



The State of the Media in the Democratic Republic of Congo¹

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Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo became independent in 1960 and, soon after, it declined into chaos with divisions along ethnic lines. The media was still influenced by the colonial legacy and became a divisive force separating groups along ethnic and regional lines. When Mobutu took over the government helm, he introduced a one party state with both the print and electronic media falling under state control. In early 1990, the liberalisation of political activities was followed by an explosion in private media activities, in both print and audiovisual format. Today, the DRC has a free and diverse media- making it one of the most diverse and free on the continent. The quality of information however, and the role of the media in the democratisation process leaves much to be desired.

The DRC is going through a political transition after long negotiations known as the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. These negotiations were concluded in Pretoria in 2003. The country is expected to hold its first democratic elections in June 2005 after the 44 years of its independence.² In this transition, the media is expected to play a critical role as the conduit of communication between the political parties engaged in an effort to access power and on the other side and between the institutions of transition and the citizens on the other. The media is expected to contribute to the maintenance of peace by producing information that builds the nation rather than having the effect of destroying it. This paper provides an overview of the state of the media in the DRC and the role it is playing in the current transition.

² If the Independent Electoral Commission finds that it impossible to organize election in June 2005, it has the prerogative to propose the postponement of the election in accordance with the Constitution of Transition which reserved the possibility of six months postponed renewal once.

It is the result of a week-long field trip undertaken in the DRC in October 2004. The study was done on behalf of the Institute of the Advancement of Journalism. The information was collected through interviews, discussions with media professionals, the print media, the electronic media and training institutions in the capital, Kinshasa.

Media Policy Environment

The media in Congo is governed by the 1996 Media Law Relative to the Freedom of Expression and as such, guarantees freedom of expression. However, it is a law promulgated during the one party state period. Although, the media is purportedly free, in reality, it is not. Despite the fact that the freedom of the press is guaranteed by law, the application is different. Journalists have been harassed, kidnapped and imprisoned and the law in many instances does not protect journalists. At the inter-Congolese Dialogue, delegates agreed on a free press which will play a role in the transition process. In an effort to see the Congolese media playing a key role in the transition, the Constitution of transition devotes at least three Articles to the Press (see Art 27, 28 and 29). These articles refer to the freedom of expression, freedom of the press and access to information. It is also in the same spirit to empower the media and ensure its independence, that the Inter-Congolese Dialogue put in place what is called *La Haute Autorité des Media* (The High Authority of the Press). Its role and mission are entrenched in the Constitution but it has not been able to function at full strength for lack of resource and human capacity.

Media Institutes and Umbrella Organisations

The DRC has also dozens of media institutes and departments of communication at universities responsible for the training of journalists. Kinshasa has three main institutes, the *Institute Facultaire des*

Sciences de l' Information (IFASIC) is one of the most reputable media institutes in the country; the *University of Kinshasa's Department of Communication* and the *Catholic University of Kinshasa's Department of Communication*.

The main five media main umbrella organisations that deal with media issues include:

- *Union National de la Press du Congo (UNPC)*. While its function is the promotion of the media, it is not a media association as such. Its members include organisations that work with the media – NGOs, journalists, labour groups, universities and IFASIC. There are media unions that are not part of UNPC but according to many, UNPC is the most recognised media union in the country.
- *Observatoire des Media au Congo (OMC)*: This supervises the behaviour of journalists in terms of ethics. It sanctions the media houses or journalists who not conform to the deontology of the profession. However, the judgement on the sanction is the responsibility of UNPC.
- *La Haute Autorite Des Media (HAM)* supervises media adherence to the law and regulations. It is one of the five section 21 institutions that emanated from the Inter Congolese Dialogue to support the democratic process in the DRC.
- *The Congolese Communities Radios Association (ARCCO)*. Supervises community radios.

In general most of these groups are ineffective at achieving the necessary regulation to ensure free access and diversity of opinion in the media. As a result both private and public media are divided along party and ethnic lines.

