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**The Media and Parliament: Creating Effective Linkages for Democracy  
(Media Coverage of the Parliament of Uganda)**


By


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A practicum report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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## **Abstract**

Parliament and the media in a well-established civil society share a responsibility to contribute to political, economic and social development in ways consistent with democratic principles. Both must be aware that economic development in particular is best achieved and sustained in societies that are democratic and well informed.

While respecting the right of individual societies to determine how best to apply democratic principles, Parliament should involve the media, and through them the public, in forming public policy. Parliament should empower civil society by opening up decision-making to enable the media to report on and participate in the debate over policy. It is then, and only then that the world, and especially countries of the South shall have an informed democracy, a democracy which goes beyond routine change of leaders to placing the people themselves at the center of efforts to improve their lot.

Peter J. Okello, "Parliament and the Media: Building an Effective Relationship for the Promotion of Democracy (A Case study of the New Vision Newspaper's Coverage of the Parliament of Uganda, March – June 2002)", April 2003

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While the above and many more people helped me successfully complete this project, I must add that the commissions or omissions in this thesis report are mine and mine alone.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this to work to my children Maria and Bart and also to the loving memory of Yasmin Meherally who perished in a road accident in New Brunswick, Canada on December 29, 2001, only two weeks after we had completed our stay as friends and classmates at St. Mary's.

## Table of Contents

### Chapter One: parliament and Media

1.1 Introduction.....	6
1.2 The Mandate of Parliament.....	8
1.3 The State of the Ugandan Media.....	10
1.4 <i>The New Vision</i> Newspaper.....	14
1.5 Parliament and Place in Ugandan Society.....	15
1.6 Research Objective.....	16
1.7 Research Questions.....	17
1.8 Methodology.....	18

### Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework (literature Review)

2.1 Introduction.....	21
2.2 Parliament and the Sovereignty of the People.....	25
2.3 Theories of the Press.....	29
2.4 Agenda Setting Role of the Media.....	31
2.5 Role of Journalists.....	37
2.6 Conclusions.....	39

### Chapter Three: *The New Vision's* Coverage of Parliament

3.1 Introduction.....	41
3.2 The Editorial Department.....	42
3.3 The Parliament Desk.....	45
3.4 Page Five – The Parliament Page.....	47

## Chapter Four: Content Review

4.1 Introduction.....	51
4.2 Issues Covered.....	52
4.3 Bills Covered.....	53
4.4 Pre-bill Coverage.....	53
4.5 Sources of Stories: Plenary/Committees/Lobby.....	54
4.6 Manner of Coverage.....	54
4.7 Prominence Given to Parliament Stories.....	55
4.8 Policy vs. Personality Stories.....	55
4.9 The Use of Page Five.....	56
4.10 Feedback from the Public.....	56
4.11 Editorials.....	57
4.12 Other Media Organizations.....	58

## Chapter Five: Challenges, Recommendations and Conclusions

5.1 Introduction.....	66
5.2 Style and Reporting from Parliament.....	67
5.3 Improving the Relationship Between the Media and Parliament	69
5.4 Respecting Social Roles.....	70
5.5 Professional and Public Capacity Building.....	70
5.6 Encouraging a Multiplicity of Information Sources.....	71
5.7 Professional Behavior.....	71
5.8 Making parliament Newsworthy.....	72



5.9 Raising Media Standards.....	72
5.10 Providing a Legislative Framework.....	73
5.11 What Parliament and Parliamentarians Can Do.....	74
5.12 What the Media and Journalists Can Do.....	76
5.13 Conclusions.....	77
Bibliography.....	80

# **PARLIAMENT AND THE MEDIA: BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIP FOR THE PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY (A case study of the New Vision Newspaper's Coverage of the Parliament of Uganda, 2000/02)**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The end of the Cold War has forced international attention on issues of human rights, good governance and democracy more than ever before. Internationally, the mass media has been caught up in the political and economic transformations brought about by the so-called New World Information Order. From the 1990s the role of the media in resuscitating and maintaining democratic governance has taken center stage.

In most countries of the South like Uganda, the issue is how to harness the power of the media as a mechanism for enabling the opinions and perspectives of the populace to bear on the decisions of leaders at all levels. Governments and non-state actors alike are increasingly appreciating that the existence of vibrant mass media is one of the only guarantees for both the advent and maintenance of genuine freedom and democratic governance.

As the main source of information for most people, the importance of the media need not be over-emphasized. Information affects the choices made in society about how that society is to develop. Information affects the relations of people and societies. Information or the lack of it can contribute to war or peace, poverty and prosperity. Most importantly, the mass media have the power to establish an agenda on public issues, which the leaders and the led regard as important.

In countries like Uganda, where political institutions and opposition groups are not yet, or are no longer -- operating freely, a free press able to report and reflect popular discontent with the course of national policy or with the government of the moment can serve as an important warning light, identifying early problems that demand solution if political stability is to be maintained.

The information role of the media is not an end in itself. The media performs an additional function of facilitating public debate of the major issues of the day. By reporters and editors choosing to focus on particular stories and angles from a wide variety of issues, the media define the important issues of public debate. In addition, the press helps promote people in all areas of life through its extensive influence that shapes policy. It also helps enlighten people to demand their rights, and its impact is felt beyond a given circulation area. In a number of instances the media has been instrumental in shaping political direction.

In the United States, for instance, the press has been credited with many political changes. It was after many Americans read Thomas Paine's Common Sense articles that they decided on the 1776 Declaration of Independence. The Spanish-American War of 1898 was fanned by competition for circulation between Joseph Pulitzer's and William Hearst's papers. The media was also instrumental in forcing President Richard M. Nixon to resign from office in 1974 over the Watergate scandal. In all these episodes the influence of the press was unmistakable.

But the media cannot single-handedly promote democracy. It has to work with other representative and democratic institutions in society. One such institution in the context of Uganda, and which shall form the focus of this study is Parliament.

## **1.2 The Mandate of Parliament**

The primary role of Parliaments world-over is to represent people. As a primary constituency within the political sphere, the Parliament is well placed through its functions and potentials to provide a lead in society in such a manner as to achieve the objectives of transforming states, of releasing and galvanizing the creative energies of civil society, and also of defining a framework for the democratization process.

As an example, The 1995 Uganda Constitution gives Parliament wide-ranging powers over the Executive. Article 79 (1) of the Constitution states that Parliament shall have power to make laws on any matter for peace, order, development and good governance of the country. Sub-clause (II) of the same article states that no person or body shall have power to make provisions having the force of law in Uganda except under authority conferred by an Act of Parliament. The import of these two constitutional provisions is that Parliament is the supreme law making body in Uganda. Together with the Executive and the Judiciary, Parliament is one of the three pillars of state authority, with enormous powers for making laws on any matter.

In representing the people, the main role of Parliament is to check on the political and bureaucratic arm of the executive. The question of government debt and borrowing is an example. By law, the Uganda government cannot borrow any funds from any source without the express approval of Parliament. This is a role that, if taken seriously, would not only help the country better manage its debt portfolio, it would also help direct resources to key areas that could improve the economy.

Given its vantage position as a law-making body, and as a representative of the people, Parliament is perhaps best placed to lead the struggle for democracy and empowerment of people. There is no doubt that Parliament as an institution is strategically positioned to serve as the arrow ahead in the effectuation of the democratic process.

The regret however is that Parliaments in Africa have not shown initiative in this direction. They have proven to be too weak, indecisive and almost eternally afraid of their own capacity. For instance, despite its enormous powers on the question of government borrowing, the Ugandan Parliament continues to approve every Executive request for borrowing without even setting strict accountability standards.

According to the Uganda Debt Network, an NGO that monitors the country's debt portfolio, over 80% of (over US2.6 billion) loans borrowed since 1996 with the approval of Parliament have not had any significant impact on the ground due to corruption and other related maladies; yet Parliament continues passing such approvals almost like a ritual. The point is that Parliaments have in a sense proven to be a victim of the very limitations they are in principle conceived to manage, and the crisis they are expected to solve. Thus manacled, the Parliament in most parts of Africa rather than being part of the solution has been a central part of the problem.

This study therefore stemmed from a basic awareness of the strategic importance of both the media and Parliament in Africa. In the face of a gradual transition from varying forms of military dictatorship, one party/ one-man rule, communism to a more liberal and participatory democracy, both institutions seem to be destined to have greater responsibilities thrust upon them. For them to cope with the demands of the emerging

societies in transition, it requires not merely an awareness of their role and functions but also the expectations, which constitute their relevance in the public sphere.

The point of departure is that the power and authority at the disposal of Parliament can either be harnessed for development purposes or, as all too often, it can be abused to serve the interests of the dominant political group (or regime) and their allies who come in all shades. This is where the critical role of the media is required to safeguard the interests of the populace. This need not come across as either strange or new.

According to Mwesige (2000), by tradition, journalism is to inform the public and act as a watchdog over government. In Uganda, in the absence of legal opposition as we know it in multi-party democracies like Canada, the press has come to be seen as the alternative forum to government propaganda. This gives the press a disproportionate burden to explain issues that would otherwise have been explained by political parties and other civil society players, say at the grassroots level.

Of course besides the media and Parliaments there are other institutions that are critical in the fight for, and sustenance of democracy, for instance, the schools, churches and communities. But it would be next to impossible to meaningfully cover all such institutions or players in a work of such scope. I will therefore limit my study to establishing ways and means through which the media, in covering the institution of Parliament could help in establishing and promoting an informed democracy.

### **1.3 The State of the Ugandan Media**

Ugandans have had control of the modern systems of mass media since 1962, when Uganda became independent of Great Britain. But those systems are yet to be reorganized

in ways that could make them more responsive and appealing to a broader spectrum of Ugandans. None of the three modern systems of mass media, as currently structured, can be said to be an effective agency of socialization in Uganda. For example, television programs sweeping across the country over large and small rural communities are perhaps perceived only by the spirits of departed ancestors.

Until there is general rural electrification, and until the people's socioeconomic status significantly improves through higher income, television in Uganda is likely to remain strictly an urban phenomenon. Even with the much-talked about progress the country has made since 1986, Uganda Television, a government owned TV station remains the most dominant with repeater transmitters spread through most urban areas of the country. But its programming is hardly geared towards emancipating ordinary people or providing information that Ugandans could use to better their lot. Presently, state-owned TV and Radio services concentrate on covering the President, his ministers and other government functionaries.

Radio broadcasting -- potentially the most feasible medium of communication to reach the majority of the rural population in Uganda has not yet been fully utilized to allow for its immediate widespread exploitation. Much more remains to be done in the broadcasting sector, especially with regard to the mushrooming private FM stations that seem to have minimum standards with which to comply. Apart from music (entertainment) and occasional top of the hour news broadcasts of between 2-5 minutes most FM stations do not have any developmental content in their programmes.

The print media system is likewise crippled in many ways as a vehicle for impelling the process of evolving the desired common culture. Print media demand a particular

skill--literacy--which is in very short supply in Uganda, especially in the rural areas where the vast majority of the population is concentrated. The effect of mass illiteracy in the countryside coupled with crippling poverty is to marginalize a large segment of the population who would otherwise read newspapers. It is for this reason that *The New Vision*, Uganda's leading daily can only manage 40,000 copies per day. Its main rival, the Aga Khan owned *Monitor* newspaper on average sells between 15,000 and 17,000 copies a day. Despite positive gains in marketing and distribution today's papers are still a long way from attaining the 1960s heights of over 50,000 daily circulation for the then government daily, the *Uganda Argus*.

