**Media Development and Democratization in Africa**

Throughout history and across the world, the media has occupied a prominent role in democratic transitions and statebuilding. From the proliferation of hundreds of independent newspapers in colonial America ahead of the Revolutionary War to the watchdog publications spurred by Haitian Revolution that dutifully monitored the activity of the colonial assemblies of French Saint-Domingue, the press has sought to provide a window from the populace on one side to the centers of power on the other. In ideal cases, they are able to provide insight into the happenings of their respective regions in a transparent exchange that breeds democracy. Africa possesses an immense potential to incubate democracy as it states undergo these transitions, particular attention should be paid, and thus particular attention should be paid to the varied instances of press media that occur across the continent. When democratic transitions happen, what roles does the press play, and what symbiotic relationships does it form with the governments and its people? For the purposes of the analysis, “media,” “press” or “press media” will refer to those organizations, whether privately owned or part of a state-run enterprise, which ostensibly perform information-gathering for journalistic reporting or editorial purposes to be disseminated to a mass audience through any medium, including print, television and radio; this will *not* include social media. This paper seeks to examine the instrumentality of these outlets in the transition to and consolidation of democracy, and to evaluate their efficacy in a landscape wrought with challenges of governance, corruption and service delivery as these processes occur. In what form does the press media exist in Africa, and what role does it play in the development of democracy?

In its original conception, the modern media in Africa was the product of European colonialists to disseminate information among their own settlers (Ochilo 1993, 21). During these early days, it was used not as a tool to orchestrate sociopolitical change, but as a means of maintaining the status quo as it lacked the necessary contextual, regional “social foundation” for it to be applicable to the indigenous population (Ochilo 1993, 21). In this context, the media became a stepping stone on the path to “modernization,” one that emphasized a structure of control instead of democratic education (Park & Curran 2000, 5). Taking the example of Kenya, one of its very first publications, the *Taveta Chronicle*, emerged as the product of an English missionary, serving the purpose of keeping the settlers informed of news in their motherland (Ochilo 1993, 23-24). Asian immigrants to Kenya, too, would weaponize the media to set themselves above the resident Africans, who themselves would only later enter the media marketplace to amplify demands for justice and equality with their *indigenous press* (Ochilo 1993, 24). This indigenous press was especially salient during the rally for independence. Much like the state that the native Kenyans hoped to claim from their colonizers, their new, alternative media was anchored within the bounds of an existing system rooted in a colonial history. The ultimate potential for colonial systems, however, surfaces in how these systems are co-opted and restructured. Hopeful, pro-independence leaders were able to incorporate the indigenous press into their political organization efforts, and simultaneously the press could cause enough disruption for it to be integral to the movement (Ochilo 1993, 24). As the country moved into the postcolonial era, however, despite the prevalence of this alternative form of justice-seeking media, Kenya would see a different pattern of media ownership emerge. After independence, as many African nations became one-party states, the centers of power in these areas retained media as a means of maintaining the status quo; with some exceptions, many states subsumed outlets (Teshome 2009, 86). Kenya, with its de facto one-party state headed by KANU (Nyström), the Kenyan African National Union, fell into the media control and development patterns of their colonizers, assuming full control of electronic mediums and establishment of a ruling party’s *Daily Newspaper*. The government even exerted pressure over the handful of privately owned newspapers via political maneuvers and harsh lawsuit threats. The indigenous press still has some presence, though unlike their mainstream private counterparts, their limited financial backing makes them less able to weather the threats of the government, and restricts their circulation capacity to urban centers (Ochilo, 23-24).

This inevitably impacts the trajectory of democratic transition. In similarly restrictive media environments perpetuated by one-party states, opposition parties may find it difficult to find footing in a sea of state-owned media where broadcasters and other outlets stifle their visibility. In the 1992 election season, KANU was accorded more media coverage than all other parties combined, and what little coverage the latter *did* receive was often starkly negative in comparison (Teshome 2009, 87-88). This suffocating environment helps to prevent the formation of strong opposition; if the people cannot receive their messaging, how can they gain support? The case of Kenya presents, too, a relevant dichotomy in regard to media development in African states. It illustrates the creation a dividing line between: the alternative, independent, or privately owned media, in the indigenous press’ mobilizing mechanisms during the struggle for independence and their non-governmental alignment in the postcolonial state; and stringently operated state-run media, in KANU’s eventual control of the Kenya Broadcasting Company and Kenya News Agency. The latter aligns with what academia calls the *authoritarian theory* of the press, which, having emerged during the European Renaissance, suggests that the role of the media merely advances the policy of the ruling class (Ocitti 1999, 7). The former, however, falls more in line with the *libertarian theory* constructed by media researchers, which instead casts these media actors as instruments of the *people*, not the state (Ocitti 1999, 7). This stark contrast is a theme that persists throughout the development of the media in African states, pitting a state-centric press against a people-centric press.

