that they can live to fight another day. This is still a better deal than a reporter disappearing in the middle of the night! Even in the so-called liberal environments, entrance of big business has meant increasing emphasis on attracting and entertaining consumers than informing citizens. And if one does not want to offend their business buddies, they practice *Afghanism* by focusing on Africa where the

tried and tested formula is bad news all the way. This way people are entertained and the editors with MBAs (Croteau and Hoynes 2003:47) would have satisfied their paymasters with superlative profit. Meanwhile, the skyrocketing crime rate in American cities is left unreported; so the perception is that the crime wave is normal. And by all indices, going by the pictures of starving Ethiopian children, hostage taking in Nigeria’s Niger Delta, Rwandan massacre, conflict in Darfur etc, the West feels it is better off. And Africans risk all to have a piece of the better life in the west, thanks to the media.

Instead of allowing the west to reposition you and your course, it is best to invest in the media and service niche audiences that are fiercely loyal to your offerings. We here have in mind *aljazeera* and *alarabiyah* which have forced the West to listen in because their news is compelling – the beheadings of western hostages and the warnings from *al Qaeda* figures are aired here first and the western media get their footage and story, not directly, but from these secondary sources. Even though those acts are morally reprehensible and condemnable, their coverage still offers useful lessons. Contrast this with African newsmakers who would rather use the western news media (BBC, Radio Deutsche Welle, CNN, etc.) to announce policy decisions and personal ambitions, when a revamped Pan African News Agency (PANA) is begging to be relevant. And so – as with the economic scheme of things – we are a dumping ground for news and information from a western perspective, apart from second hand clothes, cars and computers. Seeing is believing, as the next section will clearly indicate.

Southern Africa Media and Agency Reports

What is saddening indeed is that our African gatekeepers repeat the fallacies of Western superiority and value judgments inextricably embedded in their news reports uncritically in the African media. A note of warning though: it is not being suggested that we paper over cracks and join hands with corrupt and repressive governments in the task of development, while looking the other way as regards corruption and maladministration as the development media theory suggests. We do not have a problem with Australia picking a new central bank chief as carried in the *Botswana Guardian*¹ based wholly on a BBC report but what we do have a problem with, is the laziness of the gatekeepers of the medium in not even adding any value to the report by making it more relevant to the audience through editing changes. And if you think that it is only Botswana media that is afflicted then you have another think coming. The *Daily Mirror* report titled “Mideast peace on knife-edge”² is wholly foreign.

But what is really repulsive is when African issues are sourced also from these foreign news agencies and they adorn the pages of African papers warts and all. Examples include headlines such as “Burundian crackdown leads to another arrest”,³ “Light turned on at the end of Liberia’s tunnel.”⁴ This latter story reports the epileptic electricity power situation in Monrovia after decades of conflict:

The way Karpah Toe runs his snack stand, much of the 20th century might as well never have happened. He sells soft drinks on the side of the road from a shack, but does not own a refrigerator. Instead he keeps the bottles cold with blocks of ice he buys every morning for about ten cents and hauls to his shop in a wheelbarrow.

To many Africans it would not be the passage of the Twentieth century that has left Karpah behind that would be interesting, but the resilient spirit in marching on and improvising to sell his soft drinks in spite of the hostile operating environment. Just as this is surprising to a western observer, a number of Africans are at their wits ends trying to understand why a man would want to be a woman not only through sex change operation, but also by enrolling in classes where he or she is taught female mannerisms; and then granting interviews explaining that their macho behaviours throughout a good part of their lives were really intended to hide the woman in them!

In a Reuters report in *Daily News* titled “After Hollywood, Bollywood: Kenya has ‘Riverwood’”⁵ the writer in talking of the Kenyan film industry took a swipe at the Nigerian film industry:

Nollywood which produces low budget films, took off after cash-strapped Nigerian producers, priced off the big screen, turned to the made-for-video market. Now, Nollywood films are hugely popular across east Africa, despite **pedestrian scripts and often wooden acting** (emphasis added).

This latest example is from Botswana which uncritically carried this report about one film industry which had defied the odds stacked against it – and it is from Africa – one shiny example of a good thing emerging from the continent. But what do the gatekeepers in the *Daily News* do? They allow their platform to be used in this inveighing against one of Africa’s proudest achievements. Even if one is to examine the criticisms dispassionately, one can see the patent bias of the writer. It is true that producing on celluloid was expensive and the harvest of Nigerian films

using this medium was indeed paltry. That is why the author observed elsewhere that the popularity of Nollywood productions was not achieved on a celluloid platter of gold (Akpabio 2003a:129). Rather, creativity and resilience of the industry is indeed a shining testament that there is still hope for Africa. The industry turned to the cheaper video cassette format and eureka! Between 1992 and 2005, it had produced 6 000 films and generated \$200 million in turnover from the export market.⁶ And this is springing from an environment where American, Chinese and Indian productions were the order of the day. As for pedestrian scripts and wooden acting, in spite of the age of Hollywood, we still see this happening. So whether it is Hollywood, Bollywood or Nollywood, there are good and bad productions. So, dismissing all the Nollywood productions with a wave of the hand shows perpetuation of a hidden agenda – is the report intended to make us return to the status quo ante? And really, if one asks the reporter, they have probably just seen a handful of the movies, and they are already an expert in these matters!

