

Should governments own newspapers?

by Peter Schellschmidt

Media debates in Africa of the last two decades or so have produced some widely accepted key standards:

- The indispensability of an independent and pluralistic press (Windhoek Declaration of 1991), and
- The need to transform state broadcasters into public broadcasters (African Charter on Broadcasting 2001).

This again has influenced to a large extent the formulation of the "Declaration on Freedom of Expression in Africa", adopted in 2002 by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). This declaration has received much acclaim (although less attention than it deserves) as one of the most comprehensive global documents on freedom of expression and freedom of the media issues.

But, surprisingly, even this document is relatively silent (or vague) on an issue that has received very little attention even in media circles: what to do with state-owned newspapers?

State-owned newspapers are not particular to African countries. They used to be a regular feature in countries of the former communist bloc in Eastern Europe and they still exist in China and North Korea as well as some other authoritarian regimes in Asia. But they never played a significant role in democratic societies in Europe and the Americas. But in quite a number of African countries they still do. Obviously, some parts of the colonial heritage die very hard.

The African Commission's Declaration, mentioned above, makes reference to state-owned print media in just one sentence: "Any print media published by a public authority should be protected adequately against undue political interference."

Measured against the mostly very concise stipulations of the other parts of the declaration this sounds fairly vague: what

is "adequate" and what is "undue"? And is there (or should there be) anything like "due" political interference at all?

Even in most of those countries which still maintain state-owned newspapers, the consensus prevails that the print media – as opposed to broadcasting – does need little or no regulation. Basically company legislation and some kind of competition legislation will do, sometimes with some additional restrictions on foreign ownership.

Where print media need to be registered with governments it is just a formal process with no restrictions attached. The famous exception to that rule are the notorious strangulations of the media in Zimbabwe.

But why then do some governments still feel that they should operate print media? Is it an legitimate interest of governments to maintain their own means of communication and should it stay that way?

These were some of the questions that were debated during a brainstorming workshop which took place in May 2005 near Stellenbosch in South Africa. The Media Project for Southern Africa of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation had invited some of the most renowned media scholars and media activists from Southern African countries for that purpose.

The group came up with a joint position paper, called "Memorandum on the transformation of state newspapers", which is quoted in its essential parts here (see column on the right). But the group at the same time cautioned that this "first memorandum... needs further in-depth debate, including on the future role of state-owned news agencies".

And that is exactly what it is: a first position paper for much needed further debate. Or, to put it this way: an invitation to actively participate in that debate, which is still very much in the beginning stages.

also act as a complementary source of information to the print edition.

Another benefit to this extended reach is that the information becomes more accessible to the Western media, which Mbanga says, is not without its faults and blind spots.

"Since 9/11," Mbanga says, "the world's attention is elsewhere. Nobody's interested in Africa anymore. Mugabe is free to do as he pleases, nobody is watching him."

What's more, Mbanga says, the Western media often get it wrong, or get a distorted perception. Part of the problem is that Western journalists are often banned from Zimbabwe, but even so they've unwittingly helped to perpetuate the myth that Mugabe takes farms away from whites and gives them to blacks.

"It's nothing of the sort," Mbanga exclaims. 'He's taking land from white farmers and giving it to his

cronies!'"

A free Zimbabwean press operating on the international stage will help to remedy these deficiencies, as the Zimbabwean situation is reported around the world by Zimbabweans.

Their mission?

"To produce and distribute a newspaper dedicated to freedom of expression and access to information for all peoples of Zimbabwe, founded on the sacred principles of journalism – fairness and honesty. To play a role in opposing everything offensive to basic human decency and hostile to peace, in order that Zimbabwe may return to the path of wisdom and sanity, and become once again an honourable nation, governed by honourable people with due respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law."

They appear to be doing a fantastic job – running a world-class newspaper on a shoestring – and FTP! ■

Memorandum on the transformation of state newspapers

- State controlled/owned newspapers as a legitimate tool of communication for governments have outlived their purpose in view of the multitude and plurality of independent media voices.
- Governments' responsibility to inform citizens on government issues is best served through their professional public relations departments.
- Governments have the responsibility to create an enabling environment for a free press and must ensure a level playing field for all sectors, eg: in regard to use of government facilities, access to capital, taxation, (duty free) import of newsprint and equipment as well as the widest possible distribution of newspapers. All government advertising should be placed by a commercial agency (selected through a tender process) according to criteria of impact. Government publications should not carry commercial advertising.
- Governments should not own, control or operate newspapers.
- Viable state newspapers should be privatised. This process should be based on:
 - decisions by an institution that operates at arm's length from government;
 - documentation submitted by the bidder in regard to editorial independence;
 - professional quality standards;
 - the avoidance of monopolies and undesirable foreign ownership with a view to increasing media diversity and pluralism.
- The process of privatisation will take different forms according to specific circumstances in the various countries (eg: vibrancy of private market, number and types of state newspapers):
 - State newspapers should not necessarily be sold to the highest bidder.
 - Additional conditions could be set to ensure editorial independence through boards of trustees and/or editorial staff rights in appointing top editorial staff.
 - Shares could be offered to citizens in general in certain (limited) amounts for each individual/group, with restricted rights of resale, to ensure broad-based ownership.
 - Staff and management could be offered a buy out.
 - An appropriate solution might also be a mix of the above options.
- Wherever such a transformation is not possible due to lack of political will, the danger of creating a new (now private) monopoly, or no buyer being found, as a transitional solution state newspapers should be transferred to a public legal entity. This entity must be accountable to the public at large through a board protected against any political or economic influence and appointed in an open and transparent manner involving the participation of civil society.
- Whenever the information needs of citizens are not sufficiently catered for by the mainstream press, media development agencies should be put in place to promote community and local media. Such agencies must be independent even if public funds are used.

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Some useful websites

The following sites offer important information on the state of the media in Zimbabwe:

The Zimbabwean – <http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk/>

Stichting Vrijplaats – <http://www.koppenhinksteeg.nl/>

NIZA – <http://www.niza.nl>

New Zimbabwe – <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/>

Wilf Mbanga Profile – <http://people.africadatabase.org/en/person/14023.html>

Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe – <http://www.mmpz.org.zw>