

# COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

## WEEK ELEVEN: Democratization of Public Communication

### Learning Outcomes



1. Understand an overview of the democratization of African Media
2. Explain the relation between Media and Democracy
3. Analyze the role of the Media in Deepening Democracy in Africa
4. Discuss recommendations on factors affecting media and democratization process.

### Overview of the democratization of African Media

Let us begin by looking at the following famous quotes on media:

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru called media **‘the watchdog of our democracy’**.

**“If it were left on me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”**

(Thomas Jefferson)

After independence in the 1960s most African governments embraced a developmental philosophy in their approach to political and economic issues. Then after there were systematic suppression of organized opposition parties, and the elimination of all forms of dissent consequently the establishment of one-party states or military regimes. It was argued that in the face of the enormous problems facing many African and other developing countries, it was necessary to abridge civil and political rights in order to accelerate development (Mak’Ochieng, 1994). The role of the media in a developing country should also be seen in this context of participation, meaning the critical examination, evaluation and report of the relevance, enactment and impact of development. In order to undertake this critical evaluation, it is essential that the media be sufficiently free and independent of governmental control and political pressures (Mak’Ochieng, 1994).

## **The Role of Media in Democracy**

Democracy is a government of the people, for the people and by the people and which gives equal chance to all the citizens to participate and play a significant role in the political process, ensures and guarantees certain rights and freedoms to the people constituting the policy. Of the fundamental freedoms that the citizens enjoy, freedom of speech and expression is one of the most important ones as it gives substance and meaning to ‘participation’ of the people. Thus reliable information sources form an important constituent of a democratic society. This is where the role and importance of media arises. They have provided information and entertainment to people across countries (<https://ocd.lcwu.edu.pk>, 2021).

**Access to information** is essential to the health of democracy for at least *two reasons*.

First, it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation.

Second, information serves a “checking function” by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them. In some societies, an antagonistic relationship between media and government represents a vital and healthy element of fully functioning democracies. (<https://ocd.lcwu.edu.pk>, 2021).

**Media supports democracy** by bringing out the democratic norms and inculcating the same in the general public. Providing live coverage of parliament proceedings, activities of politicians, programmes on democracies are few of the examples. Also support for media may yield results in governance activities, particularly those related to decentralization, anti-corruption, and citizen participation in the policy process. The rule of law may be further institutionalized by support for an independent media that keeps a check on the judiciary, reports on the courts, and promotes a legal enabling environment suitable for press freedom. Free and fair elections conducted through transparent processes require a media sector which gives candidates equal access, and reports the relevant issues in a timely, objective manner (<https://ocd.lcwu.edu.pk>, 2021).

**Role of Media in Good Governance;** Good governance is an indeterminate term used to describe how public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources. Governance is the process of decision making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented)”. Good governance is about the processes for making and implementing decisions.

It is not about making ‘correct’ decisions but about the best possible process for making those decision. The concept of “good governance” centres on the responsibility of governments and governing bodies to meet the needs of the masses as opposed to select groups in society. (<https://ocd.lcwu.edu.pk>, 2021).

According to Center for Democracy and Governance (1999), the role of the media in democracy and governance may yield results in governance activities, particularly those related to decentralization, anti-corruption, and citizen participation in the policy process. The rule of law may be further institutionalized by support for an independent media that keeps a check on the judiciary, reports on the courts, and promotes a legal enabling environment suitable for press freedom. Free and fair elections conducted through transparent processes require a media sector which gives candidates equal access, and reports the relevant issues in a timely, objective manner. Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers,” (Center for Democracy and Governance, 1999). Within the context of supporting democratic transitions, the goal of media development generally should be to move the media from one that is directed or even overtly controlled by government or private interests to one that is more open and has a degree of editorial independence that serves the public interest. If the media is to have any meaningful role in democracy, then the ultimate goal of media assistance should be to develop a range of diverse media and voices that are credible, and to create and strengthen a sector that promotes such outlets. Credible outlets enable citizens to have access to information that they need to make informed decisions and to participate in society. A media sector supportive of democracy would be one that has a degree of editorial independence, is financially viable, has diverse and plural voices, and serves the public interest (Center for Democracy and Governance, 1999).

