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Media Pluralism, Democratic Discourses and Political Accountability in Africa

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Introduction:

A major fillip to the process of democratization and citizen engagement in Africa has been the changes in media ownership and pluralism over the last two decades or so. There is no question about the fact that the media landscape in Africa over this period has shown significant shifts, with tremendous expansion in the number of media outlets as democratic transformations make inroads into what used to be largely dictatorial political environments.¹ Even countries with regimes that are not receptive to democratic ideals have not escaped these developments and have seen spaces open for mediated politics. For example, Khartoum has 35 dailies, six weeklies and three monthlies, with the independent press assuming a visible place in the city, particularly since the peace agreement between the North and the South was signed in 2005.² While none of the seven private radio stations in the country venture into the political, there is relatively more room for independent voices to be heard in the print media, although the extent of that independence is not as elastic as to make one say that there is free rein for the media to be as expressive as they want, if that means taking a position that is fundamentally at variance with that of the government.

Various analysts contend that there is a positive relationship between expanded access to information, political pluralism and demands for more accountable government. As Jacob points out:

It is widely agreed that the health of democracy in the 20th and 21st century is linked to the health of systems of communication, though of course democracy cannot be reduced to issues of the media.... However, the dynamics of democracy are intimately linked to the practices of communication, and societal communication increasingly takes place within the mass media. Concern for democracy, therefore necessitates a concern about media.³

There are, however, pessimists who argue that these relationships, which are expected to flow mainly from media privatization, do not necessarily yield the expected dividends but rather reinforce the influence, and protect the interests, of powerful elements in society to the neglect of the less powerful. In order to avoid this consequence, Kuper and Kuper argue that the media have to operate in ways that allow them to achieve critical independence, democratic constructiveness and commercial viability.⁴ In the following discussion, we will explore the extent to which Africa's media have been able to achieve this critical balance, by first examining the contributions that they have made to democratic accountability, political education, and an informed citizenry. This is followed by a critical interrogation of the challenges that confront them as they strive to find the balance suggested above. The chapter ends with a discussion of what could be done to enhance the media's ability to influence the public sphere as a progressive force and to contribute to accountability on the part of various actors in society.

The Media as Conduits for Accountability and the Development of Civic Competence*Media, Democratic Accountability, and Fostering Informed Citizenship*

It is no secret that governments everywhere are not enamored of coverage that will put them in a bad light. However, an informed and engaged citizenry is not cultivated by foisting on them only the politically palatable. The media in various African countries have demonstrated that they are willing to defy the wrath of their governments to bring information to the public that will enable them to accurately assess their political leaders and to hold them accountable.

In his analysis of South African media, Jacobs contends that "media are not merely conduits for the government, political parties or citizens in post-apartheid South Africa, but have emerged as autonomous power centers in competition with other power centers."⁵ This is vividly illustrated by the

significant influence that the media have had in relation to civic education, election monitoring, and results tallying. The extent to which a vibrant media environment affects citizens' engagement with their political system, particularly in relation to elections, has been extensively established by several studies. Kuenzi and Lambright, for example, conclude, based on a study of countries that have had two consecutive multi-party elections since the early 1990s, that there is a significant positive relationship between media exposure and voter turn-out in Africa's multiparty democratic elections.⁶

In their analysis of the impact of private media growth in Madagascar, Adriantsoa et al (2005, p. 1939), note that "over 90 private radio stations and 15 private radio stations have begun operation over the last decade. The resulting profusion of private media has played a key role in improving governance, most recently in the hotly contested presidential election of 2001." They not only became sources for a diverse array of perspectives and political platforms, but also provided the conduit for civic action in support of particular causes, as they were used to galvanize and mobilize supporters of opposition parties for rallies against the incumbent regime, a scenario that was inconceivable when only state-controlled media existed. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, community radio stations were credited with playing a critical role in getting information about the country's political transition and elections to the public, particularly in areas isolated by the long, drawn-out, conflict. In view of the relationship between an informed citizenry and a sophisticated voter, it is obvious that the more people are able to access information, and engage with the public discourses around them, the more likely they are to hold politicians accountable, make the political choices that benefit them, reward or sanction governments through those choices, and hence increase the chances of getting a responsive state. As Schaffner opines,

the extent to which elections are useful instruments of accountability is closely related to the ability of citizens to acquire and utilize information about candidates and elected officials running in those contests. If citizens are not presented with a sufficient amount of information about competing candidates, then they may be less able to evaluate these candidates and to make reasonable choices between them.⁷

Various media organizations and practitioners have played a significant role in holding public officials and institutions to account by exposing acts of commission and omission that undermine good governance. One such major case involves the "Oilgate Scandal" in South Africa, which was exposed in 2005 by investigative journalists from the *Mail and Guardian*. The gist of the scandal, which is worth quoting directly from the newspaper, is as follows:

A *Mail & Guardian* investigation into covert party funding has revealed how R11-million of public money was diverted to African National Congress coffers ahead of the 2004 elections. In what may be the biggest political funding scandal since 1994, the *M&G* has established that South Africa's state oil company, PetroSA, irregularly paid R15-million to Imvume Management — a company closely tied to the ANC — at a time when the party was desperate for funds to fight elections. The *M&G* possesses bank statements and has seen other forensic evidence proving that Imvume transferred the lion's share of this to the ANC within days. PetroSA this week said it was unaware of this. The ANC denied impropriety and said it was not obliged to discuss its funders. The scheme unfolded in two stages. First, PetroSA management bent over backwards to pay Imvume the money as an advance for the procurement of oil condensate. Then, when Imvume diverted the funds to the ANC instead of paying its own foreign suppliers, PetroSA had to cover the shortfall by paying the same amount again. A multimillion-rand hole remains in the parastatal's books. PetroSA has gone through the motions to recover the debt by

suings Imvume — but most of it remains outstanding. The effect of the entire transaction was that PetroSA, and ultimately the taxpayer, subsidised the ruling party's election campaign: a blatant abuse of public resources.⁸

