

AN AFRICAN AL-JAZEERA?
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The Foreign Policy Centre 

An African Al-Jazeera?

Mass Media and the African Renaissance

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Executive Summary

Good governance is universally acknowledged as a crucial precursor for development in Africa. Free and effective media play a vital role in improving that governance.

African countries need effective media because they cannot hope to democratise, prosper, or engage with the rest of the world as equals otherwise. Yet in Africa the development of a pluralistic print and broadcast media has been fitful. As a consequence, the African media have struggled to make positive contributions to the political, economic and social needs of the continent. An indigenous pan-African broadcaster could help to redress this quickly, yet to date such a project has received scant attention from policymakers and stakeholders. It may be the case that country-specific aid planning has been an obstacle in this regard.

Africa will continue to need an effective pluralist media embodying a wide variety of forms, content, and funding models, and operating at local, national and regional levels. Stakeholders and donors should continue to support the development of such a diverse and fragmented media, especially through support for journalist training schools and media research facilities.

At the same time, African stakeholders should now also look to establish a multi-lingual, independent, pan-African broadcaster. This paper argues that such an entity would do much to improve the continent's political and economic landscape in the medium-to-long term. Lessons can be learned from the experience of the Arab satellite television news channel Al-Jazeera. This station, which only began broadcasting in 1996, has already had a real impact, for example, in improving transparency and accountability across the Middle East. As a consequence state media, which have previously tended towards uncritical 'protocol news', are now being forced to improve their own coverage.

It seems probable that a pan-African broadcaster would have similar consequences. Previously secretive governments would be forced to become more transparent and open. Intra-continental understanding

– and consequent political and economic contact – would increase. It also seems likely, for example, that a pan-African broadcaster would help build solidarity between North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Opportunities for factional media to incite violence, for example, as in Rwanda in 1994 would be more easily limited. Media which act as an alternative to established western broadcasters, and better present Africa to itself, will improve the continent's 'self-confidence'. Such media also help educate viewers and listeners about the workings of democracy, or health issues such as HIV/AIDS. A pan-African broadcaster which reaches out to the diaspora, as Al-Jazeera has, would also have positive economic and cultural influences, inviting greater participation from Africans outside the continent.

A pan-African broadcaster would also compliment, not undermine, UK public diplomacy efforts. The creation of successful indigenous media which advocate transparency and good governance in Africa is in the UK's political and economic interest. As Africans turn from traditional transnational sources of news like the BBC World Service to indigenous local and national media, as they will, it is important that impartial, independent media sources are available. A pan-African broadcaster would help meet that need. It would be short-sighted for UK policymakers to ignore the prospective mutual benefits of such a broadcaster. UK involvement in the establishment of, or support for, such a broadcaster would also do much to project a positive image of Britain in the region.

In this context, the following UK-specific policy actions are recommended:

- 1) The UK government, as 2005 chair of the G8 and holder of the EU presidency, and in partnership with key stakeholders in Africa and the EU, should move to establish an effective, independent pan-African broadcaster;
- 2) The UK government should announce funding for a series of feasibility studies. A working group should simultaneously be established (with a majority African element) to address issues such

as language, choice of media, technology, programming, location and balance between regional and sub regional content;

3) The UK government should convene a small conference of key stakeholders, including African private sector interests and media NGOs, to draw up a plan of action.

A variety of stakeholders have developed specialised research in the field of media development – and a number of African and non-African organisations are working to create more effective media in Africa. These include the South Africa National Editors Forum (SANEF), the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), the BBC World Service Trust, the Department for International Development (DfID), the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, and Article 19. Other initiatives, such as the Africa Together Vision (ATV) project, are already investigating the feasibility of a pan-African television station. The UK government should engage the expertise of these organisations, and other stakeholders, in establishing an independent pan-African broadcaster. Lessons should also be drawn from the experience of other transnational broadcasters such as Al-Jazeera and the BBC World Service, particularly the latter’s multi-lingual, multi-media output.

At a cost of around £1 million, a series of UK-sponsored working groups, and a small conference, would comprehensively examine both the feasibility and design of an indigenous pan-African broadcaster. Ultimately, such a broadcaster could be established at a cost of around £70 million per year, over a five year period. This presents an affordable and constructive opportunity for the UK, in partnership with stakeholders from Africa and the EU, to make a major contribution to African development. African governments, donors, and non-state actors (including private sector interests) can and should work towards establishing such a broadcaster as part of a pluralist, continent-wide media.

