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Deregulating the Broadcast Media in Africa

THE FOREGOING question came towards the end of a rather stormy interview session on a novel concept in Nigeria and indeed most of Africa: broadcasting as private enterprise.

However, rather than meet with vociferous denials and boring recapitalisation of some criteria upon which licences are granted applicants to run private broadcast media outlets, the mass communication scholar and head of the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission made matter-of-fact admissions of extraneous considerations to the process.

His subsequent explanation, rather than entailing 'politics' in the popular sense, merely underscored two vital features of deregulated broadcasting: the sensitive nature of the electronic media generally and its capital intensive nature.

His words: 'What we do in NBC is to recommend on the basis of stated criteria. The Head of State (Nigeria) in granting the final approval may look beyond our criteria in determining who gets what in the final analysis because the bank of information open at that level will be far, far more than what we have...'

Such a bank, he explains, will incorporate issues of geo-political spread and the all important security check which includes ensuring that drug money is not ploughed into the foreign exchange intensive private broadcast media business.

Perhaps, drawing examples from other advanced societies, the advantages of plural broadcasting as a purveyor of democracy, cultural values and ultimate liberator of the mind as well as a money spinning venture are after all not entirely

GLENDORA REVIEW: *How much of politics go into granting licences to applicants?*

Hakeem Bello

TOM ADABA: *I must say that there must be a good measure of politics involved...*



Homeward : Bound 1995, by Oladele Ajiboye Bamigboye, a Video projection from the exhibition 'Self Evident' at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

lost on African governments.

However, releasing electronic media to private managers with its quality of immediacy and frightening implications for tenuous, even dictatorial clingers to power in African countries has not been an easy decision to take for most governments.

Thus, it is instructive to note that a precursor of the deregulation drive of the broadcast media in Nigeria was the 1988 decree that first placed hitherto fully government controlled outlets like the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) under partial commercialisation.

The objective here was obvious: government wanted to be relieved of the burden of funding by means of limited autonomy to enable broadcast stations shore up their resource profile while government still had partial control through the information ministry.

It was almost a year later before the Nigerian government admitted private operators and by extension alternative information flow by the granting of licences to fourteen 'open broadcast television stations on the Ultra High Frequency (UHF) bandwidth and thirteen cable satellite operators in mid-1993 through the NBC's stringent guidelines. The first private radio station was to get a nod again some twelve months after in August 1994.

In other parts of Africa, problem still remains with iron-clasp government control, raising requisite capital to procure equipment and train personnel and most importantly, create a market that will sustain the industry through advertising.

'When we started', recalls Modibo Diallo, president of the management board of Radio Bamakan, an independent radio station in Mali which went on air two years ago, 'the government tried to stop us... Now they are putting through a law that both accepts and protects private radio. We are part of the movement to support democracy.'

Diallo spoke with Pat Machees as one of twelve representatives of African Radio Stations from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Guinea, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa and Zimbabwe who attended a two week seminar on radio management, sponsored by the Voice of America, held in the USA last year.

Among other participants at the seminar whose contributions provided revealing insights into the politics of broadcast media deregulation in Africa were Moustapha Thiombiano of Burkina Faso, who reportedly pioneered independent radio in Africa and now owns seven stations, and George Christensen, who owns Radio One FM, an independent station in the Gambia.

'In the first thirty years of African independence, people were not given the chance to speak out,' declares Thiombiano. 'We need more than public radio if we are going to emancipate the African people.'

According to him many of the private broadcast media outlets are using radio to address such problems as AIDS, vaccinations, education, women's liberation, and family planning.

The urge to offer alternative information source is the single compelling force behind proponents of private electronic media but cost remains the forbidding factor. This is the problem of an aspiring entrepreneur like, Joao Baptista Sousa - commercial director of the government-owned Radio Mozambique who is part of Nov Antenna, a group of announcers, technicians and

producers currently floating an independent station.

'We are applying for the licence', Sousa says. 'But getting the financing is the main problem. It costs \$50,000 to buy the equipment and build the station. Not a large one, just basic.' In Nigeria, the rough estimate for establishing a television station stands at the range of 150 to 200 million Naira; for the radio station, anything between 80 and 120 million Naira will be needed, all in foreign exchange and excluding staff training and overhead costs.

Thus, just as in Nigeria, the cost factor may be forcing other African governments to deregulate even the government funded electronic media as Joao Sousa contends. 'The government is putting pressure on the public radio stations to make money because they do not have enough... They give you 50 to 75 per cent and ask you to raise the rest.'

