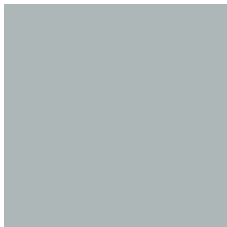
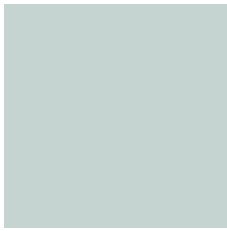
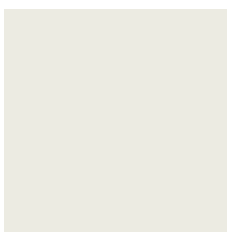


Africa's Media Boom: The Role of International Aid

BY MARY MYERS

October 2014





ABOUT CIMA

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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Africa's Media Boom: The Role of International Aid

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Photos on Pages 6, 15, 17 and 27 were taken by the author in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Chad.

Introduction

In 1991 in Mali, as the dictator Moussa Traoré was toppled by a popular revolution, a little known Italian NGO decided to help start a radio station: “During [Mali’s] bloody crisis in March of 1991... Italian civilians living in Mali told some of their Malian friends involved in the associative movements that they were in a position to provide them with necessary equipment to set up a radio station,” according to an account by the Panos Institute. “As a result the person in charge of Italian health cooperation, a member of the Italian NGO ‘GAO’ and [the] Terra Nova Coordinator in Mali got together...with a number of Malian intellectuals ..to obtain... the broadcasting equipment and the Italian NGO sent a technician to Bamako to install the radio and train Malian technicians.”¹

And so in September 1991 Radio Bamakan went on the air. It was Mali’s first officially sanctioned independent radio station, the first of hundreds of independent radio stations that crowd the Malian airwaves today—and it was started with foreign money.

This anecdote illustrates the role of media assistance in sub-Saharan Africa’s media liberalization-process as it ramped up in the early 1990s. It is the subject of this report, which explores these questions:

- How much of a catalyst were foreign donors in this mushrooming of Africa’s news media?
- What were the motives and mechanisms of this aid?
- What difference did it make at the time, and subsequently?
- Was media proliferation necessarily a good thing—did it lead to pluralism and genuine freedom?

This study also looks at what key lessons have been learned by donors 25 years on and the implications of these lessons for the future of media development in Africa.



The African Media Explosion, Post 1989

This year, 2014, marks 25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the symbolic end of the Cold War in 1989. It also marks the anniversary of the beginning of an extraordinary proliferation of media outlets in sub-Saharan Africa, which swept across the continent, freeing Africa's press and liberating the airwaves from monopoly by the state. The early 1990s has been called the "springtime of media proliferation in Africa"² and Africa's "democratic rebirth."³



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Economics, technology, and socio-political forces all played major roles in this boom of Africa's media. But one of the untold stories of these changes is the role of donor aid in this process. After the fall of communism in 1989, Western governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, and other donors began a concerted effort to provide assistance to the media to develop them along Western lines.⁴ It has been estimated that at least \$600 million was spent worldwide on media assistance by the U.S. government and media foundations alone during the decade after 1989.⁵

Globally, donor assistance to media in the developing world appears to be increasing year by year and is estimated to amount to an annual total of \$650 million.⁶

In 1985, according to the NGO Article 19, there were only 10 commercial broadcasters in Africa. Today there are more than 2,000 private and community radio stations in sub-Saharan Africa and more than 300 independent TV stations.⁷ As Professor Kwame Karikari, executive director of the Media Foundation for West Africa, puts it, "Since the 1990s the independent media have grown like the savannah grass after prolific rainfalls following a long drought."⁸ The pattern of pluralism now extends all over sub-Saharan Africa, with only a very few stubborn exceptions still remaining (Eritrea, Zimbabwe, and Equatorial Guinea are such cases where the state still retains a firm grip on information and expression⁹). Apart from these outliers, almost every country in sub-Saharan Africa has seen an enormous rise in the numbers and diversity of private and independent newspapers and TV and radio channels in the last 25 years.

This boom started in the early 1990s and has continued steadily until now, but there was a distinct jump in the early years, those immediately following the end of the Cold War, for example:

- In **Benin**, 80 new publications were registered in the space of a few months after military rule was overturned at the polls in 1991. In Cote d'Ivoire, in just six years, 178 newspapers swamped the Ivorian market, whereas during the previous 26 years (1964–1990), there had been only four newspapers.¹⁰
- In **Nigeria**, the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, newly established in 1992, issued licenses to 114 new applicants for radio, TV, and cable services in its first four years of operation.¹¹ Now Nigeria has 100 radio and 150 TV stations.¹²
- In **Madagascar**, whereas before 1991 the state broadcaster had a monopoly, a decade later there were 90 private radio stations and 15 private TV stations,¹³ and today there are estimated to be 250 radio stations in the country.¹⁴
- In **Tanzania**, before multiparty politics was introduced in 1992 there had been only two government-owned newspapers—one published in English and the other in Swahili,¹⁵ but by 2000 there were more than 60 private newspapers, 10 private radio stations, and 15 private TV stations—almost all concentrated in Dar es Salaam.¹⁶
- The pattern in **Uganda** was very similar: Broadcasting was opened up to private investors in 1992 and within eight years 22 private radios and four TV stations were on air, mostly owned by Ugandan nationals.¹⁷
- In **Mali**, whereas before the fall of Traoré in 1991, there had been a monopoly on broadcasting by the state, it took only two years for 11 brand new commercial and community radio stations to fill the independent information void, with an additional five community radio projects in the pipeline at the time.¹⁸ Now Mali is among the leaders of African media pluralism, with more than 200 radio stations spread across this sparsely-populated desert country.

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“Africa is watching the birth of a new movement for change. Some call it democratization, others, exasperation. People across the continent are reclaiming the right to participate, the right to a decent life, and the right to freedom of expression.”

— EUGÉNIE AW (1992)

While media still have a long way to go in reaching the poorest and remotest parts of the continent, from today’s perspective, the expansion of the mass media in Africa has since been joined by the boom in mobile phones and Internet. But it was in the crucial period of the early 1990s that the media explosion really began. One country after another introduced legislation that gave the local media the freedom it lacked in previous decades, so that “what was once a media desert [became] a landscape flourishing with newspapers, radio and TV stations,” in the words of Goran Hyden and Michael Leslie.¹⁹

Those were heady times for free expression in Africa. As former journalist, activist, and scholar Eugénie Aw expressed it in 1992, “Africa is watching the birth of a new movement for change. Some call it democratization, others, exasperation. People across the continent are reclaiming the right to participate, the right to a decent life, and the right to freedom of expression.”²⁰

Writing in 1995 media studies scholar Louise Bourgault describes it thus: “After years of muffled expression... many would-be journalists have... simply gone ahead and begun to publish... So eager have been political writers to have their say that they have used their own funds to get out their news sheets. Throughout the continent, newspapers have sprung up overnight.”²¹

Commentators, analysts, investors and donors hailed a new era of empowerment, interactivity and optimism for political accountability and democracy. Independent radio was seen, in particular, as the medium that would bring a new era for information and participation for Africa’s rural masses:

“In the coming years radio broadcasting will follow in the footsteps of this unstoppable movement of change in our countries and will be freed from the shackles of the State. Radio has the ability to address

