

## The State of the Media in Southern Africa 2000: Botswana

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### Introduction

The main development in Botswana in 2000 was in the area of broadcasting. The press, of course, continued to play an active role in the promotion of civil society and democracy. MISA Botswana monitored and reported accordingly on media related issues, and in November there was a sub-regional workshop on *Cartoon Journalism and Democratisation in Southern Africa*, at the University of Botswana. As the report shows, government-media relations are not, comparatively speaking, characterised by hostility. But there is no room for complacency.

### State Radio

The state-owned Radio Botswana (RB) has dominated the media scene since independence. The government and politicians have traditionally depended heavily on RB to reach the population. A state-owned government controlled paper - *Daily News*, distributed free of charge, has been in partnership with RB in the service of the government and the public since independence, even if critics are of the opinion that as state-run media, the two are yet to prove that they are indeed pluralistic and public service-oriented in mission. In other parts of Africa where the state-owned media have been appropriated in similar ways by the government and its auxiliaries, the result has not always been democracy.

The decision by Radio Botswana to restructure in 1992 by breaking itself up into a public channel (RB1) and a semi commercial channel (RB2), was partly an effort to resist the popularity of foreign (especially South African) stations among its traditional Botswana audiences. Radio Botswana also embarked on an exercise of setting up FM transmission facilities in its major urban areas, to improve broadcast quality and retain its thirsting and youthful audience. Today it boasts 18 FM stations with a range of 100 watts to 5 kilowatts, although it continues to broadcast on MW and SW for the

attention of audiences in rural areas. This implies that the transmission facilities and infrastructure are there to make Radio Botswana an excellent tool of good governance and participatory democracy. However, much remains to be done in terms of content and accessibility in order that Radio Botswana may truly reflect the plurality and diversity of voices in Botswana, without necessarily posing a danger to national consensus and collective ideals. For Radio Botswana to enhance its contribution to democracy, it must prove in content and quality of its programmes and services, that it is more than simply a mouthpiece of the government and ruling party or of some dominant interest groups.

### **Private Radio and Television**

Quite recently, in May 1999, the government decided to liberalise radio broadcasting after 33 years of state monopoly. A commendable move in a continent where many governments are still vacillating about liberalising the airwaves, afraid to lose grip on broadcasting which they perceive as too dangerous to be left unattended. *Yarona FM* was the first station to be granted a licence to broadcast within a radius of 50 km of Gaborone, the capital city. This station is a joint enterprise between Copacabana Pty Ltd (a consortium of local entrepreneurs), which owns 51 per cent of the shares, and South Africa's Union Alliance Media, which owns the rest. It targets the young principally, and is rapidly succeeding in building a constituency amongst them. But the educational and informational quality and relevance of its programme content remains a matter of debate. A second licence was granted to *Gabz FM* of Thari Investments, also a joint venture between Botswana and a South African company, Makana Media and Communications

These new stations are competing with RB2 for advertising revenue from local businesses, and for listener-ship, especially among the young. They offer a regular menu of music and other forms of entertainment, interspaced with local and foreign news. The giant presence of neighbouring South Africa is felt both in the entertainment and news programmes, and some observers are of the opinion that local content of public service programmes is quite low, the license obligation and popularity of these stations notwithstanding.

Just like Radio Botswana should be made to grasp the need of reflecting the plurality and diversity of perspectives in society, so too must the private broadcasters understand that promoting participatory democracy does not imply an uncritical endorsement of every critic of the government and state, or of everyone who swears in the name of the opposition, civil society and/or the masses. They must be sophisticated enough to realise that not every government policy, action or official is

necessarily to be criticised *because it is government*, just as not everything opposition is necessarily to be endorsed *for being opposition*.

There are three private television networks in Botswana namely, Gaborone Broadcasting Company (GBC), M-Net, and Multi-Choice (a subscriber management company whose Digital Satellite Television – DSTV – offers over 23 satellite television channels and 48 audio channels). The latter two operate from South Africa, and specialise in routinised, standardised or McDonaldised international sports, entertainment and information, which they serve to every subscriber on the African continent, regardless of region, nationality or cultural preferences. GBC is a closed-circuit service established in Gaborone in 1988. Although entertainment programmes dominate, GBC also presents educational material, and envisages production of local educational programmes in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. Slots have also been made available to the police and religious groups. Local news broadcasts are in Setswana and English, in consonance with a desire to reach the broadest viewership possible (cf. Sechele 2000:93).

### **Botswana Television**

It was with difficulty that Botswana Television (BTV) effectively went on air in July 2000. And when the test transmissions eventually started around mid May, the *Mmegi Monitor* was not impressed. "We want a good TV service not info-Dept", he wrote, stressing that: "It would be a pity indeed if so much public money were to be spent on the TV project only for it to end up as just another part of the government's information service - informing the nation uncritically about the government's various activities, and especially about the president and his ministers' speeches and other engagements" (*Mmegi Monitor*, 23-29 May, 2000, p.12).

