Public Broadcasting in Africa Series: Uganda

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1 The Uganda Broadcasting Corporation

The national broadcasting policy ‘seeks to introduce a viable, independent, professionally-run public broadcaster accountable to the public to ensure efficiency and quality programming’. The objectives set for public broadcasting in the policy are:

1) To provide services which will inform, educate and entertain the whole country;
2) To offer a high percentage of local content;
3) To offer programming of a high standard;
4) To enrich the cultural heritage of Uganda through support for the indigenous arts and cultural diversity;
5) To contribute, through its programming, to a sense of national identity and unity;
6) To ensure programming that will cater for the poor and vulnerable;
7) To ensure that the public has access to information;
8) To serve the overall public interest, avoiding one-sided reporting and programming in regard to religion, political orientation, culture, race and gender.

The Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) was established in 2005 under the UBC Act, meant to transform the state broadcaster into an independent public broadcasting corporation. Its TV and radio networks have the widest reach compared to their competitors in the commercial sector. The TV network (UBC TV) is entirely

terrestrial and covers at least 60 per cent of the country. UBC TV operates a single channel. The radio network (UBC Radio) reaches at least 80 per cent of the country. Because of their extensive network, both UBC Radio and UBC TV have the widest geographical coverage of all broadcasters. Although reliable information is hard to come by, commercial competitors collectively appear to command by far a larger share of the national market.

UBC Radio transmits programmes on five channels: Red, Blue, Butebo, Star FM and Magic FM which came on the air in mid 2008. The three primary channels (Red, Blue and Butebo) comprise a national network of 18 FM- and MW-based radio stations. Except for Star FM which broadcasts exclusively in Luganda, the Red, Blue and Butebo channels broadcast in different languages grouped by region as indicated in Table 8.

The national broadcasting policy obliges the public broadcaster:

[T]o report news and current affairs impartially, fairly and in a balanced manner; Comply with any relevant regulatory supervision and maintain broadcasting standards; Establish relevant broadcasting facilities for operations across the country; Fulfil universal access in the shortest time possible; Promote national sporting events and the local arts; Ensure that programming promotes diversity; Ensure that programming promotes political and socio-economic development; Ensure that terms and conditions of employment within the station/s conform to national employment policy; and Be accountable to the public.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Red (North/West Nile)</th>
<th>Blue (Central/Southwest)</th>
<th>Butebo (East/Northeast)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Runyoro-Rutoro</td>
<td>Lusoga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alur</td>
<td>Luganda</td>
<td>Nyakarimojong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakwa</td>
<td>Rwamba</td>
<td>Ateso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinubi (Nubian)</td>
<td>Rukonzo</td>
<td>Kumam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lugbara</td>
<td>Urufumbira</td>
<td>Lumasaba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madi</td>
<td>Ruruli</td>
<td>Lunyole/Lusamia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luo</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lugwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adhola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kupsabiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lugwere</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Uganda Broadcasting Corporation
2 Commercial/private broadcasters

Commercial broadcasting is one of the key policy areas identified in the national broadcasting policy developed by the regulator, the Broadcasting Council. The policy is supposed to be the basis for a new or revised legal framework for the broadcast industry.

The policy lays out the mandate for commercial or private broadcasting in five objectives:

(i) To provide a vibrant broadcasting industry that will play a key role in nation building by reflecting the rich cultural, linguistic, religious and regional diversity of Uganda; (ii) To promote the development of national sporting events, music dance and drama; (iii) To ensure a significant percentage of local content; (iv) To ensure high professional standards of journalism and integrity; (v) To provide programmes of specific interest to the poor and the vulnerable.37

These objectives are in line with article 5(i) of the African Commission’s Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa which calls on states to encourage a diverse and independent private broadcasting industry.

Spurred on by the government’s generally positive disposition towards liberalisation, private entrepreneurs and non-governmental institutions including faith-based organisations have invested heavily in setting up radio and TV stations. Through its licensing system, the Broadcasting Council has not discriminated (at least not openly) against any particular operator on religious, political, ideological or other grounds. As a result, Uganda boasts one of the most vibrant private broadcasting industries in east and central Africa.

