

Functional democracy and mass media: a critique

Stanley Naribo Opuamie-Ngoa

Abstract

This paper comprises two parts. The first part defines democracy and attempts an examination of the role of the media in a functional democracy. In an attempt to explain issues in the media and public opinion within the realm of democracy, the paper explores etymological origins of media, arguing that what the media ought to be differs from what is obtainable.

Part two examines the media's role in various African countries when they were under colonial rule and the continent's push for self-rule, observing that post-colonial Africa witnessed a bifurcated partisan media.

The paper, with specific reference to the role of the media in present day South Africa and Nigeria, concludes that, for the proper role of promoting a healthy culture of democracy in society, today's news media needs to reflect society's concerns and the media's interest in democratic equity.

Keywords

analysis, critique, functional democracy, role of the media in society

Introduction

Democracy is described variously as the rule of the people, for and by the people. It refers to a regime where the rule of law enacted by the people prevails; where none is above the law (Swant, 2000:24) however highly placed individuals may be. Democracy is a government by debate and discussion of the people as against rule by arbitrary will or dictate of an individual or few individuals. A common denominator here is that the people constitute the foundation of the democratic space; in other words, democracy has to run according to the wishes, directions and decisions of the people.

The three essential requisites of democracy are: a well-informed citizenry, freedom to participation in the decision-making process and accountability to the citizens by those who on their behalf exercise power. Any governing and governed environment that encourages and enables the above can be described as a 'functional democracy'.

But, unless citizens have adequate and at the least close enough accurate information on all, if not most, of the issues and problems confronting them, they will be unable to take enlightened decisions. Without such information, citizens will neither be able to comprehend the day-to-day workings of the government nor will they be able to participate (Swant, 2000: 17- 40).

Eighteenth Century French political philosopher and enlightenment theorist, Montesquieu, prescribed publicity – that is, the spread of appropriate and necessary information - as the cure for the abuse of power (Holmes, 1990:27). According to this prescription, to participate more meaningfully in political and social life and have a better understanding of the actions and activities of government officials and institutions, citizens must be properly informed; otherwise, the governed will not be able to hold governors accountable. Thus the notably famous Jeffersonian declaration on the importance and relevance of media in society that, were it left to him (Thomas Jefferson) to decide whether “we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government”, he would “not hesitate to prefer the latter;” and this is where the role of the media in a ‘functional democracy’ becomes pertinent.

Of the many views about society, a rather simplistic one is that society is an aggregation of individuals (Curran, 1991) on the one hand and on the other those it nominated, voted or authorised to represent it. Those so authorized to represent the rest of ‘us’ therefore constitute the ‘government’ as ‘the seat of power’; that is, the three estates of the realm – the presidency (the Cabinet Office or Executive arm of government), the Legislature and the Judiciary.

Between the government and the aggregation of individuals is a space which classical liberal theory and in recent times Habermas (1989) phenomenally and characteristically refers to as the ‘public sphere’ or public forum.

The ‘public sphere’ thus becomes what Curran (1991:29) describes as ‘...the space between government and society in which private individuals exercise formal and informal control over the state’. Individuals exercise formal control of this space by voting or electing people into the ‘seat of power’ and informally through pressures and expressions of (amongst others) opinions - ‘public opinion’? Perhaps; but I will return to this shortly in the section that deals with the ‘media and issues in public opinion’.

However, these pressures and expressions of opinions, views, ideas and even preferences referred to above are usually through a channel, that is channels of the mass media and thus the media supposedly serves not only as conduit for the diffusion of information and views but also as a free market place/battleground for contending ideological forces.

Theoretical approach and discussion:

With the above introduction as a backdrop, this paper will in its first part attempt a definition of the media from its etymological foundations, examine the significant expected roles of media in society and the media’s dialectics in a ‘functional democracy’; using as discursive reference the ‘civilized’ or ‘democratic’ (?) West.

Here, I will argue that the media has seemingly, largely deviated from its classical liberal tradition and radical expectations of being the principal institution of the ‘public sphere’. I will argue that by succumbing to the pressures and interests of power structures and thus generally overriding issues of social justice with political considerations, conventional media narrowly defines public opinion/interests by dictates of a ‘global village’ disease called ‘profit motive’.

In part two, the paper will employ Africa generally and South Africa and Nigeria specifically as its discursive unit of analysis adopting anecdotal evidence as explanatory cells. The **method** of investigation will be the qualitative ‘triangulatory’ approach of media scanning, personal interviews and observation in the hope that what is obtained will be representative enough. Here, I will argue that the continent’s media is an animated version of its western counterpart.

This is a critical commentary; a critique of what the media ought to be in a functional democracy but is quite often not.

