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# THE MEDIA IN EMERGING AFRICAN DEMOCRACIES: POWER, POLITICS, AND THE ROLE OF THE PRESS

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The circumstances surrounding global press activity in the 1990s and beyond no longer justify theories of media and the press developed in earlier decades. Four widely accepted theories propounded in 1963 by Frederick Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm — the libertarian, authoritarian, communist, and social responsibility theories — hardly provide an acceptable framework today for analyzing media functions in a world said to be no more than a global village, albeit one that is still under construction.<sup>1</sup> These theories reflected political facts of their day, but both communist and authoritarian rule are disappearing as models of governance.

The world of 1963 was divided along opposing ends of an ideological gulf. Africa came into the community of nations in the early sixties, mostly as a fragmented extension of one of two prevailing schools of political thought. While the majority of African states gained their independence only as part of a deal that would keep them within the ambit of their former colonial masters, some, with the help of the communist powers, forced their way out of the fold and established *de jure* communist regimes. The ideological division of the post-war world thus became a significant feature on the African political landscape.

With the transformation of the bipolar world, politics and economics, along with society and the media, will never be quite the same again. This is particularly apparent in the radically changing sociopolitical environments of emerging democracies. Strong currents of change, for example, are sweeping through Africa as the continent reacts to post-Cold War modifications in the geopolitical

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1. See Frederick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963). The concept of the globe as an electronically contracted village is crucial to any new hypothesis on the role of the modern press. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964). For a discussion of this concept in the context of the 1990s, see Jonathan Alter, "Ted's Global Village," *Newsweek*, 11 June 1990, 48-52.

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configuration of the world. In virtually all fifty-two African states, major institutional forces currently seek to overthrow, by peaceful or violent means, the status quo. From Lagos to Mombassa, Annaba to the Cape of Good Hope, advocates of a new order are engaged in a struggle to end monolithic, one-party governments; they seek greater accountability in government; they demand a redefinition of gender roles in society; and they speak out in favor of state constitutions that guarantee basic freedoms of the individual and the press.

The press on the African continent has emerged as a key player in the demise of neo-capitalist dictatorships and pro-communist totalitarian regimes. In most African countries, radio, television, and print media mirrored the changing global mood of the late 1980s and generally set the pace of transformation. Where the media did not play a leading role, they kept the process on course. Virtually everywhere the press challenged governments, often incurring costly repercussions for their efforts. The result has been the collapse of monolithism and the end of the one-party system of government, the demise of centralized state-run economies, and in most African states, a redefinition of the social order once manipulated exclusively by a dictatorial governing elite.

This sweeping tide of democratic change has left many states during the first half of the 1990s in a period of ideological transition. As pluralism increasingly becomes the norm, individuals across the African continent are demanding a redefinition of the fundamental rules by which society will be governed in the future. Countries have taken different trajectories towards fulfilling this "imperative of democratization." Some states, like Benin, Congo, and Togo, opted to convene a national conference — a forum "where the misrule and abuses of past and present governments can be exposed...[an] exercise in collective catharsis."<sup>2</sup> Others, like Zambia and Sao Tome, took the matter straight to the electorate, resulting in the dismantling of the government in power. Still other regimes tried to hold out against the tide, resorting to delay tactics and strong-arm manipulation of the process. Cameroon and Zaire, for example, have undertaken some reform but have not yet removed burdensome government controls on the press and society. Nevertheless, a new socio-political order is emerging on the continent, forcing most African states to learn quickly the rules of nascent democracy.

The urgent need for popular education in the fundamentals of representative government and free market economics necessarily puts the burden on the press, especially the broadcast media, the only instrument of mass education available to most of Africa. Early in this transition to democracy, there was also a need for institutional points of reference to orient society and serve as a kind of compass for determining future directions of the state. With society adrift and the government losing control, the press naturally served as this point of reference.

In Africa, unlike in the West, there have been few rules or standards of ethics regarding politics and press-government relations. The uniqueness of the Afri-

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2. Richard Joseph, "Africa: The Rebirth of Political Freedom," *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 2, No. 4 (Fall 1992): 11-24.

can media experience both past and present has transcended traditional press theories conceived during the Cold War era. This article seeks to provide a basis for conceptualizing a new paradigm for the role of the press in Africa.

### The Press-Government-Society Triad

The dynamics of internal socio-political and economic change in a state is directly dependent upon an informational triad involving the press, the government, and society. Indeed, the challenges that face the press in Africa today are inextricably linked to developments in the other two spheres. One critical and defining aspect of the press-government-society triad is censorship, an activity which regulates not only the power play between the government and the press but also the character of the press-society relationship.

