

TO say that southern African media are in a state of flux these days is to belabour the obvious. But the obvious can be revolutionary. There is greater hope for a free press today than there has been for many years in states like Zimbabwe and Zambia as popular democratization movements gain steam. There are even signs of an easing of the reins on state-run broadcasting monopolies in a few places.

In one state of the region, however, recent media developments are less revolutionary in scope and certainly less controversial in character. Botswana has been one of the most democratic states in Africa over its entire quarter-century of independence, with a functioning multi-party parliamentary political system and regular elections.

Diamond revenues, cattle and mineral exports have financed ambitious infrastructural development projects, including roads, dams, and airports, along with generally successful social programmes, enabling the state to avert the economic collapses and famines suffered by its neighbors. While far from perfect, the economic and political record of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party and its leadership has certainly been noteworthy.

These factors have also helped nurture a small but viable private press and an environment which allows for mild media criticism of government policy, at times even by the government's own media. In how many African states today could one open the government newspaper and read a headline like "Government Ministers Only Enrich Themselves"? Particularly since 1982, the private press has not only been tolerated by government leaders but held up as tangible evidence of the democratic political atmosphere of the country.

Although unique in certain respects, Botswana's media share several important basic attributes of neighboring states' systems, including: 1) skewed, urban-based centralization of infrastructure, resources, and audiences; 2) emphasis in coverage on words and images of top national leaders, particularly the head of state; 3) heavy, often conflicting demands upon media institutions, particularly radio, to serve national development, inform, educate, and entertain; 4) a general lack of diversity of information and focus between different national media organs, for example from the *Daily News* to *Radio Botswana*; 5) a structure which ensures top-down, one-way communication flows.

Botswana's Press

Currently there are four private newspapers, all weeklies, as well as the government's own *Daily News*, which appears Monday through Friday. There are also a variety of magazines and journals, including *Kutlwano*, a government monthly, and a recent addition, the *Botswana Political Diarist*, put out by the main opposition party, the Botswana National Front (BNF), "to provide a forum for democratic debate

media watch

Continuing our series on journalism in southern African states, **JAMES ZAFFIRO** examines the state of the media in Botswana

between individuals from different political persuasions and organizations in Botswana".

The most outspoken paper is *Mmegi*, or *The Reporter* in English. There is also the *Botswana Guardian*, the *Botswana Gazette*, and the *Mid-Week Sun*. Each of these papers is written mainly in English and aimed at an urban, secondary school educated readership. Figures fluctuate and are unreliable but it would be fair to say the *Daily News* commands the largest readership and circulation, probably close to 50 000 copies, due to the fact that it is distributed free and transported to other major urban and peri-urban centres around the country on Government transport. *Mmegi*, the most widely-read private paper, costs 60 thebe (about 30 cents). For reasons of cost and efficiency, private papers are printed in South Africa then transported by truck to Gaborone for distribution.

The private papers have tried to increase circulation outside of Gaborone, where none probably commands more than about 25 000 copies weekly, but only *Mmegi* has had much success. Even then, the major audience is urban and English-speaking from cities like Francistown, Molepolole, and Serowe. Most rural dwellers rarely see a newspaper and when they do it is generally weeks, if not months, old. Radio Botswana is their major, if not exclusive, media source of news and entertainment.

No newspaper is exclusively or even mainly written in Setswana and aimed at a non-English readership. The *Daily News* reserves its back page for reprinted headline stories in Setswana, while its other seven pages are in English. *Mmegi* runs five or six stories and an editorial or two in Setswana. The government hopes to increase the number of pages of the *Daily News* during the next National Development Plan period but still has not considered enlarging the Setswana section.

Other recent efforts at private newspapers have included the *Examiner*, edited by Brian Egner during the early 1980's, and *Newslink Africa*, which disappeared in late 1991 after ongoing investigative reporting by *Mmegi* revealed a major financial and editorial connection with the South African military (SADF).