PART 1

i) The media in a ‘functional democracy’

The word media as commonly used is the plural form of the Latin word ‘medius’ (for medium). A medium in its simple but functional form can therefore be referred to as a channel, vehicle, conduit or even an avenue of passage. The media or mass media therefore refers to these tools, avenues and vehicles of information dissemination usually employed by communicators to send out messages - in the form of news, opinion pieces, advertisements etc - to a wide and diverse audience.

These media of information dissemination range from folklore (especially from an African perspective) to the very contemporary 21st Century www.com phenomenon. For purposes of this paper however, mass media here refers to mainstream media of **print** – newspapers, magazines and journals, as well as **electronic**, especially radio and television.

Nineteenth Century liberal rhetoric (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1993) refers to the media as the ‘fourth estate of the realm’. In a functional democracy, not only are the media expected to manage the ‘space’ between government and the governed but are also central to the political process whose primary *raison d’être* is ‘freedom’ - as in freedom of expression, association and movement.

The media therefore becomes the principal institution of the public forum which requires constant vigilance and monitoring of the societal war between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’, the politically and socio-economically influential and those at the margins of society. Curran (1991:29) observes that the media ‘... are on permanent guard duty patrolling against the abuse of executive power and safeguarding individual liberty’.

The above represents the classical liberal view of the media in a functional democracy. But as should be expected, perhaps typically too in a democratic setting, there are other contrasting views on the functions of the media in a ‘functional democracy’. These include the radical democratic perspective within which there are other equally divergent views.

As against the liberal view that the media is primarily a vertical channel of communication between private citizens and the government, a radical democratic view perceives the media as a 'complex articulation of vertical, horizontal and diagonal channels of communication between individuals, groups and power structures' (Curran, 1991:31).

However, a less radical argument notes that there is a basic ambiguity within the radical tradition and rather advances that the media in a 'functional democracy' should be representative enough to reflect the balance in society's contending forces.

And yet another voice from within the radical approach argument on the functions of the media harps on the ethics of political neutrality. According to this school of thought, the media should be an equilibrating force and a countervailing agent that ensures the representation of all interests (see Curran, 1991).

All of the above, we can summarise into three basic but broad relationship¹ areas of: (i) the media and government (ii) the media and diverse views and opinion sources and (iii) the media and the general citizenry or the public at large.

With the above brief but basic relationship areas identified, a list of some significant expectations of the media in 'a functional democracy' will read as follows (depending on who is proposing):

- a) Surveillance and chronicle of the political environment
- b) Meaningful as well as purposeful agenda-setting
- c) Serve as platforms for vibrant and illuminating advocacy
- d) Serve as society's watchdog to make government accountable to the governed
- e) Channel for dialogue across diverse shades of opinions, views and preferences
- f) Protect the citizen's right to be informed and to be heard too
- g) Uphold the independence, integrity and dignity of private citizens and the public at large
- h) Respect citizens' political choices, preferences and judgments
- i) Promote equality amongst all citizens irrespective of gender, religious belief and social or political affiliation (see Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990:270).

This list of expectations of the media in 'a functional democracy' is by no means exhaustive as there is also the general assumption that the media is handicapped to satisfy fully its societal expectations, due mostly (perhaps) to economic and socio-political pressures from its power associates as well as other self-imposed boundaries and 'routines' of media practice (see Shoemaker & Reese, 1996 for 'Influence of Media Routines').

With the general assumption of a handicapped media in a functional democracy, let me here proceed too from the general assumption and propose that there is yet to emerge an intellectual unit of analysis from the government, and governed environment, we could conveniently describe as a perfect democracy or to use our phrase in currency 'functional democracy'. Not in the United

Kingdom (UK) and certainly not in the United States of America (USA), where democratic conducts and practices are said to have rather firm tap-roots.

For example, the role of the media in the recent UK controversial executive profligacy on the part of some cabinet ministers raises concerns on the functions of the media in a 'functional democracy'. The controversy which had become an albatross for prime minister Gordon Brown and the ruling Labour Party obviously found the media on 'surveillance' protecting the 'innocent'; but the 'exposing' and 'protecting' role played by the media could be argued to have depended also on which side of the power divide the 'exposing' and 'protecting' media stands.

My earlier proposition about a handicapped media in a functional democracy is even more arguable with the USA – the self appointed global 'godfather' of democracy - and the still fresh in memory American Presidential elections' (2000) Florida polls count and recount between Democratic party presidential candidate Al Gore and immediate past president George W. Bush of the Republican party.

It will be recalled that even before the final counts were called, the Cable News Network (CNN) prematurely declared 'George Walker Bush ... 43rd President of the United States ...' perhaps on the strength of the US Supreme Court stoppage of the Florida vote's recount; and what this arguably translates to is that even in 'democratic' America public opinion/interests seem to be narrowly defined as political considerations override issues of 'social-justice' – the USA's 'democratic' moral weapon.

