

Book Review

The Great Trek North: The Expansion of South African Media and ICT Companies into the SADC Region

by Console Tleane

Braamfontein, South Africa: Freedom of Expression Institute, 2006
ISBN 0-620-34905-0.

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Console Tleane's book could not have come at a better time than just over a decade since South Africa has attained democracy following the collapse of the apartheid regime in 1994. What makes this book even better timed is the context in which it has been written defined largely by the calls led by the South African government under the leadership of President Thabo Mbeki, in partnership with other leading African states such as Nigeria and Algeria, for the renewal of Africa as captured through the concept of African Renaissance strongly espoused by President Mbeki. Within this discourse, a declaration has been made at the end of the 20th century and the dawn of the 21st century, that the latter is the African century.

The book provides a critical assessment of SA's role in the continent, and especially in sub-Saharan or Southern Africa, through specific focus on the expansion of the SA Media, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector into the region. This is accomplished through examination of SA companies that fall within the Media and ICT sector's sub-sectors i.e. broadcast media; print media;

telephony; and the internet, satellite and other electronic communication media. They include broadcasting companies such as the SABC, M-Net, E-TV, Channel Africa, and Multi-Choice; newspaper companies such as *Mail & Guardian*, *City Press*, *Sunday World*, *Business Day*, *Financial Times*, *Beeld*, and *Rapport*; Telkom and Eskom; cellular phone companies Vodacom and MTN; Internet Service Providers (ISPs) such as M-Web and ABSA ISP.

In all these sub-sectors, Tleane finds a common trend in their expansion into the region i.e. defined and characterised largely by the neo-liberal capitalist motives driven by the pursuit of profit for the companies as opposed to a genuine concern with contributing to the development and advancement of the sub-continent as part of the broader project of African Renaissance aimed at ensuring that the twenty-first century is indeed the African century. Hence his conclusion

... a simple understanding of how capitalism functions should be adequate for us to understand that the primary motive for capitalist expansion is not to offer services to other countries, but to make profits, and the media industry is no exception (p. 69).

Tleane finds this pre-occupation with pursuit of profits and domination of markets evident in amongst others lack of concern with promoting local content in news (basically telling the SA story as opposed to telling a 'true Africa story') as well as with developing local skills and capacity in the countries which they do business (often senior personnel from SA is used to run operations and locals are only employed in junior capacities); a rife competition amongst SA companies with foreign-owned companies from USA, UK and Western Europe for market share; tendencies to set up operations and provide services in urban cities e.g. in DRC they prefer to operate in cities of Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, which occurs at the detriment of rural areas perpetuating rural-urban divide/inequalities and urban bias; preference to go into stable countries and thus not helping in peace-building efforts in countries riddled with conflicts; the introduction of mainly subscription broadcast channels such as Channel Africa which are outside of the reach of the impoverished masses; the fact that competition amongst foreign-owned and managed companies fails to bring down prices for the

services rendered; and collaborations entered into with some local elites seeking to subvert the already weak regulatory frameworks.

He also finds that SA companies' penetration into SADC countries is facilitated by their technological superiority; lack of media freedom in most of the countries in the region as well as effective independent regulatory framework; comparative advantage of SA in terms of the levels of industrial capitalist development with sophisticated infrastructure and financial resources; and lack of transparency and openness on the part of some SADC and other African countries in areas of broadcasting and print media. Thus he finds that 'a combination of already highly developed industries that had long adopted profit-making operations; the destruction of the economies of the region through the World Bank and IMF's Structural Adjustment Programmes; the advent of neo-liberal globalisation which forced countries to relax their trade rules ...' have been vital in the expansion of SA companies into the region (see p.119).

