

REVIEW ESSAYS

MEDIA IN AFRICA

Francis Nyamnjoh. *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging.* London: Zed Books, 2005. 308 pp. References. Index. \$29.95. Paper.

Ragnar Waldahl. *Politics and Persuasion: Media Coverage of Zimbabwe's 2000 Election.* Harare: Weaver Press, 2004. Distributed by African Books Collective Ltd., Unit 13 Kings Meadow, Ferry Hinksey Rd., Oxford, OX2 0DP, UK. 148 pp. Bibliography. \$24.95. Paper.

Jennifer Hasty. *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xvi + 189 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$22.95. Paper.

LIKE MOST MEDIA STUDIES of Africa, these focus on a country within each author's field of specialization or expertise: they are case studies of the media in Cameroon, Zimbabwe, and Ghana, respectively. Only rarely do authors take on the whole continent, or even a whole region, and when they do, it is usually as editors of a collection of essays by country specialists (as in Beverly Hawks's *Africa's Media Image*, Praeger, 1992) or a collection of conference papers (as in *Media and Democracy in Africa*, Nordic Institute, 2002).

Francis Nyamnjoh's book, however, is an attempt to do both, since one-third of it (the first one hundred pages) deals with the media and democracy throughout the continent and the remaining two-thirds with the media and democracy in Cameroon. As such, it really amounts to two books, each of which could stand on its own, although there is no indication of this in a title that is very misleading because it does not even mention Cameroon, the subject of most of the book. Perhaps the publishers, understandably with an eye to sales, thought that there would be more of a market for a book on Africa's media, since Cameroon is a country not often covered either in the media or in media studies of Africa (except, of course, for the author's thirteen publications on the subject listed in the references).

But these reservations are not intended to detract from the high quality of this study, which also deals with the new information technologies, ethnicity and belonging, media ownership and control, and media ethics,

professionalism, and training in Africa. As the author explains, his book “examines the media in action in the 1990s, seeking to understand how the media have contributed to the continent’s efforts at democratisation in a context of growing obsession with belonging” (1). With such competing and conflicting understandings of democracy, he says, the outcome has been “the propagation of liberal democratic rhetoric in principle while at the same time promoting the struggles for recognition and representation of the various cultural, ethnic or sectarian groups with which they identify.” Thus, “the politics of belonging” is central to understanding democracy in Africa and the role of the media in promoting it (3).

In considering “the press and its predicaments” in Africa, the author shows that continuity between past and present has been an important factor in accounting for the failure to achieve freedom of expression and access to the media. If the colonial press was either at the service of the settler communities (as in East, Central, and southern Africa) or victim of repressive laws, the postcolonial press was similarly either “the mouthpiece of the government or subjected to draconian laws and administrative censorship” (43). In this regard, the Francophone colonies were worse off than their Anglophone counterparts (where some anticolonial newspapers were tolerated) because they were subjected to a policy specifically designed to discourage the development of a critical local press. Even greater control was exercised over broadcasting, which was owned and operated as a government monopoly throughout the colonial period, a legacy inherited by the postcolonial governments. With the “second wave of democratization,” beginning in the 1990s, most African governments opened up the airwaves to private enterprise and removed many of the restrictions on the press. But despite the proliferation of new radio stations (in West Africa alone, seventy-two opened in the 1990s) and the appearance of hundreds of new newspapers (most of them with a very short life-span), the promises of democratization and a free and unfettered media have not been fulfilled.

In explaining this failure, the author places much of the blame on the journalists themselves, although he does recognize that the media are in many ways a reflection of their society: “If the politics and culture of the larger society are dishonest and corrupt (or unethical), it is unlikely that the media will be any different” (86). And even if the media were to attempt to play an active role in facilitating “genuine democratization,” they would find themselves in a “hostile environment if prevailing attitudes and practices [were] not in tune with the spirit of change” (272). As for the practitioners’ share of the blame, the author finds both the state-employed journalists and broadcasters and their private or independent counterparts at fault: the former for behaving more like loyal civil servants than media professionals, and the latter for assuming “a partisan, highly politicised, militant role in Africa.” Here the Cameroon experience is cited to show how “scapegoatism, partisanship, and regional and ethnic tendencies in

the media have affected their liberal democratic responsibility to act as honest, fair and neutral mediators—accessible to all” (231). Similar complaints are quoted from the Zambian media analyst Francis Kassoma, who has been very critical of the independent tabloids for their “muckraking journalistic exploits” and their “vendetta journalism” (83). It seems most unfair, however, to criticize the independent press for being “antigovernment” when holding government accountable to the public is one of its main obligations, especially when the state-owned media serve as government apologists.

