

De-regulation of the Namibian broadcasting industry: Challenges and contradictions

Kaitira Kandjii

Outlining the ownership patterns of commercial and community broadcasting, the following article offers information on the re-regulation of the broadcast media environment in Namibia between 1990 and 1999. It argues that ownership patterns do not indicate a transformation of historical imbalances in the form of black empowerment. The Namibian Communications Commission tasked with regulating the sector has no policy on how to develop and guide the broadcasting sector in the country. Formed under the pretence of an autonomous body, it remains an arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Information and Broadcasting. The lack of black participation in the black media industry is found to be largely due to lack of capital and interest in the sector. The emergence of community radio has also not provided the necessary opportunities and advantages to communities to participate significantly in the sector.

The process of de-regulation (i.e. transforming and putting legislation in place to re-regulate the broadcasting sector) which was meant to transform the broadcasting scene throughout southern Africa in the 1990s, has not brought about meaningful changes in the ownership of media in Namibia. Furthermore, the de-regulation process is also flawed with contradictions. The lack of meaningful transformation in the broadcasting sector in Namibia is, on the one hand, largely due to the government's failure to implement a policy framework that satisfactorily supports transformation; while on the other hand is hampered by the lack of 'black' capital in the country. Other factors include the lack of interest among the general public to participate meaningfully in broadcasting transformation; and no platforms to encourage the private sector to enter the realms of broadcasting and diversify their interests. These factors are largely due to historical imbalances and the country's poor economic infrastructure.

The initiative to transform the broadcasting process in Namibia, or 'the opening of the airwaves' campaign, has been necessitated by two transformative processes:

One at the politico-ideological level - that is the need to transform the legislation and policies guiding the old state broadcasting stations in accordance with nation-building and development policies (the national policy initiative);

And the other at the global/international level necessitated by the globalisation of the media and telecommunications industries (see Barnett, 2000) -- the global policy environment.

History of broadcasting in Namibia

Before independence, the South West Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SWABC) dominated the broadcasting scene (Lush & Kandjii, 1998). The SWABC was established in 1956 as the regional news representative of the SABC. Its radio broadcasts were intended for the white communities, particularly farmers. However in 1969 three vernacular radio services were launched. These were Otjiherero, Damara>Nama and Oshiwambo. Other ethno-linguistic radio services were launched much later. These radio stations were used to articulate racial and ethnic differences among the Namibian people and to disseminate propaganda messages of the South African apartheid government against the national liberation movements.

Television broadcasts of the SWABC began in 1981 with similar intentions as radio broadcasts. Initially it was a relay from the SABC or cassette services, flown in daily for a rebroadcast. This service was later extended to Oshakati and Walvis Bay. But with time the SWABC was able to produce local news. Television broadcasting in Namibia consisted of only one channel, which remains the case today.

Soon after independence, the government and civil society felt that the broadcasting corporation SWABC did not fully represent the interests and rights of the Namibian citizens. A need thus existed to dismantle the whole broadcasting framework and establish a public broadcasting system intended to inform, educate and entertain the Namibian people. In addition to this the need was identified to introduce new policies and regulations that would improve access to information relevant to the Namibian people. The secondary aim of this policy making was to address diversity of ownership as well as to reassess the allocation of limited frequencies.

Transformation of state broadcasting in Namibia

Bold steps were immediately taken by the Namibian government to re-shape the realm of broadcasting. Media legislation was promulgated and policies formulated. The Namibian Broadcasting Corporation Act of 1991 and the Namibian Communications Commission Act of 1992 paved the way for the de-regulation of the broadcasting sector in Namibia. Soon thereafter, a number of commercial and community radio stations sprung up.

In terms of these Acts, the old state-controlled SWABC was transformed into the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). This transformation was applauded as unshackling public broadcasting from state control but, on the contrary the new NBC was soon politically and economically 'chained' by the new rulers. The NBC's independence from government regulation as a public broadcaster is compromised by the appointment of its board by the Minister of Information and Broadcasting and as a result, the NBC Board, through the Director-General, is directly accountable to the Minister. Following the appointment of the new Cabinet in March 2000, the newly formed Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Information and Broadcasting will now make these appointments.