Thus of the democratic expectations of the media Gurevitch & Blumler (1990: 270/1) argue that, conflicts among democratic values themselves could 'necessitate trade-offs and compromises' in the performance of the media and that could also create obstacles that hinder the attainment of the expected goals. The authors argue that the very structure of society and the communication of politics involve a division between movers and shakers. In other words, those with political relevance and economic muscle stay at the top while bystanders – the 'have-nots' or the politically helpless and economically weak remain below and in that order, impose limits on the participatory energy that the system generates.

The likely effect of the above Gurevitch & Blumler (1990:271) assertion is the 'transmission of messages and pressures to and from individuals who are demonstrably unequal'; that is, 'the highly informed and the abysmally ignorant, the highly powerful and the pitifully powerless, the highly involved and the blissfully indifferent'. Yet, an expectation of the media requires protection of the citizen's right to be informed and to be heard irrespective of social status. Yet perhaps Tichenor, Donohue & Olien (1970) are right on the spot that the very nature of mass media system is geared towards persons of higher socio-economic status.

So far, we have been defining and identifying the (supposed) functions of media in a 'functional democracy'. Below, this paper examines the media's relationship to the general public, the so called 'masses' - the heterogeneous audience to who the 'mass media' disseminates its messages and

information and the media's orchestrated function as an intervening channel and a canvas for the display of 'public opinion'.

ii) The media and issues in public opinion

The media, by its etymological origins, holds the traditional logic of being the middleman between the feudal land owning class (bourgeoisie) and the proletariat (the proverbial 'common-man'). Here the media operates in a social context of two-way traffic by informing and receiving feedback, educating as well as entertaining its large and diverse audience. Furthermore, by operating through classical theoretical expositions, the media holds a unique position in society: first and traditionally seen as a voice for the voiceless by providing a public arena where all men are equal and free to promote diverse perspectives, independent thought and expressions of views, opinions and preferences.

That is how the media was seen in the beginning and to date that has been the way practitioners portray themselves and the practice, a people's voice, a public interest role-player and thus the principal institution of the public sphere. Perhaps it is in recognition of this traditional role of the media that the 'free press' is protected in the constitution of the United States of America.

The code of ethics for the practice of journalism the world over and especially the USA and UK canvass public enlightenment as the foundation for democracy. In fulfillment of societal expectations, therefore, journalism practice is supposed to be objectively thorough and comprehensively honest in presentation of events and issues to the public.

It can be taken for granted, therefore, that the primary purpose of the mass media gathering and distributing news, views and opinions is to serve the general welfare of the people by informing the citizenry as to enable them make valid judgments on issues of public interest, while equally keeping a watchful eye on the excesses of those elected, voted or even 'chosen' to represent or govern the rest of society.

However, there are concerns today about power collaborations by those in control of economic and political power with its attendant integration of big business and cross-ownership of media empires which has turned the media into a powerful cartel; a cartel Croteau & Hoynes (2001) recognise as an elite power group.

Implicit in an 'elite power group' having a near monopoly of mass communication power may not only mean being able to manipulate 'people power' in times of conflict and controversy over power divides but equally the capabilities to manage and control the flow of views and opinions. The likely result of which could translate into failure of the media in its traditional role (Ngoa, 2006) as the voice of the voiceless; public interest is then defined by economic logic and considerations whereas public opinion becomes opinion of the vocal minority.

Thus the dilemma (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001:1) becomes the yardstick with which to measure or assess the 'tensions and disparities between the ostensibly democratic ideals' (Gurevitch & Blumler,

1990: 269-70) which the media ought to serve within the prevailing integrating, concentrated and ever-changing business of the media system.

Issues of public opinion rests on the shoulders of public interest, but it is indeed quite often easier for the media to describe, define or identify what, by its hegemonic routine, is not in the public interest.

By market standards - the economic principle behind modern media - public interest simply becomes what the public is interested in while Croteau & Hoynes (2001:32) lament that, it is not a 'small task to define what the public interest means or how our mass media can serve in this capacity'.

Thus I argue here as elsewhere (Ngoa, 2006) that public opinion as presented by the media seems to represent the opinion of loud minorities in the midst of silent majorities and conventional wisdom seem to accommodate this view too. That is, the elitist views about public opinion seemingly suggest that opinions, wishes and intentions of the loud minority represent majority opinion whereas that of the silent majority becomes a minority view. Even so, John Stuart Mills in his famous 1859 essay declared that:

If either of two opinions has a better claim than the other, not merely to be tolerated, but to be encouraged and countenanced, it is the one which happens at the particular time and place to be in minority. That is the opinion which for the time being represents the neglected interest, the side of human well-being which is in danger of obtaining less than its share (Mills, 1859 cited in Miscovici, 1991).