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Introduction

I have said on many occasions that I believe Africa is the scar on the conscience of the world, and I think it is right that we continue to treat this as an absolute priority over the coming years.

Tony Blair, 26th February 2004¹

Prime Minister Tony Blair's establishment of a Commission for Africa in early 2004 can arguably be read in two ways. On the one hand, it is a demonstration of the willingness of certain developed countries to once again roll up their shirtsleeves and get to grips with the complex challenges facing the African continent. On the other, it is a reminder that despite at least four decades of previous efforts, Africa still lags far behind the rest of the world on almost all political, economic and social indicators.

Diagnoses of Africa's ills are many and varied. Historically, analysts have identified a wide array of factors including bad governance, ineffective capacity-building, low foreign investment, lack of transparency and accountability, endemic corruption, poor education, adverse geographic and climatic conditions, and inadequate healthcare. Others emphasize the absence of effective democracy and the rule of law. Jeffrey Sachs has identified what he calls 'Africa's unique circumstances', namely 'very high transport costs and small markets; low productivity agriculture; very high disease burden; a history of adverse geopolitics; [and] very slow diffusion of technology from abroad'.² Nicholas Stern, director of policy at the Commission for Africa, has recently observed, for example, that the continent's political realities themselves are an obstacle, suggesting that in a continent of more than fifty states too often 'political borders become economic barriers'.³ Others note simply that the problem with Sub-Saharan Africa is that it is sub-Saharan – the desert itself

¹ Downing Street Press Conference 26/2/04

² Jeffrey Sachs, 'Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals' London: Earthscan 2005

³ Nicholas Stern, 'Our Common Interest: Support Africa's Resurgence', Lecture at London School of Economics, 9/5/05

acts as the greatest obstacle to trade and much-needed foreign investment.

While acknowledging that Africa's problems are manifold, and that the issues outlined above are indeed valid, limited attention has been drawn to another key variable in the African development equation: the media. The right to receive and impart information is, of course, guaranteed under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the mass media are key actors in preserving that right. But the media, in all oral, print, broadcast and electronic forms, are also a key factor in political, economic and social development. Indeed the development and management of effective independent media has historically been a key factor in the success of modern nation-states. This suggests that African countries need effective media because they cannot hope to democratise, prosper, or engage with the rest of the world as equals otherwise. Contemporary states require a nationwide media to function. States seeking to engage with a globalising world need a prospering and pluralist media to make that engagement a reality.

Understanding the role of the media in political and economic development is challenging, and practical research in the field typically time-consuming, and, ultimately, speculative. It is perhaps for this reason that development strategists have tended not to prioritise the issue. It is also true that past claims about the relationship between communication and development have proven difficult to substantiate. 1960s deterministic rhetoric on the mass media and development, championed by the likes of Wilbur Schramm and Lucian Pye, did much to diminish the perceived importance of the issue, as theoretical promises did not become practical reality. Policymakers seeking to address the developing world's ills can therefore not afford to ignore the importance of the media in their calculations.

In the case of nascent democratic states like many of those in Africa, the media's role can be said to be fourfold. *Firstly*, the media plays an important role in the day-to-day conduct of representative democracy, acting as the so-called 'fourth estate', informing citizens of government activity, facilitating the electoral process, and

challenging bad governance. *Secondly*, an effective media system is a requirement for any country seeking to achieve advanced economic development, stimulating enterprise through advertising and the exchange of knowledge. *Thirdly*, the media is an important tool in the shaping of a sense of national identity, (what Benedict Anderson has called 'nation-ness').⁴ *Fourthly*, the behaviour of the media can have significant security implications, with the capacity to inflame hatred, passion and aggression, such as the media's role in inciting violence in Rwanda; or ease the security situation, for example, by acting as a safety valve for political discontent.

The aim of this paper is not, however, to rehearse well-worn arguments about the relationship between media and democratisation, or media and development. Nor has it been conceived as a detailed manifesto for donor action, or indeed a comprehensive survey of the state of the media in Africa. These can only follow with more comprehensive research. It is intended instead both as a timely reminder that the media should be a significant variable in any calculation of how best to proceed with democratisation and development in Africa, and as a means of identifying some of the many issues which should be taken into account in any such calculation. The reader should also be aware that the decision to use the title 'An African Al-Jazeera?' is born not from a belief that Africa needs an *exact* facsimile of the Arab news channel, but from the view that for Africa to thrive the media landscape must change, and that positive change should incorporate a significant pan-continental dimension.