Getahum Gebremichael, an acting programme manager of Voice of Ethiopia, a government-backed station also acknowledged this pressure. According to him, 'we were socialistic and now are becoming capitalistic. The knowledge of sales management is all new to me. We need to have sales peoples who will go door to door and invite companies to use radio-especially if they do not know the value of advertising. Now we do not go door to door, they come to us. We have the same sales people for radio, television, and print. Radio needs its own sales force. We need a different market for radio. We will do better than now.'

In Zimbabwe Ufi Khumalo of Radio Three speaks of restructuring sales and programming as a way of coping with deregulation. 'We have to be more customer-focused,' she declares. With her seventeen years' experience at the Rhodesia Broadcasting Corporation which she joined as a clerk-typist, she should know.

When she joined the Africa Service of the network, it broadcast in English and one African language; but now it broadcasts in eight languages. 'The minority languages get two hours or less a day, but this is better than the nothing they had before independence in 1980'

We cannot but wonder at this juncture why government electronic media throughout Africa have been unable to raise adequate revenue until forced to do so by the partial deregulation stance and in the face of stiff opposition from the private media. The answer says Machees, lies in the lack of reward mechanisms for the staff of government-owned radio stations:

'In the well established private stations, sales people are paid based on collections from their sales, an incentive to get out and hustle. But in government-owned stations, sales people may be civil servants who get paid the same whether they sell a little, a lot, or nothing.' For example, in the government-run Namibia Broadcasting Corporation, salaries are fixed and commissions are not allowed.'

A staffer, Alex Tjihera says, 'I have been top salesman at my radio station every year for several years, and I have learned that I was not working hard enough.' His colleague, Rachel Gowasses would want to see a delineation of job responsibility so that people will know who is to do what.

Such a confusion would definitely not arise in a private media with a profit motivated management ready to hire the best in the market in order to succeed. Such is the experience of the Gambian radio entrepreneur, George Christensen: 'It was making money by the second or third month... within three to four months, we became the most popular radio station in our country and blew away all the competition.'

So what are the other problem areas for the deregulated broadcast media in Africa?

'We have all the equipment for broadcasting', declares Ahmadou Sadio Diallo, administrator of the Independent Radio Gendal in Guinea. 'We are only waiting for the okay from the government.' Aside from the feet dragging by many African governments and the daunting financial outlay of venturing into private media, watchers of the industry have identified certain intrinsic problems with the entire enterprise.

First, there is the danger inherent in having an industry, just like many others,

wholly dependent on imported technology and expertise. Thus, asked recently by *Glendora Review* in Lagos why the independent Raypower Television station had not taken off despite three postponements and numerous assurances. Chief Raymond Dokpesi, the chairman of DAR Communications who successfully started the first private radio in Nigeria said, 'Africa was allocated one satellite frequency at the World Radio Conference held in Geneva in 1977, and to utilise it, a lot of work had to be done and you have to apply to the International Telecommunication Union for approval for the allocation of the frequency.'

Besides, there are other international broadcast rules to be complied with and worse still the Russian equipment, the satellite, Interscruity Express II which he first acquired could not fit into the Inter-sat mode which most other countries are using hence the need to apply to Inter-sat for a Transponder Space while also having to reappraise, redesign and realign already acquired equipment to the new satellite.

Again, there is the question of programmes of dubious quality for which

the NBC has indicted some private television stations in Lagos and Kaduna just as it indicted radio and television stations and cable satellite retransmission stations for consistently flouting the agreed ratio for local and foreign content of broadcast materials.

'I am saying that we won't be a conduit pipe for foreign programmes. Do they want to make money so the national image should go to hell?' Adaba asked angrily when confronted with the allegations by private electronic media operators that he was being dictatorial over the programme ratios in Nigeria.

He explained that he had tried without success to establish a relationship between the Independent Television Producers Association of Nigeria (a potential source of credible local programmes) and the private media operators without success because the entrepreneurs prefer merely beaming cheap foreign programmes even if such are violent, erotic, offensive or repetitive.

Finally, in view of the lack of motivation in the government-owned media, private media outfits have created

room for professionals who are being attracted with promise of more rewards.

But how much of such qualified personnel are actually available? Critics have complained about a lowering of broadcasting standards by a crop of younger broadcasters who lack the proper grounding and exposure of the older but Dr. Adaba says this should be an expected fall-out of proliferation.

Such a short circuit entry into the studio, he said, would not obtain in the 70s for example, when rigorous training was uncompromised and media stations were far between.

Despite the shortcomings and problems spawned by deregulation, the idea of a deregulated media in Africa is indeed welcome. MEDIA WORLD, a media development organisation in Lagos enthusiastically stated that, 'the licensing of private broadcast stations remains a wise decision even by current African standards and reflects the yearning of not only the Nigerian, but also the entire world community.' **GR**

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