The public interest is defined as representing a plurality of voices both through a greater number of outlets and through the diversity of views and voices reflected within one outlet. We acknowledge that the media is a critical ingredient in the transition of society from authoritarianism to democracy; and appreciate the fact that the media mirrors the level of democratic maturity in a country, and is in turn affected by the maturity of that democracy (Center for Democracy and Governance, 1999).

The media epitomize what has often been described as the unfettered freedom of expression of ideas and opinions in a society. In other words, it acts as the thermometer of measuring the democratic body temperature of a country or society (Ocitti, 1999). Hence it is accurate to state that the media supports the democratic system of free elections, majority rule, political freedom, political equality, minority rights, representative government and an independent judiciary. And since freedom itself means a lack of restraint, it is assumed that media can operate unfettered at least until they collide with individual rights or institutional interests. Ideally, democracy and media coexist and support each other through a process of negotiation hopefully aimed at developing a consensus about the public interest (Freedom forum, 1995).

The mass media constitute the backbone of democracy. The media supply the political information that voters base their decisions on. They identify problems in our society and serve as a medium for deliberation. They are also the watchdogs that we rely on for uncovering errors and wrongdoings by those who have power. It is therefore reasonable to require that the media perform to certain standards with respect to these functions, and our democratic society rests on the assumption that they do (Venturelli 1998; Kellner 2004; McQuail 1993; Skogerbø 1996).

The most important democratic functions that we can expect the media to serve include surveillance of socio-political developments, identifying the most relevant issues, providing a platform for debate across a diverse range of views, holding officials to account for the way they exercise power, provide incentives for citizens to learn, choose and become involved in the political process, and resist efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence.

**Media criticism:** However, there is a growing concern that the mass media are not fulfilling these functions properly. Media critics claim that commercial mass media controlled by a few multinational conglomerates have become an antidemocratic force supporting the status quo (Kellner 2004; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Herman and McChesney 1997; Alger 1998; McChesney 1999; Keane 1991). The news is more entertaining than informing, supplying mostly gossip, scandals, sex, and violence. Political news is more about personalities than about their ideologies. In the absence of serious debate, voters are left with paid political propaganda containing only meaningless slogans making them disinterested and cynical about politics (Bagdikian 1983; Fallows 1996; Capella and Jamieson 1997).

It is also claimed that the watchdogs are barking of the wrong things. The media hunt for scandals in the private lives of politicians and their families, but ignore much more serious consequences of their policies. They go after wounded politicians like sharks in a feeding frenzy (Sabato 1991). All too often, the media make us afraid of the wrong things. Minor dangers are hysterically blown out of proportion, while much more serious dangers in our society go largely unnoticed (Glassner 1999). The exaggerated fears often lead to unnecessary measures and legislation and "gonzo justice" (Altheide and Michalowski 1999). If all these claims have any merit at all, then we have to drastically revise our view of the way democracy should ideally work.

**The Democratic Space in Africa:** Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States of America defined Democracy as "the government of the people, by the people, for the people". The pillars that ensure democracy in any given sovereign state are: Sovereignty of the people, Government based upon consent of the governed, Majority rule, Minority rights, Guarantee of basic human rights, Free and fair elections, Equality before the law, Due process of law, Constitutional limits on government, Social, economic, and political pluralism, Values of tolerance, pragmatism, cooperation, and compromise (Ocitti, 1999).

### **Democratic reforms and structural economic adjustments in Africa**

The 1990s go down in history as the decade of sweeping democratic reforms and structural economic adjustments in Africa. As one government after another succumbed to growing domestic demands for political reforms in the face of increasing disenchantment with military rule or single party systems, and as pressure for political change gradually gained momentum from outside the continent in the aftermath of the Cold War, African leaders have found it increasingly difficult to hold on to power by force of arms (Ocitti, 1999).

