

Plurality and power relations in Zambian broadcasting

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In deconstructing the concept of pluralism in Zambian broadcasting the following article structures its discussion around the key elements of the definition of pluralism laid out in the Windhoek Declaration (1991). Essentially, these elements are the end of monopolies, a diversity of channels and a diversity of opinions. In relation to television and radio, the authors critically examine each of these points and demonstrate that Zambian broadcasting policies and operating principles fall short of achieving conditions for pluralism and thus fail in contributing to the democratic ambitions of the country. They conclude by giving an overall summary of how pluralism and power relations are related and played out in Zambian media.

Zambia was a colony of Britain until 1964. This colonial history undeniably influenced the type of leadership that was adopted in post-colonial Zambia: Just eight years after the declaration of independence, Zambia was declared a one-party state. This change saw most private companies, including the media, transfer into state hands: 'as a product of former Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda's policy of indigenisation in which... private companies... were either totally nationalised or were turned into parastatals with the state holding 51 percent shares' (Banda, 2001). Thus, under one-party rule, state power was highly centralised.

This centralisation of power was carried into the press policies under Kaunda. Francis Kasoma's work on the history of the press in Zambia shows that the media failed to gain autonomy during Kaunda's one-party rule. Kasoma shows that attempts by individuals and groups to establish an independent press in the late 1960s through the 80s also failed miserably (Phiri, 1999: 56). Thus by the mid-1980s the only media outlet that continued to challenge the status quo was the church-run newspaper the National Mirror (Kasoma, 1986: 117-129), contradicting Banda's assertion that the National Mirror was seen by government as 'a harmless communication tool.' It is clear that even after breaking from colonial rule, power in Zambian government and media systems remained highly centralised and controlled by Kaunda's ruling party, thus limiting true freedom and independence.

By the late 1980s, the one-party state's grip on the country began to loosen, paving way for a multi-party democracy and the possibility of pluralism. The crumbling of the one-party state also accompanied unprecedented changes in the legal and political climate. The period leading up to the 1991 democratic elections was characterised by an environment of increased optimism among the people for a more democratic and pluralistic government. When the MMD came into power, many expected that it would be committed to what it termed 'multi-party pluralism' and draft a constitution that was steeped in democratic ideals. The preamble to the Zambian Constitution of 1991, amended in 1996, declares Zambia a 'Sovereign Democratic Republic' and further resolves 'to uphold the values of democracy, transparency, accountability and good governance... [ensuring] that Zambia shall forever remain a unitary, indivisible, multi-party and democratic sovereign state'. Clearly, based on the constitution, Zambia committed itself to democratic ideals and pluralistic principles.

This commitment to democracy and pluralism was carried through in the constitutional discussion of freedom of expression and the media in Zambia. Article 20 of the constitution states that:

Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of expression, that is to say, freedom to hold opinions without interference, freedom to receive ideas and information without interference, freedom to impart and communicate ideas and information without interference, whether the communication be to the public generally or to any person or class of persons, and freedom from interference with his correspondence. Subject to the provisions of this Constitution no law shall make any provision that derogates from freedom of the press.

The governmental framework of Zambia carries its commitment to pluralism and democracy through its policies regarding the exchange of ideas and press freedom. In terms of normative ideals, the press in Zambia is clearly meant to be democratic and pluralistic.

Commitment to press freedom was incorporated into the rhetoric of the early pioneers of the MMD during their bid to oust Kaunda:

At their very first public conference, leaders of [the MMD] championed freedom of speech and criticized the one-party state for failing to foster an environment conducive to a free press. Remmy Mushota, who became Minister of Legal Affairs when the MMD eventually came to power, identified freedom of the press as 'one of the most significant freedoms in the process of establishing and sustaining a free and democratic society' (Mushota, 1989: 42).

Furthermore:

The MMD manifesto... stated: 'The MMD believes that freedom of expression and the right to information are basic human rights. As such journalists will have to play an important role in promoting democracy and development in a MMD-led government' (Chiluba, 1994: 332).