The role of the press in Africa today is also determined in part by the absence of political definition in most countries still caught in the throes of a sweeping democratic tide, by the perceptions journalists have of their role in a transforming polity, and by the availability in each country of modern communications technology.

#### *Press and Government*

Relations between government and the press are generally determined by a range of ideological, legal, ethical, and technological factors which help establish the structure and texture of the relationship. Ideology generally defines the kind of relations: in communist and other autocratic systems the relationship is top-to-bottom, with the press as a subservient player in the process of governance; in libertarian societies, government and press tend to be participants with separate but complimentary roles. Laws limit the actions of each player, while ethics guarantee the respect of accepted rules. Legal and ethical guidelines serve as external instruments of control without which the relationship would be essentially vertical and manipulative in character. With or without these guidelines, the press-government relationship is sustained by an intense but often subtle power play, with "power" being the ability to produce intended effects.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between the press and government is also strongly affected by technological variables. Marvin Kalb wrote of a "gigantic globe-girdling, hi-tech loop that has obliterated time and space, while linking the worlds of press and politics."<sup>4</sup> The ability to control the flow of information changed considerably with the introduction of the fax machine; the computer age and the greater availability of desk-top publishing equipment further eroded the

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3. In defining power, standard dictionaries tend to emphasize the ability to do or act. Communication theorists would insist on the production of intended effects because only when intention determines the act can one identify the true repository of power. See Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis* (London: Longman, 1936).

4. See "Foreword" in Simon Sefarty, ed., *The Media and Foreign Policy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991).

power governments once had to regulate newspaper production. As the nature of the regime changes in Africa become more well-defined, this impact of these factors will become clearer.

One of the most effective expressions of power is censorship — an instrument used to achieve an intended effect through control, distortion, or deletion of the media product. The government, especially in autocratic regimes, easily controls this power. However, the press is not totally incapable, even under such restrictive regimes, of exerting some control over the product, perhaps through deliberate omissions or subtle distortions in media messages. Hence, the power of censorship is a central element in relations between government and the press: one or the other is constantly using it to ensure ultimate control of the press product. Power remains in the hands of the party that can successfully censor, control, distort, or delete the media product.<sup>5</sup>

### *Press and Society*

The press, in a sense, is always courting society. The essential quality of the relationship, therefore, is its congeniality. Credibility, or perceived objectivity, is at the very heart of congeniality, and congruity with society, consumer of the media product, is the “raison d’être” of press activity. Even the “captive” press of totalitarian systems persists in what can be described as a delusion of sorts, believing that it has the attention of the majority in society. Journalists in these systems often seek to create a subtle smoke screen through which, they hope, society will filter out messages that may appear offensive or simply untrue. Journalists in this setting would claim that the political environment within which press and society interrelate is not as important as the tacit understanding that society will consume the message of the press with just the required dose of credibility.

Media professionals in such an environment see themselves in a conspiratorial league with society — one that will give away an intended message by a wink on television, a particular word in the newspaper, or an obvious omission. Before the advent of democratic change in Cameroon, for instance, the media would preface every government-imposed editorial opinion with a quote from one of the Head of State’s many speeches, signalling that the message should be consumed with care. When it exists, this understanding best illustrates the nature of the relationship between the media and society, often in culture-specific terms that can be interpreted on a “perceived objectivity” scale.

Journalists of all ideological persuasions are generally sensitive to the fact that as long as the majority views the press as credible, their relationship with society is considered intact. When congeniality fails, as it did in many African countries at the start of the 1990s, the relationship ruptures. In the Cote d’Ivoire and Gabon, for example, journalists complained of their inability to connect

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5. Especially from the ideological perspective, there is a systemic variant in the possession and use of this power: totalitarian regimes have it and jealously keep it almost as a condition for the very survival of their rule. When society starts becoming more pluralistic, their grip weakens with each new vise of political dissonance.

with audiences after the first democratic tremors. The same could be said for the majority of countries on the African continent now caught in the spiral of socio-political transformation. The changing times obviously require a revision of old rules governing the press-society relationship.

Maintaining a congenial relationship with society, even in totalitarian states, may be just as important as preparing and delivering the media product. In an antagonistic or ambivalent atmosphere, the message is easily lost, conveying nothing and generating no reaction on the part of readers or viewers. Most African state-controlled media organizations failed to fully appreciate this fact — overlooking the impact of modern technology on their part of the global village — and suffered the consequences. The challenge for the African press lies in re-establishing and maintaining the relationship with society by packaging and delivering a credible product.

Just as political landscapes change, so does the nature of the ties that bind press, government, and society in the informational environment. The autocratic, post-colonial years in Africa have been marked by a rigid, vertical, and dictatorial order in relations, with the press no more than a tool in the hands of the government. Relations with society have followed a subtle pattern of courtship, often eluding the ideologues in government. Whenever they could, however, these ideologues disrupted that pattern by using the most potent weapon at their disposal, the power of censorship.