This stance of Southern African media gatekeepers is repeated all over the continent though in varying degrees. In the South African media, one notices attempts at rewriting some of the stories so that the extra baggage of western bias is eliminated. Examples include “Israel opens the gates of hell”⁷ credited to Mathew Burbidge and SAPA-AFP, “Violence flows as Congo goes to Poll” SAPA-AFP.⁸ Other African media confine these agency reports to news briefs, most notably Nigerian papers, although in a number of instances the reports are carried verbatim. But it is a sad development that even African stories are still sourced from these western sources while PANA is neglected. Botswana’s *Daily News* is a major culprit in this respect. Pick any edition and in the sea of foreign reports about other SADC countries, one or two reports will be credited to PANA. In the edition of August 169 these reports – “Orphans (sic) Africa’s next AIDS challenge”, “Low condoms use fuels AIDS” – are about neighbouring Johannesburg, “SADC summit to push regional integration” from Maseru, “DRC donors fund elections but neglect crisis – UN” from Kinshasa, and “Swaziland seeks ways to care for Orphans” from Mabane, were all sourced from Reuters. One hopes it is not another manifestation of the colonial mentality syndrome which sees everything western as better than the best from Africa. Even if PANA did not cover these events which is very doubtful, why not take the report from an African, regional or national agency or media?

This brief excursion should not end without some mention of the electronic media. Complaints about cultural imperialism, usually alluding to US cultural products, is a concern all over the world. Even other western nations

complain about the domineering influence of American cultural products. And these are nations that have the economic muscle to finance home-grown programming. In Africa, the same ubiquitous influence of American programming is also felt but worth commending is the African Magic channel on South Africa's Multichoice Digital Satellite Television (DSTV) which is beamed all over the continent. It may be a drop in the ocean but it is still a beginning. And because of the relevance of the channel to the African world view and way of life, it is hugely popular. But the DSTV *Dish* magazine still shows the influence of the West. We get to see Western film stars – Jude Law, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie etc. When will the cover of the *Dish* magazine, and indeed all the other South African magazines with a fixation about Western stars, be adorned by our own Richard Mofe Damijo (RMD), Genevieve Nnaji, Pete Edozie etc of Nollywood fame?

Conclusion

It has been argued that the United State's opposition to a NWICO was self serving as Hamelink, Nordenstreng and Somavia have examined the economic interest of transnational corporations and the US private sector's stake in the debate (Roach 1990: 329). Roach has also gone to great pains to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the United States whose main opposition to NWICO was based on the oversimplified argument of "government control of the media," by citing examples of the US intolerance of contrasting views. In 1981, the US customs seized written materials arriving from Cuba and asked citizens who wanted their mails to report to government, stating who they were and why they wanted their mails! (Ibid: 333). In 1983, the US government attempted to restrict the distribution of three Canadian films which were against nuclear wars and which brought to the fore the dangers of acid rain (ibid). In recent times, we have read about the travails of Michael Moore in the hands of the Bush administration.

Equally instructive is the fact that Hezbollah kept its TV station on air in spite of the blitzkrieg of Israeli bombardment of Lebanon thus pointing to the critical role of the media in shaping the public agenda. And, yet, in Africa we have surrendered our media without a fight to the designs of the west. And the rosy picture of the west turns to ashes when Africans have crossed the seas and conquered the deserts only to arrive into the bosom of racism and other ills in the west based on media fairy tales. The Nigerian film industry resurrected and came into reckoning because some Nigerian entrepreneurs invested in the sector and they are getting returns on their investment. When Rupert Murdoch and the Ted Turners of this world (who are hard-nosed business persons) put their hard-earned money in the media busi-

ness, it means that there is some good in the sector. The vertical and horizontal integration that these business persons have brought to the media business has galvanised the media from being a cost centre to a gold mine. African business people should take a second look at the sector because this concerns the very soul of the continent and any investment in the African media project should galvanize the continent to greater heights by showcasing commendable achievements and inveighing against those who would give us a bad name. And this time around, no Mugabes would say it is western propaganda; it will be Africans holding Africans accountable.

I have a dream (apologies Dr Martin Luther King Jr) of a resurrected and revived African media that would position itself as the authoritative voice on the continent, that the west and other regions would look up to for news and commentaries on Africa. I have a dream that like the Nollywood films, the media would take up an unoccupied position that would make it relevant to Africans and people of African descent. But NWICO, like old Roger, may be dead and gone to its grave, but this critique is a knock for those African gatekeepers who have been picking up the Mangos as if celebrating its death in tandem with western media interests. ●

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Endnotes

- 1 *Botswana Guardian*, Thursday 3 August 2006 p.16
- 2 *Daily Mirror* on line Tuesday 15 August 2006
- 3 *The Star* Friday 4 August 2006 p.4
- 4 *The Star* Friday 4 August 2006 p. 33
- 5 *Daily News* Monday 31 July 2006 p.6
- 6 *The Punch* online Friday 7 October 2005
- 7 *Mail and Guardian* 21-27 July 2006 p.2
- 8 *The Star* Friday 4 August 2006 p.4
- 9 *Daily News* Wednesday 16 August 2006 pp18-20

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