Commentary: Negotiating Distant Influences: Globalization and Broadcasting Policy Reforms in Zambia and South Africa

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Globalization operates as a powerful buzzword in discussions of media reform policy in the region of southern Africa. Implied in these debates is an insistence that the forces of globalization exert an ineradicable external pressure on local national contexts. This sentiment is captured in Chris Arthur’s definition of globalization as that “inter-related complex of processes, industrial, economic, technological, cultural and cognitive, which have resulted in regional boundaries (whether of family, class, religion or nation) being rendered permeable to distant influences” (Arthur, 1998, p. 3). If one looks closely at southern Africa, it becomes evident that globalization has not had a uniform effect. This is apparent in the way such “distant influences” have played out on media policy reforms in South Africa and Zambia. As the discourse of globalization is not unique to southern Africa, this constitutes a case for some shared lesson-learning.

In recent theoretical debates about the effects of globalization on poorer countries, Held, among others, posits “three different theses on globalisation” (in Servaes & Lie, 2003, p. 8). Firstly, there is the “globalist” thesis, which understands globalization as an inevitable development that cannot be resisted or significantly influenced by human intervention, particularly through traditional political institutions, such as nation-states. Globalists can be divided into two camps: the neo-liberalist and the neo-Marxist. Neo-liberal optimists emphasize the benefits of new technologies, global communications, and increased cultural contacts and welcome the triumph of individual autonomy and the market principle over state power. Neo-Marxist pessimists stress the dominance of major economic and political interests and point mainly to the uneven consequences of globalization. The second thesis is put forth by “traditionalists” who argue that the significance of globalization has been exaggerated and contend that most economic and social activity is regional, rather than global. The traditionalist thesis underplays the effects of distant influences and attributes changes in policy reform to the local level, and it thus sees a significant role for nation-states in the policy process. Thirdly, the “transformationalist” thesis posits that globalization is a significant

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shift that affects local places, but it questions the inevitability of its impact. This position asserts that there is still significant scope for national, local, and other agents to act in terms of policy, and it identifies specific local conditions and histories that enable the policy reform process within this global context (Servaes & Lie, 2003). The globalist and traditionalist positions represent opposite sides of the same determinist coin. What these positions share is an understanding of globalization as having overdetermining causal effects on the local. The transformationalist view is less deterministic in its view of the process of media policy reform. It asserts that although globalization creates pressures, opportunities, and constraints, communication reforms are the result of domestic actors working within domestic political institutions (Horwitz, 2001).

My thesis, drawn from my knowledge and research of media broadcast policy in southern Africa, is aligned with the transformationalist view of globalization. The influence of “global capitalism and economic imperialism” (Herman & McChesney, 1997, p. 24) on national media policies must be viewed within the context of the checkered local histories of in-country media policy reform processes. Each country in the region of southern Africa has different historical and cultural baggage and hence different institutional structures that come into play in the complex negotiation of the “distant influences” occasioned by global capital. Indeed, I would argue that globalization is itself subject to a certain localization, which can be characterized as “a resistance, as the source of particularities and variety, and as the ground of meaning for individuals and communities” (Braman, 1996, p. 27).

While it is beyond the scope of this commentary to examine broadcasting policy reforms in all of the countries in the region, South Africa and Zambia offer two extreme cases, which allows for a clear comparison of the process of media policy reform as an actively negotiated response to local exigencies and global political and economic tendencies. While both countries are located in southern Africa, Zambia is ranked among the poorest countries of the world, with over 80% of the population living on one dollar a day. South Africa, which borders Zambia to the south, is a middle-income country with an average per-capita income of US$10,346. South Africa boasts a media system comparable with any in the First World; Zambia does not. South Africa became independent in 1994, while Zambia did so in 1964. It is important to emphasize these distinctions because it is all too easy to treat sub-Saharan Africa as one homogenous entity. Zambia’s and South Africa’s differing responses to globalization demonstrate the strong historical and cultural heterogeneity among countries in southern Africa.

