

Journal of African Media Studies Volume 1 Number 2 © 2009 Intellect Ltd  
 Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/jams.1.2.295/1

## The politics of broadcasting, language policy and democracy in Uganda

Monica B. Chibita *Makerere University, Uganda*

### Abstract

*This article examines the interweaving between socio-political history, broadcast policy and regulation, and political participation. Although the article primarily discusses the Ugandan situation, it draws conclusions that could be helpful in examining similar situations in Africa and in other parts of the world. The research was conducted in Uganda in three phases over three years (2003–2006) and additional research was conducted between 2007 and 2008.<sup>1</sup> The first phase of the research constituted a socio-historical analysis of Uganda's media and politics. The second phase focused on the language debate in Uganda and the final phase sought to interpret the Ugandan language debate in light of the findings from the socio-historical analysis. The article is conceived within a critical media studies framework and the methodology is inspired by J.B. Thompson's (1990) depth hermeneutics. The study employed qualitative interviews and an analysis of media, communication and education policy documents and other archival sources to elicit information at various levels on indigenous language broadcasting policy in Uganda. Placing the debate on indigenous language policy in historical context made it possible to critically examine the relationship between language policy and political participation in Uganda. The article concludes that effective future policy and regulation must strike a balance between the priorities of government, media proprietors and audiences. It must also take cognizance of current commercial realities, while being sensitive to the socio-historical factors that determine attitudes towards the use of specific languages in the media.*

### Keywords

African languages  
 broadcasting  
 diversity  
 policy  
 politics  
 radio  
 Uganda

### Introduction

An examination of the broadcasting situation in multi-lingual nations in Africa suggests a connection between policy and regulation for linguistic diversity in broadcasting, and people's ability to participate in the democratic process. This article examines the potential, as well as the limitations, of intervention at the policy level to address the regulatory bottlenecks to participation, with a focus on indigenous languages. A key assumption of this article is that in multi-lingual environments such as postcolonial Uganda, availability of content in indigenous languages enhances participation by a greater diversity of citizens in the democratic process. The mass media thus become central to discussions of democracy in modern day times in as far as they are highly visible and play a specific amplifying or publicizing role, and to the extent that political participation today is

1. A large component of this research was part of the author's doctoral studies at the University of South Africa while the rest was part of post-doctoral research under the Makerere/Sida-Sarec research collaboration.

characterized by a publicity that is, to a great extent, mediated. As Curran argues in relation to the democratic role of the media:

A basic requirement of a democratic media system should be that it represents all significant interests in society. It should facilitate their participation in the public domain, enable them to contribute to public debate and have an input in the framing of public policy. The media should also represent the functioning of representative organisations and expose their internal processes to public scrutiny and the play of public opinion. In short a central role of the media should be defined as assisting the equitable negotiation or arbitration of competing interests through democratic processes.

(Curran 1991: 23)

The language resources which people have at their disposal make it possible for people to access opportunities that make them productive participants in public debate and in decision-making. Thus language can be an important factor in enhancing diverse participation in the broadcast media. Language here refers to the codified way in which human beings communicate. It has the potential to bring different people into the arena of public debate and the broadcast media today play a key role in constituting this arena. Once in this arena, people have better access to information and are (at least potentially and ideally) better placed to have a say on issues that relate to their governance and their general well-being.

Access to information is important for the full exercise of citizen rights. As Redekopp has argued, 'informed citizens are equipped to participate in the open public discourse that is the lifeblood of democratic society. They demand more of their institutions and they are able to contribute more to them' (<http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/discours/20021112.shtml>). An examination of Uganda's broadcast environment in the context of its broader socio-political history helps to illuminate the salient issues relating to language and participation, as well as to draw some conclusions that could be useful in examining similar contexts elsewhere in Africa.

### Theoretical framework

This article is situated within a critical media studies framework, 'critical' in the sense that such analysis espouses specific values with regards to the media (in this case diversity) and actively advocates for the adoption of these values. There has been intense debate in communication circles in the last two decades on whether it is best to forget about policy and let human agency take charge of how the average citizen uses the media, given the extent to which policy is prone to political and economic manipulation (see for instance Garnham 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Grossberg 1995; Ferguson and Golding 1997; Barker 2003). Critical political economy, which acknowledges that the media are potentially a key contributor to the formation of a viable public sphere, is sceptical about the assertion that human agency alone is sufficient to protect the citizen's vital communication interests in a highly commercialized environment. Thus critical political economy argues that the market alone cannot be entrusted with the responsibility of regulating media diversity. It must sometimes be supported by *principled* [emphasis author's] state intervention (Goldsmith Media Group 2000: 54). Critical

political economy also argues that human agency is powerless in the face of the forces of commercialization that govern the modern media.