### Censorship as an Instrument of Power

The power of political institutions is inherent in their function as articulators of interests and mobilizers of social power.<sup>6</sup> The press interprets those functions and conveys them to society, deriving its power from this role. Merely designing the message is not enough; packaging and delivering it may be even more important. Governments invariably seek to control the packaging and delivery process, creating a power play between both press and government as both seek to regulate, distort, or delete a product to achieve an intended result. Given that both government and the press have a single target — the consumer — only one has the ability at any given moment to manipulate the information product. This ability is exercised through censorship.

There is a direct correlation between forms of censorship and the stages in a country's political development. Different types of censorship enforcement reflect not only the nature of political institutions but also the full range of factors that ultimately affect the product delivered to the consumer. These include access to information, the journalist's form of reporting, and the role ascribed to the press by those that control the media at any given moment. The following chart illustrates this continuum among censorship types:

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6. Tatab Mentan, "Politics and Media Power: A Conceptual Note," *Frekuensi Sud* 9 (April 1989): 61-74.

Censorship Type	Political Phase	Access Mode	Reporting Style	Role of News
Ideological	Authoritarian	*Filtered *No Leaks	*Subjective *Commentary	*Educate *Propaganda
Coercive	Social Agitation	*Limited *Leaks	*Subjective *Editorial	Inform
Social	Pre-Democratic	*Open *Leaks	*Manipulative *Objective	Inform
Legal Barred Access	Democratic	Open *Classified *Unclassified	*Manipulative *Factual	*Entertain *Inform

This typology seeks to establish how the forms of censorship evolve with political change, determining not only access to information but also how the news will be packaged and what objectives it will serve. This model also shows how changing censorship types redefine the character of the power play between government and the press and modify both the nature of press work and the quality of what the media produce.

#### *Ideological Censorship*

Ideological censorship enforcement is most prevalent in authoritarian political systems. Until the late 1980s, this form of censorship enforcement existed in virtually every country on the African continent, with the possible exception of Nigeria, Botswana, and Mauritius. Autocrats used it to stifle all dissent within the press and to promote a top-to-bottom political discourse that discouraged or rejected any feedback. This unwillingness to listen to the governed explains why growing frustrations with government incompetence, bureaucratic gridlock, and the absence of accountability went undetected for over two decades after the independence from colonial rule of most countries.

The effectiveness of ideological censorship is contingent upon the total control of all information sources and the manner in which the media product is processed. Totalitarian regimes endeavor to control both source and procedure, and the press is generally reduced to the subservient role of dishing out propaganda that is intended to enforce the ruling elite's hold on power. For most of the African press, it that meant the official communiqué issued from the President's or a government minister's office was the most important source of information. Newsrooms would regularly receive instructions prohibiting stories from being published. The government determined what was news, the press disseminated it, and a society without much choice consumed it as truth. Before diversity became the standard in the African informational environment, resulting in an increased audience for such foreign media as the BBC, *Radio France Internationale*, and *Deutschewelle*, local radio news was gospel. For instance, it was not uncommon to hear people on the streets of Bamako, Mali,

support an argument with the single premise that it was said on radio.

It was not unusual to have journalists in Africa argue that there was no official censorship in their countries, only a form of self-censorship that they did not consider to be censorship at all. They were taught this in the schools of journalism in Accra, Yaounde, or Dakar and encouraged to hold the view by editors-in-chief who were often no more than political operatives for the government in power. African journalists were persuaded that ultimate decisions about what to print belonged to individual editors. The practical implication here, of course, was that "subversive" thoughts would often come to consciousness "only to be beaten back in the interest of pragmatic getting along".<sup>7</sup> Inherent in self-censorship, therefore, is the fear of unknown consequences for expressing one's thoughts. Governments would exploit this fear and generally rely on self-censoring attitudes to maintain the hold over the press and, by extension, society.

With the unstated acquiescence of journalists, the regime develops a monolithic political discourse for the entire society, and the press simply becomes a medium for the transmission of what government officials consider politically correct messages. To the outside observer, the messages, often couched in carefully-worded slogans, appear repetitive and boring at best, hypnotic and illusionary at worst. Society, however diverse, is presented in the media as a homogenous whole, with think-alike citizens who must be constantly reminded of the achievements and benevolence of their governing elite. The role of the journalist is reduced to that of a top-to-bottom delivery person whose professional competence is measured by his political conformity.

