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## **Angola – a Country on the Margin of Global Media Society**

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### **I. Some General Remarks on Peripheral Communication**

A Luandan daily paper recently carried the picture of a fireman rescuing a cat stranded on a roof. Printed characteristically on one of the less serious pages of the newspaper, I registered this with interest, since the picture had not in fact been taken in the capital of Angola but in faraway Paris.

A wide range of political and communication issues are raised when the relevance of this photograph for the typical reader of an Angolan newspaper is put to the test. The Paris bureau of Agence France-Presse supplied the picture.<sup>1</sup>

The following case study pursues the twofold aim of analysing the Angolan communication system, and of applying empirical media studies to the conceptual framework of dependency theory. Using *Wolfgang Stock's* term "peripheral communication" (Stock 1984: 7) and considering the case of Angola in particular, several aspects of the dependence inherent in information systems will be explored. Studying Angola's peripheral communication contributes greatly to research into how political systems and their economies depend on external interest orientation and realisation. Theories about the structural dependence of peripheries (Third World) on metropolitan (industrialised) countries clearly point to marginalisation tendencies in the field of the media (Stock 1984: 83). As seen in recent developments, these tendencies become particularly explosive in times of crisis and conflict (e.g., Third Gulf War), with a small number of monopolists determining global reporting, and war parties influencing what is reported (Schmitz 1996: 1).<sup>2</sup>

We know that metropolitan penetration of the periphery is not restricted to the economy but affects decisive spheres of society from government to culture and communication. The time has past when conquest was territorial and economic only. The non-material fields of perception have in the meantime been globally appropriated. Historically, communication links were the basis of industrial expansion. At the same

<sup>1</sup> On a global scale, Agence France-Presse is in the possession of the largest correspondent network, relying on well over 2 000 correspondents and an equal number of freelance contributors.

<sup>2</sup> With one hegemon left to determine what the media report, the periphery has obviously been enlarged. Today, structural dependence equally affects industrialised countries, whose economic strength at one time permitted them to influence media flows. .

time, mass communication became an essential product of industrial society, and constitutes one of the few areas of continued expansion today. Communication has become the *conditio sine qua non* of modern industrial society.

Control by the centre over mass communication in the periphery guarantees non-development of the latter's productive forces.

As elsewhere, the relevance of communication in Africa as a function of social dependence was an integral part of the colonisation process. As a result, no genuinely African system of mass communication was allowed to develop. Instead the information system was controlled externally and reinforced through acculturation.

## **II. Rule of Global Agencies**

The monopoly on news gathering and distribution held by the centre and along with it peripheral communication structures initially developed under the influence of the colonial powers, succeeded by the hegemonic powers and the colluding global news agencies and broadcasting systems. Only a few countries, such as Japan and China, managed to stay clear of this dependence network. In all other cases, an international system of dependence has enveloped the media world wide, following the prevailing international system of dominance. Just looking at information routes bears out the findings of dependency theory, with information flowing hierarchically and solely in a North-South direction. Individual metropolitan centres communicate with each other directly, while the exchange of information between peripheral states functions indirectly via a metropolitan intermediary. The issue of peripheries in one region or further apart proposing to establish their own network of contacts is beside the point. In a nutshell, direct and free communication between peripheral states is impossible. Historically following on economic and cultural colonisation, globally established dependence determines all remaining international communication flows. Since 1989 at the latest, this development has clearly contributed markedly to strengthening the sphere of influence of the sole remaining hegemonic power. The history of former colonial empires and current division of the world into spheres of interest has secured the decisive sway over information distribution in favour of the USA mainly in Latin America, Great Britain in Asia, and France in Africa (Singer 1972: 190). As a former colonial power, Portugal has comparatively little influence on communication in the lusophone countries in Africa, with news passing through the metropolitan relay points of New York, Atlanta, Paris, and London. It is here that the news agencies and broadcasting stations in their capacity as global players determine the flow of information world wide.

The Reuter agencies (today: Reuters) Haras and Wolff originally supported the interests of the colonial powers, curbing all attempts at media emancipation that might have occurred on the periphery. After World War I and domination by a few states, the core of the communication supply shifted from Europe to North America. As a result of World War II, the news agencies of the victorious powers (AP, UPI, Reuters, and AFP as successor to Haras) consolidated their hold based on political and economic developments (Stock 1984: 106). The metropolitan powers are undoubtedly aware that their economic interests fit in perfectly with the global spread of the commodity "information", and their political and cultural sway over this commodity.

## **III. World-wide Agencies as Collection Centres and Carriers**

The political importance metropolitan governments attribute to "their" agencies can be gauged by the control these governments exercise by means of part-funding or financial

guarantees. AFP as a global news agency, for instance, is guaranteed government funding for up to 40 per cent of its transactions. And the worldwide active CNN, which is currently favoured by Angolan elites, is another safe bet. Meanwhile – as seen in Gulf Wars II and III – the interests of TV producers on the one hand and those who start wars on the other have become inseparable.