The revelations from this story led to an investigation by the Public Protector, a statutory position under the South African Constitution, whose responsibility it is to hold public officials accountable. The Public Protector subsequently issued a report which was seen by many observers as unsatisfactory. In the context of this reaction, it is revealing of the commitment of the South African media to their watchdog and agenda-setting roles that the *Mail and Guardian* did not rest on its laurels after revealing the alleged connivance among the ANC, Imvume and PetroSA. For two years, since the report's release in 2005, it vigorously pursued another line of action that focused the lens on the Public Prosecutor and the quality of the investigations; it sought recourse to the courts for the report to be reviewed, under the Promotion of Administrative Justice Act. This was to ensure that certain dimensions of the initial allegations that were not taken up by the Public Protector, or for which the parties involved were exonerated, were explored further. The newspaper's efforts paid off when, in November 2007, a court started hearing its case. It is worth noting that the allegations of campaign contributions from Imvume were confirmed when the ANC's former Treasurer disclosed at the Party's Congress last December that the party did receive the 11 million rand donation, but "immediately returned the entire donation to the donor in two instalments of R6-million on the 31st May 2005 and R5-million on the 20th June 2005."⁹ In spite of the assertion from the ANC that the issue was resolved by repaying the donation, the newspaper continues to keep the matter on the national agenda by raising certain unresolved questions, and the opposition parties have taken up the issue as well. Similar work by other South African media outlets have helped to expose the nefarious activities of public officials, such as the links between former Police Chief Jackie Selebi and associates of slain shadowy businessman Brett Kebble. In Ghana, investigations by the *Inquirer* led to credible recorded allegations, by a Chairman of the New Patriotic Party of President Kufuor, that his government was receiving kickbacks from contractors working on government projects.¹⁰

The valuable role of the media in agenda-setting is borne out by the fact that initial investigative work by various journalists has provided the basis from which relevant state institutions have taken up and pursued lapses in performance, malfeasance, corruption in government, etc, and consequently brought those concerned to book. The *Mail and Guardian's* Adriaan Basson and Carien du Plessis were, for example, responsible for revelations of impropriety on the part of former prisons Commissioner Linda Mti in the award of contracts, an exposure that eventually led to the 'early departure' of the Commissioner and the Department of Correctional Services' Chief Financial Officer from their posts. "Despite being threatened with court action, the two journalists established a link between Mti and a company that won a dubious, multimillion-rand tender, and then proved that the tender document had been written by the company which won it."¹¹

A critical role of government in ensuring good governance is the exercise of due diligence in decisions by various arms of government and their implementation. Unfortunately, many governments on the continent have shirked these responsibilities, with significant repercussions for the national purse and the provision of quality stewardship to their citizens. Fortunately, the media are stepping in to fill this gap by scrutinizing legislative and executive decisions, for example, to ensure that they are credible, feasible, and in the national interest. The work of some Ghanaian media helps to illustrate this contribution. In 2002 the Kufuor government sought parliamentary approval of a loan agreement with International Finance Consortium (IFC) for an amount totaling about US\$1 billion. Investigations by the *Ghana Palavar*, an opposition newspaper, revealed that the company was bogus and was using an

acronym similar to that of the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank to gain credibility for its dubious operations.¹²

The revelations led to pressure on the government by opposition parties, other media organizations, and the public to defend its decision to enter into the agreement or save the country, from a hoax of tremendous proportions, by pulling out.¹³ The latter option eventually prevailed. The fact that the same government got caught up in another sham loan agreement with Chinese New Techniques Construction Investments Limited (CNTCI) is troubling and shows that in the absence of an active public sphere, where such agreements are subject to public scrutiny, the country can be taken to ransom. In the latter case, the leading opposition party, the National Democratic Congress, raised significant questions about the trustworthiness of the agreement, after it was passed by parliament. Follow-up investigations by *Ghana Palavar* and *Radio Gold* confirmed the fraud when they revealed that the location of CNTCI, indicated on the agreement, was occupied by a hairdressing salon.¹⁴

The extensive opacity of government transactions in Africa is inimical to good governance because it makes it difficult for citizens to know the 'whys' and 'hows' of processes and decision that impact their lives and, therefore, their ability to hold their public officials to account. It is, therefore, refreshing when the media bring transparency to those transactions and interactions and help citizens understand the basis for certain occurrences and consequences and actions which will, otherwise, not be known to them. This was the case recently, in Uganda, when President Museveni sent a letter to his Prime Minister and members of parliament on May 4, 2008,, expressing concern about the inflation of road construction costs and corruption in the award of road contracts. In order to situate the president's concerns within a context, the *Daily Monitor* managed to get access to the brief on the basis of which the president wrote his letter. It then provided the public with information that showed the extent of impropriety within the Road Agency and Formation Unit (RAFU) of the Ministry of Works. According to the *Daily Monitor's* report:

The brief to the President noted that the contract award figures differed sharply with estimates of external consulting engineers hired by the ministry and noted that the government in the worst case scenario could have saved \$20 million for the three projects, if the tendering process had been transparent. For example, while consultants - PKS Group of South Africa estimated the Kabale-Kisoro Road construction to cost \$36 million (approx. Shs65billion); Rafu later contracted it out at a cost of \$80 million (approx. Shs147 billion). This means that the government is paying Shs82 billion more than the consultant's estimates. The accompanying analysis for the brief handed over to the President also notes that another consultant – Gauff Engineering Ltd had estimated the cost of Soroti-Dokolo-Lira Road at \$ 47million (approx. Shs85 billion) but Rafu handed over the tender to China Road & Bridge at \$88 million (approx. Shs160 billion).¹⁵

In a country where the road network is falling apart, it is useful for the public to fully understand the machinations behind escalating construction costs and shoddy work in order to counter other narratives explaining why they have to contend with crumbling infrastructure. The same desire to contextualize developments that impact the public explains why, despite efforts by the Nigerien regime of Mamadou Tandja to clamp down on coverage of the Tuareg question by jailing several journalists who write about the matter, the persistence of those journalists has succeeded in bringing it to the attention of the international community. The importance of drawing Nigeriens' as well as world attention to the conflict between the rebels and the government is important. It helps to unravel the real reasons behind the conflict, expose its nature, and to critically assess the role of the various actors in order to foster solutions that go beyond those based on the government's claim that the rebels are just drug traffickers

or bandits. In the words of Callahan, “journalism is a profession with unique privileges and obligations. Journalists can claim their goal is to seek and communicate truths about the world on behalf of the common good.”¹⁶

A fundamental responsibility of the media in support of democratic governance is serving as a means for the expression of varied views. It is a sign of the development of democratic discourse in Africa that, even in a country such as the Sudan where the authorities were obdurately intolerant of dissent a decade ago, we can see editorials, such as the pro-South *Khartoum Monitor's* of March 18, 2007, excoriating China and Russia for fuelling the Darfur conflict by pursuing activities in Sudan that put pecuniary gain above human rights. The editorial argues that “it is not solely the government of Sudan that kills its own people, but it does so in collaboration with whoever helps it reach these heinous levels of human rights violation.” On the same day, *The Citizen* slammed the Sudanese government’s links to the *Janjeweed* militia, denouncing it as “a racist regime that is in many respects worse than the Apartheid regime in South Africa, which at least had the dignity not to employ rape as a tactic of suppression.” The foregoing provides the context for the following comment from Adil Elbaz, editor of the private paper *Al-Sahafa*: “the Sudanese press is not really free, ... but we are making progress”¹⁷