The book comprises of three parts with 11 main chapters and some addendums. The first 3 chapters constitute part 1. In chapter 1, Tleane traces SA's expansion into the region back to the colonial times of Cecil John Rhodes in the late 19th century. He finds that the expansion has always been capitalist expansion and part of global trends. Chapter 2 elaborates on this by providing a broad overview of SA's economic expansion into region, showing that all key sectors have presence in the region with a single main motive i.e. to take over and dominate markets and maximise profits without regard for protection of natural environment and social responsibility. This confirms one of the scenarios painted by Davies (1992) to whom the author refers, who argued, writing prior to 1994, that in its expansion into the region, post-apartheid SA is likely to adopt the 'South Africa first' approach whereby the state and capital would blindly pursue their narrow interests without regard or sensitivity to the damage such an approach would inflict (see p.19). This point is boldly presented in the subsequent chapters 4-8, which together constitute part 2. These are case-study based and cover some companies in the broadcast media; the print media; the telephony; and the internet, satellite and other electronic media as sub-sectors of the broader ICT sector with presence in the region. In the preceding chapter 3, the author locates SA's expansion and domination in the broader context of globalisation showing how multilateral and international agreements and

standards have shaped exploitative relationships in the region. The remaining Part 3 comprises of chapters 9-11. In chapter 9, the author examines local factors such as lack of capital and support from governments to the local industries that contribute to SA's expansion and the actual role of the latter in the region which he finds to be not just serving as a gateway but also as a competitor for control of markets. This leads to the conclusion he draws in chapter 10, following some careful analysis, that SA is a sub-imperial power of the region. In chapter 11, Tleane not only sums up his findings but most importantly makes suggestions on how to reverse the situation of SA's dominance in the region, and indeed in the rest of Africa, especially as he sees the danger of this current trend of capitalist expansion being likely to continue unless interventions are made to reverse it. His proposed interventions include the need for campaigns against the privatisation and liberalisation of the ICT sector and state control, tightening of the regulatory framework through creation of independent regulator, as well as jealously guarding against the public good, rights and ethos.

A key strength of this book is its scholarly soundness. The analysis and the arguments provided are informed by and based on powerful historical, theoretical and empirical evidence (the latter drawn from case studies done by the author despite lack of time and resources as he acknowledges to further conduct in-depth studies). This can be noticed from Tleane's reference to the historical context and background to SA's expansion into the region as outlined in the chapter 1, his critical review of the theoretical works of relevance to the topic under investigation e.g. Lenin's theory of imperialism, Alex Callinicos' contribution on the concept of sub-imperialism, the notion of middle power as well as Davies' theoretical scenarios of how SA was likely to approach the region in the post-apartheid era (note too his reference to Ibbo Mandaza's work). Perhaps a point of weakness is that Tleane does not present and contribute his own take on the concept of sub-imperialism in terms of considering an alternative concept to best describe SA's expansion into the region. This weakness is common amongst our local scholars who tend to restrict themselves to foreign developed concepts rather than seeking to find new and appropriate locally grown concepts and theories. Notwithstanding this weakness, Tleane's recognition of the shortfalls in the concept of sup-imperialism, arguing that it suffers impoverished definition should however be seen as a point of

strength presenting a challenge of the need to further unpack the concept. What I find to be a further weak point in the book is Tleane's argument that the proposed changes for the SABC Africa channel such as to introduce continuous news and broadcast in English, French and Portuguese are a sign of optimism that could see the channel beginning to tell a true 'Africa story'. My concern with this view, which seems to be pervasive amongst most Africans, including those strongly opposed to neo-colonialism, is that it justifies the perpetuation of colonial domination and fails to challenge colonial languages in Africa. The result is that Africa remains divided along colonial boundaries i.e. Anglo-phone, Franco-phone, and Luso-phone. Entrenching these languages does not augur well for Africa renewal efforts.

This book however is a great scholarly contribution to the understanding of SA's role in the region and indeed the entire continent. It adds a scholarly independent voice to the discourse of African Renaissance and should no doubt trigger further debate on the subject beyond political pronouncements that receive greater mass media coverage. It should prove a valuable source and reference to all those interested in post-apartheid, post-colonial Africa. It is written in accessible language and should be a manageable read to students at school level but also at higher education levels.