It is worth acknowledging that the Commission for Africa has itself acknowledged the importance of the media in tackling Africa's problems, stating that, 'the media is an educator and a key information source that can help deliver the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), promote transparent governance, and through balanced reporting, help prevent conflicts. The wide benefits from plural media means it acts as a public good in development'.⁵ Jeffrey Sachs, meanwhile, has observed that 'implementation becomes

⁴ Benedict Anderson 'Imagined Communities' 1991 (1983)

⁵ 'Our Common Interest: Report of the Commission For Africa' 2005

more effective if there is a free press that can inform the public, analyze and critique government policies, monitor government performance and service delivery, and raise concerns if some parts of the population are being excluded or marginalized'.⁶

It is of crucial importance to the long-term development of Africa that donors and policymakers digest such a message. Folu Ogundimu has suggested that opportunities for effective media influence in Africa have tended to come in waves – most notably in the de-colonisation period, and the period following the end of the Cold War.⁷ It should be the ambition of those that want genuine change for the better that governments, donors and policymakers, engaged as they are in discussions on how best to help Africa, take advantage of what may be another such opportunity.

Africa's Media Story So Far

The peoples of Africa are interdependent and share a common destiny. It makes no sense that they should be separated from one another by ignorance of one another. Indeed that dangerous state of unknowing, which leads to prejudice and superstition against and about one another, would make it impossible for us to achieve the goal of African unity.

Thabo Mbeki, 12th April, 2003⁸

Historically, the media have played a complex political, economic and social role in Africa. The activities of the so-called 'guerrilla typewriters' in the 1960s, for example, were a notable catalyst for change during the struggles for independence. Unfortunately the tradition of free, adversarial media pioneered by the 'guerrilla typewriters' did not persist in the post-colonial era. In many cases, in

⁶ Jeffrey Sachs, 'Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals' London: Earthscan 2005

⁷ Folu Ogundimu 'Media and Democracy in 21st Century Africa', in 'Media and Democracy in Africa' Ed. Goran Hyden and Michael Leslie, New Jersey: Transaction 2002

⁸ Thabo Mbeki, speaking at SANEF Conference 2003, available at http://www.sanef.org.za/african_editors/conference_2003/

the aftermath of independence, governments who had come to power in the name of democracy abandoned the principles of free media which they had themselves advocated. As Gwen Lister has noted 'those who had been so widely praised for taking on the oppressors, namely the independent media, were now perceived as a thorn in the flesh of new governments'.⁹ Indigenous African media output since the 1960s has too often resembled so-called 'protocol news', typically working to national government priorities rather than the adversarial approach required in nascent democracies.

In the 1970s, debates which sought to highlight and so reverse perceived African 'dependence' on western media sources, although hard fought were not, ultimately, successful. The establishment of a Pan-African News Agency (PANA), managed by the Conference of Information Ministers of the Organisation of African Unity, failed to meet the needs of the African media. Too often PANA's bulletins uncritically circulated state media and news agency reports. At the same time, the volume of newspaper circulation continent-wide was consistently low. During the 1980s, UNESCO recommended that newspaper circulation should achieve a minimum of 100 copies per 1000 people. In Africa, newspaper circulation averaged 10 copies per 1000 people.

Although actual performance has been weak, aspirational statements of intent regarding the media have continued. The 1991 UNESCO Windhoek declaration, for example, promoted the need for an 'independent and pluralistic media' across Africa noting that 'the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development'.¹⁰ At another gathering ten years later, appropriately named 'Windhoek +10', participants addressed the need for 'independence and pluralism in radio and television broadcasting', asserting that 'all state and government controlled broadcasters should be transformed into public service broadcasters, that are accountable to all strata of the people as represented by an

⁹ Gwen Lister, speaking at SANE Conference 2003, 12/4/03

¹⁰ UNESCO 'Declaration on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Media'. Windhoek 3/5/91

independent board, and that serve the overall public interest, avoiding one-sided reporting and programming in regard to religion, political belief, culture, race and gender'.¹¹

Despite such declarations, the development of a genuinely pluralistic print and broadcast media in Africa has been fitful. The prevalence of state-controlled broadcast media and financially vulnerable print media has been a common national model. As a consequence the African media has failed to meet the political, economic and social needs of the continent.

