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This is an Accepted Manuscript of a chapter that has been published in *International Media Development: Historical Perspectives and New Frontiers* edited by Nicholas Benequista, Susan Abbott, Paul Rothman and Winston Mano

The original work can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.3726/b14700>

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Refocusing Media Development in Africa

Winston Mano

Media Development as Agency, Technological Innovation, and Social Change

Real needs drive the communicative agency and innovation of Africans. Take for example the creative way in which Alfred Sirleaf, founder of a roadside chalkboard newspaper in Monrovia, Liberia, *The Daily Talk*, used symbols so that those with little education are “able to follow along with those who have education know-how.”¹ He has been successful in developing a daily “newspaper” that communicates news in a more accessible way to Liberians. Sirleaf was previously arrested and imprisoned for criticizing the government, but has continued to publish and even has a presence on Facebook.²

Many media producers in Mozambique have followed a similarly unconventional path. “In other countries, printed newspapers often produce online offshoots. But in Mozambique the reverse is true. Local publications often start off distributing by fax or email. They only develop a printed version once they have really got going.”³ *Mediafax* was founded in 1991 by Carlos Cardoso, an investigative journalist who was murdered for his work in 2000. It operated out of a garage and was distributed by fax and email to cut costs. With limited financial support from the Norwegian Development Agency (NORAD), *Mediafax*’s high-quality journalism quickly attracted subscribers, including the Presidential Office (though perhaps for different reasons). The fax newspapers become online newspapers, often initiated and run on the “side-line” by journalists employed by legacy media. Such innovation allows for the development of a news style which is more critical of the authorities.

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These examples, and many more besides, attest to how actors shape their communicative environment to suit their needs and the needs of their fellow citizens. Yet, in spite of the innovations and agency found on the continent, African media remains strongly influenced by colonial legacies ranging from colonial media infrastructure and operational logic. What's more, models of journalism, especially those from Britain, Germany and France, are taught and practiced in independent African countries; meanwhile African talk shows, soap operas, and newscasts follow formats developed in the colonial era; and the very messages transmitted by African broadcasts and in African newspapers can frequently be traced back to news sources in Britain, France and Germany. Amid this contradiction, those pursuing media development must remain uniquely focused on ensuring that the media being developed is relevant. This chapter gives some indication of where more relevant forms of media development are likely to emerge in Africa.

What is needed are new ways of thinking to overcome the colonial models. The guiding principle of such an orientation is not just decolonization, but the alleviation of the suffering of Africans and the furtherance of societal emancipation. It should arise from a recognition that institutional practices have for centuries been dominated by application of Arabic and Western-centric modes, Old Thought, and are no longer fully responsive to continental situations and clearly can no longer sustain the “dynamics of an awakening youth population of Africa” (Asante 2016, 2). “New Thought” deliberately privileges “African ideals and values, interrogates indigenous languages and cultures” (Asante 2016, 2). “More, decolonization is not about ignoring Western and Eastern contributions to the world pool of information; these are considerable achievements and must be appreciated and examined in context of a more energetic Afrocentric school of thought that seeks African agency, while seeking other ways of seeing, viewing reality and knowing” (Asante 2016: 4). This chapter

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discusses African agency in media development so that media practices and output are more suited to African conditions and needs.

A refocused media development approach in Africa will need to grasp the observation made years ago by Lucian Pye (1963) that “innovation and tidiness rarely go together.” The media developer will need to engage with communication and media as part of social change, incorporating emerging, formal, and informal aspects of social and mediated processes that have an impact on communications. Pye (1963, 3) also points out that “in the future it will be the creation of new channels of communication and the ready acceptance of new content of communications which will be decisive” in building new societies. It is important that media developers reconnect with the notion that communication is “one way of studying social life” (4).

If the theory is to be trusted, then media development in Africa is most likely to be driven by initiatives and efforts that feature African agency, focus on social change, and are embedded in technological innovation. These characteristics, I will argue in the rest of the chapter, are most frequently found in the sphere of alternative, digital media.

Old Thought and Media Development in Africa

Media development in postcolonial Africa has so far been driven by both national and international organizations intervening in country-level or regional media sectors to produce outcomes associated with notions of media pluralism, independence, freedom and the like. After gaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe set up the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust to promote media in the public interest covering newspapers, a national news agency, and bookstores. South Africa’s Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) is another example of a statutory development agency set up to promote and ensure media development and diversity. These national efforts at media development have been especially driven by

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governments and have targeted formal media institutions. Shortage of resources has meant that international organizations, however, play a more prominent media development role in Africa.

