

Chapter 20

The citizen, media and social change in Namibia

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According to a fairly recent survey¹, South Africans and Namibians exhibit the greatest awareness of the concept of democracy in Southern Africa, and they have a largely positive understanding of the concept. However, South Africans and Namibians are more likely to emphasize the realization of socio-economic outcomes as more crucial to democracy than key procedural components, such as elections, multi-party competition or freedom of speech. They seem to be becoming pessimistic. They put significantly less trust in elected institutions, seeing them as less responsive to public opinion, and are dissatisfied with the performance of these bodies (Mattes et al, 1998). Respondents give more positive evaluations to the present democratic system than to *apartheid*, but there are also signs of a certain 'nostalgia' for the ways these countries were governed under *apartheid*.

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These intriguing results could perhaps be interpreted as follows: Africans who have lived under an indigenous authoritarian government (e.g. Banda, Mugabe) have learned to attach an independent value to democracy that has not yet widely evolved in Namibia and in South Africa. Rather, ordinary people in these two countries are distressed about the slowness of change, and per-

¹ Afrobarometer Series, based on a sample of 2,200 South Africans, carried out from July 6 to August 6, 2000. A similar survey was carried out in late 1999 and early 2000 in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia and Lesotho. The results are reported in Mattes et al, *Views of Democracy in South Africa and the Region: Trends and Comparisons, The Southern African Democracy Barometer*, Number 2, October 2000. According to this, South Africans score 60% and Namibians 58% in a question on respect for democracy, while the figures for most others are around 70-80%.

326 | haps even the direction their governments have chosen to take. Accordingly, they rank quite poorly in terms of interest and participation in democratic politics.

In attempts to motivate people into political activity in these two countries, attention has been focused on the media, especially radio. Unlike many other African countries, the media in both South Africa and Namibia do reach large audiences, and many studies have explicitly identified the special ability of radio to “mediate the popular word” (Martín-Barbero, 1993: 235). Radio speaks the language known by the majority of the population, for an oral language is not simply the product of illiteracy. The oral language of the radio is a bridge between symbolic-expressive rationality and instrumental informative rationality. Radio is a medium that, for the general audience, fills the vacuum left by the disappearance or weakening of the role played by traditional institutions in the construction of meaning, such as oral tradition or inherited community rules (e.g. Martín-Barbero, 1993: 234-236). In South Africa, there are more than 80 community radio stations, aiming to ‘give voice to the voiceless’. Not all community radio stations have operated that well, but South Africa’s community radio sector is still referred to in neighbouring countries as an example to follow.

South Africa is a large country, and no doubt one of the most confusing in the world today. Although class differences may be even greater in a number of other countries, the contradictions are striking: a small number of the population lead a post-industrial life, while the majority lack even the basic necessities of life. This contradiction is reflected in the position of the media. In Namibia, which is far smaller, a similar contradiction is also visible. Since independence, political power has been dominated by one party, SWAPO, and this party is predominantly led by blacks, but it is only political power which has changed hands. The wealth is still concentrated in large farms owned predominantly by the German-speaking white minority, while industries are predominantly controlled by Afrikaans-speaking whites.

Namibia only gained independence in 1990, a latecomer on the African continent, but with a constitution that became one of the most democratic in Africa. But it is not constitutions that make countries democratic, it is the implementation of official texts. Thus, one of the most urgent tasks for the national broadcaster, the NBC (Namibia Broadcasting Company), was to develop a genuine profile for the institution. On the one hand, it had to make a clear departure from the *apartheid* past and encourage nation-building; on the other, it also had to promote reconciliation and freedom of expression. The main mouthpiece for such endeavours was radio, still the most important medium in the country, covering some 98% of the population.

A clear-cut division between public and community media similar to that made in South African media policies has not been carried out in Namibia. Media policies strongly support national-level mass communication. Broadcasting channels have usually acted more or less as vehicles for those in power, although

today there are also private local radio stations, some educational or religious, but most only play popular music. The total number of community radio stations is barely half a dozen and they are scattered, offering no realistic comparison with South Africa. The strongest government influence is today perhaps felt at NBC Television, but the largest audience is gathered by NBC Radio. Some commercial satellite/terrestrial television services, such as M-Net, are available but are only taken up by hotels and bars, plus the urban well-to-do. The situation is made even more complex by the fact that the dominant party, SWAPO, has part-ownership in several private media institutions, including local radio as well as television services.

Occasionally, the government or individual ministers try to regulate the media, but due to the complex structure of the mediascape², a big fuss is made and after a while the efforts to exert pressure tend to get forgotten. As in most countries, Namibian media structures are not very flexible and are apt to change. Even such a radical change as the independence struggle did not result in great structural transformations, although content was gradually changed. The rigidity of media structures is also a security mechanism, because if the infrastructure is continuously on the move, multiplicity of media content tends to get lost among the rapid changes.