African Media Today

Today's picture is mixed. On one hand there is the example of South Africa whose largely professional media is of a high standard. On the other hand countries like Zimbabwe, Equatorial Guinea and Eritrea have taken deliberate steps to limit all media scrutiny, reportedly 'expelling foreign journalists, banning international human rights groups, and trying to control Internet access'.¹² Rwanda, Gabon and Ethiopia have demonstrated similar tendencies. At the same time, security remains a major issue for journalists working in countries like Somalia, the Central African Republic (CAR), Nigeria, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), although statistically journalists in Africa are less at risk than those working in the Middle East and Latin America. Where governments choose not to employ heavy-handedness in their management of journalists and editors, they have often become skilled in applying more subtle pressure, for example, through pressure on advertisers and funders, or deliberate non-cooperation with local political journalists.

The fact is that the dream of a robust, independent, indigenous continent-wide African mass media is still far from becoming reality. There have been signs of improvement, and some commentators have perceived real and lasting change, suggesting, for example,

¹¹ UNESCO 'African Charter on Broadcasting', Windhoek 3/5/01

¹² Committee to Protect Journalists 'Attacks on the Press 2004' available at www.cpi.org/attacks04/africa04/africa.html

that 'what was once a media desert has become a landscape flourishing with newspapers, radio and TV stations'.¹³ This is not a vision, however, shared with confidence. Too many issues are unresolved. Many national governments have demonstrated reluctance to allow the development of an effective 'fourth estate'. Other concerns persist. For example, even where African television stations are relatively free of political interference, they typically use very little local material; other than clumsily-produced news and some entertainment programming, conspicuous dependence on Western programming is common. Funding also remains a key issue for many media outlets in Africa; failure rates for financial reasons are high.

In the realm of indigenous Pan-African media, pickings are slim. Although projects like the Inter Press Service and AllAfrica.com have recently made pioneering and welcome use of the Internet, acting in many ways as unofficial pan-African news agencies, they can only ever be expected to reach journalists and other opinion formers not the audiences and readers that need them. Internet access and use in Africa is simply too limited. At the same time, transnational satellite television stations like CNN and BBC World, although widely available, are inevitably inadequate for African audiences. Their coverage of African news and current affairs is too limited. Africa cannot, and should not, rely on such sources for coverage of African issues. Similar concerns apply to radio stations like that of BBC World Service radio. Although the BBC African Service, for example, has served the continent well, consistently acting as an effective, adversarial opposition, and so challenging the actions of autocratic regimes, African audiences will ultimately be better served by indigenous broadcasters. In this context donors, governments and non-state actors (including private sector interests) should work together to improve the current media situation in Africa.

¹³ 'Media and Democracy in Africa' Ed. Goran Hyden and Michael Leslie New Jersey: Transaction 2002, p.11

Towards A Better African Media

In addressing the state of African media, what are the key theoretical and practical issues which governments and donors ought to take into account?

The unique nature of the African continent requires media analysts and policymakers to address a wide variety of design and development issues. Among them are issues of media form, content, distribution and delivery, language, funding, research, policy design, regulatory frameworks and training. Although many of these issues will be familiar to analysts and policymakers, they are worth reviewing.

African media content, while naturally varying from country to country, and region to region, ought ideally to contain significant political, economic, cultural and environmental components. The media can plainly play a significant role, for example, in educating audiences and readers about the workings of democracy, or health issues such as HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, in order to fulfill its role as government interrogator and watchdog, the mass media should ideally include a range of short-term news and longer-view current affairs programmes. Policymakers ought also to remember that, historically, debates have raged over the developing world's dependence on the developed world for access to information. It is important that African media continue to strive to generate and use their own material where possible. It is ultimately in donors' interests to facilitate and encourage this. A robust and independent Africa-wide media which can project an indigenous understanding of Africa both to its own people and to others beyond the continent will aid the development of a more stable, prosperous and confident Africa.

Media form is another perennially complex and controversial issue. Western media form has been so all-conquering that alternative forms have not generally had the opportunity to develop. The unique nature of Africa's oral culture ought perhaps to be the foundation of its own distinctive media form. This may already be represented in the reportedly increasing numbers of non-colonial language radio

stations. Nevertheless, media practitioners continent-wide ought always to challenge the 'hegemonic' media form models they are often expected to ape. African media do not need to closely resemble the BBC or CNN to be good. For the same reasons African governments and donors alike should be alert to the dangers of local and national media output being dominated by transnational media corporations, or consolidation of African media within those same corporations. There is also the danger that as the mass media develops across the continent, larger countries with better developed media systems and infrastructure will gain media dominance in the same way western transnational broadcasters and corporations are threatening to do. South Africa is perhaps the most likely candidate for this. While a robust South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) should be an important piece in the pluralist media jigsaw in Africa, it should not be allowed to dominate.