Ateker Ejalu, a former Editor in Chief of the *Argus* attributes the wide discrepancy to the prosperity the country enjoyed immediately after independence which was unfortunately brought to an abrupt end with the 1971 coup by dictator Idi Amin. According to Ejalu, because the economy was doing well, many people could afford to buy newspapers. It remains to be seen whether the economic reforms of the last 16 years will soon get the country back to the prosperity levels of the 1960s.

Also hindering print media development in Uganda is the lack of an effective distribution system. Printing facilities are dependent on electricity and are thus located in urban areas. The cost, effort, and time needed to transport these newspapers deep into the rural hinterland is so great as to severely restrict its economic feasibility. In any case, unless it was heavily subsidized, a newspaper would become so expensive that it could very well be non-affordable by the average person, since most Ugandans are subsistence farmers eking meager, subsistence living from the land. This leaves little surplus money for disbursement on such 'luxuries' as newspaper buying.



According to Nelson (1968), Uganda has built an elitist press and the government must take the blame for this. Government news, for example, is entirely minister-oriented and so are the reports that get published in newspapers. The government information services have failed to mobilize support for development projects, and they have failed to inspire people to work hard. Indeed, the government information services have not succeeded in getting through to the people except at very superficial levels. Instead of reporting about ordinary people in their labors, noting their successes and problems, the information services concentrate on reporting about government ministers, their trips, and their formal meetings.

Complicating an already difficult situation is the fact that the print media system, as indeed each of the other mass media systems in Uganda, has always been under close scrutiny by a very suspicious, and perhaps, insecure government. The government reserved the right to interpret what was, or was not, objective reporting of facts. Any journalist whose views differed from the government's interpretation committed a criminal offense.

The British colonial administration in Uganda and all of the governments of independent Uganda, to date, expected the operators of the mass media systems to recognize the government line, directly or indirectly. Often, media personnel were imprisoned or deported for criticizing the government or questioning its methods and style. In the days of Idi Amin's regime, several journalists fled the country, others found alternative employment, some were found dead, and many simply disappeared.

The state of affairs with regard to Uganda's governance has since significantly improved and the media is slowly but steadily assuming its rightful place as a key player

in the process of democratic renewal and development. Therefore, rather than be weighed down by the limitations of the Ugandan media (as discussed above), my main concern in this study is to critically examine the emerging patterns with a view to making proposals on how the media can better serve as a link between ordinary people and those in power. I set out to accomplish this task by way of a case study of how *The New Vision*, Uganda's leading daily is covering the 7<sup>th</sup> Parliament of Uganda.

#### **1.4 *The New Vision* Newspaper**

Set up by an Act of Parliament, The New Vision Printing and Publishing Corporation is a public corporation with 100% government ownership. With a combined weekly circulation in excess of over 250,000 copies, the corporation is without doubt Uganda's largest and most influential printing and publishing house.

*The New Vision*, its flagship is Uganda's biggest English daily with average daily sales of over 40,000 copies. It's Sunday edition, dubbed 'Uganda's best selling paper' sometimes grosses over 50,000 copies. The cumulative weekly total sales of over 250,000 may seem dismal when compared to newspapers in countries like Canada but the figures need to be looked at contextually -- in terms of Uganda's population and economy.

The company also publishes four weekly regional-based vernacular papers that together sell over 100,000 copies daily. *The New Vision*'s closest rival, *The Monitor* publication owned by the Aga Khan sells only about 150,000 copies in a week. From the figures alone, there is no doubt that *The New Vision* is Uganda's most influential and widely spread-out media house.

Significantly, the *New Vision* leads all the other media organizations in terms of its coverage of Parliament and other centers of power. It is for instance the only paper that devotes a full page to parliamentary news. It has of a strong team of over 10 parliamentary reporters and correspondents assigned to cover Parliament. Its sheer size and scale of operation put *The New Vision* in a unique position in terms of influencing the great decisions of the country as well as linking the electorate with their representatives, the Parliamentarians. This is one of the reasons I considered the company for my research.

### **1.5 Parliament and its place in the Ugandan society**

The Republic of Uganda has had seven Parliaments since independence in 1962. There have however been periods during the past four decades when Parliament as an institution was virtually in suspension. In 1967, the new Republican Constitution provided that Uganda had become a Unitary Republic with an Executive President; Federal States and monarchies were abolished. The abrogation of the independence constitution in 1966 was also an abrogation of the safeguards put there to promote democratic governance.

Under the subsequent Republican constitution of 1967, the sitting members of the National Assembly were deemed to have been elected for another term of five years, thereby curtailing the opportunity for the electorate to exercise their right of electing their representatives. Thus from 1962 to 1971 (when Idi Amin's coup took place), there were no elections for parliamentary representatives. The assault by civilians on the Independence Constitution and the democratic guarantees within it, fostered military

interventions into Uganda's governance systems. A military coup led by Idi Amin in January 1971, brought to power one of the most brutal military dictators in the world. Amin ruled Uganda for eight years, a period in which the Uganda Parliament was also suspended.

It was against this background that a group of leftist-leaning guerillas assumed power in 1986, promising to restore all power and authority to the people. A constitutional exercise ending in 1995 brought into force the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda. It is under the afore-mentioned Constitution that the last (Sixth) and the present Seventh Parliament were elected.

## **1.6 Research Objective**

The objective of this research is therefore, to study and propose ways through which the use of the print media as a forum of popular participation could help people monitor and hence remedy the weaknesses and or, even the excesses of Parliament. This role of the media would then guide Parliament to make laws and pass policies geared towards the general good of the people. The issue is how the power of the media through its coverage of Parliament can be harnessed to produce an informed democracy; a democracy where people go beyond periodically choosing leaders to setting the agenda for and holding such leaders accountable for their decisions and actions.

It's my hope that the conclusions and recommendations arising from this research will be of use for policy review and for further studies by scholars interested in this field. I approached the study in the context of how *The New Vision*, Uganda's oldest, biggest

and most influential daily newspaper, is covering the country's most powerful center of power – Parliament.

### 1.7 Research Question (s)

Many scholars concerned about the social crises of our times may consider information/media incapacity a minor problem. Why worry about communication when attention to unemployment, famine, AIDS and lately, terrorism is urgently required? This question however doesn't take into account the intimate connection between communications and a host of other social issues. Although information is an intangible product, it is a necessity as basic to human survival as food, water and shelter. It is therefore important to understand how news media – a major source of information, works, and or relates with the centers of power.

Many questions came to mind when I was designing this study; the primary question is identified as: **How can the media meaningfully link the electorate and their elected representatives in Parliament in the quest for an informed democracy?**

What are the key issues or concerns of the electorate and how best can the media convey or cover them? How can the media help ordinary people monitor, and hence help remedy the weaknesses or even the excesses of MPs and the legislature? In other words, how can the media help the electorate enjoy better and meaningful representation by MPs? How can the media help make MPs and Parliament accountable for their decisions and or their actions? What are some of the key issues that the media, in its coverage of Parliament, should highlight?

What constraints do the media and the institution of Parliament face in their communication policies and programs? How could these be addressed? The closed and bureaucratic nature of Parliament notwithstanding, how can the media make the legislative process more participatory so that ordinary people have an input in the laws and policies that emanate from Parliament? How can voices from below; voices of the electorate, voices of civil society groups be picked up by the media? How can the media help make the legislative process more participatory? Can the power of the media be harnessed as a mechanism for enabling the popular will of the people bear on the decisions of MPs (Parliament)? How? The above and many more questions were central to my inquiry. As is manifest in the questions, this research was predicated or centered around issues of power, accountability, participation, democracy and ultimately development.

## **1.8 Methodology**

Since I was interested in understanding the underlying themes and contexts that account for the media role in democracy, this study took the form of a phenomenological study. I therefore collected data for this project by way of a six-month internship placement at Uganda's leading daily newspaper, *The New Vision*.

At *The New Vision* I was designated a Political Correspondent attached to the Political desk, which handles parliamentary coverage. My responsibilities were set out as "initiating, gathering and writing insightful stories and commentaries on Parliament, the Presidency and Public Affairs." In this position, I actively participated in editorial meetings by asking questions and raising news tips about development issues I felt

needed to be covered. The editorial department holds daily editorial meetings in the morning at which news tips for the day and comments about the day's paper are discussed. I made good use of this one-hour forum to ask questions and gain insight into the editorial operations of the corporation. The meetings were very useful to my inquiry in that they offered me a better insight into the way and the thought processes that inform media decisions. Being a forum that brings together all levels of participants from interns, reporters to editors and management, it offered me a rich mix of perspectives on the key concerns of my research. David Sseppuuya, the Deputy Editor-in-Chief was always available at the meetings to answer queries on the day's paper and offer ideas to reporters.

As part of my research I often went to Parliament House to cover plenary and committee proceedings so as to better understand the context in which news is gathered. At Parliament, I sought audience with and interviewed three MPs who I considered insightful and influential about how the media could enhance the linkage between them as representatives and the electorate. Since the Ugandan Parliament does not have an official opposition side (under the 'Movement system' of President Yoweri Museveni all Ugandans are presumed to belong to the ruling party) in choosing the three interviewees I considered those I considered more knowledgeable in my subject of study.

I tried to be as representative as possible so as to reflect the rich diversity of the Ugandan Parliament where directly elected constituency representatives seat together with representatives of special interest groups such as women, the disabled, the youth, the workers and the army. I found the perspectives of these MPs particularly useful in as far as recommendations for improvement are concerned.

I also interviewed Mr. Kivumbi Kagole, Parliament's Senior Public Relations Officer to identify the institution's communication and media strategies. Furthermore, I interviewed four senior media managers and reporters about the present coverage of Parliament and the ideas they have for improvement. To balance the study, I interviewed two representatives of civil society groups to get their input on how the media could better link them with Parliament. I had very frank and useful discussions with officials from the NGO Forum, the Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), the Uganda Debt Network (UDN), and Human Rights Network (HURINET). I chose these because they are among the few groups that have been trying to contribute to, and influence the legislative process in Uganda.

Lastly, throughout this study I made extensive use of various literature on the media and politics (Parliament). The rich wealth of information that I obtained from the literature helped me to contextualize my findings and to put the research in perspective. I for instance keenly read *The New Vision's* Parliament page on a daily basis to help me do a thorough content analysis of the Paper's coverage of the House. Content analysis was useful in helping me determine the relevance or otherwise of the current media coverage of the Ugandan Parliament.



## **Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework (Literature Review)**

### **2.1 Introduction**

As Graham Mytton has observed, it is not possible to think of politics outside the framework of communication (media). Politics and the media are so closely intertwined that you can't talk of one while isolating the other.<sup>1</sup> Though a rather sweeping generalization, there is no denying that communication processes pervade all matters of politics. For instance, a candidate in an election for any office in Uganda has, as of necessity, to convey his/her manifesto to the electorate through television, radio or newspapers or even through interpersonal communication, for example a person moving from house to house or person to person.

As clearly stated by Richard Davis, every democratic government needs a mechanism not only to communicate its own policies and decisions to its people but also to gather and organize the responses and needs of those people in order to make appropriate policy decisions. In essence what this means is that the media plays (rather should play) a very crucial intermediary role- a link between the leaders and the led. In Uganda, for example, government conveys its policies to the masses through the media while the masses also channel their views, grievances and suggestions to the political system through the same media. This is especially so through such interactive platforms such as letters to the editor et cetera. In the context of electoral politics, a democratic system needs a mechanism of disseminating information and of gathering and shaping public views for the policy makers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Mytton, *Mass Communication in Africa*, p.6

<sup>2</sup> Richard Davis, *The Press and American Politics*, P.17

In "open" or democratic systems like the US and Canada people rely on the media for all information and believe that it has credibility. Indeed, a recent survey in the US suggests that people find the media more credible than the president.<sup>3</sup> The media also plays the role of political socialization. It is an undeniable fact that much of what the average person learns about political norms, rules, values, and events, and about the way people cope with these political happenings comes as of necessity from the mass media. The values in political socialization may be explicit or overt, or, implicit or covert. In electoral politics, for instance, the media intends to change either the attitudes or behavior of its audiences.