As of June 2008, according to the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), the regulator of the communication industry, there were 176 operational private/commercial radio stations. Out of the 44 applicants that had been issued licences to operate private/commercial TV stations, 18 were not operational and only ten were on air.

As indicated, private/commercial broadcasters command a larger proportion of the market share than do the public and community broadcasters. Owners include business people, by far the majority, as well as religious groups and politicians. Tables 10 and 11 provide an idea of the major players in the broadcasting sector.

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### Table 10: Major radio stations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Primary language</th>
<th>Audience rating*</th>
<th>Primary area of coverage</th>
<th>Political orientation**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital Radio</td>
<td>Capital Radio Ltd</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio One</td>
<td>Radio One Ltd</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KFM</td>
<td>Nation Media Group</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Broadcasting Service (CBS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buganda monarchy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Luganda</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Pro-monarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bukedde FM</td>
<td>Vision Group</td>
<td>Luganda</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Pro-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UBC Radio</td>
<td>Public / government</td>
<td>All major languages</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Pro-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simba FM</td>
<td>Africa FM Ltd</td>
<td>Luganda</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio West</td>
<td>Vision Group</td>
<td>Runyankore</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>West, Southwest</td>
<td>Pro-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mega FM</td>
<td>Uganda Broadcasting Corporation</td>
<td>Luo</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Pro-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice of Teso</td>
<td>Voice of Teso Ltd</td>
<td>Ateso</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Pro-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Paida</td>
<td>Radio Paida Ltd</td>
<td>Lugbara</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>West Nile</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Wa</td>
<td>Lira Catholic Diocese</td>
<td>Langi</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice of Toro</td>
<td>Voice of Toro</td>
<td>Rutooro</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice of Kigezi</td>
<td>Voice of Kigezi Ltd</td>
<td>Rukiga</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiira FM</td>
<td>Radio Kiira Ltd</td>
<td>Lusoga</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Deduced from levels of overall awareness of a station (‘top of mind’) as measured by the Steadman Group audience survey, March 2009.
** Deduced solely on the basis of ownership.

### Table 11: Major TV stations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Primary language</th>
<th>Audience rating*</th>
<th>Primary area of coverage</th>
<th>Political orientation**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UBC TV</td>
<td>Public/Government</td>
<td>English, Luganda, Swahili</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Pro-government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTV</td>
<td>Africa Broadcasting (Uganda) Ltd</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WBS TV</td>
<td>Wavah Broadcasting Services Ltd</td>
<td>English, Luganda</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Deduced from levels of overall awareness of a station (‘top of mind’) as measured by the Steadman Group audience survey, March 2009.
** Deduced solely on the basis of ownership.

39 Ibid.
The programming of private/commercial stations is dominated by entertainment, especially music on radio. They allocate considerably few hours to news and public affairs content compared to the time they devote to entertainment. That said, the actual proportions vary among stations. Generally from a purely business point of view, many proprietors of commercial broadcasting stations do not look favourably upon programming that is likely to undermine their ability to make profit. It is only those with very strong financial backing that take the risks of engaging in politically sensitive public affairs programming.

Radios tend to build their programming around the tastes of their niche markets. Hence the market at large offers a wide range of music – western, African, and indigenous – to suit different tastes. Most of the commercial stations do broadcast regular news bulletins as well in the mornings, afternoons, and evenings. Some broadcast news at every top of the hour. Live phone-in talk shows on current affairs and public issues are also a common feature. Shows such as Capital Gang on Capital Radio, Spectrum on Radio One, Palimenti Yaffe (Our Parliament) on Central Broadcasting Service (CBS), Olutindo (The Bridge) on Simba FM, and The Hot Seat on KFM have established strong records for engaging debate. The most widely listened to appear to be the Luganda talk shows on CBS, which is owned by the Buganda monarchy.

