

The role of the media during the conflict and in the construction of democracy

Ismael Mateus

Ismael Mateus is Secretary General of the Union of Angolan Journalists (SJA). He has worked as editor in chief for media outlets in Angola and writes regularly in the independent press.

The Angolan media is currently facing the enormous challenge of transforming itself into a force for democratic change and national reconciliation after decades as a weapon in the country's ideological and military conflicts. The importance of the media to political struggle and control can be traced to the colonial period, when the Portuguese authorities and the anti-colonialists of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) transferred their differences to the airwaves. At the time, the programme *Angola Combatente*, for instance, was broadcast from Congo Brazzaville and secretly listened to in various parts of the country.

1975-1991: controlling the media

After independence, the warring parties used different media strategies to further their cause. The government developed a rationale of 'state journalism' stemming from Marxist-Leninist ideology. With the exception of the first years of revolutionary zeal, pressure and censorship were not applied through the prior authorization of articles. The archaic 'red pen' method of censorship was seldom used, but instead officials interfered directly with the decisions of editors and heads of news programmes.

In the name of war, media organizations were filled with people without the minimum technical or ethical qualifications to practice the profession. All that mattered was the political criterion; as long as political directives were adhered to, any worker, member of the military or political commissar could be a 'good journalist'. Conversely, no journalist would be considered adequate unless guided by the government's socialist ideology or conveying the political directives of the regime. The news agency (Angop), the state newspaper (*O Jornal de Angola*), the national radio (*Rádio Nacional de Angola*) and the public television station (*Televisão Pública de Angola*) all became vehicles for political rhetoric and attacks on the enemy.



The political and military instrumentalization of the media was a dominant feature of the first 16 years of independence. Its use for public mobilization was apparent at the first national information conference in 1982, which was responsible for defining the strategies to be followed by the media and which concluded that “the media must endeavour that the South African aggression is felt, in its real proportions, to be a problem for all Angolans.” The media was full of propagandistic interviews about military events, denunciations of opposition attacks and excited appeals for the defence of the nation against ‘the enemy’ – meaning Angolans belonging to the opposing side. Press reports reflected the government’s presentation of the state of the war, whether for purposes of improving troops’ morale, celebrating an important victory, or covering up a serious defeat. In times of more intense fighting, articles were more inflammatory, with long and aggressive editorials. At other times, there could be military battles or attacks known to the whole population, with hospitals full of wounded people, whilst the media calmly continued reporting trivial events or sporting victories.

1991-2002: liberalization and continuing war

This picture was slightly modified in 1991 with the regime’s switch to a multiparty political system. Soon the private media appeared: first the weekly *Correio da Semana* and then the radio station *Luanda Antena Comercial-LAC*. Unfortunately, this period lasted less than a year due to the general climate of the electoral campaign. Once again, the conflict dynamics determined journalistic practice. The state media (the newspaper *Jornal de Angola*, the radio programme *Angola Combatente* and state television) adopted a partisan discourse, as did UNITA’s media outlets, *Rádio Vorgan* (the Voice of the Black Cockerel), broadcast from Jamba, and the paper *Terra Angolana*.

If the campaign saw a return to partisan discourse in the press, the resumption of the war after the 1992 election triggered a resurgence of even more aggressive language. Viewing the media as an ideological party tool, government and UNITA-controlled institutions used the airwaves and public

space to exchange insults. Both parties reverted to inflammatory language, editorials, accusatory statements and intolerance.

As the war intensified, the press became more aggressive, not only towards the belligerents, but also towards the mediators and the international community. Margaret Anstee, then the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative to Angola, describes several instances of often personal hostility by outlets such as *Rádio Vorgan*: "Among the carefully selected remarks were accusations that I was corrupt, in the pay of the 'Futungistas' (that is, the presidential entourage) and had betrayed my own country, Angola, and the trust of the United Nations."

The military regularly used the state media to broadcast communiqués and programmes directed at the army. The battle for Huambo (UNITA's headquarters) in 1993 provided television with horrific moments, dreadful images and descriptions of bombardments, shocking killings, and inhumane treatment of people. *Rádio Nacional* journalists, reporting from the main cities affected by the war, followed suit with similar stories. The only deviation from this general picture came from the independent press, to begin with the bi-weekly magazine *Folha 8*, which reported on attacks and military plans neglected by the official press. Other weekly papers followed, mainly *Agora* and *Angolense*, gradually providing a voice for those segments of civil society, including clergymen and politicians, who opposed the war. Along with the churches, the independent press helped create a critical consciousness regarding the war within Angolan society. The re-inauguration of *Rádio Ecclésia* in 1997 by the Catholic Church encouraged this critical mass by opening its microphones to the public. While the end of the war cannot be attributed to mounting critical public opinion, society at least manifested a greater diversity of views in the late 1990s, challenging the myth of so-called 'popular unanimity' behind the war effort that the official media ceaselessly reiterated.

International media organizations also played a growing role. To monitor the Angolan situation in more detail, *Voice of America* set up a special office in Luanda and created a programme, named *Open Line (Linha Aberta)*, specifically directed at Angolans. Many other foreign news agencies, radio stations and newspapers placed special correspondents in Luanda. Angolan matters merited the most headlines and reporting space in Portugal; in some instances the interviews, articles and commentary in the Portuguese press had great repercussions in Luandan political circles, as well as in the independent press, which sometimes

used articles and quotes published in the Portuguese papers as a means to bypass the pressure against reporting war news.

