The Role of Media in Promoting Access to Information and Serving as a Public Watchdog

By:

By Rosemary Okello-Orlale
Executive Director
African Woman and Child Feature Service (AWC)
rookello@awcfs.org/ info@awcfs.org
Introduction

We all know that the media is assigned a special watchdog role in a democracy. This means that the independence of the media—freedom of speech and freedom of information is sacrosanct.

We have seen in Kenya what happens when the independence of the media is tampered with therefore the role of the media in any given society in promoting freedom of information and expression is usually equated with democracy.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN ONCE SAID, “Democracy is two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for dinner,” and yet on democracy the truth lies where the facts are hidden.

Looking back 15 years ago when the media industry adopted the ‘Windhoek Declaration on press freedom,’ the very nature of press freedom has remained excluded from the constitutions of many African countries and few countries have been passed a law on the right to information.

When the declaration was adopted in 1991, it focused only on the press. And now with the mushrooming of community media and commercial broadcasters, the media is losing out on local content.

In relation to ICTs, the new technology has revolutionised the way news is gathered, packaged and published, but looking at the expansion of ICTs in rural Africa where majority of people live and work, they hampered with the problem of connectivity.

So when we are talking about freedom of information and expression, one need to take cognisance that as elsewhere in the world, the media in Africa are at crossroads. They are challenged to comply with the highest management standards while portraying the essence of a changing society. Few countries have media policy to guide media scenarios in their countries.

Like any other media in Africa, the media in Kenya is caught between ‘the hammer of the state and the anvil of the market’, as stated by Prof. Fackson Banda of Rhodes University who further revealed that there was less investment in worthy but unprofitable tasks like investigative journalism and media content has been neglected.

While journalists have a responsibility to get information themselves, most newsrooms are under-resourced, data is unreliable, and there are poor newsroom management skills, weak economies, weak regulatory institutions and sloppy ethics”.

Yet the media’s role as the watchdog cannot be fully achieved without proper environment. Powered by awesome and fast changing technology with its vast reach; the
media is, quite simply, one of the most powerful forces on earth today for shaping the way people think.

And the issue before us here today is not the argument of whether or not freedom of information can empower society.

Just to illustrate my point, all of you remember when Prince Diana died. One of our partners was in a remote village in Malawi the day she was being buried. The entire village had turned out to watch this event on CNN at the local hotel. In Africa, of course we have a way of grieving for our loved ones like nowhere else. Yes against this background, the content to which this event so far from the reality of those gathered has come so close to their hearts reflected the immense power of the electronic media.

Power can be used constructively or destructively. Ye the media could be amazing tool for the public and for years the government has made sure that the ordinary person cannot access information.

The ‘demassified’ and ‘globalized’ reality

Dennis McQuail (1981) refers to ‘the decline of the mass society’ or what Alvin Toefler refers to as ‘demassification,’ which refers to a situation whereby the traditional mass audience is splintered into all sorts of sub-groups; some interested in this, some that! This situation is a consequence of new communication technologies like the Internet and satellite technology.

Toefler argues in his book “The Third Wave” that the society appears to be moving in a certain direction. He describes three waves of change that have occurred in the human society – from agrarian society (first wave) to industrial society (second wave) and now information society (which he refers to as the third wave). In the third wave or the information age, what we see coming down the line are third wave methods of communication which have taken the mass audience and splintered it into sub-groups (or different audience groups).

In the demassified reality, audiences have wider choices from which to choose from, whether its cable TV, Internet FM broadcasts or the numerous FM stations. This is not just limited to channels of communication but also goes down to programming with audiences having a variety of programmes to choose from. We now have a situation whereby different media organizations are no longer targeting a mass audience but dealing with niche audiences. For instance, audiences are now being categorized by age group or social class by different media houses. While this phenomenon started in the Western countries, it is now the norm in many African countries, made possible by new technologies.

An interesting phenomenon revealing itself in this demassified reality is what is referred to as globalization of mass media (the globalized reality). This is where the mass media is not just operating at the national or local level but the audiences are now being “sold” to the global arena. Toefler has used the term “global gladiators” (Power Shift) to refer to forces operating globally that are no longer just nation states. Here, we’re referring to a
few big multinational or transnational corporations that are major players on the global scene. Just like we have Transparency International, Vatican, Coca Cola, Pepsi, Unilever, so do we also have CNN, BBC, and Sky that set the global agenda. We also have the civil society, which are no longer just localized or national, but are now global in reach, and makes very active use of the Internet and the new communications media.