The MMD was, therefore, elected in part based on its apparent commitment to the transformation of the media from an instrument of the ruling party to being an autonomous participant in the democratic process. Kasoma posits that democracy entails the right to choose from alternatives regarding the best course of action and to this end is largely based on the availability of information which lays out those alternatives (Kasoma, 2000: 29). In the Zambian situation, a free and pluralistic press is indispensable in guaranteeing the diversity of ownership, channels and opinion that characterise a democratic state.

End of monopolies

Ownership of broadcasting organizations has an undeniable influence on the information that is placed in the public sphere. For this reason, one of the primary requirements of a pluralistic media is 'the end of monopolies of any kind' (Barker & Minnie, 2001: 6). The American Heritage Dictionary defines monopoly as 'exclusive control by one group of the means of producing or selling a commodity or service'. Thus, the end of monopolies must encourage multiple controlling parties in a particular industry and also implies direct competition between these parties. As noted above, after independence, the one-party state in Zambia nationalised broadcasting. When the MMD came to power, it privatised most industries, but opted to liberalise rather than privatise the state-held media. Therefore, rather than selling off their media holdings to private individuals or interests, the government retained control of the primary broadcasting channels and merely allowed other participants to enter the market-place.

The way in which the government invited these other participants to enter the market-place served to maintain their broadcasting monopoly. Phiri observes that 'the state-run media have neither been privatised nor granted editorial autonomy. They have continued in more or less the same vein in which they operated under the one-party state' (Phiri, 1999: 60). He further asserts that 'private efforts in broadcasting have been dismal... there is virtually no private [competitor] in radio [and] television broadcasting in the country to the state-owned Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation' (Phiri, 1999: 61). The state's grip on broadcasting in Zambia is still so tight that in many cases media outlets are handled as a civil service entity, with heads appointed by political leaders. Francis Nyamnjoh characterises a similar situation in the media system of Cameroon:

The government not only monopolises broadcasting, it has made broadcasters part of the civil service. This has meant that civil servants or politicians with little or no knowledge about the media, are often charged with overseeing the way radio and television are operated. Professional broadcasters become subservient to these bureaucrats who determine [everything] 'this becomes frustrating to talented broadcasters who are likely to give up entirely or to become

absorbed by the bureaucratic machinery (Nyamnjoh 1998: 32).

Thus, the level of monopolisation of the media pervades even to the working ranks of the individual organisations.

The MMD has primarily maintained its broadcasting monopoly through the manner in which they issue licenses. Zambian broadcasting regulation states that 'licenses may be issued to natural and legal persons (corporate bodies and associations of persons) established on a permanent basis other than political parties' (author's emphasis, Banda, 2001). Further on Banda postulates that:

...the ZNBC (Licensing) Regulations, which seem to provide the most authoritative procedures for acquiring radio and television licenses to-date, seem to place near absolute power in the hands of the Minister of Information and Broadcasting Services. He/she is empowered to receive and scrutinise applications for radio and television licenses. It is only he/she who can give or refuse to give a licence.

Therefore, although the government allows other radio and television channels to broadcast, they must not directly compete with the already established ZNBC in terms of substantive political content. Thus, the ZNBC retains a monopoly on the discussion of political issues in broadcasting and absolute control of who can enter the marketplace.

The government monopoly of the media industry does not just end at ownership of the ZNBC, it extends further through government control of private holdings. For example, ZNBC's 30% shareholding in Multichoice (Z) Ltd. is in essence a government shareholding since ZNBC is government owned. Therefore, even the satellite broadcasting that Banda contends brings 'choice' to Zambians is not free of the hand of government. This scenario, arguably, places near-absolute monopolistic power in the hands of government over the entire broadcasting terrain 'both public and private' in Zambia.

