

Broadcasting's Precarious Future

Who pays the piper?

John Barker makes a strong case for reform in African broadcasting



to render it truly a public service...

We are constantly bombarded by talk of the 'African renaissance' and economic liberalisation'. These are seductive terms, conjuring visions of freedom, equality and Africa finding its true place in the world, finally breaking the chains of slavery.

I, too, was seduced – by all the talk of the 'liberalisation of broadcasting', until one day I realised that 'liberalisation' really meant 'privatisation'. I was being sold a repackaged form of the Thatcher and Reagan dream of a free market based on individual materialistic values.

What I was looking for was the promotion of a broadcasting environment that provided comprehensive, in-depth and impartial news and information coverage – one that ensured access to minorities and provided culturally relevant programming in local languages. What the politicians and organisations such as the World Trade Organisation were selling was the chance for overseas companies to infiltrate our markets and make a profit. In short, they were offering a broadcasting system primarily focused on providing a narrowcast service for an elite audience.

The outcome of 'liberalisation' in southern Africa has been an opening up of the broadcasting market to private enterprise. This has often occurred in a complete policy vacuum, with no regard for the promotion of diversity or pluralism. Simultaneously, we have seen the removal of subsidies from the established national or state broadcasters, forcing them to become more and more commercially orientated. This has happened at a time when we should have been focused on transforming these ageing government mouthpieces into independent and public service-orientated broadcasters.

The Zimbabwean government, for instance, funds only a small percentage of the Zimbabwean Broadcasting Corporation's budget and still owes millions of dollars in back payments. In Zambia anyone with the resources can place prime-time broadcast programmes on the Zambian National Broadcasting Corporation's Services. What does this mean for the broadcaster's editorial integrity? Our governments say that they cannot afford to subsidise broadcasting, while they seem to have no trouble in paying to go to war in neighbouring states. If we really want broadcasting in the region to meet its true potential, publicly funded broadcasting still has an important place.

The transformation of our national broadcasting corporations into broadcasters dedicated to the principles of public service and editorial independence is indeed an important component of broadcasting reform. This transformation can be achieved only if we find ways to ensure editorial and programming independence. Editorial staff

must abandon self-censorship and be enabled to do their jobs without fear of reprisals. In Malawi recently, at least four senior employees of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation were fired, apparently because they were opposition supporters. We can go a long way in putting mechanisms in place to stop this type of harassment, but nothing will be fully adequate unless editorial staff are prepared to stand together to protect editorial principles.

Funding is a stumbling block to editorial independence, with many in the region believing in the old adage, 'he who pays the piper, calls the tune'. It is hard for people to imagine that a government can pay for something without controlling it. Financial self-reliance would help to ensure independence, but the gate-keeping system found in our national broadcasters makes the situation much more complex. There is a strong argument that suggests, for a number of reasons, that commercially dependent public broadcasters would not be able to develop the local and culturally relevant programming we are seeking. This is backed up by the fact that public service broadcasting is subsidised in many countries throughout the world.

What is needed are safeguards incorporated into the funding process that ensure editorial independence. One way of doing



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this is through multi-party consensus voting on public broadcasting subsidies. We should also ensure that public servants, members of Parliament and political party office bearers do not sit on the boards of broadcasters or the bodies that regulate broadcasting.

The 'liberalisation of broadcasting' has also brought us a proliferation of commercial music radio stations. The majority of these broadcasters' only concession to news and current affairs is rebroadcasting 'Voice of America' or reading the headlines of the national newspapers. These broadcasters are currently using terms such as 'freedom of expression' and the 'right to choice' to argue for re-broadcast licences. The re-broadcasting licences are a means of reaching additional audiences for advertising without investing in new studios or staff. None of these licences cover rural areas.

We need to urgently consider the conditions under which private broadcasting licences are issued. Should commercial broadcasters be under some public broadcasting obligations, for example? Should they be required to provide local news and information or programming in local languages?

The existence and role of community broadcasting is another issue. A lot of damage has already been done to this sector by over-zealous donors attempting to set up community broadcasting without proper consultation or even by developing community stations hand-in-hand with government. The definition and role of community broadcasting is an essential component of any broadcasting policy. How does it integrate into the overall broadcasting environment? A true policy challenge: the sustainable co-existence of public, commercial and community broadcasters.

Our aim should be to develop a stable and sustainable broadcasting system that serves the needs of all our citizens, promoting democracy and cultural diversity. The policy issues involved in this are numerous and many will be unique to particular national circumstances. But I believe that it is possible to persuade our often-secretive governments to adopt an open and transparent broadcasting policy process – one that gives us an opportunity not only to promote the need for policy reform, but also to take an active role in its formulation. All this, however, will require mobilising the active support of civil society representatives and media professionals in the region. Who is prepared to stand up and be counted?

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