The State of the Media

The state of the media in the Democratic Republic of Congo is a reflection of the

socio-economic and political environment of the country. Just as the economy and the politics of the country need salvation, there is equally a need to salvage the media. The media continues to be politicised. The public media, both television and radio, are controlled by the party in power. Journalists of the Congolese National Radio and Television (RTNC) are subjected to political intervention that makes reporting very biased. Radio and television are widely perceived to be under President Kabila's party control in order to deny the broadcasting of other opposition or dissenting views. The DRC media landscape is dominated by private media which includes television, radio and newspapers, is also not neutral but reflect the political, religious and ethnic inclinations of the owners. Widespread use of libel litigation is used by leading political figures in an attempt to gag the print media. There are reports of a number of such cases pending against newspapers. In some cases allegations of libel are justified, but it is perceived this partly due to the fact that there is inadequate access to official information. A number of newspapers and journalists have been intimidated to the extent that they are unable to print dissenting or critical views of government.

The media is also a profession that is divided, and without vision. There is total disregard for ethics and professionalism by the media houses and journalists. Journalists are driven more by financial return than by the need to provide credible and accurate information to the public. This has contributed to undermine the quality of the information. Kinshasa has the biggest concentration of the media and, according to the statistics produced by the Media Union of CONGO (UPC), 80% of Congolese media houses are located there.

Newspapers

There are at least 213 newspapers countrywide and Kinshasa, alone has

108 newspapers production houses, according to the Ministry of Media and Information, of which only 64 publish regularly. The public does not take newspapers articles seriously because of the way they are produced. It is said that in most cases the information published is not verified. Observers of the Congolese media say that most articles are bought. Journalists are paid by any one who wants to have his/her story published. This reveals the absence of a sense of responsibility within the media fraternity. Journalists, because they have been paid, can publish false and unverified information. Most journalists, although passionate about their profession are faced with social challenges that force them to disregard professionalism and quality for monetary return.

Most of the papers in Kinshasa have daily and weekly editions. Kinshasa has 8 big daily newspapers – *Le Potentiel*, *Le Phare*, *L' Observateur*, *La Référence Plus*, *Le Parmares*, *Forum des As*, *La Tempête des Tropiques et l' Avenir*. These papers have some sort of company structure but have difficulty in surviving business-wise. The content of their papers is politicised and of very poor professional quality.³

The media in the rest of provinces face even greater critical challenges and most papers do not appear on a regular basis.

Table 1: Provincial Distribution of Newspapers

Province	Number of Newspapers
Kinshasa	108
Katanga	50
Kasai Occidental	4
Kasai Oriental	28
Bas Congo	8
Bandundu	5
Equateur	4
Province Oriental	4
Nord Kivu	0
Sud Kivu	4

Source: La Haute Autorité des média, Kinshasa

³ Etat des Lieux, problématique et Enjeux da la Press Congolaise, La Haute Autorite Des Media, Kinshasa, 2004

The province of Katanga has 50 papers, with only 15 in operation; North Kivu has 12 newspapers, Kasai Oriental has 28; Bas-Congo 8; Orientale 4; Kasai Occidental 4, Sud Kivu 4, while Maniema has no papers at all. Most print media face the same challenge of lack of equipment and market. Congolese who have no purchasing power do not buy newspapers but prefer to read newspapers on the floor as they are being sold.

Audiovisual

The DRC has at least 52 private television stations and 119 radios (These include public, commercial and religious stations). The allocation of frequencies is made without verification, causing close saturation of the airwaves. Radio and TV stations have no real infrastructure to even allow them to go on air, indicating the casual and mindless approach to media activities in the DRC.

Table 2: The number of Radio and TV stations per province

Province	Radio Stations	Television Stations
Kinshasa	23	25
Katanga	16	5
Kasai Occidental	16	5
Kasai Oriental	13	5
Bas Congo	12	5
Bandundu	5	1
Equateur	4	1
Province Oriental	6	0
Nord Kivu	16	3
Sud Kivu	6	1

Source: La Haute Autorité des médias, Kinshasa

Television channels focus on protocol, the reporting of meetings and conferences and they have no well-researched documentaries and stories. There is a total absence of investigative journalism with both TV and radio content failing to capture the reality of the society. Instead, they opt for the simple way out, music. Radio and TV focus on what is easy to broadcast – entertainment, music and movies but even here, they are not very creative.

