

# Globalisation and its possible effects on independent media in South Africa

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As South Africa has shifted into a neo-liberal gear after apartheid and opened up to foreign capital, the media face new structures of ownership, financing and allocative control. Seen in the light of the authoritarian past, this development has certainly brought some positive changes in the breaking up of apartheid-linked conglomerates and infusion of new capital. But media influenced, or even controlled by, global economic forces could pose negative effects on the country as well. Instead of government controlled media, we might face a situation where the market rather than the state threatens the public sphere. The following article sets out to identify the challenges and possible negative and positive effects of globalisation.

What is globalization? As a starting point, a very general and basic definition comes from John B. Thompson (1995:149): "Globalization refers to growing interconnectedness of different parts of the world, a process which gives rise to the complex form of the interaction and interdependency?". Some argue that globalisation is not specifically about our time; it started several hundred years ago. As Helge Ronning pointed out, one might say that globalisation started near the coast of Natal when the Portuguese Bartolomeo Dias arrived there in 1488. In this perspective, the following period of expansionist European colonisation was the continuation of globalisation. Sejersted (1998) has also noted that the first high tide of capitalist globalisation can be located to the prime period of imperialism from 1870 to the beginning of World War I.

Clearly, the word globalisation used in the 1990s contains a broad set of meanings, both generally and in relation to media. These are very often determined by the political position of those who use it. Roughly there are two poles: Those who see globalisation largely in positive terms, and those who view it negatively. In academia the poles correspond to the rather hostile relationship between Cultural Theorists and Political Economists.<sup>1</sup> Cultural Theorists from the 1990s onward tend to view globalisation as a positive force "(...) increasing international dialogue, empowering minorities, and building progressive solidarity" (Curran and Park, 2000: 10). A typical example of the positive effects of globalisation from this approach is the way the Internet has provided possibilities of escaping censorship and suppression of free speech. The standard example is the filing of reports, condemned by the Mexican government, by the Chiapas Indians.

Political Economists on the other hand, describe the phenomenon as "(...) a capitalist victory that is dispossessing democracies, imposing policy homogenization, and weakening progressive movements rooted in working-class and popular political organizations" (Curran and Park 2000: 10-11). What seems to be a common conclusion, however, is that globalisation leads to a weakening of power and influence of the nation-states.

Seen from the perspective of Political Economy, globalisation is explained in terms of class and power relations as a continuation of capitalist production and accumulation, legitimized by neo-liberal ideology. According to Vincent Mosco (1996: 205), globalisation is "[t]he spatial agglomeration of capital led by transnational business and the state, that transforms the spaces through which flow resources and commodities, including communication and information". Mosco points to the rise of what he calls global cities and regional blocs at the expense of nation-states. The nation-state is both too small and too big. It is too big to deliver the concentrated personal and information power of the global city and too small to take care of continental blocs. "These transformations create hierarchies of control over which the term globalization can serve as a mystifying gloss" (p. 206).

South African analyst Hein Marais (1999: 112) characterizes globalisation as "(...) transnational production, freer passage of commodities, the dominance of finance capital, the increasing authority of supra-national organizations and the rapid development of new labour saving or

labour replacing technologies?.

An important aspect of the globalisation of the media is the de-regulation of national economies and privatisation of formerly state-controlled institutions during the last couple of decades.<sup>2</sup> A landmark in this respect was the US Telecommunications Act of 1996, which arguably opened up the market as the determinant force of all communication systems. Herman and McChesney (1996), some of the most outspoken critics of this process, argue that this creates a major hindrance for the realization of positive potentials of new technology in terms of access, participation and democratic communication.

As has been the locus in Political Economy, Herman and McChesney (1996) are very materialist and structurally oriented in their analysis of globalisation and the global media, sometimes coming close to essentialist Marxism. One of their arguments is that globalisation as North American cultural imperialism is detrimental to local cultures, specifically in the Third World. Chris Paterson (2000: 2) presents a similar view in his analysis of the globalisation of Southern African broadcasting: "(...) the rapid shift from public to frequently foreign private ownership of television may be symptomatic of a broader re-colonization of Africa by American and European multinationals(...)."

A main point of critique against this approach is that it tends to ignore the perception of the audience as well as the influence of human agency. As Thompson (1995: 173) puts it: "Theory of globalization must be an elaborate account which gives attention to the multiple shifting ways in which symbolic power overlapped with economic, political and coercive power in the process of globalization?". Thompson finds that global influence in communities may have positive effects on inhabitants not previously exposed to other forms of living and thinking. This localized appropriation of globalised media products enables individuals to distance themselves symbolically and imaginatively from their daily life and to think critically about their own life conditions.

