



Public Service Broadcasting in Africa

The Africa Commission recognized that a strong and independent media is a prerequisite for development and a necessary tool to fight corruption. A number of initiatives have taken place in recent years to promote the training of journalists, freedom of the press and community radio in Africa, but little or no attention has been paid to television.

Television in Africa is at a crucial 'in between' stage. As with mobile phones, Africa is likely to take a leap forward, missing out a stage of development. In the UK and other developed countries (with the exception of the US) a strong and regulated terrestrial broadcasting system is being replaced by a multi channel digital environment. Crucially, the fact that the terrestrial system has been strongly regulated has enabled regulation to continue into the digital era.

In Africa, regulation of terrestrial broadcasting is weak. Unless there is stronger regulation and a genuine move towards public service broadcasting, an American style multi channel world will emerge and quickly become entrenched. There will be little or no regulation and a weak commitment to any public interest programming.

African television is dominated, for the moment, by state broadcasters. Many are reluctant to embrace wholeheartedly a public service ethos. They rely on government funding and do not want to become overtly critical of their paymasters. They also rely on advertising revenue and therefore need to compete with satellite broadcasters by offering US imports.

IBT believes that UK based international development agencies can play a unique role in promoting and strengthening public service broadcasting in Africa – and that now is the time to act.

For many years there have been a small number of specialist media NGOs active in promoting public service broadcasting in Africa (mostly radio), but they have never had sufficient grassroots support to challenge the entrenched interests of governments. Some have been UK based (Panos, Article 19, the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, the World Service Trust). Others have been Africa based (the Media Institute for Southern Africa, the Media Foundation for West Africa, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, Femnet, EcoNews). There has been funding from DFID and UNESCO.

How effective have these organizations been? They have been successful in one area in particular: promoting community radio. In terms of television – which has never been their priority – they have, so far, had a minimal effect. There has been no co-ordinated effort nor any attempt to create a grassroots movement in support of psb in Africa.

IBT has spoken to all these organizations and there is a consensus that if they continue to work in the way in which they have done in the past, then there will be no wholesale move towards public service television and a unique opportunity will be lost.

In the UK, IBT and its campaigning arm, 3WE, have built a strong grassroots coalition in favour of public service broadcasting. Our strategy has been to lobby government, regulators and broadcasters and to create a strong civil society voice in favour of public service broadcasting. The success of this strategy suggests that the same approach may work in other countries, including in Africa.

Whilst UK based development agencies have supported IBT, in recognition that television in the UK is an important tool for development education, it seems logical for them to take an interest in television as a tool for development *within* developing countries.

IBT believes it has a distinctive role to play in promoting ‘pro poor broadcasting’ in Africa. We want to build an alliance of grassroots organizations, working together to help shape a policy environment which supports and nourishes a plural and diverse range of broadcast institutions and recognises the importance of broadcasting in Africa as a guarantor of a democratic, inclusive and egalitarian society.

What is pro poor broadcasting? It is broadcasting which recognizes that poor people have a voice which should be heard, otherwise they risk becoming increasingly marginalized, both politically and economically. To reduce poverty, poor people need access to information and the means of communication. They need access not just to western media, but to local media too, so they can voice their concerns, become politically engaged, participate in public policy debates, and use the media to find out about health and other issues. A strong local media will also help to promote Africa’s own cultural industries by commissioning local content, rather than buying in US tv programmes.

Why should IBT’s member agencies become involved in this initiative?

1. The need for a grassroots movement. Previous initiatives have failed because specialist African and UK media NGOs have adopted a ‘top down’ approach. They have never represented a strong or popular lobby for change. We believe that development agencies, their African partners and representatives could significantly strengthen this lobby.
2. The need for pro poor broadcasting. UK based agencies work hard to give a voice to poor people in Africa through media training and other initiatives. It seems logical that they should take an interest in the media environment in which their partners operate. Their voices will be much more powerful if they have access to local media.

Why public service broadcasting? In Africa, state and commercial broadcasters may choose to provide a news service or educational programming but this is not guaranteed. In the UK we have successfully campaigned for broadcasting legislation which

entrenches psb in law. It is not left to the whim of broadcasters. They have a statutory duty to provide a range of programming defined in law. This is the goal we shall be working towards in Africa. Public service broadcasters serve all sections of society and are editorially independent. They are not under the influence of government and are independently regulated and managed transparently.

Why television? It's true that radio is the medium to which most Africans have access, but that is changing rapidly. There are an estimated 25 million tv sets in Nigeria and more than 5 million sets in South Africa. Television ownership is growing quickly – for example in Ghana, there were an estimated 2.7 million sets in 2003, now there are 5.6 million (source CBA). Television will play an increasingly important role in African societies in the next 10 years and will become a powerful tool for influencing government and society.

A unique vision

We believe that our vision of a *grassroots* lobby for public service television in Africa is unique. Yet it is a simple and, in some ways, an obvious idea. There are a range of organizations which would support such an initiative – Panos, MISA, AMARC, CBA, UNESCO – but none will undertake this on their own. It is striking that all the present initiatives -and there are not many - adopt a pragmatic top down approach.

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