However, as mentioned above, there are categories that are distinctive: the community radios and Radio Okapi. Radio Okapi is the MONUC radio, the only radio capable of reaching all the provinces.

It seems as if the electronic media expanded in early 1990 without proper preparation, planning and adequate resources. The TV depends on publicity to survive. Kinshasa has only three companies - the two big beer companies Primus and Skol and a communication company Vodacom – that have money to spend on publicity. There is fierce competition among the media houses to capture the interest of these three companies.

Community Radios

Radio remains the mode of information the most popular and accessible to most citizens, especially in the provinces where the production of the newspapers is very limited. Congo has a vast network of community radios with an estimated 135 radios countrywide. These stations are organised under the umbrella of the Congolese Communities Radios Association or ARCCO. It is important to say that the community radio is quite a recent phenomenon in the DRC, only commencing in about 1998. They were created to cover the vacuum created by the failure of the national radio to cover specific community issues and the limited coverage of commercial radios. No private radio or television has a broadcasting capacity beyond the limits of the city or locality where the transmitter is installed.

Community radios lack the necessary resources and expertise. Most of these function through transmitters created by individuals in the community. There is great potential for any external intervention to further activate this sector of the media. Their impact on the communities is extensive as they concentrate on the issue of proximity. Contrary to commercial radio stations which have no educational programmes,

these stations are known for their sensitisation approach in different areas.

The number of TV, radios and newspapers should not create a wrong impression. The number simply reflects the casual approach to media activities in the DRC. This frivolous and irresponsible attitude can be ascribed to both the public authorities who issue licences and the media company owners who enter the market as source of enrichment. The media in the DRC is facing serious challenges that impact negatively on their contribution to the transition process.

The Quality of Reporting

The quality of reporting is very poor. The information produced by the media in general is not appreciated by the Congolese people. The main cause is the absence of qualified journalists. This is due to the fact that the quality of training has deteriorated alongside the collapse of the state. The poor quality is not simply a reflection of the lack of know-how, though this is a major factor. The DRC has, after all, had some of the best journalists in Central Africa coming from training schools in the country. The poor quality is the result of the adoption of negative values by Congolese journalists. There is a total absence of respect for the media ethics by most journalists. Although media houses exist to monitor and supervise the behaviour and conduct of journalists, they are also disorganised and lack professionalism.

There are serious weaknesses, which have caused Congolese citizens to not value the information given to them. Most people do not buy newspapers. Although the problem has also to do with the economic situation, as we will see below, citizens in general, are not happy with quality of the content. For example, the biggest paper in the capital Kinshasa produces only 3000 copies a day for a population estimated at 8 million and still it is unable to sell all the copies. There are three factors that

contribute to the low circulation: no confidence in the media, absence of a reading culture, and the citizens' weak purchasing power. Among these, the first seems to take pre-eminence. There is a constant outcry from the population that the information they receive both from the print media and audiovisual, is inadequate, irrelevant and manipulated. Following are some of the factors that contribute to the poor quality and lack of professionalism suffered by the Congolese journalist.

Weak Interpretation of Society

The media in the DRC is only interested in politics which is understandable. The citizens are preoccupied with the resolution of the political impasse more than anything else. When one scrutinises the information, however, there is no serious work being done to produce relatively accurate and original pieces of work. Despite the day-to-day hardship, there is not much reporting on the economy. It is also possible to find reports dealing with diplomacy but after politics, music has the largest coverage.

Inefficient Education and Training Systems

Many Congolese journalists are proud of their institutions of higher learning, which they claim are very good. However, a closer look suggests just the opposite. Most institutions concentrate on theory with no emphasis on practice. The infrastructure of all institutions has collapsed. Lecturers have no access to new materials or books to improve their programmes and their moral is too low to expect them to give maximum time to their teaching programmes.