Below, I again attempt an exploration of conventional mainstream media as 'power player' in a post-modern economic cum socio-political context. I will argue that today's media work in tandem with power structures as opposed to its tradition of civic responsibility.

iii) The media as power player

The tradition of civic responsibility of the media until as recent as about the second-half of the 20th Century was widely, if not universally, accepted. But, perhaps due to the focus on profit motive and consideration for political power, the media asserts now work in a field of social forces where media content is a reflection of practitioners and their organizations – i.e. content is chosen by identifiable individuals or groups 'telling something of their intentions, attitudes and assumptions about the audience' as 'mass' (McQuail, 1987:141).

Our media is now a power-player as Croteau & Hoynes (2001:1) confirm that 'nearly all media companies are commercial corporations whose primary function is creating profits for owners or stockholders'. Stakeholders who in turn measure performance of media companies along the lines of sales volume, accruals from advertising and profits as opposed to public interest concerns about creativity, independent thought and diversity.

Revered intellectual Noam Chomsky confirmed the above assertion some time ago (2004) in a private communication with this author. According to Chomsky, 'the media typically have their own

interest in determining which issues to '*raise*' (my emphasis) in the public mind: typically, the issues that conform to the interests of the power structures of which they are a part, and which they serve'.

Chomsky's position seems to clarify issues of the allocation of colossal resources of the media and information industry and who controls this busy movement. A busy movement which as Inglis (1990:111) observes enables us to understand why the media's forms and content are the way they are – i.e. a shift from analysis of consumption to production.

In other words, what is done with the 'enormous power' of the media explains 'how the structures of productive power themselves generate a momentum far beyond individual control', because, the media is an 'elite power group' and a power player. A power group where ownership has become so concentrated that the integration of media, big business and government has enabled media 'elite to exert control' as Shoemaker & Reese (1996:231) observe, 'over its own scrutiny and as such has successfully resisted obstacles to greater profits'.

Unlike the folklore of capitalism in which giant firms, corporations, or even multinationals, forcefully compete against each other, mass advertising has resulted in media monopoly with mutual cooperation, interlocked directorships and shared partnerships interests (see Bagdikian, 2000) like cooperative cartels.

Put differently, the lines between traditional forms of media ownership have become blurred. That is, people are either publishers of newspapers and magazines, proprietors of radio or television organizations, owners of movie houses and producers of television programs etc. These days, however, people with economic muscle now seat atop financial empires, mining concerns or a multinational information technology corporation and complements these with media chains or what Donald Wood (1983) would describe as 'cross-ownerships' ranging from newspapers to the 21st Century www.com phenomenon.

For example, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation along with Viacom, Time Warner, Bertelsmann, Disney and Vivendi constitute the 'the Big Six' multi-national corporations that dominate the global media system; and that perhaps explains the choking effect on the media and its failure in properly performing its supposed role as principal institution of the public sphere.

The World Bank's World Development Report in a 2001 study of 97 countries also shows that monopolies dominate the world media landscape. According to the 97 countries sample study, the world media industry is owned and controlled overwhelmingly by parties most likely to extract private benefits of control.

We have above in the first part of this paper attempted a definition of the media from its etymological foundations, examined the significant expected roles of the media in society and the media's dialectics in a 'functional democracy' along with its associated economic and socio-political power trappings.

As earlier stated (see: 'theoretical approach and discussion'), I will employ Africa generally, and South Africa and Nigeria specifically, as my discursive unit of analysis and adopt anecdotal evidence as explanatory cells in 'part two'. My method of investigation here is simply the qualitative approach of media scanning, personal interviews and observation. I will, furthermore, argue that, on a general note, the continent's media is an animated version of its western counterpart.

PART 2:

Africa, them media and 'functional democracy'

Africa is an active participant in the 21st Century 'global village'² and a major player on the world socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic stage. To that extent, the democratic expectations

of the media say in the UK or the USA may not be quite different from those either in South Africa or Nigeria. In fact, considering Africa's colonial history, her rurality and orality, isolation and insulation from modern media and its technological sophistry (Ngoa, 2006), Africa in her democratization process certainly expect and require more functional roles from the media to promote and sustain a strong and healthy culture of freedom.

However, although this paper argues that there is not yet one contemporaneous government and governed situation we could conveniently identify as a perfect or 'functional democracy' as a result of the issues raised earlier - the media's inability to perform unencumbered - it is worthy of note that when the strong pull towards self rule as an idea became rife on the continent, African media, especially of the print variety, credibly discharged itself.