For their part, cultural studies scholars argue that the kind of unifying public sphere which Habermas and many coming from a critical political economy perspective envisage, is unattainable. They instead propose that what is more realistic are multiple spheres each representing some cultural peculiarities.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding human agency, however, the field of critical political economy maintains that the intervention of the state through media policy is still essential to the full exercise of citizenship rights. Political economy approaches to the study of the media thus posit that the enjoyment of the right of access to information and communication is fundamental to the appreciation and enjoyment of civil and political rights. If the essence of citizenship is not just the enjoyment of rights but also participation in the demarcation of these rights (Ronning 1994: 15–16; Berger 2002: 34–35), then examining factors which enhance or curtail citizen participation in a specific historical context is important in advancing the debate on this important topic (Murdock & Golding 1989: 183–184; Golding 1990: 98–99; Goldsmith Media Group 2000: 54).

Civil and political rights are closely intertwined. Access to adequate information and to a diversity of debate is a basic precondition for the effective functioning of a democratic polity and for the full exercise of citizen rights. For this reason, proponents of the political economy of the media approach argue – from a normative perspective – that communication systems (including the media) should provide people with access to information, advice and analysis in order to enable them to pursue their rights. Media should provide the broadest possible range of information, interpretation, debate and guidance on areas related to rights and political choice. This would enable citizens to make adequate choices during elections, or to dissent and propose alternatives (Murdock & Golding 1989: 183; Golding & Murdock 1991: 21–22; Berger 2002: 32, 34–35, 41). However, because the market is imperfect, political economy scholars argue, market forces cannot be depended upon to secure the kind of access to information that enables citizens to make sense of their world, contribute to how they are governed and generally make informed choices. Thus, as Van Cuilenburg has argued, for the free market model to apply to the marketplace of ideas, we have to assume that there are a number of different providers of information, that there is full and fair competition between them and that the recipients of this information are ‘fully and rationally informed’ about the marketplace (Van Cuilenburg 1998: 40).

Then, and only then, will there be a balance of power between providers and users of information. And then, and only then, will maximally diverse information be supplied, exchanged and used by all people in the marketplace of ideas.

(Van Cuilenburg 1998: 40)

What is often underrated in this equation is the importance of information being available in the full range of languages. This article lays out the historical context within which language policy in Uganda’s broadcast media has evolved and how this has impacted upon opportunities for Ugandans to participate in the political process via the media.

2. For a comprehensive critique of the Habermasian view of the public sphere, see: Thompson 1995; Berger 2002; Dahlgren 2002.

3. See Chibita & Fourie 2007 for a detailed discussion on language and participation in Uganda's broadcast media.
4. <http://www.ethnologue.com/show-country.aspx?name=UG>,

### A brief history of participation in Uganda

Uganda's socio-political history brings to light some key factors that have had a bearing on the ability of the average Ugandan to participate in public debate on matters concerning their governance through the broadcast media. These factors include the aftermath of British administrative policies and the use of ethnicity as a tool for governance and subjugation by both colonial and postcolonial governments. They also include the depoliticization of civil society, as well as the failure for policy and regulation to take cognizance of the importance of indigenous languages in enhancing diversity and participation in the broadcast media, and to deal with the consequences of Uganda's political history.<sup>3</sup>

Uganda was under British colonial rule between 1894 and 1962 when it gained independence. The British colonial policy, dubbed 'indirect rule', was based on patronage and selective attention to particular ethnic groups. The country has subsequently had a turbulent political history with most of its postcolonial governments having come to power through the barrel of the gun. Thanks to the colonial legacy of divide and rule, the government that took over from the colonialists in 1962, headed by Milton Obote, saw the Kingdom of Buganda, which shortly before independence had attempted to secede from the rest of Uganda, as a threat. Buganda's perceived special status became a major challenge to the project of national integration and the Obote government was determined to trim it to size and to undo the effects of British patronage. The tension between the government of Milton Obote and the Kingdom of Buganda came to a head in 1966 when, in response to a perceived political threat from the Buganda government, Obote ordered his troops to attack the headquarters of the Buganda government. By the end of this crisis, the government had sent the Kabaka of Buganda into exile and suspended essential political freedoms including freedom of expression, the media, speech and association (Karugire 1988: 58; Kabwegyere 1995: 210–214). This confrontation set a precedent for arbitrary cancellation or suspension of rights by political leaders under the pretext of 'national security and unity'. Uganda's different postcolonial governments have since, to varying degrees, curtailed multi-party activity and muzzled the media to secure their places in power.