With ideological censorship, events are not only reported, they must be commented on and situated within the grand social scheme of the ruling class. Events that do not fit the scheme are simply ignored or downplayed. The decision to carry or not carry a story is often made outside the newsroom and the principal source of news is the official press release. A violent student demonstration in some neighboring country, often does not get reported because it might give the "wrong ideas" to local students. An equally violent suppression of the demonstration may get coverage as a warning to potential agitators. Typically, accompanying commentary to the report would strongly decry any expressions of student discontent.

With ideological censorship, the pendulum of power clearly sways toward the government until some external force — economic, technological, or other — enters the system to weaken the regime and allow a the redistribution of power.

### *Coercive Censorship*

By 1990, ideological censors were quickly disappearing in Africa. The structures of a world in which they operated with untold impunity were shaken

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7. Todd Gitlin, "Redefining Censorship: The Control of Access, Information and Public Opinion," paper presented at the conference, "The Media and the Gulf Crisis: A Closer Look," Berkeley, California, May 1991.

down to their very foundations. From the Equatorial Guinea to Uganda, Tanzania, and Djibouti, the social landscape was in the throes of a minor revolution. Most national economies had failed, thanks to years of massive capital flight, poor planning, graft, incompetence, and sheer greed. In virtually all the nations of the continent, citizens were demanding that governments account for their stewardship. Populations everywhere seemed to be waking up from a post-colonial independence dream that had slowly become, by 1990, a scary political nightmare.

The world beyond Africa was also chasing out autocrats, and that fact was brought home to Africans with the ease and rapidity afforded by modern communications technology. In state after state, dictators, like Kerekou in Benin or Troare in Mali who had survived decades of unchallenged authority, were suddenly being pressured to account to the people for years of corrupt leadership. From this environment, a new censorship type, coercive censorship, also emerged.

Coercive censorship enforcement uses harsh and sometimes violent means to maintain the pro-government imbalance in the distribution of power in the environment, thus reflecting a different political reality from ideological censorship. Coercive censorship is a weakened dictator's response to an often defiant press that invariably emerges from cracks in the totalitarian wall. In early 1990, when the press in Kenya and Cameroon criticized Presidents Arap Moi and Paul Biya, respectively, it signalled for the first time that the apparent smooth sailing of ideological government was over: journalists had obviously detected weaknesses in the system and thereafter became emboldened enough to take on the government. In both cases, the government responded with coercion.

Coercive censorship is an external sign of internal political decay and an early indication that all is not well within the system. It comes in many forms and usually reflects the degree of perceived threat to government power: the greater the threat, the harsher the measures of coercion. Paradoxically, this censorship type also marks the early stages of increasing press influence as the pendulum of power swings away from a regime that no longer speaks for all of society. Cameroon underwent this process which included a landmark speech in June 1990 by President Biya acknowledging that the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement could no longer claim to be the sole voice of the people.

As the political situation evolves and control over the media message is ensured more by brute force than by ideological persuasion, censorship of the press, once largely a matter for self-censoring journalists, is divulged to a body outside the press — usually the government department with the means to enforce conformity. In the majority of cases — as in Congo, Gabon, or Niger — this enforcement comes from the Department of the Interior which has authority over the national police force and the prisons. Censors would look for “unpatriotic” or “subversive” messages and readily resort to strong-arm tactics to ensure press compliance with a set of guidelines established to preserve a crumbling order. In at least half the African nations, these coercion tactics actually created a more radical and reactionary press as the measures to control

journalists became more repressive. Even the guns of military regimes in Zaire and Burkina Faso, for instance, were not dissuasive enough to silence the critics of Presidents Mobutu and Blaise Compaore.

A worldwide survey by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) to determine the state of the world press revealed some rather gory statistics: in 1991, 267 attacks on the press occurred in Africa alone. In addition to cataloguing these tangible injustices against journalists, it was interlaced with descriptive words that together illustrate the state of the world in what some call the year of democratic change (e.g., warned, threatened, harassed, fired, confiscated, banned, interrogated, detained, imprisoned, assaulted, kidnapped, and killed).<sup>8</sup> In a postscript to the CPJ report, Stuart Loory of the Cable News Network (CNN) spoke of the dangers journalists face from all points of the political spectrum and powerful interests in societies throughout the world. This was especially true in Benin, Cameroon, Congo, the Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Zambia — countries undergoing a restructuring of power relationships.

Coercive censorship reflects the gradual loss of a regime's hold over the press and introduces, in effect, a transitional period that ends only with the redefinition of the lines of authority within the informational environment. This period is generally marked by a collective hunger in society for information, for news that is as free as possible of the former propaganda. In these circumstances, a press opposed to the status quo is born and grows in stature. As the press gains ground in the battle to deliver an alternative kind of news, a power shift becomes inevitable.