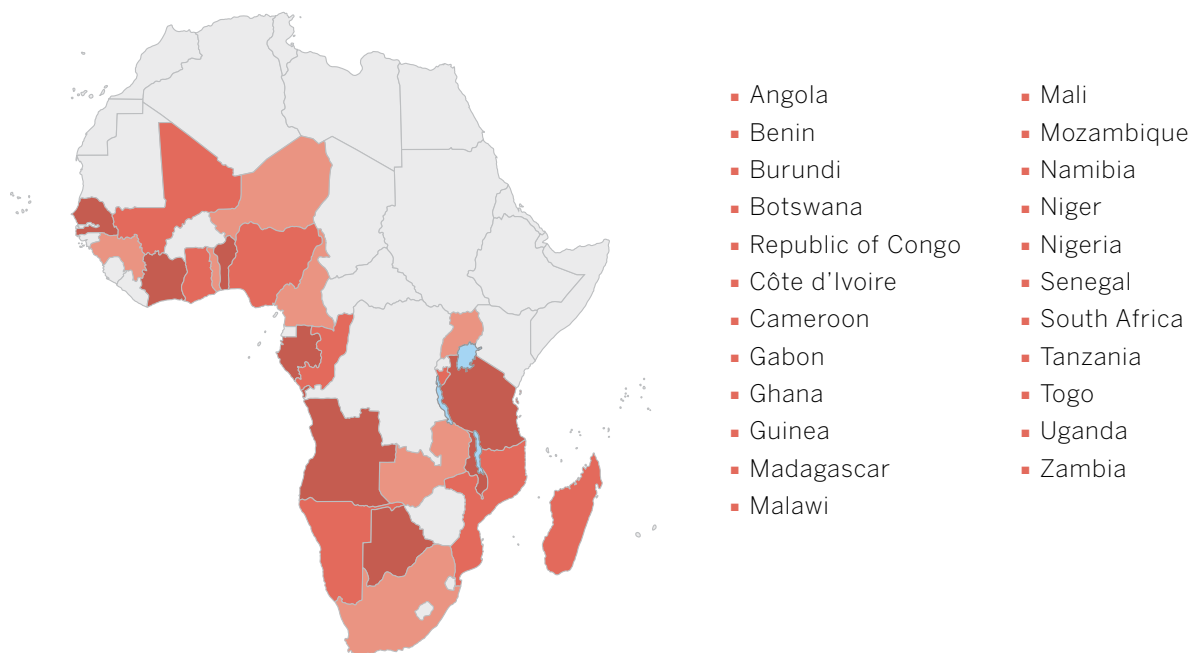
people in the language they speak every day... This is a very important factor," said Samba Touré, director of the CIERRO training institute in Ouagadougou.²²

In the prevailing optimistic political and economic mood, options were seen in binary terms. As activist and author Lynne Muthoni Wanyeki put it: "the end of government monopoly equals freedom, and the introduction of free-market competition equals consumer choice and pluralism."²³

At the time, foreign donors played a crucial role, although often behind the scenes, as the example from Mali above illustrates. Not only were most of the alternative and community media outlets in Africa founded and supported by foreign aid, but even the state media—notably government radio networks—were given significant outside support to become more public-service-oriented and to expand to reach more language groups and rural areas across their respective countries, once the competition from small independent broadcasters became stronger.

By the end of the 1990s the following states had taken steps to legalize competitive broadcasting: Angola, Benin, Burundi, Botswana, Republic of Congo, Cote-d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda and Zambia.²⁴

Countries that took steps to legalize competitive broadcasting in the 1990s



Catalysts of Change

To allow the pattern of media growth and liberalization to start, African rulers had to loosen their grip on the media and the political, economic, and technological conditions had to be right.

INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Looking back to the end of the Cold War historians agree that the early 1990s marked a turning point for the dictatorships that had defined sub-Saharan African politics since the independence wave of the 1960s. As author Martin Meredith says: “Africa, by the end of the 1980s was renowned for its Big Men, dictators who strutted the stage, tolerating neither opposition nor dissent, rigging elections, emasculating the courts, cowing the press.”²⁵

But a new “wind of change” meant that countries such as Tanzania, Ethiopia, Benin, Mozambique, and Guinea, which had been tied in with China and the Soviet Bloc, replaced socialism with a free market and made steps towards multiparty democracy. In August 1992 the Carter Center at Emory University in the United States reported that 30 African regimes were “in political transition.” By 1996, 37 out of 48 African states in sub-Saharan Africa held multiparty elections.²⁶ Popular



Photo: Mary Myers

dissent, student protests and public demonstrations played a major role in what has been called the “clamour for democracy.”²⁷ One after the other, military rulers and autocrats like Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, Moussa Traoré of Mali, Mathieu Kérékou of Benin, and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia were either forced out of office or pressured into allowing freedom of association, opposition parties, and elections and into liberalizing their economies.

As local leaders and citizens pressed for democracy, Western governments helped the process, urging for the observation of human rights, including freedom of the press, and making their promises of aid and loans conditional upon such changes. As academic Thad Dunning writes, “Once competition with the Soviet Union for African clients had receded, Western donors could much more credibly threaten to withdraw aid if democratic reforms were not enacted by recipient states.”²⁸

The World Bank urged bilateral donors to become far more selective and to direct their aid only to countries pursuing sound and sustained reform programs: “Ultimately, better governance requires political renewal. This means a concerted attack on corruption from the highest to the lowest levels. This can be done by setting a good example, and by strengthening accountability, by encouraging public debate, and by nurturing a free press.”²⁹

Britain’s foreign secretary, Douglas Hurd, announced in 1990 that countries that “tend toward pluralism, public accountability, respect for the rule of law, human rights, market principles, should be encouraged” and that governments that “persist with repressive policies” on the other hand “should not expect us to support them in their folly with scarce aid resources.”³⁰

Also in 1990, French President François Mitterrand made a speech at the Franco-African summit held at La Baule in western France, attended by 33 African delegations, in which he linked French economic aid to democratization and in which he specifically mentioned the need for “the clash of ideas and resources for the media.”³¹

In Malawi in 1992, President Banda was refused more aid by the UK, the World Bank, the EU and the United States unless human rights were respected and a political liberalization agenda announced.³² In Zambia in 1996, donors including the United States, Britain, and Japan reduced their aid after expressing unhappiness over President Chiluba’s souring of relations with the independent press.³³ In Ghana, pressure came from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which made democratic and liberal reform a condition for continued loans.³⁴ At the

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THAD DUNNING

Many “independent” newspapers and broadcasters in the early 1990s took sides once multiparty participation in politics was allowed, publicizing and championing opposing political parties.

time, President Rawlings of Ghana was keen to “project an image of a politically democratic national environment to external donor agencies and potential investors,” which partly explains “the absence of explicit content regulations or guidelines as well as the relatively hassle-free process of reviewing and approving [media license] applications.”³⁵

Thus we see that the influence of foreign donors had a role to play in media expansion from the very start of the wave of media liberalization—in this case in the shape of threats to withhold aid from governments.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FORCES

At the same time, donor-supported activities to help establish plural media systems in Africa were dwarfed by the private efforts of thousands of local entrepreneurs, politicians, and religious groups³⁶ who set up private media outlets once the political and economic conditions were right. In almost all countries the commercial media were generally backed by domestic business people with an eye to advertising profits. One of the reasons that most investors were local business people was that governments tended to make citizenship a condition of granting licenses. Restrictions on foreign ownership meant that in most cases multinational investors were unable to buy direct control of media entities and were therefore unwilling to invest.³⁷ An important near-universal characteristic of the private media as they emerged from the late 1980s was that they were set up with a small amount of capital, with the exception of the bigger economies of Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria.³⁸

Tanzania illustrates how local ownership predominated: In the first eight years of liberalization (1992–2000) the names of private media owners in Tanzania were all Tanzanian.³⁹ Three business groups dominated at the time⁴⁰—IPP Media (Reginald Abraham Mengi), Habari Corporation (Jenerali Ulimwengu and Gideon Shoo), and Business Care Services (Richard Nyaulawa). Their business interests were not limited to media but included cosmetics, soft drinks, insurance, and banking and, tellingly, their political affiliations tended to be in favor of the ruling party. The political leanings of media owners were significant. Many “independent” newspapers and broadcasters in the early 1990s took sides once multiparty participation in politics was allowed, publicizing and championing opposing political parties. The new private media profited from printing or broadcasting the party manifestos of political candidates. Incumbent governments often withdrew advertising by state enterprises from opposition newspapers, thereby effectively weakening opposition voices through economic means.