In South Africa for example, whereas the country's mainstream media largely catered for the white minority community and its mining capital, the African National Congress' (ANC) virile propaganda machine personified in Nelson Mandela and the anti-apartheid press (the alternative press) became an arrow-head of the liberation struggle. The anti-apartheid press amongst which were political education journals like *Isiziwe*, *Saso Newsletter*, *South* and *Grassroots*, the *Guardian*, *Sowetan*, *New Nation* and others quite numerous to mention in their different ways, served as conduits for inspiring and giving meaning to Black township culture while equally propagating the majority Black community's collective aspirations.

In Ghana, the late Kwame Nkrumah's independence struggle successes were attributable to a vibrant anti-colonial press; and in Nigeria, between 1859 and 1937 (*Irohin* to the *pilot*) there emerged newspapers (Dare, 2000:12) that became the spearhead of a nationalism that was cultural and political. That era was mostly epitomized in Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and his *West African Pilot*. The *Pilot* launched in November 1937 announced its mission as the 'Sentinel of popular liberty and guardian of civilization' with the 'supreme task' of making assertions in unequivocal terms (Omu, 1978:69; Ngoa 2006).

But the continent's media, especially the anti-colonial press that was a product of anti-colonial protest and agitation soaked in the frenzy of 'independence' propaganda, did not have much to show nor say for itself after the 'struggle'.

In Nigeria for instance, Omu (1978 & 2000), Dare (2000) and Ngoa (2006) confirm that cleavages hitherto hidden came to the open and primordial prejudices and ethnic tensions reduced the immediate post-colonial press to an instrumental press. Of the consequences of the above, veteran Journalist and civil war time Commissioner for Information - Anthony Enahoro - laments that 'whoever and whatever' ruined post-colonial Nigeria 'did so with the active collaboration of the greater section of the Nigerian press'.

Enahoro's lamentation and indictment of the Nigerian press put differently would probably be read as: 'the Nigerian press actively encouraged the military incursion into politics that ruined post-colonial Nigeria'. But Enahoro's choice of the words 'whoever and whatever' is understandable: he served as commissioner for information in Nigeria's first serial military governments.

However, military incursion into politics was not peculiar to Nigeria but a continent-wide experience as most of Africa shortly after the attainment of independence became hostage to her neo-colonial masters. They were the soldiers bequeathed by colonial governors to guide and protect the sovereignty of the newly independent nation states. But within the first two decades of independence, the soldiers forcefully removed virtually all of Africa's (except South Africa which was a different story) first set of post-colonial (elected) political leadership and recorded about forty successful *coup d'états* and innumerable botched ones.

On January 15th 1966 a military coup codenamed 'Operation Damisa' (Operation Leopard) marked the beginning of serial military governments in Nigeria. In Ghana 1967, 27 year old army lieutenant Sam Arthur codenamed his attempt to seize power forcefully 'Operation Guitar Boy'. Although Arthur's desire 'to make history' (Meredith, 2005:218) as the first lieutenant to successfully carry-through a military putsch failed, the seed of coups on the continent had taken root and flowered while the continents media became tools of 'divide and rule' for the soldiers.

The incursion of the military into Africa's political space and the asphyxiation of the media, especially those in opposition to military rule, was not peculiar to just one country but continent wide; except perhaps, as earlier stated, South Africa with a different kind of experience.

In general, suffocation of the media by the continents' new 'leaders' ranged from Mobutu's Congo to the Master Sergeant Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor's Liberia where Journalists were slaughtered on the 'beat'. One example amongst many was that of the Nigerian *Guardian's* Chris Imodibe who was killed in Liberia allegedly on Charles Taylor's instructions.

Indeed the military culture of 'killing' a vibrant and purposeful media on the continent was palpable in Nigeria as it was in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Gambia and many other parts of the continent; and neither Africa nor her media had fully recovered from that trauma.

Today, the continent's media is also an animated version of its western counterparts. As opposed to the dedication with which Africa's anti-colonial press discharged its functions, a 'global village'

disease called ‘profit motive’ derived from the economic logic of diversification and the creation of giant industrial concerns has infected the traditional watchdog role of the media.

Thus ‘objectivity’ as a journalistic paradigm had become antiquated. And when and where the media strives to perform, quite often it does so with some undertones, vested interests and ‘power-plays’ that smacks of the ‘master’s voice’. The continents’ media today seem to be at its best as proxies in the battle between rival political camps sowing hatred, cynicism, public apathy and divisiveness.

Again, examples of these are quite manifest in the media’s reportage and handling of some recent dominant socio-political issues on the continent. Some of these issues include the media’s treatment of the ANC (African National Congress) succession rift and the then seeming but now publicly known feud between then South African President Thabo Mbeki and his then deputy - Jacob Zuma - now his boss at Lutuli House as ANC as well as the country’s president.

