

# Media's role in the developing countries

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**A**lthough radio is "king of the media" in Africa, the Press is increasingly becoming an active player in the democratic process. This has been seen particularly over the last six years in the French-speaking African states where a burgeoning of political parties has been matched by the appearance of an unusually large number of newspapers. In these countries, the Press still requires rudimentary political stability in contrast to English-speaking countries, where it has a much longer tradition and can nowadays be generally regarded as the "fourth estate". Nigeria is a good illustration of this. One need only cite the Press campaigns mounted there to protest against the Federation's membership of the Islamic Conference Organisation in 1986, and more recently, the support given to Mashood Abiola. The vitality of the Nigerian Press is something that deserves to be emphasised. Despite a series of measures over the years aimed at suppressing it not exclusively by the military authorities, it is still much in evidence. There are demonstrations to support it, and it has gone underground at times, continuing to publish clandestinely. The journalists struggle has intensified in June 1933 when it was recommended that they should exercise discretion and self-regulation. In spite of the problems, the Nigerian Press endeavour to remain a source of pressure in Negeria's political and social arena.

Returning to the French-speaking media, we see that the pace of expansion varies considerably from one country to another. In Benin, for example, current discussions are centred strongly on opening up the country's airwaves. It is debatable whether the private Press is truly independent. In the political sphere, it is often highly partisan while economic independence in the sense of access to the materials needed to produce a newspaper is not always possible. Printing

and distribution are often subject to monopolies which may constitute a form of disguised censorship for the publishers. Initiatives aimed at setting up Press associations in one form or another have been launched in an attempt to overcome these problems. This helps explain why the SEP Publishers' society was established. This group, which hopes to extend its activities throughout the region, is based in Benin where the demonstration process and the proliferation of Press titles first begun. In many countries, media associations have already been formed covering specific areas such as radio, the Press and publishing. There are plans for similar organisations in the field of television. Sometimes, they have printing facilities which are available to other private publications.

for the role that it played in the process. By and large, it concentrated on portraying popular expectations. During an election period, the print media is an essential vehicle of opinion and power, justifying the creation of special titles. At present, the private Press is playing an increasingly important role in the democratic process and the question of its survival appears to have attracted more serious attention from the authorities. In Senegal, a subsidy has been granted to a number of newspapers, subject to certain conditions, and Mali set an example this year by establishing a private Press aid fund, with Cote d'Ivoire about to follow suit.

The political context which has favoured this flourishing of the private Press has had a marked influence on the way it has developed and on the editorial content of most journals - which is strongly focused on politics and national issues. The Press has barely had a chance to find its feet on the media scene and in the political process and it has had to contend with huge economic constraints. Low circulation figures are one key reason for its precarious position newspapers are read only by an educated, urban minority. However, the Press is now embarking on a new course, attempting to establish a loyal readership with a view to guaranteeing its long-term survival. Independence and integrity out of course, to be the hallmark of journalism, although currently it is not possible to say that the profession is dissociated entirely from political militancy. In the past, the Press has played a part in undermining the national consensus by promoting division and, on occasion, fomenting exclusion and confrontation. The issue today is whether the sector can now take its place in states governed by the rule of law, representing public opinion and helping to bring about a rapprochement of ideas.

Government and Press relationships are not particularly healthy at the moment. The

usual reflex of authorities in any country is to control or manipulate the Press wherever possible. At the ORTB (Benin Broadcasting and Television Office), a branch of the public sector, journalists often complain of the pressures they face in processing information. The same is said at the national daily *La Nation*. Fortunately, such pressures have not always shaken the resolve of the profes-

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sional journalists.

The private Press has a different problem. In this case, it is newspaper proprietors who look to collaborate with the political parties. As one publishing editor has said, our problem is more one of allegiance than of harassment.

Virtually all publications are political vehicles for one or other group. sense of the code of

appear regularly and on time. The next stage ideally, is for it to be able to increase its distribution. Initially, a number of newspapers only came out monthly or even every two months. After appearing regularly for several months and thereby achieving relative financial stability they then moved to weekly publication. In most countries, a new legal framework was also adopted, although the application of the legislation has often proved laborious. This is particularly true of the setting up of regulatory authorities. In Senegal, where the media was previously governed by a law passed in 1979 and amended in 1986, new legislation was enacted at the beginning of 1996. The measure was prompted by concerns over ethical standards, a demand for a more responsible approach, a desire to prevent monopolies developing and fears of excessive foreign involvement. This year has also seen the implementation of media law amendments in Cote d'Ivoire.