Uganda is made up of four broad linguistic groups: the Bantu, Eastern Nilotic, Western Nilotic and Sudanic. There is limited mutual intelligibility within languages in each group and none across the four groups. According to the Summer Institute of Linguistics,<sup>4</sup> there are at least 36 different languages spoken in Uganda. English is the official language and Kiswahili the second official language. Although the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda recognizes the existence of the different indigenous languages it does not name a *national* language and politically explosive discussion has surrounded debates on this topic. The debate has mostly centred on the roles of three key languages in the public domain: Luganda, Kiswahili and English.

Luganda, according to the Summer Institute of Linguistics, is the language spoken by the largest number of Ugandans (17.3 per cent), but is largely unintelligible to the non-Bantu population. Besides, because the Baganda were used as agents of British indirect rule, Luganda is still

associated with political oppression and arrogance in some parts of the country. For this reason, it is deemed undesirable as a national or 'unifying' language. Kiswahili, the second official language, designated by the British as the language of the security forces, has increasingly been promoted as advantageous for regional integration, but remains unpopular among large sections of the population because since the colonial days and especially under the rule of Idi Amin, Swahili has emerged as the language of the military. Under Amin's rule, the military perpetuated violent acts against ordinary citizens. Ugandans still recall commands in Kiswahili like '*panda gari*' (get onto the truck) and '*lala chini*' (lie down) which the army used as they committed atrocities against civilians. Furthermore, unlike in Kenya and Tanzania, Kiswahili has been difficult to propagate in Uganda because it has no native speakers there; there also remains a critical shortage of teachers and learning materials in the language.

Language politics in Uganda is further grounded in the fact that colonial language policies created an elite class, equipping them with English which was a key to social mobility. This is significant given that 80 per cent of Uganda's population lives in the rural areas and most of them neither speak nor understand English. Ugandans typically learn English through formal schooling. This implies that in order to make sense of the media, the majority of Ugandans must be able to access it in indigenous languages. However, there has been a reluctance among Uganda's post-independence governments to address the link between linguistic and political diversity decisively thus harnessing the country's linguistic diversity for democracy. Official documents stop short of assigning a role in the public domain to any language except English, and more recently Kiswahili (Uganda Policy Review Commission 1992).

This ambivalence has been facilitated by the fact that in colonial Uganda, British rule only maintained the dominant local languages as the language of official business at a localized level; this was done in order to combat any efforts by the different ethnic groups to cooperate with one another in the independence struggle. The colonial language policy thus served to maintain separate development in the different regions (Kabwegyere 1995: 144–145). The colonial administrators handpicked a few Ugandans, typically from privileged families in Buganda and parts of Western Uganda, and gave them a western education. English, which was the official language of business and debate, turned out to be a language of privilege of the colonial masters and those Ugandans with a western education. In this way, at a very early stage colonial administrators in Uganda equipped a relatively small group with the ability to participate in debates on Uganda's political direction. Because language was closely tied to educational privilege, the average Ugandan in the rural areas was limited to discussing the local politics of his or her respective district or ethnic group. Such policies have over the years served to widen the gap between the (generally highly educated) elite and the rest of the Ugandan population. As a consequence of this, public debate in Uganda has typically been conducted at two separate levels, one dominated by the elite and often conducted in English, and another dominated by the remainder of Uganda's population and conducted in the indigenous languages (Kabwegyere 1995: 190–197).

5. [www.ucc.co.ug/  
RadioTvStations.pdf](http://www.ucc.co.ug/RadioTvStations.pdf)  
2008.

Not only has the ethnicity factor driven a wedge between ethnic groups, sometimes culminating in violent takeovers of political power by those whose ethnic groups felt repressed, it has also intensified inter-ethnic animosities, which have included animosities against particular languages, notably Kiswahili (associated with oppression and harassment linked with past rulers and their agents from Northern Uganda) and Luganda (associated with the privileges bestowed by the British in the process of executing their indirect rule policy). Uganda has not had a comprehensive, written down language policy with regards to the role of indigenous languages. This fact underscores not just the powerful position of English as the global language of official business, but also the internal weaknesses that have prevented any of Uganda's indigenous languages reaching a similar position and, more importantly, the development of a national public sphere facilitated by a common language.