According to Doris A. Graber much of what the average person learns about political norms, rules, values, and events and about the way people cope with these political happenings comes of necessity from the mass media. Mass media provide a nationwide forum for both individuals and groups and the important aspects of the nation's political and social life that the media choose to cover. People rely on the mass media for information and use it to identify their own interests.<sup>4</sup>

Experience over the years has shown local populations that are aware of what is happening are better equipped to confront their problems and disasters. Credible, impartial information not only helps people deal more effectively with rumor, landmines, cholera outbreaks, it also helps them understand better how the system works. For Lopez Escobar, an increment in media use for political information corresponds to an increment in community (or national) consensus about social priorities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid* Davis Richard, p.23

<sup>4</sup> Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, p.2

<sup>5</sup> Lopez Escobar, "The Right to Inform and be Informed" in *Development Dialogue* 1981:2, p.6

Government which is assigned the duty of managing public affairs on behalf of the people ordinarily is supposed to manage those affairs in such a way that they would serve the public interest to the greatest extent possible. On the contrary, however, African government officials tend to perform in ways that often fall seriously short of serving the public interest<sup>6</sup>. Yet government continues to command the greatest power for shaping public affairs for good or ill in society through its policies and programmes. In order to ensure that the gap between government power and government performance is reasonably narrowed, members of the public must be well informed about, and participate actively in government activities and other affairs that affect the public interest. This is a responsibility the media cannot shy away from. The people's active participation will keep government and other sources of public affairs aware and thus help in shaping the character and direction of those affairs for the general good. The media has an enormous responsibility in this difficult but necessary civic duty.

One of the reasons communication is being harnessed is that the traditional role of the media and information is changing. The media and its functions in the new global dispensation need to be re-defined in a constantly changing environment in both the local and international contexts. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to a credible journalistic approach is the inability on the part of some policy/ lawmakers to recognize this change. Whether through ignorance or fear, many public officials regard the media with suspicion. Information, they believe is something to be controlled, or used only for promotional purposes. But the media themselves do not fair any better. Both the press and politicians seldom see any advantage in participating in events designed to emphasize the extended and complex discussion of issues. Reporters often fail to communicate the

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Okigbo (ed), Reporting Politics and Public Affairs, p.19

complexities of public issues, opting instead for simplified confrontational narratives that make for more exciting, if not informative news stories.

According to Campbell (1998) deliberation on issues in all their complexity is often perceived by news people as boring, and nuance positions on these issues are condemned as indecisive. Coverage of development issues is a particularly daunting task. Development programs in Uganda, like much of the rest of the Third World are not the guns, revolutions and war that appeal to editors or at least make them take notice. Key issues like population, energy, food security and positive developments in health and agriculture usually get sacrificed. In their place news people focus on meetings of diplomats, political problems, coups, civil unrest and politics generally.

As Pericles said in his famous funeral oration before his fellow citizens: the man who holds aloof from public life is not "quiet" but "useless". The power of the people finds expression not only in demonstrations and the ballot, but also in their discussion of public issues<sup>7</sup>.

Citizens voicing their discontent can combine with thorough media coverage to produce a vigorous and constructive dialogue about important public concerns. People who are voiceless in society are neither critics nor conscious actors. They are colonized - locked into relationships which make them reliant on others for definitions of their world. McManus (1999) noted in the absence of any mechanism for regularly monitoring and evaluating the government's performance before the bar of public opinion, there is always a clear and present danger that the government will fall into complacency, unresponsiveness, irresponsibility, arrogance and, as Uganda's history shows vividly - dictatorship.

## 2.2 Parliament and the Sovereignty of the People

World over, in societies that claim to be democratic or aspire to be so, it is through Parliament that people express their will and exercise their sovereignty. Parliament has no right other than those the people have chosen to delegate to it. Parliament therefore derives its authority from the people, and it is sustained or violated, only to the extent that people's rights are equally sustained or violated<sup>8</sup>. Parliament, because of this interdependence, guards the people's rights. The responsibility according to Thomas Odhiambo (1995) is therefore both a privilege and a right.

Odhiambo expresses the view that to function effectively, parliamentary process should be open and transparent, involving the open participation of those who may be interested in them or who may be affected by its outcome. Parliament should not only be free and democratic, it must be seen to be such, and at all times, it should provide vital information to the public and remain accountable to the people<sup>9</sup>. For parliamentarians to sustain political liberalization and foster democracy they must be jealous guardians of the rights of Parliament and the electorate.

At the conceptual level, Parliament is a sovereign legal institution and supreme political authority. The responsibility of Parliament is to ensure that there is an enabling environment within which the civil society groups such as professional associations, the media, churches, schools and so on can function. The mass media is particularly important for the purpose of promoting ideas and providing information to bridge gaps of ignorance and of misunderstanding between the governors and the governed. A well-

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<sup>7</sup> Nick Gatheru Wanjohi, "The Substance of Politics" in Reporting Politics and Public Affairs, p.29

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Odhiambo, Understanding African Politics and the Power of African Politicians, p.84

informed citizenry is crucial to the strengthening of civil society and in turn, to the sustenance democratic structures and processes.

Parliament is the agency through which people express their sovereignty. Nowhere is this function of parliament more clearly and authoritatively expressed than in its law-making function. As the supreme legislative body Parliament has to exercise this authority with a full recognition of its supreme responsibility towards the people. This responsibility requires that Parliament should deliberate thoughtfully and thoroughly before it enacts any law.

Parliament should not only enact laws, but it should be seen enacting laws. It's deliberations and processes should be open and transparent. In a democratic Parliament, there is no place for deals behind closed doors, and the peoples' business in Parliament should be done publicly, with the open participation of those who may have an interest in the business before Parliament or those who may be affected by it.

The deliberative processes and procedures of Parliament should not only be fair and democratic, they should likewise be seen to be fair and democratic. A Parliament that fails to meet those tests will soon lose peoples' confidence and mandate. In addition to legislative functions, parliament's oversight or appointive functions, or that of providing checks to the powers of the other branches of government, should also be seen by the people while being exercised. The public exercise of those functions, in addition to providing to the electorate vital information on how Parliament is conducting the peoples' business, should be one of the means by which they make Parliament continually accountable to them.

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<sup>9</sup> ibid Thomas Odhiambo, p.115

Parliament and its members are indeed right in seeing that the government acts in a fully transparent manner and is accountable to them for its actions. On the other hand, parliament and its members have an identical duty of transparency towards the people they represent: they have to be accountable to citizens and contribute to their civic education. Parliament has a duty to inform the public at large about its action and the work it carries out. Everywhere, and more especially in Africa, it is important that everything is done so that the people understand the mechanisms of Parliament and the rules of democracy.

Parliament has everything to gain by having its work better understood by the general public which, if it does not perceive the importance of that work, could doubt the reasons for the very existence of the institution. Parliament and its members can work and flourish to the full in a favorable environment, that is to say, in a society capable of assessing what it can realistically expect of the institution and its members.

For instance, it is common knowledge that in African societies, MPs are constantly the subject of undue solicitations on the part of citizens who see their MPs as mere distributors of the benefits of the state. The media should help correct some of these distortions. It is by virtue of example and through information that the culture of democracy will gradually permeate society. A famous French king of the XVIIIth century is supposed to have said. "I am the state." On the contrary a democracy is when citizens do not confuse the state with the office or person of its head and realize that the state is the sum of different and complementary institutions whose working and whose value to the community are fully understood by every citizen.

In other words, the democratic process must provide for the full involvement of citizens; complete openness and transparency of legislative as well as electoral processes. In addition, it should specify mechanisms for accountability. Citizens must be full participants in the legislative process. The points at which they actively participate must be determined case by case, whether at the point of initial drafting of the bills, when they are first reviewed by Cabinet, after they are returned to the draftsman, or when they are again presented to the Cabinet and eventually to the Parliament.

The foregoing does not in anyway mean that other organs of government, representatives of civil society, or agencies in the global system are exempt from responsibilities and accountability to the people. It simply means calling on parliamentarians as vital actors on the national scene to play their role and be a catalyst for action in the other circles or at the various levels of interdependent processes.

A good Parliament keeps civil society alive by dedicating itself to the evolution of good politics. Largely in Africa politics is not seen in its humanizing sense, but as a crass, craving for power. There has to be a demystification of politics and Parliament can do this but liaising with social institutions, particularly the mass media. Parliaments, it has to be appreciated are part of civil society, there must exist between both, a culture of understanding and cooperation. Civil society organizations can alert government and parliament to omissions in their processes and performance. Civil society must have a right to organize and become part of the broader process of politics in society.



### 2.3 Theories of the Press

Fred S. Siebert et al. advanced four theories of the press: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and Soviet Communist.

In an authoritarian system, rulers use the press to inform subjects of what the rulers think they should know. The libertarian theory reverses the relationship between the individual and the state. Arising from growth in religious and political freedom as well as economic development, the press assists the individual, as the ruler, in the search for truth. The individual is no longer being led by government but is able to rationally evaluate evidence and make choices. The press is part of a "free market place" for the introduction of ideas and information. The Soviet Communist theory, a derivative of the authoritarian theory assigns the press the role of conveying the state's ideology. The social responsibility theory, an overshoot of the libertarian theory, requires that the press contribute to the search for truth in a socially responsible way.

According to the social responsibility theory, the media, functioning as the 'fourth estate' play an important part in the democratic process in constituting a source of information that is independent of government. The media are also viewed as adding to the series of sources of power, which, in liberal democracies, are said to prevent a disproportionate degree of power from being concentrated in any one sector of the population or organ of government. In addition, through the clash and diversity of viewpoints that often characterizes the media, the press contributes to the free and open circulation of ideas, through which the governing elite can be pressured and reminded of their dependency on majority opinion.

However as research and experience over the years have consistently shown, in much of Africa, the social responsibility theory, which should be penultimate in any democratic society, has always been repressed, leaving the totalitarian model to hold sway. According to Mytton Graham, the African media is in most cases centralized and hence the information they carry tends to come from the political center with little or no link with the wider political or national system.

The communicators -who are, not infrequently, employees or even members of the government are less receptive to information from political opponents of the regime in power. According to Graham, because African journalists are frequently employees or even members of their governments, media content tends to be heavily dominated by command and exhortation of the regimes in power<sup>10</sup>.

James Curran et al have also observed that the history of the media shows clearly enough that control of media has always been valued as a form of property for those seeking economic and social power. According to them, the media, more often than not, by commission or omission tend to serve the interests of those who already have more political and economic power in society especially where these are in position to use the media for their objectives<sup>11</sup>. In Africa, because of the undemocratic tendencies of most governments, the media is often in the tight grip of the executive arm of government.

The expression of dissenting or challenging views rooted in interests unable themselves to support the media are largely absent from the spectrum of legitimated views and ideas provided by the major media. Perhaps the most salient and subtle role of the media in politics is agenda-setting to which I now turn.

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<sup>10</sup> Graham Mytton, Mass Communication in Africa, p.17

<sup>11</sup> James Curran, Mass Communication and People, P.8

## 2.4 Agenda Setting Role of the Media

Werner J. Severin et al define agenda setting as the notion or idea that the news media, by their display of news, come to determine the issues the public thinks about and talks about . This can be through headlines or even in the stories they cover generally. Under agenda setting, the media, by virtue of their strategic placement are assumed to dictate the issues for the public and the leaders to focus on. The mass media deliberately focuses attention on certain issues, causing those issues to be elevated in importance to the public. In electoral politics, the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues.