On local political content, some politicians believe that BTV could only play a genuine public service role if privatised. Okavango MP, Joseph Kavindama argues, that: "State control as is the case now, does not enable reporters to make fair decisions. Even against their better judgment, reporters are compelled to be biased in favour of the government because anything else would threaten their jobs." Others feel BTV should support government policy, and broadcasters must be called to order if they do something that is not in line with government policies (*The Botswana Guardian*, 1/12/2000, p.5 & 17). In this connection, BTV news presenter, Reginald Richardson was reprimanded by the Information and Broadcasting Director Andrew Sesinyi, for daring to challenge politicians and national leaders to follow his example by disclosing their HIV status in public. In "a strongly worded memorandum" Mr

Sesinyi cautioned state broadcasters against using “the power of the media to coerce individuals of any position in the society into publicly pronouncing their HIV status” (cf. *The Botswana Guardian* 8/12/2000p.1&18; *Mmegi*, 15/12/2000, p.19; *Mmegi*, 12/01/2001,p.7). In general, opinion on state involvement in broadcasting is divided among politicians, media practitioners and the wider public.

### **Private Print Media**

Also active on the stage of democracy in Botswana is the private press. Five weeklies - *Mmegi*, *The Botswana Guardian*, *The Botswana Gazette*, *Midweek Sun* and *The Voice* appeared in the 1980s and 1990s to compete with the state media for audiences. The latest additions to the list include *The Sunday Tribune* and the *Mmegi Monitor*. The latter’s maiden edition was published on February 29, 2000, promising a weekly Tuesday menu of "human interest news and lighthearted stories ... [with] an extended lifestyle/leisure section and sports" that could be shared by all family members regardless of age, gender, level of education or religion (cf. *Mmegi*, February 25, 2000, p.3; *Daily News*, February 24, 2000, p.2).

This private press in Botswana has been thought of as offering a noteworthy exception, notwithstanding its observed lack of alertness, up-to-date-ness, reliability, and fine performance in public policy debate, interpretation and analysis. The press enjoys a degree of tolerance from the government that is rare in Southern Africa, and has earned credibility for its critical and investigative journalism over the years. This does not imply the absence of legislation and practices by the government aimed at curbing press freedom. The Botswana chapter of the Media Institute for Southern Africa (MISA) recently published a 62-page inventory of media unfriendly laws and practices in the country (cf. Balule & Maripe 2000). All it says is that the Botswana state is relatively more tolerant to the press than are its counterparts in SADC. Compared with fellow SADC countries such as Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, and even South Africa, fewer alerts on infringement of press freedom have been issued by MISA on Botswana for the year 2000.

The press on its part is not complacent. It has continued to table issues of governance and democracy in Botswana, sometimes embarrassing the government or government officials. Instances are many, but a couple suffice to illustrate the active involvement of the press as a fourth estate, sometimes acting the opposition where opposition parties seem wanting. When Vice President Khama was given a year's sabbatical leave from active politics by President Mogae following the 1999 general elections which he had helped the president and BDP win, the press was vehement in questioning the

decision, and some, like *The Botswana Guardian* (January 7, pp.1 &4-5) insinuated that the president was playing second fiddle to his vice-president. It published a front paged picture of both men in which the vice-president was captured as being very much taller and imposing than the bowing and obliging president, with the caption: "The Shrinking President: Mogae's blunders are threatening to end him, and this time his friends are deserting him in droves. Hardly six months after his resounding victory at the General Elections, the president has lost his moral leverage to demand sacrifices and honesty from Batswana. *The Guardian* presents a portrait of the president's diminishing silhouette". This depiction provoked outrage in the corridors of power, as well as public debate on journalism ethnics and professionalism. The chairman of *The Botswana Guardian*, William Jones, dissociated himself entirely from the article with the following disclaimer: "It is my opinion that it was unnecessarily offensive and disrespectful to the Head of State and damaging to the internationally recognised good image of Botswana. I further believe that the parameters of editorial freedom were exceeded by virtue of not being exercised responsibly" (*The Botswana Guardian*, January 21, 2000, p.4). In his defence, the editor, Outsa Mokone replied:

It is very unfortunate that phrases such as "disrespectful of the Head of State" and "damaging to the internationally recognised good image of Botswana" are used as a blunt club to beat us into collaborating with government to suppress information, and to numb all rational and forthright debate on a series of President Mogae's blunders.

Botswana is slowly being afflicted by the battered wife syndrome, each time we are short-changed by our leadership, we try to make excuses for them, for fear of appearing disrespectful, while the country degenerates into a wasteland.

Apologists of the status quo do not dispute the facts of the story, but rather oppose the publication of those facts and the manner in which they have been presented. [...]