In his quest to renew the Political Economy of Communications, Mosco (1996) tries to move away from essentialism, reductionism and the tendency to view structures as something set and static. Structures, be they class, gender or race, are rather dynamic entities formed through the process of structuration, a term borrowed from the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984). Structuration means that structures and social systems are the outcome of human agency and at the same time, structures are the means by which people act. Structuration is "(...) a process by which structures are constituted out of human agency, even as they provide the very medium of that constitution" (Mosco, 1996: 212). Hence, understanding of globalisation processes should include the micro-level, human agency, people. It may seem that this aspect is often forgotten, and that globalisation exists as an autonomous self-regulated entity. Clive Barnett (2001) stresses that this is not the case. Globalisation is constructed by people and involves the agency of people.

### Consequences of globalization

In the perspective of Political Economists, the consequences of globalisation are solely devastating. "The pressure to become and remain attractive to capital increases, producing a mating dance with globalized capital that tends to follow a sequence of routines choreographed by the ideology of neo-liberalism" (Marais, 1999: 119). Accumulation of finance capital is the main threat, and Marais includes both the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the UN when he critiques the consequences of a weaker nation-state. Marais stresses that globalisation cannot be divorced from the roles of dominant states in accumulating national and transnational groupings of capital. These dominant states are definitely not to be found in sub-Saharan Africa: "In terms of their relevance in the global economy, whole regions have virtually dropped off the world map, notably sub-Saharan Africa, which remains linked to the world economy primarily through its heavy indebtedness although even its ability to attract loan finance has become limited" (Marais 1999: 112).<sup>3</sup>

While per capita income grew by 34.4% in Africa from 1960 to 1980, it has since fallen by about

23% (Weisbrout, 2000). Weisbrout suggests that the distribution of income worsened after the globalising forces impacted African countries. He finds these forces to represent a move away from democracy, calling the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank, often referred to as institutions of global governance, rather anti-governmental: 'Indeed, one does not need a conspiracy theory to notice the progressive transfer of economic decision-making from governments to un-elected bureaucrats?' (Weisbrout 2000: 30).

The effects of globalisation are disputable, to a large extent because it is difficult to differentiate between which effects actually come as a result of globalisation and which are caused by other forces. What is most likely is that there are different causes of damaging effects on national or local business, culture and media.

Such dialectic ideas are not considered by Herman and McChesney (1997). According to them, the most important effect of globalisation is the spread and increasing dominance of commercialised media. Herman and McChesney state that economic analysis suggests that commercialisation of the media will be detrimental to the public sphere. Public sphere programmes do not sell well, which means loss of an informed citizenry, loss of democratic order and loss of social stability. Furthermore, they claim that the United States is the winning player in the global media game, and the influence of the country on the rest of the world is huge.

Technology is being corrupted by the logic of neo-liberal capitalism, which gained the position of the legitimate paradigm of economic policy around the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This paved the way for massive de-regulation and privatisation, which quickly fuelled the process of convergence, that is the merging of traditionally separate technological sectors and industries such as telecommunications and computer industries. The players in this game do not have idealistic intentions, but are rather directed by their own dynamic of profit-making and expansion in order to stay ahead of competitors. Consequently, the target audience of the increasingly oligopolised and globalised media is consumers, since the source of income comes from advertisers. This audience-commodification corrupts the basic premises of democratic communication, such as access, participation, and a necessary politicized voice in media content. Mainstream content, maximizing audiences to attract advertisers, comes instead (Herman and McChesney 1997; McChesney, 1997).

The USA is the leading proponent and organiser of a neo-liberal global order, Herman and McChesney declare. It seeks world hegemony, and an important way of gaining influence is through the media; making profit through media ownership, and transferring neo-liberal ideology through media channels. Even so, the media are inseparable from broader economic, political and cultural influences, such as authoritarian rule, the military, economic and financial linkages and tourism.

Herman and McChesney (1997) point out four negative effects of this cultural imperialism: the first concerns values. Commercialisation will focus on consumption and the individual's right to choose products. This emphasis strengthens materialistic values, weakens sympathetic feelings towards others and tends to diminish the spirit of community and the strength of communal ties. Carried to extremes, individualism is dangerous. Secondly, displacement of the public sphere by entertainment is taking place. Real information is replaced with happy news, infotainment, talk shows and news magazines that stress personalities, conflict and petty exposures of mainly minor crimes.