According to Doris A. Graber, most people are prone to accept news people's views in those areas where they have not had personal experience or guidance from social contacts. Rarely do they have enough information and understanding to form their own views about all national and international issues that confront them in bewildering succession<sup>12</sup>.

Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel as quoted by Werner et al, assert that the mass media force attention to certain issues, and build up images of political figures; that the mass media are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, and have feelings about. Likewise, Norton Long holds the view that the newspaper is the prime mover in determining what most people will be thinking about, what most people will think the facts are, and what most people will regard as the way problems are to be dealt <sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, P.2

<sup>13</sup> Kurt Lang and Gladys Engels, in Severin Werner, *Communication and the Third World*, p.26

It is extremely difficult for the media to mesh the public's preference for simple, dramatic stories with the needs to present sufficient information for issue-based decision-making. Research has shown that information for issue-based decision-making, information that may be crucial for voting decisions is often too complex and technical to appeal to much of the audience. The point here is that, the so-called "important issues" just don't sell. Most people usually tend to prefer simple exciting stories.

Given the complexity of the situation, news people feel compelled to cover exciting, humanly touching aspects of the election, even when they are trivial, without totally neglecting essential, unglamorous information useful for issue-based decision-making. In other words, the media opts for rough parity between the two extremes. As McQuail observed, it is fairly clear that the media are everywhere dependent on the rest of society, reactive to move fundamental impulses and sub-ordinate to sources of real economic and political power. The media are nowhere expected to exercise direct power in their own interest, outside the sphere of gaining attention, communicating, informing, entertaining and making money<sup>14</sup>.

According to McQuail, the very stance of neutrality which most media adopt makes them vulnerable to assimilation by existing power holders. The mass media are so integrated into the life of most societies that it makes little sense to view them as independent source of power or influence. Their activities are geared to the needs, interests and purposes of innumerable other actors in society<sup>15</sup>. However, the proposition that the media are ultimately dependent on other institutional arrangements in society is not inconsistent with the fact that other institutions may also be dependent on the media,

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<sup>14</sup> Denis McQuail, Mass Communication Theory, p.84

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, McQuail, P.98

certainly in the short run. It therefore follows that in conveying news, the media has its own inherent interests.

According to James Curran et al, the media are themselves separate institutions with their own place in society, their own objectives to pursue, their own power as an institutional dynamic, they are not merely neutral "message carrying" networks." Geoff Gration et al have also observed that all media organizations have a particular view about how the world should be structured and how people ought to behave in it. Sometimes the values are implicit or covert. That during political campaigns each media organization is prepared offer a corporate point of view to its audience, with the aim of changing either the attitudes or behavior of that audience. In the case of the New Vision, like other print publications, its corporate viewpoint is usually contained in its editorial.

But there is a catch to the agenda setting role of the media. According to Dan Okolo, politicians and their handlers know that the media set the agenda for political discussion and public opinion. They therefore always try to set the agenda for journalists' coverage of political affairs by directing their attention to selected issues that project a better image of specific politicians or political groups. In many government organizations in Africa today, some former or retiring journalists are employed as consultants or public affairs managers so that they can use their newsroom experiences to set the agenda for practicing journalists, in the interest of the government of the day. In some cases, even without the unseen hand of journalists in government setting the agenda for practicing journalists in the media, the common practice of self-censorship often leads to the media unnecessarily being too supportive of government. The bias is evident in the way many African media covering public affairs implies that the newsreader is often exposed to

only a certain perspective unless he or she makes the effort to get the views of the other side. A renowned public affairs specialist in Nigeria analyzed the performance of the media in political affairs and recommended that one has to read several newspapers to get an accurate reflection of the reality of the political environment. According to Pat Utomi, journalist, public affairs analyst and former adviser to Nigeria's Federal Government, the media are often partisan to the disadvantage of the news audience<sup>16</sup>.

Indeed according to Alschull, media categorization into four distinct systems of libertarian, social responsibility, authoritarian and soviet communist is no longer relevant. Alschull holds that such categorization is value-laden and based on the out-modeled cold war hostilities. He argues that beyond the artificial differences, all mass media are agents of those who hold power in the system, and that an independent media cannot exist, although the media has potential to exercise independent power. The content of the news media always reflect the interests of those who finance the press.

This raises concern over whether the communication process still serves the interests of the wider community. According to Dutch educationalist Harry Van Kesteren, the mass media prevents rather than serves communications. According to him, the existing structure of the media in much of the South makes it difficult for development groups and similar groups working for change to get their messages across to the public. As a result, the rights of the underprivileged do not get the attention they should<sup>17</sup>.

Editorial content and activities are usually subservient to business considerations and demands for advertising. The information that is published is all one way, with the

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<sup>16</sup> Pat Utomi, in Charles Okigbo, *Reporting Politics and Public Affairs*, P.63

<sup>17</sup> Van Kesteren, *The Emerging Media and its Double Face*, P.17

publisher/ editor sitting at the wheel of the communication line, which runs in only one direction. In addition, fringe groups' messages are censored, either through their messages not being printed at all, or by it being printed in such an abridged form that the public do not receive an accurate picture of what a group wants to say. All this means that development groups face considerable communication problems. The intolerance of the media gives them no certainty, let alone guarantee, that the public will be allowed to read and consider certain viewpoints.

One of the most quoted studies on press responsibility was carried out in 1947 in the United States by the Commission on Freedom of the Press. The study team headed by Robert Hutchins, then Chancellor of the University of Chicago, sought to establish the standards of responsibility for the American press. The Commission recommended five requirements for the media:

- 1) The press must give a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context that gives them meaning.
- 2) The press must provide a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism.
- 3) The press must project a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society.
- 4) The press must present and clarify the goals and values of the society.
- 5) The press must provide full access to the day's intelligence.

Many who had an opportunity to acquire formal journalism training were taught these tenets at school. However as many often discover, the rules of the market are not based on such morality. In this era of liberalization and competition journalists face growing internal pressure to keep things as lively as the entertainment on private television and FM radio stations. This pressure often tends to reduce public

understanding of issues instead of aiding it. It is as if issues don't matter except as items for politicians to squabble about<sup>17</sup>.

American journalist James Fallows (2000) captured this problem succinctly in a country to which many of us look for journalistic and political excellence. "Step by step, mainstream journalism has fallen into the habit of portraying public life as a race to the bottom, in which one group of conniving, insincere politicians ceaselessly tries to out-manuever another," he said. "The media increasingly present public life as a depressing spectacle, rather than a vital activity in which citizens should be and are engaged. The implied message of this approach is that people will only pay attention to public affairs only if politics can be made as interesting as the other entertainment options available to them, from celebrity scandals to human melodrama featured on day time talk programs." Scandals often serve as a distraction machine, systematically diverting attention to a spectacle whenever the political system threatens to deal with important but seemingly mundane questions affecting the way people actually live. Often lost through these distractions are the persistent problems of our time, such as inequality, hunger, resource depletion, AIDS, environmental degradation, poverty, illiteracy and political oppression.

Both the media and Parliament as an institution and as members in their individual capacities have a responsibility to help keep the news in perspective. The essence of journalism is the search for information of use to the public. People may want to know the details but they also need to be told what the details add up to. Does it affect their lives?

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<sup>17</sup> Peter G. Mwesige, "Media Coverage of the Legislative Process" in Uganda Journalism Review, vol. 2, No.1, June 2000.



## **2.5 Role of Journalists**

According to Okigbo (1994) the first task of a journalist in a political arena is to be the antenna of the people in sensing the political climate at all times and reporting the same as accurately and objectively as the situations may allow. Politics as the art of the possible always involves compromises, promises and the advocacy of certain points of view. The journalist must make sense of all these in the interest of the electorate. The second role is that of championing a peaceful revolution of ideas. The astute political reporter must be an advocate of positive change - not for the sake of change, but because it would lead to improvement. Journalists have a right to call politicians and governments to their responsibilities. Many politicians would accept this only if the press is on their side, and attacking their opposition. Some other politicians will always see the press as playing adversarial roles.

The third function of journalists from a political standpoint is to defend the freedom of society and its constituent members. The entire society suffers when any member is denied the full expression of his or her views. Not surprisingly even the most autocratic regimes and their constitutions will usually have some phrases that at least pay lip service to the guarantees of free speech and individual liberties. When politicians are in opposition they easily recognize this vital role of journalists. But when these same politicians form part of the ruling power, they often see the press as part of the opposition. Reporters must understand where the politicians are coming from and thus be able to accommodate their different perspectives on political reporting.

It is very important also to touch on the issue of accountability in journalism. The fact that the press is not accountable to any other power except the market place clearly

agitates a lot of people. This often takes the form of a hostile question to journalists: "Who elected you anyway?" In Africa some people like Gatheru Wanjogi argue that some institutions should be excused from the usual political processes and public scrutiny. African royalty used to enjoy this special treatment. It is expected that journalists and the media should subject themselves to the judgement of the court of public opinion. The African press should have a central role for itself in the development and promotion of political democracy. The argument about the power of the press in Africa will be empty if it does not seek ways to centralize the position of African media and journalists in the campaign for democracy. It may be true that the black press in South Africa was not the main tool for the independence struggle, but its contribution cannot be denied. What is now needed is a recharging of the will of African journalists to use their profession and media as channels for a new revolution.

It is therefore pertinent to note that journalists - whether professionals or ordinary citizens play a vital role in the defence of democracy. The liberty to criticize, to express dissenting opinions - however unpopular, noxious, or perverse they may be - must remain, in democracy, absolute. This absoluteness stems not from direct intuition or any other special faculty or evidence but from the operating requirement of government by participation. Every citizen must have a say in the affairs of the state, with public affairs reporters setting the agenda for much of that discussion. The citizen who does not participate in this is not useful to his society.

## 2.6 Conclusion

While the media's role and intervention is crucial in the quest for democracy and development, there are significant hurdles to be overcome before the media reclaims its central and pivotal role in the development process. Most of the lines of analysis I have covered in this review indicate that the mass media in much of the Third (and even the First World) today exhibit the following characteristics: 1) freedom of expression is limited to those who own or finance the mass media. 2) Information is largely a one-way flow from those with power to the broad mass of citizens, with little or no horizontal communication. 3) Communication systems are not subjected to a public review process whereby distortions are corrected so that information may serve the needs of the majority of the population. 4) The concept of information for commercial and political persuasion often prevails over the concept of objective and unbiased information.

This research was therefore primarily concerned about mechanisms of how to harness or re-orient the power of the mass media to help produce an informed democracy. I believe that far from subverting public order in unstable or democratizing societies, free and robust media can actually promote conciliation by encouraging the discussion of controversial issues before they reach a volatile or explosive stage. Central to this study is my strong belief that the actions of the government - which is only a trustee of the collective will and power of the people - should be regulated by the full force of public opinion. I chose to focus on Parliament because it is the single most important assembly of elected representatives of the people, who must as of necessity be accountable to their electors.

As American media scholar John McManus (2000), observes: "The news media are supposed to act as society's headlights. As we travel through time, they illuminate what is before us. If they work properly - and we don't fall asleep at the wheel, society may not only avoid driving off a cliff, it may avoid dead ends and steer around some pitfalls. Good journalism can't smooth the path into the future, but it can help us find less bumpy routes." The apparent limited reach of the Ugandan media notwithstanding, this study is therefore an exploration of whether the Ugandan media, as viewed through the lenses of *The New Vision* newspaper is capable of playing an effective role in the promotion of democracy and good governance.

## Chapter Three: *The New Vision's* Coverage of Parliament

### 3.1 Introduction

In its coverage of events and institutions, the New Vision Printing and Publishing Corporation is guided by its editorial policy.