The target of most control attempts has been *The Namibian* newspaper, which offered a consistently dissident voice in Namibian society during *apartheid* rule. During the last few years, the government has declined to use *The Namibian* as its advertising channel, although the paper has the highest readership figures in the country.

Thus, the Namibian public is fairly sophisticated in its relationship to the media, and the public is more used to contradictory approaches in the mediascape than in many other countries on the continent. However, the number of people using the media regularly remains limited, and they are mainly located in towns. If the public are able to express sophistication in media matters, official media policies are quite vague and lack consistency. However, it could be claimed that both the public and the private media no doubt see it as one of their basic functions to inform citizens about their rights and responsibilities. Independence is quite new and unanimously valued in the dominant ideoscape, the ideological atmosphere (see Appadurai, 1989). 'Purely' entertainment media meant to bring in money for their publishers are imported from South Africa, especially popular magazines in great numbers. The target audience of these media is predominantly the white and coloured middle class.

² The concept "mediascape" was introduced to research literature by Arjun Appadurai (e.g. 1989). It means the whole media scenery, i.e. media content as well as structures, but viewed from the recipient's perspective. Appadurai explains the social life of an individual as filled with changing values and disjunctions caused by changes in five 'scapes': mediascape, ideoscape (ideological 'scenery' in the community), ethnoscape (people on the move), technoscape (technology on the move) and moneyscape (money on the move). In this article, mediascape is used in a somewhat more concrete way, meaning of the totality of all media and their content in a society.

Accordingly, it can be claimed that the structure of the mediascape has not changed much with the new line of politics followed since independence. The content has naturally changed, but perhaps not radically. The wider public has long been used to a public/private mix in media matters and, even more, to a media mix which disagrees both internally and with the power elites. Even during *apartheid* there were private media –though in those days only newspapers– criticizing those in power, while certain other private media more or less openly recognized the authority of *apartheid* rule.

This legacy of multiplicity continues. For a small and relatively poor African country, even now Namibia offers its southern urban population a numerous and many-voiced media mix. In the poorer, totally black northern regions, media distribution is weak, although it has improved in recent years. Today, most newspapers arrange for distribution in the north and offer pages in northern languages.

Undoubtedly, one legacy of the *apartheid* period is the extremely weak status of community media. Thus, it can be said that in Namibia the media have remained in the hands of the power elites, and the multiplicity of the mediascape in fact only confirms that the power elites are multiple and their interests contradictory. The elite orientation of the media is reflected especially strongly in the weakness of local media. Local radio stations are few and not very local in their broadcasting, and community papers are almost non-existent. Practically all the private radio stations in the country are commercial and broadcast to central and southern towns. Further, plans to focus parts of the media system at the grassroots level via libraries have proved unsuccessful. For a while, library services managers cherished a plan to re-focus all HIV/AIDS information distribution on computers placed at existing village libraries. The idea behind this was that people were already accustomed to using local libraries. Instead of establishing separate local media centres, as in Mozambique³, the existing structures could be used. This plan for turning the libraries into a kind of public service channel did not succeed, however, again mainly due to rigid structures and organizational ideologies. Libraries and the media were considered to be two separate institutional systems which could not be merged together. Instead, a large project for strengthening local government was launched with foreign assistance, involving the extensive training of local government employers in the use of computers.

What is interesting is the fact that, despite the rhetoric regarding the strengthening of decentralized political power, no serious plans have been made either to establish new community media or to adopt community-oriented information as part of the existing media system. The few attempts made by the

³ Mozambique has an extensive regional media centre project going on with support from the UNDP, UNESCO, and several Nordic countries. The aim is to decentralize both media use and media content-gathering by establishing media centres with newspapers, radio and television sets, computers and modest printing equipment in all the regions.

Polytechnic of Namibia to establish and strengthen community media are in fact the only consistent arrangements operating in the country so far⁴.

There are probably several reasons why new forms of citizens' media have met with difficulties. One is no doubt simply the fact that the population is so small and scattered that only very small and very local media might work as a balancing factor in the Windhoek-dominated mediascape today; even regional media would face an extensive and expensive task in coping with distribution (Spitulnik, 2002). They would also probably meet political resistance, because the nation-building ideology is still running high. To some extent, the media appearing in several languages also cater for specific population groups. The national radio operates in seven languages, the national television predominantly in English, but four minority languages are used regularly in news and current affairs programmes. Newspapers appear in three languages.

Top/down or bottom/up - does it really matter?

But would a top/down or a bottom/up ideology be best in promoting democracy via the media? Does it really matter? The following provides a short description of a case which started as top/down but which in fact has become a mediation of the 'popular word'.