It is estimated, according to a study conducted by Panos Paris, that there are at least 2 800 trained journalists practicing across the country. The breakdown is demonstrated in the table that follows:

Number of journalists by province

Provinces	Number
Kinshasa	1800
Katanga	370
Kasai Occidental	120
Bas Congo	70
Kasai Oriental	124
Bandundu	40
Equateur	40
Province Orientale	65
Nord Kivu	80
Maniema	60
Sud Kivu	120

Source: *La Haute Autorité des Médias, Kinshasa*

The DRC has had a very good media education system. Most old journalists came from sound Congolese schools of journalism, which unfortunately have been affected by the general socio-economic situation the country is experiencing. The infrastructure has all but disappeared. For example, lecturers do not get paid for months on end; there are no studios and libraries. New technology related to journalism in terms of reporting are not part of the Congolese structure. This includes the lack of access to Internet for most journalists. All these problems are the reflections of the country's politics and economy.

There are permanent outside organisations in the Congo providing training to journalists. These include international partners such as PANOS, Konrad Adenauer, Groupement de recherche and technology and UNESCO. There are also local institutions that organise training. However, these interventions have been sporadic, limited and lacking in coordination.

However, bad reporting is not purely linked to education or training. While training has been lacking, there is no doubt the level of education in high institutions of learning and centres of training have deteriorated.

Lack of Independence

The DRC has no independent media. It seems the training given has not created a credible media. The quality of journalism remains weak. *There is need to promote media houses that are independent.* In most cases, reporting is influenced by the chief manager's sentiments and the information is manipulated according to his/her political or ethnic tendencies. There is only one radio station that was applauded for its professionalism and that is Radio Okapi. Radio Okapi is the MONUC station. Its success is due to the better conditions of service enjoyed by its journalists and reporters. Unlike their colleague in local media houses, Okapi's journalists are relatively well paid and have the necessary professional support in terms of access to relevant equipment. It is the only short wave radio in the country. As is the case with most of the radios and television stations, Radio Okapi broadcasts in five languages – French, Lingala, Tshiluba, Swahili and Kikongo. French is the official language and the remaining four are national languages. It is the only radio that covers political processes in the country with some degree of impartiality and it also has educational programmes in all of the languages.

Bad Conditions of Service for Journalists

Beside the absence of both high calibre personnel and professional values, the media in the DRC also lacks the necessary infrastructure and resources to perform or produce quality news and programmes. The socio-economic difficulties in which the country finds itself in has prompted media owners to become more interested in monetary return than in the provision of credible information. The need for credible media in Congo is so pressing that it requires an urgent and well-planned intervention to enable it to provide a professional service.

Most media houses do not have the infrastructure and equipment to enable them to be in business. In serious and organised states, most media houses in the DRC would have long been closed. They all lack the necessary equipment such studios, cameras and have no access to new technology for the collection of data. This situation is not only specific to the media. It is the reflection of the impact of economic hardship experienced by the entire society. Most printing equipment is that left behind by the Belgians. They are just too old to be maintained. Most media houses have no access to computers and journalists have no telephones. Although most of them have cell phones, as they are not paid, they do not use their cell phone for work related activities unless there is some financial return.

The media do not have the necessary resources to collect information. In most cases, they rely on fees paid by the person providing information. The influence of money has had a very negative impact on reporting since the interviewee dictates the terms in this relationship on what should and should not be published or transmitted. In the DRC, the interviewee produces the news and not the journalist. There exists a phenomenon called "*le Coupage*". It is simply a financial remuneration given to a professional journalist to influence him/her to broadcast or publish a particular programme or information. It is a corrupt behaviour whereby a journalist is given money in exchange for publishing information. There exists serious doubt on the objectivity of the media reports in the DRC. The reality of the media in the DRC points to negative values. Congolese journalists who are involved in the "*coupage*" phenomenon have a privileged relationship with the source of information rather than dealing with the information according to journalistic norms. They debase the truth and other values of media freedom. Subjectivity has replaced objectivity in the way in which journalists treat information.

Certainly, with this approach, reporting has become open to manipulation. In the DRC information is not always correct as it reflects what the person who pays the money wants to hear. There is a deep gap between the training received and practice. There is no professionalism and most journalists, reporters and station managers lack ethics. Those who sometimes try to instil a level of honesty (correct reporting) often find themselves in serious trouble with political authorities. The media is also seriously influenced to protect groups such as family, ethnic, or cliques with financial influence.