The organizations most commonly found working to support media development in Africa include UNESCO, Article 19, BBC Media Action, Thompson Foundation, Internews, IREX, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and International Media Support. It should be mentioned that China and other countries in the Global South are now also undertaking their own form of “media development” as soft power within their broader development projects (Zhang, Wasserman and Mano 2016). International media developers have championed various strategies to influence media in specific African countries and have to some extent formalized and set global standards in media development, though much debate remains about what kinds of approaches are most effective. Nelson and Susman-Peña (2012) have, for example, pointed out that existing approaches to media development have been “poorly coordinated” and without much input from recipient countries.

Though frequently involving both local and international actors, the dominant approach has been to promote media development from the perspective of Western democratic thinking, which often does not take into account particular issues in the context where they are applied (Nelson and Susman-Peña 2012). For Relly and Zanger, media development has become a “Wild West atmosphere”... a “free-for-all” with all manner of media actors and training agencies whose stated objective is to create a “new media landscape” (Relly and Zanger 2017, 1234).

Worse, interventionist media development projects are thought to be driven by “ulterior purpose” and an “instrumentalist understanding of the media” which emphasizes “externally originating steps to develop the media, and usually between North-South

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developers and ‘developees’” (Berger 2010, 550). The idea of “media missionaries” from the Global North who come to “develop,” “assist,” “support,” or “strengthen” media in the Global South inevitably generates skepticism across Africa as it carries the intention of “media manipulation” or “media meddling” (550).

This is not to say, however, that genuine media development has not occurred in Africa, or that the efforts of international donors or organizations have not, at times, been supportive for this development, but that challenges remain within the field of international media assistance that are an obstacle to more effective support. Refocusing media development efforts could avoid mistakes of the Old Thought and can instead adhere to New Thought that promotes African agency, innovation, and social change.

Legacy Media’s Limitations in Africa

While it is an undeniable fact that radio, newspapers, and television remain significant media in Africa, which should continue to receive support from media development, many of the so-called legacy media outlets in Africa do not meet the communication needs of the majority, and their capacity to be reformed to meet public needs remains in question.

In South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, to name but a few countries, legacy media have been “captured” by narrow interests. The notion of “media capture” is being put forward by journalists and scholars in Africa to describe the manner in which political and business elites have ganged up to own and control what comes out of the media (Schiffrin 2017).⁴

For instance, in Kenya during the 2017 elections, media owners, editors and journalists failed to perform the information, education and watchdog roles due to capture. The coverage was polarized as media sided with political parties or candidates. According to the *Media monitoring Report on the coverage of the Kenya General Elections 2017*⁵ Kenyan

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“media platforms such as *The Star Newspapers* and community radio stations such as Namlolwe, Kameme FM and KASS FM were notorious for airing or printing sensational, unbalanced, hate speech, inflammatory, ethnic profiling and generally unethical content that goes against media ethics in Kenya. There was a meltdown of gate-keeping roles in mainstream media houses such as Nation Media Group and Standard Group. The Editors, either by design or just negligence passed stories for either broadcast or publications that were sensational, biased or slanted to suite political interests of either Jubilee Party or NASA” (6). Kenyan media were afflicted by “apparent ineptitude, wrangles, state capture” (15). Biased coverage extended to the social media space as fake news became more pronounced. The failure of journalism in Kenya resulted in lawlessness which endangered the lives of journalists and judges, among other groups. There was next to no public outcry because citizens were misinformed

Similarly, in South Africa there are serious concerns about how media houses such as Media 24, Independent Media, Caxton and the Times Media Group (with Media24/Naspers controlling 40% alone) constitute a white monopoly that that has unhealthy effect on South African democracy. What has come to be described as white monopoly capital owned and controlled mainstream media is thought to be in support of white economic hegemony in South Africa. The ruling politicians are also implicated in scandals to control both the state and private media. Collusions between politicians and businesspersons have undermined the role of media with a tendency of focusing on middle class issues squabbles at the expense of issues affecting marginalized groups who are in the majority.

In Zimbabwe, the November 2017 political crisis, which forced the resignation of Zimbabwe’s 93-year old President Robert Mugabe after 37 years of continuous rule, highlighted problems with the selective coverage of traditional media and lack of professionalism in the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). The ZBC has since 1980

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received media support and resources from Britain, Germany and China, to name but a few countries. The resources failed to sustain professionalism at a critical moment, with the ZBC transmitting the ruling party's statements, while ignoring the messages conveyed by the army. Starved with information about the military involvement in party politics, citizens had to rely on online sources.

