

The Last Word

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Mass media and the challenge of xenophobia in promoting the ideals of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important events on the African political landscape in the new millennium was the “transformation” of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (AU). One of the major goals of the new African Union is to reposition the African continent in the globalizing world in such a way that interaction among its nation states and with the rest of the world is improved and geared towards sustainable development. This transformation became imperative to pull Africa out of the quagmire of the vicious cycle of underdevelopment.

For decades, Africa had to live with the appellation of *The Dark Continent*, and seemed impotent to do much about it. The “darkness” of the continent was not based so much on the dark skin colour of most of its inhabitants as on the “darkness” of the events that occurred there as a matter of routine. The wars and other kinds of conflicts, the crisis of governance, the excruciating poverty, the corruption, the frequency of natural and man-inspired disasters and catastrophes such as famine and flood, the diseases and the high mortality rate among different age groups have all combined to cast a somewhat dark shadow on the present and the future of the continent.

But as Africa entered the 21st century, it became clear to its new crop of leaders that the continent could not continue to be comfortable with the status quo. It dawned on them that the vicious cycle of underdevelopment was taking the continent nowhere and that something must be done. There was a need for some introspection.

The introspection revealed what had always been evident – that the continent was impoverished, with very poor economic base; that the continent had been unable to

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attract substantial foreign investment to breathe some life into many state economies; that there was no unity in the continent and thus Africans did not act as a people with a common destiny; and that Africa had a profound problem of poor leadership and bad governance. Most of this was not new. What was new, however, was the realization and the appreciation that the fault lies mainly with Africans themselves and it would take Africans to deal with the situation.

For the transformation to have any meaning and impact, the new African Union had to be anchored on a new development strategy that embodies Africa's acknowledgement of its faults and frailties and its determination and pledge to come clean (as it were) and appeal to the rich and industrialised world to come along with it as partners in the pursuit of its developmental goals. In this, Africa is assuring the rest of the world of a fertile ground in which to plant their investment, and of an enabling political and social environment that would allow the investment to grow and bear fruits for all concerned. Africa is thus giving a pledge that it will not allow the dysfunctional scenario of the past to recreate and repeat itself. This new position is the hallmark of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). It is envisaged that with the new AU, many of the old shall pass away, and many things are to become new!

NEPAD is now the engine that should drive the new African Union towards prosperity. It is a framework that is multi-dimensional with the goals of promoting accelerated economic growth and sustainable development, eradicating widespread and severe poverty as well as integrating Africa into the globalization process. As an outcome of this, it is expected that within the new AU, Africans are to enjoy a new kind of fraternity that had not been evident in most of post-colonial Africa. Thus, if NEPAD is to work in tandem with the AU, it becomes clear that the unity of Africa – the coming together of its peoples – should constitute one of the fundamental issues that NEPAD has to grapple with in its operation.

It is posited here that one of the obstacles to the kind of unity that the new Africa envisages is xenophobia and that the mass media are well placed to deal with the situation and help NEPAD achieve its goals.

2. WHAT IS NEPAD?

NEPAD is the final version of a series of initiatives that include the Millennium Partnership for Africa's Recovery Plan (MAP), the Omega Plan – both of which led to the New Africa Initiative that then culminated in the new partnership. It has been variously described as a development strategy that should integrate Africa into the world economy (Govender, 2003); as a neo-liberal economic model related to "free market fundamentalism"

(Ngwane, 2002) and as a springboard for Africa's renaissance. However, in specific terms, it is:

- A holistic, comprehensive integrated strategic framework for the socio-economic development of Africa. The NEPAD document provides the vision for Africa, a statement of the problems facing the continent and a programme of action to resolve these problems in order to reach this vision.
- A plan that has been conceived and developed by African leaders.
- A comprehensive integrated development plan that addresses key social, economic and political priorities in a coherent and balanced manner.
- A commitment that African leaders are making to African people and to the international community to place Africa on a path of sustainable growth.
- A commitment that African leaders are making to accelerate the integration of the African continent into the global economy.
- A framework for a new partnership with the rest of the world.
- A call to the rest of the world to partner Africa in her own development on the basis of her own agenda and programme of action.