TV programming is dominated by foreign content, although stations like NTV and WBS are starting to invest more in local productions. Latin American telenovelas are now among the major attractions on TV. While entertainment remains dominant, the leading TV stations like NTV, WBS, and UBC TV pay serious attention to news and they do carry elaborate news broadcasts during the peak viewing hours of nine to ten in the evening. They also run weekly talk shows on topical public issues that give viewers the chance to call in to air their views.

The market for satellite subscription TV is growing, with Multichoice of South Africa holding a monopoly following the collapse of UK-based GTV. The Multichoice service, branded as DSTV, offers packages within the range of ten to 60 channels extending across the whole gamut of programmes about news, children, sports, movies, etc. A typical package costs about Shs 200,000 (approx. US$ 120) to take out a subscription (including the equipment) and a monthly charge of about Shs 60,000 (approx. US$ 35). The average monthly salary of a university graduate in a professional field is in the region of Shs 700,000 (approx. US$ 450). There were an estimated 50,000 digital satellite television subscribers in Uganda by February 2008, although this number is growing as low-priced subscription packages are introduced. Many low-income folks in urban areas access satellite TV programmes, especially popular sports like the English football league, in commercial venues such as video halls and bars.

To the extent that owners of broadcasting stations shape the missions and agendas of
their investments, there is no doubt that they do influence the content of the programming on their stations. For instance, stations owned by politicians are known to shut out views other than those that support their own parties or positions. Although this practice as well as the political orientations of particular stations may not be obvious to the average or unsuspecting listener, a few opposition politicians have brought their concerns to the attention of the media and have alluded to seeking the intervention of Parliament.

During the campaigns for the 2006 general elections, some radio stations in the countryside were said to have refused to host opposition politicians on orders of their owners who were either ministers, members of Parliament affiliated to the incumbent party, or its supporters. Major advertisers continue to exert pressure on commercial broadcasters to the extent that certain stories that would put them in a bad light are often not aired at all. Instead, these advertisers, especially mobile phone service providers, banks, and soft drinks and beer companies, generally manage to have their corporate promotions as dominant features of the news not only on radio and TV but in the media generally.

There clearly are strong external interests that from time to time exert unwarranted pressures on decision-making in the broadcasting sector. While in the past a lot of attention has been paid to political interference, it appears that business pressures have come to play a similarly, if not more, significant role in influencing editorial decision-making in broadcasting.

The government nevertheless remains the most visible source of interference in the media as evidenced in the closure of various radio stations over the years (see chapter 5).

3 Community and other forms of broadcasting

As with other areas of broadcasting, the national broadcasting policy has objectives specific to community broadcasting. These are:

(i) To provide citizens with a platform to articulate their local issues; (ii) To provide more opportunities for programming in the indigenous Ugandan languages; (iii) To provide indigenous programmes relevant to development at the grassroots; (iv) To reduce the gap between urban and rural communities in accessing communication for development; (v) To encourage members of the community to participate in the planning, production and presentation of programmes; (vi) To promote ownership of media by low income groups of society i.e. the poor and vulnerable.40

These objectives are consistent with article 5(2) of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa which promotes the opening up of access to the airwaves for poor and rural communities.

Many stations that describe themselves as ‘community’ radios do not meet the classic definition of the concept. Most consider themselves community stations merely by virtue of their location in rural areas but can hardly be described as ‘owned and controlled by communities’. While the regulator does not differentiate between commercial and community broadcasters, the Broadcasting Council issues a different type of licence to community broadcasters for which they pay a substantially lower fee because they are seen as non-profit-seeking. Probably just about five stations in the country technically qualify to be called community broadcasters.