There were few exceptions to the nationalism rule, and these tended to be countries where the media market was more lucrative. For example in Kenya and South Africa, foreign-owned companies, such as the Nation Media Group (a major shareholder was the Agha Khan and is now the Agha Khan Fund for Economic Development), the Standard Media Group (in the 1990s, part of the British company Lonrho's business empire), and the Argus group (the largest South African newspaper conglomerate, formerly owned by Tony O'Reilly of Ireland), tapped into the superior buying power of the expanding urban populations of these two countries.

The link between profit and party politics was ever present, and many opposition politicians and political candidates (many of whom were also rich businessmen) set up newspapers and radio stations to publicize themselves and their parties. Côte d'Ivoire provides a case in point: In the period between 1990 and 1996, nearly 100 political organizations and 178 daily newspapers and periodicals were born.⁴¹ Zio Moussa, a media analyst from Ivory Coast, rhetorically asks: "does what is referred to as the springtime of the media, which was also the springtime of political parties, not explain, to some considerable extent, the much decried content of the Ivorian media? The perfect synchronisation between the two springtimes is startling and raises questions on the partisan political commitment, in other words, the exploitation, of the thousand petals of the media's springtime."⁴²

He paints the following picture:

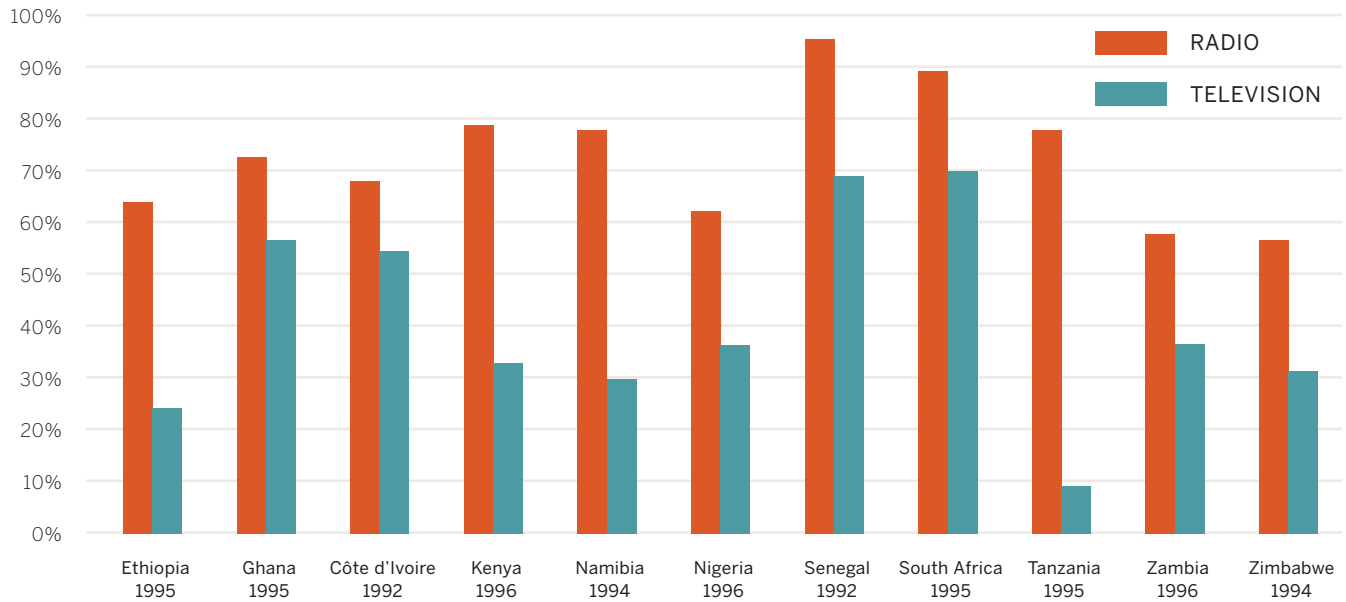
To express the proximity-subservience of Ivorian newspapers with and by political parties and politicians, Ivorians group them by colour: those which are for Laurent Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), are the blues; those for the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire-African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA) of Henri Konan Bédié, the greens... such classification is obviously not scientific and limited. It nonetheless expresses a certain reality: the Ivorian consumers of news... are not ignorant of the relationships of dependence between the media and power blocs.⁴³

Market forces meant that the private media houses naturally favored urban elites and concentrated on political intrigue and cheap, entertaining and tabloid-type content to maximize audiences. Generally speaking, the rural majority did not have the buying power to make advertising on rural radio worthwhile for commercial companies, nor were rural people literate or rich enough to buy newspapers.

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Media Use in Selected Sub-Saharan African Countries

WEEKLY USE OF RADIO AND TELEVISION (NATIONAL DATA)



SOURCE: Graham Mytton, *African Broadcast Cultures: Radio in Transition*

TECHNOLOGY

Other global forces were in play: The sheer force of technical innovations in communications technologies rapidly made reforms in ownership and access an imperative that states could not resist.⁴⁴ Satellite technology and, later, the advent of the Internet opened up huge new possibilities for freedom of expression, and lower prices for hardware made entry into the media world significantly more affordable. For instance, for the first time it was possible to set up a small radio station for as little as \$15,000⁴⁵ or less, and once FM licenses started to be granted by governments, it was possible for private entrepreneurs and donor-funded community initiatives alike to potentially reach millions of people in their local languages, with a radio signal from a cheap, simple studio with a staff of perhaps only four or five people. While radio remained dominant in Africa, television ownership and viewership figures also started to increase markedly in the 1990s, as equipment costs fell and there was more viewer choice. The chart above shows media use in selected sub-Saharan African countries in the mid-1990s, with radio being the highest, followed by use of TVs. Considering the poverty of the majority of Africa's population, household media equipment ownership was relatively high.

Donor Support to the Media

In the early 1990s donors to Africa not only used the stick to withhold aid but also the carrot of financial support to encourage liberal policies that would favor a free media. The following stories from Ghana, Mali, Zambia, and Nigeria illustrate the way in which support was given to help locally-driven processes guarantee greater press freedom and establish codes of ethics for more professional journalism practice.