Some feel that Botswana journalists sometimes go too far in assuming watchdog status over public officials and institutions, for example the private press exposures of the Leno real estate irregularities, *Newslink Africa's* ties to the SADF, and coverage of a recent land scandal which resulted in the resignation of the Vice-President and Agriculture minister. Others proudly point to these cases as evidence of the effectiveness and importance of a critical and free press.

Government, for its part, holds mixed feelings on this but clearly some believe in the importance of a free press. Some ministers are more hostile than others, denying press access to them and questioning their right to carry out investigative reporting. In 1991, UNESCO was commissioned to advise on how it might regulate relations with the private press.

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The report recommended creation of a press council "to ensure that the freedom that the press enjoys goes with a high sense of responsibility and professional conduct". The council should also be able to "review existing laws affecting the press with a view to updating them and ensuring that they are consistent with Botswana's democratic traditions and ideals". The report also urged government to begin to charge for the *Daily News* and to take measures to ensure the economic viability of the private press.

Broadcasting

Botswana broadcasting is housed within the Department of Information and Broadcasting, a section of the Ministry of Presidential Affairs. Despite being a government institution it is fair to say that there is more freedom from interference and heavy-handed censorship at *Radio Botswana* than is true of many other African services which merely maintain a facade of independence from the government.

Station employees acknowledge their responsibility as public servants to explain and support government policies, yet many feel strongly that their role sometimes compels them to put social responsibility first, exposing corruption and illegal activities and transcending government media guidelines to grant opposition leaders access to criticise a particular individual or policy, although this is much more rare than private press criticism.

Calling itself for years "The Station of the Nation" but criticised by many in rural areas as "Radio Gaborone", *Radio Botswana* has expanded efforts to upgrade its signal strength and quality nation-wide. Major urban areas now have FM coverage, while further expansion of the medium wave service continues. The government station remains the only broadcast service in the country.

Like other African systems, *Radio Botswana* has too often focused on hardware improvements at the expense of audience, content, and staff development. The result is a more powerful, modern national service which sometimes fails to serve, inform, educate, promote development, or even offer popular entertainment because it is compelled to try to be too many different things for too many different audiences and interests on a one-channel service. Some of the most recent efforts include expanded broadcast hours, from 5am to midnight, more news bulletins, and a renewed effort to improve schools broadcasts with help from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

Attempts to initiate a commercial service were repeatedly headed off or postponed, on the grounds that it was wasteful and could not be supported by local advertising revenue, scarcely able to help sustain the private press and provide a partial subsidy to the *Daily News*. Beginning in April 1992, a commercial channel was scheduled to begin serving a 50 kilometer radius of the Gaborone area on the FM band, broadcasting

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mainly in English, catering to the 15 to 45 age group, operating primarily as a music and entertainment service. If successful, the service would be extended nationwide during the next National Development Plan Period.

Introduction of television appears stalled again, in light of government's failure to locate a suitable consultant to update a 1988 International Telecommunications Union (ITU) national television feasibility study. There is consensus among government leaders that any television service must be national in scope and not simply entertainment for urban elites. It should cover more than half the population and not rely heavily on foreign-produced documentaries and situation comedies but rather based on "imaginative, home-grown material". A national service should also be run "by people of professional integrity" and "should be seen to be abstaining from political partisanship".

Since 1988 there also has been a closed-circuit Gaborone-based service, GBC (Gaborone Broadcasting Company) which airs films and documentaries to subscribers. In addition, many urban dwellers own televisions and regularly tune to South African and Homeland television stations. Indeed, since the mid-1980's, a major force driving efforts by government to introduce national TV was to counter South African influence via the airwaves by winning back Botswana viewers.

In partnership with *Radio Botswana* and the government, the *Voice of America* has recently completed a major upgrade of its Africa Service signal with installation of four new 100 kw shortwave and two new 100 kw medium wave transmitters near Selebi Phikwe. There are plans to add a 500 kw medium wave transmitter by 1994. This is now VOA's main site in Africa, replacing the destroyed equipment in Liberia and dramatically upgrading the signal throughout East, Central, and Southern Africa.

