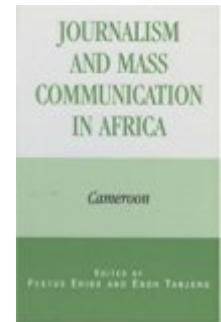


**Festus Eribo, Enoch Tanjong, eds..** *Journalism and Mass Communication in Africa: Cameroon*. Lanham and Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002. x + 169 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7391-0377-7.



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## Out of Cameroon: The Media and the Message

This bold new study stands out as "the first twenty-first-century book on mass communications in Cameroon" (p. vii). Eight of its fourteen African authors have taught in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Buea in Cameroon. Two of the remaining seven teach in the United States, while the rest teach in Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda. The authors are well-placed, in the words of co-editor Festus Eribo, to take "a step forward from intellectual colonization, a momentous break from the past when parachute field workers from Europe and America dominated epistemological research on African communication" (p. vii).

Cameroon is a first-rate place to conduct a study of mass communication in Africa. One of the few African countries whose food production rate tops its population growth rate, it has a literacy rate greater than sixty percent. Around three hundred fifty students are enrolled in the mass communication program at the University of Buea, a university much smaller than the national universities in Yaounde and Douala. The work tar-

gets an audience of "policy makers, scholars, critics, and observers of international communication, political science, and other disciplines" (p. x). Its primary methodology is qualitative research, although some of its studies use quantitative data. Its final chapter (pp. 133-150), for example, is a fascinating quantitative study of media content in East and West Africa. That chapter's aim is to establish a data base on media content in order "to make a case for promoting authentic African values for social change" (p. x).

Unsurprisingly, many of the authors return to a theme that is inimical to "authentic African values": domination of the media by government and business interests. In the first chapter, "Evolution of the Media in Cameroon," Muluh Henry and Ndoh Bertha detail the post-independence Cameroonian government's reluctance to introduce television to the country. The authors note that Cameroon shared an "antitelevision policy" with apartheid South Africa (p. 3). While Cameroon started planning to introduce television in 1962, "Cameroonians waited for 23 years for television to make its debut," some twenty-five

years after independence (pp. 13-14). Even today Cameroon's cable system operates by reason of a "secret agreement" between a signal company and a government minister of Post and Telecommunications (p. 15). The increasing popularity of satellite dishes has furthered government loss of media control to private business interests, that are themselves intimately connected to the government.

The loser in this exchange is the "authentic African value" of a community's responsibility for the production of what it consumes. Because most films on video are in English, "video projectors have replaced the film projector in most, if not all, cinemas in Anglophone Cameroon" (p. 13). The government's failure to support the film production sector has led to video clubs in the Cameroon market and to homes with VCRs which purchase large numbers of Nigerian videos. The government claims the radio portion of the electromagnetic spectrum is "public property," but the "media are expected to implement government policies and to explain government actions to the people with the aim of winning active participation in the task of nation building" (p. 8). The government was reluctant to finance independent film production that "could be critical of the established order" (p. 11). Nevertheless, at present the broadcast sector is deregulated but always subject to the seamless bond between government and business. Henry and Bertha view the current stage of media evolution in Cameroon as quite inimical to "authentic African values." Proliferating video clubs and cable companies show pornographic films--"programs not necessarily suitable for African audiences"--to a hungry and sometimes young audience (p. 16).

Such remarks call for a wider reflection on globalization's impact on "authentic African values" through the media. Perhaps that is a matter for another volume. Also missing in this volume is more extensive general reflection on appropriate reforms of ownership and control of mass media

in the African context. While the issue is of global concern, specific attention to questions of justice and autonomy in the Cameroon media context can serve as models for more global reflection.