Its goals are:

- (i) To promote accelerated growth and sustainable development.
- (ii) To eradicate widespread and severe poverty.
- (iii) To halt the marginalization of Africa in the globalization process.

The interesting selling point of NEPAD is that it is not being imposed from outside. It is supposedly home-grown and indigenous and this sense of ownership is seen as the key factor to its sustainability.

In the past couple of years, NEPAD has come under severe criticism as a phenomenon whose success depends essentially on the benevolence of others, thus placing Africa's development in the hands and at the mercy of speculators and gamblers of the global casino and the Bretton Woods institutions (African Caucus, 2002). Some have doubted the indigeneity of the programme, arguing that it must have been imposed or, at least, inspired from outside. But in spite of these, the programme seems to be forging ahead, having been endorsed by some western powers such as Britain and Canada who hailed it as a way forward for Africa's development.

NEPAD is still in its infancy and any verdict about its success at the moment would be premature. It is, nonetheless, important to recognize that in order for it to achieve its goals many obstacles need to be dealt with.

One fact stands out, however. It seems that much emphasis is often placed on the importance and significance of NEPAD from the perspective of interaction with the industrialised world. For instance, Short (2002) argues that if NEPAD is to succeed, it must transform the relationship between Africa and the rest of the world. It must bring a new drive, a political energy and a greatly sharpened focus to joint efforts between Africa and the industrialized world to push forward the development of Africa. With this kind of emphasis, a very fundamental issue is often ignored or, at best, glossed over – that is, for a meaningful interaction with the rest of the world, there must first be a successful integration of the peoples of the continent so they can confront the rest of the world as a unit. Such integration cannot take place unless a conducive environment is first established in which Africans of whatever background and from whichever nation state can live and work in peace in whatever part of the continent they wish to adopt as home. So far, African unity appears to be seen essentially at the governmental level. This cannot sustain the spirit of the new AU and the African Renaissance that should help bring about a new way in which Africans look at themselves as a people with common interests, experience, aspirations and goals. Coming together at the governmental level is a much easier task than living together at grassroots without fear or prejudice. It is the latter that calls for a special focus.

One of the areas of concern with regard to the integration and unity of Africans is the incessant conflicts that continuously threaten to tear the continent apart. These conflicts are both intra-national and international, the former being the more prevalent. These intra-national conflicts are often the outcomes of internal political and/or economic power squabbles and rivalries. Some of these conflicts sometimes escalate into civil wars. Some do not quite make it, but remain menacingly explosive while they last. However, there is a genre of conflict that occurs, which has not been given sufficient coverage, yet it is very crucial in the pursuit of the goals of NEPAD, because of its roots and consequences. This is the conflict that derives from all forms of discrimination, especially racism and xenophobia. Such conflict has been known to be quite vicious and has gone on for a while now in Africa. Xenophobia and other forms of discrimination are serious global issues that have been brought onto the global agenda on many occasions. The conflict that derives from these kinds of discrimination helps to create an atmosphere of insecurity and instability that does not encourage foreign (and sometimes local) investment that ought to engender development. Therefore, in this discourse, an attempt is made to examine the phenomenon of xenophobia and how the mass media can help to eliminate it and contribute to the creation of a favourable environment for investment and development that would work towards achieving some of the goals of NEPAD.

3. XENOPHOBIA

Xenophobia has been defined as the deep dislike of non-nationals of a recipient state embodied in a discriminatory attitude and behaviour towards such non-nationals and culminating in violence against them, abuses of all sorts and the exhibition of hatred. In its most explosive form, xenophobia has been manifested in killings and ethnic cleansing that have been witnessed in many parts of Africa and the rest of the world. Although it is a global problem, its targets vary across countries and nations.

Pedahzur and Yishai (1999), who studied the state of xenophobia in Israel, have come up with three theoretical approaches that account for the rise and diffusion of hatred. The first relates mainly to the socio-economic status of individuals; the second pertains basically to their cultural identity; and the third focuses on the general attributes of society.