The media policy reforms of Zambia and South Africa can be compared in four key areas often associated with globalization. First, they can be understood as responses to the liberalization and deregulation of media markets. “Liberalization,” here, refers to the opening up of the market, largely in anticipation of competition. “Deregulation” refers to the removal of state controls that may be seen to stifle the growth of business. Deregulation is not necessarily the absence of regulation; rather, it is the application of lighter regulatory rules. Second, instituting
these reforms has involved deciding whether to privatize or commercialize state-run broadcasting and, if so, how. “Privatization” refers to a situation in which the state ceases to own businesses and sells them off to private hands. “Commercialization” refers to a replacing of forms of regulation based on public interest and related standards with market standards that emphasize profit maximization. A commercial undertaking can be under state control. Third, the negotiation of media policy reform in these two countries has taken place within the context of an ideological commitment to global communitarianism. Finally, these reforms have had to take into account the integration of new technological convergences. These four analytic categories, all integral to media policy reform, serve as a prism through which to view globalization in light of local cultural and historical specificities.

Liberalization: Deregulation of the media landscape

The 1990s saw the unfolding of the process of liberalization across southern Africa, with its attendant deregulatory policy and legislative implications. At the time, Zambia was caught up in a political reform toward embracing liberal democracy. This reflected the wider global shift from authoritarian regimes to plural politics. In 1993 the new government, elected into office in 1991, passed the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (Licensing) Regulations to liberalize the broadcasting sector for private investment. This was “cautious deregulation,” however, as licences were mostly issued to “Christian” applicants. It was this “Christian determinism” that resulted in a rather skewed distribution of radio broadcasting licences, with the majority given to Christian groupings. The new government of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) had replaced the United National Independence Party (UNIP) regime. In embracing a cautious deregulation of the broadcasting market, the MMD wanted to be seen to be reformist, while at the same time remaining firmly in command of broadcasting.

Deregulation also attracted international media business interests, mainly from South Africa. MultiChoice Africa obtained a licence to establish subscription Digital Satellite Television (DStv). However, this was largely on government terms—while MultiChoice Africa holds 70% of the shares in the new company, the state broadcaster holds 30%. The state broadcaster is the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC), established in 1961 by the British Colonial Office to serve the interests of the settler community in what was then Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). The term “state broadcaster” is preferable to “public broadcaster” because it more accurately describes the status of the ZNBC as a ruling-party propaganda mouthpiece. Although the ZNBC is partially funded by licensing fees, it does not qualify as a “public broadcaster” because its programming does not adhere to the remit of public-service broadcasters, namely, (1) contributing to a democratic and/or pluralistic society; (2) contributing to a national culture and language; (3) providing high-quality programming; and (4) meeting high journalistic standards (Betzel & Ward, 2004).

The ZNBC also receives funding through advertising, sponsorships, and shares in MultiChoice Africa, making it a competitor to the commercial broad-
casters. The definition of what constitutes a “public broadcaster” in southern Africa is a contested issue, constantly in flux. It is for this reason that Fourie (2003) suggests that “public-service broadcasting” should be treated more as a genre than as an institution. In this way, even commercial broadcasters can aspire to the “genre” of “public-service broadcasting.” Based on a re-conceptualization of public-service broadcasting as a genre, I would argue that the ZNBC’s 30% share in MultiChoice Africa would not be such an issue if the ZNBC lived up to the public-service programming ethos. As it is, MultiChoice is subsidizing ruling-party propaganda.

South Africa’s implementation of a policy of liberalization has been more aggressive. Prior to its demise in 1994, the apartheid regime had transformed South Africa into a pariah state, largely disconnected from the global capital markets. After apartheid, the new South African broadcasting policymaking became underpinned by a “nationalist-reconstructionist” project and an “expansionist-capitalist” agenda (Banda, 2003, p. 190). The subsequent restructuring of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) must be looked at in terms of the national history within which it was encased. The SABC played a significant part in both constructing and supporting the governance structures of apartheid in South Africa. It supported the then government’s efforts to combat what were seen as the “revolutionary forces” ostensibly marshalled by the African National Congress (ANC) in exile (Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 2001, p. 124).

Broadcasting policy and legislation thus became a cultural site for ideologically deconstructing the apartheid regime and reconstructing a new national identity based on the principles of truth, reconciliation, solidarity, diversity, plurality, democracy, and development—all of which seem to define the “new” South Africa. The deregulation of the media landscape was an attempt at historical redress—reconfiguring the SABC into a public broadcaster to serve the “public interest” and “liberating” the airwaves from state control. Not surprisingly, the demise of apartheid and the liberalization of the media market resulted in the inflow of foreign direct investment into the South African media market (Tomaselli, 2002).

