



Democracy, the media and developing countries



Julia Bicknell

Julia was a BBC journalist and producer for about 30 years, mainly on BBC World Service and World TV, but also on Radio 4 (producing 'Start the Week', 'Woman's Hour', 'Sunday' et al.) and the News Channel. After training as a coach, from 2005–12, she worked full-time in media development, mostly in Africa. Since 2012, she's led niche online news agency WorldWatch Monitor.org, which she co-founded.

The democratic form of government may not be perfect; it may be the best of the worst,¹ but it is a key condition for living in dignity and freedom. 'If', to quote Aristotle, 'liberty and equality, as is thought by some are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.'² Democracy is not just about 'one (wo)man, one vote': it's about a functional society where, as one enters a polling booth, one has partaken in a national conversation about the issues upon which one is basing one's voting decision.³

I believe the five 'non-negotiables' for democracy are fair rule of law, the protection of human rights, free and fair elections, independent media and participation by society in political processes.⁴ Time and again, in my travels and work around the world, I see at the root of 'persecution' that familiar trio of 'money, sex and power', which then get exacerbated by the fact that the victims find themselves trapped in entrenched systems of discrimination, in which they are powerless to access the fair rule of law. Also, just as importantly, they have no means of seeking redress apart from the fair rule of law, or even of ever having their voices heard. This is where, I believe, media development is an indispensable pre-requisite for democracy to operate because it can help connect, inform and empower people.

In this article, I want to draw on my experiences and highlight some examples from around the world where the media has had a positive impact and helped improve people's lives. Before doing so,

we will briefly reflect on the role of public service broadcasting.

Independent media

Whatever you think of the BBC, it does strive to broadcast for the 'public good' rather than for the 'good' of the person in charge of the state apparatus: I will never forget the two weeks I spent in Zimbabwe in 1987, when every first report on the nightly TV news was 'What did President Mugabe do today?' No matter how insignificant that might be - his visit to a brick factory was especially memorable.

Donning my ex-BBC producer's hat for a moment, a public service broadcaster tries to ensure that more than one viewpoint is heard on every issue. Granted, the BBC doesn't always get the best representatives to put each case, and sometimes even I am shocked at the partisan way in which some societal apparent 'givens' are reported. However, its founding Charter,⁵ which details some important principles, states: 'The BBC must be independent in all matters concerning the fulfilment of its Mission and the promotion of the Public Purposes, particularly as regards editorial and creative decisions.'

The BBC's Mission is 'To act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain.' And its Public Purposes are 'To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them: the BBC should provide duly accurate and impartial news, current affairs and factual programming to build

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1. Winston Churchill famously said 'Many forms of Government ... will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' *Hansard*, 11 November 1947.

2. Aristotle, *Politics* Book 4, 1291b 35.

3. www.giz.de/expertise/html/1940.html

4. <http://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/international-day-democracy-statement-secretary-general>

5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bbc-charter-and-framework-agreement>

6. Last year there was a 'national conversation' about domestic abuse, which, I'd argue, was propelled into the national consciousness by the Rob Titchener/Helen Aldridge storyline on *The Archers*.

7. A Skuse, M Gillespie & G Power, *Drama for Development: Cultural Translation and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2011).

8. W Macdowall, C Bonnell, M Davies, *Health Promotion Practice* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), p. 118.

people's understanding of all parts of the UK and of the wider world ... It should offer a range and depth of analysis and content not widely available from other UK news providers ... and championing freedom of expression, so that all audiences can engage fully with major local, regional, national, UK and global issues and participate in the democratic process, at all levels, as active and informed citizens ... To support learning for people of all ages ... To show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services ... To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all the UK's nations and regions ... To reflect the UK, its culture and values to the world.'

The media and democracy: Some case studies

1. Afghanistan

The longest running radio soap opera in the world, *The Archers*, started life as a government 'vehicle' to help increase agricultural productivity in the post-World War II years of food shortages and has provided a blueprint for similar programmes around the world.⁶

Twenty-five years ago, after the Soviets had left Afghanistan, but before the Taliban came to full power, the country was fought over by seven rival mujahedeen groups. I was living in Islamabad, and the Head of BBC Pashto and Dari Services knew that the best way to get life-saving information into the country – such as how to protect children from dying of diarrhoea, or in a landmine explosion – was to create a radio soap opera exploring such events.

So, in 1992–93, I went from UN agency to UN agency, convincing them that around 83 percent of Afghan households would hear such messages on the radio. They didn't need too much convincing, and *New Home, New Life* has become a blueprint for 'drama for development' around the world.

The drama (which continues to this day, now entirely produced by Afghans in Kabul) doesn't just tackle 'social' themes. 'Faced with a society undergoing radical transformation and political disintegration, the dramatists sought to write stories that might help to strengthen existing traditional political and legal institutions, especially as the civil war intensified. [Its] narratives attempt to address ... the political, legal and moral shifts created by war and social disintegration and guide [listeners] how to manage change and strengthen social bonds.'⁷

As Afghanistan is one of the three countries from which most refugees fled in 2016, the need for *New Home, New Life* to keep broadcasting is as urgent as it was in 1993.

2. Vietnam

Now, let me transport you to Vietnam in 1998. It had (and still has) a state broadcasting system, Voice of Vietnam, from whose studios Jane Fonda broadcast propaganda against the American

troops during the Vietnam War. In 1998, the defeated US had only just restored its relationship with its adversary and foreigners were starting to visit the South Asian 'tiger' economy.