SUPPORT FOR REFORM

Donor money from Canada, Britain, and Germany supported the initial domestic impetus for Ghana's government to liberalize the media in the early 1990s. In 1993 and 1994 two important national conferences chaired by the University of Ghana on the promotion and privatization of radio and TV broadcasting, were backed by Canada's International Development Research Centre, the Panos Institute (then based in the UK), and Germany's Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Forwarding their recommendations on legal, technical, and financial matters to parliament, the Ghanaian academics, media professionals, and government representatives at these conferences eventually saw their recommendations enshrined in the 1996 Ghanaian National Communications Authority Act. By 1998 more than 45 FM radio stations had been authorized, and 29 were on air.⁴⁶

In Mali in 1993 President Konaré signed the Bamako Declaration on Radio Pluralism, issued by the Colloquium on Radio Pluralism in West Africa, which was organized by the West Africa Journalists' Association and the Panos Institute, an NGO with various branches in Europe and the global South, and essentially funded by the governments of Britain, France, and the Nordic countries. This official backing was significant because it gave strength to diverse groups to start up their own small FM stations all over Mali.⁴⁷

In Zambia USAID initiated the U.S.-Zambia Democratic Governance Project in the early 1990s which was a package of reforms expected of the Zambian government in the aftermath of the 1991 multiparty elections that brought President Chiluba to power. This package included a media component estimated at about \$15 million to be spent over five years, involving legal reforms to abolish or modify restrictive press laws; the use of strong diplomatic signals as disincentives for using extra-legal measures to harass the press; and

Once the process of media liberalization had been launched in many sub-Saharan African countries, donors supported efforts to sustain it in various ways. However, these economic and technological forces and political reforms, such as multiparty elections, did not automatically mean that the press was more free everywhere.

the ending of state monopoly over media enterprises via privatization and commercialization exercises.⁴⁸ This project in Zambia was, in size and scope, “unlike any other the U.S. government had previously implemented,”⁴⁹ but it set the pattern for other similar media support projects elsewhere in Africa.

In Nigeria Radio Democrat International (later renamed Radio Kudirat, after the assassinated wife of the popular opposition politician, M.K.O. Abiola) was launched in 1996 and run by a London-based group that opposed the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha, who was in power in Nigeria from 1993 to 1998.⁵⁰ Backed by, among others, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, the programs were funded by Worldview Rights, a media NGO. The station used commercial airtime on South African transmitters,⁵¹ and was run under the aegis of a foundation registered in Norway. As one of its founders put it, “By setting up the radio, we... wanted to achieve three broad objectives: provide an alternative to the heavy dose of propaganda of the then military regime, empower the people and also reach the military class by promoting dialogue as the most viable option out of the political quagmire.”⁵²

After broadcasting for three years, the radio station closed down in 1999, when parliamentary and presidential elections were finally held in Nigeria and a civilian government was sworn in.

SUPPORT FOR SUSTAINED CHANGE

Once the process of media liberalization had been launched in many sub-Saharan African countries, donors supported efforts to sustain it in various ways. However, these economic and technological forces and political reforms, such as multiparty elections, did not automatically mean that the press was more free everywhere. Indeed, Peter Kareithi, an exiled Kenyan journalist, described the state of the African press during the transition period of the 1990s this way: “African leaders are practising managed change so that they can control the agenda of [political] reformation. Africans can never go back to treating their presidents like demigods. This does not mean that there is freedom for journalists. It means that journalists will be writing things that they were never able to write before but at greater risk.”⁵³

Where there seemed, initially, to be gains in terms of democracy there were many reverses just a few years later. For instance, in Cote d’Ivoire media started to flourish in 1990 when opposition parties were legalized,

but a year later a draconian press law was passed that “authorized the suspension or seizure of publications for those who disparage the head of state, give away national secrets or deride the nation.” In 1994 both Nigeria and Zaire increasingly cracked down on the opposition press in the run-up to elections. In Benin only a year after elections in 1991, the new regime attempted to re-impose censorship; and in Tanzania, in 1992, “one month after recommending multiparty politics for the country, the government was attempting to devise new ways of managing the free flow of information by empowering the Tanzanian director of information to assume the controlling role previously held by SHIHATA, the party newspaper,” according to Bourgault.⁵⁴

Therefore, donors found themselves working around the edges of a media environment where growth was exuberant but chaotic. Competition and inadequate legislation meant that only the most economically fit survived and grave dangers still lurked in the form of a repressive state. War and civil conflict was another huge factor in several African countries during the 1990s, putting a brake on development and upsetting the hoped-for progress of democracy across many countries.

In supporting independent media, donors’ strategies included projects to:

- promote peace
- counter market failures and promote the interests of women, minorities, and rural audiences
- help organize journalists into unions to resist exploitation by media bosses
- ensure that public-service content and development issues were covered
- help nudge governments into passing legislation that left media free
- uphold the rights of journalists and, at the same time, to reign in media excesses and hate speech, which threatened to aggravate pre-existing ethnic and other tensions.

In particular, there was direct support from donors for independent media outlets, notably for community radio; support for legal, structural and enabling measures to help independent journalism, and many journalist training courses.

SUPPORT IN MANY FORMS

Donors supported the African media in various ways during the 1990s. It is difficult to know exactly how much money was put into the African media sector by donors in the 1990s. Often financial provision for media was incorporated under larger projects such as election support or general aid to civil society and channeled through many different NGOs, such as groups advocating for freedom of expression. In some cases, donors clearly supported opposition media and in others, donors saw support to the media as an adjunct to ensuring that the new-found parliamentary and democratic processes were able to function better.

Bilateral donors, NGOs, and UN agencies not only funded media, defined as news-based journalism, but also often funded equipment for a community radio, for example, under wider development programs, in areas such as agriculture or a HIV/AIDS awareness. Therefore, isolating media assistance, when it was hardly ever identified as such, and was embedded within many different budget lines, is almost impossible.

However, as an indication, USAID evaluation advisor, Krishna Kumar's research shows that U.S. funding by USAID to media assistance programs amounted to \$264 million between 1985 and 2001, or about \$16.5 million per year worldwide on media assistance programs during that period.⁵⁵ If this sum had been shared equally among all aid-recipient countries (which numbered up to 80 eligible developing and transitional states during any one year), media assistance by USAID would have amounted to around a few hundred thousand dollars in any one country per year. But it was not shared equally, and we also know that the bulk of worldwide media assistance during the 1990s was spent in countries of the former Soviet bloc, and not so much in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, as noted above, a little could go a long way, considering a complete radio station could be set up in sub-Saharan Africa for only \$15,000.

As is the case today, the biggest funders in the media sector in the 1990s were probably the United States and the European Union, but individual European countries, Japan, and private foundations also played a significant role. For instance, estimates show that Nordic countries' assistance to journalism training in East and Southern Africa amounted to \$2–4 million over the decade of the 1990s.⁵⁷

**A Little Goes
A Long Way**



\$15,000

**Approximate cost to
set up a complete
radio station in
sub-Saharan Africa
in the 1990s**

EXAMPLES OF DONOR SUPPORT

Community radios were supported strongly by donors after the airwaves were liberalized in many countries in the early 1990s. Growth of community radio was notable especially in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, Senegal, and South Africa.⁵⁸ In South Africa, 79 community stations were licensed in 1995 alone, most with financial backing from international NGOs, although most of these stations were off the air again within the first year, due to economic pressures. In Mali, community radios grew at a rate of two new stations per month throughout the 1990s. Almost all of these were donor-backed.⁵⁹ In Mozambique, “Strengthening Democracy and Governance through Development of the Media in Mozambique” was the title of a major UNESCO/UNDP media development project that ran for eight years, created “to support Mozambique’s process to become a multiparty democracy after the peace accord in 1992.”⁶⁰ UNDP coordinated six bilateral donors—Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden—who spent more than \$14 million to establish eight community radio stations, provide training and support to independent newspapers, and help the state broadcaster to decentralize.⁶¹

Donor money supported many “firsts” during this period. For example, the first community radio in Uganda, Kagadi-Kibaale (KKCR 91.7 FM) was started in Kibaale in western Uganda in 1992 with Swedish money as part of a wider East Africa Community Media Project.⁶² The first community radio in Namibia, Radio Katatura, began broadcasting in 1995 with backing from the Danish NGO IBIS, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Swedish International Development Agency, the Open Society Institute and UNESCO.⁶³ The first community radio station in Kenya, Radio Mang’elele, was set up in 1994 under an East Africa-wide donor-initiative led by EcoNews and subsequently heavily dependent on funding from Sweden. And Oxfam financed the establishment of the first community radio station in Senegal, Radio Penci-Mi, in 1995 for the sum of \$60,000.⁶⁴

It is interesting to note that while community radio was a priority for many donors, it was not a priority for the U.S. government at the time.⁶⁵ Kumar writes, “Although community radio stations can promote grassroots democracy and development, USAID has largely ignored them. It is recommended that the Agency reconsider its position and invest in promoting community radio stations, particularly in Africa.”⁶⁶



Photo: Mary Myers



“Our strategy is... geared towards improving the health of press and radio businesses... These days when a government asks for our help our answer is that there needs to be a balance with the private sector as well.”