As a supplementary point it is worth highlighting the complex issue of language in the African mass media. In everyday life, Africans typically use local, tribal languages to communicate - a fact reflected in increasing tribal language 'community' broadcasting across the continent. The colonial languages of English, French and Portuguese remain in common use, each functioning as a regional lingua franca. The extraordinary cultural diversity of the continent means it is perhaps unrealistic to expect there to be print, broadcast and electronic media available in every functional language, nevertheless a plurality of languages, like a plurality of content and forms, should be encouraged and supported.

Of course, language is as much an issue of identity as anything else and in the complex reality of contemporary Africa, identity further complicates media design and development. In a continent with several distinct regions, more than 50 states, and hundreds of distinct tribal and ethnic groupings, the issue of media and identity becomes particularly pertinent. Media has the power both to challenge and reinforce a range of tribal, national and regional identities. In a continent where rural populations are urbanising with unprecedented speed, representative media must also address the information needs of marginalized rural populations.

Another key issue in media development is that of funding and finance. Media models are traditionally divided into state, public and private. Historically, state media – government-funded and government-controlled – have not delivered the free democratic press the continent requires. However, both the latter two models, public and private, also have their drawbacks. The publicly-funded media model requires mature, stable and accountable government to fund apolitically and without interference. Even in the established democracies, publicly-funded media have not always been able to resist pressure from above. Public, independent media, while probably the ideal, is a fragile enterprise. In the case of privately-funded media, independence can be compromised by private or corporate interests, by pressure from potential advertisers and by the demands of the market itself.

Two further supplementary issues are worth identifying at this point. The first relates to journalist training. It is impossible to develop an independent and effective media without adequate training and development of editors and journalists. There are, of course, many talented and skilled individuals already working as journalists in Africa. Many more are needed, however, particularly in those countries where media freedom and development is embryonic. Of course, donors have long realised the value of funding journalist training programmes. Such schemes function both as contributions to democratisation and development, and as constructive exercises in cultural diplomacy and relations. Many organisations, such as the BBC World Service Trust, have involved themselves in such programmes – in some cases bringing journalists to the organisation's country, in others training them in-country. Such efforts are worthwhile; however, donors should increasingly look to support journalist training schools in and around the African continent. Such schools are a requirement if the African media is to flourish in the medium-to-long-term.

The same principle applies in the field of media planning and research. In the developed world, media policy and regulation is based on extensive research and planning. An effective African mass media too will require robust, empirical research and policy design at the national and regional levels. Research facilities such as

the Media Institute of Southern Africa are evidence of a growing indigenous capacity in this area – donors should support such initiatives. The author also welcomes the proposed establishment of an Africa Media Development Facility by the UK Commission For Africa and BBC.

This brief review of issues relating to the development of the media in Africa is not exhaustive or comprehensive. Nor will many of the issues raised come as surprise to media scholars. If a single lesson can be drawn, however, it is this: Africa needs an effective pluralist media which embodies a wide variety of forms, content, and funding models. Donors should support the development of such a diverse media without looking for any more uniform or tidy model. An untidy looking media is an effective, democratic media. For the media to do all the things it ought in a prospering democracy – to challenge autocratic government, to minimise the mobilising effect of ‘hate media’, to grease the wheels of the national and regional economies – it cannot be limited to a single model. Donors should continue to support the development of a complex local, national and regional mass media across Africa.

There is one more issue, implicit in the title of this paper, which deserves attention: the prospects for, and implications of, an effective, independent pan-African broadcaster. As part of any discussion of the creation of such an entity two questions are particularly salient: What might be the impact of a Pan-African broadcaster? What are the practical challenges and issues which need to be addressed? By way of addressing these questions it is valuable to examine lessons from another recently established transnational broadcaster: the Arab satellite television news channel Al-Jazeera.

The Case of Al-Jazeera

The Americans call for reform. They call for freedom of expression. For democratisation. Liberalisation. We have been part of that process, helping create real and lasting change in society, giving people a voice. We are part of the march towards reform in the Middle East.