The stations that come closest to the definition of ‘community’ radio are Mama FM, Kagadi-Kibaale FM, and those set up with the support of UNESCO grants, that is, Kachwekano, Nabweru, Nakaseke, and Buwama. Mama qualifies primarily as a community of interest. The station is owned by the Uganda Media Women Association and its mission is to advocate for women’s issues and be the women’s voice. It is funded mainly with donor money. Kagadi-Kibaale was founded by an indigenous NGO, the Uganda Rural Development Trust, which runs programmes in the area where it is located. While local people participate in content production in some cases, the degree of community control over the radio is debatable.

On the whole, the pressures that community stations face, however they are defined, are the same pressures that all private broadcasters have to contend with. Much like private owners, organisations that set up these stations have agendas of their own, and they will often intervene to ensure that such agendas are adhered to.

4 Accessibility of services and technical standards

Although many parts of the country have access to commercial and public radio, a few remote areas, particularly in the northeast and mountainous areas in eastern and western Uganda, do not receive any signals. In fact, even where radio signals can be received, there are often vast differences in degree of access and quality.

UBC Radio, the ‘public’ broadcaster, which has the widest reach, covers about 80 per cent of the country. The capital Kampala and the central region are better served than are the outlying districts and regions such as Karamoja in the northeast. Some of the well-established FM radio broadcasters have booster stations in various parts of the country to prop up the reach of their signals, although this would appear to violate regulations that allow FM stations a maximum radius of 70km. Most commercial
radio operators own their transmitter systems, though in Kampala some rent space on the national broadcaster’s mast on Kololo hill, which is one of the highest elevations in the city.

Television is primarily an urban medium. The two leading commercial broadcasters, WBS TV and NTV, cover mainly Kampala and surrounding areas and a few urban areas in eastern and central Uganda. The public broadcaster, which has the most extensive national network, reaches only about 60 per cent of the country. Because UBC TV uses terrestrial broadcasting, it has taken longer for mountainous areas to receive the public broadcaster’s signal.

Shortage of electricity also affects access to broadcasting, especially television. The current rural electricity coverage rate – ‘the percentage of rural households living in the service areas of low voltage distribution grids’ – is 4 per cent, up from 2 per cent in 2001. The government’s target for 2010 is 10 percent rural coverage. The estimate for urban coverage is 9–10 per cent. Generally, however, the country experiences an acute power shortage. Since about 2006, electricity supply has been unreliable with frequent interruptions and power rationing or load-shedding as a result of supply falling well below demand. By the end of 2006, there was a supply deficit of 160MW at peak demand. By early 2008 the situation had grown worse given that the trend in supply since 2004 had been going downward while demand was going up. The government, however, reported improvements in power generation at the end of 2009 that led to a general 10 per cent reduction in electricity tariffs.

For the dozen or so major radio and TV stations, production equipment is generally in good working condition and most operators have gone digital. Operators vary significantly in terms of how close their technologies are to the state-of-the-art, with smaller players especially in rural areas continuing to rely on obsolete production equipment.

5 Concentration of media ownership

As the media industry has grown over the last decade, so has the interest of investors both domestic and foreign. The state-owned media giant, Vision Group, is the market leader in the newspaper sector and its shares are some of the best performers on the Uganda Stock Exchange. It is now spreading its wings over radio and TV and in August 2008 it acquired Radio West, which has the largest audience in western Uganda. In 2009 Vision Group launched Bukedde TV, which joined Bukedde FM

41 Figure provided by the Rural Electrification Agency.
and Vision Voice. The Nation Media Group owns the leading independent newspaper, *Daily Monitor*, a major TV station NTV and KFM radio. The Vision Group and NMG between themselves control the biggest share of the public space in which the national discourse is conducted.

In the draft national broadcasting policy, the government had come out strongly against concentration of ownership in the broadcasting sector and media generally. However, resistance by media owners and the lack of engagement and advocacy by civil society on the issue led to a watered down policy. In the draft policy, the Broadcasting Council had noted that ‘concentration’ through ‘joint co-operation deals, mergers, acquisitions and cross-acquisitions’ was ‘a threat to diversity of information’. Therefore, in order to ‘ensure the protection of the principle of pluralism and diversity’ and to ‘prevent concentration of print and electronic media in the hands of a few proprietors’, it was proposed that the government would:\(^43\)

- Emphasise the principle of demand control, where a person shall be regarded as being in control of a company if their shares exceed 20 per cent;
- Ensure that criminal sanctions and financial penalties for breach of regulations to cross-media limitations are implemented; and
- Ensure that the level of ownership of private radio and television permitted to a foreigner does not constitute [a] majority.