FRANCE'S FOREIGN
MINISTRY (1996)

Some **private radio stations** also received donor funding, despite the fact that commercial enterprises usually do not receive such aid. For example, Radio Phoenix in Lusaka, Zambia, was set up as a commercial radio station but also got financial help from USAID in the form of a grant for civic education under the USAID/Southern University Democratic Governance Project.⁶⁷ Aside from donor money, Phoenix began its life in 1996 with advertising and sponsorship from Daewoo, Toyota, Philips Electrical, Zambia National Breweries, Honda Zambia, and a number of wholesale pharmaceutical companies.⁶⁸

In West Africa, the French Foreign Ministry and the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* declared their interest in extending their support to private sector media, seeing it as fulfilling a public service role and also as a source for significant employment opportunities. A representative of France's foreign ministry said in 1996: “Our strategy is... geared towards improving the health of press and radio businesses... We offer all-round support to the media profession, which means private radio as well as public radio... These days when a government asks for our help our answer is that there needs to be a balance with the private sector as well.”⁶⁹

Semi-independent radio stations were set up by donors or through international NGOs in several countries, notably in war zones. For example Radio Agatashya was set up by the Swiss NGO Fondation Hirondelle in 1994 in direct response to the misinformation and hateful propaganda of Radio Television Libre Milles Collines (RTL) in Rwanda during the genocide. Radio Gulu in northern Uganda, which later became the successful commercial Mega FM, was originally set up with a large grant from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) intended primarily for its peace-building potential, in the late 1990s. In Burundi, during the internal conflict that ravaged the country in the mid-1990s, several radio stations were sponsored by donors, partly to counteract the partisan hate-speech in the written press and the national radio station and partly to ensure balanced reporting for people stuck in war zones. Marie-Soleil Frère, a scholar of media in Francophone Africa, acknowledges the role of the EU and the U.S.-based NGO, Search for Common Ground, in supporting Radio Bonesha and Radio Isanganiro respectively: “Coverage outside the capital [was] absolutely crucial, because the rural regions [were] the site of chronic violence, massacres of civilian populations, and fighting between armed forces and rebels.” This, she writes, required a large investment: “Burundian radio stations have benefited from funding, mainly from foreign donors,” which has enabled them to operate despite a lack of traditional revenue sources such as commercial advertising or contributions from local partners.⁷⁰

NEW AND OPPOSITION NEWSPAPERS

Donors occasionally got involved with direct funding for independent newspapers. For example, in Mozambique, the Norwegian Development Agency (NORAD) provided money for the first independent newspaper in 1992. It was called *Mediafax* and appeared at first only by fax. Published by a cooperative of journalist formerly employed by the state media, *Mediafax* became a commercial success but would not have been launched without international donor support.⁷¹ In several countries, notably in war zones like Burundi, moderate newspapers that tried to maintain a neutral and moderate tone in the mid-1990s survived thanks to financial support and equipment from donors through human rights NGOs such as Reporters Without Borders.⁷²

In some cases direct support was given by donors to overtly political, opposition newspapers specifically to nudge the democratization process along. For example, Lars Rudebeck of Uppsala University writes:

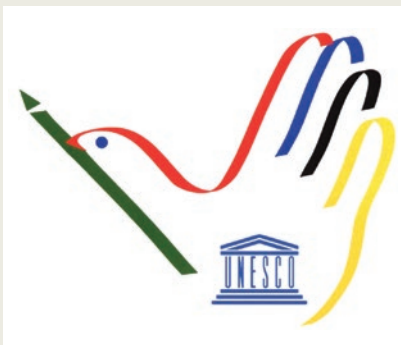
*Once in the early 1990's, I was sitting in the air-conditioned office of a European chargé d'affaires to a small sub-Saharan country. This official told me that... he... had taken a few thousand dollars of his country's aid budget to pay for the printing bills of a courageous opposition newspaper, at a sensitive stage of the still ongoing transition towards democracy in that African country. If those bills had not been paid at that particular moment, the paper would most probably have been forced to close down...To my mind [this] is... one of the most intelligent, useful and cost-efficient examples of democratisation aid that I have ever come across.*⁷³

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD-SETTING AND ADVOCACY

In 1995 UNESCO adopted the “Windhoek Resolution,” born out of a seminar coordinated by UNESCO in Namibia in 1991. This seminar was donor funded and formulated the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent African Press. This set African—and even international—standards for independent media at the time and established May 3 as **World Press Freedom Day**. The Windhoek Declaration affirmed that “the creation, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press are essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development.”⁷⁴



Photo: Mary Myers



May 3 established as World Press Freedom Day

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During the 1990s donors funded other conferences and inter-African meetings aimed at strengthening the liberalization trend and lobbying for greater media freedoms—for example, the International Conference on Radio Pluralism in Bamako, Mali, in 1993; the International Conference on Deregulation of Broadcasting in Africa in Abuja, Nigeria (1996); the first conference of the West African Independent Broadcasters Association in Banjul, Gambia (1996); and several meetings of the African section of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC).⁷⁵

UNESCO played a large role in supporting initiatives such as these, as well as in setting up and sustaining regional professional bodies.

PROFESSIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Professional Associations, Journalist Organizations, and Resource Centers emerged in the 1990’s, mostly with considerable donor help from, among others, UNESCO, the European Union, the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.⁷⁶ Examples include:

- Ghana’s International Press Centre, which was founded by the Ghana Journalists’ Association in 1993. It received the support of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) through the Media for Democracy in Africa project, financed by the European Union.
- *The Centre de Ressources pour la Presse* (CRP) in Republic of the Congo created in 1994 with the support of UNESCO and *Ouest Fraternité*, a French NGO, providing journalists with access to computing resources, basic documentation, workshops, and training sessions.⁷⁷
- The *Maisons de la Presse* of Rwanda and Burundi were established in the ’90s with donor funding (including from USAID) and so were private press journalists’ associations (e.g., the UJPB in Bénin), organizations for publishers in the private press (AEPT in Chad), organizations for protection of press freedom (*Journaliste en Danger* in the DRC).
- In Burundi, in 1995, when the number of privately owned newspapers had increased quickly due to liberalization, the *Association Burundaise des Journalistes* (ABJ) was helped by UNESCO to create a code of ethics and professional practice to try to counteract the “excesses” of the newly liberalized partisan press. This code was adopted by 240 Burundian media professionals.

Press centers and journalists associations were “all important as they enabled the development of a common feeling of professional identity and solidarity between journalists who are then more likely to collectively demand improvement of their status, defense of their rights and protection of their interests.”