Ethiopia provides another relevant case study for this dichotomy. Under the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF, private, non-state media was initially able to flourish as the result of a number of legislatively backed reforms. The 1994 Constitution enshrined the right to an opinion in the societal fabric, and a series of Press Laws strengthened the prospects for independent and private media, including such provisions as the limitation of censorship, shield laws which preclude journalists from disclosing sensitive sources, and the lifting of prison sentences for journalists convicted of “press crimes” (Teshome 2009, 91-93). These conditions seemed, on their face, to promote the inclusion of independent press media in the country. Looking at this legislation on its own, one might have been inclined to mistake this media development as a symptom of broader democratization. Many, after all, conceptualize strides in the media as equal strides in democratic footing. In its ideal circumstances, the health of the media in a region should closely mirror the health of its democracy, representing the open floodgates that allow for the free expression and flow of information (Ocitti 1999, 6).

Underlying Ethiopia’s expanding press freedoms, however, were equal measures to prevent too relaxed a speech environment, a repressive condition that would become startlingly obvious in attempts to develop a multiparty state. Ahead of the 2005 election, considered to be the most contested multiparty election in the country’s history (Wondwosen 2008, 131 via Teshome 2009, 94), state-owned broadcasting outlets vowed to allocate 54% of airtime to opposition candidates, a promise that scholars claim went unfulfilled (Teshome 2009, 94). Across Radio Ethiopia, the ruling EPRDF occupied 84% of the airtime, and in the realm of television they claimed a smaller but still significant plurality of the time with 41% and were portrayed more positively (Teshome 2009, 95). Overall, were one to consume the mainstream, state-sponsored media during the 2005 Ethiopian election period, the EPRDF would not only dominate the media one consumed, but also appear as the superior party. Conversely, a team at Adis Ababa University found that, among the private media entities in the country, *almost all* opposed the continued reign of the EPRDF. This discrepancy, coupled with the delay in releasing the results of the parliamentary election, pushed people increasingly toward private-owned outlets, who saw their circulation as a result of this consumer shift multiply by several times (Teshome 2009, 95-96). Their bolstered influence drew the ire of an adversarial state and its media arm. Ethiopia, headed by the EPRDF, would prove in the post-election period that their rollout of press freedoms years earlier was simply the veneer of democracy-building over an authoritarian core - not unlike Zimbabwe’s militarized electoralism, though in somewhat less bloody, brutalistic fashion. After the election, the private media outlets that formed against the EPRDF were struck by the government’s accusation that they were culpable in divulging sensitive national security issues. Many editors would be arrested and their equipment confiscated. This targeted crackdown, under which state journalists were seemingly immune, affected both domestic *and* foreign media. It was during this suppression that many lost confidence in state media. (Teshome 2009, 96-99). Though the desire to silence independent media is neither an explicit declaration of authoritarianism nor sufficient proof on its own for the democratizing effect of free media, it is telling that, when faced with multipartyism, the ruling party would go to such lengths to discredit outlets that were rapidly gaining a foothold among an anxious populace. Were these outlets not in the position to catalyze the free flow of information, it is unlikely that the people would have flocked to them during a time when they were attempting to consolidate their collective democratic power. Where the state media, following the authoritarian theory, sought to uphold the status quo and maintain the power of the EPRDF, it would seem that independent media, adhering to the libertarian theory amid efforts to stifle them, allowed more nuanced, diverse politics to emerge.

A further subset of the duties outlaid by the libertarian posits the press as a means of checking the power of institutions (Isike & Omotoso 2017, 210) and praises its presumed role as a watchdog that exposes abuses of state authority (Curran 2011, 147). During the regular function of government bureaucracy, this creates a window via which, in perfect conditions, the state can be viewed and held accountable for its actions. In something of a forced transparency, it allows the citizenry to discern with clarity the machinations of its government, including, in some cases, those schemes that may negatively impact the populace at large. The watchdog position extends in equal capacity to elections, during which it may scrutinize parties and promote democratic participation (Teshome 2009, 85). The perception of the media in this role finds increasing relevance several decades on from the wave of independence that washed across many African states. One of the leading issues these nations face is rampant corruption rooted in their bureaucracies, sapping their capacity for service delivery and their resources both monetary and otherwise. Petty corruption is of salient interest, as opposed to the sweeping grand-scale corruption, because it’s the one that is latently under the surface of society and the one that most people encounter (Rønning 2009, 156). This form of corruption originates on individual-level service acquisition, where government departments stonewall citizens and prevent them from receiving services unless one offers the official a bribe or under-the-table gift (Rønning 2009, 156). Since service delivery is one of the primary functions of the state, petty corruption prevents a state from being fully actualized and represents an abuse of bureaucracy for the purposes of personal gain. One could expect that a regional or local media operating in a watchdog capacity has the potential to counteract corruption by providing transparency, but what is the reality?

