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Towards the Democratization of Public Communication: A Critique of the Current Criteria of News

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Abstract

The contention of this paper is that it is possible, though demanding, to develop a new type of journalism which would lead to the democratization of public communication. Based on the normative framework of the ultimate dignity of the human being, the paper argues that the African mass media are an aberration from the African democratic tradition. It observes that the conventional rules applied in the selection and management of news are obstacles to democracy. It ends by suggesting some ways in which the situation may be changed to allow for the development of a more democratic form of journalism.

Résumé

Cet article postule qu'il est possible, quoique difficile de concevoir un nouveau type de journalisme qui ouvrirait la voie à la démocratisation de la communication publique. Se fondant sur le cadre normatif de la dignité de l'homme, l'auteur avance que les mass média en Afrique sont une aberration de la tradition démocratique Africaine. Il fait observer que les règles conventionelles appliquées dans la sélection et la gestion de l'information constitutent de obstacles à la démocratie. Il suggère, pour finir, quelques voies qui pourraient conduire à un changement de la situation et permettre l'émergence d'une forme de journalisme plus démocratique.

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The following reflections fall into the broad category of public philosophy of Communication, or communication ethics. All philosophy and all ethics analyse a phenomenon, or reality, from the perspective of certain principles. The normative framework from which I proceed is the humanistic and socialistic concept of the ultimate value and dignity of the human being, and therefore of the essential equality of all persons - not just before the law - but more fundamentally in their right to participate in the public realm.

The notions of human dignity of all, and of equality between people, do not contradict the roles, ranks and status, both ascribed and achieved, which regulate relationships in our communities and societies, and consequently the patterns of behaviour, such as respect and social sanctions. The concept of equality in a structured community can, perhaps, best be explained by the attitude demanded in African societies towards two age-groups, the young and the old. Both these groups may be said to be dependent, often physically weak and vulnerable. They therefore demand special attention, care, and indeed respect. But it is not just *your* child or our child but *any* child which deserves protection. Likewise, any old woman or man is worthy of special recognition, reverence and respect.

Respect for human dignity and the principle of equality - regardless of sex, education, ethnicity, wealth, status, etc. - are the foundations of democracy. Democracy is a modern concept for what, in most parts of Africa, has been a way of life, and, to a certain extent a matter of course for centuries. Even colonialism could not eradicate the democratic ordering of life and of relationships, at least not in the rural areas.

My contention now is that the African mass media are an aberration from that tradition. As the mass media in general, they are, by and large, autocratic rather than democratic. They are primarily concerned with interests of the elites rather than with the aspirations of what we disparagingly call 'ordinary people', or, in the terminology of the left, 'the masses', who have no face, no will of their own.

In the words of the MacBride Report, Democratization (of communication) is the process whereby;

(a) the individual becomes an active partner and not a mere object of communication;
(b) the variety of messages exchanged increases; and
(c) the extent and quality of social representation or participation in communication are augmented.1

This process has often been overlooked, both on the international level and on the national and local levels. It is not merely the powers behind the media which are challenged by NWICO but also the journalists and broadcasters who wield considerable communication power of their own.

Democratization of communication and democratization of society are of course interdependent. They are variables of the same reality. To democratize communication therefore means to democratize society, and vice versa. But from our perspective of public philosophy it is precisely the role of the media to be a catalyst in the democratic process. For democracy in any society is never providing more space and more participation for all. It is therefore always a struggle. The Latin American media experts, meeting in Embu, Brazil, in 1982 went a step further by saying:2

> Democracy is above all a fundamental human attitude, expressed in communication by abolishing authoritarian forms and relying on the conscious, organised and collective action of the oppressed. Pluralistic participation of social sectors should manifest itself in the different levels of communication process, particularly in the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural goods.

There would be a great deal to say about the "conscious, organized and collective" communication actions of the oppressed, or peasants and workers, or women, which have emerged in this country and several other countries of the continent. Meanwhile, let us return to the democratic potential that lies within the established mass media, and this is a practical way.