Domestically, a combination of student activism, trade union strikes and 'watch-dog' journalism of the press were instrumental in paving the way for the new atmosphere of political pluralism. Externally, the linkage of economic aid by Western governments and multilateral institutions to Africa's political and economic reforms was crucial in the democratic changes and economic liberalism that swept much of Africa in the 1990s. For African leaders, the new momentum meant that survival became predicated on political adjustments towards liberalism, rather than

the dictatorship or one-man rule of the past. Structural adjustment meant economic reforms and political plurality. Pluralism became synonymous with general elections; elections that have since become the rule rather than the exception in nearly all African countries (Ocitti, 1999).

As a result, nearly a decade after the first of such reforms were launched in Africa, even countries that have not yet embarked on this democratization path now publicly acknowledge that, politically, the way forward in Africa lies in long-term commitments to the values of liberal democracy. Hence, virtually all such countries have had to publicly commit themselves, if only rhetorically, to the values that is essential for the establishment or consolidation of democracy. This includes support for political pluralism, regular elections, freedom of the press, and the right of association. It is this picture of Africa as an emerging democratic continent from decades of brutal dictatorship and the massive economic mismanagement and social misery of the 1970s and 1980s, into an era of regular elections and greater involvement in the world economy that has led to the wildly stated claim that a renaissance is emerging on the continent (Ocitti, 1999).

According to Ocitti (1999), asserts that viewed from this perspective, Africans are now said to enjoy unprecedented levels of political freedom, greatly improved human rights records, freedom of speech and expression, and unparalleled levels of economic growth. In other words, the evolving dynamics are now seen to have greatly enhanced political life for the average African far more than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. However, a fact is that the growing enthusiasm to celebrate the little gains in the 1990s in terms of electoral politics and economic reforms is blinding us to the grinding problems of consolidating the new democracy. This is evidenced by the growing conflicts in many of the new African democracies, the lack of effective political opposition in Africa, and questionable democracy in the so called 'democratic' sovereign states. We therefore shall seek to observe Africa's democratic process by focusing on the role of the media as a way of gauging the effectiveness of Africa's democracy in the 1990s. We shall do this by examining the interface between the media and politics in some of the countries that joined the democratic bandwagon in the 1990s.

### **The key functions of the media**

According to MacQuail (2000) the key functions of the media includes:

- Use their platforms to promote good governance and accountability by bridging the information dissemination gap, as information is an indispensable and essential ingredient of democracy, economic growth and consumer choice.
- By enabling the free flow of information, the media stands as an important and key stakeholder of the political process in democracies.
- Use their platforms and programmes to educate through news and information dissemination.
- Provide the general public with entertainment programmes.
- Bridging of the gaps in societies, social institutions and cultures etc through news coverage and information dissemination.
- Act as watchdogs over governments' officials, ministries agencies and institutions as well as over society and its institutions.
- Leads the setting of the agenda for debates and discussion on issues of importance and of national interest.

According to Ogbondah (1994), African leaders argue that given the continent's subservient position in the global economic system, a colonial legacy and the fragility of newly independent African countries, a free press in the Western sense can too easily lead to instability of government to function and into internal chaos (Aggarwala1977; Mboya 1970 & Sommerlad 1966). Thus, African leaders argue, press control is necessary for national development and political stability. It is worth noting that curbing Press freedom is not the panacea for socio-political stability and national development.

**Accountability of the governors to the governed** is one of the essential ingredients in social stability and development. Channelling national resources into development projects to provide piped water, electricity, healthcare, education and transportation will help bring about social stability and development. The embezzlement and mismanagement of national resources by those in political office is counterproductive to social stability and development efforts. The ability of the press to investigate and unearth embezzlement within the ruling bourgeois class is an important element in stemming down corruption which has been identified as one of the

reasons for the failure of communication-for development programmes in Africa. For example, Pratt (1993) concluded that the pervasive corruption, mismanagement, and spoliation by African leadership are among the main reasons for the failure of development programs in Africa.