In African countries, where political differences and their attendant tensions can create highly volatile political situations, the media have a significant role in curbing those potentials. This was demonstrated during the recent post-election violence that engulfed Kenya. While the media were not able to prevent the eruption, spread and continuation of violence, they did make a conscious effort not to exacerbate the situation. They did this by bringing to the fore perspectives that aimed at calming tempers and promoting reconciliation among the various factions. In fact, a number of traditional rivals in the media rose above the fray and came together to forge a common purpose of galvanizing support for peace and defusing the political tension. On Jan. 3, 2007, *The Nation* and *The Standard* published a common editorial, headlined “Save Our Nation.” The caption was echoed by television stations, as they streamed the words across television screens, and radio stations carried the editorials. As noted in a report by Reporters Without Borders, “the press very quickly agreed on appealing for calm and collective prayers, running joint editorials in Nairobi’s main newspapers and avoiding sensationalism and comments likely to aggravate ethnic divisions. The line was “peace above all.”¹⁸

Many African journalists are living with, and haunted by, the aftermath of indelible images imprinted on their consciousness partly as a result of some Rwandese media’s complicity in the genocide of 1994. Consequently, they are careful not to fan sentiments that could degenerate into chaos, discrimination, and targeted reprisals. Indeed, Kenya had seen the markings of such tendencies when, during the 2005 constitutional referendum, some media organizations were accused of fomenting violence and division between those groups which supported the Constitution and those who did not – divisions that broke down largely along ethnic lines. *Kass FM*, a private radio station which broadcast in Kalenjin, was, for example, suspended as a result of these accusations.

The ingenuity of the media in facilitating political discourse and holding officials to account is borne out by the use of political satire. For example, in September 2007, Zimbabwean playwright, Daniel Maphosa, put up a performance of his play *The Final Push* which showcased a satirical look at 8 years of political crisis that had bedeviled the country. Even though the performance was disrupted by police, at least, the audience was fed with a critical assessment of the country’s predicament. In Burkina Faso “a robust satirical press comes out regularly without suffering any particular difficulties” whereas its counterpart in Guinea, despite being “battered, threatened and attacked, has become very powerful.”¹⁹

Holding Non-State Actors Accountable

There is a tendency among analysts who look at the media's watchdog role, in the context of democracies and transitional polities, to focus on state officials and government institutions to the neglect of other actors and centers of activity whose actions have significant implications for good governance, democratic accountability and sustainability of democratic institutions and practices. This dimension of the media's watchdog and agenda-setting roles is manifested by the efforts of journalists in Guinea Bissau to bring visibility to the activities of drug traffickers in their country and seek action on the part of state institutions to stem the trade and expose officials who are aiding and abetting the barons. The work of Allen Yéro Emballo and Agnello Regala in this respect is noteworthy, even though it has led to exile for the former and continued threats and intimidation of the latter by highly-placed military officials suspected of being accomplices. The media's work in keeping an eye on this burgeoning transnational drug business is as critical to building and sustaining good governance as the traditional foci on state-media relations. This is because of the fact that these activities tend to undermine and corrupt state institutions, cow journalists, and sow seeds of fear among the populace in ways that take away its ability to confront the perpetrators and protect the rule of law.

The media are also extending their scrutiny of the public realm to encompass the activities of private companies whose activities undermine the integrity of the polity and undercut the ability of the public to get what it deserves. In South Africa, *Independent Newspapers'* Bruce Cameron investigated a pension-fund scandal, unearthing the fact that companies administering the retirement-fund were making, and stashing away, huge profits to the detriment of beneficiaries. The significance of this story is captured in the following citation by a panel of judges, explaining the basis for declaring Cameron the winner of the *Sanlam Financial Journalist of the Year Award* for 2006:

Cameron's tenacity in exposing undesired practices in the financial services industry and generally promoting consumer education, has set new standards for personal finance and investigative journalism in the country. "In his entries, he exposed how Alexander Forbes skimmed off millions of "secret profits" at the expense of retirement funds and their members - arguably the most telling financial story break of 2006 with wide-ranging consequences for the financial services industry. The exposé resulted, amongst other things, in an industry-wide FSB investigation, proposed legislative amendments and a repayment of some R500 million to retirement funds."²⁰

There have been numerous stories across the continent outlining the impact of private extractive industries on the lives of marginalized communities whose voice has been drowned by the exigencies and dictates of a neo-liberal economic agenda being pursued by governments and corporations.²¹ By focusing on such development news the media not only reveal the immediate detrimental impacts that come with the operations of these industries, but engage the public in a larger debate about the benefits and beneficiaries of state and private company policies, including the socio-economic dislocation of communities, the impact on the environment and sustainable livelihoods. A May 19, 2008, editorial by *The Citizen* of Tanzania explores these issues as it analyzes the plight of

About 200 families in Geita District [who] are living as refugees in their own country after their houses were demolished to pave the way for large-scale mining. What is even more heart-rending is the fact that the families have been destitute for almost a year after they were evicted on a court order early last year.

The tents they are living in were donated by Norwegian benefactors, which suggests that Tanzanian society as a whole has been indifferent to their plight.

It is easy to dismiss the evictees as law-breakers since they were forcibly moved on a court order after apparently encroaching on land owned by a gold mining company, but it is immoral for district and regional authorities to assume the role of onlookers as the families continue to suffer. ...

It is cause for concern that conflicts over land pitting big business against ordinary Tanzanians are now an all too familiar occurrence in the country. Apart from the Geita tug-of-war, there are similar disputes in Dar es Salaam, Arusha and Mara regions, some of which are the subjects of long drawn-out court cases. Some of these conflicts have turned bloody as locals resist eviction from land which some have occupied for years.²²

Injecting Marginalized Voices into the Public Sphere

It is fair to acknowledge that 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. While this issue of a constricted public sphere will be taken up later, it is important to note the efforts being made by sections of the media to champion the interests of the marginalized and vulnerable in society and to ensure that their situations are given visibility on the national agenda. This was the case with a group of Sudanese journalists who were arrested in August 2006 while investigating the negative impact of a dam on dislocated residents of Marawi and the displacement of people in Algazera province as a result of the authorities giving their lands to a foreign businessman. 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.