The conventional criteria of news - and obstacle to democratization

The mass media are characterized by a set of conventional 'rules' which are applied to the selection and treatment of news in a fairly uniform way. These criteria for news have been made most explicit in North American and British journalism and are part of the pattern of most news agencies. They have also been adopted by the mass media in most countries of the South, and, with certain variations, by the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The adherence to these conventional rules of the news media do not only show the news managers of broadcasting stations and newspapers, but they also reflect the kind of society in which we live and the role the news media have to maintain the dominance of the dominant sectors.

Here then is a critique of the conventional criteria for news - from the perspective of the 'ordinary people' or 'masses'.

The very concept of news is tied up with that of *timeliness:* how recently has something happened? Timeliness signifies an 'event' that took place yesterday, or last week, or, as we often write, 'recently'. 'Recently' serves us well when we report on an accident that happened some time ago in a remote rural area. But we tend to be lost when the reality we wish to describe is not an 'event' but a status quo, or, in the words of Johan Galtung 'a permanent'. The difficulty or inability to determine the time frame of a process, or trend, or status quo, or 'permanent', makes us reject a great deal of news. Witness the drought situation in many African countries two or three years ago: for months it did not qualify as news, until some TV cameramen stumbled across some hunger victims and shot their pictures, mainly for foreign consumption. Or what happens in our factories, our ports, our railways etc? Unless a minister visits them and makes a speech, or unless an accident occurs, they go largely unreported. In short, it is in part because of the rule of 'timeliness' as a criteria for news that rural reporting and people-centred industrial reporting are so difficult and take third or fifth place in the selection of news.

The next anti-democratic villain is *prominence.* How important is a person? Following this criterion of news, the mass media are supposed to make the people with power also socially prominent. Power of course is not only measured in terms of political responsibility, but also in terms of money and material possessions, in terms of the power play that goes on in politics and the economy. Add to this the prominence awarded by the mass media to the 'glamourous', the beauty queens and kings, and the heroes of our entertainment industry and of sports, and the picture that emerges is that some very few men or women, who are either politically powerful or economically rich, or both, and those who because of looks or muscle power or their soft singing voice, truly qualify as the VIP of the media.

The criterion of prominence does not only apply to people, but also to countries and town. For a long time, Britain has been one of the elite countries that has figured prominently in the press of Anglophone Africa, just as France has assumed the same role, and continues to be the elite country *per excellence,* for most of the media in Francophone Africa. The United States of America and the Soviet Union are now also elite countries, which tend to take prominence over such strategically important countries as the Frontline States of Africa. And there are, of course, the elite towns within our own countries, almost always the capitals. An editor seeing the word KweKwe as dateline will scrutinize the item with

special care, thinking, what can really happen in this little sleepy town in the midlands of Zimbabwe.

However, there is a problem with some elite persons residing in our elite towns. Are they, as our elected representatives or as ministers of government, not prominent in a way that the media have a duty to cover their travel and their speeches? Of course, they are. In many African countries, a few political leaders stand for the unity of the nation, the sovereignty of its destiny, and the integrity of leadership. The more they embody these values, the more important they are for the lives of ordinary people. Every nation needs leaders who can inspire people, and once the force of inspiration wanes or even disappears, there is a crisis of identity and a credibility gap.

But even in the best of circumstances, the prominence of the prominent should not go at the expense of the ordinary men, women and children. At least some of our political leaders expect the mass media to make the powerless more prominent, the groups of peasants, organisations of workers, associations of women, young men and women taking initiatives to build their nation as well as their lives.

In continuing this critique of the criteria for news, I shall deal with only two more, namely, the criteria of 'conflict' and the 'unusual'.

Conflict

We have become so obsessed by this news value that we capitalize on any event that contains even the slightest element of it. A certain phrase of a politician can somehow be interpreted as aimed at his political rivals, and what started as an innocent statement now becomes the opening salvo of an alleged power struggle between politicians. Are we aware of the warlike language we use in political reporting, to keep up the element of conflict, and this not only during election times? 'Minister throws back challenge; 'Government to fight to the last drop' (meaning it will re-orienate its economy) - these are typical conflict headlines.