The Zambian broadcasting terrain has been visited by a new player recently that many hoped would break the government's monopolistic hold. Community radio is a growing prospect in Zambia. Over the last six years, six new community radio stations have been established, many reaching into the most rural parts of the country. However, a concentration-of-ownership trend is emerging 'which subsequently defeats the hopes of those who were looking toward an end to the centralisation of broadcasting power. We posit that another form of monopoly is developing in Zambian radio 'one that is in a separate sector from government broadcasting' but no less influential. Of the six community radio stations operational now, four of them are owned and controlled by the Roman Catholic Church. This supports Banda's concern that government has not done enough in terms of a policy framework to ensure the establishment of truly non-partisan radio that can freely report news and comments without undue pressure from any quarter (Banda, 2001).

Before gaining political legitimisation, the MMD leaders, lamented the state control of the media in Zambia, stating:

One of the most disturbing aspects of our society is the way in which the mass media have, unashamedly, been manipulated to the exclusive monopoly of a small clique of the leaders at the top and how the views of the ordinary citizen who wishes constructively to criticize our policies are blacked out (Mushota, 1989: 42 cited in Phiri, 1999: 54).

Now, just nine years after coming to power, they have adopted the very practices they formerly condemned. Presently, the media are 'entirely controlled by the state and... independent media [are] struggling to survive economically and failing to live up to their professional role in a democratic society' (Phiri, 1999: 63). The government control of state broadcasting and the monopoly of private and community radio by vested interests such as the Catholic Church make competition impossible and allow media monopolies to flourish unchecked. These monopolies

detract from pluralism and serve to centralise power in the hands of the few.

Diversity of channels

The second element of the Windhoek definition of pluralism is 'the existence of the greatest possible number of newspapers, magazines and periodicals' (Barker & Minnie, 2001: 6). When translated into broadcasting terms, this can be seen as the existence of a diversity of both radio and television channels. We believe the concept of broadcasting diversity informs a discussion of pluralism and power relations, largely due to the fact that it takes into consideration the composition and political orientation of the channel. The term diversity implies something more than 'many.' Mosco makes the distinction between multiplicity which is 'sheer number of voices' and diversity which is 'number of different voices' (our emphasis, Mosco 1996: 258). In many ways privatisation, globalisation and convergence have threatened broadcasting diversity. Graham Murdock writes that 'more does not mean different,' 'it means the same basic commodity appearing in different markets and in a variety of packages... privatisation has led to a widening of the gap between the number of voices in society and the number heard in the media' (Murdock, 1990).

These broad-based issues can be examined in three-dimensional terms by analyzing the case of Zambia's move toward 'diversification' and 'choice'. Banda and many other Zambians would argue that the diversity of channels and level of choice has increased with the incorporation of subscriber television in Zambia. However, while pay television 'Multichoice and CASAT' may have a variety of channels, as Banda observes (2001), it is accessed only by a select elite with the capital to pay the high monthly subscription fees. The average annual income in Zambia is approximately US\$2,000; while the subscription fees for Multichoice are approximately US\$480 per year. Based on simple mathematics, it is clear that the diversity brought by subscription television only reaches a very select portion of Zambian society. For the bulk of Zambians, ZNBC, with its one television channel that broadcasts for only 7 hours a day (opening at 5 p.m. and closing at midnight), constitutes the only viewing option. Therefore channel diversity does not reach the total Zambian population universe, but only to a small sector.

The prospect for a greater diversity of channels in the future is also dismal at best. The ministry of information and broadcasting in its recent white paper on broadcasting acknowledged the lack of incentives by government to media investors who want to set up media: 'Government has made investments in media unattractive by imposing numerous taxes and duties on the importation of media equipment' (Information and media policy paper, 1999: 20). ZNBC shows limited signs of growth, Banda himself recommends that the ZNBC shed some of its operations and remain with what it can support from government grants and from advertising' (Banda, 2001). Unfortunately, this would decrease rather than increase the number and diversity of channels, thus giving rise to greater privatisation and a higher disparity between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in Zambia.

The fact is that the Zambian economy and broadcasting infrastructure at this time cannot support a diversity of channels. There exists an economic catch-22 in that 'with such a small audience, only subsidized media can survive in the long term' (Phiri, 1999: 60). However as Banda points out, Zambia's economy is 'not strong enough to support much commercial radio or television broadcasting in the near future' (2001). Thus, the possibility for a true diversity of channels offered to the majority of Zambians seems a distant hope. As long as the hope remains at a distance, so will media plurality and a true democratic exchange.

