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Author

Ssali, Ndugu Mike

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THE UGANDA PRESS: A COMMENTARY

Ndugu Mike Ssali

Uganda's newspaper industry started slowly early this century and expanded rather rapidly in the 1960s, but by the end of Idi Amin's rule in 1979, only a few of the many newspapers established over a period of more than 80 years still existed. The Anglican missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) were the first publishers to start a newspaper around 1897. It was a mimeographed quarterly edited by Rev. A. W. Crabtree. Nevertheless, information about this mimeograph is so sketchy that it is difficult even to establish its name. This, probably, is why most observers do not mention it and mistakenly regard *Mengo Notes*, established in May, 1900, as Uganda's first newspaper. *Mengo Notes* was an English language newspaper also belonging to the C.M.S. It was printed at the C.M.S. Uganda Industrial Mission Press at Mengo near Kampala, Uganda's capital city.

The C.M.S. had two main objectives in starting the tabloid. First, it was to be the medium through which missionaries in Uganda and those abroad on leave would keep each other informed about their work in the Protectorate. Second, it would focus on church news and often report on government policies which might have an impact on missionary endeavors.

In addition, in 1907, the Anglican Missionaries started a local Luganda language newspaper, *Ebifa mu Buganda*, which became *Ebifa mu Uganda* in March 1934. It informed luganda readers about Church activities.

The colonial missionaries realized early the importance of this medium and its potential for propagating their work in Uganda. The Roman Catholics also entered the newspaper industry. Unlike the arrogant Anglicans, however, they started off with *Munno*, publishing it in Luganda. *Munno* belonged to the White Fathers who established it in

1911. Before President Amin banned it in 1976, it was perhaps the most influential and the most popular indigenous language newspaper. It should be noted that following the fall of the Amin regime in 1979 *Munno* was once again in print and it continues to thrive.

At about the same time that *Munno* was established, Uganda's first private commercially owned newspaper was started. The *Uganda Herald* was founded by a Mr. Borup of the Uganda Company. The company was established in 1904 to take over the work that had been carried out by the C.M.S. Uganda Industrial Mission in building, brick making, carpentry, printing and book-binding. The *Uganda Herald* commanded higher standards than those of other Ugandan newspapers. Until the mid-1950s, it was reportedly the most widely read and most influential newspaper in the Protectorate.

Its clientele was mainly European and a few Asian and African educated elite. The only other Ugandan English language rival, *Mengo Notes* was more interested in church news, and by this time there was a sizable English speaking community in private industry and government interested more in the social and political dynamics of the Protectorate than the religious matters. For nearly half a century, *Uganda Herald* was the major newspaper in Uganda. As soon as *Uganda Argus* started in 1955 and became a formidable competitor, *Uganda Herald* ceased publication.

From the mid-1950s to early 1960s, there were several weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies, and dailies sponsored by the colonial government, emerging and later emergent nationalist political parties and other institutions. But by late 1960s, the number had declined greatly due to government interference. In the 1970s under the Amin regime the situation worsened.

However, it should be noted that today Uganda has four dailies, several bi-weeklies, a number of weeklies, and some periodicals. It may also be interesting to note that all these newspapers, periodicals and magazines are indigenously owned and edited.

The Role of the Press

Perhaps not to detract from the problem at hand, this paper attempts to analyse and suggest ways of improving the standards of Uganda's Newspapers. Finally, it will also attempt to discuss how the press can be an agent of positive social change in Uganda.

Traditionally, the press is supposed to inform, educate and, in some cases, persuade the audience. In Uganda, the role of the press appears to be taken for granted. Perhaps because it has remained elitist

society is to serve development purposes. To that end, reporters must strive to educate the people, to enable ordinary people in the villages understand and define problems and to help serve them within the framework of self-reliance.

When information is used in this manner, it will help to change the negative lifestyle of the people, showing them the various constraints to development. Such information will have as its basis, the need to improve the people's standard of living.

The Public has a Right to Know

Indeed, the first responsibility of the press is to provide information to keep the public up to date with news. In every society the people have a right to know how they are being governed. Nevertheless, for the last two decades, Ugandans were denied this inalienable right by their rulers. It is hoped that the Museveni administration will guarantee the right of the people to know how they are governed. Ideally every citizen must have a share in the government or society of which he is a member. In this regard the citizen has the right to have the basic information to enable him to make up his mind. The role of the press is to help build up and keep informed a vital public opinion. This democratic function of the press should help develop an active partnership between the government and the governed. In this way, the press serves as a medium between the governed and the government. It therefore, constitutes itself into the channel through which the country's activities, problems and progress are made known to the people at home and to the outside world.