Another key factor in Uganda's political history that has affected participation of the majority in the democratic process has been the systematic de-politicization of civil society. During the colonial period, British colonial rulers permitted trade unions to operate only on condition that they did not actively engage in politics. Post-independence governments in Uganda have also employed various tactics to ensure that civil society remains as de-politicized as possible (Bazaara and Barya 1999; Okoth 1996; Oloka-Onyango and Barya 1997).

At some stage in Uganda's history, notably between 1971 and 1985 under Idi Amin, Obote II and Tito Okello, even discussing politics at the local level was closely monitored by state agents. In pursuit of this, the state banned the formation of civil society organizations. The implication of this was that until 1986, when the National Resistance Army/National Resistance Movement (NRA/NRM) captured state power and began to introduce reforms aimed at promoting what they termed 'popular democracy', the average Ugandan hardly had any input into debate pertaining to the political direction of his or her country. This situation was complicated by the fact that for most of the period following independence, the media were under the control and close surveillance of the state. For three decades after independence, state media such as Radio Uganda and Uganda Television (UTV) in particular dominated the broadcast scene.

The broadcast sector has now been liberalized, and according to the Uganda Communications Commission, as of February 2008, there were 144 radio stations licensed, with 99 of them on air.<sup>5</sup> These broadcast in at least one of Uganda's seven regional languages: English, Luganda, Lwo, the '4Rs' (Runyoro/Rutooro/Runyankore/Rukiga, which are treated as one language on the state broadcaster and often collectively referred to as Runyakitara), Ateso, Ngakarimojong and Lugbara. By an act of parliament, Radio Uganda and Uganda Television have become the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC), which the act refers to as 'the public broadcaster.' This notwithstanding, the prevailing regulatory environment is such that broadcasting still remains under the close surveillance of the state. All private licences must be renewed annually by a government-appointed Broadcasting Council. Therefore, for their survival, the media exercise caution in what they permit to be debated on the airwaves.

## Language and participation in Uganda's broadcast media

Currently, state radio broadcasts to the different regions of Uganda on five channels, namely Blue Channel, Red Channel, *Buteebo* Channel, Magic FM and Star FM. English occupies the bulk of the broadcasting hours on UBC Radio, followed by Luganda. Other languages such as Dhopadhola, Kupsbiny, Lunyole/Lusamia/Lugwe, Kumam and Lebthur are considered 'small' languages and are allocated a maximum of one hour each daily. The criteria for categorizing a language as a 'small' language for purposes of allocating airtime, though, have not always been clear. For instance, during the reign of Idi Amin in the 1970s, his own language, Kakwa, which by any measure was a 'small' language, was allocated more time than some of the languages spoken by much larger ethnic groups.

The language practice of UBC Radio, according to its former Controller of Programmes, has been largely guided by 'geo-economics'. For instance, there is more sponsorship for Luganda programmes on UBC Radio because there are more 'economically viable' listeners who speak Luganda than there are for most other languages. It is important to note, though, that there are many non-native Luganda speakers who listen to Luganda programmes. While for some this is out of choice, for others it is out of necessity, as many broadcasters in the Bantu-speaking parts of the country choose to use Luganda because of its numeric advantage over other languages. According to the former Controller of Programmes, languages that have a bearing on economic production at the national level (like Lumasaba whose speakers produce coffee, a leading cash crop) tend to be favoured over others. On the other hand, other languages like Ngakarimojong, which is spoken by one of the poorest communities in Uganda, are allocated one hour a day at most because their speakers are considered non-viable for the purposes of attracting advertising and sponsorship. Thus although officially UBC Radio broadcasts in 24 languages, most of the broadcasting time is still dominated by English, Luganda and Kiswahili. The use of most of the other indigenous languages amounts to tokenism.