In its maiden editorial in March 1986, the paper set out its mission statement and objectives. Among other things, *The New Vision's* editorial policy specifically requires *The New Vision* and its sister dailies to act as a forum for public debate on national affairs. According to the policy the paper is to have the following objectives:

- (a) To establish an effective machinery for the nationwide coverage of events.
- (b) To uphold the integrity of the Republic of Uganda and promote harmonious relationship among its people.
- (c) To propagate news and comments truthfully, honestly and fairly without jeopardizing peace and harmony in the country.
- (d) To bring opinion on national and international issues to bear on formulation of correct national policies.
- (e) To act as conveyor for news between government and people.

Points (a), (d) and (e) are of particular relevance to my research. The question is: has *The New Vision* established effective machinery for the nationwide coverage of events, especially with regard to Parliament? Secondly, has it, in its coverage, brought opinion on national and international issues to bear on the formulation of correct national policies? Lastly, has it fulfilled its mission as a conveyor of news between the government and people? We could answer these questions by first examining the organizational structure

of the Editorial department which is charged with the duty of implementing the above policies before proceeding to conclude one way or the other.

### 3.2 The Editorial Department

Even by African standards *The New Vision* is a fairly large media organization. With over 100 reporters and correspondents filing stories and de-briefing, the Editorial department is the busiest and largest of the corporation's seven departments. The other departments are: Marketing, Circulation, Production, Accounts, Audit and Management.

As a fairly large department, the operations of *The New Vision* Editorial department are handled by different desks. These include; Sunday Vision, Features Desk, Sports, Business Desk and the Subs Desk. While the News Editor remains the overall head of the Editorial department, the other sections, namely; Features, Business, Sports, Sunday Vision are all autonomous and frequently take decisions independent of the newsroom. Unlike the other desks that enjoy some form of autonomy and flexibility, the political desk which covers Parliament falls directly under the general desk and its reporters are not expected to take on assignments with the prior notification and, often times the authority of the News Editor or his deputy.

This segmentation into semi-autonomous desks is of significance because as I will elaborate later, one of the major problems hindering *The New Vision's* adequate and effective coverage of institutions like Parliament hinges on its some-what inflexible structure without clear, or rather conflicting reporting mechanisms. For example, while it is the duty of the Features department to explore issues or topics in detail, Features writers rarely cover Parliamentary proceedings; arguing as it were that Parliament is a

fast flowing news arena better suited for (general) news or political desk reporters. Likewise, because of reporting rigidities parliamentary reporters are not obliged to delve into analysis as features falls under a different desk. The implication of this is that often times New Vision readers hardly ever get timely insightful analysis of bills, motions and resolutions as they go through Parliament.

The structural problem is compounded by the fact that the different section editors, for our purposes the News Editor and Features Editor, tend to run their departments as if they are at loggerheads or in competition with each other. It is for instance not uncommon to find News Editors barking at reporters who decide to write feature articles or displacing feature writers from newsroom computers. Similarly, features writers who contribute story items to News desk often do so at the risk of suffering the wrath of the Features Editor.

David Sseppuuya, *The New Vision's* influential Deputy Editor in Chief is apparently content with the status quo. I don't see any problem with the kind of arrangement we have. What we have here has worked for us well over the years<sup>18</sup>.

In the newsroom the responsibility for covering Parliament lies with the Political Desk. Set up in 1999, the Political Desk is currently headed by John Kakande, a conservative journalist. In fact, less than a year after its formation the desk was downgraded when its first Editor, Peter G. Mwesige, wrote a stinging piece about the Presidency. Subsequently, Mwesige was 'cautioned' and the Desk re-designated the Parliamentary desk. With its powers and latitude substantially reduced the desk now concentrates on covering Parliament and not the wider political developments in the country.

Since its formation the parliamentary desk has always had (on average) between five to 10 reporters assigned to it. Half of that number are senior reporters with responsibility for, among other things, covering the Presidency.

According to Ben Bella Illakut, *The New Vision's* Training Editor the Political Desk is the most important and most powerful desk in the New Vision. Political reporters are in close contact with the most powerful people in this country. Covering institutions like the Presidency and Parliament is not a joke<sup>19</sup>. But what Ben Bella, himself a former Editor in Chief of the same paper, probably doesn't appreciate is that *The New Vision's* Political Desk, as presently constituted, exists in name only. For instance, while all the other sections like Sports, Business, Features and Sunday Vision run a small imparts to transact business, there exists no such facility for the Political Desk. In addition, there seems to exist no clear modus operandi between the Political desk and the General News desk. Political reporters and correspondents take orders and report directly to News Desk instead of the Political Editor.

In fact according to Hamis Kaheru, a Senior Reporter, apart from the fact that we all cover Parliament there is nothing else that brings us together<sup>20</sup>. Worse, most reporters on the desk are not permanent members of staff but rather merely free lancers whose services are hardly appreciated. This compounds the problem because it then introduces an element of frustration. All this hinders effective performance. Because of unclear, and somewhat conflicting reporting mechanisms reporters find it hard to develop or pursue certain stories in depth. For instance, if the Political Editor assigns you, the News Editor reserves the right to call-off that assignment without notice and assign you elsewhere.

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<sup>18</sup> David Sseppuuya, Interview, March 16, 2002, Kampala, Uganda

<sup>19</sup> Ben Bella Illakut, Interview, May 4, 2002



The structural problems extend to the coordination between News desk, the people who gather all the day's news and other sections; notably the Sub-editors desk. As with every other newspaper, all news reports at *The New Vision* have to go through the Subs desk for quality control. Ordinarily, the practice is that sub editors should check stories for content, context, clarity, coherence, grammar and brevity. The problem at the New Vision is that most sub-editors only "edit" for grammar and then cut stories to fit their dummies. *The New Vision* reporters frequently observe that some sub-editors often distort facts or copy without caring to consult News Desk or the reporters.

### **3.3 The Parliament Desk**

Reporting the legislative arm of government is professionally described as legislative or parliamentary reporting. The media use this specialized brand of reporting to educate the readership on the business or activities of the legislature or Second Estate. The media are clearly more than just a witness to record the business and activities of Parliament. Besides chronicling debate and proceedings of the House, they are the main channels to facilitate public debate on legislative issues. They also serve to explain the abundant information from Parliament to the public.

Media coverage of Parliament does not only involve the reporting of daily activities and major bills or decisions of the legislature, it also entails the effective coverage of behind the scene activities, personalities, interviews and background events associated with the law making process. The media should help in focusing the role of MPs as individual members as well as the role of Parliament as an institution. This could happen by way of the media deliberately writing a bill in an interpretative manner.

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<sup>20</sup> Hamis Kaheru, Interview, June 12, 2002

A typical day in *The New Vision* newsroom begins at 9am with an editorial meeting to brainstorm on new story ideas (tips), assign reporters and also review the day's paper for any commissions and or omissions. Before the morning meeting, the Parliament Editor is expected to call up Parliament to find out the House committees that are scheduled to meet that particular day.

Coverage of House committees is important because like other Parliaments in the Commonwealth and beyond, the Parliament of Uganda conducts most of its business through numerous committees that study bills, motions, resolutions etc and then advise the whole House on the way forward. On average there are normally about 10 committee meetings a day. After the Editorial meeting the Parliament Editor assigns reporters to cover both the committees and the plenary (main) session of Parliament.

Reporters assigned to cover committees are expectedly to go to Parliament immediately after the meetings while those assigned the plenary normally leave for Parliament at about 1.45 p.m. just in time for the 2.00 p.m. beginning of sessions.

According to a newly introduced deadline schedule reporters covering committees are expected to file their reports at the latest by 3 p.m. while those covering the plenary are supposed to de-brief or send an advisory on the kind of story News Desk should expect by 5 pm. Save for a few 'catchy' stories that are saved for the evening conference that works on the prime pages 1, 2 and 3, all Parliament stories normally go to page 5. Due to lack of space, on days when there are more than five committee stories some of them are 'stored' for use the following day. Aside from frustrating reporters, the practice of staying over some news items till the following day deprives the reading public the opportunity to be up to date as far as Parliamentary business is concerned.

### 3.4 Page Five - the Parliament Page

Coming immediately after the first four pages that are usually marked 'National News', the Parliament page features daily from Tuesday to Fridays (the parliamentary week runs from Tuesdays to Thursdays though some committees occasionally meet on Friday. Containing between 5-7 stories, and a picture the page is a juxtaposition of happenings from both the plenary and committees. Due to financial and other considerations, quite often advertising take up to half of the page, leaving room for short stories (about 200 words each) and standard briefs of about 30 words at most.

At the New Vision the choice of whom (which MP) or what (issue) to quote or focus on is left to individual journalists to decide. Journalists often look for something fresh, because they all know too well that yesterday's news is history today. Moreover with the acrimony and rancor in the House, the press often looks for moderate voices who can bring reason to the issues before the House. That is why an opposition-leaning MP who 'crosses the floor' to support a controversial government proposal is likely to receive more coverage than a loyal government supporter who merely parrots the position of the minister.

As Peter G. Mwesige has noted, *The New Vision* often summarizes the gist of debate on a given day, and then tries to mention the main speakers on each side. Of course only those who use captivating language often get quoted while others are only mentioned in passing as having contributed to the debate<sup>21</sup>.

Determining which two or three parliamentarians to quote or focus on out of over 20 who spoke on a subject often presents a challenge to reporters because those who are

left out end up complaining that the reporters are either biased in favor of a few MPs or outrightly corrupt. Some aggrieved MPs even believe that reporters take bribes to favor particular MPs at the expense of others. MPs; Prof. Tarsis Kabwegyere (Igara West), Adolf Mwesige (Bunyangabu) and Prof. Mondo Kagonyera (Rubabo) separately expressed this concern to me. Kagonyera, who doubles as a Government Minister took the issue a step further. According to him parliamentary reporters tend to give too much coverage and prominence to government critics. "You (parliamentary reporters) act as if we the government side have nothing to say. You should accord us more coverage because we also have something to say"<sup>22</sup>.

While acknowledging the need for improvement Ssemuju Ibrahim Nganda, the Uganda Parliamentary Press Association (UPPA) President Ibrahim Ssemujju Nganda dismissed the MPs' claims and charged that the complaints could be the work of timid legislators who rarely speak out in the House. Whatever the claims and counter claims, it would appear that the primary news values of impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, conflict, the unusual/bizarre, drama, and human interest will continue to be key determinants of what goes into the paper.

Because of space problems and other editorial considerations, *The New Vision* reporters hardly ever venture into in-depth analysis of debates, bills, motions and trends in the House. A weekly analytical column entitled "This Week in Parliament" was discontinued in September 2000 after management complained that it was becoming too hard-hitting to the chagrin of some powers above.

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<sup>21</sup> ibid Mwesige, P.34

<sup>22</sup> Prof. Mondo Kagonyera, interview, May 17, 2002

The one-page column that ran with the editorial in the Saturday edition of the paper contained highlights of the parliamentary and other aspects that the reporters considered important for the readers. With time, the column increasingly focused on the weaknesses of the House especially with regard to giving in to (or rubber-stamping) every Executive demand. Like the case of the five MPs who accepted a fully paid trip to the US, sponsored by AES, the American energy giant that was seeking parliamentary approval for its multi-million project in Uganda, there were also increasing cases of individual MPs acting corruptly. With these developments reporters felt the need to re-focus the coverage to expose the transgressions of the Honourable representatives of the people.