As Reimer (2007, 317) noted: "The problem with traditional news journalism is that it has said 'No!' to the role of the interpreter. Rather, it is a transmitter of what has happened; a transmitter without a voice of its own. News journalists are invisible. They have forgotten that meaningful journalism must be creative; work in which you interpret and assign meaning through your manner of interpretation." Due to censorship, the invisibility of journalists is worse. Added to economic controls, deregulation, fierce competition, audience segmentation, and rapid technological transformation, the African traditional journalism has failed to deliver journalism that moves people. Ownership of both state and commercial media has favored a few economic and political elites.

The Case for Development of Alternative Citizen News Websites in Africa

The chapter has so far highlighted the need for media developers to recognize the agency and innovation of Africans, and it has argued that legacy media remains too "captured" to offer space for such agency and innovation. But Africa has also witnessed the rise of many digitally-enabled alternatives to traditional journalism.

Since the 1990s continent has seen the growth of independent and pluralistic media characterized by "move from top-down, state-driven propaganda to message-driven and participatory forms of dialogue and expressions" (Esipisu and Kariithi 2007, 21). They add that "organic community media networks and associations across Africa emerged to give

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voice to marginalized and isolated communities in the wave of democratic reform that was sweeping the continent” (21).

In defining the emerging alternative news spaces, the chapter finds useful the concept of “third sector” which defines “media companies representing a sector of media production understood to be relatively autonomous of state and commercial interests, and operating in the interest of community and public life” (Mutibwa 2015, 278). The operations of third sector media companies are bounded by socio-political imperatives such as providing news tailored to the readers. The problem is that such companies are often controlled by sponsors and donors, unless they have good training and support from democratic media development actors.

The emergence of third sector media companies in Africa and on Africa “is in large part due to the space created by the shift from dictatorial regimes to multiparty democracies and elections as well as the end of the Cold War and internal calls for democratic reforms” (Esipisu and Kariithi 2007, 2). The so-called mainstream journalism in Africa has also created spaces that compete with citizen journalism on the internet. The problem, as Mutsvairo (2016, 4) rightly observes, is that citizen journalists lack basic training, are not obliged to observe principles of accuracy or fact-checking and “do not have specific ethical standards guiding their conduct.” If mainstream media is not trusted because they do not present “facts,” why on earth would citizen journalism be trusted when they proudly eschew facts? As Reimer (2007, 305) puts it, “another kind of journalism is required; a more interpretive journalism and a journalism capable of dealing with both rationality and emotions.” This is a move towards “expressivist politics” that moves people, “an output that makes them talk and act” (312).

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Mutsvairo (2016) observes that it does not matter whether it is called “community journalism,” “networked journalism,” “open-source journalism,” what is at stake is “citizen journalism,” whereby “citizens have, regardless of their location, benefited through the use of hashtags, retweets and image shares in a powerful citizenry collaboration and engagement that intriguingly rivals reports provided by mainstream media outlets” (3).

Citizen journalism provides faster, interactive and accessible forms of content sharing and customization that can strengthen democratization in Africa. Kperogi (2016, 19) similarly observes that emergent “genres of web-based journalism are supervening upon the traditional media as sites for the push and pull of democratic discourses,” serving as alternative sources of news. Given the widespread and deep-seated democratic problems in Sub-Saharan Africa, Mutsvairo (2016, 4) states that it is “no understatement to conclude that the very manifestation of citizen journalism is potentially a revolution itself... that technology will have a role to play in the way the continent will be governed.”

As is in other regions of the world, and although it is still limited, factors such as digital interactivity have resulted in blogs, weblogs, meta-sites commenting on news in Africa. These are becoming increasingly influential as news and cultural information websites run by locals and the African diaspora get more effective as alternatives. The ongoing rapid social changes in Africa is resulting in new information needs and giving force to alternative voices that are located in the New Thought which media developers need to take into account. Media developers will need to shift and rethink their approach to help develop more relevant journalism that connects with citizens. Even though access and download speeds are slow, the African media sector is experiencing a significant disruption due to the introduction of digital options, given how the internet and smartphones are enabling an increased audience to access new content.

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The websites below offer two contrasting dimensions of the emerging citizen journalism organisations in Africa. While both can be described as responses to repressive political environments in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, SaharaReporters is donor supported while Sokwanele is a grassroots initiative that combines a journalistic function with offline activism. They both show the nature of the variety of journalism in these emerging spaces.