We therefore observe that a free press can be a valuable weapon in fighting corruption. Democracy is impossible without a free press. Weaver (1977) defined press freedom as:

- a) The relative absence of governmental restraints on the media;
- b) The relative absence of governmental and other restraints on the media
- c) The absence of restraints on the media and also the presence of those conditions necessary for the dissemination of a diversity of ideas and opinions to a relatively large audience such as enforced right of access to newspapers and radio stations.

Merrill (1974) said that press freedom is basically press autonomy: freedom from outside control in the professional activities of the news media. As far as Merrill is concerned, "maximum journalistic autonomy is the imperative of journalism" (p. 26). Press Freedom is a precept that is deeply ingrained in democratic theory and practice.

### **Role of the Media in Deepening Democracy in Africa**

According to Coronel (<https://changecommunications.org/web/docs/dibengunpan010194.pdf>), as early as the 17th century, Enlightenment theorists had argued that publicity and openness provide the best protection against tyranny and the excesses of arbitrary rule.

#### **1. Providing checks and balances**

The media serve a very important role in making officials aware of the public's discontents and allowing governments to rectify their errors (Holmes, 1991). In recognition of this role, the press has been widely proclaimed as the "Fourth Estate," a co- equal branch of government that provides the check and balance without which governments cannot be effective. For this reason, democrats through the centuries have tended to take the Enlightenment's instrumentalist view of the press. Thomas Jefferson, for all his bitterness against journalistic criticism celebrated the press, arguing that only through the exchange of information and opinion through the press would the truth

emerge. Thus the famous Jefferson's declaration: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter."

## 2. **Accountability**

Despite the present-day mass media's propensity for sleaze, sensationalism and superficiality, they are still seen as essential democratic tools. Contemporary democratic theory appreciates the media's role in ensuring governments are held accountable. In both new and old democracies, the notion of the media as watchdog and not merely a passive recorder of events are widely accepted. Governments, it is argued, cannot be held accountable if citizens are ill informed about the actions of officials and institutions. The watchdog press is guardian of the public interest, warning citizens against those who are doing them harm.

3. **Watch-dog:** Sustained investigative reporting on corruption, human rights violations and other forms of wrongdoing has helped build a culture of accountability in government and strengthened the fledgling African democracies. A fearless and effective watchdog is critical in fledgling democracies where institutions are weak and heavily criticized by political pressure. When legislatures, judiciaries and other oversight bodies are powerless against the mighty or are themselves corruptible; the media are often left as the only check against the abuse of power. This requires that they play a heroic role, exposing the excesses of presidents, prime ministers, legislators and magistrates despite the risks.

Media exposure, particularly of corruption in high places, has helped bring down governments. In Tunisia, investigative reporting provided evidence that led to the toppling of Ben Ali, and fuelled public outrage against his excesses. Ben Ali, former president of Tunisia was ousted from office in a popular uprising on the streets of Tunis in 2011; largely due to investigative reporting on his complicity in corrupt deals. Such reporting has made the press a credible and prestigious institution in the region's new democracies. Since it has functioned effectively and independently, the media enjoy the public's support and trust.

#### **4. Adversarial Role of the Press**

In the absence of mechanisms that regularly monitor and evaluate the government's performance before the bar of public opinion, there is a great likelihood of the government falling into complacency, unresponsiveness and irresponsibility. Therefore, in this context, it is legitimate for the press to fulfil the role of an opposition in the sense of presenting another point of view where necessary; that is to say, criticizing government decisions which are not in the best interests of the people, expose and criticize bureaucratic incompetence, denouncing abuses of power in society and defending human rights. A press or media system that decides to do less than this, reneges on its responsibility and fails to contribute adequately to the democratic process or to national development based on democratic participation and decision-making.

#### **5. Press as Public Forum**

In an uneducated democracy, public opinion has to be generated and some agency is required to do the work. An instrument of mass communication can serve the requirement of effective mobilization of national opinion. The media also serve as a conduit between governors and the governed and as an arena for public debate that leads to more intelligent policy and decision-making. The Enlightenment tradition of the press as public forum remains strong. The press is expected to draw citizens to the public square and provide a culture of community conversation by activating inquiry on serious public issues. In new democracies, the expectation is that the media would help build a civic culture and a tradition of discussion and debate which was not possible during the period of authoritarian rule.