Worse than that, if there are no real conflicts to report on they are created artificially as a form of entertainment. Most of the imported feature films contain a very heavy dose of violence, murder, chase, intrigue and whatever conflict one can think of. This applies to the simple spy or detective thriller as well as to the latest productions of Star Wars.

In short, there is little space or time in our mass media that can be devoted to peace, normality, harmonious relationships etc. This

is another reason why the lives of ordinary men, women and children are to a large extent excluded from the mass media.

The Unusual

The old and utterly ridiculous story of 'man bites dog' is still traded as an example of journalistic criteria. How odd, extraordinary and bizarre must an event appear to qualify as news? It's in this category of news, however that ordinary people have a certain access to the media. If they do something particularly unusual or bizarre, like standing on their heads for four hours, or drinking twenty bottles of beer, they suddenly become news makers. If they figure otherwise in our papers or on the air, then it's usually as victims of something, usually accidents and catastrophies.

The traditional criteria for news are only one side of the problem. The other side is the media's definition of an 'event', which is equally undemocratic.

What is a News Event?

When people do something significant, or if something important is happening to them, and when, what they are doing or what is happening, is of interest to readers or listeners, it is a news event. This is the standard description of event' in most textbooks of journalism. Let's examine this definition.

Firstly, we notice that the operative words 'significant', 'important' and 'of interest to readers' are already predetermined by the criteria for news, some of which I have just outlined. 'Important event' really means important person. 'Readers' interest' is to a large extent covered by the criteria of conflict and the bizarre. In practice, therefore, events mean the speeches of the prominent, the controversies of the politicians, mostly in elite cities, and the rituals of public life (like cutting ribbons, opening or closing meetings, etc.).

Secondly, the more 'complete' an event is, the more likely that the news media will pick it up. The classical example of a complete event is the speech. Maybe this is the reason why speech reporting is so popular in the mass media. When the speaker says, 'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen', and the audience applauds, the event is over and done with. In fact it is very rare that anything really happens during or after a speech. It is usually a public ritual that is complete in itself - no follow-up needed.

Another example of a preferred event is the accident. Two men killed at a construction site - when, where and how - and the event is complete. The significant question 'why?' is sometimes asked. But the follow-up of whether or not safety procedures at the site had improved is rarely done. The social construction of news event

is particularly prevalent on radio and television. Newspapers are more accustomed to follow-up stories and interpretations of events. Once again, the status quo or the 'permanent', almost totally eludes our definition of a news event. A third aspect of the conventual news event is its *need for legitimisation.* Some years ago the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were scrutinised with regard to their news sources. The assumption was that these two prestige papers were more likely to have an independent stance on the news than most other American papers. The analysis shows that close to half of the two papers news content was attributed to U.S. government officials, and another 27 percent to 'foreign officials'. Less than 17% came from non-government sources, and only one percent of all news stories were based on the reporters' own observation and analysis. The media's need for attribution is so great that an event becomes a news event if and when it can be attributed to a high source. This has led one researcher to construct a theory of news which he calls 'the politics of illusion'.3

A fourth characteristic of an 'event' lies in its repetition. News is very repetitive. The reason is that the type of things which qualify as events are already determined, the agenda of news is set, and is all in the news diary. New issues hardly emerge. It has been pointed out by American researchers that most of the issues concerning the enviroment, particularly the pollution of water, still do not figure on the public agenda of the American media and are therefore largely unreported. Many years ago a prominent political personality of his country asked me, "Why do most journalists always ask the same questions?' I could have told him (but didn't) that most journalists don't really write for the public but what the media expect them to write about. And in that you don't want to be an outsider, in spite of the high value attributed to 'scoops'. The media of information are, in many ways, one body, with few dissenting voices. In the early months of 1980 I happened to be a part-time reporter on the Zimbabwe elections for a European radio network. One day, I got a phone call from the editor, telling me that my services had been terminated. I asked why. He told me that what I was saying was entirely different from what the other media reported. I had apparently been grossly out of tune with the rest of redundant messages from Harare, hardly any of which predicted (as I had done) that Mr. Mugabe would win by a large margin.