Wadah Khanfar, managing director of Al-Jazeera¹⁴

The Arabic-language satellite television news channel Al-Jazeera (meaning ‘The Island’ or ‘The Peninsula’) began life in November 1996. Based in the Gulf state of Qatar, and founded under the patronage of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, Al-Jazeera began broadcasting an all-news format for 6 hours a day via the Arabsat satellite. By February 1999, Al-Jazeera was being broadcast 24 hours a day on three different satellites. Originally established with an initial 5 year grant of \$137 million provided by the Emir, Al-Jazeera has since found financial independence elusive. The station reportedly received a supplementary grant of \$29 million in 2003 and has found advertising revenue difficult to secure, not least because of political pressure.¹⁵ The station’s output continues to be largely devoted to news, much of it using locally-gathered material, although the station also buys footage from Western news agencies. The development of an English-language Al-Jazeera, as well as the establishment of dedicated business and documentary channels, is ongoing. An associated Arabic language website was launched in 2001 and an English language website in 2003.

Historically, independent Arab media, much as in Africa, have been lacking. Media outlets have tended to be state-controlled with heavy emphasis on so-called ‘protocol news’. Audiences across the Arab world have consequently had little access to reliable news. In this context Al-Jazeera has been something of a revelation. An Arabic news station which on the one hand gives airtime to representatives of Hezbollah and Hamas, and on the other includes interviews with

¹⁴ Alastair Campbell ‘I Was Wrong About Al-Jazeera’, The Guardian, 15/9/04

¹⁵ Hugh Miles ‘Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World’ London: Grove 2005

Israelis, is a new and surprising phenomenon. Al-Jazeera's willingness to challenge established taboos and to air criticism of Arab regimes has defied all conventional stereotypes of the Arab media. 'Free from the shackles of censorship and government control' claims the station's website, 'Al-Jazeera has offered its audiences in the Arab world much needed freedom of thought, independence, and room for debate. In the rest of the world, often dominated by the stereotypical thinking of news "heavyweights", Al-Jazeera offers a different and a new perspective'.¹⁶

Such claims are not just empty rhetoric. A large proportion of Al-Jazeera's staff received their journalist training at the BBC, and the station has, broadly speaking, demonstrated commitment to impartiality. Al-Jazeera's broadcasts are at least as balanced as much of the U.S. domestic broadcast media's output. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the channel's independence has been the regularity with which governments in the region have sought to both censor and censure the station. The governments of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Bahrain, Iran, Morocco, Iraq, and the Palestinian Authority have all imposed bans on Al-Jazeera journalists at one time or another. Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Syria still deny Al-Jazeera the permission to open bureaux.

The implications of the rise of Al-Jazeera have been manifold. There is strong evidence that the station's political coverage has indeed made the region's political regimes more accountable. At the same time there is reason to believe that the station's coverage has forced other state media to improve their own coverage – the conventional 'protocol' model of national news has had to be abandoned.

The station has also arguably had significant cultural impact. Its coverage has almost certainly improved non-Arab understanding of the Arab world, increased understanding between different Arab societies, and acted as a network for the Arab diaspora, affording people living outside the region greater contact both with their various 'homelands' and each other. These cultural effects may have

¹⁶ Al-Jazeera Website 2005, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/5D7F956E-6B52-46D9-8D17-448856D01CDB.htm>

genuine political and economic implications, encouraging greater regional relations and trade - Al-Jazeera's political, economic and cultural impact has been real, and largely positive, across the Middle East.

An African Al-Jazeera?

If Al-Jazeera can succeed there is no reason why an African Al-Jazeera cannot succeed

Thabo Mbeki, 13th April, 2003¹⁷

What can African media analysts learn from the Al-Jazeera experience? What are the lessons for a prospective 'African Al-Jazeera'? Should African governments and non-African donors seek to replicate the success of the Arab satellite channel? How and where would such a broadcaster be established? How would such a media organisation shape, and be shaped by, Africa's unique political and economic circumstances? Is an African transnational broadcaster practically feasible?

Although it would be inappropriate to import the 'Al-Jazeera' model into Africa without adjustments to suit conditions on the continent, it is the author's view that the African continent would indeed benefit from the establishment of a genuinely independent and indigenous pan-African broadcaster. Such an entity would do much to alter and improve the continent's political and economic landscape in the medium-to-long term. Although it is difficult to quantify with confidence the changes wrought by the existence of Al-Jazeera in the Arab world, such changes are real. As noted above, Al-Jazeera has had a genuine impact in improving transparency and accountability across the region, holding governments to account to an unprecedented degree. As a consequence state media which have previously tended towards uncritical 'protocol news', are now being forced to improve their own coverage. A further consequence of the existence of a pan-Arab news channel is almost certainly

¹⁷ Thabo Mbeki, speaking at a press conference 13/4/03

greater economic and cultural exchange within the region. It is reasonable to assume that populations who see each other on the nightly news, have better understanding of each other, and are more likely to do business together.