The Ugandan scenario is in many ways typical of the dilemma of Africa's broadcast media (and in particular radio) in continuing to provide linguistic diversity in a fast-commercializing environment as they strive to remain politically safe and financially viable. The fact that in a commercialized environment, the inclusion of a language on the programme schedule of most stations is linked to the number of its economically viable speakers has implications for diversity: smaller languages with no significant economic power behind them tend to be gradually edged off the programming schedule (Wilkinson 2005). This is a challenge for both broadcasters and regulators because a balance has to be found between using the 'bigger', commercially viable languages to 'standardize' public discourse for practical reasons, and accommodating as many languages as possible to give everyone a chance to express themselves in the language they are most comfortable with.

There are now privately-owned commercial and community stations in all regions of the country. However, notwithstanding Uganda's large number of indigenous languages, these stations have no official language mandate. The emerging trend in the privately owned commercial media is that a station selects the most commercially viable language of their target

audience and carries out anything up to 100 per cent of its programming (excluding foreign sports and music) in that language, regardless of how many other languages are spoken in the station's area of coverage. The few exceptions to this are commercial radio stations in Eastern Uganda which is a region that is highly ethnically heterogeneous. Community stations, on the other hand, tend to carry more languages than their more commercial counterparts but they lack consistency as they often rely on the availability of volunteers of a given language to air it. For practical reasons, the community stations often end up broadcasting in the same 'major' languages as the state broadcaster, hereby avoiding the minority languages. Thus the plurality of channels has failed to translate into diversity.

The chances of UBC Radio competing for a consistent audience are greatly curtailed by the proliferation of privately-owned radio stations that have no specific language mandate and target the same audience as the state broadcaster. Interviews with UBC Radio listeners in all regions of the country revealed that typically people revert to local private stations broadcasting in a more familiar language, once UBC Radio begins transmission in what many interviewees referred to as a 'strange' language. This suggests that the proliferation of private (mostly commercial) broadcasters could in fact serve to cement Ugandans' ethnic insularity rather than promote diversity. It could be that while the proliferation of broadcast media that transmit in the indigenous languages improves people's chances of participation in public debate through the media, at the same time this reduces the chances of the broadcast media enhancing a shared public sphere outside people's ethnic environs.

Debates on local content have advanced the argument that a key factor in diversity is a thriving independent production sector. The argument is that unless the media are encouraged or compelled to devote a section of their programming time to independently produced content, the demands of the market and the pressures of competition will result in a narrower content repertoire, compromising diversity for viewers and listeners who cannot afford to pay for the variety offered on subscription channels.

Apart from the practical obstacles to harnessing linguistic diversity towards democratization outlined so far, there are other constraints that include weak laws and vague policies, inadequate provisions for public and community broadcasting, weak regulation of ownership and local content, and poor management of the frequency spectrum. The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda recognizes the citizen's right to freedom of information and the media (Uganda 1995: section 29) and the right of access to information (Uganda 1995: section 41). The constitution also lists 65 unique ethnic groups. Each of these groups is associated with a language or dialect of its own. Although there is a degree of mutual intelligibility between a few of these languages, there are many ethnic groups in Uganda whose languages are mutually unintelligible (particularly those from the North and from the South of the country). There is no single language, indigenous or foreign, shared by all Ugandans.

Furthermore, even though Uganda liberalized the broadcast sector in the early 1990s, the average Ugandan has not been the chief beneficiary of this liberalization. This is related to the way the laws and policies governing the broadcast media came into being as well as how they have been implemented

in key areas such as: independent regulation; provision for a genuine public broadcaster and community broadcaster; regulation of local content; ownership; and the management of the frequency spectrum. Most existing laws pertaining to media freedom and diversity in Uganda came into being in the absence of formal policy and were conceived as emergency measures to legitimize the liberalization of the media while ensuring sufficient protections for government against the media (Ogundimu 1996: 165–166).<sup>6</sup>

For thirty years Uganda's broadcast media were under the direct control of the state. At the worst of times, free speech was so constrained that the state broadcaster's role amounted to that of a government mouthpiece. Even though the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation Act was passed establishing the UBC as Uganda's first public broadcasting service, a public broadcaster that is a pillar in providing linguistic and political diversity in Uganda remains an unfulfilled dream. A recent study found that UBC falls short of the internationally accepted standards of a public broadcaster on many counts (Mwesige and Ouma 2008). Not only does the UBC remain under heavy state control, the law governing the UBC compels it to operate like a commercial station in order to generate funds for its sustenance (Uganda 2005: section 13.1). The corporation is also editorially constrained, as it is required to 'reflect government vision regarding the objective composition and overall management of the broadcasting services' (Uganda 2005: section 5(1) b).