Mozambique is consistently viewed as a state with potent corruption. Transparency International’s annual report for 2020 ranks the country 142nd out of 180 examined countries on the Corruption Perception Index, with nearly half of people perceiving it as having gotten *more corrupt* during a 12-month period, and over a third of public service users having paid a bribe (Transparency International). The latter statistic offers further insight into the nature of petty corruption. It is small-scale enough that it affects individuals, but is still a relatively regular enough occurrence that it impacts a wide population and, in a sense, becomes an almost expected part of navigating bureaucracy. A study suggests a two-pronged reasoning for the presence of this type of corruption in Mozambique: low salaries for public employees, which pushes them to accepting bribes to achieve a livable wage; and the tight relationship between the state itself and the dominant Frente de Libertação de Moçambique, FRELIMO, party, which pushes bureaucrats into becoming members of the party (Rønning 2009, 159). With such a strong link between the ruling party and public servants, corruption becomes an inherent feature that is difficult to uproot sans the ruling party’s approval. But investigative efforts by independent media organizations may be part of the remedy. It has been found that in nations with low levels of administrative corruption, press freedom tends to be higher as a result of formal measures to empower oversight and breed transparency (Pradhan et al. 2000, 46–47 via Rønning 2009). This establishes a strong correlation, then, between the openness of a state and the health of the media, further implying that the more autocratic a state, the *less* inclined to support such measures of press freedom and higher incidence of corruption. In such states, backlash is a stopper against the wave of journalism, undermining their capacity to launch investigations into corruption.

In the case of Mozambique, the journalist Carlos Cardoso, who was infamous for his skepticism of the government despite being a FRELIMO sympathizer (Committee to Protect Journalists), was assassinated for exposé of corruption pertaining to the privatization of banks in the country (Fauvet and Mosse 2003 via Rønning 2009, 165). His investigation, which centered on Banco Austral, resulted in the seizure by the central bank of the offending institution (Committee to Protect Journalists), an expression of the tangible impact of journalism against corruption. The exposure of corruption may act as a deterrent (Rønning 2009, 168). Criticism from local experts cast accusations of deliberate mishandling of the investigation. As a result of the brutalistic retaliation and the lack of justice, journalists remained hesitant to report on sensitive topics, *especially* those pertaining to corruption (Committee to Protect Journalists). It should be noted that Cardoso’s reporting on and the seizure of Banco Austral in the 2000s fell in the tenure of former President Jaoquim Chissano, whose administration is known to have practiced “a política do silêncio,” or politics of silence, in regard to stories about corruption that appeared in the media (Rønning 2009, 169). After the death of Cardoso, and the later death of an auditor responsible for the sale of Banco Austral, Chissano publicly blamed organized crime and undermined the trust in the police (Committee to Protect Journalists). Journalists wield the capability to shine a light on corruption and bring about tangible change, and in many cases are the primary source for such revealing information, but their influence ultimately ends where the state’s begins. Their divorce from the processes of government, an intrinsic part of the journalistic craft that is often viewed as - though is not *always* the case - impartiality, means that media outlets are unable to directly bring about change. Another Mozambican journalist, Marcelo Mosse, combed through the assets of a FRELIMO presidential candidate Armando Guebuza who would later be elected to replace Chissano, and found that a substantial proportion of his wealth was acquired during the period of privatization of state enterprises of the 1990s (Rønning 2009, 161). The intention of Mosse’s research, glaring insight into political conflicts of interest, was to champion the creation of formal legal structures that would require public officials to declare their assets (Rønning 2009, 161). At the time of Rønning’s writing, in the five years following Guebuza’s election, he notes that no legislative progress had been made toward that end. However, by 2012, the Law of Public Probity was established, requiring officials to “disclose their financial assets and holdings, as well as that of their immediate family, including the interests of spouses and minor children” (PPLAAF), buffering against conflicts of interest that may arise as a result of their private activities (UNODC). Mosse had done some of the work at least 8 years before the law formally called for it, but it was not common practice until it had been ratified. Thus, though they offer a window into the workings of government and are somewhat able to act against corruption, their influence in affecting change is limited by the state and adjacent actors, whether through apathy or deliberate non-acknowledgement.