For example, a government insisting that the electromagnetic spectrum belongs to the public appears to foster justice and autonomy for its people. If that same government controls the content of the media for the purposes of its own survival and flourishing, however, the public's mistrust extends beyond the government to media workers themselves. Enoch Tanjong and George Ngwa in "Public Perceptions of Cameroonian Journalists" find that journalists, for example, may be characterized as "biased, unprofessional, unethical, ignorant, and weak," as well as "corrupt, lazy and shabbily dressed" (p. 17). The authors cite a survey of heads of households in the Buea municipality showing that more than 90 percent of the respondents strongly disagree that there is freedom of press in Cameroon and more than 66 percent strongly agree that Cameroonian journalists are corrupt (p. 22). While journalists belong to the working class, "they tend to adopt and reproduce the views of the owners of the press and the ruling oligarchies in many developing countries" (p. 19). In focusing on developing countries, the authors miss the opportunity to remark on the same phenomenon of "alienated consciousness" in media workers throughout the world. Those who pay the piper call the tune. The problem appears to be exacerbated in Cameroon only because there is less need for concealment.

George Ngwa in "Communication and the Empowerment of the People" remarks on the irony that "globalization is supposed to be the best for every individual in the global village" (p. 27). Nevertheless, some aspects of globalization are irresistible, since technology is a two-edged sword. Ngwa cites the presidential elections in Senegal as an example "where private radio stations thwarted the ruling party from fraudulently winning" (p. 28). In Cameroon the government's "illegal mo-

nopoly" of radio broadcasting helped drive an increase of newspapers from less than ten in 1990 to more than one hundred fifty at the turn of the century. Ngwa proposes a Cameroonian model of communication "built on oral traditions, user-friendliness, low cost and low technological inputs" (p. 30). One of the model's chief goals would be the "inclusion of the 'illiterate' poor that were formerly marginalized" (p. 30).

Several of the essays appear to suffer from lack of attention to Cameroonian content in addressing generalized communication issues. However, the volume's point is to serve both a Cameroonian and a wider audience. Co-editor Eribo calls the book a "one-stop volume on mass communication in Cameroon" (p. vii). While not specific to Cameroon, the essays on aesthetics in television production, effective public communication, communication research, and survey methods nevertheless serve as excellent models of reflection on these subjects. Cameroonian students and researchers who do not have access to a wider literature will profit greatly from them. Other essays on public relations practices, advertising, and content analysis, however, animate their general discussions of these topics with historical examples taken from Cameroon.

Julius Che Tita's essay, "The Development of Book Publishing," is an exemplary look at the details of life in Cameroon. Tita's account of the Sultan of Fommban's invention and dissemination of an indigenous Cameroonian script is fascinating (p. 67). Publishing at the time of the Sultan's death in 1932 was and continues to be "a risky business" (p. 69). Libraries receive little government support, books are kept "under lock and key and are jealously protected from the students" (p. 72). Most worrisome is the fact that the Cameroonian government, unlike most other African countries, has not incorporated local languages into the educational system. In contrast, Ghana has published more than five hundred local-language titles (p. 73). Most devastating is Tita's claim that the World

Bank's policy of International Competitive Bidding "requires that only publishers in the north [Europe and North America] can provide books financed by the World Bank to developing countries" (p. 76).

Tita's essay deserves expansion into a book that would examine case studies in other African, Asian, and Oceanic countries together with careful scrutiny of World Bank and other international financial organizations' policies on in-country publishing. I would also like to see a revised edition of this volume that includes an examination of present and future uses of the internet as a medium of mass communication in Cameroon, along the model of Tita's essay.

The volume's final essay moves beyond Cameroon to analyze Nigerian and Kenyan print media for the "Africanness" of their content (p. 134). The authors, Charles Okigbo, Festus Eribo, Mary Kizito, and Christine Kyayonka, make the bold claim that the surveyed media "do not seem to be strong adherents of the traditional Western paradigm, which emphasizes the unusual, the negative, and the controversial" (p. 149). Their claim is perhaps philosophical rather than empirical, and I would like to see further research on such generalized statements under the hypothesis that the "unusual" and the "controversial," if not the "negative," are topics of widespread interest throughout the world. The surveyed media use Western news sources but rely principally on their own reporters and correspondents. Especially important is the authors' claim that the surveyed media, unlike their Western counterparts, take "an optimistic view of the African situation" (p. 149).

The final paragraph of this essay summarizes the principal thesis of the book: "The mass media in Africa undeniably carry the burden of their foreign origin, while still trying to meet the demands and expectations of their indigenous audiences" (p. 150). The book itself stands as the best example of this tension. We can only wish that it

could have been published in Africa and still have its deserved effect on the wider world.

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