One feature of the ensuing transition is the irrepressible emergence of a passionate anti-government press and an unavoidable schism in the media, which leaves the "private" pitted against the "government" or "official" media. The rupture is often semantic, sentimental, political, and void of deontological considerations.

The government-owned Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) corporation was caught in the semantics debate early in 1990. The organization's Estates General met to revise the corporation's internal rules to reflect the transformation of society from a unitary to a pluralist polity. A crucial problem of nomenclature arose and stalled deliberations over a preamble to the code: Was CRTV a government or public enterprise? The first argument implied direct control by the government and pandered to the still-powerful pro-status quo agents; the second, from the advocates of change, would mean greater responsiveness to the changing mood of the public. Quite significantly, the debaters, all of them from within the organization, were almost evenly divided. Just as significantly, those who would maintain the status quo carried the day, and the word

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8. The CPJ report covered the first quarter of 1991. It featured three African countries (Kenya, Liberia, and Sudan) among the sixteen cases of concern worldwide; three (Chad, Liberia, and South Africa) in which journalists were killed, and eight in which they were arrested and imprisoned (Central African Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mauritania, Rwanda, Sudan and Tunisia); see *Attack on the Press: A Worldwide Survey* (Committee to Protect Journalists, March 1991).

"government" was retained. This naturally failed to reflect, as its authors soon found out, the power shift that was taking place in the country. However slowly, power lines were being redrawn between the press and the government, and in Cameroon, like elsewhere on the continent, the government was ceding ground. It fought back with measures to streamline the press.

The regime in Kenya was also illustrative of the times. A country once heralded as an African example of participatory government and respect for individual freedoms could hardly be identified on a new democratic map of Africa that was emerging from the old mix of civil and military authoritarian regimes.<sup>9</sup> While the government in Nairobi persisted in its claim that Kenya was not ready for democracy, a veteran political reporter in the Kenyan capital was complaining: "no one knows what is allowed and what is not . . . only after the police come do you know that something you wrote is forbidden."<sup>10</sup> The government was becoming increasingly rigid and threatening, but within a year, monolithism would collapse in Kenya and open the environment to new ideas and possible new alignments.

Under coercive censorship, the role of the press also shifts. Once little more than an instrument for announcing official communiqués, disseminating propaganda literature and, ostensibly, educating the masses, the press increasingly becomes a true medium of information exchange situated somewhere between government and the governed. There is greater use of the investigative genre, and a gradual slide toward alarmist and sensational journalism. This is done both to dig out the dirt and embarrass a weakened government and, hopefully, to keep a newly inquisitive audience tuned in. With a credulous audience freshly delivered from mind-control journalism, the danger is especially great for the media to claim a role, as did the many publications that surfaced in Benin after that country's National Conference in 1990, that goes far beyond the ethical confines of the profession. Whatever the role of the press, a shift has obviously begun, and power lines will have to be more clearly drawn.

Besides Zambia and Sao Tome, the two countries that had, by 1992, successfully redefined power lines in democratic constitutions, most of Africa was marked by the rising assertiveness of various political and media actors. Distraught regimes had to deal with fresh voices that advanced competing theories for re-establishing order in the environment. Each new voice claimed to speak for the majority in society: "power to the people" was the slogan that rang most loudly from rallies everywhere. The press was generally relied upon to echo these voices and get the message across to the greatest possible numbers. This reliance would sow the seeds of a new power arrangement that emphasized the role of the press as a conduit for power and recognized a new fact of political life in Africa: that power is a numbers game. In the government-press-society triad, society would emerge as the true repository of power and, indeed, the ultimate censor.

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9. Stephen P. Riley, "The Democratic Tradition in Africa: An End to the One-Party State?" *Conflict Studies* 245 (October 1991).

10. See Bill Kovach, "Clampdown in Kenya," *Nieman Reports* Vol. XLIV, No.4 (Winter 1990): 2-26.

### *Social Censorship*

The African experience seems to indicate that society will emerge as the arbiter of conflicts that pit assertive media and political actors against one another. During the social censorship phase the landscape is marked by political party formation, an increasingly assertive civil society, student demonstrations, and trade union formation. It is also characterized by an increasing absence of consensus within the government and a steady, if imperceptible, flow of power to the press. The shift is further encouraged by contending political forces that seek the support of the press in their efforts to out-manoeuvre one another in the struggle for dominance in society. The power of the press depends on how effectively it can keep society tuned in. It is quite simply a question of numbers: the larger the audience of any medium, the greater its power.

