

## **MEDIA AS A POLITICAL TOOL FOR DOMINANCE: A CASE OF UGANDA**

By: Semambo Henry (+256773522636, 8011938596)

Email: semambohenry @yahoo.com

MA Journalism and Mass communication (from Assam University, India)

Kampala, Uganda

### **Abstract**

Libertarian theory states that nothing in the world should be restricted. It further says that, there should be free circulation of information in the world and a country should be a free market of ideas/information. However, according to Uganda media research report 2015, media leaders in Uganda constantly acknowledge that there are problems regarding the quality of journalism as often seen in the lack of depth and accuracy, lack of balance and fairness, moralization rather than analysis, provision of excitement and incitement rather than information, and unwanted attacks on the lives of private citizens.

Different media houses have been censored, journalists and political leaders arrested and jailed due to the information they disseminate through media channels mainly electronic media.

Using observation analysis, the Uganda government has constantly accused the media users of violating the media rules. Similarly, the media users also have constantly blamed the government for denying them freedom of press some times. Therefore, this paper intends to examine the ways media can lead to self violation of one`s human rights and freedom, identifies kinds of media messages fit for broadcasting or telecasting and assess the extent media should monitor government organs and activities or policies . It also recommends that the government of Uganda should promote media literacy among citizens. This will help all citizens to clearly detect false media messages on their own. Besides, journalists are recommended to gather correct facts before disseminating information and should be objective in their reporting. Uganda media houses should employ well trained journalists and organize for them journalism seminars. This will help them update their information reporting skills and principles

Key words: Dominance, Media, moralization, Press freedom, political tool.

## **Introduction**

Media refer to all communication channels through which information is disseminated to the intended audience with the aim of fulfilling the desired goals of the sender. In Uganda, the commonly used communication channels include; television, radio, newspapers, plays, music (songs), films and new media platforms.

The Ugandan media originates from colonial days when Uganda was still a British protectorate; the British introduced media industry in Uganda in 1954 aimed at supporting the colonial agenda of the colonial government (Bob, Denis.O, 2012)

According to agenda setting theory (1968), always issues highlighted by different media are considered vital by the people. This implies that people tend to do what media tell them in their agenda. The Uganda Broadcasting Cooperation (UBC), state owned rebroadcasted BBC and other local programmes meant to counter anti-British pro independent voices by local pan Africanists. Even in colonial days, media freedom was restricted because the black pan Africanists used the media to attack the colonial masters (Lugalambi, 2010:13).

Quoting Lugalambi, Bob Odongo (2012), says when Uganda got her independence on 9th October 1962, the post independent Ugandan government took control of the UBC and continued with the same aggression towards the media. It is reported that critical politicians and journalists were arrested and jailed during Obote`s government with publications called “Ssekanyolya” being banned after the 1966 Uganda crisis. This contradicts with libertarian theory which says there should be free circulation of ideas/information and the country should be a free market of ideas/information.

For very long period, UBC remained a government mouth piece with very little independence in its broadcasting therefore lost meaning. There were no laws to protect the media practitioners while performing their job. This meant much interference from the state in the matters concerning national broadcasters (Lugalambi, 2012)

The Uganda government uses its national laws to bring charges against journalists, restrict the number of people who can lawfully be journalists, revoke broadcasting licenses without due process of law, and practice other forms of repression. Similar laws exist in other countries but in Uganda, the government uses laws in a partisan way to create a minefield for media owners and reporters who speak or write about issues that the government deems politically sensitive or controversial (Human Rights Watch,2010)

According to social responsibility theory, media have freedom to show what they want but must follow some rules/principles governing them. The theory emphasizes that mass media should be controlled by people`s opinions, actions and ethics rather than by the state.

Serbert et al (1956), reinforces this by saying that the government has to act as a regulating agency to limit the number of channels and frequencies

According to Bob.D.O (2012), the 2010 Press and Journalist Amendment Bill should not only be revised, but should be repealed and withdrawn in its totality because it gives more threat to the freedom of expression in Uganda. The overwhelming powers given to the information minister to appoint members of the regulatory bodies of the media should be reduced with self regulating system taking a central role as far as the regulatory mechanism is concerned. He further recommends that, individual clauses for the media laws should be directed to the media industry rather than to individual journalists who are employees in their capacity

### **Ways Media lead to Self Violation of One's Human Rights**

According to Human Rights Watch (2010), the government should permit people to have freedom of expression and access to information. However, In Uganda, any right can be taken away from someone immediately he/she abuses his/her own human rights. In fact, it should be freedom of expression if you don't encroach into other people's freedom.