It was also proposed that the regulator would:\(^44\)

- Ensure no broadcasting licensee shall own, or hold a controlling interest in another broadcasting licensee;
- Ensure no broadcasting licensee shall own, or hold a controlling interest in a newspaper, or own or hold a controlling interest in a body corporate owning or controlling a newspaper;
- Ensure full and extensive disclosure of the shareholding and financial structures of private broadcasting licences are provided and adhered to; and
- Formulate criteria to be used to determine where effective control is held and to ensure that it is Ugandan.

However, following opposition and lobbying from media owners, the tough provisions on ownership and control were dropped from the final version of the broadcasting

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\(^44\) Ibid.
policy. It now only provides summarily that the government will:\(^{45}\)

- Ensure that an appropriate legal framework is in place;
- Ensure that appropriate sanctions and financial penalties for breach of regulations on ownership are implemented.

The final policy adds that the regulator will:\(^{46}\)

- Make and enforce regulations on foreign and cross-media ownership to ensure that pluralism, diversity and the overall national interest are safeguarded.
- Ensure full and extensive disclosure of the shareholding and financial structures of commercial broadcasting licences are provided and adhered to for transparency and accountability.

It was left to lawmakers to come up with revised legislation that would protect media pluralism and diversity. But in the current circumstances, it appears unlikely that any tough laws against media concentration will be implemented as they would be strongly opposed by the industry. Opponents argue that such measures would appear to be the wrong signal to send out while the government is scaling up its efforts to attract foreign investors. For instance, the Aga Khan Foundation for Economic Development, one of the biggest foreign investors in Uganda’s economy, is also the biggest private investor in the media industry given its ownership of NTV, KFM, and the Monitor stable. They would likely argue that the media should not be singled out for regulation since in many respects it is a business like any other.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

Uganda’s broadcast media landscape has witnessed tremendous growth in recent years. While the public broadcaster remains the dominant national player – in terms of reach – in both radio and television, commercial broadcasters have introduced a substantial level of diversity in the industry.

Public broadcasting faces serious competition from the numerous private and independent broadcasters, especially in and around the capital Kampala and major urban centres. In fact, the private/commercial sector clearly dominates the industry in most respects, notably productivity and profitability. The public broadcaster, which

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46 Ibid.
enjoys wider geographical coverage, faces the challenge of trying to fulfil a broad mandate with little funding. This makes it difficult for UBC to compete with the more nimble operators in the commercial/private sector. Overall, there appears to be a healthy degree of pluralism and diversity in terms of ownership.

On the other hand, commercial imperatives have led to the homogenisation of formats and content especially in radio programming. Most stations are entertainment-oriented, with music as the dominant content category. This means that the plurality of broadcasters has not necessarily increased the diversity or improved the quality of content available to audiences, particularly news and public affairs programming. Many proprietors of commercial broadcasting stations appear to find entertainment programming safer and a surer way of capturing audiences – and advertising – than critical or potentially controversial material which might carry the risk of upsetting sections of the public, the business community or the government.

**Recommendations**

**Resources for the public broadcaster**

- The government should commit more resources to ensure that the public broadcaster reaches all corners of the country.

**Media pluralism and diversity**

- Civil society should take a more active interest and engage in advocacy on the question of media pluralism and diversity, especially given the fact that the mainstream media are unlikely to push for a reform agenda that compromises the interests of their owners.
- Parliament should ensure that any review of media laws comprehensively addresses and protects the principle of pluralism and diversity without necessarily undermining the confidence of entrepreneurs who have invested heavily in the media sector.