By performing its functions well, the Uganda press could very well act as a public conscience. In that way, it would represent the eyes and the ears of the community. In this respect, the press has to try to present the basic information to the people to each member of the public to enable him to become a participant in the democratic process. In this delicate task, the press has to tread cautiously, in its determination to dish out the truth.

Indeed, newspapers should not hesitate to choose between what is wrong and what is right. They should take a stand and be prepared to firmly stick to it. In situations where national security is at stake, however, the press must be sensitive to take the cue from the government. They should know that one of their greatest obligations is to expose abuses and check them wherever they may be. This includes state corruption and individuals engaged in contraband. As long as they are sure about their information, they should criticize where criticism

needed even though this may be unpopular or distasteful to certain interest groups because newspaper editorials and news columns cannot please everybody.

It should be noted that in criticizing and advocating reforms, newspapers invariably contribute to social and political development. If they criticize irresponsibly, however, this should be regarded as a disservice to the country.

Positive journalism dictates that the press function as a conscience of the nation. The press should not confine itself to disseminating knowledge and wisdom based on opinions; it should foster the proper digestion of information through interpretation and explanation of facts.

Press and Politics

In a way, the reporter and the politician may be allies. They may pursue common goals. However, what is wrong, is when a reporter writes a provocative story on a politician. It may be biased and inaccurate. It may put his reputation in doubt. These are points for concern and most astute reporters know just how to avoid them, although the temptation to step on others' toes is always apparent.

Politics is often a very subtle terrain for reporters. At the same time, it is a subject that attracts the attention of every serious reporter the world over. But many reporters have also learnt through experience that purely political reportage is no longer important. In Uganda, for example, there is a saying that politics seems to have lost meaning in the eyes of the masses. All newspapers must make a balance in their general reportage of events. In a developing country like Uganda, the balance must be measured in favor of reconstructing the economy, not political activities.

Perhaps what Ugandans need now is not a purely political press as such, but one which can lift itself out of the straight jacket of politics into the whole broad field of human endeavor. Whereas, for example, there is apparent evidence that alcoholism exists in Uganda and has the effects of undermining the level of national economic productivity, Uganda papers do not give it enough coverage. The criticism is simply that a politically oriented press is necessarily narrow minded, one sided and likely to serve only its own aims, rather than the overall ones of its community. If a newspaper is one whose great passion is politicking, it is not likely to deserve the respect and confidence of all its readers, since most of them may have different political views. A purely politically partisan paper sets sensitive readers on guard and is very unlikely to

contribute towards acceptable solutions facing mankind.

This is to say that newspapers should not get out of politics altogether. Rather, the suggestion is that newspapers should not make politics the basis of their existence. They should not only report political news; they should interpret it, and whenever possible, explain to the citizens the issues at stake as objectively as possible. What is most important is the question of objectivity and truth which renders the handling of a heavy dose of politics everyday in newspapers difficult.

The press should minimize parochial political issues whose logical consequences might result in dividing the people and hence undermine government efforts to bring about national unity. Given the present socio-economic difficulties in Uganda, one hopes that the Ugandan press can transcend its ideological, ethnic and religious differences and focus on issues that reflect national unity. While patriotic press can be helpful in the mobilization of human and material resources needed for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of economic and social infrastructure, a parochial and divisive press can only hinder. Thus, the press must fulfill its obligations by explaining national policies and educating the masses. In serving the people, it strives towards high standards of public service consistent with the norms of good journalism.

Press Standards

The proper execution of the news function of the press requires serious and sincere enterprise without which the accusations of inefficiency and falsehood, often waged against newspapers, would continue to be made. Society associates the press with a high degree of responsibility and the press must demonstrate skill, knowledge and a concern for the welfare of the state and its national institutions deserve the confidence bestowed upon it. It would be useless to talk about freedom of the press without referring to press standards.

To win their way into the hearts of the public, newspapers should try to come up with better news contents. They should attempt to be more essential, more interesting and more compelling. Newspapers should report on the impact of government action and progress within the economic, social and cultural changes. In order to be trusted, which should be in the tradition of the profession, the press must report facts and provide commentary. Moreover, it is essential for the press to be responsive to the public and strive to develop their full potential while at the same time contributing effectively to national

development.