Joyfm, a private radio station in Ghana, went beyond reporting to mobilize financial support for the medical expenses of a seven-year old victim of sexual abuse at the hands of her 67-year old grandfather.²³ Not only did the station raise thousands of dollars for the treatment of the victim, whose genitals and rectum were severely damaged by the abuse and is HIV-positive, but kept the issue of pedophilia on the national consciousness in a very palpable but sensitive way, leading to the prosecution of the grandfather and demonstrations expressing outrage at the increasing spate of child rape in the country. There is, indeed, growing realization among media practitioners that they are not just there to report facts, but have a responsibility to put those 'facts' in context, tease out the reasons behind them as well as their implications, and elevate them as foci of public engagement and state action. As noted by several media practitioners in Ghana's Northern Region, following training programs by Journalists for Human Rights (JHR),

journalists' perceptions about human rights have changed. "We just reported incidents like, 'A man in Saboba has raped a school girl,' but we wouldn't investigate it further. We wouldn't go into the societal problems underlying it." Radio Justice now has a weekly human rights program and regularly covers human rights issues in its daily news updates. At Radio Justice, Ramadan Abdul Razak, an investigative reporter, said, "We always looked at human interest, not human rights. We would just get the facts. We never followed up to make a change. Now we push to change things. We now realize there are human rights issues in every story." (J. Llewelin, N. Whaites & A. Filipowich, 2007 – Journalists for Human Rights)

The leadership role taken by some of Africa's to advocate respect for human rights, in spite of the dangers entailed in such advocacy, is vividly illustrated by two cases. The first involves a report in early May, 2008, by Uganda's *Independent*, which documented alleged abuse and torture of civilian detainees by operatives of the state's para-military institutions, thereby drawing attention to the plight of the alleged victims and raising questions about the appropriateness of the state's tactics in dealing with

civilian detainees accused of links to rebel groups such as the Peoples Redemption Army, association with the opposition Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), or for leaking classified government information.²⁴

As Jones admonishes,

truth telling speaks to the responsibility of journalism to cover those people who normally may not have access to the media and to cover those issues that need light shone upon them. Investigative journalism in particular, should not be a witless apologist for dominant values – ... stories can expand, even if only a little, the community's understanding of its values, along with its willingness to apply them more justly – or it may reveal that the community no longer cares.²⁵

The second example involves a principled position by the Editor-in-Chief of Ghana's *Statesman* newspaper, Gabby Otchere Darko, who came out in support of what is considered a taboo by arguing for the right of gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered people to inclusive citizenship. He made this contribution in the wake of extensive public outrage against the gay lifestyle, following some media reports about a purported gay conference in the country in late 2006. The bold position adopted by such a high-profile journalist is highly commendable in view of the fact that his position was significantly out of tune with that of an overwhelming majority of citizens, public officials, journalists and media outlets, religious leaders, and that of the statutory body tasked with protecting human rights in the country – the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ). The Chairman of CHRAJ stated unequivocally that the Commission will not advocate gay rights. What the journalist did was to educate the public on the need to protect minority rights in a democracy and to provoke a discourse that pushed for a critical assessment of the basis for public revulsion toward homosexuality and the laws that criminalize that lifestyle. His intervention helped to fulfill a vital role for media practitioners in support of democracy, which is to educate the public to understand and appreciate the value of substantive citizenship for all members of society and the importance of protecting it. The work of Uganda Media Women's Association in educating women, particularly in rural areas, about their rights, providing them with avenues to articulate their concerns, and inserting those voices into deliberations in the public sphere is another laudable achievement by the media on behalf of the marginalized. These acts constitute what Carroll and Hackett call progressive media activism.²⁶

Post-National Constellations and the Virtual Public Sphere

A very important consequence of the opportunities provided by the internet is the extent to which the state's hold on its citizens has been ruptured, if not completely eliminated. Under the media configurations of the past, characterized by centralized control of mass-mediated information production and dissemination in African countries, the ability of citizens to produce content and share their views was constrained by the gate-keeping role of state agents. The transformations in media ownership, control, and information dissemination made possible by the Internet means that counter-discourses that challenge the hegemonic viewpoint of the state are being vigorously articulated within the virtual architecture of this reconfigured public sphere.²⁷

These opportunities are particularly available to Africans located outside the territorial boundaries of their states of origin. The location of Africans in the Diaspora affords them the opportunity to access and assess information in ways that most of their compatriots may not be able to. They are, consequently, better able to authenticate or debunk various narratives that may be put out by state actors in their countries of origin. These are then posted to support or challenge those dominant discourses. Discussion forums and chatrooms, thus, provide a plethora of deliberative politics, as burning issues are brought up, opinions expressed, and analyses provided. This is illustrated by Bernal's (2006) study of

Eritrean internet networks which provide a veritable public sphere in which ideas, that cannot be expressed in the context of the oppressive controls of the state, are articulated, disseminated and debated among interactants who may not be familiar with each other in physical space but engage one another in the ether of cyberspace. It is obvious that the following poster will not have the temerity to say the following words in the real world of Nigerian politics without fear of physically harmful retribution:

no incorrigible president has a case, moral or otherwise, against an incorrigible deputy. You keep writing like OBJ has some moral ground to stand on here, he doesn't. **OBJ and Atiku are murderers and thieves** [emphasis in the original]. They were both disbursing money from government accounts to buy cars for girlfriends while nigerian children were dying from treatable diseases like malaria. Why not ask how Atiku should have dealt with the issue? In the fight between two rogues, he is doing what he should be doing exactly. Otherwise, he would have ended up like the Audu Ogbeks and Theophilus Danjumas who stole with OBJ, then got their hands chopped off while OBJ kept eating. (Oladipo, Posted: Mon Apr 16, 2007 2:13 pm)

Nancy Fraser critiques the national/Westphalian orientation of public sphere theory, which she thinks is threatened by depoliticization, and calls for a reformulation of the theory in a way that "can illuminate the emancipatory possibilities of the present postnational constellation."²⁸ In this new constellation, the communicative targets of those who operate in the public sphere, contra the Habermasian model of the bourgeois Westphalian state and public, is not just the territorial sovereign, but the desegregated sovereign, characterized by multiple and distinct institutional levels -- some contained within, others extending beyond, the state. As Africans engage in communicative action on the internet, therefore, the institutional and other receptacles, to which they are directing attention, reflect these multiple foci and loci of sovereignty, depending on the issues at hand. One of the conduits for exercising voice in these post-national constellations is the blogosphere.