I suggest we call these worldwide agencies monopolists of global information flows: gate-keepers who rely on their economic clout, their global correspondent network, and the support of their political backers when they go about their job of selecting, evaluating and relaying news. News is sifted and information centralized, as they determine what is passed on to the press, to broadcasters, and TV stations. While these metropolitan agencies are masters of 90 per cent of all information used worldwide, just 25 per cent of that information covers the peripheries (Stock 1984: 114). As pointed out in many scholarly studies of news content – and equally applicable to our Angolan case study – there is a preponderance of topics that deal with catastrophes, conflicts and cruel wars. There is precious little reporting on everyday life, cultural affairs or general conditions in the peripheries. To describe this, Stock coined the term “unequal flow of information” (Stock 1984: 114-5). Wars and conflict harvest the most money in international news reporting.

#### **IV. Corridors of Communication – Paths of Power**

Compared with the direct form, indirect communication puts a certain amount of strain on time and money, and can cause clashes between different cultural and linguistic spheres. Yet the corridors of indirect communication are not routes of reason but routes governed by hegemonic motives.

To take a realistic example of peripheral communication:

As a critical observer you may find it difficult to understand why a piece of news about a strike in Luanda should first be relayed thousands of kilometers across a continent to Europe by an AFP correspondent on the ground using the French language. In Paris not considered adequate for world distribution, it is translated back into Portuguese by the lusophone desk at AFP for use in Portuguese-speaking Africa, and finally dumped on say Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. Thus sending news from Luanda to Maputo, a distance of almost 2,800 km as the crow flies, not only involves vast financial expense but results in a considerable amount of filtering. Constructed with regard to topicality, relevance, and commercial value, filters are applied at each of the three stations Luanda (local correspondent), Paris (central office), and Maputo (recipient).

This is but one example of a permanent threefold filtering performed by metropolitan news agencies. Newsworthy events are first of all selected on the ground. Evaluation and distribution is then carried out at the central office, with the final selection taking place at the receiving media office.

The communication dependence model and its resultant selection mechanisms affect each individual peripheral state. In our example, Luanda acts as a satellite, passing on information received from its sub-satellites (e.g., Huambo, Lubango, Saurimo or Menongue) to the metropolitan centres.

Mass media play an essential role in the integration and coordination required by national and global systems. In this system of dependent reproduction, global control of mass media means control of the messages they carry. Content control ties perception to certain topics, structuring them in the process, while journalism as a means of social guidance is used as an instrument to influence social contexts ideologically. Control of

journalism secures control of the political and economic *status quo* that peripheral societies are caught up in.

Similar to most other peripheral countries, the ruling political protagonists in Angola do not possess a strong basis for legitimation, and are continually locked in a power struggle with their rivals. The system of free collection and distribution of news that metropolitan media groups tend to organise in pursuit of Western democratic ideals puts too much strain on the regulatory capacities of a peripheral political system, which is itself hardly in a position to deal with its own conflicts. Available power is used in the periphery to put an end to conflicts that might smash the political system and endanger the rulers. Consequently free information is prevented from becoming too explosive in order to eliminate the potential for conflict (Siebold 1979: 137).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the monopoly enjoyed by transnational corporations in Angola renders any independent national development extremely difficult.

On the contrary, efforts at integration in African societies face media interests that, far from responding to the needs of national development goals, are dominated by metropolitan interests. The external influence exercised by imported models of foreign values and ways of life tends to have an effect on cultural identities that should not be taken lightly.

## V. Broadcasting, Film, TV

Electronic media constitute the field with the highest degree of dependence. This applies not least to broadcasting, where the peripheral are overshadowed by the metropolitan stations, such as Voice of America, France International, RTP, Deutsche Welle, and Radio Ecclesia, which is funded by the Vatican.

It is true that Televisão Popular de Angola, the pro-government TV station, transmits from seven stations. However, since its own productions are costly, it follows the example of most peripheral TV stations by buying up largely cheap imports from metropolitan countries, and of course the inevitable telenovelas from TV Globo, Brazil.

Yet nowhere is global domination more obvious than in the film market. It too has been dominated by the giants, Time Warner and Fox. Angolan film-making has been reduced to next to nothing.

## VI. Conclusion

What is loosely styled as globalisation and sounds better than it is, has for a long time been dominating the media market, one of the few still globally expanding. The individual example of Angola shows how “metropolitan hands” grab, pass on, and filter news, or the contrary, as the case may be, and how these hands determine what is being reported, how they impose their preferences and how they spread ways of life and behaviour that originate in industrialised countries. Angola is but one example of several forms of dependence that exist in the information sector (Schmitz 2002: 94).

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<sup>3</sup> Using Chile as his example, Portales shows how the use of national news dominated by the metropolises decreases and transnational news increases when an authoritarian government is imposed and the economy becomes outward-oriented.

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