The focus of the work of many newly-formed organisations has been the drawing up of a professional code of ethics, with a view to defining the basis of the journalist's profession. In Cote d'Ivoire, the OLPED (Press Freedom and Professional Ethics Monitor) was created in September 1995 in Yamoussoukro at a seminar on journalists responsibilities during elections. The OLPED is made up of 13 members representing publishers, civil society and the nation's journalists. Although the "monitor" has only moral authority, it has had considerable influence on journalists professional consciences. The OLPED held weekly working sessions up to March 1996 and now meets every two months. One of its main achievements has been to define the criteria whereby a responsible attitude can be guaranteed. The Press can expect to be subjected to rigorous supervision during an election campaign as happened recently in Benin. Indeed, Benin's Press has attracted special attention from various national institutions including, most notably, the NGO community. This interest resulted in the organisation of seminars on journalism during an election period, designed to avoid incitements to violence. The HAAC Audiovisual and communications High Authority, responsible for statutory control of the media in the run up to and during the campaign, took part in these meetings which were aimed at increasing awareness and highlighting the heavy responsibility carried by the media.

Despite a number of incidents during the campaign which were immediately reported and although the situation threatened to get out of hand while the country was obliged to wait for the publication of the results of the second round, the Press conducted itself in a fairly moderate manner. It should be recalled that there was a great deal of apprehension in Benin before the results were announced with a widespread fear that violence might break out. These fears were given extensive coverage by the media. The HAAC proved to be central to the electoral process and, ultimately, the Press was congratulated by most political leaders in Benin, and by those from abroad who were involved in organising and observing the poll,

tion period. All the titles that had been in hibernation came to life again and new titles were born, only to disappear once the poll was over. This is also a reflection of the very meagre resources available to most private publishers. Those who do have sufficient means are usually quick to offer allegiance for example to particular business in order to position themselves very favourably from an economic standpoint. Thus, some of the Press rather overtly promotes particular economic interests. Others assiduously woo politicians and in some cases, use blatant blackmailing techniques. In the latter situation, the market operates on the basis that a file something assembled from a number of documents will not be published if an endorsement is given or what is worse in return for hard cash.

The justification for this shameful practice is that the market is highly restricted, sales of newspapers bring in very little income and advertising is nonexistent but the newspaper has to keep going nonetheless. This situation also explains why defamation actions are frequently settled out of court by the parties to the dispute.

Another explanation for the existence of blackmail is the lack of training. The majority of journalists working for private publications come into the profession for want of something better to do, after they have finished their university courses. One experienced journalist refers to these people as mere hirelings. It is only once they have entered the profession that they learn the basics through joining journalists' associations and by receiving support from some of the bilateral cooperation missions and foundations that are operating in Benin. The country does not, itself, have any college of journalists receiving their training on the country's various publications. This course will be spread over one year.

Young journalists working at the national agency, the Benin Press Agency, are trained by WAND, the West African National Agencies Development Centre, under the auspices of UNESCO, which is subregional in vocation. The trainees have no clear idea of what awaits them when they finish their course whether all, or just some of them, will be taken on full time by the agency. Those who are not kept on at the end of their training period are likely to swell the ranks of the hirelings - who seem fated to remain at that level.

The new administration will have to tackle the more general question of aid to the Press in order to give a fresh boost to the private sector. This has been facing a real struggle since the devaluation of the CFA franc. The effect of the devaluation was to increase the cost of all the inputs needed for publishing newspapers.

A new initiative of the part of the authorities would make it possible to offer more work to journalists and to improve considerably the quality of work they produce. To quote the publisher of a private newspaper "The influence of money must be curbed. To do this, the state must grant genuine aid to the Press so that the profession can be genuinely free and objective, and, thereby, fulfil the important role it has to play in the consolidation of democracy."