

Chapter 1

Challenging Traditional Media Hegemonic Practices: A Kenyan Case

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ABSTRACT

The top-bottom model espoused by the traditional media structures is being problematized by the emerging technological change in the 21st century. Kenya presents an example of bottom-top model, which is a challenge to the hegemonic potential of top-down model. In the discussion that follows, we will establish how media in Kenya have been operating within a top-bottom model until recently. This top-bottom model has been problematized by the emergence of the new communication technologies (NCTs), which have allowed individuals to challenge dominant voices and myths, alter representation and meaning of symbols and vocabulary, and re-define politico-social structures around which the luminal rituals of the national have been interwoven for the sole purpose of fostering group cohesion. We argue in this discussion that the proliferation of NCTs and communication strategies have dismembered the nation by stimulating exponential multiplication of discursive regimes that may have been impossible previously when media technologies were confined to the control of a central, and oftentimes restrictive authority. It is against this background that we seek to probe the extent to which media technologies are inefaceably co-opted into designs of the dominant ideology and various other hegemonic structures.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, news media are like frogs before a thunderstorm and pose the question of whether

we can hear anything on account of them. Unlike the 19th century with newspapers and the 20th with newspapers, radio, and television, 21st century media are numerous, novel, often participatory, and challenging. How are we to hear anything

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from them with increased novel convergence; a disruption of a predominantly top-bottom communication model?

The top-bottom model espoused by the traditional media structures is being problematized by the emerging technological changes. Kenya presents an example of bottom-top model, which is a challenge to the hegemonic potential of top-down model. In the discussion that follows, we will establish how media in Kenya have been operating within a top-bottom model until recently. This top-bottom model has been problematized by the emergence of new communication technologies (NCTs), which have allowed individuals to challenge dominant voices and myths, alter representation and meaning of symbols and vocabulary, and re-define politico-social structures around which the luminal rituals of the nation have been interwoven for the sole purpose of fostering group cohesion. We argue in this discussion that the proliferation of NCTs and communication strategies have dismembered the nation by stimulating exponential multiplication of discursive regimes that may have been impossible previously when media technologies were confined to the control of a central, and oftentimes restrictive, authority.

Historically, Kenya's restricted information flow and limited circulation of the print media formed an integral part of consolidating rather than challenging the spatial politics of the national. Little wonder that, until recently, Kenyans had become acquiesced to a discourse that presented the national both as a cognitive and administrative authority while (mis)presenting contesting and alternative voices as detrimental. Therein lay the success of the national communication model, which thrived on purging the self as a discursive and communicative space. We are not insinuating that this space was non-existent; rather, we are emphasizing how oppressive structures were put in place to render tolerant discursive spaces taciturn because the success of national politics thrived on its reticence. The burgeoning of NCTs is changing the laconic disposition of this space.

From a global standpoint, most African countries are still trying to get onto the information super highway despite the unprecedented technological advancement. Alemneh & Hastings (2006) have noted the increasing concerns on whether the Internet is assisting Africa to realize its development plans or, to the contrary, the Internet is merely intensifying the existing economic disparity between the poor and the rich. The Internet penetration in Africa is only 5.6% compared to 26.9% in the rest of the world (www.internetworldstats.com). By March 2009, it was estimated that more than 55 million Africans were accessing the Internet. This is only 3.4% of the global Internet access. In spite of these low figures, Africa is adopting new communication technologies at a notable rate. Kenya, with a population of 39 million, for instance, had an estimated 3 million Internet users by early 2009 (www.internetworldstats.com). This is 15 fold increase from 2000 when only 0.2 million people were connected to the Internet. Kenya is ranked fourth in sub-Saharan Africa behind Nigeria (10 million users), South Africa (4.6 million users) and Sudan (3.5 million users). Kenya has an 8% Internet penetration. But it is the mobile devices, especially cellular phones that have revolutionized communication in Kenya because of their ability to bypass the necessity of elaborate infrastructure such as electricity installation, especially in rural areas. It is estimated that at least 12 million Kenyans, nearly a third of the population, have cellular phones. The current expanding mediascape in Kenya, increasing Internet penetration, and the rising number of cellular phone users present a potential for change in the media hegemony.

MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES, DOMINANT IDEOLOGY AND HEGEMONIC STRUCTURES

Across the globe, the media have generally been lauded for their positive contribution in democ-

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