Whether it was a mere coincidence or a calculated move, around the same period some overzealous administrators at Parliament, most notably the Sergeant at Arms and the Senior Public Relations Officer came up with draconian rules restricting journalists movements within and general access to Parliament. Without prior notice, journalists woke up one morning only to find notices all over Parliament severely limiting their movements and therefore interaction with MPs and House staff. The parliamentary journalists fraternity immediately instituted an interim committee to impress upon the authorities in Parliament that the new rules were not necessary and to generally lobby for better working conditions. With administrators insisting that the new restrictions be applied, reporters went on a weeklong boycott of the House, during which there was a total news blackout on Parliament. Though the authorities later relented and withdrew some of the restrictions damage to the media/ Parliament relations had been done.

*The New Vision* weekly column on Parliament effectively ceased to run in October 2000 when Felix Osike, the reporter who last handled it rejected management 'advice' that he tone down the critical elements. "I found their suggestion untenable. In fact it was ridiculous to expect me to self-censor in an attempt to please certain people. That was it<sup>23</sup>." As of the time of writing this practicum report there was no indication that the Weekly parliamentary column would resume. Instead, as I have already noted, as long as Parliament continues its non critical role to the Executive, all indications are that the House as a major source of news is likely to suffer greater marginalization in preference for other beats like crime, war and conflict generally.

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<sup>23</sup> Felix Osike, Interview June 13, 2002 Kampala, Uganda

## Chapter four: Content Review

### 4.1 Introduction

For my content review I considered mainly two factors; the sample space i.e. the time period to consider and the units of analysis – in other words the variables I would rely on to draw conclusions.

As far as the time period was concerned I decided to review *The New Vision's* coverage of Parliament over a four-month period from March – June 2002. I chose this period because it was one of the few times the Parliament of Uganda was in session continuously for four months. I thought that any other period involving breaks in between sessions could give me a distorted picture of the coverage.

In terms of the units of analysis my interest was to gain a deeper appreciation of how the New Vision covers the Parliament of Uganda. To achieve my objective I decided to breakdown some of my story variables as below:

- a) The major issues covered
- b) Bills covered during the period under review
- c) Committee, lobby, plenary stories
- d) Pre-bill, bill debate, and Post-bill debate
- e) Manner of coverage:
  - Hard/ Straight news, Features (analysis)
- f) Policy vs. Personality stories
- g) Constituency vs. National vs. International issues
- h) Executive vs. Backbenchers

- i) Prominence given to stories from Parliament: How many stories printed on pages 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
- j) The use of the Parliament page (page 5). Whether other stories other than those from Parliament dominated the space, how much was used for adverts and how many stories were cut and used as briefs.
- k) Letters to the Editors (Feedback from the public) – frequency and prominence
- l) Editorials (character and frequency)

I thought that an analysis of the above variables would give me a complete picture of *The New Vision's* coverage of Parliament.

#### **4.2 The issues covered during the period under review**

During the period under the review the House and individuals MPs considered several issues in terms of motions, debates and investigations. The issues that received coverage in the New Vision ranged from examination malpractices, the poor state of city roads, corruption to election violence. Other issues related to the environment, privatization, and the state of Uganda's foreign missions to women's rights.

The coverage also captured stories on water, terrorism, leadership code, approval of loans, the northern rebellion and the ban on political party activities among others. Of these issues, election violence with 34 stories was the most covered issue. This was essentially because there was a parliamentary probe on the conduct of the 2001 general election and the alleged violence security agencies meted out to opponents of the



establishment. The other issues or that received prominent coverage include the political organizations bill (21 stories) and the controversial privatization of the Uganda Commercial Bank (18 stories).

#### **4.3 Bills Covered**

There were only five bills before Parliament from March to June 2002, consequently they are the only Bills *The New Vision* covered. These were; The Leadership Code (Amendment) Bill, the Stamps Bill, the Political Organisations Bill (POB), the Terrorism Bill and the National Planning Authority Bill. In fact the latter, a very important bill intended to plan for the equitable development of the country, received coverage only in passing with two small inside page stories about it. There was no feature or analytical article about it.

The pattern of coverage was the same for other bills. The point here is that considering the numerous problems Uganda faces, and if the primary role of Parliament is to make laws, it appears the Ugandan legislature performed very poorly during the period under review. That the media (*The New Vision*) did not highlight this poor performance on the part of Parliament and the Executive that is supposed to initiate most legislation speaks volumes about its own performance.

#### **4.4 Pre-Bill Coverage**

It is important to note that there was no pre-bill coverage at all in *The New Vision* during the same period. Perhaps in keeping with this performance there were only six

post-bill stories during the same period. All the six were on the controversial political organizations bill the House passed in May 2002.

#### **4.5 Sources of stories: Plenary/ committees/ lobby**

In all 36 articles during the period under review were from the plenary (full session of the House) compared to 134 from committees. There were only 10 articles from the lobbies during the same period. Most of the 10 (6 articles) were from the Speaker's audiences with various visitors to Parliament. Only 4 articles covered the contribution of lobby groups like the NGO forum, the Movement Caucus and the Human Rights Commission to various bills and issues motions before the House.

#### **4.6 Manner of Coverage**

In terms of quality of coverage, only 13 articles were of a feature or analysis type. The rest were straight hard news stories of "speculation" type. Even the 13 were mostly written by in-house *New Vision* columnists most of whom double as State House or government employees. Mrs. Mary Karooro Okurut, the Presidential Press Secretary and her deputy Mr. Onapito Ekomoloit are some of the paper's columnists who contribute on a weekly basis.

The other columnists include Mr. John Nagenda the Senior Presidential Advisor on the Media and the indefatigable Ofwono-Opondo, the Director of Information at the Movement Secretariat – an organization that functions as the administrative organ of the ruling Movement (party) system. My observation is that instead of helping the public understand the issues of the day these 'state columnists' deliberately cloud issues by filling the pages with denials and unnecessary justifications week after week.

The other “feature” articles that ran in the Wednesday Magazine “Talk of Town” were mostly what could be called vox-pop or the voice of the people. These involved going out to the streets to sound out ordinary people at random on what they feel about developments in Parliament. They were hardly the kind of analytical stories necessary to help the ordinary citizen understand how politicians are engaged.

#### **4.7 Prominence given to Parliament stories**

In terms of prominence a total of 29 parliament stories made it to page one of the New Vision during the four months of review. Of these a disproportionate number 18 were from the Committee on election violence. Coming immediately after a bitterly contested and sometimes bloody election campaign the testimonies from the victims and the responses from their tormenters gained prominence in all the local media. Of the 18 page one stories on the election violence probe, 6 were about the controversy regarding the membership of MP Winnie Byanyima on the committee. Byanyima is wife to exiled former presidential candidate Dr. (rtd) Col. Kiiza Besigye who fought an election battle for the presidency with the incumbent Yoweri Museveni. Page five contained most of the Parliament stories while pages two, three and four had only 8, 5 and 7 articles respectively.

#### **4.8 Policy vs. Personality stories**

The New Vision’s focusing on personalities as opposed to issues also came out clearly during my review of its coverage of Parliament with 16 stories on the conduct or otherwise of individual MPs. One such individual is State Minister Agard Didi who had 6

stories including two front page appearances complete with pictures for what was termed indecent dressing.

The other example was the conflict between the Vice-President Dr. Speciosa Kazibwe and her estranged husband Eng. Charles Kazibwe. This otherwise private matter dominated Parliament debate and the pages for over two weeks in April, 2002 with numerous MPs urging the Vice-President to reconcile with her husband.

The foregoing is in no way intended to create the impression that the paper only dwelt on personalities. To be fair, it did cover some policy issues but even those centered on the contribution of so-called controversial MPs like Ms Byanyima to those policy issues.

*The New Vision* also fared poorly in terms of constituency coverage with only 23 inside page stories during the period under review. In the same period backbench MPs had 36 articles focusing on their contribution compared to only 14 for members of the Executive. This could mean that backbenchers are not disadvantaged as far as the New Vision's coverage of Parliament is concerned.

#### **4.9 The use of page five (the Parliament page)**

My findings were that the page is not exclusively for parliamentary articles and that sometimes up to half the page is taken up by advertising as was the case on March 4, 8 and April 2. There were even days when the entire paper had no parliamentary story. The days were; March 19, 27, April 19 and 29. This contrasts sharply with the paper's use of other specialized pages like sports and business which are normally left either completely free of advertising or other news or with very minimal advertising. Be that as it may, I

declined to rely on this evidence to conclude that *The New Vision* does not consider Parliamentary stories as important. I did not consider stories that run on the page as standard briefs or three-liners.

#### **4.10 Feedback from the Public**

In terms of feedback from the public *The New Vision* again fared poorly with only 28 letters to the Editor (an average of seven per month) during the four months. As we noted at the beginning of this review, one of the cardinal roles of media organizations is to accord a platform for members of the public to express themselves on various aspects of public life. In an interview, *The New Vision* Letters Editor, Rev. Sam Hadido noted the paper is limited in terms of the letters it can publish due to space constraints. Rev. Hadido said he receives an average of 100 letters daily and yet he can only publish between six and eight per day.

#### **4.11 Editorials**

Closely related to the question of feedback is the paper's official view as contained in its editorial. During the period under review *The New Vision* ran 6 editorials two of which were critical of Parliament's insistence on a full probe of the circumstances surrounding the sale of the Uganda Commercial Bank (UCB). Generally, perhaps as a reflection of its status as a government newspaper, *The New Vision* editorials had one common characteristic – they all seemed focused on condemning Parliament while

defending the actions of the Executive arm of government. One such editorial was titled “Insincere allegations” on the sale of UCB in the issue of Friday May 15, 2000. It stated in part:“(S)ome MPs are unhappy that government is exchanging its 20% shares in UCB for a 10% share in the merged entity of UCB and Stanbic”. But this has been public knowledge since the deal was signed.

Some MPs have also tried to gain attention by insinuating that the presence of a relative of Mrs. Museveni (wife of the President) on the board of Stanbic means she was a beneficiary of the bank sale. The MPs concerned are simply trying to make political capital without regard to the truth. The allegations in fact only discredit the sincerity of the MPs concerned and the institution of Parliament.

#### **4.12 Other Media Organizations and How they Cover Parliament**

The problem of ineffective coverage is not limited to *The New Vision*. Even the *Monitor* newspaper that generally tends to dedicate more space to Parliament, and allows its reporters a free hand to authoritatively comment on the goings-on in Parliament (by way of long –virtually uncensored features) betrays other problems that undermine its coverage of the House.

According to Senior Public Relations Officer to the Parliament of Uganda, Mr. Kagole Kivumbi, the type of reporting of the Ugandan Parliament more or less touches on personalities. “Like the obsession with Byanyima (the controversial outspoken Mbarara Municipality MP, Winnie). Some of us don’t understand why our media

organisations give prominence to a few personalities when there are more serious bills, resolutions and motions with serious repercussions for the entire country.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of in-depth analysis of developments in Parliament is of grave concern because political comment on bills is crucial to parliamentary democracy. For instance if the media had more informed commentaries contentious laws like the Income Tax, Patents Acts, Insurance etc would not have been passed without debate. The seriousness of this problem came to head in April 2002 when the House considered and passed the Anti-Terrorism Bill. The bill conceived in the aftermath of the September 11 2001 attacks on the United States was to say the least draconian and a serious affront to the democratic gains the country had made over the last two decades.

Section 11 (1) of the Bill now an Act states: Any person who establishes runs or supports any institution for;

- a) Promoting terrorism
- b) Publishing or disseminating news or material that promotes terrorism; or
- c) Training or mobilizing any group of persons for carrying out terrorism or mobilizing funds for the purpose of terrorism, commits an offence and shall be liable on conviction to suffer death.

According to Aggrey Awori an opposition-leaning MP, it was an oversight on the part of Parliament to pass provisions that impose a death penalty for publishing news or other materials that promote terrorism.