The third issue is the strengthening of conservative forces. The media support neo-liberal economic policies that serve their own and the general interests of transnational corporations, but which undermine social democratic options. This happens because they need a favourable climate for investment and advertising. And lastly, globalisation will lead to the erosion of local cultures. Preventing the erosion of weaker cultures will depend on indigenous forces of resistance.

Such an approach is far too simple and one-dimensional argues John Thompson (1995). Critiques such as those made by Herman and McChesney do not consider the role of

nationalism, religion, political, coercive, and symbolic powers other than North America. Furthermore, the US does not make and own everything. The production of electronic components has shifted to Western Europe, Japan and the Pacific. Hollywood studios are bought by foreigners. In November 1989 Columbia Pictures and Tristar Pictures were bought by the Sony Corporation for \$3.4 billion. Shortly afterwards, the Japanese Matsushita acquired MCA, which operates Universal Studios, for \$6.9 billion. Also, Non-American industries are becoming increasingly important as regional producers and exporters of films and TV-programmes, especially in Western Europe, Australia, Mexico, Brazil and India.

Thompson argues that blaming the destruction of indigenous culture solely on globalising media is too simple. This is just one of several encounters through which values, beliefs and symbols have been superimposed. Most cultures today are hybrid cultures. What Herman and McChesney (1997) do not take into account is the way media are perceived by the audience. They disregard the complex, varied and contextually specific ways in which messages are interpreted by individuals and incorporated into their day-to-day life, and assume that people who watch soap operas, infotainment, happy news and so on are not able to make proper judgements about what they see. This view has similarities with the media theory of the modernisation paradigm in the 1960s. Scholars did not consider or investigate how media were perceived and understood. They just assumed that people in the Third World would watch, understand and improve. Herman and McChesney assume that people watch, understand and get worse.

Still, Thompson does not disagree with Herman and McChesney about two main consequences of the globalisation of communication on Third World countries: material is distributed globally, but it is a one-way flow from the North to the South, and access to media is unequally distributed.

#### South Africa in a global environment

Globalisation is not some homogeneous force transforming the world and it means different things for different states and regions. According to Herman and McChesney (1997) globalisation of the media means commercialisation, thus globalised media go where there are consumers ready to buy the products of the advertisers, the motor of commercialised media. This leaves especially the African continent with some pessimistic prospects. Large segments of consumers are generally not to be found in sub-Saharan Africa. 'Left to the global media market, sub-Saharan Africa's media and communication systems will remain undeveloped and even wither' (McChesney, 1997: 65). How true this statement is, in particular with regard to the relatively 'developed' South Africa, remains to be seen. However, that South Africa today, at least to some extent, is being integrated into global media structures, is beyond doubt. According to Tomaselli (1997, 2000), economic globalisation carried a counter-development in the ownership and control of both South African print and broadcast media. From 1997 M-Net, a South African pay-TV channel, has operated in markets in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

There is seemingly a paradoxical element in South Africa's situation when it comes to globalisation. The country has opened up its economy and entered the era of globalisation. As we have seen, if there is a conclusion theorists can agree upon, it is the relative erosion of the nation-state as a consequence of globalisation. At the same time, South Africa is in the midst of an intense phase of nation-building.

The nation-building agenda also affects the question of media independence. Not necessarily linked to globalisation, there is a tension between the view of the role of the media as nation-builders and the view of journalists as watchdogs. 'South Africa provides an example of the attempt to shape media policies with the aim of ensuring collective stability, political order, and national identity through the use of public communication systems' (Barnett, 2000). As a tool for democracy and as independent institutions, however, the media arguably need to take a watchdog position. Independent Newspapers '(...) defined the group as being 'friendly to the new South Africa' (Berger, 2001). A combination of praise-singing and criticism was suggested. However, this has been seen by many as an attempt by Independent Newspapers to protect their investments in South Africa (Berger, 2000).

The market for newspapers in South Africa today is on the decrease. The country has the second lowest number of titles in the world in relation to population, and newspaper circulation shrank from 19% to 17% between 1990 and 1996 (Duncan, 2001). Jane Duncan (2001) sees this as a result of an extremely high unemployment rate: "(...) The more unemployment increases, the more the circulation of print media decreases, and the more the media will be characterized by concentration of ownership as they seek to maximize advantages to attract a portion of the shrinking advertising cake?".

Prior to 1994 the South African print media were controlled by four groups. Argus Holdings Ltd and Times Ltd (TML) controlled the English speaking press, while Peskor and Nasionale Pers held the Afrikaans press. There was a close link between the media conglomerates of the apartheid era and other South African capital interests (Teer-Tomaselli, 2001; Tomaselli 1997).