Many media houses like KFM radio, NBS TV, ABS TV, Bukedde newspaper, Top radio etc in Uganda provide platforms to people who constantly abuse fellow Ugandans. Besides, some incite violence. In Uganda, it is a criminal case to abuse and incite violence. This has caused to the temporary banning of some media houses like; Radio CBS, Radio one, Daily monitor, KFM etc. Politicians like; COL.Dr. Kiza Besigye, Hon Betty Nambooze, Hon.Kyagulanyi Sentamu have constantly been arrested by Uganda police over inciting violence

According to the state of Uganda media freedom research report (2015), the media explosion accelerated the government's interest in controlling media. Between 1986 and 2004, more than 24 journalists were charged in the courts of law on criminal publication offences. Between 2007 and February 2010, the authorities summoned 34 journalists on matters related to their work and 25 were charged with various offences.

In Uganda, once you become a true critic journalist in your reporting, you get summoned by the police and get charged with various offences. This threatens journalists and stop publishing true information against the government. The government does this with a deliberate aim to keep its loopholes hidden from citizens.

President Museveni has constantly denounced and threatened the media. For example, in April 2007, the president met media owners and editors at the Uganda state house. He accused them of granting his opponents room to abuse him. "I am going to shut down your radios" said president Museveni intending to warn media owners. After the meeting, some media owners ordered their producers not to allow certain individuals to appear on their political talk shows any longer (Uganda Media freedom Research Report 2015)

In Uganda, censorship goes up to songs of some musicians which seem to have information against government practices. For example, Africa song by Ronald Mayinja was banned temporarily by the government. Music is a strong communication tool used in Uganda. In fact, many political leaders including president Museveni use songs to transmit their messages to voters in election period. However, in the process, their songs attempt to cause hatred and incite violence according to the Uganda police. For example, Bobi Wine (Hon.Kyagulanyi Sentamu) a legislator from Kyadondo east constituency has recently been blocked from using both televisions and radios to disseminate any information to the Ugandans. This is because he was using his freedom of speech to encourage Ugandans to strongly resist the proposed amendment bill for article 102b brought by Hon.Magezi from NRM (National Resistance Movement) ruling party. The bill is about removing the age limit of 75years for the president. Indeed, through his songs, Bobi Wine has succeeded in encouraging all Ugandans to detest the current amendment bill. The government reacted by stopping him to stage any music shows which he claims to be his daily source of income

According to magic bullet theory, media can penetrate people`s minds and instantly create an affect. In fact, no matter how educated, their social status people are, magic bullets of propaganda penetrate through their defenses and transform their thoughts and actions.

Frank Gashumba, a civil society activist has constantly used social media to abuse executive manager of Vision group Mr. Robert Kabushenga. He accuses him of publishing false information about him. Besides, Religious leaders have constantly broadcasted information against other religions. Each pastor makes people think he is better than others through media. This has led to the summoning of many pastors by the police and thus given punishments of cleaning public places.

### **What kind of Messages should be Broadcast or Telecast**

Human Rights Watch (2010), Uganda authorities regularly state that broadcasts are inciting the public to commit violence as the rationale for why suspension and closures are necessary. In Uganda, information against the government policies is considered an attempt to incite violence. However, sometimes, opposition leaders use media to disseminate information which cause riots in the country. From September 10-12<sup>th</sup> 2009, riots erupted in Kampala leaving 27 people dead. The broadcasting council shut down four radio stations; CBS, Suubi, Sapientia and Kaboozi kubiri accusing them of inciting violence (state freedom Media Report, 2010)

During election campaigns, different media channels are used to spread propaganda. The people always accept the media messages and eventually vote incompetent people into political offices.

According to agenda setting theory (1968), always issues highlighted by media are considered vital by the people. People tend to do what media tell them in their agenda. In fact, most Ugandan voters are always directed who to vote by the media.

Amnesty International (2011), reported many cases of violation of media freedom in Uganda occur mostly during political elections, demonstration and riots. Media council actions such as banning live television coverage showing the inhuman capture and arrest of the opposition leader Dr. Kizza Besigye and images of security officers firing into private homes, schools and hospitals, all portray how free media has been compromised in Uganda and all illustrate intimidation and harassment of media ( HRNJ-U, 2011:22)

The Uganda government influences media operations. For example, media houses are instructed not to host some strong opposition politicians on political programmes yet legislators from ruling party NRM are granted free media space to disseminate government propaganda. Any media which defy orders from authority are threatened to be banned

Human Rights Watch (2010:Article 19), most journalists have the view that Uganda government looks at media as a big threat to their existence rather than a partner in development and democratization process hence the enactment of domestic laws that undermine media freedom and independence.