Media events, being largely ceremonial, are also repetitive if not entirely predictable. The result of all this is that the media inevitably create some kind of surface to the social reality we live in, which has very little to do with the real world of ordinary people. To

capture that world, we need to develop alternative criteria of news and redefine the meaning of 'event'.

Alternative Criteria of News

There are some newspapers, many magazines and some radio and television stations which welcome reports on the problems and issues of ordinary people. Some media managers even wish to have more reports and in-depth stories from rural areas. Such stories are increasingly acceptable to the established media, provided they are written in the conventual forms (*genres*) of journalism, i.e. mainly in the forms of news and feature articles. Some papers have introduced new types of features for precisely this purpose, like 'Letter from . . . ', 'Village Voice', 'Life in the day of . . . ', etc. In effect, the rules of journalism are changing. Alternative stories now co-exist in the media with conventional news stories. The least this may do is to alte slightly the 'public agenda' which the mass media present.

But we need to go a step further. Alternative criteria of news need to be established, and practised, and taught; and they are to a large extent a reversal of the news values of conventional journalism. What is needed, first and foremost, are *alternative social actors*, or the redefinition of the criterion of prominence. Social actors are those persons or groups of persons who, almost as a matter of right, are covered by the media and can speak through them. The very process of publicity makes them prominent, even those who otherwise might be totally insignificant in terms of their public service. If the media make a conscious effort to report on, and in fact give preferential treatment to, the manual labourers, and their agricultural and industrial organisations, to the women and their groups, to youth and children and to the forgotten minorities, these persons and groups do in fact become social actors who can speak to the public at large and thus occupy a place in the public consciousness. This may be at the expense of the established social actors, or at least some of them. But it's a price worth paying.

The second rule that needs to be changed is the *framework of time*, and thus the definition of the *event*. Journalists, should not only deal with what happened yesterday or last week, but with what is a status quo, a process or a development, none of which can be meaningfully measured in daily or weekly intervals. Thus most of the reports on alternative social actors can be carried by the media this week or next, or the week after.

The third requirement is *alternative language*. Much of the journalist's training is devoted to story construction, which was developed by Anglo-American journalism and news agencies

reporters. It is often referred to as the 'inverted pyramid' method. There is much value in this, particularly for providing a quick summary of the news. But it also has its limitations. It is almost useless for rural reporting. The story form seldom fits alternative social actors. A new type of narrative must therefore be developed. It is much more demanding of the journalist than our usual language of news. The wave of what some 15 years ago was called 'new journalism' soon discovered that only the best writers can do such observation and participation features. But where 'new journalism' failed, African story telling might succeed if only the media allowed it.

A third criterion for democratic journalism is *empathy, or affinity*, which, to some extent, replaces the news value of 'conflict'. The journalist's empathy for, and affinity with people and their daily lives and aspirations are at the core of alternative journalism. This however, requires patient listening rather than quick interviewing. It has sometimes been described as 'barefoot journalism'.

When I said that empathy and affinity would to some extent replace the criterion of conflict, I did not mean that conflicts should artificially be eliminated. What needs to be changed is conflict for conflict's sake, or just for the sake of interest or sensationalim. Naturally, the ordinary people live in situations of conflict. Their struggles should figure foremost in our reporting. But they struggle to have their conflicts resolved, rather than be treated as some sort of political entertainment.

Some ten, twelve years ago I could not have given this paper on democratization of public communication or alternative journalism. Now I know it works, it can be done, and it can be taught. But it is demanding. It requires, above all, a commitment. It also requires higher skills than conventional journalism, and finally presupposes the evolution of new genres and new formats of journalistic writing and broadcasting.

This approach to news is part of the new information and communication order, which the non-aligned nations have long demanded, and which all of our governments have meanwhile endorsed. We all know that the NWICO will not be implemented for a long time on the international level, and our newspapers and news services and news broadcasts would then look and sound very different from what they are today. But the concept of a new order is not enough. Nor is the vision of the media as the champions of the people. What is needed in addition is a new type of journalism.

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3. cf. W. Lance Bennett, *News, the Politics of Illusion*, New York: Longman, 1983.