The media have therefore reacted to the demassified reality by converging to beat off competition leading to a situation whereby only a few players are left in the field. We now have more and more cases of cross-media ownership which is becoming increasingly difficult to address.

A big challenge confronting the media in Africa especially in the demassified or globalized reality is who is to finance them as they develop? In many cases, majority are private owned media which are all commercial entities, depending on mass sales and advertisement revenue to keep them alive. For instance, with liberalization of the airwaves, the press has been facing increased competition as most of their audiences have shifted to the numerous TV and FM stations as their primary source of news or entertainment. For example, in Kenya, due to increasing costs particularly of newsprint, which is in short supply in spite of developments in composition and production, the press is now outstripped by radio and TV as the reporter of current news. Even among the various electronic media outlets, the competition is so intense that they have been forced to get a little bit more creative to make ends meet, but creativity at whose cost?

The information age has witnessed breaking up of society in cultural groups (demassification). The media has responded to information age by concentrating, that is monopolizing in order to manage competition. There’s an agreement that power is no longer wielded through the barrel of the gun but by those who control information. The media have realized the potential of new technology especially the Internet. For example, most media organizations now have on-line editions and with on-line edition, you get global and with that you can tap the global market making the advertisers happier.

This is what one of the leading and respected journalist in the USA is Bob Mayor’s plantation’s mentality and that plantations owners feared the freedom of information to their workers more than anything.

He said, “Over all those decades here in the South, when they used human beings as chattel, and quoted scripture to justify it, property rights over human rights was God’s way, they secretly lived in fear that one day — instead of saying, “Yes, Massa” — those gaunt, weary, sweat-soaked field hands, bending low over the cotton under the burning sun, would suddenly stand up straight, look around, see their sweltering and stooping kin and say, “This ain’t the product of intelligent design. The boss man in the big house has been lying to me. Something is wrong with this system.”

This is the moment freedom begins, the moment you realize someone else has been writing your story, and it’s time you took the pen from his hand and started writing it yourself.”

Mayors claimed that the big media is slowly becoming irrelevant on issues that affect the ordinary people.
So if we need to know what is happening, and Big Media won’t tell us; if we need to know why it matters, and Big Media won’t tell us; if we need to know what to do about it and Big Media won’t tell us … we have to tell the story ourselves.

Is the media therefore becoming irrelevant to majority people in Kenya and is the media capturing the diversity issues emerging from the various communities with a view of enhancing growth?

So Policy reform, yes. But, the consolidation of media ownership with newspapers, TV stations, and major online properties is in fewer hands and we have to find other ways to ensure the public has access to diverse, independent, and credible sources of information.

That means going to the market to find support for stronger independent rural media and others which have proven that progressivism doesn’t have to equal penury. It means helping protect news-gathering from predatory forces. It means fighting for more participatory media, hospitable to a full range of expression. It means building on how the ordinary person can have access to all knowledge.

It means bringing broadband service to those many millions of Africans too poor to participate so far in the digital revolution. It means ownership and participation for women. And let me tell you, it means reclaiming public broadcasting and restoring it to its original feisty, robust, fearless mission as an alternative to the dominant media, offering journalism you can afford and can trust, public affairs of which you are a part, and a wide range of civic and cultural discourse that leaves no one out.

We’ve got to get alternative content out there to people, or this country is going to die of too many lies.

**Bridging the information and the digital divide**

Whereas the media is important and powerful, unless it can empower the local person, then we can question the very notion of why it exists by asking: Information for what and for whom, why are we collecting this information and what difference is it making in the lives of ordinary people on the ground, what do we do with the information once it is collected?

These are some of the answers African Woman and Child Feature Service have been trying to answer in the last 12 years it has been in existence.

As an organisation we have been engaging the media in the region in a meaningful social justice related discourse using the concept of a “fifth estate”. The “fifth estate” phenomenon is outward looking. Outside the box, one sees alternatives to the narrow, although necessary, adversarial relationships between institutions that govern states. Outside the box there are diverse regional and global realities that can force private
media houses to build relevance. It is in this scenario that opportunities emerge for promoting a more meaningful gender related discourse.

Cultural diversity constitutes a force that can get journalists to open up their minds. The pride and status of nationals across borders is another force we use to get diversity in the media in areas around cross-border trade and recognizes for achieving the same. Out of the box, sovereignty becomes relative in a way that prevails on media houses not to stereotype and take things for granted.

The human rights factor outside the box becomes a vital yardstick for covering diverse realities. All these factors can prevail on media to shed stereotyping; to get beyond the narrow confines of national interests; and to open up to emerging regional and global concerns regarding human rights.