Congolese citizens do not trust journalists. In Congo, as one person put it, the media is about making money and because of this situation people in Congo do not read newspapers. With high poverty and unemployment in the country people do not have the luxury of buying newspapers. In many instances, newspapers are reproduced by individuals who sell the copies on the street at a reduced price.

Most Congolese media houses do not have financial capacity to finance in-depth reporting. Most reporting focuses on the day-to-day events, which are biased and factually incorrect. There is no investigative journalism in Congo because of lack of resources.

Economic Hardship and Poverty

The economic hardship has also affected the way in which the media operates and reports in the country. Most journalists in all sectors receive very low salaries that vary between 15 to 200 US dollars depending on the various categories. Salaries are not paid regularly. This forces journalists to indulge in improper behaviour which affects the quality of information.

One has to appreciate however, the effort made by the Congolese journalists considering the conditions under which they operate. The conditions in the

country are not conducive to professional and effective journalism. Most printing media use old equipment left behind by the Belgians.

Political Manipulation

Many of the private media houses belong to politicians. There are also those, although do not belong to a particular politician, have a political inclination towards one political party or figure. In addition, the public media works as part of the government service. It answers to the Minister and thus cannot take the initiative and professional risk necessary to improve on the quality of information. Since the DRC has been divided in the different administrations, those armed groups who control the different territories also control the flow of information. This is why even the Radio Okapi which comprises nine stations: Kinshasa, Goma, Kisangani, Kananga, Mbandaka, Kalemie, Kindu, Bukavu and Bunia sometimes has difficulty in operating freely in all these areas.

Difficulty in Accessing Correct Information

This has to do with lack of skill or proper training. In the DRC, there is no capacity to undertake investigative journalism. For example, journalists have difficulties in accessing information from the public sector. They also do not have the necessary resources to go out and seek information. Also, political groups are reluctant to release information to journalists for fear of disinformation.

Lack of Protection for Journalists

Journalists are not protected by the law and by the media houses. It seems that there is no guidance to support young journalists who enter the profession. Most journalists, at least 80%, work as volunteers and are not remunerated and as such, they are in a position of weakness. With no remuneration most

journalists go around searching, not for news, but for people who can pay them to publish their stories. The consequence is the lack seriousness and objectivity in most publications and information. Journalists are being paid by the providers of information who then, quite logically influence the content of the reports.

There are no collective conventions and contracts of service. Due to an ignorance of the laws that regulate the media, journalists are most of the time, misused and have problems in organising and fighting for their rights. In fact, most media houses do not have human resource departments. The private media functions without a collective convention which makes a human resource department unnecessary.

Way Forward for the Media in the DRC

What has emerged from this study is that the media in the DRC is faced with serious challenges. Its contribution to the transition process seems very limited, if not non-existent. The general observation is one of lack of both professionalism and a sense of responsibility. There is an urgent need to train journalists in all areas of the profession. An attempt follows to propose areas that require urgent attention and what certain South African institutions, such as EISA and the IAJ could do to contribute to the empowerment of the media in the DRC and thus enable them to contribute to the democratisation process currently underway.

There is an urgent need to assist in the development of a suitable media law and the establishment of an Independent Broadcasting Authority. The legal framework would need to have the confidence of all stakeholders. The 'lessons learned' from transitional states in the region will greatly inform the decisions to be made and applied in the

DRC. It is crucial that journalists and media houses know and understand the legal environment within which they are operating. There is a serious concern about the media law. External organisations should consider supplying the expertise needed to harmonise the media legal framework. The elaboration of these instruments would go a long way to protect journalists against political actors and station managers, editors or producers manipulations. As soon as the legislation has been adopted, it must be popularised countrywide. There is need to train Congolese media outlets in advocacy and lobbying. There are already organisations in the DRC performing outstanding contributions to this area but more work is needed.

