



**ASSOCIATION OF
COMMUNICATION SCHOLARS
& PROFESSIONALS OF NIGERIA
BOOK SERIES**

COMMUNICATION, MEDIA, AND POWER RELATIONS IN
A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: ONE COUNTRY, MANY VOICES,
DILEMMAS OF FREE EXPRESSION

Kwame KARIKARI

To cite this article:

Kwame Karikari (2023), Communication, Media, And Power Relations In A Multicultural Society: One Country, Many Voices, Dilemmas Of Free Expression in Communication, Media And Power Relations In A Multicultural Society: Context, Issues and Perspectives for Development ACSPN Book Series 8, pp. 202 — 209

Retrieved from <http://www.acspn.com.ng>

(Institutional or Subscribed access may be required)

Please note that this is an electronic, pre-print version of this article published by the Evan Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited for Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN).

The ACSPN Book Series is exclusive to the Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria.

ISBN: **978-978-798-550-1**

Copyright © 2023

Editor and Contributors

Layout/Design: Ashroph De Grafico Ventures.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any form or any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.



COMMUNICATION, MEDIA, AND POWER RELATIONS IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: ONE COUNTRY, MANY VOICES, DILEMMAS OF FREE EXPRESSION

Kwame KARIKARI



Introduction

There is hardly an African country which has not experienced one form or another of political crisis resulting from inter-ethnic or inter-religious conflicts. It is almost a cliché to repeat the fact that, besides the seemingly intractable problem of social-economic development, manifesting in widespread mass poverty, the most challenging burden that has confronted post-colonial African states is that of welding the diverse ethnic communities (or nationalities) into harmoniously co-existing “nations”.

Nowhere have the crises of inter-ethnic conflicts been as pronounced and as recurrent as in the following three of the largest and most populous countries on the continent: The Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Nigeria. In the latter, the difficulties of inter-ethnic relations have been compounded by bloody conflicts ostensibly inspired by differences in faith. Yet, nowhere else has the violence of inter-ethnic conflicts been so hateful as to lead to expressed attempts at exterminating the other -- genocide -- as in Rwanda: in the 1960s, 1970s and, most shockingly of all, in the 1990s.

It is only in Rwanda, relatedly, that we have found on the African continent media that have systematically and consciously served as instruments, an arsenal, to cultivate, promote and direct hatred in executing inter-ethnic conflict. The Rwanda example is also a useful lesson in the study of media as a veritable weapon of ideological and political repression in the hands of the powerful in society. ¹[See, Allan Thompson (Editor) 2007, *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. London, Ann Arbor, MI, Pluto Press and Kampala, Uganda, Fountain Publishers. Many of the chapters in this volume examine the question of the relationship between the powerful and media in promoting inter-ethnic hatred, studying the role of the notorious Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines, RTLM, in the Rwanda genocide, as a case study.]

Since the 1990s, the mass media landscape in Africa has been transformed fundamentally from one of state monopoly and small numbers to an environment of overwhelming multiplicity. The liberalization of ownership of traditional mass media came in the wake of global transformation in communications technologies with the invention of digital technology, or the internet and its derivative facilities for communication. These developments combined have fostered a wave of voices and expressions in all but, embarrassingly, Eritrea where the state maintains a vicious monopoly on media.

These progressive developments for media and expression have occurred also as continent-wide popular agitations enabled changes in the political environment, forcing the retreat of military and authoritarian self-perpetuating regimes to accept or adapt to constitutional democratic systems with defined term limits for the executive and legislative arms of government.

Thus, in this context of the multicultural societies of countries governed under multi-party constitutional democratic systems, which ostensibly provide for freedom of speech, expression and access to pluralistic media, it is pertinent to reflect on the nature and character of the state and power in our multicultural societies and the roles and functions of communication and media in managing relations among the communities in our societies.

The State, Power in Multicultural Society

One of our own defines multiculturalism as “the coexistence of diverse cultures, 'where culture includes ethnic, religious, or cultural groups and is manifested in customary behaviours, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles.’” [Zebulon Suifon Takwa. *An Overview on Multiculturalism, Diversity and Reporting of Conflict in Nigeria*. In Umaru A. Pate and Lai Oso (Editors) 2017. Ibadan, Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited. Pp. 821.]