It seems probable that a pan-African broadcaster could have similar consequences. Previously secretive governments would be forced to become more transparent and open. Intra-continental understanding – and consequent political and economic contact – would greatly benefit Africa. It is likely, for example, that a pan-African broadcaster would also help build solidarity between North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Opportunities for factional media to incite violence, for example, as in Rwanda in 1994 would be limited. It also seems likely that a media which acts as an alternative to established western broadcasters, and better presents Africa to itself, will improve the continent's 'self-confidence'. A pan-African broadcaster which reaches out to the African diaspora, as Al-Jazeera has, would also have positive economic and cultural implications.

Of course, as already noted, the single-language satellite television/internet model of Al-Jazeera is not appropriate for Africa. Instead stakeholders should consider a broader model including a range of media (TV, radio and internet) and a range of languages. Much can be learned from the BBC World Service's African output, both radio and web-based, which is available in a number of different languages including Hausa, Swahili, English, French, Portuguese and Arabic. The nature of African audiences mean it is particularly important that a pan-African broadcaster include a significant radio element, broadcasting both on shortwave, and, in major cities, on FM. Satellite television and internet websites, although favouring the urbanised elite, will become more important with time. Many rural villages in Africa already have some access to satellite television.

The phenomenon of Al-Jazeera should act not as an exact blueprint for action, but as evidence that trans-national media can play a significant role in political and economic development. Naturally, it cannot turn Africa into a prosperous, democratic continent alone, but a pan-African broadcaster can act as a catalyst for change. But is

such a broadcaster practically feasible? How might such an enterprise be established?

Here we can learn much from the recent experience of other transnational broadcasters. As a first point it is worth noting that the original 5-year seed funding for Al-Jazeera was \$137 million. The US government funded Arabic public diplomacy television station Al-Hurra was established with a grant of \$100 million. The annual budget of BBC World Service radio and internet services, in more than 40 languages, is approximately \$370 million. In the context of the Commission for Africa's calls to increase aid funding to Africa to \$75 billion per annum by 2015, the sum required to establish a pan-African broadcaster seems modest. It is true that Africa's size and cultural diversity mean that a single language broadcaster would be inappropriate, and that any effective pan-African broadcaster would need to include television, radio and internet components, nevertheless it seems likely that a seed fund of approximately \$600 million would be adequate for 5-year start-up costs. This equates to 0.16% of the Commission for Africa's total projected annual aid funds over a five year period (after 2015). Longer-term funding could reasonably come from a combination of advertising revenues, grants and subscription sales. In other words, such an enterprise is financially viable.

The location of such a broadcaster is another key issue. Part of the reason for Al-Jazeera's success has been the station's sponsorship by the Emir of Qatar himself, and consequent safe haven in Qatar. There are, as yet, no obvious candidates for a similar arrangement in Africa. Modern technology means, of course, that the broadcaster's headquarters can be based more-or-less anywhere; nevertheless an indigenous African broadcaster needs to be based in Africa. If the station is produce a range of multi-lingual output – probably English, French, Portuguese, Hausa, Arabic and Swahili – it will require a headquarters in a major African city, probably Lagos, Nairobi, Addis Ababa or Johannesburg, with regional offices in Dakar (Senegal), Maputo (Mozambique) and Cairo (Egypt), and dedicated correspondents continent-wide.

Politically, the creation of a pan-African broadcaster may be controversial. Those governments which keep a tight grip on the mass media in their own countries may well seek to block the establishment of such a broadcaster. If the broadcaster were to be created in concert with the activities of the African Union (AU), for example, some members of the AU might object to its existence. This is only to be expected. If one of the very *raison d'être* of the enterprise is to challenge autocracy and encourage democratisation, it is inevitable that those who have most to lose should obstruct it. An established relationship with the AU seems an attractive option, however. The creation of the pan-African parliament in March 2005, the Peer Review Mechanism, and plans for an African Court of Human Rights are arguably evidence of a developing pan-Africanism.