NOWHERE IS THIS more evident than in Zimbabwe, where the independent press has often been the only source of information on government misdemeanors, whether they be corruption, electoral fraud, or state-sponsored violence and human rights abuses. As Ragnar Waldahl’s *Politics and Persuasion* shows, these newspapers were also an important source for understanding what was at stake in Zimbabwe’s 2000 parliamentary election and how that election was carried out in a climate of intimidation and fear, tempered by hope, only to end in widespread dismay and disillusionment. The timing of Waldahl’s study could not have been better since 2000 was a watershed year, preceded by two momentous events in Zimbabwe’s political development: the formation of the first credible opposition party since independence in 1980 (the Movement for Democratic Change, or MDC, led by the trade unionist Morgan Tsvangirai) and the establishment of the first independent daily newspaper, the *Daily News*, which challenged, and then overtook, its government-owned rival. These and other significant developments are discussed in a survey chapter on Zimbabwe politics and the media since independence. This is followed by an analysis of media coverage of the parties’ positions on such divisive economic and social issues as poverty and unemployment, land ownership and occupation, and “people’s rights” and the rule of law. The three central chapters deal with how the media covered the various problems arising from the implementation of the election, from voter registration to polling day, and the media’s treatment of the politically related violence that occurred during the electoral campaign. In effect, the author asks whether the election was “free and fair.” He also includes a profile of Zimbabwe’s media—the government-owned Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and Zimpapers (e.g., the *Herald* and the *Chronicle*), the independent *Daily News*, and the weekly *Financial Gazette*, *Zimbabwe Independent*, and the *Standard*—which would have been better placed at the beginning of the book rather than near the end. And a final chapter places political journalism in a Zimbabwe context.

Not surprisingly, the verdict of this book and indeed of most election monitors and observers (including those from the Commonwealth, the European Union, and the United States) is that this election was not free and fair. Beginning with a notoriously flawed electoral roll that favored the ruling ZANU-PF, it was conducted in an atmosphere of state-sponsored vio-

lence that prevented the MDC from campaigning in many parts of the country (the “no-go” areas) and from placing its electoral agents in many of the polling stations. As the human rights NGOs (particularly the Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum, which conducted its own electoral survey) confirmed, nearly all the victims of this violence were opposition supporters, who were beaten, tortured, or killed by the war veterans and the youth militia deployed by the government to occupy the white-owned land as well.

Nor was there a “level playing field” as far as the media were concerned, since, as the Zimbabwe Media Monitoring Project (ZMMP) reported, the ZBC allocated nearly 90 percent of its electoral coverage to promoting the ZANU-PF campaign (and much of the remainder to denigrating the MDC). However, there was one redeeming feature to this skewed media coverage, as the author points out, and that was the role of the independent press, especially the *Daily News*. Unlike all previous elections, this one not only had an opposition party capable of winning a free and fair election, it also had an independent daily to cover both sides of the campaign and to challenge the propaganda of Zimpapers, a task shared with the weeklies and critical monthlies such as *Moto* and *Horizon*.

In considering the results of the election, the author concludes that it was a “dead heat.” ZANU-PF had a mere 1.5 percent lead in the popular vote and won only five more parliamentary seats than the MDC. Even with Mugabe’s power to appoint another thirty MPs (including the chiefs), the ruling party still would not have had the two-thirds majority necessary to amend the constitution. The election also revealed an electorate as highly polarized as the media reporting. An overwhelming majority of the Ndebele, urban, and youth vote went to the MDC, reflecting an ethnic, generational, and modernity divide. However, ZANU-PF could still rely upon the rural areas controlled by the war vets and the militia and also where monitors and observers were thin on the ground. Nevertheless, the obvious question about these opportunities for electoral fraud is not considered here, even though the MDC challenged the results in thirty-eight of the one hundred constituencies by taking their charges of electoral malpractice to the courts before Mugabe packed their membership with his party supporters.