Media-State relations

The major factors accounting for Botswana's exceptional media freedom, despite sometimes anxious feelings on the part of certain ministers and permanent secretaries about an overly challenging private press, seem to be a notable absence of major ethnic animosities and the high legitimacy of its national leaders, particularly the country's first President, Sir Seretse Khama. These seem to have discouraged temptation by leaders to create and use mass media as tools to build national unity and regime legitimacy. This is significantly different from most post-independence African media use and access policies.

As mass media grew closer to the center of the national political arena they gradually came to expect the same access, based on professionalism and support for democratic institutions which the Government allows its backbenchers and opposition party critics. Access to top decision-makers and detailed information about Government policies has been sporadic and

incomplete. Many journalists have complained that foreign reporters and media crews enjoy greater access than local media. Yet in times of crisis media are briefed and complaints are at least partly addressed via meetings with ministers and the President.

Journalists working on the private papers continue to condemn what they see as attempts by government and big business "to kill whatever remains of press freedom in this country" but the fact that many of these attacks are launched in print suggest that the situation is still markedly better than in most other African states. Reporters are sometimes harassed and on at least one recent occasion the offices of *Mmegi* were searched by the CID.

The National Security Act, passed by Parliament in 1986 amidst the destabilization and military aggression of the South African government, has been occasionally cited by certain ministers to suggest boundaries of acceptable press behavior in certain policy terms of the Act for allegedly publishing a classified government document. The minister responsible for the press and broadcasting once suggested that "there is no better censorship than self-censorship". Foreign journalists, particularly black South Africans, have at times been subject to sudden unexplained deportations by Presidential decree.

The Government of Botswana has budgeted more money for modernization, expansion, training, and development of a national press and broadcasting infrastructure, rural information services, a national news agency (BOPA), and foreign consultancies in its current National Development Plan than ever before. The Department of Information and Broadcasting received a 28% increase over 1990/91 in its 1991/92 Parliamentary allocation, to P7.9 million (about R10 million). The Department has requested P9.4 million for 1992/93, a further 19% increase. This may be expected to continue into the next Plan period.

Botswana journalists have organized themselves loosely via a journalists' association (BOJA) which attempts to formulate informal ethical and professional norms and guidelines for the fledgling media institutions. Efforts are also continuing to form a media workers' union. Journalism remains low-paying, low prestige work and all media suffer from rapid turnover and inadequately educated workers. Any advanced

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Conclusion

In Botswana, media and government are more separate and more able to communicate with each other about the common good than is true in most African states today. Both sides are realistic enough to realize that they must work together and also, that they can help each other to achieve individual ends. Some government officials make an effort to address journalists' concerns. Most journalists seem to realize and accept that there are legitimate limits to media criticism.

Necessary conditions for media freedom exist in Botswana today. It would be premature, however, to proclaim its arrival or institutionalization until key political, economic, and social norms are sufficiently ingrained in the mass and elite culture. The private press maintains a precarious existence, and will remain so until it can achieve economic viability and national distribution and readership. Higher status for journalists and greater professionalism are also needed. Until another smooth regime transition occurs Botswana's media freedom will remain a fragile thing.

Given the seriousness with which the present government views mass participation in national development and the political process, a strong argument can be made for the importance of effective, unfettered media institutions. As long as the ruling elite retains political legitimacy mass media will retain credibility and relative freedom from heavy-handed government controls, reinforcing the development of democracy and setting the country apart from many of its less fortunate neighbors.

It is still premature to assume that Botswana's media freedom, political legitimacy, and democracy itself are strong enough to survive economic collapse, opposition political victory, or any of a host of other calamities which have rocked its neighbours in the post-independence decades.

The main tests are yet to come. ●

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