In many cases, the media product is made to order: reporters, editors and publishers give society what they believe it wants. Marshall McLuhan suggested that, "the owners of media always endeavor to give the public what it wants, because they sense that their power is in the medium and not in the message or program."<sup>11</sup> Hence, it matters little what the clarity or veracity of the message is; the important thing is to attract the greatest possible number of readers or viewers. Hence, there is a propensity for the eye-catching and the sensational, with little respect for basic journalistic ethics; as facts get tampered with, reality is distorted, and the truth, in some cases, is simply not told.

It is during the shift from coercive to social censorship types that a delicate turning-point occurs in the power play between press, government, and the governed. As the press gains power, it tends to redefine its role. It is no longer the unbiased arbiter, the objective interpreter, the impartial conduit that universally recognized professional ethics require it to be; the press becomes a central player. The editor of an independent weekly in Cameroon, *Le Messenger*, made this claim: the people "are freeing themselves, and we as journalists must help them free themselves, reconquer their rights . . . [my newspaper] is the symbol of democracy in Cameroon."<sup>12</sup> *Le Messenger* was indeed a key actor in the political convulsions in Cameroon during the early 1990s. The paper was promoting a specific political agenda, easily crossing the ethical line that separates partial from impartial reporting. The fact is open for debate whether this and similar publications simply served as transitional points of reference in an environment that was clearly adrift or were active advocates of a political cause — politicians with a press pass.

This same debate is occurring in many African countries which, like Cameroon, are still working to build a constitutional democracy. Ghana, Gabon, Mali, and Togo, for example, are in the pre-democratic phase of their political development. Only in a handful of others, like Senegal, Benin, and Zambia, have the rudiments of a new order been put in place. Those societies now operate under

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11. McLuhan coined the famous phrase, "the medium is the message" — that is, the content of communication is determined by its means; see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964).

12. Pius Njiawe, "Counting the Hours in Cameroon," *World Press Review* (January 1992): 51.

what may be regarded as legal censorship rules — a set of agreed upon texts which actually spell out and constitutionally guarantee a role for the press in the shaping of the environment.

### *Legal Censorship*

The legal censorship stage corresponds with the democratic phase of a society's political evolution. It is censorship by legislation; censorship through consensual principles that emerge with this final phase in the transformation of the socio-political environment. The rules of the game have been established, and the role of each member of the government-press-society triad is fairly well defined. There is the tacit understanding that society will relinquish power to government through the ballot box and the press will operate as the principal medium of communication between the two. This accord constitutes the basis of order in the democratic environment. In many cases, the constitution actually spells out the powers of the government and also guarantees the freedom of the press. The press is, in effect, the Third Power — what some theorists have termed the Fourth Estate.<sup>13</sup>

A few countries in Africa such as Mauritius, Nigeria, Sao Tome, Senegal, and Zambia may all experience this new order. They have reached this democratic stage through different routes, but all six states have in common the recent ability of their respective national media to bring a high degree of factual and objective reporting to the news. This objectivity differentiates them from the media in countries like Cameroon, the Cote d'Ivoire, and Gabon, which have legalized opposition parties but still cannot claim to have freed the press from the politicians' hold.

Legal censorship does not, however, free the press from some attributes identified in the previous two censorship phases of socio-political transformation. In particular, the reporting mode can be manipulative because manipulating is an inherent attribute of power. It is probably too early to identify instances of manipulation in the burgeoning democratic free press in Africa. It is possible that, as in older democracies, powerful interest groups will emerge and effectively subvert the process, destroying all hope for a genuine democracy. However, the new possibilities afforded the press in the current arrangement will probably allow it to contribute to the building of a system similar to the liberal democracies of the West.

## **The Press in a Changing African Environment**

African nations stand at various points on this censorship continuum, with some having reached the legal censorship stage. The vast majority are today at

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13. For theories of the press and its relationship to the other "estates," see, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963). Also, for relations between press and politics in an established computer age democracy, see Jeffrey Abramson, Christopher Aterton, and Gary Orren, *The Electronic Commonwealth* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

the "social" censorship level; some, like Ghana, Kenya, Niger and the Equatorial Guinea, still lag at the point of coercive censorship, while an anachronistic minority that includes the Central African Republic and Malawi remain in the ideological censorship mode.

The power play between press and government in Africa varies from state to state and over time as characterized by one or other of the censorship types. One of the dramatic occurrences of the 1990s has been the unheralded and rapid progression in most of Africa from the ideological to the coercive and on to the legal forms of censorship. Even Ghana, the Central African Republic, and Malawi — three countries where the government-press rapport over time has hardened in the ideological mold — show signs of movement towards the social/legal end of the censorship spectrum, as socio-political circumstances evolve away from the staid predictability that characterizes autocratic government.