In 2007 Wael Abbas went worldwide. An Egyptian blogger, Wael spent the past few years using his site to showcase alleged police abuse inside prisons and also at the site of protests against the government. But early this year, a video posting he made on YouTube of a bus driver being sodomized with a stick at the hands of Egyptian police, forced an international spotlight on Egypt's security forces and their tactics. Two policemen from that incident were later sentenced to jail time and Egypt is taking action over other incidents. Still Wael, who briefly had his youtube account suspended some weeks ago, wants more, to inspire the Egyptian people to demand change. And as the first blogger to win the prestigious Knight International Journalism Award by the International Center For Journalists earlier this year, Wael intends to keep up the fight online and keep his check on the Egyptian government.²⁹

The ability of the internet to allow for subjective narratives of history is significant enough; but its capacity to bring alive images that are ubiquitous, accessible to a myriad of people, (re)generate passions, contest particular versions of history, and mobilize transnational constituencies for the purpose of holding governments and various actors accountable for their actions, make it a very powerful tool for democratic expression. In the African context, such imagery is exemplified by a website that was set up by some citizens of Anlo, in the Volta region of Ghana, to publish images of victims of what they considered to be government-supported police brutality during a confrontation among factions in a chieftaincy dispute. The caption accompanying the images, states:

This Website (prototype) is being created to Honor of [sic] the Heroes and those who Paid the Ultimate Sacrifice to protect The Heritage and Culture of the Anlo's [sic] on November 1 2007 in the Volta Region of Ghana. May Their Souls Rest in Peace! (<http://anlostate.org/>)

The watchdog role of the media has, thus, not only been enhanced by developments in ICTs, but also by migration and the attendant creation of diasporas which serve as expansive sources of information for media outlets located in their countries of origin. This fact, together with the time-space compression made possible by ICTs means that local media can receive information relevant to their countries from compatriots located in other parts of the world. This connection is strengthened by the intense interest that many Africans domiciled abroad have in the politics of their home countries and their willingness to inject themselves into the deterritorialized public spheres of those countries. It is this confluence of developments that triggered extensive coverage in Ghanaian media about alleged kickbacks to Ghanaian officials by Scanscom, a Norwegian company operating in Ghana, and subsequent investigations by the media.³⁰ The follow-up investigations showed that election 'donations' from Scanscom were not limited to the NDC government, the focus of the original revelations, but that the web of complicity extended to various political parties in the country, in apparent violation of Section 23(1) (Funding of Political Parties) of the Political Parties Law (Act 574). The Act stipulates that only citizens may contribute to political parties.

Challenges to Media as Facilitators of Accountability in Africa

Dadge (2005) argues that the African Peer Review Mechanism has so far not been used as a credible tool to uphold and promote freedom of expression and independent media in several African states. In fact, many African governments use covert and overt means to deny access to information and or to intimidate media houses and personnel. Among the most notorious of regimes in this respect are the Eritrea, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia. In spite of gains made over the last several years,

Freedom of the press in Africa was badly damaged in 2007. On at least 12 occasions during the year, men received orders to kill journalists. Police received orders on almost 150 occasions to make an arrest, not of a corrupt minister or a notorious killer but of a journalist. Even governments of countries in which Reporters Without Borders had invested some hope in previous years, have brought instruments of repression to bear against the press.³¹

The use of legislation and executive fiat is a tried, tested, and effective weapon in the hand of governments which want to hide behind self-serving legality to circumscribe deliberations in the mediated public sphere and beyond. In Sudan, for example, Article 130 of the Code of Criminal Procedure is used to gag reportage on significant events that the government does not want exposed. This provision was invoked to indefinitely suspend *Al-Sudani* in 2007 for making reference to the murder of Mohammed Taha, editor of *Al-Waifaaq*. *Al-Sudani's* action was in defiance of a government directive imposing a news blackout on the case, ostensibly to avert any trouble. In August 2006, Rwanda's highest court upheld the "public offence" conviction of Charles Kaonero, editor of *Umuseso*, a weekly private newspaper. He was given a one year suspended prison sentence and fined one million Rwanda francs (1450 euros) for articles that appeared in the newspaper criticizing the conduct of government business, raising questions about the political influence of the country's Deputy Speaker vis-à-vis the presidency, and alleging that he rented offices in his private building to various state-institutions.

The re-introduction of an advanced censorship committee in Chad, under a state of emergency legislation, has been the bane of newspapers as has the banning, on radio and television, of issues considered inimical to national security. The media's ability to inform, raise questions, and critically

engage with issues confronting the citizenry, at a time of national turmoil and desperation, has been severely eroded. Apart from one pro-government private newspaper, *Le Progrès*, all publications in Njamena come to the newsstands with substantial parts blacked out. Ostensibly to protect the national interest, a journalist of a community radio station, *Radio Brakoss*, was arrested and jailed in 2007 for publishing a story accusing the local police chief of extorting money from local residents. His crime? – “ruthless handling of sensitive news which could harm national cohesion”!³²

There continues to be a preponderance of laws that punish media practitioners for “insulting the president”. These laws restrict the use of the media for legitimate critique of government policies and officials. This is especially so because of the nebulous definition given to such violations. Any views against the stance of the president could be characterized as an insult for which the persons expressing them could be arrested and incarcerated. It is a sad commentary on the state of democracy on the continent that even countries such as Kenya, which are considered to be beacons of democracy, have retrogressive laws that punish journalists, ostensibly for the “publication of false news.” For example, a story in the February 25, 2007 edition of *The Standard*, indicating that a meeting had taken place between the president and a former cabinet minister, who had left the government several months earlier due to his opposition to the government’s draft constitution, evoked the government’s anger. This led to the arrests of the paper’s managing editor, editor and a reporter. They were charged with publishing false rumors with the aim of causing public panic. This was followed, days later, with a raid on the premises of the paper’s printer by police who seized and burnt copies of the March 2 edition. Instead of punishing journalists who may have made genuine errors in their reportage, it is more useful to see these mistakes as an indictment on governments that are reluctant to grant access to relevant information, thereby compelling journalists to scramble through other means to gather news and to inform the public. Based on the above incidents in Kenya, it is important that analyses of the media-democracy nexus in Africa not lose sight of the fact that a vibrant and diverse media system is not necessarily coterminous with civil liberties for journalists.³³ This is also exemplified by Nigeria, probably the most animated media setting on the continent where attacks, intimidation, and arrests of journalists are commonplace. The notorious State Security Service (SSS) continues to wage a constant assault on media freedom.³⁴

In some instances, aggrieved public officials take it upon themselves to settle scores with the media for subjecting their government to public scrutiny and/or providing a forum for perspectives that contradict or are critical of those espoused by state officials. A most ignominious example of this occurred in Ghana in April 2008 when a government minister angrily interrupted a live discussion program on *Metro TV*, broadcasting on location at a facility where an UNCTAD meeting was taking place, and ordered it closed. He said later that his goal was to protest the views of one guest, presumably for being partisan in violation of UNCTAD rules that the conference premises should not be used for political purposes. A more credible reason seems to be the fact this guest, who is a regular critic of the government’s economic policies and a leading member of an opposition party, was voicing unpleasant views in the presence of international media and conference participants.