#### **6. Injecting Marginalized Voices into the Public Sphere**

Much of the mediated public sphere in Africa is captured by elite discourses, raising concerns about whose interests are served by the spaces opened up by processes of democratization. The media is charged with the responsibility of giving a voice to those marginalized because of poverty, gender, ethnic or religious affiliation. By giving these groups a place in the media, their views or afflictions become part of mainstream public debate and hopefully contribute to a social consensus that the injustices against them

ought to be redressed. In this way, the media also contribute to the easing of social conflicts and to promoting reconciliation among divergent social groups. Efforts such as these allow the public to raise questions about government actions, their impacts, and to hold their officials accountable, even if there is no immediate respite for the victims.

### **7. Peace and Consensus Builder**

Democracy cannot thrive in countries that are in the grip of violence and strife. Ideally, democracy should provide warring groups mechanisms for mediation, representation and voice so that they can settle their differences peacefully. If it is constantly challenged by violence and dissension, the fabric of democracy will become frayed. The media have been criticized for sensationalizing violence without explaining the roots of conflict. The media ignore peace-building efforts, critics say, even as they give full coverage to warmongering. In some cases, they have sowed hate speech and encouraged violence. At the height of the conflict in Rwanda in the 1990s, a radio station that had been supported by international donors became the mouthpiece of extremists who favoured and encouraged genocide (Office of Democracy and Governance, Bureau for Democracy, 1992). Peace journalism avoids giving undue attention to violence, focusing instead on the impact of war on communities on both sides of the divide and their efforts to bridge their differences. Peace journalism has been promoted through the training of journalists covering conflict, including journalists who come from the various religious or ethnic groups currently at war.

### **8. Communication and Education Role of the Media**

The media is charged with the role of opening up channels of communication to enable public access to government and its structures, and to engender public involvement and discussion of government activities. The media is charged with the responsibility of ensuring good governance and government accountability through the provision of adequate and accessible information, which is a sine qua non (indispensable and essential condition) of democracy, economic growth and consumer choice. By providing and facilitating the flow of information, the media constitute an important component of the political process in democracies. The media educate through the provision of news and

information; Provide entertainment; Bring societies, social institutions and cultures closer to each other through news coverage and the provision of information; Perform watchdog roles over Governments, their agencies and institutions as well as over society and its institutions; as well as set the agenda for debate and discussion on issues of importance.

The media in new democracies have contributed to public education on elections. Public-affairs programs on radio and television provide the depth, context and critical analysis that news programs and commercials do not. In countries like Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and South Africa, TV and radio networks have produced sophisticated public-service announcements enjoining voters to choose wisely and warning them of the consequences of selling their vote. Debates sponsored by media organizations have been organized, enabling candidates who do not have the money to buy air time to articulate their views to a wide audience. The media have likewise given time and space to independent advocates and NGOs campaigning for clean elections and an end to money politics. Despite these, however, moneyed candidates who have favoured access to the media still have the edge. The media playing field, as far as elections go, remains uneven. In many new democracies, radio has become the medium of choice, taking the place of newspapers in drawing citizens to the town square for discussion and debate. Compared to television, radio is a less expensive and more accessible medium and is especially popular in poor countries where the media infrastructure is not well developed.