As it is, central to the concept is ethnicity from which all the attributes (language, manners or behaviour, moral codes of intra-group relations) derive. And, “In so far as ethnicity designates cultural affiliation, it locates us historically within a given cultural milieu. It defines language, customs, values, beliefs, clanship, lineage etc, and provides people with everyday references and anchor points in their social interaction. It can be used positively to give people confidence in themselves or negatively as a rallying point for chauvinist or xenophobic purposes. In societies where linguistic and cultural affinities are tied to geographically located groups, as capitalism and the cash nexus homogenize and totalize social and economic life, ethnic boundaries can sometimes become flashpoints of contending interests when exploited by elites and leading classes to mobilize

constituencies for the pursuit of narrow interests, and access to resources.” [Kwesi Kwaa Prah, 2006, *The African Nation. The State of the Nation*. Cape Town. The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, p. 307.]

As peoples living in our countries today, we have no choice but to accept our ethnic origins and differences and the imperative of living together in peace. The burdensome challenge, that is, the challenge of governance, is in the management of our coexistence in diversity: the management of the competing interests and claims; of contrasting, sometimes opposing demands for special attention and treatment; of differences in cultural realities and practices; of just, fair and unconstrained participation in the governance of the aggregated whole. It calls for an assessment of the nature and role of the state and the nature and manifestation of power relations and therefore the media's role or functions in these arrangements and processes.

To fulfil these functions, effectively or otherwise, depends on the nature and capacity of the state in Africa. This is important because we have seen how, under certain trying situations external forces have been invited or intervened to rescue governments in Africa from collapsing. Thus, it is not implausible to contend that the post-colonial state in Africa, by and large, is still in the process of formation, maturation or consolidation. This is due to historical as well as social, economic and even cultural factors. The first important post-colonial political development to hinder the growth and development of the state was the wave of coups d'etat and violent civil conflicts that took place in all but a handful of countries across the length and breadth of the continent. For example, it has been recorded that between 1966 [when Nigeria and Ghana had their first coups d'etat] and 1993, there were sixty-three successful military coups in Africa and twenty-four violent conflicts. Armed conflicts took the lives of 10 million people and many more were wounded in these conflicts, with over twenty million people becoming international refugees or internally displaced persons in their own countries. [Colin Legum, quoted by Thabo Mbeki in Address of the President of South Africa, at the Opening of the Africa Conference on Elections, Democracy and Governance: Pretoria, 7 April 2003. Cited in Kwesi Kwaa Prah and Tegegne Teka (Editors) 2003. *Chasing Futures. Africa in the 21st Century Problems and Prospects*. Introduction. Cape Town. CASAS and AddisAbaba OSSREA. P. xi-xii]

The political and social conflicts ravaging the continent would largely find their origins in the dire economic conditions and wholesale poverty afflicting the peoples of the continent. On the shorthand, these economic deprivations were manifestations, primarily, of the neo-colonial, that is dependent, economic relations in Africa were subordinated to under global capitalism, indeed a continuation of colonial economic relations in different guises. By the beginning of the new century, the social, economic and political conditions of African countries were so precarious that some African social scientists opined that what was “noticeable in Africa today is the fact that the post-colonial state is everywhere in decomposition.” [Prah and Teka, *ibid*, p. xiii]

The popular movements of the last decade of the 20th century agitated for constitutional democratic rule embedded in the rule of law, respect for human rights and inclusiveness in governance. The African Union as well as its affiliated regional blocs adopted charters that endorsed the peoples' aspirations and demanded compliance by governments. [The African Charter on Elections, Democracy and Governance adopted...] The result is that, despite the checkered and often tortuous record of application and practice, nearly all

African countries have adopted constitutional democratic forms of government highlighted by defined term limits for the executive and legislative arms of government, periodic general elections and guarantees for human rights and freedom of expression and media.