The targets of the state actions referred to above are not just local journalists, but extend to foreign journalists whose portrayal of events are considered contrary to the interest of the governments in power. Thus, many foreign journalists who seek to cover the atrocities in Darfur, for example, are characterized as spies, refused visas or denied permits to go to that region because they are seen as reflecting perspectives that do not put the government in a positive light in the global community. As noted by Reporters Without Borders, blacklisting of foreign journalists stems from the perception that

“many media have proved to be insulting towards the Sudanese government.” In other words, it is portrayed as a legitimate self-defence by the government in reaction to criticism in the US and European press since the start of the civil war in Darfur and, before that, to the 21 years of fighting between government troops and the southern rebels, especially John Garang’s SPLA.³⁵

Restrictions on the movement of journalists are not limited to the Sudan. Prior to the last presidential elections in Uganda, the Media Center, a recently created, government-controlled media surveillance entity, summoned foreign correspondents to its offices and instructed them not to travel more than 100km outside of Kampala without its authorization. The BBC’s Will Ross had his accreditation slashed from one year to four months soon after he filed a report about the death of seven civilians in a refugee camp in the north of the country. In the face of such obstacles, it is not surprising that some journalists are compelled to use unconventional and, sometimes illegal, means to get their stories, including unsanctioned entry into the county or certain areas. In Eritrea, foreign journalists function at the behest of the Information Minister, who has no qualms about revoking their permits if their coverage is deemed unfavorable to the government, such as violations of civil and political rights. It must be acknowledged, though, that in some instances, foreign media personnel have given cause for governments to react negatively to them due to the lack of understanding of local realities, a fact that is betrayed by their reportage.

On a continent where access to information, through state institutions, is a huge challenge, the media have to depend on ordinary citizens to provide relevant insights on the basis of which to undertake their responsibilities of informing deliberations, and galvanizing action, in the public sphere. Unfortunately, the fear of reprisals by targets of media scrutiny dissuades some citizens from taking up the role of informers. Such fears are not unfounded as demonstrated in the a case involving the Head-teacher of a primary school in Ghana who is believed, by most observers, to have been demoted and transferred as a result of granting an interview to journalists in which she lamented low enrolments in the school, thereby critiquing the effectiveness of the government’s education reform program.³⁶ In 2006, the Rwandese Interior Minister directed police to hold, in custody, any journalist who publishes an official document until he or she identifies the source of the leak. Such a fate stared Max Hamata, the editor of Namibia’s *Informante*, in the face when he was threatened with imprisonment in February, 2008, if he refused to reveal the source of information that formed the basis for a story the paper wrote about the mayor of Windhoek. These types of orders and threats are not comforting to prospective sources of information for journalists. In the light of these facts, President Kibaki has to be commended for refusing to sign the Media Bill of 2007, which included a provision that would have compelled journalists to reveal their sources. According to him, such a provision constitutes a threat to freedom of expression and undermines the country’s democratic achievements.

While the media landscape generally reveals significant challenges that still need to be addressed, the obstacles that confront the media are particularly dire in conflict areas. Here, the emotional proximity of journalists to atrocious realities that impact their very lives and the difficulty of being dispassionate vis-à-vis the different interests and claims behind the conflicts affect journalists’ ‘objectivity’. The consequent mistrust towards journalists by various protagonists complicates journalistic practice and the role of the media in fostering compromises, consensus, national unity or peace. In Darfur, for example, “displaced persons ‘mistrust Sudanese journalists and, more generally, those from the Arab world’ unless they are accompanied by trusted people.”³⁷ In addition to the above challenges in conflict areas is the constant threat of physical violence. Somalia continues to be the most dangerous location for journalists.

The heavy toll for the Somali press reads as follows: Eight dead, four injured, some 50 journalists in exile, and others holed up at home after abandoning their work in fear. To this toll must be added 53 journalists arrested while doing their job, either in southern Somalia, where the capital Mogadishu is sited, in semi-autonomous Puntland in the north or in the self-proclaimed state of Somaliland in the north-west.³⁸

While states with a sanguine attitude towards the media have created an environment for journalists and media organizations to build and or enhance their capacity as active voices in, and vessels for democratic discourses, in the public sphere, their brutal, intolerant and dictatorial counterparts have succeeded in eroding the capacity of media practitioners to champion democratic causes. This is due to the fact that the most accomplished journalists who are unwilling to compromise professionalism and commitment to vocation are either being lost through jail sentences, death or exile. These developments take a heavy toll on the ability of the profession to regenerate itself in ways that allow members to contribute meaningfully to the emergence, growth and sustainability of a plural, democratic polity.

As the internet becomes a powerful nexus for information dissemination, civic engagement, and contestations of state action and propaganda, a number of governments are beginning to monitor it and to curb expression in this virtual public sphere. Since 2006, the Ethiopian government has blocked access to websites and blogs that it considers critical of the regime, with the Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency instructing cybercafés to record names and addresses of customers so that they could be punished for any untoward behavior, including imprisonment. Similar requirements obtain in Tunisia. Zimbabwe has secured Chinese technology to enable it implement the provisions of the Interception of Communication Act, which authorizes state agencies to monitor telephone, fax, and e-mail messages. The Egyptian government, on its part, has increased online censorship, coming down very hard on bloggers who express critical views. In fact, in the summer of 2006, the government passed a law on Internet regulation that facilitates such clamp-downs under the pre-text of protecting national security. Several bloggers were arrested and incarcerated for varying periods, in 2007, for expressing their opinions.³⁹ State monitoring of the Internet for dissenting views is what led to the arrest, in March 2007, of Fatou Jaw Manneh, a US-based Gambian journalist, when she arrived in the country. She had published several articles on websites, including *AllGambain.net*, and

was prosecuted for an article, in October 2005, in which she accused President Yahya Jammeh of “tearing our beloved country to shreds” and describing the head of state as a “bundle of terror”. She was charged with “intention to commit sedition,” “publication of seditious words” and “publication of false news intended to create public fear and alarm” and faces three years in prison.⁴⁰

Governments and state officials employ not just the crude and brazen tactics referred to above to prevent the media from pursuing their roles of holding those officials accountable for their stewardship; they also deploy subtle means to intimidate media personnel and their organizations or to deprive the public of access to diverse political views. One such tactic is to starve media organizations that are critical of the government of advertising revenues, a very damaging tactic since such revenues constitute a significant part of operating funds for private print and electronic media. The use of this tactic is exemplified by the Kenyan government’s advice to public sector institutions, in April 2007, not to advertise in *The Standard* newspaper and *Kenyan Television Network*, both of which belong to the Standard Group. The e-mail message instructed the institutions to send their ads to media organizations that were favorably disposed to the government’s policies. The relationship between the government

and the Standard Group had been frosty since a publication by the *The Standard*, about a year earlier, suggesting that a Minister had had discussions with a group of Armenian hit-men to eliminate the son of former president Arap Moi.