In short, the establishment of a pan-African broadcaster is both desirable and feasible. African governments, donors, and non-state actors (including private sector interests) can and should work towards establishing such a broadcaster as part of a broader, pluralist, continent-wide media.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Acknowledging that Africa's problems are complex and manifold, it is important that policymakers and stakeholders are aware of another key variable in the African development equation: the media. The media, in all oral, print, broadcast and electronic forms, are a key factor in political, economic and social development. African countries need effective media because they cannot hope to democratise, prosper, or engage with the rest of the world as equals otherwise. Contemporary states require a nationwide media to function. States seeking to engage with a globalising world need a prospering and pluralist media to make that engagement a reality.

To date the development of a genuinely pluralistic print and broadcast media in Africa has been fitful. A combination of state-controlled broadcast media and financially vulnerable print media is a

common national model. As a consequence the African media has failed to meet the political, economic and social needs of the continent.

Africa needs an effective pluralist media which embodies a wide variety of forms, content and funding models. Donors should support the development of such a diverse media without looking for any uniform or tidy model. For the media to do all the things it ought in a prospering democracy – to challenge autocratic government, to minimise the mobilising effect of 'hate media', to grease the wheels of the national and regional economies – it cannot be limited to a single model. Support for the development of a complex local, national and regional mass media across Africa should be a priority.

African stakeholders should also look to establish an effective, indigenous, and independent pan-African broadcaster. This paper has argued that such an entity would do much to improve the continent's political and economic landscape in the medium-to-long term. Lessons can be learned from the experience of the Arab satellite television news channel Al-Jazeera. This station, which only began broadcasting in 1996, has already had a real impact, for example, in improving transparency and accountability across the Middle East. As a consequence state media which have previously tended towards uncritical 'protocol news', are now being forced to improve their own coverage.

It seems probable that a pan-African broadcaster would have similar consequences. Previously secretive governments would be forced to become more transparent and open. Intra-continental understanding – and consequent political and economic contact – would increase. It also seems likely, for example, that a pan-African broadcaster would help build solidarity between North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Opportunities for factional media to incite violence, for example, as in Rwanda in 1994 would be more easily limited. Media which act as an alternative to established western broadcasters, and better present Africa to itself, will improve the continent's 'self-confidence'. A pan-African broadcaster which reaches out to the African diaspora, as Al-Jazeera has, would also have positive economic and cultural

influences, inviting greater participation from Africans outside the continent.

A pan-African broadcaster would also compliment, not undermine, UK public diplomacy efforts. The creation of successful indigenous media which advocate transparency and good governance in Africa is in the UK's political and economic interest. As Africans turn from traditional transnational sources of news like the BBC World Service to indigenous local and national media, as they will, it is important that impartial, independent media sources are available to them. A pan-African broadcaster would help meet that need. It would be short-sighted for UK policymakers to ignore the prospective mutual benefits of such a broadcaster. UK involvement in the establishment of, or support for, such a broadcaster would also do much to project a positive image of Britain in the region.

In this context, the following UK-specific policy actions are recommended:

- 1) The UK government, as 2005 chair of the G8 and holder of the EU presidency, and in partnership with key stakeholders in Africa and the EU, should move to establish an effective, independent pan-African broadcaster;
- 2) The UK government should announce funding for a series of feasibility studies. A working group should simultaneously be established (with a majority African element) to address issues such as language, choice of media, technology, programming, location and balance between regional and sub regional content;
- 3) The UK government should convene a small conference of key stakeholders, including African private sector interests and media NGOs, to draw up a plan of action.

A variety of stakeholders have developed specialised research in the field of media development – and a number of African and non-African organisations are working to create more effective media in Africa. These include the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF), the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), the BBC

World Service Trust, the Department for International Development (DfID), the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, and Article 19. Other initiatives, such as the Africa Together Vision (ATV) project, are already investigating the feasibility of a pan-African television station. The UK government should engage the expertise of these organisations, and other stakeholders, in establishing an independent pan-African broadcaster.

At a cost of around £1 million, a series of UK-sponsored working groups, and a small conference, could examine both the feasibility and design of a pan-African broadcaster. Lessons can be learned from the success of both Al-Jazeera, and the BBC World Service's multi-lingual African output. Ultimately, such a broadcaster could be established at a cost of around £70 million per year, over a five year period. This presents an affordable and constructive opportunity for the UK, in partnership with stakeholders from Africa and the EU, to make a major contribution to African development. African governments, donors, and non-state actors (including private sector interests) can and should work towards establishing such a broadcaster as part of a pluralist, continent-wide media.

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