Benin, Sao Tome, Senegal, and Zambia are among the trailblazers that, with new democratic constitutions, appear to have entered the ultimate phase of the press-government power play. In these and an increasing number of nations, political plurality, increased and diverse press activity, and free elections have combined to create a convenient atmosphere for redefining the order of relations within the socio-political environment. While the power balance within states obviously varies, from a global perspective, some common factors strongly influence press activity on the African continent. These include the clarity of political definition within each country's socio-political environment, the manner in which the press articulates its role, and the level of technological awareness and access to modern communications technology.

#### *Clarity of Political Definition*

As society changes, political leadership tends to surge into an ideological limbo of ill-defined concepts of governance. Zambia wandered in this ideological no-man's land for many months as former President Kenneth Kaunda agonized over how to deal with increasing calls for political change coming especially from the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). When Mr. Kaunda settled for a genuinely democratic option, he lost his presidency in ensuing elections. Kenya, on the other hand, is still caught between representative government and dictatorship as President Arap Moi tries to figure out how he can credibly hang on to power. Gabon proffers democracy with a multi-party parliament and a government majority to show for it. But Omar Bongo is still in power, and it is not clear how effectively his dictatorship can coexist with democracy in Gabon.

The implications for press activity in such political transitions are fairly evident. In the zig-zag between governing ideologies and the consequent absence of political definition, the press often dithers between the roles of government mouthpiece to affirm the status quo and the voice of change. Depending on how decidedly the country is moving in one ideological direction or the other, the call for change will fade or rise with the political winds.

African journalists who have seen their countries begin the slow movement

from autocracy to democracy suggest that the rate of progress is influenced by the relative strength of the government vis-a-vis the forces of change, the desire for change within society, and the attractiveness and clarity of the options presented. The faster society moves in a clear political direction, the more quickly a precise role for the press will be defined.

### *Mission of the Press*

The manner in which journalists identify and articulate their mission also determines the nature of press activity in emerging democracies. It is possible to ascribe to the press the role of an agenda-setter, of a catalyst of change, or of a passive chronicler of history in the making. Consciously or not, newsmen and women tend to see themselves in one or more of these roles.

In the role of agenda-setter, news people editorialize, comment, extrapolate, suggest, insinuate, intimate, and satirize. There is no limit to what the politically-conscious newsperson can do with words and the necessary technological hardware at his or her disposal. The objective, implied or obvious, would be to orient the social thought process, reorder the priorities of society by deliberately playing up certain issues at the expense of others. The problem here is that, in the absence of political platforms with a broad national consensus, agendas tend to be self-serving and not necessarily democratic. Agenda-setters exist in all political worlds, but they are particularly effective during periods marked by coercive, social, and legal censorship.

One of Cameroon's leading private newspapers, *Challenge Hebdo*, found political and economic advantage in an agenda-setting role in a country that shows all the attributes of coercive and social censorship. Using every known genre in the trade, from sensationalist headlines to opinion polls, the weekly newspaper consistently tried to determine what issues would preoccupy the Cameroonian society in the days following each publication. At the same time, it avoided the pitfalls that derailed a handful of other newspapers which emerged after the collapse of one-party rule in Cameroon. Until readers slowly woke up to the fact that this was no more than a tribal publication, *Challenge Hebdo* did what the other papers consistently failed to do: its political agenda was implied rather than stated. In the turmoil of transitional politics, the paper avoided labels with some measure of success and stayed above the fray, while maintaining as professional a posture as possible. Its opinion surveys, for example, were published along with the methodological approach used to obtain survey results.

A perusal of Cameroon's other "free press babies" reveals an absence of journalistic tact that quickly resulted in the categorization of newspapers into political blocs. The problem for mass circulation newspapers in Cameroon, as in most African countries, is that political agenda-setting in a polarized atmosphere tends to be an exclusive enterprise that further fragments an already limited and heterogeneous readership. As a result, the press increasingly panders to smaller audiences, minimizing its role as a national player.

Press activity can also be affected by the perception that journalists should enhance and not initiate change in society. While acting as a catalyst of

change, the press has tended to play a secondary role to the forces that actually introduce change. These forces may be economic, political, social, or a combination of all three. The post-independence period of the 1960s provided the African press with an ideal context within which it could act as a change-inducing catalyst. Nations had to be forged from a collection of tribes, and common cultural symbols had to be identified and promoted as part of that process. National consciousness had to be developed among the wide array of ethnicities that often constituted the new states. When the press actively pursued a goal of national cultural identity, disparate groups moved less hesitantly into the broader concept of the nation-state that colonialism had forged and independence attempted to nurture. There is evidence of this in Tanzania and Senegal, two countries that made cultural promotion a mainstay of post-colonial media programs. In most cases, however, cultural homogeneity as a measure of national identity was not considered a priority objective. The media did not take on the task, and nations evolved more as a cluster of ethnic states than as homogenous political entities with a common destiny.