Another tactic employed by some governments to block the public's access to opposing viewpoints is jamming broadcast signals. In fact, in February 2007, Zimbabwe's Deputy Minister of Information and Publicity, Bright Mutongo, acknowledged before Parliament that the government was jamming signals from *Studio 7*, a Washington DC station which broadcasts programs by Zimbabwean journalists in the United States that can be received in Zimbabwe on short and medium wave frequencies. In Cameroon, the government of Paul Biya simply limited access to the airwaves by not implementing a 1990 law allowing private broadcasting; waiting until 2000 to pass legislation to outline its implementation; and only granting licenses to the first four private broadcasters in 2007. Criminal or civil libel suits continue to be a strategy of choice to compel the media to acquiesce, self-censor or fold up under the weight of fines or imprisonment.

Watching the Watchdogs, Agenda Setters, and Gate-keepers

As we explore the relationship between the media and democratic governance, it is imperative that we focus the critical lens on the media as well. This is to ensure that the positive contributions discussed above are not undermined by the lack of credibility as a result of the unprofessional conduct on the part of some journalists and media organizations.⁴¹ As noted by Reporters Without Borders,

across the continent, chiefly in the French-speaking part, there are numerous scandal sheets, which feed on ordinary corruption, chasing spectacular headlines and "little envelopes." But the politicians, from Madagascar to Mauritania, from Guinea to Cameroun, via Cote d'Ivoire ad the Central African Republic, are the main beneficiaries, making use of badly or unpaid journalists to settle their scores with opponents through bogus "revelations".⁴²

The erosion of solidarity among media practitioners in upholding the fundamental right to free expression can be the single most damaging threat to the media's role as a forum for the exercise democratic citizenship and a catalyst for sustaining democratic institutions and practices. It is in this context that recent developments within Rwanda's inky fraternity are troubling. The Rwanda Media Ethics Commission, together with some media owners and journalists issued a statement on March 19, 2008 indicating their resolve to sue the privately-owned *Umoco* newspaper for publishing slanderous and defamatory articles against President Kagame in its March 12-27 edition.⁴³ They accused the paper of tarnishing the reputation of the president by likening him to Adolf Hitler and criticized it for offering outrageous options for the president to consider in the light of indictments brought against forty Rwandese Defence Forces officers by a Spanish court. The group suggested that, through the article, the paper was denying the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and that the story had caused panic among the populace. It, therefore, called on the High Council of the Press to withdraw the paper's accreditation and to ask the line ministry to ban it for a year.

The right of this group to caution against and condemn incendiary comments from journalists that could create socio-political chaos is appreciated and respected. What is disturbing is the fact that a group of media practitioners deems is fit to arrogate to themselves the right to be the president's unsolicited legal team, to pursue criminal charges against the editor, and to urge the authorities to ban the publication. Not only are they encouraging a government that has a record of clamping down on opposition to continue its hostility towards dissenting voices, but are undermining the principles of free expression that is the best protection the media have against state harassment.

As alluded to earlier, there are concerns about the extent to which the mass mediated public sphere in Africa has, largely, been constricted to the advantage of particular segments of society. These concerns, which echo what has been expressed in other places, challenge the Habermasian ideal of equally situated citizens engaging in deliberative politics.⁴⁴ Jacobs notes, in relation to mediated politics in South Africa, that “the new deliberation processes are restricted to policy professional and already empowered (meanly largely ‘white’ and neo-liberal) non-governmental, business, professional lobby groups as well as think tanks. ... ‘the irony is that the levels of involvement in political and civic issues were higher under the repressive machinery than under the new democratic dispensation.’”⁴⁵ Elite capture of the mass mediated public sphere might be portentous for democratic governance in a number of ways. First, it could mean a multiplicity of voices that produce different versions of the class interests of the most powerful groups. The ‘have nots’ might not have a place in the discourses that shape the direction of their countries and, therefore, might be unable to have their interest served in the new democratic dispensations that are taking hold on the continent. The signs of such exclusion are evident in the nature and language of the preponderant discourses in the mediascape, the locations of major media outlets, and the distributional contours for media output. The majority of the continent’s media are located in urban areas, use European languages, and have a reach that do not extend far beyond their areas of production. Rural dwellers who constitute the majority of the population in many countries, but do not attract the media because they do not have the economic power on which these media depend. By extension, their voices do not get articulated in the mediated public sphere. While the commitment of various media practitioners to democratic consolidation is not in doubt, the reality is that, for many media organizations, the economic imperatives behind their operations tend to trump their public service role.⁴⁶ As Kivikuru points out in the assessment of community radio in South Africa and Namibia, “it is easy to talk about community and grassroots orientation, but to implement such policies is difficult, especially when the basic task is to promote democracy and citizenship.”⁴⁷

Secondly, if these media outlets become means for spewing the views of their backers and owners, without the opportunity for engaging directly with contesting views, and thereby and cross-fertilizing them, Africans might end up with a cacophony of media silos and voices that do not produce a useful synthesis of well-distilled ideas that can move society forward. This situation veers very closely to a corroborating Gerstl-Pepin’s skepticism about the mediated public sphere in which she argues that “although the media can function as a form of the public sphere, ... they essentially operate as a “thin” public sphere ... in the sense that genuine dialogue about governance issues does not take place in most forms of media coverage. Instead, the media operate more as a billboard of opposing viewpoints rather than a forum for debates and analysis of issues.”⁴⁸

Another concern about elite capture stems from trends that show that they may become a tool for limiting democratic expression to the wealthy who might use it for their own parochial political interests rather than as true catalysts of a vibrant, accessible and open public sphere. For example,

some danger signs have emerged in Madagascar’s media transition. Money matters much more in politics now than it did before. Wealthy candidates, who can afford to purchase their own media outlets, become more competitive most quickly. Private media ownership appears to have reduced incentives for direct candidate debates, as candidates prefer to run propaganda wars from their own media outlets (Adriantsoa et al, 2005, p. 1955).