While Radio Uganda was originally mandated to broadcast to the majority of Ugandans in as many languages as possible, UBC's stated language obligation now amounts to providing programmes that 'contribute to a sense of national unity in culture [sic] diversity' and adopting programmes to indigenous needs (Uganda 2005: section 5.1). This vagueness has allowed the state broadcaster to pick up and drop languages depending on audience dynamics as well as political and economic forces at play. Furthermore, the government has systematically cut its funding to the UBC which exposes the state broadcaster to many of the logistical challenges that other state broadcasters attempting to transform themselves into public broadcasters also face. The pressure to remain financially viable at all costs is evident in interviews with UBC staff. Senior UBC officials see their unwritten mandate to broadcast in as many Ugandan languages as possible as a burden and an obstacle to survival in a competitive and hardly regulated environment.

There is currently no agreed standard for the regulation of ownership or local content in Uganda's broadcast media. Because of the financial and political power that commercial media owners wield, both government and the regulator handle commercial media owners with kid gloves. In return, some commercial media owners desist from offending government, as this would threaten their chances of existence. For as long as this symbiotic relationship between government and the media exists, there is little incentive for media owners to push for a language policy which does not prioritize profit. There is also little motivation on the part of government to make the process of policy-making more inclusive as this could upset a delicate balance of interests. Therefore, it seems unlikely that Uganda's broadcasting policy in the near future would seek to promote linguistic diversity, except in so far as it serves the political and economic interests of government and business.

6. See also, Van Cuilenburg and McQuail 2003: 199–200, for a discussion of how political self-preservation influences media policy.

There has not been a systematic or transparent way to manage the broadcast spectrum in Uganda. The result has been that media are unevenly distributed both geographically and in terms of ownership. Furthermore, while a small class of wealthy and politically well-connected people own most of the media, the poor hardly own any of the media at all. As long as the largest part of the broadcast spectrum is controlled by commercial media owners whose priority appears to be profit rather than linguistic diversity, perhaps one should not expect to hear more than a few numerically and economically powerful languages on Uganda's airwaves.

On the whole, policies and laws relating to linguistic diversity in Uganda have side-stepped the complexity of promoting ethnic diversity while forging national unity. The current government has proposed the elevation of Kiswahili rather than any of the indigenous languages to the level of second official language, arguing that the indigenous languages in Uganda have historically played a divisive role (Uganda Policy Review Commission 1992: 15). However, even though since 1992 the NRM government has presented Kiswahili as a 'neutral language' that should be promoted as the language of national unity and regional integration, it has, to date, done relatively little to enhance the position of Kiswahili in terms of providing teachers, teaching/learning materials, or issuing guidelines on its use in the media. In the same way, in the Education Policy, the NRM government has paid lip-service to the promotion of the 'major' indigenous languages but has done little to facilitate their growth.

The reality of the regulatory environment for broadcasting in Uganda, therefore, suggests that existing policy is inadequate to support the kind of linguistic diversity in the media that would allow the majority of Ugandans to articulate their concerns through the broadcast media in their own languages, thus becoming more active participants in national political debate. Though there are opportunities for Ugandans to engage in debate regarding their governance using the indigenous languages, colonial policies perfected by postcolonial governments, the regulatory environment, as well as different governments' efforts to restrain civil society have had an impact on the average Ugandan's opportunities to engage in democratic debate through the broadcast media. Golooba-Mutebi captures the importance of this for Uganda's democracy as follows:

In a context where political culture dictates obedience and deference towards people in positions of power and authority, years of oppressive rule have rendered avoidance of politics the sensible way to ensure personal safety and survival [...]. [C]hances that popular participation could serve as an effective tool for policy-making and implementation, and holding leaders to account [are] necessarily limited.

(Golooba-Mutebi 2004: 301–302)

Under the above circumstances, it is difficult to see how Uganda's linguistic diversity could be channelled to further the participation of the majority in the democratic process without taking advantage of the colonial linguistic legacy of English and Kiswahili, harnessing the strength of numerically powerful indigenous languages such as Luganda, Lwo and the 4Rs and guaranteeing meaningful inclusion of the rest of Uganda's indigenous

languages in the broadcast media. For the purposes of developing a national public sphere, the debate would therefore have to shift from looking for a unifying language to addressing the historical factors that have made this difficult so far. This way a public sphere centred on a common language and a common understanding could develop gradually and spontaneously as tensions are diffused. Furthermore, it appears that any regulation in this regard would need to remain sensitive to the sentiments of Ugandans towards particular languages as this affects their acceptability.