The programme concerned has many detailed elements, usually linked to community media. Community media have been popular since the 1960s, mainly taking the form of literacy papers linked to massive literacy campaigns and of community radio stations, advocating improvements in health and agriculture. These have experienced a renaissance during the past 10-15 years. In particular, community radio has become highly popular among foreign donors in Africa. Grassroots-oriented community media, produced and controlled by local people, sound like an ideal tool for the promotion of democracy: these media are able to 'give a voice to the voiceless', to discuss matters important to 'ordinary people' and to exert pressure on decision-makers. Today, there are community radio stations in most African countries. The best-organized system is found in South Africa, where even the Constitution recognises the role of grassroots media. The country has more than 80 community radio stations which have been given a licence and basic equipment by either the government or foreign donors, but which are meant to be operated independently by volunteers. This fine idea has not always been easy to implement: even modest production demands resources and professional competence, and quite often local decision-makers have contradictory ideas about programming policies. All community radio stations have eco-

⁴ Namibia Polytechnic has had a community paper project in a small town, including local training and support for the monthly paper *Sunflower*. The Polytechnic's community journalism projects, which include field trips to rural areas, have also yielded locally oriented supplements, named *Echoes*, which have been inserted into the newspaper *The Namibian*. Certain development projects have produced publications on ecology, water and health issues, and one community radio, UNAM Radio, has been a stronghold of HIV/AIDS information.

330 | nomic difficulties, and fairly many of them are actually mouthpieces of either local politicians or projects financed by foreign donors. Thus, their local character and bottom/up policy could be questioned (Teer-Tomaselli, 2001).

The Namibian grassroots-oriented radio scheme was originally a top/down exercise. Right from the beginning, NBC Radio had quite a challenging task in Namibia, because it was supposed to operate both in the form of a national channel (National Radio) in English, but also in six other languages through what was called the Language Service. Only a small proportion of the population were fluent in the new official language, English. In Namibia English was considered 'neutral', unlike, say, German and Afrikaans which carried bitter memories from the past. Hence, one of the roles of the National Radio channel was to promote nation-building, also via the new national language. Even so, it proved impossible to do away with the Language Service, which operates even today in Afrikaans, Damara-Nama, German, Oshiwambo, Otjiherero and Rukavango.

In August 1991, the NBC Board decided to introduce in a 9-10 a.m. time slot a 'national window', broadcasting in English via National Radio but also being sent out on the whole spectrum of the Language Service channels. While planning the programme, the then Manager of National Radio recalled a visit he had made to London and his strange experience in Hyde Park, where speakers freely took the podium and spoke on an incredible variety of topics. What if the time slot could be developed into a similar platform for Namibians? The top management were hesitant but allowed the programme, called *Chatshow*, to be launched. To begin with, the presenter mostly played music on the live morning programme, but gradually people found the courage to phone in.

Afterwards, certain Namibians have seen the programme format as an immediate answer to the demands laid down in the Windhoek Declaration (1991)⁵, underlining the significance of freedom of expression and the need for a multiplicity of mediascapes in Africa. However, according to the individuals who put the programme on air, the two were parallel but separate processes, taking place independently of each other⁶. No doubt *Chatshow* –soon unofficially renamed *People's Parliament* by its listeners– might have been cut more easily during its initial difficulties without the somewhat euphoric atmosphere following the Windhoek Conference.

The objectives of the programme were elaborated during the first months of operation, although the basic line was clear right from the beginning. The programme was set up to give people a platform for venting the anger they felt because of the bitter past. *Chatshow* was meant to become a platform for

5 The Windhoek Declaration was formulated at a UNESCO-organized seminar in Windhoek by media practitioners and researchers from African countries recently converted to multiparty democracies. It emphasizes the crucial role independent media play in the promotion of democracy.

6 Both the then Radio Manager Rector Mutelo and the first presenter Robin Tyson point out that the emergence of *Chatshow* was an internal affair within the NBC, defining its new profile according to the needs of the new nation.

healing, for promoting peace, unity and nation-building, and for creating a culture of tolerance. The idea was not to bury differences but to develop a meaningful debate between the government and the opposition. Another of *Chatshow's* roles was to promote use of the English language among the general public.

The *Chatshow* platform is free for people to express themselves on politics, on the economy, on military issues, on abortion, on local government, on bad roads, on poor service in public and private institutions, or on world politics. Roughly two-thirds of the contributions include a question, while most others offer comments or broader views. Over the years, both National Radio and the Language Services have acquired some true friends who contribute to the programmes on a continuous basis, but there are also occasional callers who are regular listeners but who do not contribute actively very often. Further, most regular callers have their own 'networks' which provide them with questions and enquiries. Thus, instead of phoning themselves, people approach a person known for his/her ability to express him/herself well.