Diversity of opinion

The third requirement of a pluralistic press is that the media reflect the 'widest possible range of opinion within the community' (Barker & Minnie, 2001). In order to be both pluralistic and democratic, the media must represent a diversity of opinions:

It could be argued that the core of a democratic society is the presence of a public debate about the distribution and execution of power. It is crucial for democratic arrangements that choices

made by the power holders are publicly scrutinised and contested... if the interests of the information and culture producers and the powers that be are intertwined, a society's capacity for democratic government is seriously undermined (Hamelink 1994, cited in Lee 1995:3).

When examining the level of diversity of opinion in Zambian broadcasting, several factors clearly limit an open exchange of opinions: government control, restricted press freedom and globalised content. These factors, when taken together, indicate that there is not a single comprehensive channel or forum in which locally relevant issues can be debated in Zambia. This lack of diversity of opinion and a contained place in which opinions can be negotiated leads to a breakdown of democratic principles and the centralisation of power in the hands of the elite.

A major factor that limits the diversity of opinion in Zambian broadcasting is the high degree of government control and limits to press freedom. Zambia's history as a one-party state has heavily influenced trends in ownership and power relations. The media have not escaped this fate and in many ways was one of the institutions most heavily hit. Although there is theoretical debate on the overall influence of the state on issues of media diversity, in Zambia and most of southern Africa:

The problem with state-owned broadcasters in [the] region has been their control: Using the broadcaster predominantly as the voice of government and/or the ruling party. They have also been suppressing pluralism in political and development debate and even denying cultural pluralism by refusing access to different ethnic groups or those groups who do not traditionally vote for the ruling party (Barker & Minnie, 2001).

Banda emphasises the fact that the media are largely controlled and influenced by the ruling party and in other research found 'press coverage of the 1996 election... was clearly biased in favour of the ruling MMD' (Banda, 1997: 62). In terms of the allocation of broadcasting resources, the media also show signs of governmental control in focusing more attention on political leaders and elites: 'the President of the land will predictably have a camera assigned to him, even if the event surrounding him is not newsworthy. So it is for the other members of the ruling elite' (Banda). Some would say that this over-attentiveness to state policies and personalities is the result of the misguided news judgement of Zambian reporters, but reading and personal experience demonstrates that the MMD definitely exerts a high degree of control over the opinions expressed on ZNBC channels.

The media's accountability to the government extends as far as the everyday working conditions of reporters in that 'work routines, conditioned by a plethora of factors, such as fear of reprisals, job insecurity, economic uncertainty etc., often position them as the conveyor-belts of this unwitting bias that serves to reproduce a single dominant ideological position' (Banda). Through these restrictive strategies the government ensures that its beliefs are predominant and silences dissenters who would voice their opinions in the private media. This reinforces the view that 'in countries where the market is strongly controlled by government interests, the tendency will be for both private and public media to gravitate towards a careful and safe middle ground from a content point of view' (Barker & Minnie, 2001).

In the face of this level of censorship, restrictive regulation and government control, it is nearly impossible to have a diversity of opinions reflecting the community at-large. Government control over the transfer of ideas and opinions clearly undermines plurality and works to centralise power in the hands of the state. Lack of press freedom in Zambia, largely due to government control, also serves to threaten a pluralistic press. Rather than an open exchange of diverse opinions, the new MMD media landscape has been characterised by state-control and hostility toward independent media (Phiri 1999: 55). According to Banda:

Evidence on the ground suggests that the Third Republic Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD), though openly appearing to espouse strong commitments to liberalising the broadcast industry, has not done much to ensure the establishment of truly non-partisan radio or television stations that will freely report news and comments or opinions without undue pressure from any

quarter (Banda, 2001).