This development, in my opinion, is progress that must be upheld, defended, protected and deepened through constant critical reflection and struggle. For, the experience in the management of the constitutional democratic order so far suggests that the state in Africa continues to be bedevilled by factors that make it incapable of consistently and transparently sustaining democratic development and governance. These factors include the dependency of most African states on and subordination to external political and economic powers, and thereby the absence or fragility of their sovereignty, the social class character of the state; the ideological mindset characterized by a deficit in commitment to patriotism and democratic ideals and culture; tendencies toward ethnocentric as opposed to wider 'national' interests and concerns; ethical vulnerability concerning the protection of the public good; and an aversion to ideas and intellectual reflection. These factors are visibly manifest in the Character of political parties that compete for power and which govern under the new constitutional dispensations prevailing in our countries. Political parties in Africa today may define themselves as espousing any number of ideological precepts. In practice and theory, they are generally bereft of or, in the case of former liberation movements, have abandoned, any enlightening ideas and principles of organizing and leading society for progress. These attributes, usually compounded by factors external to Africa, account for the continued incapacitation of the state in Africa as it confronts the numerous challenges of development generally and those arising from the contradictions of the multicultural realities of our countries.

This is a broad general overview of the political-economic setting in which we examine the media's relation to the state and power and their roles and function in promoting harmonious relations and coexistence among the different communities, sects and factions of the multicultural society in their contestations, competitions and contradictions for existential and other interests. In other words, it is the context within which to assess the media's role and function in the development of democratic governance and relations in a multicultural society.

Background to African Media and Communities, and Situation Today

The emergence of authoritarian governments from the early years after independence in the late 60s and 1970s unleashed a wave of trampling on the democratic and human rights of citizens nearly everywhere. The freedom of the mass media in most cases was among the first line of rights to be attacked. This explains why the restoration of press freedom assumed such a prominent place in the debates and processes for constitution-making across the continent. As a result of popular clamour for the right to free speech and expression in the public space, by the end of the last century the entire continent, minus a few countries, was awash with privately owned newspapers and broadcasting stations. In addition to this development, the contemporaneous introduction of digital or internet-based communications technologies expanded boundlessly the possibilities, and potential capacity, of citizens to exercise the freedom of speech and expression to participate in public affairs discussions. Whether this potential has been realised and effected requires further investigation.

For, though the mass media have generally been assumed to have contributed to social and political progress since their introduction into Africa, in most societies their function as institutions for community self-expression and cultural self-assertion appears to have been less than complementary. Right from its introduction in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the newspaper remained an exclusive cultural product for the small elite literate in colonial languages of the medium. Up until the 21st century, the small number of newspapers published in African languages across the continent rarely count among the largest circulating titles.

In Africa, the newspaper is a quintessential urban medium. Introduced by colonial officials, Christian missionaries or established by the emerging African literate elite, the cultural influence of the newspaper in Africa was effectively primarily limited to the elite. They served as useful instruments for propagating anti-colonial ideas. Considering the ideological and political formation among the popular social forces, concerning the new political ideas they introduced, such as nationalism and Pan-Africanism, the influence of newspapers could be significantly limited. The obvious reasons are the language of the press and mass illiteracy which was partially mitigated only after independence. In Europe, industrialization and the introduction of literacy among the hordes of the emerging wage-earning working class made the newspaper a true mass medium and newspaper reading a mass cultural activity. This development did not occur anywhere in Africa.

The role of the newspaper as a medium for informing the public, serving as a forum for discussing important issues of public interest and as a watchdog over people in public authority, has been immeasurably immense. The point here, however, is that the print medium has never been a truly mass medium of the masses in Africa. Its character, as a medium limited to the elite or sections of the literate populations, has hardly changed even with the political liberalization of the 1990s onward. Much less, as a general rule, has the newspaper served as a medium for the education, cultural advancement and organization of the community in the multicultural society.

Broadcasting, by its very nature, readily functions as a true mass medium of the mass. But then it was also introduced by the colonial states and continued to serve after independence as state-controlled instruments of rule. Having been under the monopoly of authoritarian and other undemocratic states for decades, radio and television could hardly serve the purposes of democratization. Such that even when the state broadcasters set up “local” stations in rural districts they did not, and could not, function to promote democratic empowerment of the communities. So, over the years, citizens learned almost no systematic information from the media about their communities in our countries because the character of the media was hardly local or community oriented in outlook, content and appeal.