Marie Soleil Frère writes that such press centers and journalists associations were “all important as they enabled the development of a common feeling of professional identity and solidarity between journalists who are then more likely to collectively demand improvement of their status, defense of their rights and protection of their interests. Professional solidarity is also essential in countries where journalists are particularly harassed or threatened.”⁷⁸

WATCHDOG / SELF-REGULATION BODIES

The first independent press regulator in Francophone Africa was formed in Cote d'Ivoire in 1995. Baptised OLPED⁷⁹ (observatory for press freedom, ethics and professional standards), it was formed thanks to donor money from the United States, Canada, France, the EU, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.⁸⁰ Frère credits OLPED for playing a pioneering role in the whole of francophone Africa.⁸¹ It was followed by the creation of ODEM⁸² in Benin in 1998, (observatory for professional conduct and ethics in the media), of CRED⁸³ in Senegal (council for respect of ethics and professional conduct), of ONAP⁸⁴ in Burkina Faso (national press observatory) , all of which also benefitted from core funding from donors, notably from the European Union's Media for Democracy in Africa program.⁸⁵

JOURNALIST TRAINING SCHEMES, INSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTES

Capacity building was a priority in the context of new-found pluralism. As Karikari puts it: “The emergent private media [of the 1990s] confronted a severe demand for personnel in all sections of media work and management... the rescue operation was initiated by government and donor agencies which mounted training programs for the new cadre of journalists” but, he notes “even then the growth of the new [private] media seems to be too fast for... response from the donor community.”⁸⁶

Prominent international organizations involved in media training in Africa during the 1990s included the BBC, the Thomson Foundation, the European Journalism Centre, Deutsche Welle's training institute, the World Association of Newspapers, and the International Center for Journalists. Major foundation support was provided by The Freedom Forum, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and others.⁸⁷

Local journalist associations were often funded with one-off grants, such as the Uganda Journalists Association, which received a U.S. government grant for \$350,000 for media training in the mid-1990s.⁸⁸ Much of the journalism training undertaken involved short courses outside of academic institutions, which were generally regarded by donors as inadequate by international standards.⁸⁹ However three African institutions stand out in terms of excellence in journalism education in the 1990s: the Inter-African Center for Rural Broadcasting Studies of Ouagadougou (CIERRO) in Burkina Faso, the Department of Journalism and Communication (DJC) at Makerere University in Uganda, and the Nordic-SADC Journalism Centre (NSJ) in Mozambique. All were founded and/or depended heavily on international donor money. CIERRO was financed in major part by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) for more than a decade, although it now no longer exists. The DJC at Makerere was, and still is, sustained partly by donors such as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and UNESCO. The NSJ's principal founding partners were the Southern African SADC countries, and the Nordic countries represented by the Danish government, which, along with Sweden and Norway, have provided the NSJ millions of dollars over the years.⁹⁰

Linked with training, but mainly doing advocacy and press-freedom work, was the Media Institute for Southern Africa (MISA) based in Windhoek, Namibia. This is an institute that, along with those centers mentioned above, was also founded in 1992, at the time of the post-Cold War boom; it was set up almost entirely with donor money to monitor, investigate, and report on media freedom violations in the southern Africa region. With chapters in 11 countries in southern Africa, MISA was founded with financing from Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), through a trust fund, and other long-term funders included UNESCO, Norway, Denmark, Australia, and Germany.^{91, 92} Millions of dollars have been spent by donors on this institution to help ensure diversity and pluralism in Africa's media.

AID TO STATE MEDIA

As the competition from small independent broadcasters became stronger, donors backed some state broadcasters to establish regional stations, with the rationale of expanding public service broadcasting. For example:

- In Niger, the state radio station (ORTN) was awarded a multimillion dollar grant from international donors for a decade-long initiative ending in 1999 to decentralize its radio network and establish six regional FM stations in Niger's provincial capitals. The donors involved included the UN's FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), ACCT (French for agency of cultural and technical cooperation), Oxfam and the GTZ. Until the further liberalization of the Niger's airwaves in the late 1990s brought greater competition in rural areas from private radio stations, these ORTN regional stations were the most popular broadcasters in their respective areas.⁹³ In Zambia the ZNBC (Zambia National Broadcasting Corp.) relied in the 1990s on technical assistance from donor countries such as Japan, which helped to construct the Mass Media complex where ZNBC is now housed; South Africa, which donated TV cameras; and China, which assisted with transmitters.⁹⁴
- Namibia signed an agreement with the European Union to expand the transmitter network of its state broadcaster, NBC, shortly after independence in 1990, which, by the end of the decade ensured almost total coverage of Namibia's territory with over 30 FM transmitter stations.
- In Gambia, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the European Economic Community offered to finance the rural radio network of the state radio, Radio Gambia.⁹⁵

SPONSORSHIP

In the story of African media pluralism, donors also have played—and continue to play—the role of sponsors of airtime. NGOs and UN agencies (as well as national government departments) regularly pay private media outlets to run or broadcast public service advertising and campaigning messages on their behalf. These may be news about a vaccination campaign or advice on anything from road safety to farming. In many cases, the revenue that media outlets gain from this is substantial. For instance Radio Television Mwangaza, a commercial station in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, relies on these kinds of partnerships with donors like UNICEF for up to 25 percent of its operating budget,⁹⁶ even though it is nominally a commercial outfit. At



Vlad Galenko / Shutterstock.com

Jozi FM in South Africa—a community radio run along commercial lines, revenues from public service announcements cover 15 percent of its budget.⁹⁷ Thus, in the eyes of hard-pressed media managers who need to sell airtime, messages by NGOs about agriculture or health start to assume the same utility as advertisements by big companies for soap powder.

In a survey of 15 radio stations of all types (public, commercial, and community) across Africa for Farm Radio International in 2008, Christopher Yordy found that for all stations, loans and grants from NGOs and international organizations are by far the preferred source of funding; at most, international donors tended to cover a greater portion of start-up expenses while other revenue sources, such as airtime sales, advertising, and fundraising, tended to cover operating expenses.”⁹⁸ He goes on to note that “commercial radio stations tend to rely on private capital for startup [but replace] this with revenues from airtime sales once the station establishes operations.”⁹⁹

Even state radio stations, such as the regional network of the ORTN of the Republic of Niger, rely heavily on sponsored advertising by international donors. As journalist and media consultant, Christine Nimaga Ceesay shows in her case-study of ORTN during the 1990s, “the potential of radio as an educational tool... opened up a new source of income for the permanently underfunded local stations. The donor agencies constitute a big market in an economy like Niger, even if the usefulness of a market that depends on outside investments is debatable.”¹⁰⁰

Donor Motives

Looking back at how the media markets opened up in sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s, it is clear that most direct investors were local business people and the motive was profit (and often that profit was linked to political power), with the exception of some large-market countries where foreign business also invested.

But the indirect investment in the media environment and in public service media was made by foreign government donors. As we have seen, this investment took many forms and was normally behind the scenes, although it did occasionally involve directly setting up newspapers or radio stations where judged necessary.