If you went out of the country and met a rebel leader who is considered by government to be a terrorist, you could be arrested if you published his interview<sup>24</sup>. He

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<sup>23</sup> Kagole, Kivumbi, Interview, March 2002, Kampala, Uganda

<sup>24</sup> Aggrey Awori, Interview July 3, 2002, Kampala, Uganda

said the law further poses a grave danger to Movement (ruling regime) critics and the political parties. They can plant things at your headquarters and then turn around to charge you with terrorism<sup>25</sup>.

The problem, as John Kakande, the New Vision's Parliamentary Editor noted in his weekly column of Wednesday April 10 is that the Terrorism law does not recognize the right of a bonafide journalist to report about activities of terrorists. It is not unusual for rebels to telephone or grant interviews to journalists<sup>26</sup>.

However, despite the far-reaching implications of the bill Uganda journalists never treated it with the seriousness it deserved. Apart from the usual half-folio stories quoting MPs (unresearched) views about the bill, no serious attempt was made to dissect the bill and present it for what it really was. It was only much later, well after the bill had been passed that the Ugandan journalist fraternity realized reality. That was after Reporters Without Frontiers, a France-based journalist organization wrote to President Yoweri Museveni expressing grave worries about the bill. Arguing that section 11 of the bill could be used by repressive governments to silence the media, RWF urged the President not to accented to the bill until the offensive clause is deleted.

Subsequently the Uganda chapter of the East African Media Institute (EAMI) also took up the matter with the Speaker of Parliament. At a meeting in the Parliament's VIP room (date) Speaker Edward Ssekandi flatly told David Ouma Balikowa, the EAMI chairman that while the clause could still be reconsidered the media was to blame for the debacle since they never made a submission objecting to the clause from the time the bill

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<sup>25</sup> ibid Awori

<sup>26</sup> John Kakande, The New Vision May 26, 2002, p.14



was presented for the first reading till it was passed. "You certainly didn't play your role and you shouldn't blame us for passing the clause," Ssekandi said.

It is a subject of debate whether the press should publish or quote from statements issued by 'terrorists' or 'terrorist' organizations. One view is that the media should not publish or quote statements by terrorists because doing so would promote terrorism. It is therefore argued that the activities of terrorists should not be publicized. A suicide bomber's aim is to get publicity for his cause and probably to instill fear and panic among the people.

In reality, it is impossible to completely ignore statements made by terrorists or terrorist organizations or to impose a news blackout on the activities of terrorists. For instance while Osama Bin Laden is America's most wanted terrorist, the American press still publishes his virulent attacks on the USA. The American people need to know what their enemy is saying.

As I began to write up this chapter MP Aggrey Awori was contemplating introducing a private members motion seeking to delete the clause from the law. It is unlikely that either Awori or even the Speaker himself will succeed to have the law revised. But therein lies the dilemma. There is a precedent as I will explain shortly. The problem (offensive clause in the Terrorist Bill) could have been satisfactorily dealt with if parliamentary reporters and the media generally had paid a little more attention to the details of the Bill. Felix Osike, a senior New Vision Political / Parliamentary Reporter captured the position succinctly when he remarked; "I don't know how that skipped all of us. Somehow we never focused on that clause!"<sup>26</sup> Osike is one of the few serious minded journalists who cover Parliament and his revelation is telling as it is scary. It is likely that

several other unjust and draconian laws affecting different segments of the Ugandan populace go through Parliament in that manner (without scrutiny).

The Income Tax 1997, a repressive law that was passed without debate and without the required quorum but no one raised an objection at the time. One year later when the law was reviewed dissent came from the most unlikely quarters - from among the MPs and media organizations. The MPs argument was that they had been misled into passing the law without enough information! As I write the law still stands and salaried workers continue to lose up to 35% of their earnings to government as Pay As You Earn (PAYE) tax.

Another interesting case was in October 2001, when Parliament hurriedly passed, without debate the government proposal that their pay be increased with a car loan included. The increment had grave implications for Uganda's Gross Domestic Product. The nominal GDP for Uganda is about sh10,265bn of which sh548.9bn is spent on paying salaries for all those who earn their pay from government. Of this figure, sh5.20bn will now be spent on meeting the new wage bill for 304 so representatives in parliament.

Shortly after the motion passed through the House, Government announced that it would effect radical budgetary cuts on allocations to ministries and other departments in order to raise an additional Shs 9.3bn needed to cover emoluments of Members of Parliament.

Mwesigwa Rukutana, the Minister of State for Finance (General Duties) revealed in November 2001 that while the increase in MPs pay took effect November 1, it was never included in budget consultative process and therefore the increment was not catered for in budget expenditure ceiling. He said the extra funding required from November to the

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<sup>26</sup> Felix Osike, Interview, May 24, 2002, Kampala, Uganda

end of the financial year in June 2002 amounted to Shs 9.3 billion. “This represents a very substantial requirement. The [budget] ceiling is not elastic and in view of this hard budget constraint, the Shs 9.3bn can only be accommodated by making cuts in other budget allocations.<sup>27</sup>”

The increment was, in my view, clearly against the general aspirations or well being of most Ugandans. In fact the whole scheme looked like a conspiracy between the Executive and Parliament to milk the prodigal cow further without feeding it. As one would expect, the increment caused quite a stir in the public with most people casting their representatives as selfish. Writing in *The New Vision* of November 18, 2001, one David Bayo termed the MPs as ‘pickpockets’ who had conspired to rob from their poor electors. In a country where the majority, including public servants live from hand to mouth, concern about the MPs pay rise was understandable.

The question is, did Parliament, supposedly the embodiment of the peoples' collective will fall prey to a very skewed sense of priorities when it came to rewarding themselves? Absurdly, the justification given for the hefty pay rise was that the rates that had been revised were for the sixth Parliament, which lapsed with its tenure of office. There was the point that the cost of mobilization was high and that besides much of this money was spent in these exercises for the improvement of the lot of the constituents who are forever demanding for school fees, burial expenses and other forms of contribution.

Couldn't the media have made a difference? Why wasn't this issue subjected to a thorough debate beyond the precincts of Parliament? Ordinarily the Ugandan media should have initiated debate about the issue by highlighting and writing in-depth

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<sup>27</sup> Mwesigwa Rukutana, *The New Vision* November 23, p.3, 2001

background reports about the development. This did not happen. Instead what we had was fast-paced narratives from the floor for only about two days. No attempt was made by parliamentary reporters to place the issue in perspective so as to help readers understand the implications of the increment for the whole economy. At the time of putting the final touches to this paper (in August, 2002) Parliament again passed a motion awarding MPs a hefty shs.2.4m as in annual medical insurance! Regrettably, again the media did not come out forcefully on the side of the people.

A related problem with the current media coverage of Parliament is the obsession with events as opposed to processes. For some reason Ugandan journalists don't seem to study the progression of issues from their genesis to the time they become reality. At the time the Terrorism Bill was going through Parliament there were two other pieces of legislation initiated by Cabinet, the Political Organizations Bill and the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Bill. Read together the three bills were a serious drawback to the democratization process.

While the Terrorism Bill made no pretence about its objective (its every wording was draconian), the other two were clothed in language that concealed their true intentions i.e. to close the democratic space further. Even without going into the details, the Political Organisations Act (it was easily passed in the manner the Executive wanted it) is now being used to continue the 16-year old restriction on the activities of political parties and other individual liberties like freedom of assembly and association. The NGO Bill was also conceived along the same lines of further restricting the licensing and operations of NGOs and other civil society groups. My contention is that someone ought to have come out openly to state that the three proposed laws were related. That the

proposed pieces of legislation had a common characteristic of seeking to limit people's freedoms of speech and assembly, and that such laws are completely out of step with the democratic wave that is sweeping through most of the world.

It is difficult to point out more examples but it is possible that there are many more such laws that are adversely affecting various sections of the populace who unlike the journalists do not have the rare opportunity of meeting the Speaker to express their concerns. For how long should this sad state of affairs continue?

## **Chapter Five: Challenges, Recommendations and Conclusion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

One major objective of this research has been to identify ways to improve the relationship between Parliament and the media. The aim has been to determine how their complementary roles in the democratic process can be enhanced to better inform the electorate.

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, much of the current reportage of the Ugandan Parliament (both print and broadcast) is rather shallow because most reporters do not seem to follow up issues beyond the rigorous debates on the floor. While short stories, scripts and sound bites are useful, they normally do not enhance greater public understanding of complex issues that daily go through Parliament. There is therefore need for more analysis, background features and futuristic insights into how bills and motions are likely to affect society.

Reporters interviewed for this research cited the fast-paced nature of parliamentary proceedings, reporter self-censorship, lack of facilities at Parliament house, lack of space/airtime and in-house editorial restrictions as some of the factors limiting effective coverage of Parliament. These problems have got to be addressed if the media is to meaningfully serve its mandate.

While there is little that can be done about the fast-paced nature of parliamentary debates, it is certainly possible to improve the working conditions for parliamentary reporters. I am convinced that journalists would do better if they had a

fully equipped press office with facilities like phone/fax lines, E-mail and the Internet with which to receive and relay information as fast as possible. The current media office, located at the backyard of Parliament is not only inaccessible to MPs, it is just like any other small room without any facilities. In fact because most journalists don't frequent it, some Parliament staff have turned it into a walk-way to their offices.

Secondly I think it is possible, at least in the long run, to avail more space for Parliamentary news in the media. From my interaction with the editors and reporters I learnt that about 30% of stories *New Vision* reporters file don't get used because of lack of space. With more space, this sheer wastage in terms of resources and effort could be minimized while at the same time informing the populace about Parliament better. At the time of this writing there were moves by *The New Vision* management to replace the paper's rather lackluster "inverted pyramid" style with a more "participatory" style but there are already concerns that this effort will also not bear fruit unless management takes a decision to increase editorial space. It is hoped that a less structured free-flowing style will attract more readers to the paper and therefore generate more revenue. While the inverted pyramid style usually involved fewer words, more "captivating" writing styles like the champagne glass require more space for more words as writers embellish their stories.

## **5.2 Style and Reporting from Parliament**

While political (and parliamentary) reports generally tend to be rather dull and boring, journalists must strive to make such reports more interesting without clouding the message. The adopted style must be one that encourages ordinary people to participate in

political life as opposed to a cynical approach that depicts politics as a dirty game and hence discourages 'decent' people from taking part in the political life of the country.

Reporters must be conscious that the job of journalism is not to parrot the points of view of government but rather to raise the views of the people themselves. Journalists must have confidence in their own individual abilities to inform, to assess and criticize. Parliamentary reporters must encourage the widest engagement of ordinary people in politics. There is need to break the cynicism that politics is only for politicians. The purpose of reporting should be to make sure that the people you're addressing will be able to understand key issues and be able to make informed judgment.

When considering style, the foremost consideration should be the purpose for communication and the target audience in terms of their lifestyles, their education level etc. A communication style targeting the educated middle class in the city should of necessity be different from the style intended for illiterate peasants in villages. With regard to the rather subjective question of fairness, while journalists have a duty to balance all sides of an issue it is potentially dangerous and misleading to report in a manner that portrays the minority view as the popular one.

In addition, parliamentary reporters need to pay attention to the wider context in which they are reporting. In the context of the current situation in Uganda, reporters need to pay heed to the role of poverty, corruption and the army in Uganda's body politic and in influencing the trend of debate in Parliament. In other words, as Parliament goes about its business journalists have to watch the general public. Is it following or breaking away from MPs?



Overall, the Ugandan media needs to devote more attention and resources to in-depth coverage of Parliament and its committees. While reports about personalities, especially controversial ones like Winnie Byanyima (MP, Mbarara Municipality) are necessary to sell newspapers, the media would do better if it devoted more space to the important issues with ramifications for the entire society. The media should lead the way in challenging members of Parliament to rise to the occasion and do what they were elected to do, namely represent their people instead of being seen to be serving the interests of the president and, or his agents.

