

When media freedom is simply not enough

Rights, lives, income, and credibility are under threat

By Efram Bashan

Interesting developments are shaping the media landscape globally, and this is most pronounced in emerging democracies, especially on the African continent. Afrobarometer's recent [Pan-Africa Profile on media](#) points to a worrying trend – dwindling citizen support for media freedom and increasing tolerance for political or state regulation of media rights.

In politics where media freedoms decline, citizens want more space for media, and where freedoms increase, citizens get uncomfortable with the media, running back to government to curtail the very rights they agitated for. What a paradox!

To unravel this mystery is to answer these three questions:

- What happens to citizens when media space is heavily regulated or constricted?
- And what happens to citizens when media or press autonomy flourishes?
- Is it a case of a double-edged sword, or is there a fine balance we are failing to capture?

Perhaps this calls for a bigger conversation for African media owners, practitioners, and regulatory bodies to reflect on citizens' expectations vis-a-vis media power and practice. Against the backdrop of these reports, a call for media literacy for citizens is very timely – and strategic to its survival. Citizens need expanded knowledge or understanding of what the media does, especially in relation to active citizenship. Such an understanding will enhance relations between the two: media and citizens.

When citizens begin to justify why journalists deserve to be maltreated, sometimes to the point of being attacked or even killed, then we ought to know we are dealing with the symptom of a deeply rooted problem requiring urgent and systemic attention.

But consider also that some media practitioners lack an understanding of the relationship between media freedom and media responsibility. Sometimes the irperception is that a call for responsible and accountable media equals a threat against media independence. But need it be so?

Zealous to protect unfettered media, we sometimes place a heavy emphasis on press freedom without its corresponding balance of media accountability.

Citizens who feel agitated that this professional class is accountable to none but itself – and maybe, feebly, to a national media commission – may revert to the old devil they know (the government or state) for safety rather than to the angel they looked to for deliverance (the media).

The media stands accused of the same ills as the state, for which reason the state cannot be trusted with regulating the media: lack of credibility, lack of transparency, lack of integrity, lack of accountability, divisiveness, elitism. ... It is noteworthy that the rights and privileges that the media enjoys emanate from constitutions, and these powers conferred on the profession are



predicated on the fulfillment of certain responsibilities. They are never given in a vacuum! This fact must begin to sink in deeply, especially among us as practitioners.

Moreover, in addition to constitutional rights, the powers of the media come from the very citizens they serve. People's patronage of media content provides the ratings that guarantee revenue! Without these patrons, the media is nothing! Indeed, citizens even trade off their resources such as the airwaves, their privacy, etc., to give the media the power and privilege to practice fearlessly and incorruptibly so as to advance the common good of society. That is the true cost of the power the media enjoys, and it must be willing to pay for it to justify its existence in the first place.

If the media fails to meet these basic expectations, it clears the path for state-controlled media as a preferred alternative. What a dilemma!

When citizens begin to devalue the essence of media freedom and relevance, then the profession is in serious crisis, and it doesn't matter anymore what the constitution says. Popular trust and support is a bottom-line issue – a matter of survival.

Digital and citizen journalism are twin precarious phenomena in recent times, challenging the scope, relevance, and place of the traditional media. Digital resources make it less difficult financially and infrastructurally to produce and publish mass content anywhere and anytime. Anyone can take up such opportunities with limited or no scrutiny or commitment to quality, professionalism, or ethics. This means citizens not properly schooled in the rudiments of serious journalism and media ethics – and in some cases out to peddle half-truths and lies for political gain – will add to the one big output and assessment of the media – for good or bad.

At the same time, digitalization of media has positively revolutionized reach, size, cost, and impact of its work. Challenges come along with opportunities for media to be more innovative, creative, management smart, and entrepreneurial, especially for individual practitioners.

Where do we go from here?

I move for a quick convening, either by media or civil society watchers, to champion a media literacy agenda and enhance citizen-journalist relations to cure the ignorance and mistrust that characterize their interaction. Media ought to be seen as a citizen-driven public service – even when operating as a commercial business – not just in promise but also in practice. Citizens must be given plenty of space and recognition in programming, production, and indeed general operations.

Journalism training schools ought to creatively do more in teaching students the responsibilities that come with the profession. Practitioners need be more open and responsive to scrutiny while guarding their independence. Both can coexist! It wins confidence and gives credibility. In the age of competitive and nuanced digital practice, investing in the media organization's reputation will be key to viability in the market.

The strong appetite for political authority as the solution of choice to regulate the media needs to be equally subjected to extensive public debate so we understand the implications fully. What standards do we collectively desire to see in our media, failing which we believe more



state control is needed? What kind of state control do we have in mind? Does the digitalization of media require a review of the current regime of standards that regulate media operations?

A public service media model does exist in Ghana, for instance, that allows some level of state involvement through constitutional guidelines on content and recruitment, funding, etc. Do we have a thorough understanding of how satisfactory this model has been? Perhaps it's time for a study of the regulatory landscapes, media establishments, and a qualitative survey of citizens' evaluation and expectations of the media. This is once again an assignment either government or civil society can champion to strengthen and preserve the media and its fourth estate.

This is an urgent call for balance and true two-way communication, lest the media's gains, over years of growing press freedoms, be eroded. Protecting practitioners' rights, lives, income, and credibility is a challenge that won't go away until we face it head on.

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