### **Constraints on the media**

According to Coronel (<https://changecommunications.org/web/docs/dibengunpan010194.pdf>), journalists are often feared by politicians because they have succeeded in uncovering corruption, the abuse of power and assorted official misconduct. They are also relentlessly wooed because a bad press can mean the end of a political career. Policies have been changed, reforms initiated and corrupt officials including presidents and prime ministers, ousted partly because of media exposés. In many new democracies, an adversarial press is part of the political process and it is hard to imagine how governments would function without it. Yet, despite constitutional guarantees and in many cases, also wide public support, the media in fledgling democracies have been muzzled by stringent laws, monopolistic ownership and sometimes, brute force. Serious reporting is difficult to sustain in media markets that put a premium on the shallow and the

Sensational. Even though euphoria is a wonderful thing, it does not always give birth to good journalism. Lack of skilled journalists to staff the upcoming media houses in the continent created by the media boom has relegated the practice of Journalism in Africa to merely racing for the headlines at the expense of substance and depth. The competition for the market has meant that the media in most new democracies have succumbed to the global trend of “dumbing down” the news. This is especially the case in television, where reports on crime and entertainment drown out the more important news of the day. The stress on glitzy effects and bite-size news reports leaves no time for serious and in-depth discussion of the issues that matter. The result is that public discourse is dumbed down as well, as both officials and citizens respond to the “infotainment” type of news they get. Even though media in many African countries are profitable enterprises, tight budgets do not allow for the investment in time and resources that solid journalism requires. The media managers would rather invest their money in technology and effects rather than on reportage. In addition, journalists often do not have the experience and the training to do the kind of contextualized reporting that a new democracy needs. Even if they did, the financial commitments and political interests of media owners limit the freedom of journalists to conduct exposés. In many countries, ownership of the media is controlled by a few vested business and political interests.

### **Recommendations on factors affecting media and democratization process.**

Media usually refers to mass media, which is any medium that provides citizens with information regarding all the current affairs of any area at a large scale. It is unbiased reporting of facts through print, television, radio or Internet. Media literacy needs to gain traction within the development community and innovative approaches are needed to promote media literacy skills among all citizens. Key recommendations for highlighting the need to:

- Support media watchdog and media monitoring groups as a tool for promoting media literacy and transforming civil society and the public into active participants in the media.
- Raise awareness of the role and function of the news ombudsman, which acts as a key link between citizens and news agencies, and helps to hold news agencies accountable and accessible to citizens.
- Develop media literacy skills through mobilization, public forums and debate on relevant topics such as current affairs, media practices, and citizens’ rights and obligations.
- Incorporate media literacy as a core element of media development programmes.

- Promote research on the impact of media literacy on citizen action, participation and good governance. Empirical evidence is also needed to build support for related policy development and advocacy efforts. (<https://ocd.lcwu.edu.pk>, 2021).

## Importance of Good Governance for a Country

Good governance is required at all levels of society and state. Essentials of good governance

- Importance for the Economic Sector
  - Import/ export
  - Budget Making
  - Foreign Debt
- Importance for the Political Sector
  - Democracy
  - Leadership Crises
  - Political Will
  - Foreign Dictation
  - Writ of Government
- Importance for the Social Sector
  - Merit System
  - Accountability
  - Corruption
  - Education (<https://ocd.lcwu.edu.pk>, 2021).

### Summary



The media also exposes loopholes in the democratic system, which ultimately helps government in filling the vacuums of loopholes and making a system more accountable, responsive and citizen-friendly. A democracy without media is like a vehicle without wheels. So the ultimate goal of media should be to provide assistance to develop a range of diverse mediums and voices that are credible, and to create and strengthen a sector that promotes such outlets.

Traditionally and constitutionally, the media has no defined role in governance. It doesn't have the power to change any decisions made by the various arms of a state—the legislature, executive and the judiciary. Yet, the media plays one of the most important roles in the functioning of any society. It amplifies the voice of citizens and communicates their opinions to the lawmakers.

Good governance is an ideal system which is difficult to achieve in its totality. In other words, no country or society has ever said to achieve good governance in totality. We can only come close to this by our activities with the aim of making this ideal a reality. It

needs to be focused on the real matters, which are mostly social and economic in nature, instead of trying to divert the attention to the non issues. Achieving the good governance requires the understanding and participation of every member of the society. The media, their significant roles, channels and contents, are considered to be the most powerful weapon to make this achievement a reality.

Today, despite the mass media's propensity for sleaze, sensationalism and superficiality, the notion of the media as watchdog, as guardian of the public interest, and as a conduit between governors and the governed remains deeply ingrained.

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