Otherwise, this is a useful and comprehensive survey of Zimbabwe’s 2000 election, which can be supplemented by the ZMMP report on Election 2000, *The Media War* (2003). However, whether the word “persuasion” should have been included in the title of a book dealing with such a violent election must remain open to question.

FIELDWORK IS AN important part of African studies, especially for anthropologists. The anthropologist Jennifer Hasty not only observed her subjects, she actually joined them. Also unusual was the choice of a country, Ghana, which was not her original choice as a fieldwork site but offered

easier access and wider opportunities for research than Nigeria, the original choice. As it turned out, she probably made a wise decision, because while the media in Ghana were free to operate in the newly emerging multiparty democracy that succeeded the years of the authoritarian presidency of Jerry Rawlings, the media in Nigeria were still struggling against the restrictions imposed by the military rule of the Abacha regime. As the author explains, then, the book is based upon her “experiences as a journalist and researcher over the seven-year period of democratic renewal and consolidation in Ghana from 1995 to 2002” (xii).

The division of the book coincides with the author’s division of labor, part 1 dealing with the state press and part 2 with the private press. Like Waldahl in Zimbabwe, she was also present for a watershed election, but in Ghana it was the opposition, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) led by John Kufour, that emerged victorious, defeating Rawlings’s National Democratic Congress (NDC) and hand-picked successor to the presidency. Throughout the campaign, the author worked for the privately owned *Ghanaian Independent*, writing political and cultural stories along with an occasional editorial and even a guest contribution to the editor’s political column. From there, she moved on to the leading state paper, the *Daily Graphic*, from which she went out on “invited assignments” to cover development initiatives (known in Africa as “development journalism”), obviously in a favorable light. Then she went back to the private sector to work at the investigative *Ghanaian Chronicle* and later at *Public Agenda*, which was financed by an NGO with pan-African aspirations. And in between, she worked at the official Ghana News Agency (GNA), where journalists were assigned to “polish and improve” the speeches of politicians (160). With this comprehensive experience, she more or less covered the whole gamut of the news media in Ghana except for broadcasting, which was not included in the research project.

Throughout the study, Hasty examines Ghanaian journalism at three levels—rhetoric, text, and practice—an approach that involved the author in “mapping contradictions” among them and recognizing the deep divide separating the practices of journalism at state and private newspapers. As she explains, “state and private journalists articulate different forms of professional rhetoric, deploy different tactics of newsgathering, negotiate different political pressures, and enjoy different forms of compensation and reward for their work” (28). By examining the writings of leading Ghanaian journalists, she is able to show how state journalism draws on “development discourse” while private journalism relies on the international rhetoric of democracy and human rights. In both cases, however, the influence of the “big men” in African politics is ever present, with the state press defending and applauding the leadership and the private press attacking their policies and exposing fraud and corruption. This distinction is vividly displayed in the dozen or so photographs of the front pages of several Ghanaian newspapers, especially those depicting the often lurid and sen-

sational allegations in the independent press about the “big men” and their entourages.

ALTOGETHER, THESE STUDIES provide valuable insights into the operation of the media in Africa, at least in some parts of it. Of the three authors, Nyamnjoh is certainly the most critical, regarding African journalists as undertrained, unprofessional, and unreliable, engaging in Jekyll-and-Hyde-like behavior. But as the only African author among them (and a representative of CODESRIA as well), he perhaps should be allowed to indulge in Afro-pessimism. While the other authors appear to have been immune from such practices, Hasty may have been struck by the Jekyll-and-Hyde analogy when she found herself having to attack the Ghanaian government in one publication and defend it in another, only to repeat the process with each new journalistic appointment. This problem—along with the challenge of having to write intelligibly for a Ghanaian audience on the one hand and an anthropological one on the other—she appears to have surmounted in great style.

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