Through a series of so-called unbundlings, the owner structure changed significantly after 1993, and after the election victory of ANC in 1994, South Africa was opened to foreign investment. Today, Irish-based Independent Newspapers controls what was Argus Ltd. Independent Newspapers also bought TML's shares in companies previously held by Argus. Thus, Independent Newspapers secured control over a large part of the English speaking print media (Teer-Tomaselli, 1999). Furthermore, UK based Pearsons now owns 50% of Business Day and Financial Mail, bought from TML. British The Guardian has bought 67% in Mail & Guardian, while Swedish Dagens Industri owns 24% of Mafube publishing (Berger, 2000).

In South Africa's case, the assumed loss of national sovereignty because of globalisation is followed by loss of national control of the print media. It is probably too early to say what this new structure of media ownership does to democracy. Berger (2001) notes: "Considered in terms of concentration, this foreign investment was not a positive development from the vantage point of pluralistic democracy, in that in Cape Town and Durban the same company now owns both morning and evening newspapers?". But competition increased and two new publications were started.

The level of allocative control located in South Africa or elsewhere does not necessarily determine output from the level of operational control in terms of content, access, and possibilities for participation. It should also be noted that foreign ownership in South African print media is Irish and English, and Herman and McChesney's assumption that globalisation leads to the infusion of Americanised content does not fit this context.

#### Role of independent media

Francis Kasoma has noted that, "Unless the independent media take root and prosper, Africa's current multiparty experience would be short-lived?" (Kasoma, 1994: 553).

Traditionally, in the Sub-Saharan African context, the independent media have been threatened mainly by the interference and more or less forced control of authoritarian governments. This problem persists, one striking current example being Zimbabwe, where a large proportion of the press is controlled by the Zanu-PF ruling party, while the presumably independent press suffers from the constant threat of (even violent) sanctions from the government. In other countries, where democracy has found its place, desirably independent media are continually controlled or threatened by governments.

In South Africa the heavy heritage of the authoritarian past of apartheid and lack of a democratic tradition complicate the formation of a healthy democratic media environment. Still, it could be argued, the problem in South Africa is not so much of government interference, even though the African National Congress-led (ANC) government is not particularly press friendly. A strong Constitution protects basic principles of press freedom and the media seem largely committed to the same principles.

Journalist Sechaba Ka-Nkosi (2000) writes that Southern Africa has emerged as one of the most

dangerous spots in the world for media practitioners. The situation in some states, like Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo, has been disastrous for independent journalism. Journalists have been subjected to censorship, imprisonment and physical attacks. The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), blames state-controlled media for escalating negative feelings against independent journalists in countries like Zimbabwe (Barker and Minnie, 2001). As Kasoma (1994: 539) puts it: 'The longer an African regime lasts, the more dictatorial it becomes'. As is the case with Zimbabwe today and in South Africa during the apartheid era, governments view the independent press as political opposition capable of causing national discontent and disunity.

Governments have several ways of preventing the independent press from prospering. One common method, as in Malawi, is refusing to issue a licence to operate new media, or postponing the granting of such a licence for years and years. Another strategy in poor African countries is to refuse to lend what is possibly the only printing press to newly started papers. The economic situation will then undermine any activity. Kasoma states two main reasons for a dying independent press in Africa: They are strangled by government, either economically, or through legislation.

An independent press is crucial for a democratic state. As a normative ideal, an independent press is one which is neither directed by the government nor by the owner. In the following we scrutinize the role of African Eye News Service (AENS). It calls itself independent, how true is this? It is not controlled by government, even though the provincial legislature gives it problems, but it is dependent on who buys its stories, and these clients are again dependent on who owns them and what their shifting roles are in the global system.

#### African Eye News Service in a global context

African Eye News Agency (AENS) was born in 1995, one year after the first democratic elections in South Africa. Though still small, since its emergence AENA has become an important deliverer of provincial, socially oriented news articles, which the South African Press Agency (SAPA) does not cover. It has also done groundbreaking investigative journalism, acting as a watchdog on the provincial legislature. The agency is still based in the North-Eastern part of the country.

AENS, selling articles to both South African newspapers and online publications in the USA, Britain and Germany, has a particularly important democratic function with regard to its rural and investigative focus. AENS delivers to foreign publications such as German Focus, which has replaced former clients Der Spiegel and Washington Post. Some commentators believe that there is a great need for more agencies like AENS to meet the goal of media diversity. But the question of whether there will be a place for investigative journalism in the future South African media environment is open.