While well-intentioned, the view of media outlets as a watchdog offers a limited view as to the purpose of the modern press, in Africa especially. A more holistic approach to understanding the media offers up its potential as a pluralistic system that fosters open-ended collective dialogue (Park & Curran 200, 9). Extending beyond its investigative, adversarial capacity, then, is its ability to interface and liaise directly with local communities. In June 2006, African media leaders convened in Johannesburg and declared the necessity of African citizens inserting their voices in independent, pluralistic media, a process “central in empowering Africans to develop ideas and policies and make the political and economic choices needed to generate irreversible progress of the continent” (Mail and Guardian 2006 via Isike & Omotoso 2017, 223). Here, rather than separating the media from both the people and the government as an intermediary of information, the media is conceived as *of the people* instead of strictly just *for* them - or in the case of authoritarian media, for the government. This philosophy refocuses from a traditional model of journalism built upon centralization whereby individual outlets and their staffs are nexuses for information and dissemination toward a community-oriented model of journalism. In the latter case, it becomes *decentralized* and incorporates the work of citizen journalists - people reporting about the communities to which they belong. The informal settlement of Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya, is one of the central stories in this discussion of decentralized citizen journalism. In 2009, the Map Kibera project was launched as an effort to create a digital map for residents of the slum to be able to navigate and understand where their services and resources are (Map Kibera). Since then, they have also incorporated citizen journalism into the mix in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the area from the perspective of those who live there. Through the Voice of Kibera and Kibera News Network, the project collects information from local residents and compiles it into content to be shared amongst the community (Avila). The Kibera News Network has more recently ventured into training programs for community youth, prepping them for the creation of news stories and providing them with technical skills to do so, including camera operation and audio-visual editing (Adele). The Map Kibera project has since expanded to another informal settlement, Mathare, and saw the creation of the Mathare Valley Blog, another similar reporting initiative (Avila). This falls in line with the *social responsibility theory* of media, which builds upon the libertarian model; this theory represents an examination of media on served populations, and a consideration of the impact they have brought and are *able* to bring about.

With social responsibility in mind, where can one expect media in Africa to go from its turbulent past? The citizen journalism originating from the Map Kibera project is just one example of current media development. In March 2019, incidentally the same month that the Map Kibera youth training program launched (Avila), the Center for International Media Assistance, CIMA, issued a report on media development trajectories in West Africa. One of the major issues they address is the intolerance of governments acting against the “democratic firewalls” of media independence and security (Tietaah & Braimah 2019, 2), implying the old wounds of authoritarian suppression against independent media still ache. Further, they recognize other similar challenges, including media sustainability, its relationship with those in governance roles, and the difficulty of communicating across some cultural borders (Tietaah & Braimah 2019, 4). They make mention of ethnic Ghanian expressions of decorum and gesticulation, just one example of social considerations that must be made by journalists working in these communities to maintain a level of dignity and respect for those individuals. This point especially is crucial, as it is a matter of due representation for marginalized groups, much in the way one would expect a political body to be representative of its constituency. To improve the condition of the media and its capacity to strengthen democracy, CIMA recommends the following in West Africa specifically: the creation of a network of media freedom and governance groups to work with the Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS, to work toward the creation of strong policy that perpetuates healthy media practices and safeguards; formulate a process to align legislative goals with media development goals; commission regional research to identify solutions to ensure media sustainability; and foster the capacity of media in line with governance agendas, including elections and peacebuilding (Tietaah & Braimah 2019, 19). These solutions, of course, have broad applicability in *many* regions of Africa, but the successes of these developments among the ECOWAS states might offer a model for growth in other areas. Working closely with governments ensures that political bodies and independent media are step-in-step in ushering in representative democratic systems, in theory. Paying particular attention to regional research additionally aids in discovering long-term solutions for media longevity to better service underrepresented, marginal groups.

From its roots as a colonial tool to connect European settlers to its modern emphasis on regional governance and sustainability, media in Africa has taken many forms and has had many implications for the process of democratization throughout the region. In Kenya, the indigenous press served as an example for how the news media can galvanize and mobilize democratic social movements, and the trend of some states toward co-opting colonial bureaucracies and practices post-independence. Ethiopia’s case provided a glimpse into the clash between one-party states and the weaponization of state media, and how independent media supports attempts at multiparty electioneering. Mozambique provided insight into the relationship between corruption and the media, as well as its inherent limitations vis-a-vis legislative change. The Map Kibera project offered a look into the changing face of journalism as it becomes more decentralized, pluralistic and community dialogue-oriented. And the CIMA report offers hope for the future of media in Africa. Through these stories, the growth of media in Africa is apparent in the trends of its history. Though it has come a long way, the work is not done. Particular attention should be paid to the development of media in states across the continent, for they help anchor the population to the underpinnings of democracy.

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