I would be very irresponsible to try and play down the gravity of the situation and lull the president into a false sense of security, because sooner or later, he is going to have to deal with it. The future of the country depends on how effectively the President deals with this situation. We cannot afford to sacrifice Botswana on the altar of being respectful to the powers that be.

Lest we forget, the media in Botswana is the last line of defence against excesses committed by the government, NGOs and the business community. Botswana, while not a one party state, is a one party dominant state. The political opposition is fragmented and weak. The parliamentary watchdog role has been eroded by the overwhelming majority of ruling Botswana Democratic Party members of parliament in the House, the civil society is small and still developing and this places more of the watchdog role on the media, than would generally be the case in societies with more developed democratic institutions. [...] (*The Botswana Guardian*, January 21, 2000, p.4).

What is noteworthy here is the fact that although the article "touched a raw nerve in the government enclave, and divided opinion of the newspaper management and editorial", the paper in question was not banned, nor was the editor fired or sanctioned. Elsewhere in Africa, sanctions would certainly have included banning the paper and charging the editor with holding the president in contempt. *The Botswana Guardian* has remained at the forefront of provocative publications, ranging from reasons why Ian Khama was not fit to be president and could not be trusted as such (see December 10, 1999 issue), to a recent *Kgotla* meeting between an uncompromising President and bulldozer-threatened squatters in Mogoditshane. The paper accused the president and his government of displaying a "casual approach to poverty eradication", and criticised him for claiming that Botswana's poverty was overstated (cf. *The Botswana Guardian*, 20/10/2000, p.1&6). The paper was also at the forefront of dramatic reports on the resurgence of tribalism and overt tensions among the constituent ethnic groups of (cf. *The Botswana Guardian*, October 6, 2000, p.1).

In July the *Mmegi Monitor* (11-17 July 2000, p.2&3) published an open letter by a "Concerned Mbotswana Citizen" accusing the "Makalaka" of being from Zimbabwe, of using their tribalism to monopolise economic opportunities and public service jobs, and of being hungry for power over the "real Botswana". While this letter points to evidence of cracks on the national consensus that has kept Botswana in one piece for 34 years, *Mmegi Monitor's* publication of it was criticised in certain circles as disgusting. The Balopi Commission on the constitution has revealed further evidence that ethnicity in Botswana which has been dormant most of the time, seems to be active all of a sudden. There appears to be rumblings in the interior of the hitherto consensual Botswana, rumblings that need addressing. How successful this is done would depend very much on what role the media decide or are made to play in the process. The future of good governance and participatory democracy in Botswana may well depend on how the issue of belonging and entitlements for various individuals, ethnic groups

and social strata is articulated and/or resolved. And this includes the entitlements of youth as a social group in its own right. On Friday 20th October 2000, students of the University of Botswana went on strike asking for a 60 per cent rise in allowances. While the press condemned the force and brutality of the police intervention in the strike, some of the papers were quite critical of the students for making irresponsible demands on the state and government, and of being misguided and disappointing. In an editorial on the issue, the *Mmegi* (see *Mmegi*, 27/10/2000, p.20) demonstrated that, as a paper, it has not adopted a frozen position to endorse, uncritically, anything that seems to challenge the government and state. Good governance requires responsibility and commitment from the government and from every other individual and group in the society, and the media's role ought to be one of balancing the various forces, interests and aspirations in play. Students or any other group are just as liable to endanger democracy, as is the government.

The fact that the press in Botswana has had more space than the press in many other states in Africa to play a positive role in the empowerment of civil society and the promotion of democracy, does not imply that it has all been a bed of roses. To discourage journalists from scrutinising the ruling elite and their activities, news concerning the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) tends to be tied to state security, and the media may be accused of undermining national security by publishing 'sensitive' information (Good 1999:52-53). However, journalists do not always appear that discouraged. The Botswana *Guardian* for example, was not discouraged from the Segametsi Mogomosti ritual murder by the jailing of its reporter. In a recent edition (October 20, 2000, p.1, 4&7), the paper expressed concern over the fact that six years after the murder, "police investigations have not turned up evidence against anyone", and "it is almost certain that case will be closed", the tribulations of the victim's parents and relatives notwithstanding.

### **The Internet**

Another window of opportunity for good governance and democracy in Botswana, one that could empower ordinary citizens through networks that bypass both the government and exclusionist conventional media, is the Internet. Working hand in hand with the *Kgotla* and the more amenable alternative media, the Internet could enshrine participatory democracy and contribute significantly to curbing the threat posed by HIV/AIDS to the edification of democracy and citizen empowerment in Botswana. With one of the best telecommunications networks on the continent, and with an availability of 7 telephones for every 100 people in the population, Botswana is among the first seven countries in Africa in terms of Internet connectivity (cf. Eytayo and Molefe (2000).

Although current costs imply that the Internet may not be adequately affordable to most ordinary Batswana, there is optimism that connectivity will keep rising, and in the not so distant future, most Batswana will become part of the information superhighway in one way or another.

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