The enforcement of these principles would, in Uganda as elsewhere, require trained and skilled manpower, an attractive format, adequate space for news and comments, and sound financial and business management. Infact, there are numerous ways and standards by which a newspaper can judge its performance and be judged by other people and their government. The press must recognize that the business of the government is to govern and that of the press is to report.

Ugandan newspapers, magazines and other journals must, because of the nature of their public tasks, and the magnitude of the power they wield, reassure the public by making a clear statement of their obligations. They must codify their ethics and practices to ensure that high editorial standards are maintained. As the guardians of civil liberties, as reporters, teachers and interpreters of truth in society, they must submit themselves to clearly defined principles to which their commitment would be complete and total. They must pledge that they will avoid certain pitfalls in order to gain public confidence. The adoption of press codes of ethics has been the inevitable outcome of the search for public confidence in the press. The absence of the codes would be detrimental to the journalism profession. Reporters all over the world seem to realize the danger to which the profession would be exposed without state obligations regarding the common good of society. They must regulate their relationship with the public before the government steps in to regulate it for them.

Code of Ethics

The best protection against the infringement of press freedom is the observance of a professional code of sufficiently high standard, competence and self discipline of the press. This is particularly so in a situation where the government of the day is not an authoritarian one. Such principles will give the press dignity and authority and gain for it the respect of state authorities, while procuring for it the confidence of the public. But since it is clear that not all controlling influences would automatically result in putting the press on its best behavior, the people would have to be constantly on the look out, always subjecting the press to periodic evaluation.

However, since the press would gain much of its reputation as a result of its participation in Uganda's political life, and since it is conceivable that a few top elites could grab the press for political ends inconsistent with societal responsibilities which have been assigned to

it, the watchdogs of the democratic process would have to be watched. Ugandan intellectuals and people in professions, would be called upon to this task. And so, with the removal of the external threat, the developing Ugandan press would have no fear of suppression. However, until that day comes, the fear will remain and nothing could be worse for any society than a frightened press.

How can this fear be prevented? The invaluable service of the press in the Ugandan society must be understood. The role of information in a developing nation must be appreciated in society as well as in the higher circles of national leadership. As an educator of its readers, the press would mobilize its forces to teach the virtues of freedom of expression among its readership. Readers have the right to all information, and it is up to them to demand why such information is not forthcoming. It is often the case that the public takes the news media for granted. And while the public tends to accept the news media as a providential right, at the same time, many news clients are disposed to criticize the news practices of the press. This is the way it should be. Conscientious news readers must make an effort to detect the mistakes made by newspapers.

Newspapers are intended to provide their readers with a complete, accurate and balanced account of world events. They provide so much news that the public invariably takes their existence for granted, not caring to find out what they mean to them and their community. Ironically the papers which are so often criticized for inefficiencies and false reports, are the same papers from which world events are expected.

Without the availability of adequate information, even the country's leaders could find themselves in some embarrassing situations. There is a true story about the president of an African country who went to a cocktail party one evening and got into conversation with a foreign ambassador. During the conversation, the ambassador commented:

Isn't it a terrible thing about Darg Hammar-skjoeld? The President replied, "Oh? What do you mean? I think he is doing a good job at the United Nations." The ambassador looked startled and answered, "But surely you have had the news?" "What news?" said the president rather angrily "Hammar-skjoeld was killed in an air crash this morning," the ambassador told him.

Because of the poor mass media in the country, the president did not know about the death of the Secretary General of the United Nations. That is the sort of thing that can happen if a country does not

have a good press.

Finally, if the standards discussed in this paper are to be achieved by the press, qualified reporters, editors and better conditions of service to attract the best people into the profession will be needed. The present state of affairs in the profession is not encouraging. Amazingly, in spite of the importance of the need for teachers in the war against ignorance and soldiers in the propaganda war against ideological adversaries of the state, there is no formal School of Mass Communications or Journalism in Uganda. It should be worthwhile for the government to seriously consider establishing a department or school of mass media at Makerere University and to formalize and upgrade the ad hoc facility at the Institute of Public Administration (IPA). Until that happens, Uganda reporters will command no social respect from the government technocrats and intellectuals. This will inevitably undermine the flow of accurate information from these "goldmines" of sources and that doesn't look good, at least for the information industry.

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