I was sent by the BBC World Service Trust (Media Action's name until about 2011) to launch the country's first national radio phone-in – about

democracy is a key condition for living in dignity and freedom

health, for the nation's booming youth population. After decades of international isolation, Vietnam's government believed its youth were at risk from the more 'open' culture of neighbouring Thailand. There was just one problem, as I discovered on arrival: no one in Voice of Vietnam had the faintest concept what a 'phone-in' was, because they'd never heard one. The idea of 'ordinary' people expressing opinions over the airwaves was completely alien to the communist government, because the people might criticise the authorities 'on-air', and that would, inevitably, in the ruling party's mind, lead to chaos and anarchy in the streets.

Having realised the 'disconnect' between London and Hanoi,⁸ I spent three long, hard months convincing the Ministry of Information that to open the national airwaves to its young people's questions would not risk the country's stability. But to give the Vietnamese credit, the eventual popularity of *Window on Love* (as we called our phone-in) meant that it spawned, first, a phone-in for children, then for the Army, then (I think) women, then farmers, until many sectors of society had their own dedicated phone-in. I would like to argue that this enabling of a 'national conversation' helped to open up communist-run Vietnam as much as any IMF loan.

One of the most thrilling moments in the Hanoi studio for me was when a crackly phone call would come through from a rural corner of the country. Even though I could not understand Vietnamese, I could tell a 'provincial' accent. My Vietnamese colleagues were at first reluctant to put these calls on-air (I think they felt a bit embarrassed about the 'rustic' voices) but I convinced them it was important to hear all types and shades of opinion, and from everywhere, not just the big cities.

3. South Sudan

If we return to the BBC's Public Purposes, it's notable that it stresses, 'To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all the UK's nations and regions.' The inclusivity of this aspiration might not strike you as particularly unusual, but, having worked across African broadcast mass media, I can say that this is not a given.

I was in Sudan at the height of the Darfur crisis in the mid-2000s and was continually told that the voices of Darfuris were just not being heard in the country's mass media, meaning that issues of real significance were not being raised. There were also whole sections of the community that were 'invisible' in the media: I well remember that the group of journalists I was training admitting that they had never met anyone living with HIV/AIDS, and they were afraid to do so because they thought they might 'catch' the virus. Some overcame their fears when we introduced

a free and diverse media is a cornerstone of effective governance and democracy

someone living with HIV/AIDS into the training session: only one or two of them walked out.

I first arrived in Sudan in 2005 shortly after the Peace Agreement had been signed. In 2011 this led to the independence of the world's newest country, South Sudan. In 2006, I was in Juba for UNESCO, teaching journalists 'How to build credible programming which is accurate, impartial, free from bias, and yet which allows expression of the voices of all communities and groups in Southern Sudan'. A second goal was 'How to make programming which is able to discuss in a clear, open way, while avoiding inflammatory comment, issues which arise from differences in religion, tribal identity, language, ethnicity, gender and age'.

The desperate need for that training became all too apparent when South Sudan disintegrated into civil war after its President sacked his deputy, accusing him of plotting a coup. The two men came from different tribes and the new country quickly fractured along centuries' old ethnic and linguistic lines.

4. Kenya

Tribal fault-lines are a reality in many African nations. In 2007, Kenya disintegrated into several days of post-election bloodshed when Kikuyu and Luo clashed over the result. Half-a-million people were displaced. The international community was determined to prevent a re-run in the 2013 elections.⁹ Whilst working for BBC Media Action, with Department for International Development Funding, I drew up on a blank piece of paper a plan and budget for a *Question Time* style show which, every week, would travel to a different part of Kenya. *Sema Kenya* (Kenya speaks) came to full fruition after I'd moved on:¹⁰ but did I do more for the Church in Kenya by helping to ensure the 2013 election passed off without violence than all my articles about the Garissa University and other such attacks since summer 2012, when I co-launched our current niche online news agency World Watch Monitor?

5. Nigeria

I have the same question about Nigeria. I spent much of 2009–11 there, helping to manage a programme funded by USAID called MESSAGE (Media Support For Strengthening Advocacy, Good Governance And Empowerment). This involved training 24 radio stations across the country to produce more participatory programming, enabling the public, via their local media, to hold officials more accountable.

Nigeria has great difficulty ensuring accountability, partly because there are low levels of public involvement in the political process. Many media houses are owned or controlled by politicians or political parties. When elections come, journalists are allocated to follow a particular party but, unlike in the UK, they can be 'rewarded' with a brown envelope,¹¹ depending on how much coverage they manage to get for that party!

It's against this backdrop that I've been reporting on discrimination against the Church in the country's Middle Belt, right on the fault line of Christianity and Islam. What I hear of institutional and systemic exclusion, sadly, doesn't surprise me because of what I've already seen of how the mass media operate there. Recently I was in Brussels, at the European Parliament, hearing how local grievances are just not being heard by the state and federal governments, and how the Western media are not paying any attention at all.

Conclusion

It's true: anyone who's ever sat in a global newsroom, as I have, can see how the news agenda is skewed by the North American domination of broadcast satellite technology.

However, I still believe that a free and diverse media rooted in a strong culture of independent journalism is a cornerstone of effective governance and democracy. As we're seeing now, also in the Western world, it is also sometimes polarised and partisan, reinforcing prejudice and fuelling divisions, failing to empower people or improve accountability because it operates under strong state or other factional influence, or even exercises self-censorship.

But in helping to strengthen local accountability, and improved political and social inclusion in countries like Vietnam, Nigeria, Sudan and Kenya, I'd like to think I've contributed to poverty reduction there. And in turn, I believe that that has helped to create more equal societies where everyone, including religious minorities, can have a voice and human dignity. While drawing attention to the global Church under pressure is my current focus, I'm convinced that media development can offer them just as much.

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9. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/briefings/africa/kenya/kenya-election-research-briefing>

10. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmmediaaction/entries/15796706-e36c-44dc-9701-447bcf60f6bc>

11. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmmediaaction/entries/a859f106-26c1-4b16-be30-f175106272f3>