SaharaReporters

Most of the evolving online news practices that should be factored in media development have been instigated by African diasporas, most of whom have access to better training and resources. As Kperogi (2016, 23) observes that “The negligence of the mainstream institutional media in Nigeria in calling to corruption, misgovernance and abuse of power—in addition to their ability to stay up to speed with the dizzying pace of multimediality and interactivity of twenty-first century news—inspired the advent and explosion of citizen media sites by Nigerians resident in the United States.” These include Sahara Reporters.com (published from New York) and the NigeriaVillageSquare.com (published from Houston, Texas), amongst many others whose journalism has become key to Nigeria. SaharaReporters has emerged as the “standard-bearer of Nigerian diasporan citizen journalism, in time became the go-to-news site for breaking news and news about corruption in government.” Media development should promote the concept of community in the discursive preoccupation of the new sites. These emerging sites for news “provide a model for the future of journalism in transitional societies.” Such sites do not fall within the remit of traditional media development organizations that come to Africa as they are deemed to be based in the West. The SaharaReporters online sites, including its Twitter and Facebook pages register more hits than any of the traditional media in Nigeria, clearly showing how its news is reaching Nigerians. “Typically, news now starts from social media chatter, percolates into online news networks, and then into mainstream media, from where it is further shared by social media

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users to create social stories” (30). Media developers can focus on these new sites as they are performing an important role in the public sphere.

Zvakwana-Sokwanele

In the case of Zimbabwe, Moyo (2016, 35) warns against making a strict comparison of the traditional and citizen journalism as these are often different. He instead points out that citizen journalism must be seen as responsive to unique needs in restrictive, politically volatile and authoritarian media environments and must be analyzed in terms of how it is underpinned by “a humanist moral obligation that seeks to wrestle journalism from the publishing monopolies” (35). Like Nigeria, Zimbabwe has many citizen journalism websites, with NewZimbabwe.com, ZimDaily.com and Nehanda Radio.com published from the diaspora. Some of these were founded and run by professional journalists, in self-imposed exiled from Zimbabwe. Moyo identifies Zvakwana-Sokwanele, as a leading example of how citizen journalism has developed within Zimbabwe. “Zvakwana-Sokwanele is a civic organization that uses cyber activism to highlight democracy and human rights issues in the country. It is an underground social movement that uses innovative multimedia strategies online and offline. Apart from its media, it also uses graffiti, leaflets, CDs, videos and condoms inscribed with messages of resistance that aim to wake up the masses through conscientization.” The citizen journalism practice is “fluid” as it involves unrestricted flow of witness accounts, news and information flow with professional journalists, amateurs, academics and people previously outside news. The problem is that some of the stories published on the site are published with no sources or bylines and “have no pretensions towards objectivity and balance” (Moyo, 2016, 15). In the events leading to the fall of Robert Mugabe in November 2017, this civic group mobilized people to demonstrate and push him to resign. The point here is that media development think carefully about how to extent help to citizen journalism sites even though they come across as mere “social media

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chatterers.” To attract donor support the news function of such websites might need to first show a commitment towards being more of a professional journalistic outfit. I’m raising this as an important question where there is need to think through how this can be done.

Popularity only should not be the criteria, rather a carefully tool needs to be developed to measure the role and impact of these emerging sites for democratization. Such a tool can especially examine how these emerging sites perform within and outside key democratic events, such as elections. The test should include matters of access and their ability to set and shift the news agenda among all categories of citizens, including youths, workers, rural and elderly citizens.

Towards a Model of Media Development for Citizen Journalism

The chapter has discussed the problems facing media development and identified alternative citizen journalism as an important area that needs supporting. However, citizen news media has a complex character as shown by the variety review above. What media developers might need is to put the emphasis on defining the practice and actors involved. For example, this could mean a focus on what Willems (2015, 90) calls “alternative mediation” and “mediated civic agency” rather than alternative media institutions or civil society organisations, which could enable us to “gain a fuller understanding of the multiple ways in which different forms of media are involved in resisting different forms of power.” “The concept of mediated agency,” according to Willems (2015, 92), “points to a wider spectrum of actions in which citizens engage power through a range of media forms, whether formal or informal.” It is one way in which media developers can foster new media modes that are non-Eurocentric, decolonised and more effectively informing African citizens. The notion of alternative mediation and its link to mediated civic agency could be productive across Africa. In reality, independence for the alternative news sites is difficult to achieve and would require careful strategies and support. Media development organizations will need to find ways to make

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these sites viable by offering them training and strategies to raise independent funding. The example of Zvakwana-Sokwanele discussed above shows that definitions of alternative journalism need to be loosened. A typology for supporting progressive alternative citizen journalism, some of which may be linked to social movements, is needed. Citizen alternative media is important because it facilitates democratic communication through providing relevant content and encouraging broader links with popular culture. The refocusing can help include actors and content that plays a key part in social change. Wasserman and Benequista's (2017) call for a shift in focus and solidarity among media development organizations in Africa needs to be taken seriously. This chapter has called for a shift in the focus in media development in Africa in the digital age towards alternative mediation and mediated civic agency which include formal and informal spaces.

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