## Conclusion

Following the liberal pluralist view that the processes of liberalization, privatization, de-regulation and re-regulation of the media and communication sectors worldwide are linked to increased access to information for citizenship, some have sought to address the issues of diversity and participation by advocating for the liberalizing of the media. Their object has been to create a plurality of channels and thus purportedly give a variety of voices and languages access to the airwaves. The Ugandan scenario, however, demonstrates that this may not solve the diversity problem in a fundamental way. Indeed as critical political economy scholars argue (Murdock and Golding 1989: 180–184; Murdock 2000: 149–150; Van Cuilenburg 1998), market-oriented communication and information systems purport to give people more choices, liberating and empowering them to influence the trend of their lives, but deliver much less than they promise (cf. Article 19 2003: 4). It is perhaps for this reason that critical political economy argues that in a context where profit maximization is paramount, small scale, genuinely pluralistic media are difficult to sustain, with the likely consequence that those who do not have the socio-economic clout to access or express themselves through the mainstream media have limited opportunities for participating in public debate.

What the Ugandan situation illustrates is the complexity of formulating and implementing media policy and regulation to enhance diverse political participation through radio in postcolonial, *multi-lingual* settings. The legacy of colonialism, the realities of underdeveloped democratic systems, weak regulatory environments for the media, and state intervention in the day-to-day operation of the media all make it difficult to have clear and consistent guidelines on the use of indigenous languages. This is further complicated by the commercialization of the media. It would appear, therefore, that effective future policy (and regulation) would need to strike a delicate balance between the priorities of government, media proprietors and audiences. It would also need to take cognizance of current commercial realities while being sensitive to socio-historical factors that determine attitudes towards the use of specific languages in the media, no matter how practical or viable those languages may appear.

## References

- Article 19 (2003), *Broadcasting Policy and Practice in Africa*, London: Article 19.
- Barker, C. (2002), *Making Sense of Cultural Studies: Central Problems and Critical Debates*, London: Sage.

- Bazaara, N. and Barya, J. J. (1999), 'Civil Society and Governance in Uganda, a Historical Perspective', paper presented at the *Second International Conference on Civil Society and Governance*, Bantry Bay, Cape Town, South Africa, July 2002: available at: <http://www.norad.no/items/1029/38/2057014607/UGA%20civsociety%20report.doc>. Accessed December 5 2005.
- Berger, G. (2002), 'Theorizing the media-democracy relationship in Southern Africa', *Gazette*, 64:1, pp. 21–45.
- Chibita, M. and Fourie, P. J. (2007), 'A socio-history of the media and participation in Uganda', *Communicatio*, 33:1, pp. 1–25.
- Curran, J. (1991), Rethinking media as a public sphere, in *The political Economy of the media*, vol. ii, edited by P. Golding & G. Murdock. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 120–150.
- Dahlgren, P. (2002), 'The Public Sphere as Historical Narrative', in: D. McQuail (ed.), *McQuail's reader in Mass Communication theory*, London: Sage, pp. 194–200.
- Ethnologue, (2004), available at: <http://www.ethnologue.com/show-country.asp?name=UG>. Accessed 18 October 2007.
- Ferguson, M. and Golding, P. (eds.) (1997), *Cultural Studies in Question*, London: Sage.
- Garnham, N. (1993), 'Political Economy and Cultural Studies', in: S. During (ed.) *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 492–503.
- Garnham, N. (1995a), 'Reconciliation or Divorce?', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12:1&2, pp. 62–71.
- Garnham, N. (1995b), 'Reply to Grossberg and Carey', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12:1&2, pp. 95–100.
- Golding, P. (1990), 'Political Communication and Citizenship, the Media and Democracy in an Inegalitarian Social Order', in: M. Ferguson (ed.), *Public Communication, the New Imperatives, Future Directions for Media Research*, London: Sage, pp. 84–100.
- Golding, P. and Murdock, G. (1991), 'Culture, Communications and Political Economy', in: J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds), *Mass Media and Society*, London: Edward Arnold, pp. 15–32.
- Goldsmiths Media Group (2000), 'Media organisations in society, central issues', in: J. Curran (ed.), *Media Organisations in Society*, London: Arnold, pp. 19–65.
- Golooba-Mutebi, E. (2004), 'Reassessing popular participation in Uganda', *Public Administration and Development*, 24:4, pp. 289–304.
- Grossberg, L. (1995), 'Cultural studies vs. political economy, is anyone else bored with this debate?', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12:1&2, pp. 72–81.
- Hutchison, D. (1999), *Media Policy, An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kabwegyere, T. B. (1995), *The Politics of State Formation and Destruction in Uganda*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Karugire, S. R. (1988), *Roots of Instability in Uganda*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Murdock, G. and Golding, P. (1989), 'Information poverty and political inequality: citizenship in the age of privatised communications', *Journal of Communication*, 39:3, pp. 180–195.
- Murdock, G. (2000), 'Concentration and ownership in the era of privatisation', in: P. Marris & S. Thornham (eds.), *Media Studies: A Reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), New York, NC: New York University Press.
- Mwesige, P. and Ouma, B. (2008), *Public Broadcasting: an assessment of Uganda Broadcasting Corporation*, Kampala: Eastern Africa Media Institute.