The second approach is of particular interest to the mass media. This cultural symbolic approach holds that animosity towards the other is not necessarily a consequence of economic competition between rival groups, but a product of early political and value socialization (McConahay, 1982). Here, cultural differences among people could be responsible for conflicts and hatred (Wimmer, 1997). In this approach, it is suggested that people are more comfortable being among their kind than having the other around them. Here, the inability of certain minority groups to integrate into the structure and culture of society leads the majority population to xenophobic rejection. Rejection of a group based on differences in culture means that the majority population does not really understand the minority group – who they are, where they are coming from, the predisposing factors to their present behavioural pattern, their world view and their aspirations.

President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa underscored the problem of xenophobia during the celebration of Africa Day in 2001. He first lamented the low level of knowledge among South Africans about the continent of Africa, explaining that this is partly the result of many years of international isolation of the country and the fact that, historically, “a significant part of our international relations has focused on interaction with the countries of the North, especially Europe”. He blamed the mass media for doing little to inform South Africa’s population about the continent in a balanced way, noting that what tends to get reported are the negative things that do, indeed, occur on the continent. He underlined the fact that “the continent has a very rich culture to which we are not exposed, except, perhaps, in the area of popular music”. He noted that a better understanding of these cultures “would help us greatly to understand both ourselves and the sister peoples of Africa, with whom we are bound by a common destiny”. The President stressed the necessity of paying attention to improving teaching about Africa

in schools and institutions of higher learning, not only in subjects such as history and geography, but also to matters of culture and current political and socio-economic activity as well as languages. But beyond this, he urged the public broadcaster, the SABC, to make a special effort “to educate our broad population about the continent, to address the historical bias according to which our population in general would be more familiar with countries of Europe and North America than with their own continent” (Mbeki, 2001).

Mbeki’s message underscores the fact that ignorance is a very vital element in xenophobia and should be addressed.

4. WHAT THE MASS MEDIA CAN/SHOULD DO

Ignorance is a serious state of information deprivation that sometimes makes it difficult for people to think beyond the here and now. It is a state of mind that derives from limited or incomplete information and, therefore, knowledge, which could in turn lead to irrational behaviour.

Because of poverty on the continent, it is often difficult for many to go physically beyond their immediate places of abode. Therefore, the world they know is their small environment. They lack information either from experience or otherwise and, consequently, their worldview is very narrow. There are usually wide gaps in knowledge. If, as Mbeki notes, a better understanding of our cultures would help greatly in understanding ourselves as Africans, any action to improve this understanding is a welcome proposition in dealing with xenophobia.

Dealing with xenophobia and other forms of discrimination is a serious challenge for the media of mass communication. The obvious and logical strategy to deal with the situation is to be involved in continuous cross-cultural communication in their content with the goal being to contribute to the elimination of ignorance. Since ignorance and the attendant discrimination result principally from information deficiency, the mass media are placed in a strategic position to deal with the situation. When it is recognized that human behaviour cannot go beyond the human thought or that people’s behaviour can only be within the limits of their thought, and that an individual’s thought derives from the information he possesses, then it would be easy to appreciate that one’s thought, and, therefore, one’s behaviour is only as good as the information he possesses. Xenophobes are guided by the limitations of their thought. Consequently, the best way to expand that thought would be to increase the amount of information available to the individual and encourage him/her to utilize such information. The main challenge for the mass media would, therefore, be to provide individuals with enough, adequate and relevant information about their environment and other societies, making a serious and sustained effort to emphasize areas of similarity among groups while de-emphasizing

the kind of differences that promote discord. In their day-to-day selection and dissemination of news, the mass media should pay attention to this responsibility.

In different parts of the world, the mass media have been identified as contributing to dysfunctional images of (minority) groups within given societies. In Europe, for instance, there have been concerns that the mass media have played a significant role in inciting negative attitudes towards immigrants (Ter Wal, 2001) and suggestions have been made about how to deal with the situation. In 2002, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia reported that the British media were involved in the promotion of anti-Muslim prejudices, especially after September 11, 2001. Similarly, the American media, in their coverage of the aftermath of the World Trade Centre bombings, have helped generate a feeling of anger and prejudice against people of Arab descent (<http://www.wtps.co.uk/latestnews>).