Political appointments at the senior editorial level also affect the NBC's editorial independence, resulting in occasional ruling party influence on NBC news and current affairs content.

Media ownership in Namibia

Although the Namibian Broadcasting Act does not stipulate that the ownership of public broadcasting (NBC) will rest with the Minister, it makes a provision for the Minister of Broadcasting and Information to be the holder of debentures of a company or to be Registrar of Companies. Section 3 (b) reads: 'the Registrar of Companies' shall be construed as a reference to the Minister.' This could be seen as following a trend in some African countries, in that public ownership of broadcast media means majority ownership by the State. In the case of NBC, this translates into 100 percent ownership by the State. Needless to say there is no plurality in the ownership of public broadcasting.

Commercial broadcasting, whether television or radio, is a new phenomenon in Namibia, having come about only after 1990. Despite the small population of the country, commercial broadcasting in Namibia has one ideal in common with commercial ventures in the rest of southern Africa: profit making. As Tomaselli (1997: 21) has noted the 1990s saw the making of profit and accumulation of capital back on the agenda as the sole criteria for media operations. However, profit making in Namibia is affected by two main factors:

ö Firstly, Namibia's small, poor and largely rural and dispersed population makes profitable commercial broadcasting difficult;

ö Secondly, commercial broadcasting is largely dependent on advertising. Namibia's small private sector provides stiff competition for market share.

It is difficult to quantify these stations' commercial success. However, it is rumoured that one is making a reasonable profit, another is breaking even and there is a case of one making no money at all. Profit making imperatives of commercial broadcasting have led to the dominant players in the broadcasting media having other business interests or alliances.

It is interesting to note that a requirement of the Namibian Communication Commission for a foreign investor to qualify for a broadcasting licence in Namibia, is to form alliances with Namibian citizens who should make up 51 percent of the shareholding of the joint venture. This, and the lack of strong local capital in the country, has led to the dualistic nature of media ownership. South African capital, possibly as a result of that country's status as erstwhile colonial power, always plays a significant role in media ownership in Namibia. For example:

Namibia's longest running commercial radio station, Radio 99, is owned by a partnership of German citizens (M. Aita and R. Lange) who own 49 percent, and the remainder by Namibian parliamentarian P. Moongo and local business woman E. Van Wyk.

These same German citizens also have a 49 percent share in Radio Energy, while Kalahari Holdings (the investment arm of the ruling party) owns the other 51 percent.

A partnership of Thomson (Namibian) and McGregor (South African) own Radio Wave, while G. Jensen (Namibian) owns Radio Kudu - the former broadcasting in English and the latter largely in Afrikaans.

E. Absolon is the sole owner of Hardap Radio situated in the south of the country.

Kosmos Radio is 51 percent owned by a parliamentarian (recently deceased) and the remainder by South African company KD Media. The same South African Company has been issued a television licence but it is still not in operation.

MNET commercial station which is owned through Multi-Choice Namibia is again owned by the politically charged Kalahari Holdings (51%) and MIH South Africa.

What this breakdown highlights is that there is little or no penetration of Namibian ? and even more so ?black dominated? ? capital in the broadcasting sector. The absence of media conglomerates (such as TML, Naspers etc as is the case in South Africa) and individuals with significant capital in the private sector, has created a situation whereby entry into the broadcasting industry by blacks is limited. Because they don't have the option to 'buy into' already existing media organisations, they are able to enter the sector only by starting new ventures from scratch. This proves difficult both from an economic and human resource and capacity perspective.

It is my contention that in order to achieve meaningful diversification of broadcast media ownership in a country overcoming apartheid's historical imbalances, it is decisive that this change be characterised by black capital intervention.

Community broadcasting

Community broadcasting in Namibia only dates back to 1994, when Katutura Community Radio (KCR) was established by a group of NGOs. Based in Windhoek, its reach only includes two residential areas inhabited largely by blacks. The station, which is owned through a trust, is controlled by an elite group of former community activists.