It is clear that the government's initial good intentions are far from being realised. Government restrictions to press freedom disallow dissenters and the disenfranchised from taking equal part in Zambian democracy. Media pluralism and democracy are also jeopardised by another threat to press freedom – the threat of unchecked commercialism. Media activists have pointed out that:

with the transformation of media organisations into large scale commercial organisations, freedom of expression has been confronted by a new threat, a threat stemming not from excessive use of state power, but rather from the unhindered growth of media organisations as commercial concerns (Barker & Minnie, 2001).

As large multi- and international broadcasting companies and private organizations, such as Multichoice-South Africa, Trinity Broadcasting Network and Radio Christian Voice, continue to lay hold of the small private broadcasting space, they introduce their own agendas, interests and values. Commercialized media form a relationship with their audiences as consumers and in this way limit their ability to provide input or feedback to a single purchase.

Vincent Mosco characterises commercialisation as a process – that specifically refers to the creation of a relationship between an audience and an advertiser? (Mosco, 1996: 144). In many ways this relationship limits the freedom of the audience. The local issues relevant to the people are a small factor in the formula for economic success. By filling the limited amount of Zambian broadcasting airtime with generalised programming and Westernised interpretation of a product-oriented society, the freedom of the people living in the community is restricted. They experience a kind of de facto exclusion that silences their opinions and denies a pluralistic exchange of ideas. Both the increased commercialisation of the media and continued government negligence serve to limit the freedom of the press and effectively silence diverse opinions of community members.

Related to a discussion of commercialisation and press freedom is the prevalence of global players and global content in Zambian broadcasting. As discussed above, outside multi-national and international broadcasters and private organizations are gaining increasing control of Zambia's private media. Organizations like the Catholic Church and Western neo-liberal aid organizations have cornered the private and community-based media market in Zambia. Globalisation has been defined as:

The 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. The outcome is a literal transformation of the geography of communication and information that accentuates certain spaces and the relationship among them (Mosco, 1996: 205).

Clearly then, it is impossible for so many foreign interests to enter into the Zambian media equation without somehow influencing the type, tone and timing of information disseminated through their newly acquired channels.

The degree of globalisation serves to limit the diversity of opinion in the Zambian media because it crowds out the local in making room for the pre-packaged commercial; – liberalisation in the southern African region has indeed given rise to an increase in imported programming? (Barker & Minnie, 2001). This imported programming generally takes the form of packaged soaps, dramas and sitcoms such as Bold and Beautiful, Baywatch, Sunset Beach, ER, Faulty Towers and Mr. Bean which are currently being run on the seven hours of daily ZNBC television. These shows limit the diversity of opinion expressed and reflected within the community because they were created for a specific audience in their country of origin. The end result of globalisation in the African media is a self-perpetuating process of silencing local opinion, since – a globalised media system that is not first and foremost grounded within a local context, produces nothing but copycats who bear no true resemblance to the realities of their national context? (Banda, 2001).

Conclusion

Francis Kasoma clearly has a great deal of hope for the future of the media in Zambia and the rest of Africa:

[For the press in Africa,] the first decade of the 2000s is, certainly, going to be slightly better than that of [the 1990s], in terms of availability to the public, ability to give the people a wider choice, and, above all, some limited ability to put pressure on government to be transparent and accountable to the people?. (Kasoma, 2000: 230)

Although we share his energy and optimism our primary question after examining plurality and power relations in Zambian broadcasting is: How? In analyzing issues of pluralism and power relations we contend that Zambia's broadcasting system is not consistent with the political values of the country. An overview of the history of media and democracy in Zambia amplifies this point. In deconstructing the primary elements of the definition of pluralism as laid out by the Windhoek Declaration, it is clear that Zambian broadcasting fails to meet these minimum requirements. A monopoly of all radio and television channels is still maintained by the government. Even in the areas where ownership has diversified, there is still a centralisation of power in the hands of a few vested interests. Furthermore, the number of channels is far from diverse and the opinions carried on those channels are also limited in their scope and highly censored.

It is clear that the lack of pluralism and centralisation of power in the hands of the state and vested interests leads to undemocratic practices in Zambian broadcasting. Although we would like to believe that the first years of the new millennium will bring greater plurality to Zambian broadcasting, we see little evidence to indicate that change will be quick in coming.

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