Thabo Mbeki relieved Jacob Zuma of his post as South Africa’s Deputy President in 2005 on the unproven accusation of bribery and the assumption of having ‘a generally corrupt relationship’ with his erstwhile financial adviser, Schabir Shaik, now serving a jail term for soliciting and accepting bribe from the supplier of South Africa’s Defense Ministry arms contract. Not long after President Mbeki relieved him of his position as the country’s deputy president (he continued as ANC deputy president), Zuma was charged to court for allegedly raping a ‘HIV Positive’ woman young enough to be his daughter.

Then the negative media rain poured on Zuma from all fronts; from the angle of unproven bribery allegation, a ‘generally corrupt relationship’ to having unprotected sex with a late ‘comrade’s’ HIV positive daughter. Most guilty of the negative media rain that poured on Zuma was the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) – radio and television – supposedly a public broadcaster, but has a long history of bias in favour of the existing power structure; just as it pandered to the apartheid government.

Meanwhile, Zuma and his supporters consistently maintained that the allegations were all a set-up designed by his adversaries to truncate his political ambition but not many (except a few sympathetic media houses – the press) gave him any chance in hell of surviving the rather hostile media frenzy. Zapiro, the ace cartoonist for example, maintained through the period a ‘shower-head’ of Zuma in his cartoons to demonstrate Zuma’s court room evidence that he had a cold shower soon after having sex with the HIV-positive lady.

Sunday Times columnist Mac Maharaj, on reflection indicted ‘many’ journalists and media houses for going ‘overboard’ in reporting Zuma. Maharaj confirms that: ‘they became perception-makers playing to an agenda rather than purveyors of information’; and concluded ‘...some media allowed themselves to be manipulated by people in senior positions in state agencies. They conflated being on the side of the ‘right guys’ with being on the side of ‘right’ (Sunday Times 23-8-09:7)

The situation was similar in Nigeria where the immediate past President - Olusegun Obasanjo - was accused of attempting to manipulate the country’s constitution to enable him to stay in office for a

third term but was vehemently opposed by his then deputy, Atiku Abubakar. Although Obasanjo denies any intention to elongate his tenure in office, Dubem Onyia, Nigeria's minister of state for Foreign Affairs during Obasanjo's first term (1999 – 2003) confirmed to this author in an interview (23-11-2007) that: 'Obasanjo solicited my support for a third term in office as far back as 2003'.

But the accusations and counter accusations of corruption between Obasanjo and his deputy continued until Atiku was said to have been 'disenfranchised' and ultimately the 'do or die'³ April 2007 elections (actually selections) which former leader of the failed secessionist Biafra Republic, Odumegwu Ojukwu, described as:

'... Worse than anything we had ever seen or imagined. We had always worked on the basis that we knew elections could be rigged, but we didn't, at least I didn't ever imagine that the entire election results would be faked and mandates would be stolen totally. I didn't believe it

was possible. Thanks to my good friend, Obasanjo, I have learnt that it is possible and therefore I am more wary ...' (*Punch* on the web – Saturday, February 23rd 2008 - www.nigeriaworld.com).

Ojukwu's wariness was confirmed when by the end of February 2008 the law courts annulled election results in about ten Senatorial zones (including that of the seating Senate President – retired General David Mark). Election Tribunals (including some Supreme Court rulings) equally nullified the April 2007 election results of seven state governors (Adamawa, Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Kogi, Rivers and yobe); but Judgment had since been given in favour of most of the above including that of president Yar'Adua who most Nigerians believe Obasanjo imposed both on his party and the country as his replacement.

Again, as in the South African case where Zuma found sympathy with some friendly print media, Atiku also did in Nigeria; but Nigeria's supposed public broadcaster – the Nigerian Television Authority and Radio Nigeria – like its South African counterpart also has a history of bias in favour of the power structures in existence.

In both examples above, one could safely argue that the media, not all, but most and especially the government controlled and funded (or subsidized?) Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation whose executives are appointed by the government took sides (hard as they try to deny this) with then president Obasanjo; just like the SABC did and was roundly condemned by most South Africans for unprofessional conduct.

The media muggings of Africa's political Jacob Zumas, the concentration and consolidation of media power in one or few hands or rather very powerful organisations that could threaten the political process as against the media playing a role that will promote the sustenance of a strong and healthy culture of freedom strengthen the concerns about the media in a functional democracy.

The concerns become even more imperative when viewed from the point that apart from the government or party controlled electronic media, the majority of media of the print variety in the two

countries, especially South Africa is in tune with the global trend of concentration and consolidation of mass communication power in the hands of a few powerful individuals or organisations.

Whereas the global media system is controlled by the ‘big six’, ownership structure of the South African media landscape is what Anton Harber⁴ counts as ‘two giant media companies’ – SABC and Naspers - ‘three medium-sized’ ones – Independent group (owned by an Irish investor), Caxton and Avusa (which has metamorphosed to its present identity from Johnic and later Johncom) and perhaps a few next-level media companies courtesy of the ANC government Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policy criteria on the issuance of new broadcasting licenses.