### **What extent should Media Monitor Government Arms**

Media have to bridge the information gap between the citizens and central government. In Uganda, media industry is largely controlled by the state despite having many private media houses. According to CPJ (2009), journalists continue to be prevented from reporting the events which reflect negatively on the Uganda government and many have been physically beaten and tortured by security. In 2011, two social networks; face book and twitter were blocked on orders of UCC (Uganda Communication Commission) for 24 hours. This also happens during election process of declaring results. The political talk show programme named “ebimeeza” was absolutely banned by the government. Therefore, it is clear that mass media are theoretically protected by the law but in practice heavily censored in Uganda (Human Rights House Network, 2010). Uganda is a democratic nation and people are expected to have freedom of press. However, in Uganda, only journalists who publish information in line with the desires of the government enjoy the freedom of expression and press.

According to Human Rights Watch Report (2010), since 2005, attempts by journalists to conduct independent political reporting and analysis in print and on radio have been met by increasing government threats, intimidation, and harassment. In fact, tolerance of criticism and protection of free speech in Uganda fluctuates based on political factors. Campaign and election seasons are particularly tense when violations of freedom of expression tend to escalate.

Uganda`s 1995 constitution, a product of national consultation, contains strong provisions on freedom of expression. However, while NRM government has permitted more radio stations to function since coming to power, it has also passed a series of increasingly repressive laws and has expanded the number of government regulatory bodies which have mandates to oversee, control and monitor the media (HRW, 2010).

Therefore, it is evident that in Uganda, media industry doesn't have full freedom to report against the government practices. Criminal charges against journalists for critical speech are increasingly common in Uganda, though in the rare instances when a case goes before a judge, courts have often protected journalists from the full repressive potential of this tactic.

In Uganda, journalists and media owners constantly receive intimidation, harassment and penalty charges from the government attributed to the information they disseminate. This scares away journalists and stop reporting real information which the citizens need to know about the prevailing government policies and injustices.

According to Bob, Devis.O (2012), by 1993, the public media industry had become one of the sectors that were difficult to work in because the media professionals were not protected by the law and there was a lot of interference, intimidation and harassment and in some cases coercion by state apparatus. The absence of media censorship in a country is seen as an indication of a free society where people may criticize those holding power as well as stimulating debates on issues of national, regional and international importance (Smith, 2010:293). Similarly, media freedom is therefore "an important right" recognized in a democratic society as a mechanism and tool that enables the citizens to participate in their own governance through analyzing what the government is doing and holding their leaders accountable for their actions (HURINET-U, 2010:5)

However, in Uganda, media can't have total freedom. This is attributed to the fear of the government from the nature of anti government politicians who constantly decampaign government policies whether good or bad and disseminate messages of hatred to the public.

For example, the Uganda government introduced UPE and USE schemes to help Ugandans obtain free education at primary and secondary levels. These education schemes are good but decampaigned by the anti government politicians claiming that they have declined education levels in Uganda.

Once people's minds are corrupted by media, all sorts of bad long term consequences result not only bringing ruin to individual lives but also creating social problems on a vast scale (Marcuse,1941) Most problems like; prostitution and delinquency to urban violence and drug abuse are linked to media. Besides, teenage girls hate their bodies after reading beauty magazines. In Uganda, the government has constantly kept on influencing media activities through dictating on media content. Any media house that broadcasts against the content stated by the government, it is closed for a given period of time.

HRNJ-U (2011:5), the anti terrorism Act prohibits promoting acts of terrorism through publication. Media houses continue to be attacked, intimidated and their equipment vandalized by state security.

## **Conclusion**

In a democratic country like Uganda, media should be granted its total freedom. However, the media users like journalists should not forget their journalistic principles. They should report objectively without taking side or influence from anybody including government. Ugandan constitution guarantee basic freedom of expression and speech which includes freedom of press and media (Sekaggya 2010:39)

The government needs to promote media literacy. All media users should properly be taught their human rights and circumstances under which they can violate their own human rights and penalties attached in case one is found guilty of misusing his/her own freedom of expression. This will encourage all media users to be responsible while reporting or posting any information for public consumption.

In fact, social responsibility theory supports media to show any information of their choice provided they follow some rules governing them. The same theory allows reasonable government control of media. However, the government of Uganda seems to have over controlled media thus denying citizens chance to have active participation in the development process of their country through media.

Marshall, McLuhan (1964), says media is the message. He added that medium is as vital as the message and help to give focus and light on the message`s content. Therefore, without media freedom, there will be a huge information gap between citizens and the central government. The government should have less intervention in the media operations to allow media play its contributory role in promoting development and democracy in the country.

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