It could be claimed that, of the two main objectives, nation-building and reconciliation, nation-building seems to have been more strongly promoted over the years. This was partly the result of the overall set-up: each large language group was approached separately, as during *apartheid*. Further, the prohibition on racially-related statements perhaps led to the fact that all callers were rather careful about referring to people's skin colour or tribal background, because these were the primary reasons for discrimination during *apartheid* times. A devil's advocate might in fact claim that the structure of the programme family –the same programme in various languages– and the deliberate avoidance of tribalism in content are slightly contradictory. In practice, however, these flaws are not conspicuous. The National Radio programmes *Chatshow* and its feedback programme, *Open Line*, are no doubt the main mouthpieces of *People's Parliament*. The six other programmes in other languages have been used mainly for localizing problems and activating people who are not fluent in English.

Can a single radio programme format have national significance?

The *People's Parliament* programme family receives some 11,000 calls annually, and it is one of the top three most listened-to programmes. Issues brought up on *People's Parliament* are referred to in homes, at workplaces and in Parliament, because the scope of issues discussed ranges from clean water problems in a particular village to the President's speeches, and the participants genuinely disagree. Sometimes the debate becomes quite animated. An interesting detail, especially concerning the English-language service, is that several people phoning in to the programmes are actually representatives of wider concerns. The grassroots –whether organized or not– have found their representatives in individuals who are known to be good at presenting their case efficiently. Individuals come to these people with their concerns and ask them to mediate the issue to *People's*

332 | *Parliament*. In a large country with what is still a strongly centralized administrative system, *People's Parliament* offers a channel where village folk can express their concerns, and the programme has credibility because it also allows those in power to defend themselves in feedback sessions. Members of Parliament often refer to issues brought up in the programmes.

No exact listener surveys have been carried out on *People's Parliament*, to say nothing of 'softer' monitoring and reception surveys. But the presenters assume that their basic audience is composed of people from all strata of the social spectrum, while comprising more middle-aged and older groups. Occasionally, younger people also get interested in some of the debates on the air, and might then form the majority of the callers on a particular programme. Still, it can be claimed that while the Namibian population is relatively young, more than half the total population being under 20, *People's Parliament* mostly attracts middle-aged and elderly citizens. Several surveys have documented that the young tend to prefer the commercial radio stations that exist in abundance, especially in the capital Windhoek and some bigger towns. In the countryside, the NBC stations are the only ones available (65% of the population still live in rural areas, although the city of Windhoek is growing fast).

Just over two-thirds of the callers are men, although the proportion of women is somewhat larger, at 35-40%, on the German and Afrikaans programmes. On the other hand, a few of the most frequent participants are women, quite often advocates speaking for some 10-15 'back-up' individuals who have chosen an articulate woman to express their mutual concerns. It is more typical for women participants to network frequently. Another feature typical of women callers is that they seem to be more concerned about concrete, practical issues, while men often widely discuss political matters and religion, for example. Certain frequent contributors create a profile for themselves, and they are known all over the country. Probably the best-known national figure is a blind liberation struggle veteran called Uncle Paul in Windhoek, who contributes to both the National Radio and the Oshiwambo service. But there are quite a few frequent regional callers as well. Quite often these are either people with a 'known past' (e.g. freedom fighters) or present-day activists (members of NGOs).

Although television is gradually also making its way to the masses in African societies, radio is still the medium which seems to respond most flexibly to social change. Television production is expensive and television is nowhere near as mobile as radio. Further, radio has long traditions in the transmission of essential information. Death announcements and workplace programmes have been important channels not only for distributing topical information but for keeping the urban and the rural in continuous contact. In Zimbabwe, the *Chakafukidza* programme combines modernity and customary tradition.

During the struggle against *apartheid* in Southern Africa, radio programmes, legitimate and illegitimate, maintained contact between members of

liberation movements. *People's Parliament* continues these traditions, but it also carries a hint of the now so popular American-origin public journalism⁷, because it encourages people to become active. However, it does not talk about grassroots-level organization and joint action, and hence its political power can be questioned. Is *People's Parliament* a tension-relief mechanism rather than a genuine tool of democracy? On the other hand, in a society based on mass action and on a liberation movement that became the dominant party with a variety of mass organizations supporting it, a programme talking about joint problems, but on the individual level, might be credible precisely because it remains at that level. Popular it certainly is in any case –so popular that not even censorship has ever tried to touch it. Another issue is whether it is able to reach the country's urban youth.

⁷ Public journalism is a trend which emphasizes the fact that journalists should be advocates of recipients' interests, not those favoured by power-holders and other elites. In public journalism, journalists should monitor the public's concerns via surveys, citizens' meetings and the like, should open up the media so that ordinary people can express themselves in the public arena, and should work with members of the public to find solutions to people's concerns. "We should not only inform the public but form publics", says Jay Rosen, one of the advocates of this trend, which is currently favoured by hundreds of local and regional media in the US.