Using the “fifth estate” paradigm, one can conceivably argue that it was global opinion, expressed through international media outlets that brought down apartheid in yester - .years. In today’s reality the same dynamic is compelling leaders to abide by the dictates of good governance, transparency and accountability. Peer Review activities under NEPAD get extensive global coverage even as they compel African Governments to conform to democratic ideals in full view of global audiences.

In our dealing with the media houses we make sure that we use the argument that coverage of any issues must be “consistent with freedom of expression,” by doing the following:

- Giving equal voice and air-time to everyone irrespective whether they are women, men, leaders and children
- The media should bring out multiple roles in society, which is intrinsic to freedom of speech and expression. We argue that the media cannot claim to be a mirror of society when it is giving such skewed reflection of it.

Conclusion

As we foster freedom information a number of fundamental things need to be taken into consideration.

- **A clear conceptual framework:** In order to be effective, we need to understand clearly who our targets are. Clearly the producers of news are at the heart of the matter. But they work within legal and policy frameworks that create or negate an enabling environment for transformation. Media ownership- state, private, community- has a bearing on responsiveness to change, as well as strategies for advocating change. Change is not just about the media; but those who are well placed to shape the news (eg women decision-makers and activists) as well as citizens and news consumers who should aspire to be shapers of news!
• **Broadening the approach:** While it is understandable that advocacy efforts to date have focused specifically on the gender deficiencies in the media, as we move forward there is need to situate these within broader debates on human rights, media diversity, ethics and professionalism in the media, growing markets and media sustainability. This approach will not only help to overcome some of the resistance that is apparent in some quarters, but also foster the notion that gender awareness is not just a matter of being politically correct: it is also enlightened self interest

• **Engaging with media regulatory authorities:** Until recently media regulatory authorities have largely been excluded from gender and media debates. This is an unfortunate omission, as they have a key role to play in setting out the macro policy framework in which the media operates and freedom of expression is interpreted. AWC has been in the fore-front in breaking new ground with research by country chapters into existing laws and policies, the implementing agencies, and international best practice on gender and media regulation. Engagements with editors in Kenya and the Africa Editor’s Forum.

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<th>What governments can do</th>
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<td>▪ Pledging to mainstream gender in all information, communication and media laws.</td>
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<td>▪ Pledging statutory regulatory authorities, and encouraging self-regulatory authorities, to use whatever leverage they have at their disposal, especially in relation to publicly funded media, to ensure, diversity and accountability. This could include requiring gender balance and sensitivity in institutional structures as well as editorial content part of licensing agreements, as well as annual reports stating progress in this regard.</td>
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<td>▪ Pledging to ensure that gender will be mainstreamed in all publicly funded media training institutions, and encouraging privately funded media training institutions to follow suit.</td>
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• **Deepening the engagement with media decision-makers:** Many of the policy changes that need to take place will continue to be at newsroom level. After an initial set of pilot projects to develop communication policies in newsrooms, the partnership with various stakeholders opens the possibility for a much broader and more sustained engagement with media decision makers for example our work with the East Africa editor’s forum and the Africa Editor’s Forum (TAEF).

• **Setting specific targets:** As part of developing newsroom policies there is need to set specific targets, such as women sources reaching 30% of the total by 2010, and 50% by 2020 (in line with AU targets for women’s representation in decision-making). Although targets like this alone are not enough, they help to focus the mind, to mobilise and to conduct more effective monitoring and evaluation.

• **Taking a fresh look at training:** There have now been several different approaches to various trainings with an aim to encourage public journalism in the region. Newsroom training in the run up to elections proved a useful strategy for reaching working journalists.

• **Foregrounding citizens and consumers:** The Gender and Media Audience Research (GMAS) places a new and important focus on media consumers that has generally been lacking in the way the media in the region goes about doing its business and the door to engagement with media marketing departments as well as give a shot in the arm to the gender and media literacy work soon to be started by AWC.

• **Media activism:** Among the most valuable contribution of gender and media networks has been in organising campaigns like the Sixteen Days of Activism on Gender Violence in which activists help the media to create gender aware content, International Women’s day to create awareness around gender policies, International day on HIV/AIDS among other important calendar events.

• **Coordination and reflection:** While partnerships, networks, and “networks of networks” have been at the core of the progress made so far in the region, these are also demanding and at times lead to confusion about roles, responsibilities and ownership of specific programmes and projects. There is need to set aside time and resources for coordination, governance, effective institution building and reflection. In particular, establishment of a Media Diversity Centre that would provide an institutional home for the many activities, writing, research, debates and seminars that will continue to be generated in the long road ahead to achieving a society in which -