The results of such propaganda wars can be catastrophic if they are not controlled and conducted with circumspection. A case in point is the mayhem in the Democratic Republic of Congo that resulted from a

statement by Jean-Pierre Bemba on one of his radio station, after he lost the presidential election in 2006. He claimed that the top hierarchy of the army was embezzling 500 million Congolese francs a month from the army payroll. Over the next two days bloody clashes erupted in the streets of Kinshasa pitting the DR Congo Armed Forces (FARDC) against the personal guard of Senator Bemba. ...Repeated death threats forced numbers of staff on Jean-Pierre Bemba-owned media into hiding.”⁴⁹

In view of the foregoing concerns about elite and commercial capture, it is necessary that alternative media which champion the cause of the marginalized, and provide disinterested diverse perspectives on national and local issues are supported. In Madagascar, for example, “highly respected religious publications and broadcasts offer a valuable counterweight to the purely commercial private press. Unlike purely commercial stations, the religious media are actively striving to serve rural communities more fully. The national print media, though private, have likewise contributed to political debate, some with strongly partisan rhetoric, others counterbalancing the purely political press by contrasting candidate positions and providing content-focused political analysis.”⁵⁰

One of the challenges that the media have had to contend with is to find a balance between the public’s right to know and the need for political stability and national security. The dilemma imposed by the dialectics of responsible journalism and self-censorship is manifested in several cases where media personnel have toed the government’s line with respect to what the public needs to know or its right to free expression. It is important to note that the context in which these journalists operate needs to be taken into account when we make assessments of whether or not they are pandering to the government of the day. It is, thus, understandable that in the midst of Kenya 2007-2008 post-election violence media outlets were willing to follow instructions from the Ministry of Information to broadcast news items with a delay.

It is important, though, that these mechanisms are not used to deny the public access to relevant information because it might not carve a positive image for the one group or the other. Self-censorship has dire consequences for democratic accountability. In the context of Kenya’s post-election violence, for example, some analysts of the media scene have criticized journalists for not pursuing issues intensively and extensively enough because of the gnawing fear that they might undermine national security. Consequently, the truth about the reality that people were living was not adequately unraveled, thereby making it difficult to determine who the real winner of the presidential elections was and what the nature and extent of malfeasance was. These insights are necessary in order to assess the veracity of claims and counterclaims regarding the conduct of the elections; hold people accountable; protect the vulnerable, and ensure that there is no future replication of the triggers of the violence. According to one of the country’s most senior journalists,

the media failed It did not properly investigate what happened after the voting and he said this has haunted him ever since Journalists had not pushed to find out the truth after it was clear the results were rigged. {However}, so much was at stake that not seeking the truth was impermissible, he said.⁵¹

The failure of the media to verify, authenticate or challenge state officials’ rendition of reality might rob the public of the critical conversation need to develop appropriate policy interventions and correct erroneous impressions that can have dangerous consequences. Danso and Macdonald provide evidence of such failure and its consequences, in South Africa, when they assert that the print media was partly responsible for some of the worst examples of xenophobic rhetoric in the country by failing to check the veracity of government statements on immigration, arguing thus:

there is a self-reinforcing mechanism at play, with the Department of Home Affairs (as well as the police and defence forces) issuing anti-immigrant statements and statistics and the media uncritically reproducing them. This creates a feedback loop to bureaucrats and policy makers as to the legitimacy and “correctness” of what they are saying. When combined with the highly xenophobic attitudes of the population at large, this self-reinforcing mechanism serves to foreclose more progressive policy options and acts to stifle (and even shut down) more informed public debates about the issues.⁵²

The significance of this assessment is eerily brought home by attacks on, and killing of, immigrants in various parts of the country in May, 2008.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis shows that many media outlets and journalists in Africa are fulfilling their watchdog, agenda-setting, and gate-keeping roles commendably under trying circumstances. They are making tremendous contributions toward the building of democratic practices and institutions. It is also clear that the traditional media are being complemented significantly by the opportunities made possible by the Internet. As Tetley notes,

cyberspace has encouraged the development of a civic culture and an active citizenry that integrates the local and the global, and compels the state to be responsive to a public sphere that is external to it and over which it does not exercise complete, if any, sovereign control. This is not to suggest that domestic politics is driven by virtual politics, but just that it is inflected by it in some instances.⁵³

The above achievements, notwithstanding, the evidence also shows that the development of an active, diverse, and critical mediated public sphere faces tremendous obstacles which need to be removed if the continent is to make strides in creating a conducive environment for democratic expression and accountability which facilitate good governance.

One of the ways that African media can be supported to perform their critical function as facilitators of critical discourse in the public sphere is through solidarity among various stakeholders in civil society working together to demonstrate their commitment to a multi-vocal public sphere and standing up to support diversity in the media whenever that comes under attack. Such solidarity sends a message to even the most unyielding dictators the media practitioners are not just a fringe bunch of trouble makers whose views are not shared by society at large and that they cannot continue to pursue hostile policies toward the media without eroding their own political security. Mobilization in support of media freedom, through protests by journalists and media organizations, was effective in getting the Sudanese government to revoke the suspension of *Al-Sudani*, referred to above, after 48 hours. Such acts demonstrate, in the words of Dahlgren, not just ‘civic agency’ but also ‘civic competence’ which means that “for democracy to work, we must look beyond its institutionalized structures and dynamics. While these are essential, if they are not filled by real flesh-and-blood people with relevant values, virtues and competencies, democracy will become merely a hollow formalism.”⁵⁴

Obviously, the media are a crucial ingredient for democratic governance and its consolidation. They will, however, not be able to play this role without support from other key institutions of the state. These include the legislature, which should ensure that the media are not hamstrung by laws that are inimical to a vibrant and pluralistic public sphere and which degrade their ability to hold various actors accountable to the citizenry. Laws that support the cultivation and sustenance of such an environment

are necessary. The judiciary also needs to interpret laws in ways that are not dictated by loyalty to persons in government but to the cause of democracy, civil liberties, and political freedoms.

In spite of the difficulty of getting governments to pass Freedom of Information and Whistleblower legislation on the continent, civil society organizations, journalists, and the general public should continue advocating and lobbying for these. It is only through the opportunities presented by these laws that the media, and citizens in general, can accomplish their role of holding governments accountable and providing the public with information it deserves to know, without the onerous obstacles and threats to their lives and freedoms that they currently have to endure. A number of countries, such as Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya have come close to passing such laws, and further pressure is needed to get their governments to making them a reality.⁵⁵ It is in the interest of governments to pass these laws, because the transparency that comes with unfettered access to government information and the protections that comes with a Whistleblower Act helps to build trust in government which, in turn, helps to elicit the support of the citizenry for decisions and actions of state institutions. As Fard et al. point out, “public trust has a tremendous effect on the quality of public administration. Trust is one of the most valuable social capitals, and its decline will impose heavy expenditure on the political system.”⁵⁶

The media themselves have a role in sustaining their place as vessels for democratic expression, accountability, and democratic consolidation. Based on the discussion above, it is appropriate that we balance the enthusiasm surrounding the numerical pluralization of the media landscape in Africa with what Karppinen refers to as the ‘ethos of pluralization’, which requires “an understanding of the media structures and the public sphere in which the point is not to celebrate all multiplicity and heterogeneity but rather an effort to question the inclusiveness of current pluralist discourses and their understanding of economic and political power.”⁵⁷

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