The SABC which was a near-monopoly still has more radio and television stations, a wider reach and about 50 percent of the advertising market. Naspers on the other hand not only has a stranglehold on the Afrikaans media market, but also sells more English language newspapers and magazines in South Africa. Naspers market value is in the neighbourhood of R60 billion; it sells about 50 percent of all South African newspapers, earns over 40 percent of advertising revenue and owns Media 24 – the internet market leader - as well as a huge interest in pay-TV.

However, unlike the concentrated and consolidated ownership structure of the South African media, the Nigerian media – apart from the central and 36 state governments controlled ones - especially the print is found in the hands of a few (considering the country’s population of about 140 million people) individuals along the ‘South and North’ divide line of the country - a continuation of ownership pattern from its early history which qualifies the Nigerian media as primarily an ethnic media.

Thus of the many self-styled national newspapers, the more prominent ones (12 by my estimation - *Daily Trust, Daily Champion, Daily Sun, the Guardian, This Day, Daily Independent, the Punch, Nigeria Tribune, Vanguard, The Nation and Leadership*) can be easily identified by their tribal or ethnic owners. Same applies to the magazines category (mostly weeklies and seven by my estimation - *Newswatch, Tell, the News, Insider Weekly, the Week, the Source and Scroll*), except perhaps *Newswatch* whose owners are known and respected professional journalists from the country’s different geo-political zones.

Unlike what is obtainable in South Africa and the information-dense West, circulation figures are a closely guarded secret in the Nigerian print media industry. Although I was able to obtain individual circulation figures of the earlier mentioned national dailies (the figures range from 10,000 - 70,000 copies per day) that enabled me to arrive at a cumulative daily circulation figure of 425, 000 and 131,000 weekly for the magazines (the highest for magazines then was 40,000), Sam Amuka, publisher of the influential *Vanguard* newspapers says “... circulation is a different issue here unlike what is obtainable out there.”

The *Vanguard* publisher explained that infrastructural decay had left newspaper organisations to provide their own energy to power their press whereas a nonexistent railway service and trans-national highways that are death-traps had turned circulation of media products into nightmare. This perhaps is responsible for the reliance of some media organizations on government patronage; which

also explains why such media organisations and their owners have to be politically correct, even in matters affecting a majority of the people.

The above forms one of the bases on which this author argues that the assumptions about media audience as ‘mass’ may just be limited to a description that fits to a large extent an urban phenomenon, because an urban population, as I have argued elsewhere (Ngoa, 2006), could be different in many ways and reasons from a rural population. For example, big business and economic and political ‘power-plays’ are considerably urban, but rural Africa where the majority of the people reside is rooted in illiteracy, poverty and unemployment. Thus rural Africans are by far less likely to read newspapers or watch television and equally less disposed from necessity and habit to take or make opinions from mainstream media than people in other continents.

Ellis & ter Haar (2004:30) confirm the above. According to the authors, only 11 newspapers were produced for every thousand people living in Africa compared with 96 per thousand for the world as a whole. Within the period 1995 – 2000, on average, 198 people out of every thousand in sub-Saharan Africa had a radio and only 59 per thousand had a television set. These figures, one can safely suggest, are most probably obtainable from Africa’s urban centres and may not necessarily represent rural Africa where incidentally the majority of the continent’s people are domiciled.

Concluding thoughts:

This paper has attempted a definition of what functional democracy is, identified some significant expected roles of the media as a principal institution of the public sphere as well as advance that the media is unable to function or play its expected traditional and perhaps mandatory role because of its hegemonic alliance with power structures which stifle thoughts and opinions in diversity. The paper neither asked the media to abandon the sale of its soul to economic logic and market dictates nor did the author refuse to recognise and acknowledge the media’s various quite often selective and interest motivated roles within the limits of its boundaries and ‘routines’.

To the contrary this critique of the expected role of the media in a functional democracy simply challenges the media to seek to redefine its whole existence and its expected and proper role in society if democracy is to be functional.

The media should seek ways of balancing the tension between the economic imperatives of profit-making and the democratic/civic mandates of all inclusive-participation and developments that will reduce the marginalization of social sectors without access to the media and other centres of economic and socio-political power.

In other words, for the media to play its proper role of promoting a healthy culture of democracy in society, today’s news media need to adjust its surveillance lenses to provide frames that will reflect society’s concerns as well as the media’s interests in a functional democracy.