Lastly in an atmosphere where opposition political parties are by law restricted from seriously challenging the regime in power, the media should, without being overly partisan, become even more courageous in fulfilling its role as watchdog for the voiceless. Indeed one area the media will have to keenly watch is Uganda's transition from a movement system to a pluralist society. Again, without being unnecessarily partisan I think the Ugandan media should be at the forefront of the struggle for opening-up of the political space.

### **5.3 Improving the Relationship Between the Media and Parliament**

To perform their respective duties Parliament and the media must work together, but it has to be accepted that a degree of mutual suspicion will always be an essential part of the relationship. But even with the expected occasional cleavages the need for closer cooperation between the media and Parliament need not be over-emphasized. Luckily for the Uganda Press the Speaker of Parliament Hon. Edward Ssekandi is aware of the importance of the partnership between Parliament and the media. According to him while

Parliamentarians represent and articulate the interests and aspirations of the people the media relays to the people what Parliament does as their representatives. “While we acknowledge and respect you in the media as the legitimate reflection of public opinion, public concern, social problems and a reaction to policies and programs, we are focused on you Parliamentary journalists in this particular field to fairly and factually cover Parliament as the duly elected voice of the people.”

There are other ways and mechanisms through which Parliament and the media either singly or collectively can enhance the linkage of ordinary people with their representatives in Parliament. Below are some of the proposals for the way forward.

#### **5.4 Respecting Social Roles**

Parliament and the media should respect the other’s role in serving their community so that people in turn respect both institutions as providers of accurate information and informed opinion. Parliamentarians should recognize the value of fair and accurate reporting as a channel for public feedback to assist them to legislate, formulate policy and scrutinize government performance. Journalists need to understand the issues crucial to all segments of the population and play their full part in informing the public about the challenges facing their society.

#### **5.5 Professional and Public Capacity-Building**

Journalists and Parliamentarians should be given greater access to professional development programs to prepare them to participate more effectively in the democratic

process. Of particular benefit are orientation courses for Members and journalists on parliamentary practices and procedures, and adequate research support for Members.

Governments should in turn ensure that education systems encourage the development of citizens who can understand and assess for themselves the policy issues debated in Parliament and in the media.

### **5.6 Encouraging a Multiplicity of Information Sources**

Parliamentarians, journalists and the public should have access to a variety of print, broadcast and Internet-based media to end reliance on government information or party-run information sources. Investment in all forms of independent media should be encouraged. The media should pool their often-limited resources to improve the coverage of Parliament and other institutions.

### **5.7 Professional Behavior**

Parliamentarians should conduct debate in a respectful and well-informed manner. The media should establish self-regulatory codes of professional conduct and should pursue fact-based, fully substantiated reporting.

Society must accept that periodic abuses by individual Parliamentarians and journalists of their rights and freedoms, and of their special positions in society, must not be used as reasons to curb the legitimate performance of their roles. The freedoms accorded to Parliamentarians and the media reflect the supremacy of the ultimate right of the public to be informed.

## **5.8 Making Parliament Newsworthy**

To advance a more participatory democracy, Parliament should open all their processes to media coverage, including the work of all its committees. In the current Ugandan context, there should be no justification whatsoever for keeping proceedings of certain meetings for instance the Appointments Committee and the Movement Caucus closed to the press. Parliaments should provide schedules of committee meetings to the media and journalists should in turn cover this important parliamentary process.

Media coverage of committees will better involve the public in the formulation of public policy and prevent collusion in cases where committees are investigating wrongdoing. Broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings and greater media coverage will raise the quality of debate. Vital issues should be addressed in a timely fashion in Parliament, and ministerial announcements should whenever possible be made first in Parliament rather than in the media.

## **5.9 Raising Media Standards**

Media organisations should retain more experienced reporters and should assign such reporters to cover Parliament. The media's responsibility is to inform the electorate of the conduct and performance of the representatives they have elected. Journalists should be encouraged to report on public policy issues that are relevant to everyone and not just the economic and political elite.

### **5.10 Providing a Legislative Framework**

To enable Parliament, MPs and journalists to play a full role in disseminating information to the people and from the people to the government, there is need to secure a supportive environment for the free flow of information.

In pursuing this goal, governments and Parliaments should:

- Pass freedom of information legislation as provided under article 41 of the Uganda Constitution.
- Resist privacy legislation that could be used to suppress freedom of speech and freedom of the media. Officials of Parliament for instance the Sergeant At Arms need should be cautioned against issuing arbitrary rules intended to gag the press.
- Apply parliamentary privilege fully to all fair and accurate reports of parliamentary proceedings, including committees. Technically, till now under the Rules of Procedure of Parliament journalists, like other visitors are considered strangers in the precincts of Parliament. My contention is that this rule be revised to give parliamentary reporters the necessary immunity to execute their work without fear of litigation.

Representatives of Commonwealth Parliamentarians and journalists meeting in New Delhi 2000 identified for the first time ways to improve the relationship between Parliament and the media. The objective was to determine how their complementary roles in the democratic process can be enhanced to better inform the electorate.

Concern was expressed that in almost every Commonwealth country the trend towards governments making statements outside Parliament draws media attention away from Parliament and tends to detract from the role and the importance of business

conducted in the House. This in turn means that the media is informing the electorate inadequately of the work of its representatives.

Representatives of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Commonwealth Press Union, Commonwealth Broadcasting Association and Commonwealth Journalists Association suggested these possible lines of action to make Parliament the “main game” in the politics of each Commonwealth country:

#### **5.11 What Parliaments and Parliamentarians Can Do:**

1. Recognize the value of an independent media in contributing toward the development of a well-informed society through its exposure to a wide range of well articulated views.
2. Appreciate that the media are also responsive to the people, serving as their watchdog in reporting the actions of Parliaments and governments.
3. Develop more imaginative and attractive ways to enhance parliamentary coverage so that the people are encouraged to take greater interest in their society’s principal democratic forum.
4. Develop new procedures to ensure that the vital issues of the day are discussed in Parliament promptly.
5. Accept that a lack of some privacy is a necessary price which public office holders must pay if a free media is to remain a bedrock of democracy.
6. Explain policies fully to the news media but avoid manipulating the way the story is told.
7. Facilitate more coverage of Parliament by opening the proceedings of select and other

committees to the media.

8. Take steps to raise the standard of parliamentary debate by: striving to elect high-caliber candidates, enhancing research support, encouraging a better awareness of what the media needs, and discouraging unruly behavior, abusive language and personal attacks in the Chamber which inevitably lead to adverse media coverage.
9. Respect the media as a legitimate reflection of public opinion, public concerns and social problems and reactions to policies and programs.
10. Provide more training opportunities and information for journalists on parliamentary practice and procedure.
11. Be accessible and honest in all dealings with the media rather than remaining aloof and secretive, or attempting to manipulate or overly influence media coverage.
12. Avoid conducting relations with the media in an adversarial manner or attempting to shield themselves, their parties or governments from media investigations which are in the public interest.
13. Provide the media with full access to basic information and documents produced by the parliamentary process, such as access to parliamentary libraries, the provision of on-line information and the distribution of parliamentary speeches promptly after delivery in the House.
14. Take full advantage of new information technology to provide authoritative information to the media and the public.
15. Preserve the independence of the journalist by encouraging newspapers to establish, support and respect a voluntary self-regulating body which is allowed to function

effectively, and which suits local circumstances.

16. Some technical regulation of the broadcast media may still be required due to the limitation of available space in the television and radio signal spectrum; and broadcasters should be encouraged to set and respect their own independent and self-regulating codes of professional practice.
17. Make reports of parliamentary proceedings in other Commonwealth jurisdictions much more accessible to Parliamentarians and the media, especially by use of new information technology.

#### **5.12 What the Media and Journalists Can Do:**

1. Gain a comprehensive knowledge of, and respect for, the role and position of Parliament and Parliamentarians.
2. Provide fair and factually accurate coverage of Parliament as the duly elected voice of the people.
3. Develop more imaginative and attractive ways to enhance parliamentary coverage so that the people are encouraged to take greater interest in their society's principal democratic forum.
4. Expose the public more to the battle of ideas by providing balanced coverage of Parliament and paying attention to views expressed by opposition and all MPs.
5. Monitor more closely the activities of parliamentary committees and analyze their reports and other documents in more detail.
6. Respect the right of public figures and their families to a degree of personal privacy



- consistent with a responsible definition of the public's need to know.
7. Ensure that parliamentary and political news coverage and analysis are clear, factual, objective and differentiated from opinion.
  8. Put greater emphasis on inquiring more deeply and objectively into public policy issues, focusing less on trivialities and not relying solely on news releases.
  9. Assign to cover Parliament the most competent journalists available to ensure that the broad range of often-complex issues in Parliament is adequately covered.
  10. Avoid conducting relations with Parliaments in an adversarial manner or in a way which unfairly denigrates Parliaments and their Members.
  11. Provide constructive criticism and informed and fearless coverage of political issues so that an increasingly aware electorate has the information it needs to participate in the democratic process.
  12. Refrain from fabricating controversies and overplaying internal differences of opinion.

### **5.13 Conclusion**

The all-important task of facilitating an informed democracy cannot be left to the traditional media alone. Apart from the media, there are other initiatives that have been instituted to strengthen the linkage between Parliament and the public. One such initiative is the Uganda Joint Christian Council's Parliamentary Information, Monitoring and Resource Project.

The project aims at encouraging people's participation in the national legislative process in order to foster democracy. Elements of the project include:

- a) Gathering information and disseminating it to the public. These may include information relating to the House's rules of procedure, legislation and other policy documents.
- b) Monitoring the decisions and discussions of MPs in pursuance of the rule of law.
- c) Providing reports and memoranda to Parliament on peoples' views on issues being debated in Parliament.
- d) Encouraging members of civil society to be active in their influence of legislation.

According to Beatrice Mugambe, the UJCC Parliamentary Liaison Officer, their project enables MPs who may not be in position to visit their constituencies to still know what his or her people are saying. Sometimes it is difficult or impractical for MPs to always go back and forth to solicit people's views before making certain laws. UJCC attempts to bridge this gap by collecting the necessary information and making it available to parliamentarians through memoranda for them to use as they legislate.

The UJCC also uses the debates from Parliament to update people on what is happening. It does this through a monthly magazine "Parliamentary Update". UJCC also holds regular meetings with civil society groups to discuss matters of concern. Their views are then presented to Parliament through memoranda when legislation is at committee stage.

The beauty of it is that the UJCC does all in a complementary and supportive rather than a confrontational way. According to Mugambe, the UJCC is not there to say that MPs are not listening to their constituencies. Rather it recognizes the fact that MPs may not be in two places at the same time and tries to bridge the gap.

As for *The New Vision* and its coverage of Parliament the future offers a mix bag. In line with the government policy of privatization, the New Vision Printing and Publishing Corporation is lined up for divestiture. In fact all the indications are that the corporation will be privatized within the next one or two years. On July 3, 2002, the Privatization Unit, the government agency handling divestiture of government parastals, wrote to the New Vision Corporation Secretary, informing him that with effect from July 1, the legal status of the company had changed from being a government parastatal under the ministry of Information to the Public Enterprise Reform and Divestiture (PERD) Statute. This change of legal status is an important step in the preparation of PEs for divestiture.

Whether *The New Vision* will sold off as a going concern or whether government will retain majority shareholding is not yet clear. The one clear thing though is that once privatized, the new owners are likely revise the editorial policy and even come up with a new one. Whatever happens, the recommendations I have given above could act as a blue print for improvement of parliamentary media coverage as well as a reference for other researchers interested in this field.

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