In South Africa, the situation is equally disturbing. In a 2002 report released by the FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION (FXI) organization in South Africa, concern was expressed regarding the extent to which the mass media contribute to xenophobia in the country. According to the report (<http://www.fx.org.za/update/aprilmayup/xenoph.htm>), media headlines “were specifically to blame for encouraging misinformation and xenophobia”. As an illustration, it noted a headline, which stated *Cops Nail Illegal Aliens, Recover Luxury Vehicles*, thereby creating the misconception that the illegal aliens were in possession of the stolen vehicles. However, the text of the article offered better insight into the two separate police operations: one in which people were arrested for being “illegal aliens” and another totally separate police operation, which saw the police confiscate luxury vehicles to the value of R1.1 million. In the latter, the police arrested “four men” who were not identified as being anything in the article and were, therefore, presumably, South African.

In another report, the South African media were berated for stoking xenophobia. Dube (2000) reported a survey that indicated that the South African media are guilty of stoking xenophobic tendencies towards African migrants. And to compound the problems of many of the refugees and immigrants, the South African media have perpetuated the stereotype that an African immigrant is “illegal” and a criminal who brings diseases such as AIDS to the country. The report accused the media of always taking, without analyzing or investigating, the word of Home Affairs officials and of the police, who are also accused of xenophobic tendencies.

Given such “indictments” it is clear what the mass media can, and should, do.

The training of journalists should be re-examined such that curricula should reflect the need to produce journalists who are aware of the human rights of others and are ready

to protect them. In this regard, they will realize that it is part of their responsibility to provide factual coverage that does not perpetuate myths, encourage generalizations and spread misinformation about people from other cultures.

Beyond straight news, the mass media, especially television, can utilize the entertainment format to address ethnic or trans-national issues and problems. For instance, soap operas and radio and TV drama series are becoming very popular in many African countries and can be used to fill the information gaps that were discussed earlier. Rather than promote class, ethnic and social differences, these programmes could focus on those cultural, ethnic and social issues with the aim of destroying stereotypes and myths, and promoting understanding among various groups and nationalities. A better understanding could then lead to more acceptance and a further breakdown of different sorts of barriers and a reduction of tension and conflict that often result from misunderstanding.

In addition to entertainment, the mass media could organize discussion programmes in which pertinent issues regarding the fostering of unity are dealt with. When such programmes are given adequate airing, the media would be bringing about an awareness that is necessary to deal with and resist the various attempts at political manipulation and exploitation of people's ignorance.

There are various other avenues that could be exploited by the mass media to make meaningful contributions to the establishment of peace, security and stability on the continent. The mass media must continue to explore such avenues.

5. CONCLUSION

It would be naïve and probably unrealistic to suggest that the mass media alone can bring about peace, security and stability that should propel the ideals of the new African Union and pursue the goals of NEPAD.

This discourse has briefly examined Africa's new initiative called NEPAD and its strategies for pulling Africa out of its present stupor. Its plans and goals are realistic and achievable. But no one sector of society can claim to have the solution to all the problems that the initiative poses. Neither can any stand aloof and expect the others to do the job. Each sector has a contribution to make. The summary of the contribution of the mass media in achieving the goals of NEPAD is to make enough and meaningful information available to all stakeholders so they can be empowered in their different niches to participate in the general endeavour.

But it must be pointed out that the mass media are not a magic wand. What is suggested is not a panacea. That the mass media can make information available to all does not

mean that all will necessarily take advantage of the information available. For instance, to help solve the problem of ignorance and xenophobia, the mass media can make relevant information available but cannot force people to make use of it. There are some who would rather remain in their ignorance because it serves their purpose. Some xenophobes may still remain so in spite of available information because behaving otherwise would be too cognitively turbulent for them. So all the mass media can really do is to take the horse to the river. The horse would then decide to drink or not.

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