The movement of global capital and investment has not only been one-way—that is, into South Africa. There has also been an out-flow of media investment from South Africa. Arguably, this demonstrates that an African media system could extend its reach into the Western money markets, with Naspers-controlled MultiChoice International listed on the Dutch stock exchange as well as on the USA’s Nasdaq (Berger, 2001). It is for this reason that the South African broadcasting policy and regulatory model can be said to be “expansionist-capitalistic.”

Examining globalisation through the lens of liberalization illustrates the significance of agency and agents acting within local conditions. Zambia’s appropriation of the liberalization imperative was based on the political elite’s fear of the state’s loss of hegemony, while South Africa’s demonstrates a desire to adapt to change based on politics and trade.
Privatization and the commercialization of state media

Consider, for a moment, the issue of privatization and commercialization and media policy reform: while privatization does not allow for continued state ownership of businesses, such as the media, commercialization does.

Zambia avoided privatization as an option for capitalizing state broadcasting for reasons of political expediency. Privatizing the state broadcaster would entail loss of state control over the ZNBC. Instead, Zambia chose to commercialize some units of state broadcasting. For instance, a new commercial radio channel, Radio 4, was introduced in an attempt to raise advertising revenue. So-called “commercial rates” were introduced for television advertising, and they were extended to political advertisements. Given this example of commercialization, it can be argued that a highly commercialized media system, whether state-owned or not, can become an affront to democratic politics if not tempered with strong in-house editorial and other societal controls (McChesney, 1999).

South Africa followed a different policy path to wean broadcasting from state funding. This trajectory was evident in the Broadcasting Act of 1999. The so-called “corporatization” process saw the SABC “privatize” some public radio stations by selling them to private owners. The SABC was split up into a “public-service broadcaster” and a “commercial public-service broadcaster.” The latter would generate revenue to finance the public-service obligations of the former. In addition, the SABC became a liability company, with the state as the shareholder (Wigston, 2001). Some contend that the SABC’s content has become somewhat dependent on cheap entertainment programs from the U.S.A. (Berger, 2001). I would argue that such a “commercial imperative” may not be entirely avoided, in an environment where state resources are constrained as a result of competing demands. This shift in the definitional and structural strictures of Western public service is being subjected to a reinterpretation in South Africa, with the commercial imperative as a point of departure. The SABC’s privatization program also contributed to creating plurality between the SABC and the commercial radio stations around the country. This enabled the expanded communicative space in the country.

In Zambia, “commercialism” was more influential than privatization. In South Africa, privatization and commercialization—two aspects of globalization—were refracted to mirror the socio-political pluralism of the new South Africa.

Communitarianism

The next aspect of globalization to be highlighted is “communitarianization.” While the rhetoric and analysis of globalization above stresses the impacts of various market forces on and within the region, communitarian forms of globalization emphasize globalization’s utopian social potential. Communitarianization can be treated as an element of globalization, first because of the ideological connection of communitarianism to Marshall McLuhan’s notion of the global village, and second—and more significantly—because the popularity of communitarianism in Africa occurred at the height of the transnationalization of civil society in the 1990s. This allowed for the formation of a veritable social movement con-
nected to media policy reform, a movement that was to prove powerful in lobbying governments in Africa to realign their media, communication, and information policies within the paradigm of “development communication.” This was most important in community radio. The international broadcasting policy campaign of the World Association for Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), headquartered in Montréal, legitimated community radio broadcasting as an alternative medium distinct from state and commercial broadcasting in Africa. It was such transnational networks that carried forth the ideology and practice of communitarian communication (Banda, 2003).

In Zambia, the process of “communitarianization” has been subject to state resistance. An Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Act was passed in 2002 to respond to the global policy pressure to domesticate communitarian communication. It soon became clear that the state had been “pressured” to enact the law. The law required that an ad hoc appointments committee be set up by the Ministry of Information to suggest names of persons to constitute the IBA and the ZNBC governance boards. No sooner had this been done than the minister refused to take the names to Parliament for ratification, arguing that the state needed to have a stronger say in the selection process. Media-freedom activists then sued the state. A high-court judge ruled in their favour, ordering the state to present the names for parliamentary approval. The state has since appealed to the Supreme Court for a reinterpretation of the very law it enacted. Here we have an example of how the state could resist an initiative with global ramifications in an attempt to counter a movement in civil society attempting to advance a more international agenda.

