
Practical reality of media freedom: an examination of the challenges facing the Namibian media

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Namibia, formerly South West Africa, is a young country situated in the semi-desert off the Atlantic coast of southern Africa. The country has development opportunities as well as serious challenges, and, while it is unique in many respects, it shares important features with other countries in the southern African region.

Namibia is vast but sparsely populated, with an estimated population of about 1.9 million which is expected to reach 2.3 million by 2025 and 3.75 million by 2050. It is bordered by Angola and Zambia (north), the Atlantic Ocean (west), South Africa (south and southeast) and Botswana (east). Walvis Bay, which covers 434 square miles, is Namibia's main port for imports and exports.

Social challenges in Namibia range from development and health-related issues to the media which has been heavily controlled by government, as is the case elsewhere in Africa.

The need to control one's environment is a strong human instinct. Lecturers exercise control in the classroom to ensure the safety and learning of students; politicians, on the other hand, control the votes of their constituents; sales executives and advertisers control the behaviour of customers. The media, too, is used as a controlling instrument to achieve a certain degree of organisation in social settings and the modern economy.

The media, however, does not always operate with socially responsible intent but rather for private benefit or political gain. This paper examines the transition of the Namibian media from pre-independence to post-independence as well the causal relationship between the two dispensations. Namibian independence, in so far as it affected the press, brought both opportunities and a vexing transitional period, demanding that Namibian journalism reassess its role in society in the post-independence era.

Before independence, the media landscape was characterised by an unequal distribution of information and a dearth of skilled journalists. The press, largely government-owned, was biased, restricted and partisan. In fact, there were eight newspapers that gave extra parliamentary voice to the spectrum of politics in the country. Only two papers were independent with various political parties owning the remaining majority. The government-funded television station, *South West Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SWABC)*, added volume to the the voice of the ruling party.

Mwilima (1998) lists the eight media institutions as: *The Namibian* (independent); *Windhoek Observer* (independent), *Die Republikein* (Democratic Media Holding), *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Democratic Media Holding), *Times of Namibia* (Democratic Media Holding), *SWABC TV* (government-funded), *SWABC Radio* (government-funded).

The majority of Namibian society expected a paradigm shift in the operations of the Namibian media. They thirsted for change and for the type of media they could relate to. This change was expected to bring an enabling environment for a free press where journalists, training institutions, politicians and civic society would defend and promote media freedom. It was hoped that there would be an absence of censorship, government press and inimical laws to press freedom. It was also hoped that there would be no misuse of laws to suppress the freedom of the press.

Apart from the constitutionalisation of media freedom, society also hoped for a free flow of information and

accountability for social institutions. In addition, this new freedom was expected to be instrumental in improving the quality of governance.

The advent of this dispensation brought with it the hope of the inclusion of media freedom in the country's supreme law: Article 21 (1) states 'All persons shall have the right to a) freedom of speech and expression, which shall include freedom of the press and other media' (Constitution of the Republic of Namibia, Namibian Government, Windhoek).

Today, there are eight newspapers in circulation, six of which are privately owned. In addition there are at least 11 private radio stations and two private television stations that broadcast in English and German (Larsen, 2007).

In 1992 a law was passed to facilitate the establishment of a national academic institution, the University of Namibia (University of Namibia Act, No. 18). But it was only in 1998, when a department responsible for training journalists in the country, Information and Communication Studies at the University of Namibia, was established. Since then the department has grown in leaps and bounds.

A quality and free press must have a well trained team of media workers who are able not only to present facts but interpret them in relation to their social impact. A free press in any country plays a key role in sustaining and monitoring a healthy democracy, as well as in contributing to greater accountability, good governance and economic development.

Eight years after independence, the dream of Namibia's constitutional pioneers still lives on as the country's press is rated as one of the most free on the continent (Freedom House Report, 2007). The Namibian media routinely criticises the government on a number of issues without fear of being muzzled.

As is the case elsewhere and regardless of what kind of government is in power, however, secrecy remains the hallmark of any government. Altshull (1995) is of the opinion that the powerful have never been comfortable with the idea of a free press and that transparency has always been contrary to their objectives. This is true, as many governments, including Namibia, are reluctant to introduce laws that would oblige civil servants to provide information to journalists when necessary. Having media freedom enshrined in a constitution is one thing but its practical application, quite another. A deliberate move by the Namibian government against press freedom was a ban on all government ministries not to advertise in the Namibian newspaper. This has been interpreted as an attempt to silence the critical voice of the media.

Because the media is rife with political implication (Paletz & Entman, 1981) much attention is given to its influence on society. The media has invisible power that greatly influences and shapes social behaviour. For obvious reasons governments are uncomfortable with this power vested in the media.

Paletz & Entman (1981) make a very important observation in stating that this power is particularly significant when transformed into authority. They cite examples where occupying positions in public formal office endows the incumbent with power and the right to use that power. Perhaps this explains the reluctance of the current government, headed by President Hifikepunye Pohamba, to lift the six-year ban on *The Namibian*.

We have recently seen the exercise of this power in Namibia itself with the sacking of the board chairman of the Namibia Broadcasting Corporation, Ponhele ya France by the Minister of Information and Technology, Joel Kaapanda without any explanation (*The Namibian*, 2008-10-10).

Theorists argue that whoever controls the media will yield immense power in the new century. The Namibian government and its agencies are fully aware of this fact. It is easier to govern the ignorant than the enlightened who, because of the power of the information they possess, are able to question those in power and to hold them accountable.

The African Media Barometer Report (2005) observes that Namibia's freedom of expression and freedom of the media are guaranteed in the constitution but not sufficiently protected by other legislation. Although Namibians are generally free to express themselves, threatening voices against the media have emerged. Attempts are under way to establish a media council, engineered and spearheaded by the government, a move that has been widely criticised by the Namibian media (*The Namibian*, 2008-02-05).

Developments worth mentioning within this context of a lack of legislative protection of press freedom include the late Hannes Smith case. Smith was hauled to court for a story he wrote on the murder of Swapo activist, Anton Lubowski. Smith, long-serving former editor of the *Windhoek Observer*, was given a four month prison term for refusing to reveal his sources on the murderer of Lubowski. This sentence was later set aside by a full bench of the Namibian High Court.

The Namibian (2008-10-10) reports on the *Informante* blunder (2008-09-10) regarding Henk Mudge, leader of the opposition party in the national assembly. The weekly reported under the headline 'Mudge's politics lead wife astray' that Mudge filed for divorce on the grounds of adultery. It turned out that it was a case of mistaken identify. The newspaper apologized publicly, recalled the edition and suspended its news editor, Mbatjiua Ngavirue. The newspaper could have saved itself from embarrassment by verifying the facts.

I therefore conclude that the Namibian media is indeed free to express themselves on a number of issues deemed relevant for readers, viewers and listeners - as was observed by the Media Sustainability Index Report of 2006/2007, in which the media was rated high in terms of media freedom. But worrying trends have emerged with attempts made to silence voices of criticism in the media. Should this continue there will be death of the human voice and the Namibian public will remain mere recipients rather than intelligent consumers of media content. The Namibian media's journey to the freedom house remains a bumpy one.

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