Today, Africa is awash with corruption, poverty, violence, unemployment and its associated vices. To be able to play the role that will ensure promotion and sustenance of a strong, healthy culture of freedom, the continent’s media requires a rethinking of its mandatory requirements which in a

‘functional democracy’ will include, the outright ‘*exposé*’ of ill-gotten wealth – some of which may be responsible for the concentration, consolidation and cross-ownerships of media in society.

Perhaps only when the media fulfills its role as voice of the voiceless, meets the requirement of constant surveillance and scrutiny of political authority and creates an unconditional true level playing field for society’s aggregation of individuals to have unrestricted access to it, will everyone – the rich and the poor - recognize the true meaning and importance of ‘a functional democracy’ with the media as its principal institution.

About the author:

Author: Stanley Naribo Opuamie-Ngoa

Title: Stanley Naribo Opuamie-Ngoa is a researcher and adjunct lecturer of Communication Theory at the Wits Journalism & Media Studies Program in Johannesburg

Email address: dr.snn.enigma@gmail.com

Physical address: P. O. BOX 582, WITS, 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa

Telephone: +27 83 923 2499

Fax: +27 86 524 8209

Notes:

1) Both Gurevitch & Blumler (in Lichtenberg, 1990:269 – see references) and Wood (1983 – see references too), propose that: (i) acting on behalf of the citizenry, the media should guard against abuses of power by those in positions of authority (ii) the media should provide robust uninhibited and wide-open marketplace of ideas where opposing views and contending forces will meet to take each other’s measure (iii) the media should protect and uphold the citizens’ ‘right-to-know’ as well as offer the platform for effective participation of citizens in civic affairs.

2) ‘Global Village’ is a term or phrase made popular by Marshall McLuhan – media scholar and gifted ‘phraseologist’ – who before his death in 1980 had predicted that ‘electronic media has turned the planet into a “global village”’; and as such, we now live in a ‘global village’. (See McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extension of man*. New York: McGraw-Hill; and also, ‘Technological Determinism’ of Marshall McLuhan in: Griffin Em. (1991). *A First Look at Communication Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

3) It is a thing of common knowledge in Nigeria that, when the ‘third term’ bid of then president Olusegun Obasanjo failed, he did not just see the April 2007 elections as a personal challenge; but was widely

4) quoted to have said that, for him, it was a matter of 'do or die'. He eventually succeeded in installing his choice of candidate as the president.

5) Anton Haber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism, writing in the Business Day (February 20, 2008) – see also the Wits Journalism website (www.journalism.co.za) – notes that, 'Media24' (apparently in reference to the NASPERS group) 'is getting the nation's eyeballs'; with its dominance of the South Africa media landscape.

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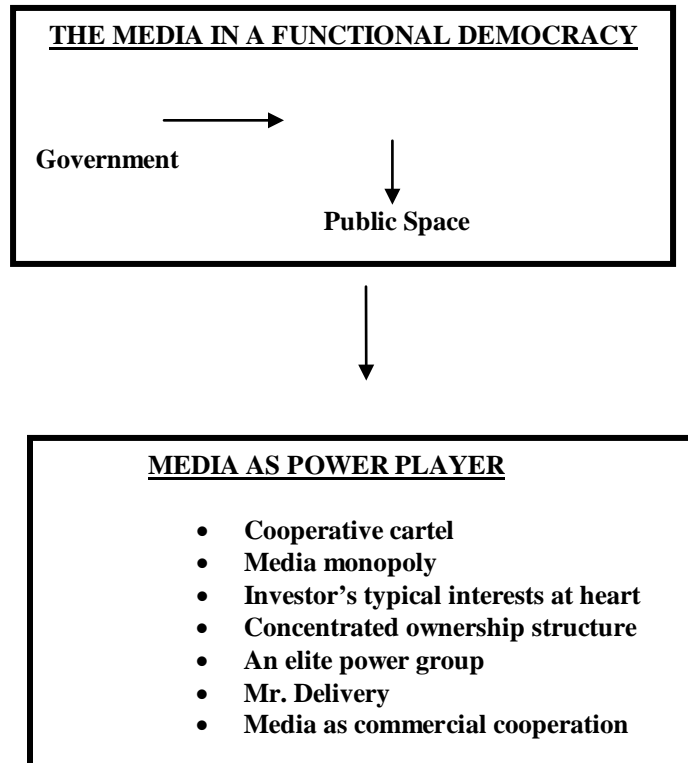
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ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN COLONIAL/POST-COLONIAL AFRICA.

Colonial - Credible Discharge

Post-Colonial - Mixed Bag



**CONCLUSION: WHAT THE MEDIA OUGHT TO BE ...
BUT IS NOT QUITE ...**

- **Voice of the voiceless**
- **Constant surveillance & scrutiny ...**
- **Principal institution of the public sphere**
- **A proper 4th Estate of the realm.**
- **An unconditional level playing field.**