It is still not clear if the present day proponents of democracy in Africa will find in the assertive media of a post-totalitarian age a cooperative vehicle for the dissemination of democratic values. The success of the democratic experiment in Africa may well depend on how the press articulates the concept of democracy. The question for media professionals in Africa should be fairly straight forward: Is the press an active agent of change or simply a part, albeit a quintessential one, of an evolutionary process? Should media practice in these changing polities be reflective of a universal experience and be subject, therefore, to established international ethical standards, or should performance be determined by culture-specific attributes that change with the times? Consensus among media professionals on their role will help determine whether the press will be an active or passive participant in the process of democratizing society.

### *Modern Communications Technology*

All across the world, says author Alvin Toffler, "new communication media, or new ways of using old ones, are being exploited to challenge — and sometimes overthrow — the power of the state."<sup>14</sup> Popular access to modern communications technology not only contributed to the demise of most African governments but also greatly affected the power structure within each national environment. The facsimile machine, for example, helped put an end in some states to a totalitarian practice of stifling dissent by keeping out all opposition literature. Thanks to the fax and photocopy machines, governments in just about every African country realized the futility of seizing newspapers from abroad that contained reports critical of the regime. Word of these reports invariably went out, and before long, a chain of events was unleashed: a phone call to the country of publication, one faxed copy of the contentious article and,

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14. Alvin Toffler, *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 340.

within minutes, photocopy machines would be rolling out enough copies for all who were willing to pay the often inflated copy price.

In most African countries, foreign radio broadcasts provide an important alternative news source. Disenchanted audiences turned from local radio news to Africa Number One, the Gabon-based independent radio station that has, in just over a decade, established a solid reputation for unbiased reporting. Along with the BBC, *Radio France Internationale*, the VOA, and *Deutschewelle*, Africa Number One constituted the "foreign voice" that attracted audiences in droves from local government-controlled radio stations. The "official voice" of government was reduced to simply carrying one rebuttal after another to what it generally referred to as unfounded allegations broadcast by "imperialist" media.

Although the foreign media brought an outside perspective on local events, the message in many cases was hardly a disinterested one. When Western governments took a stand against the status quo powers in Africa, even the reputedly objective BBC spiced its reports with a good dose of what was clearly an opposition view. When France found existing regimes more conducive to its interests, RFI came through as rather sympathetic in its coverage of even the most autocratic regimes. What is important, however, is that foreign radio broadcasts not only provided African societies with an alternative news source, but also made it impossible for governments to preserve isolated islands of repression with one-voice, one-truth media organizations. In generating choices, the international media greatly influenced the process and helped define the role of the press in the democratic experience of Africa.

### Conclusion

An effective press theory for Africa must include an examination of the role of the press in a changing polity. How the press functions in any one national context will depend on the degree of political definition in the country as well as on the mission local journalists ascribe to themselves, either as agenda-setters, catalysts of change, or detached chroniclers of history. Their articulation of that role will, in turn, depend on the quality of training of the journalists, the availability of working tools, and the financial circumstances of each news organization.

Press activity, and consequently press power, is also affected by technospheric considerations: the degree of access to modern communications technology seems to have a direct correlation to increased and freer press activity in any environment. By giving audiences in Africa options other than censored national broadcast news, foreign radio stations, with their technological advancements that facilitate a wider broadcast range across the continent, contributed to the demise of totalitarian regimes and the monolithic press in Africa.

The proliferation of media technology and the increasingly low cost of the media product may mean that even the poorest nations on the continent will soon be able to find a place in the "giant technological loop" that binds the

different points of a global village currently under construction. More important, it suggests that private interests as well as governments will be in a position to acquire the hardware necessary for a particular media activity.

Indeed, the tendency in most countries today is toward increased privatization of the media. While African regimes presided over the general destruction of national economies, a small private sector in many countries flourished and, therefore, do have a viable private sector economy. With the introduction of pluralism in the political arena, many wealthy citizens are beginning to appreciate the power that comes with media control. The proof is in the sudden proliferation of independent newspapers each time an African dictatorship lost its control over society. There is real danger, of course, that quantity may ultimately destroy quality; but in societies that had neither, more can only mean better.

In Africa today, the structure of relations between government, press, and society is being transformed to respond to important economic and socio-political changes in each national environment. The old order is collapsing everywhere on the continent, and society seems to be caught in a tidal wave of change that shows no immediate signs of subsiding. These sweeping events suggest that the rules that bind the media to government and society in the emerging democracies of Africa must be broad enough to allow for significant structural and institutional changes that invariably accompany such movements.



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