Media And Power in APluralistic Context

In a democratic multicultural society, the very nature of pluralistic media demands that media reflect the diverse interests, aspirations and viewpoints of the various communities. Yet, as McChesney put it, “Democratic theory generally posits that society needs a journalism that is a rigorous watchdog of those in power and who want to be in power, can ferret out truth from lies, and can present a wide range of informed positions on the important issues of the day. Each medium need not do all of these things, but the media

system as a whole should make this readily available to the citizenry...How a society can construct a media system that will generate something approximating democratic journalism is a fundamental problem for a free society, as powerful interests tend to wish to dominate the flow of information.” [McChesney, Robert W, (2008) *The Political Economy of Media*. Enduring issues, emerging dilemmas. New York, Monthly Review Press, p. 25]

The implication of our argument here is to find out whether the mass media played any significant role in the political development of democratic culture for self-governance in the communities of our multicultural society; the extent of their contribution to the cultural advancement of the diverse communities; whether they played any watchdog functions in exacting accountability from local political, traditional or other public authorities and officers.

Today, under the constitutional multiparty democratic conditions established in our countries since the 1990s, many, if not most, urban commercial district towns have a radio station or more. Some even have a television station. The question is: To what extent do they devote their output, such as News, to the needs and concerns of the locality, the community, in which they are based? Do they pursue social and economic issues of interest to the communities, and to the benefit of which segments of the society?

In other words, what is the character of the media under today's constitutional democratic system? What is the nature of their relations to the structure of power and authority in our multicultural societies? The answers to these questions may be found in an examination of, first, the system of media ownership prevailing and second, the ideological, political, social and cultural orientation of the media's output over time.

Whether, indeed, the media system approximates democratic pluralism may be discerned from diversity in ownership as well as a representation of the diverse interests, concerns and perspectives on public affairs existing in the society, especially of multicultural communities. For, as noted elsewhere, the pluralism of the media is not a simple question of numbers or multiplicity. “...It demands that variety, difference, contrariety and divergence are permitted, tolerated and even encouraged.” [Karikari, 1993, *Africa Media Review*]

Thus, even in the case of Ghana's much-touted acclaim for promoting press freedom, the media system's pluralistic credentials have come under critical questioning by academics and leaders of the media regulatory agencies. [see Karikari in Akpabli, 2020 *Plenty Talk Day 4 Ghana*] Just as democratic governance and culture provide the ideal environment for enabling the harmonious coexistence of all communities in a multicultural society, so does an open pluralistic media system facilitate best the representation and expression of the interests, views and aspirations of all communities in the media.

As inferred above, press freedom and freedom of speech and expression for the citizens are the fundamental conditions for media to function effectively in a democratic multicultural environment. But democracy, specifically press freedom exists in real social, economic, political and cultural conditions that are not always enabling for all and sundry to fulfil those freedoms. Chomsky [quoted in McChesney, p. 83] for instance asserts that “the capitalist media are far more about generating support for elite policies than they are about empowering people to make informed political decisions.” So much so that there is

“incompatibility between a corporate-run news media and an ostensibly democratic society”.

Challenges to Press Freedom

Besides, quite often, the media's freedom and capacity to perform its functions are constrained by social forces and other non-state centres of power. In Ghana today, as we assemble here, there is serious contention between the freedom of a radio station in Kumasi, the second largest city, and the council of the powerful Asante traditional authority whose capital is Kumasi. The king's council, bypassing laid-down constitutional and legal processes, arbitrarily closed down a radio station for broadcasting material the king's men found unpalatable. Other traditional authorities have in recent weeks and months acted similarly with mute silence from all authority instituted under the republican constitution. Such extra-legal obstruction of the media's freedom abounds and occurs in various forms all over, including more violent, and even fatal interventions by other non-state actors.

But, sometimes, it is in the actual process of performing the regular function of reporting or publishing information that may induce the kind of self-restraint that undermine the freedom to exercise independent editorial judgment which then could lead to the insidious practice of self-censorship. This may be provoked by threats and fear of life-threatening dangers from the environment, or by a consideration that the exposure of certain truths or facts may result in unwanted consequences for the public or a section of the community. Several contributions to Pate and Oso's work on “Multiculturalism, Diversity and Reporting Conflict in Nigeria” [2017, Ibadan, Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited].