Provisions made in the Namibian Communications Commission Act of 1992, an 'opening of the airwaves' so to speak, provided a new opportunity for establishing community broadcasting.

Community radio is being established in the far northern rural areas of the country, by UNESCO

in collaboration with the government. With only one station having been established to date, this initiative seems to be progressing rather slowly. Only one of the planned community radio stations, Ohangwena Community Radio (funded by UNESCO), has been established. However, there are three other community radio stations elsewhere in the country. They are:

Channel 7 a religious radio station owned by several denominational groups;

Radio Ecclesia-Namibia is owned by the Catholic Church;

The campus radio station of the University of Namibia.

With the exception of Ohangwena Community Radio, all the other community radio stations are urban centred.

Black empowerment and media ownership

Although in South Africa there is a new discourse of 'black empowerment' advanced in industry as a means to promote greater involvement of 'black' people at all levels of business management and ownership, these ideals have not really taken root in the Namibian public sphere.

However much the government's information policy talks of educationally-based 'empowerment' and 'capacity-building' for nation building and development, it makes no reference to empowering Namibians to enter the business of broadcasting.

One sign of 'black economic empowerment' in Namibia is tokenist affirmative action. This entails the appointment of high profile 'black' personalities to senior positions both in parastatal organisations and the private sector.

Another more extensive empowerment initiative is that undertaken by the South West African People's Organisation, in the form of Kalahari Holdings. Originally a SWAPO company, Namibia Properties, the organisation later became Freedom Holdings before being renamed as Kalahari Holdings. Although in strict terms this constitutes 'black' empowerment, the SWAPO ownership could also be seen as a form of party 'empowerment' rather than 'black empowerment'

In 1991 Electronic Media Network (M-Net South Africa) entered into an agreement with Kalahari Holdings to apply for a broadcast licence to re-broadcast M-Net programmes in Namibia. In terms of this agreement, MultiChoice Namibia was formed with Kalahari taking a 51% share.

In addition to the above larger media ventures, Kalahari Holdings has part ownership in one commercial radio station.

These considerations suggest the following possible reasons for the lack of black ownership in Namibia's broadcast media:

No legislated provisions in broadcasting policy prescribing black (as opposed to merely 'Namibian') participation in new consortia.

A lack of financial funds or banking provisions (like South Africa's Independent Development Trust) for blacks wishing to enter the broadcasting industry;

The lack of private sector diversification into the media industry;

No unbundling has taken place in independent Namibia, as has occurred in South Africa after 1994. Where the latter could follow this route to empowerment because of that country's plurality of corporate media, this is impossible in Namibia because such conglomerates do not exist there.

These problems are compounded by the Namibian Communication Commission's 'first come, first served' laissez faire approach. This means that applications are accepted purely on the basis of available frequencies. Like NBC, the NCC is currently an arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Information and Broadcasting. Reform is underway to improve the independence of the commission.

The commission conducts no economic research on the sustainability of the sector, nor do they review licensing conditions and obligations once licences have been issued.

Conclusion

Ten years after independence new broadcasting regulation has enabled the emergence of commercial and community broadcasting in the country, although a large percentage of it lies in the hands of 'white' capital.

However, while post-independence regulations were aimed at transforming the previous state owned SWABC, the newly formed public broadcaster the NBC is still very much under the wing of the government. The NBC being the only television broadcaster (with a single channel to inform, educate and entertain eleven ethnic groups and a largely rural population) still dominates the television industry.

To end, I wish to suggest that democratisation of media ownership ? given our socio-economic situation ? should include greater black capital representation alongside white capital in order to address historical imbalances. Ownership should lie more with Namibians as opposed to foreigners and initiatives (local, international and multilateral) should be taken to aid this process of transformation.

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Notes

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6. The Namibian Broadcasting Act 1991

7. The Namibian Communications Commission Act 1992.

Kaitira Kandjii is Regional Information Co-ordinator of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, Windhoek, Namibia. He may be contacted at Kkandjii@misa.org.na