The return on investment for donors was obviously not financial but arguably political. Looking back over the decade of liberalization, Kumar (2004) concludes that USAID's media assistance was unashamedly a tool of foreign policy: "Independent media building has served U.S. national interests ... In many countries, support to independent media created political space that enabled the United States to pursue specific foreign policy goals, such as holding of elections, promotion of human rights, or political reconciliation."¹⁰¹

USAID articulated its rationale for support to the media sector as follows: "a free and independent media, unrestrained by abusive government restrictions, is a key component to building vibrant democracies."¹⁰² Folu Folarin Ogundimu, journalism scholar, writes about USAID's motives in supporting the media in Zambia:

[US]AID's Zambia Democratic Governance project appears consistent with a US government strategic objective to encourage a worldwide movement toward multi-partyism, structural adjustment and free market systems in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet empire. Indeed, AID administrator, Brian Atwood, said in testimony before Congress in 1996 that AID objectives had six key purposes: a) creation of demand for American exports b) strengthening of foreign markets c) helping countries get their policies right d) helping create capital markets e) helping countries privatize and deregulate their economies and f) helping develop human capacity through education and health programs.¹⁰³

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But it was not only the U.S. government that articulated its support for media growth as part of the democratization agenda. Japanese aid to media in Africa changed markedly in the early 1990s, too. As outlined by Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA) official, Tomizawa Ryuichi, "The governance side of what JICA has been doing on investigative journalism and ethics, and working with non-state media, only started once the Cold War had ended."¹⁰⁴ Prior to that, records show that JICA concentrated mainly on technical equipment and training to state broadcasters.¹⁰⁵

From the European Union's perspective, the rationale for media support was arguably slightly different and focused more on the promotion of free speech as a human right. Richard Youngs shows that the EU's total overseas democracy assistance during the late 1990s was higher than that of the United States (he puts it at nearly \$900 million USD in 1999 and the U.S. contribution to "government and civil society" at almost \$600 million in the same year) and most grants given were through NGOs: "By the end of the 1990's in most regions 80%-90% of democracy and human rights expenditure was allocated to NGOs... the overwhelming majority of media projects have taken the form of funding for freedom-of-expression NGOs."¹⁰⁶ Youngs says, "While it might be naïve to believe that, despite their claims to the contrary, European governments did not in fact approach democracy-building through the lens of their own forms of democracy, the US was more explicit and forceful in pushing replica features of American democracy—strong checks and balances, two moderate parties, privately owned media, decentralised union bargaining."¹⁰⁷

Taken together the influence of the West (or the North) was fairly homogeneous in terms of its liberal ideology and is summed up by journalism scholar Francis P. Kasoma: "The influence which donors exerted on the press in Africa at the turn of the decade and throughout the 1990s was as real and decisive as that which they exerted on Africa's political and economic life... Behind the notion of a free press by the North is the understanding that the press so promoted will enhance and safeguard liberal democratic interests."¹⁰⁸

Dueling Assessments

Was the 1990s African media boom ultimately a success? Did the proliferation of independent media outlets after the Cold War mean genuine pluralism, diversity, better quality, and a more informed public?

There are arguments for and against. But before entering into them, it must be emphasized that a simple increase in numbers of non-state media outlets does not necessarily mean genuine liberalization. Plurality must not be mistaken for diversity. Where the media are genuinely liberalized it means that they are released from the strictures and control of the state; that they start to comprise different types of ownership models (commercial, community, public, etc.); and that they offer the public a large and wide choice of media content, as well as representing a diversity of opinion, including the voices of minorities and marginalized groups within society.

A dramatic increase in numbers was certainly achieved in most countries in Africa in the decade after the Cold War, but whether real liberalization was achieved is debatable. From there it is another large step to assert that media liberalization (if achieved) did (or will eventually) lead to democracy.

Nevertheless, there are several analysts who take that very step. For instance, Francis P. Kasoma sees an unequivocal causal link between democracy and a free press: "multiparty democracy would not have come to Africa in the 1990s and certainly could not last without the enabling role of the independent media."¹⁰⁹ He writes that "experience has shown that, whenever the press has been muzzled, dictatorship by civilian (as opposed to military) governments has crept in. It is not by accident that the three countries in Africa that have maintained democratic governance, namely Botswana, Senegal and Mauritius, are also the countries which have consistently maintained a free and independent press."¹¹⁰

Communications scholar Isaac Blankson, writing in 2007, also looks back at the 1990s with a decidedly positive view: "[T]he democratic and liberal reforms and the development of media independence and pluralism have transformed the African citizenry from being passive... to show[ing] interest and participat[ing] in civic and state matters... Africa's emerging independent media have begun to assume center

stage in the democratic process.”¹¹¹ Blankson cites many positive examples, such as the Senegalese elections of 2000, where “media reported several instances of vote buying, ballot stuffing, and other irregularities that embarrassed President Diouf and prevented more extensive fraud”¹¹² and in Ghana, where “the presence of a large number of private radio stations throughout the country and the immediacy with which they reported irregularities”¹¹³ prevented the incumbent government from rigging the 2000 presidential elections, which it consequently lost.

Blankson also describes how investigative reporting by individual journalists have exposed serious corruption, human rights violations, and fraud among prominent politicians in Nigeria, Ghana, and Chad. He concludes: “Africa’s emerging independent media are shaping the democratic process and civic engagement. Through a variety of programming formats and investigative reporting, the media are holding officials accountable for their decisions and actions.”¹¹⁴

Karikari also offers a positive view: “Weak though they may often be, the media, especially the independent outlets, have made remarkable contributions to peaceful and transparent elections in Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mali, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia; to post-conflict transitions and the restoration of peace in Liberia, Mozambique and Sierra Leone; and to sustaining constitutional rule in times of political crises in Guinea, Kenya and Nigeria. And many continue to push to open up the space for freedom in suffocating environments.”¹¹⁵

Arthur A. Goldsmith, a foreign policy scholar, says that after the end of the Cold War, Western aid concentrated much more directly on the promotion of democratic values. “The watershed year was 1989. Over the next ten years, eighteen African countries moved up at least one category in the Freedom House ratings... [in the] direction of political pluralism and multiparty elections.”¹¹⁶

In 2001 journalist Thomas L. Friedman wrote in the *New York Times*: “Fact: The four most democratic countries in West Africa today—Benin,

“Weak though they may often be, the media, especially the independent outlets, have made remarkable contributions to peaceful and transparent elections... to post-conflict transitions and the restoration of peace ...and to sustaining constitutional rule in times of political crises.... And many continue to push to open up the space for freedom in suffocating environments.

—PROFESSOR KWAME KARIKARI,
Executive Director of the Media Foundation for West Africa

Ghana, Mali and Senegal—all have private, flourishing FM talk radio stations. Sure, all of Africa will get the Internet one day, but for now, the real information revolution here will be based on cheap FM transmitters and even cheaper radios."¹¹⁷

Joining these positive assessments, a comprehensive 2006 study for USAID came to similar conclusions and (perhaps not surprisingly) attributed success to USAID's democracy-building efforts, including media support initiatives. Professors Steven E. Finkel, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, and Mitchell A. Seligson examined the effects of U.S. foreign assistance on democracy building from 1990 to 2003, measured in terms of point-improvements allocated by Freedom House, and found that U.S. democracy and governance programs led to statistically significant improvements in democracy worldwide. The researchers found that the amount of democracy and governance assistance given to the area of "free media" (along with support to elections and civil society) was one of the variables that had "statistically significant effects, and these effects were often of reasonable magnitude."¹¹⁸

However, the contrary argument has been asserted just as strongly by other academics and analysts. Perhaps the weightiest argument on the negative side is that proliferation of private media houses, co-existing as they did with local, paternalist power structures and immature democratic politics, produced a largely co-opted media that was unable to perform a watchdog role.