- Ogundimu, F. F. (1998), 'Private-enterprise broadcasting and accelerating dependency, case studies from Nigeria and Uganda', *Gazette*, 58:3, pp. 159–172.
- Okoth, G. P. (1996), 'The historical dimensions of democracy in Uganda: a review of the problems and prospects', in: J. Oloka-Onyango, K. Kivana and C. M. Peter (eds.), *Law and the Struggle for Democracy in East Africa*, Nairobi: Claripress, pp. 46–69.
- Oloka-Onyango, J. and Barya, J. J. (1997), 'Civil society and the political economy of foreign aid in Uganda', *Democratization*, 4:2, pp. 113–138.
- Redekopp, H. (2002), 'The role of public broadcasting in fostering civil society', speech delivered at the *Public Broadcasters International*, Hong Kong, November 11–12, 2002; available at: <http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/discours/20021112.shtml>. Accessed December 15 2005.
- Ronning, H. (1994), *Media and Democracy: Theories and Principles with Reference to an African Context*, Harare: SAPES.
- Thompson, J. B. (1990), *Ideology and modern culture: critical social theory in the era of mass communication*. Cambridge: Polity
- Thompson, J. B. (1995), 'The theory of the public sphere', in: O. Boyd-Barrett and C. Newbold (eds.), *Approaches to Media, a Reader*, New York: Arnold, pp. 252–259.
- Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) (2005), *Housing and Population Census 2002. Final Report*, Entebbe: Uganda Bureau of Statistics.
- Uganda. (1995), *Constitution of the Republic of Uganda*, Entebbe: Government Printer.
- Uganda. (2005), *Uganda Broadcasting Corporation Act*, Entebbe: Government Printer.
- Uganda. Policy Review Commission (1992), *Education for National Integration and Development, Government White Paper on the Education Report*, Entebbe: Government Printer.
- Uganda Communications Commission (2008), available at: <http://www.ucc.co.ug/RadioTvStations.pdf> 2008. Accessed 10 December 2008.
- Van Cuilenburg, J. (1998) 'Diversity revisited: towards a rational critical model of diversity', in: K. Brants, J. Hermes and L. van Zoonen (eds.), *The Media in Question: Popular Cultures and Public Interests*, London: Sage, pp. 38–49.
- Van Cuilenburg, J. and McQuail, D. (2003), 'Media policy paradigm shifts: towards a new communications policy paradigm', *European Journal of Communications*, 18:2, pp. 181–207.
- Wilkinson, K. T. (2005), 'Language, Economics, and policy challenges to PSB in North America and the European Union', in Ferrell G. L., Jauert P. (2005) (eds), *Cultural Dilemmas in Public Service Broadcasting*, Goteberg: University of Goteberg, pp. 293–315.

### Suggested citation

Chibita, M. B. (2009), 'The politics of broadcasting, language policy and democracy in Uganda', *Journal of African Media Studies* 1: 2, pp. 295–307, doi: [10.1386/jams.1.2.295/1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jams.1.2.295/1)

### Contributor details

The author is a senior lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda and a researcher on the Makerere/Sida-Sarec research collaboration project. She acted as Head of Department from 2000–2003.

Contact: Department of Mass Communication, Makerere University, P.O. Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda.

E-mail: [monica@masscom.mak.ac.ug](mailto:monica@masscom.mak.ac.ug) and [mbchibita@yahoo.com](mailto:mbchibita@yahoo.com)