The peculiarly violent conflicts that manifest themselves in ethnic and religious forms in Nigeria, for example, seem to induce a tendency to avoid certain factors, even as they may be the truth, to, as it were, avoid inflaming passions, according to other studies. Demarest and Langer, Belgian researchers, note that journalists exercise considerable responsibility in Nigeria media houses “not to overly frame conflict in religious or ethnic terms”, and that the Nigerian media they studied, *The Guardian*, *The Nation* and *This Day*, “rarely use inciting language depicting diversity or a particular religious/ethnic group as the cause of conflict”. These same researchers observe in their study that most conflicts in Nigeria “appear to have been caused by the presence of severe political and economic “horizontal inequalities, corruption, and elite competition for resources and power”, but these “underlying structural causes are discussed even less frequently”. The explanation is that, “Nigerian journalists, out of a sense of responsibility, consciously aim to avoid divisive and potentially escalatory language, but that a dearth of capacity and resources impede independent analysis concerning drivers of conflicts.” [Leila Demarest, Armin Langer. *Peace Journalism on a Shoestring? Conflict reporting in Nigeria's national news media. Journalism. Theory, Practice and Criticism. Volume 22 Number 3. March 2021, pp. 671-688*]

A contributor to Pate and Oso's volume {Toyosi Olugbenga Samson Owolabi, p. 96-117} proposes that “The media, through its power of advocacy, can take the attention of the feuding parties away from issues that tend to divide them to those that bind them together and guarantee their joint future.” This suggests, in my mind, that to achieve unity and peace, the media must ignore those issues that triggered the conflict, to begin with. But what if those issues are questions of justice and rights of a community or communities?

On the other hand, however, the essence of the proposition suggests a consideration of the idea that press freedom, and freedom of expression, have limits and may not be exercised at all times. It seems to me that the challenge though is not the exercise of the freedom not to publish or say. The challenge is if exercising that option to say or not to say or publish is freely and independently decided and chosen by the media organization or journalist and in the absence of any external prompting by any force or authority.

Conclusion

The last point though, raises the problems of dilemmas of the exercise of the right to free speech which are much of the time questions of ethics or impositions by forces of intolerance which abound in society all the time. Intolerance is quite often the bane of constraints on the exercise of the freedom of expression and press. But, as a US defender of press freedom put it, quoting US Supreme Justice William Brennan, "... debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open, and that it may well include vehement, caustic, and sometimes unpleasantly sharp attacks on government and public officials." And that indeed even "false statements are inevitable in free debate". [Bollinger, Lee C., 2010. p. 16]

However this may sound to any of us, the important point is that, in our deliberations on concepts and propositions of rights of freedom and democracy, we do so often by borrowing from traditions, experiences and debates of foreign cultures. The caution, therefore, is that we ought to acknowledge that the development, progress and maturation of these ideas and practices took place over time and using political, cultural and social struggles, conflicts, and controversies in those societies from which we borrow these ideas and ideals.

The lesson from the US, or for that matter, any of the older democracies we borrow from, for instance, is that: "During the 20th century, both the press and press freedom underwent enormous unprecedented transformations." But "Freedom of speech and press did not expand consistently over the 20th century. They ebbed and flowed, largely in tandem, with a retreat in times of war and national stress and advance in times of relative peace and prosperity." [Bollinger, p. 45-46]

Thus, the struggles for the freedoms we cherish for our societies, hoping they will enhance, facilitate and promote progress for our peoples, must bear this in mind lest we become despondent when progress is slow, obstructed, derailed or disrupted. The challenge, and the task, as I see it, is: how to continually challenge and refine these ideals and ideas drawing from our peculiar and particular histories, struggles, cultures, traditions and the fundamental interests and aspirations of our peoples for freedom, justice, peace, unity, socio-economic progress, well-being and welfare. For us as intellectuals, the task is how to maintain a commitment to pursuing those principles and ideals and garner and sustain the courage to defend, advocate for and promote them in the face of difficult, and sometimes dangerous, forces and circumstances.

***Being a keynote address presented at the 2022 Annual International Conference of the Association of Communication Scholars and Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN), August 31-September, 1 2022.