This view is put succinctly by scholar Arthur-Martins Aginam, who argues that private media are often an integral part of the system in power and pursue their own interests, rather than the needs of citizens."¹¹⁹ Such media outlets, Aginam concludes, "are content to follow the government line and... are driven by the bottom line... offering music and other entertainment programming aimed at maximizing audiences."¹²⁰

Media academic, Paul van der Veur spells out the problem thus: "In principle private media can play an important role in the development of democracy by informing and educating the public. In practice, Africa's independent broadcasters are often unable to fulfil this function in part because media owners are members of the ruling elite... Owners are unwilling to jeopardize their investments by offending government or the socio-political elite." This means music and entertainment dominate, rather than political expression that contradicts the state and holds it to account, and so "radio in Kampala ends up sounding very much like that emanating out of Accra."¹²¹



Photo: Mary Myers

Ultimately, a verdict on whether the 1990s media liberalization drive by international donors was a success perhaps depends on whether or not one subscribes to the idea that Africa is currently in the process of democratizing and the extent to which this process—if it is happening at all—is the product of pressures from the West.

Media scholar Fackson Banda also wonders about the supposed virtues of liberalization: “Technically, broadcasting liberalisation is supposed to achieve pluralism of views, information and opinion. In practice, it has offered more access and a stronger voice to the rich and powerful, and is serving commercial interests more than rural and marginalised groups.”¹²²

Another media scholar, Francis Nyamjoh, is equally negative about the role of the media in the democratization process, particularly in his native Cameroon. On the one hand he blames globalization and the forces of international capital, and on the other he blames “the tendency among African journalists and media to serve ethnic, religious and regional interests.”¹²³

Another argument raised in some quarters against donor support of the African media during the post-Cold War period (or, indeed, subsequently) is the charge of neo-colonialism and Western political-cultural intervention. For instance academic James Miller asserts, “Media assistance during and after the Cold War has been closely bound up with geopolitical considerations of the West.”¹²⁴ He argues that “[It] seeks to universalize some very specific media forms and practices that arose out of quite particular historical conditions in North America and Western Europe... media assistance donors may be overconfident in believing that it necessarily promotes democracy.”¹²⁵ However, Miller concedes, “At the same time many media assistance practitioners and their NGOs are motivated by the most genuine sense of altruism; no doubt in at least some cases, their efforts... do in fact contribute to more modern and democracy-inducing journalism.”¹²⁶

Several strongly critical voices have fundamentally questioned the whole point of aid and the conflation of development with the democracy agenda. For instance academic Rita Abrahamsen writes, “the rebirth of political pluralism on the African continent in the early 1990s... soon gave way to a more sombre mood, as the democratic project was abandoned, aborted or subverted in country after country.”¹²⁷ She goes on to say, “the good governance discourse is merely the latest reproduction of the ‘dream of development’ and similarly entitles the North to develop and democratise the South in its image.”¹²⁸

Ultimately, a verdict on whether the 1990s media liberalization drive by international donors was a success perhaps depends on whether or not one subscribes to the idea that Africa is currently in the process of democratizing and the extent to which this process—if it is happening at all—is the product of pressures from the West. However, to enter any further into those debates is beyond the scope of this report.

It is more fruitful to ask where the African media would be without international donor aid. This report has illustrated the various ways international donors helped to develop and diversify the African media during the post-Cold War era of liberalization. While the amount of aid in question was relatively small, the effect was nevertheless tangible. And while different donors, both governmental and non-governmental, may have aided the media sector in a relatively piecemeal and haphazard way, taken together, there was some coherence to the way it was done and the effect it had. Some donors may have romanticized the notion of deregulation as the answer to promoting openness, freedom, and ultimately democracy, but meanwhile they were working hard, through specialized NGOs, to uphold freedom of speech. To do this, they were setting up institutes like MISA to document violations against journalists; ensuring that there were trained journalists in newsrooms by funding training centers like the one at Makerere University; setting up hundreds of vernacular radios serving minorities and counteracting the rural-urban divide; and funding the elaboration of internationally recognized ethical standards underpinning the whole profession, such as the Windhoek Resolution of 1995.

The efforts of media donors and donor-funded local NGOs were arguably a kind of David against a big commercial Goliath. If it were not for donor funding during the big expansion period for the African media in the 1990s, the media landscape in Africa today would probably look even more urban-biased, commercial, and entertainment-focused than it is now. Without the many hundreds of community radios across the continent, the sheer numbers that make for the pluralism that we see today, would look decidedly less impressive. Without donor aid, the African media would probably be far more constrained by states and by partisan interests. Furthermore, thanks to the training, protection and advocacy work by professional agencies and freedom-of-expression organizations funded largely by donors, the many African journalists who now speak out against vested interests would be in much shorter supply and in greater danger.

The last word should go to Fackson Banda,¹²⁹ often critical of foreign, especially Western, influences on Africa. He concedes the following: "Donor funding has promoted aspects of media development, but also created dependencies and unsustainability... On the other hand, much media—some that today is even commercially viable—and much that is positive in the media environment would be less advanced if it were not for external resources."¹³⁰

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Lessons Learned

The 1990s marked the period in which donors arguably “discovered” media assistance, but it was not until the early 2000s that there were attempts to codify it, to systematically learn from experience, and to set standards for all donors.



For instance, in 2003 Ross Howard wrote his paper *International Media Assistance: A Review of Donor Activities and Lessons Learned*.¹³¹ A year later, Krishna Kumar wrote an analysis of *USAID’s Media Assistance: Policy and Programmatic Lessons* and in 2007 Lise Rakner et. al. produced a working paper entitled *Democratisation’s Third Wave and the Challenges of Democratic Deepening: Assessing International Democracy Assistance and Lessons Learned*.¹³²

Howard has four succinct recommendations for media donors, which still resonate today:¹³³

- Develop more appropriate impact assessment methodologies.
- Establish strategic coordination mechanisms.
- Do not concentrate exclusively on the privatization of the media.
- Allow more time and focus on sustainability.

It is perhaps the third recommendation, about not concentrating exclusively on the privatization of the media, which is the single biggest lesson that was learned—and learned quickly—by donors in Africa during their involvement in the African media boom: namely that Africa is not Central and Eastern Europe. The strategies that donors successfully used to help the new independent media of the former Soviet bloc to develop in the 1990s did not apply so dramatically and successfully in Africa, mainly because of the sheer poverty of the media-consuming public. In countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and others in that region, the private business model worked to a large degree, as these countries moved from centrally planned statist economic systems to market-based systems.¹³⁴

However, in Africa, the market-based model—which assumed that many independent news-media outlets would emerge, sustain themselves financially, and serve a public service and watchdog function—did

not happen. Donors in sub-Saharan Africa therefore found they had to work around the edges of a highly energetic but impoverished and politically-charged media arena, where, unfortunately, only the least public-service oriented outfits could survive financially on their own, and where regulation was either non-existent or heavily influenced by the state and/or other partisan interests. As we have seen, working around these other big forces was exactly what donors did. In so doing, donors probably contributed substantially to the African media boom in a positive way and helped redress some of the imbalances and market-failures that would have resulted if left unchecked.

Twenty-five years later, media assistance has gradually become more professionalized as a sector. Most donors now work with carefully thought-through “theories of change” rather than acting on their gut instincts and reaching into their bottom drawer for a few dollars for an opposition newspaper. Considering the media sector as part of the wider political economy of a country is becoming more widespread in donor circles and, although there is still room for improvement, there is much greater recognition today that supporting a healthy media is a matter of encouraging a wider enabling environment. This requires attention not just to the media outlets themselves but to the laws on free speech, broadcasting regulations, etc. A historical overview such as this is a reminder that change takes time and that donors should be committed to media development for the long haul.

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