However, it is strongly indicated that the independent investigative profile of AENS might be increasingly difficult to hold on to. There are several reasons why. Firstly, its main clients are adapting to a more competitive climate, making new priorities to broaden their readership. Secondly, there is a lack of professional skills and credibility within the agency. Thirdly, there is a general lack of democratic culture in the new South African democracy, complicating access to information and making damaging lawsuits a threatening possibility. And lastly, AENS has broadened client base and thus increased competition. In this process AENS is likely to cut down on investigative reporting since it does not pay.

But to understand AENS' position, potential and challenges, it is also necessary to include a broader picture. Globalisation is bound to influence the fate of AENS and the direction it will take as an independent agency with a rural investigative agenda. If globalisation carries the increased exposure to South Africans of Anglo-American news and general cultural values, as is a logical consequence of Political Economy theory, it might look like AENS is against the wall. Will the agency survive?

On the optimistic side, it is worth noting that South Africa had already opened up to global interests when AENS started up in 1995, and the agency has grown since then. In terms of ownership AENS is far from being a global corporation. AENS is wholly-owned by its employees who hold shares in the company. However, its income depends on its clients, and its clients depend on their (foreign) ownership. How far does AENS have to go in tailoring the news in order to satisfy its clients? It may be that developments towards more commercialised media threaten the integrity and independence of news writers. Similarly, an agency like AENS is particularly vulnerable, since it is not selling directly to an audience but has to follow the demand of its clients. If we suppose that allocative control is a determining factor when it comes to media content, then AENS' profile is also exposed to the forces of globalisation. Conversely, at present AENS' main market is the Sunday newspapers, which today are in South African hands.

The concentration of ownership, in particular the Independent group's dominant share of the English speaking press, could potentially shrink AENS' market significantly. Fortunately, AENS has managed to agree with Independent Newspapers a deal which implies that its important client, Independent owned The Star, cannot circulate the stories to other Independent Newspapers.

With the emergence of new technology, and new media such as the Internet, print media are somehow old-fashioned in terms of technology and possibilities of presentation, and some have predicted the death of the newspapers. AENS' main market is print media, and in the above scenario the agency would logically be in trouble. Still, it could be that globalization directly benefits AENS notably through the opening up of new online markets.

It could also be that globalisation and its tendency towards concentrated ownership and possibly increasingly mainstream content, benefits AENS. At the same time as local nuance slips off the agenda of the global giants, globalisation seems to bring a parallel re-focus on the local. It is at this level that AENS operates, and instead of being doomed by the effects of globalization, it may be that this process is providing the very niche for AENS to prosper.

## Conclusion

In this article we have tried to elaborate some positive and negative effects of globalisation in relation to its impact on independence of the media. It is a difficult task, because it is hard to determine what globalisation means for a nation, economically or culturally, and what the actual effects or results are. Another trap easy to fall into is to consider globalisation as an uncontrollable force operating outside the world of humans. Globalisation is a term created by humans to describe a type of human action reaching beyond the nation-states. We believe that commercialisation and an oligopolised media structure are definitely a threat to diversity and sovereignty, but to assume that all people lose their cultural identity when being exposed to American soaps, is too one-dimensional. We also believe that the emergence of new technologies for the most part will benefit news agencies like AENS, enabling them to publish online and to seek information that might be difficult to find elsewhere, especially when it is situated in the periphery. New technologies also give agencies the opportunity to reach clients and send out burning hot news in very short time.

Media convergence and foreign ownership might have both positive and negative consequences. Owner interests in countries other than South Africa might give new opportunities for a small agency to sell articles abroad. This is already the situation for AENS. On the other hand, if the same owner controls several clients, this might limit AENS's selling potential, given that the agency does not have special agreement hindering circulation among several publications within a corporation.<sup>4</sup>

We find it difficult to agree with any absolutist speculation on what the consequences of globalisation might be for independent media. When it comes to the SADC region and the transitional South African situation, specifically referring to print media, it is even more difficult to give an adequate answer. It is clear that the increasing influence of market forces generally brings

a potential threat to a functioning public sphere. However, it could be argued that governments still engender a greater threat to the operation of free and independent media in the region than does globalisation.

#### Notes

1. Within the field of Cultural Studies, there are a variety of different schools of thought, and naturally, the opinions on a topic like globalisation vary greatly. Our generalization is done in order to make the differentiation between Political Economy and Cultural Studies easier to grasp.
2. Many scholars prefer to discuss globalisation as re-regulation rather than de-regulation, because regulations do not disappear, they are merely transformed.
3. It is important to note that the South African economic situation is different. The country has a stronger economy and a smaller debt burden than the rest of the region.
4. Which is actually the case with AENS? agreement with the Star.

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-BLOGS WITHOUT PHOTOS -

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