The Angolan media today and the construction of democracy

Paradoxically, the war helped to accelerate the crystallization of more critical and communicative journalism. In the final years of the conflict, the MPLA government itself signalled that it wanted to leave behind the militaristic slogans that dominated the period following the 1992 post-electoral crisis. In the aftermath of this long and ambiguous period there is mounting social pressure for a more critical media.

The journalism practised by the state media has visibly improved, but not yet enough to drive away a sense of political bias or the old practice of government manipulation. The situation for radio stations has not changed much, but the introduction of new independent stations may be expected. New press legislation drafted in 2000 is still under review, but there is a consensus that the new law will allow for independent television. However, there is a lack of clarity on the concept of public broadcasting, poor understanding of the definitions of 'private' and 'community' broadcasting, and no provision in the draft law for the existence of community radio stations. *Rádio Ecclésia*, meanwhile, accused of 'radio terrorism' by the government in 2003, faces serious obstruction by the authorities in its plans to extend its signal to the whole country.

In the independent sector, around eight magazines are published every week, a remarkable achievement in a country without a paper industry and where one printing press prints all private newspapers.

Unfortunately, there is no regional press except for small initiatives too marginal to have much impact. These include NGO initiatives such as Development Workshop's Umbundu language community newsletter *Ondaka* in Huambo. Independent newspapers circulate mainly in Luanda, and only three other provinces have private radio stations (*Rádio Morena* in Benguela, *Rádio 2000* in Lubango and *Rádio Comercial* in Cabinda), which are no substitute for pluralism in the press and real freedom of expression.

The quality of Angolan journalism nowadays reflects the long years of silence – whether imposed or consented to – and the practice of patriotic rather than public interest journalism. There is a lingering sense within some political and journalistic circles

that the media is intended to protect the government and that whoever does not comply with this view intends to bring it down. The old practice of managers undermining editorial control is so deeply ingrained that there is currently a permanent clash between some editors, who seek to become more professional, and some heads of services and managing directors who insist on subjecting the rules of journalism to political dictates.

There have been a few cases of harassment of journalists by the government. The most well-publicized case was that of Rafael Marques, who was illegally detained for several weeks in 1999 on charges of defaming the President (calling him a “dictator”), and later given a suspended six-month sentence after a trial marred by irregularities. Ironically, the international publicity surrounding this case ultimately afforded Marques exceptional latitude for criticizing the government, and he became coordinator of the Open Society Institute for Southern Africa office in Luanda.

The Angolan media is currently in a transition period. In the aftermath of the war, there is a need for a strategic redefinition that ensures a balanced variety of media outlets across the country, as well as a need for improvements on technical issues.

The current crisis cannot be blamed exclusively on the incorporation of non-professionals into the media during the long period of violent struggle. The sector's weak educational and training foundations are equally responsible. There are no Faculties of Journalism and a training centre was only opened in 2003. There are also no professional identification cards, nor mechanisms for self-regulation, a code of conduct or a press law. Furthermore, many of the more capable journalists are drawn into political and diplomatic careers.

Increasing the media's participation in the democratic development of the country will include reversing its conceptual understanding of the idea of public service. In a development-orientated media, journalistic programming priorities need to be redirected towards informative and educational content, oriented to both nation building and the local development of each region.

The media can accomplish civic education and provide people with knowledge of their rights, duties and safeguards. Through the media, whether community radio stations, local newspapers or television programmes, it is possible to take development to the country's farthest regions as well as to build bridges among the different cultural groups that make up the

emerging Angolan nation. Further consideration needs to be given to whether more indigenous language broadcasting and local content is required, as well as to more careful use of the national language, Portuguese, including more serious training of journalists as disseminators of this language.

One of the elements of modern journalism that makes the greatest contribution to the democratization of a society is investigative journalism. It is a valuable mechanism for monitoring the performance of democratic institutions, and promoting accountability in governmental bodies, civic organizations and public companies. Due to the poor levels of both journalistic training and audience demand, many so-called ‘investigative’ stories published are of dubious worth. They fall far short of the mark, and their output is often a set of unconfirmed statements of questionable reliability based on anonymous sources. On the other hand, some of the more important opportunities have been missed. When the International Monetary Fund found that huge amounts of money were missing from government coffers in 2002, it was the BBC that exposed their leaked report.

Despite the shortage of true investigative reporting, some organizations, mainly newspapers, frequently divulge cases of alleged corruption, injustice, and abuse of power. But as a rule, these accusations bear no consequences, not only because there is little political will to investigate the leads provided by the press, but also because the information in question lacks sufficient detail, leaving the political power holders with room to get away. Notwithstanding important ongoing work in denouncing abuses of power, the greatest contribution by the media towards the democratization of society in the current post-war period is still to come.

Conclusion

The challenge faced by the media and the institutions that have committed themselves to supporting democracy in Angola is great. However, although professional structures like the Union of Angolan Journalists (SJA) and the Luanda-based press centre exist, they require strengthening. Combined with poor professional training, this situation constrains the media's capacity to provide an immediate answer to this challenge. Yet, in the aftermath of war, when corruption is rife and when the country is trying to reconstitute itself with new ethical and moral values, Angola cannot afford to postpone such an urgent task.