For its part, South Africa domesticated community broadcasting within its Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Act, defining community broadcasting as a service that (i) is fully controlled by a non-profit entity and carried on for non-profit purposes; (ii) serves a particular community; (iii) encourages members of the community served by it or persons associated with or promoting the interests of such a community to participate in the selection and provision of programs to be broadcast in the course of such broadcasting service; and (iv) may be funded by donations, grants, sponsorships, advertising, or membership fees, or by any combination of the aforementioned.

The South African Broadcasting Act of 1999 was followed by the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) Act (South Africa, 2000, pp. 10-11). This re-invigorated the nationalist-reconstructionist ideology that sought to uplift hitherto marginalized groups—communitarian communication was historically and culturally appropriated to empower Black South Africans with ownership of media structures. The MDDA Act defines diversity as access to the widest range of sources of information and opinion, as well as equitable representation within the media in general. It defines media development as the development of the media environment and infrastructure so that historically disadvantaged communities and persons have access to the media as owners, managers, producers, and consumers of media.
The MDDA has specific tasks. These address problems associated with community broadcasting, such as inadequate funding and lack of skills. The MDDA has identified “the lack of resources to support the growth of community, non-profit and small commercial media” and “the legacy in media organisations of inadequate education, training and advancement of black South Africans” as being some of the major problems or challenges (South Africa, 2000, pp. 27-28).

In Zambia, communitarianism is viewed as a philosophy that might politically organize communities against the ruling elite. In South Africa, communitarianism is seen as a way of empowering historically disadvantaged groups. These differential appropriations of the same discourse on globalization show how globalization may be subject to the refractions of political histories and cultures.

**Technological convergence**

The final dimension of global-capital influence to consider is that of technological convergence. Southern Africa has seen previously discrete media forms and processes being drawn together and combined through digital technologies. This process has been occurring at the levels of production and distribution. Newspapers, music, and television, which once had very different physical production bases, can all now be substantively produced using the same networked multimedia computer. Previously discrete networks are absorbed into the single process of online networks—news, music, and entertainment can all be distributed through the Internet (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant & Kelly, 2003).

In Zambia, policy to regulate this sector has been slow. The final draft of the Zambian information and communication technology (ICT) policy was only signed off in 2005 (Zambia, 2005). Zambia’s broadcasting and telecommunications regulatory regimes have largely developed “un-converged.” The policy seeks to address this. In particular, it proposes the transforming of the existing regulatory structure into an autonomous “converged regulatory agency” (Zambia, 2005, p. 58). The policy goes further, suggesting that the IBA Act, which has not yet been effected, be repealed to facilitate the establishment of a converged regulatory authority (Zambia, 2005).

In South Africa, policy and legislative responses to technological convergence have been quicker and better co-ordinated. Before the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and the South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (SATRA) existed to oversee broadcasting and telecommunications services respectively. ICASA was set up to take advantage of the processes of technological convergence and bring the two hitherto separate domains—broadcasting and telecommunications—under one regulatory agency. The converged regulatory system has not been very successful in simplifying the processes of applying for telecommunications and broadcasting services, and there are now fresh consultations on the proposed Electronic Communications Bill (formerly the Convergence Bill). There is anecdotal evidence that suggests that ICASA has to prove that a monolithic regulatory system is a better option in Africa.
Conclusion
Broadcast policy reforms, as they have occurred in South Africa and Zambia, are the complex outcome of a dynamic process of negotiation between global “distant influences” and local politico-cultural realities. In many cases, internal political pressures have tended to be dominant in shaping the nature of broadcasting policy reforms. Far from being overriding, globalization is refracted and modified through the prism of historical and political contexts. Globalization is not a unilinear process, and neither are its results—it is almost always tamed by the historico-cultural specificities of the recipient country. As we have seen in the case of Zambia and South Africa, even countries in the same region may react in myriad, oftentimes unpredictable, ways to the tendencies associated with globalization—liberalization, deregulation, privatization, and commercialization—as well as in terms of communitarianism and technological convergence. By their very nature, “influences” occasioned by globalization are “distant” in cultural, geographical, and political terms.

References