It will also be critical to focus on strengthening journalistic skills and to improve on the capacity of the media houses. The need to educate journalists on the ethics of journalism is an area of great importance. As has emerged throughout this study, the Congolese journalist, at least on the surface or through a clinical observation of output and behaviour, lacks the necessary skill to adequately perform the job. There is a great need for the training of journalists in the DRC but this does not mean there is no training going on in the DRC. The basic terms of training are being covered but they seem to be of very poor quality. The question that needs to be asked is whether the training received so far corresponds to the needs on the ground? There are areas that urgently need training. These include collection of data, analysis of information and writing and reporting techniques. Journalists also seldom meet to discuss their common problems in an open and transparent manner. There is a need to encourage the level of exchange among journalists. This could be done through conferences, workshops and radio and TV debates.

The media also needs to be supported in terms of infrastructure and technology. There are journalists in this modern age who have not used a computer and who

cannot surf the Internet. There is also need for management skills. Most people who own media houses in the DRC came into the profession by accident. They have no idea as how to manage a media company: on occasion they are simultaneously both the director and accountant. They operate on a day-to-day basis with no planning at all. The training here should focus both on broader issues of management and on specificities related to the media industry.

As for the transition, there is need to build media capacity for meaningful participation in the electoral process. A massive *Elections Training Project* is needed for journalists on the reporting and monitoring of the entire electoral process in the DRC. This is likely to be one of the largest – if not *the* largest – mobilisation of journalists in the DRC.

Election focussed training seems to be an immediate need in the light of the planned election. Journalists must be given the necessary skill on how to report elections in a country emerging from civil war. There is need to train trainers in election reporting. A training module for the entire country needs elaboration – on how to collect, analyse information and on the observation of elections. A training-of-trainers methodology would be developed with materials and handbook to support the exercise. Technical assistance would be provided on writing a strategic plan aimed at a comprehensive coverage on election-day.

A suggestion of a long term project in this effort to contribute the democratisation process could be the creation of a *Journalist Training Centre for Democracy*. Different categories/sectors of journalists – print media, audiovisual, Community radios – would be trained, each in their own sphere, on the nature of democracy and the demands that democracy place on day-to-day activities. This project would

be an opportunity to explore the concepts of democracy and citizenship and the impact of the media in the democratisation process. Courses could be designed to empower journalists to understand and report efficiently in a manner that unifies the country. Based on this orientation towards democratic prerogatives, a network of journalists working on elections and democracy could then be created. It is here that external actors could intervene by advising on the structure as well as providing guidance on monitoring and reporting on each phase of the electoral process.

Conclusion

The DRC is the principal reservoir of world strategic materials which are the envy of both regional and international powers. The DRC needs to be protected

by a truly democratic state, enabling it to make a contribution to the development of the continent as a whole. The media holds the crucial key in promoting the culture of democracy and good governance but it needs the necessary support to play its role efficiently and correctly. Training in various spheres is vital and covers the collection of data, analysis, packaging, production, writing skills, introduction of journalists to new technology and exchange of experiences. In the short term, training could focus on election reporting in preparation of the general democratic elections at the end of the transition. The people of the Congo need to be equipped to make informed decisions or choices in determining their future and the media can play a seminal role in this process.

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To strengthen electoral processes, democratic governance, human rights and democratic values through research, capacity building, advocacy and other strategically targeted interventions.

ABOUT EISA

EISA is a not-for-profit and non-partisan non-governmental organisation which was established in 1996. Its core business is to provide technical assistance for capacity building of relevant government departments, electoral management bodies, political parties and civil society organisations operating in the democracy and governance field throughout the SADC region and beyond. Inspired by the various positive developments towards democratic governance in Africa as a whole and the SADC region in particular since the early 1990s, EISA aims to advance democratic values, practices and enhance the credibility of electoral processes. The ultimate goal is to assist countries in Africa and the SADC region to nurture and consolidate democratic governance. SADC countries have received enormous technical assistance and advice from EISA in building solid institutional foundations for democracy. This includes electoral system reforms; election monitoring and observation; constructive conflict management; strengthening of parliament and other democratic institutions; strengthening of political parties; capacity building for civil society organisations; deepening democratic local governance; and enhancing the institutional capacity of the election management bodies. EISA is currently the secretariat of the Electoral Commissions Forum (ECF) composed of electoral commissions in the SADC region and established in 1998. EISA is also the secretariat of the SADC Election Support Network (ESN) comprising election-related civil society organisations established in 1997.

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