

FXI releases book on South African media and ICT companies in the SADC Region

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The FXI has just launched Console Tleane's 'The Great Trek North: the Expansion of South African Media and ICT Companies into the SADC Region'. Based on two years of research, it critically examines the expansion of South African media and ICT companies into the SADC region since 1994. See information about the book below. Also visit our Books section to view details of more books published by the FXI.

On the 1 March, the FXI launched a book titled 'The Great Trek North; the Expansion of South African Media and ICT Companies into the SADC Region', written by the Institute's former Head of Media and ICT's, Console Tleane. Based on two years of research, the book examines the expansion of South African media and information communications technology companies into the SADC region since 1994. Adopting a critical approach the book offers an insight into the extensive gains made by many South African companies after the demise of apartheid.

The book examines the evolution of South African domination over the region, from Cecil John Rhodes during the early 20th century through to the current dispensation, which is spearheading the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). Critical attention is given to the print, broadcast, telecommunications, satellite and Internet sectors.

Written in an accessible manner the book will add to the growing body of evidence about the actual nature and interests of South Africa on the African continent, challenging some of the mainstream, often celebratory analyses of the country's interventions on the continent, where South Africa is fast becoming (if it is not already) a sub-imperialist power in the region.

In addition to providing empirical evidence and critical commentary about South Africa's domination the book also offers, perhaps more importantly, possible intervention strategies that can be adopted by both South African organizations and their regional counterparts that are concerned about the consequences of the expansion.

The following are some of the suggestions contained in the book:

- For the negative effects of the expansion to be reversed, there is a need to formulate a network or at least link campaigns to existing formations.
- There should be a campaign, at both regional and national level, to tighten ownership and control regulations. Ownership and control laws should be biased in favour of local ownership and control of the media and ICT industries. As a minimum, no country should be allowed to relax the ownership and control regulations to less than 50 per cent. Majority ownership and control should remain in local hands, and local ownership and control percentages should be higher.
- Local quotas should be maintained at high levels for such genres as music and drama. This should be done for two reasons: local content assists in engendering the promotion of a dynamic local culture, and high local quotas are beneficial to/local artists.
- There should be a campaign to promote, support and defend the independence of regulators. One of the first things to do will be to lobby for increased funding for regulators and support them to withstand pressures and legal challenges from providers who might want to advance interests beneficial only to themselves and not the broader public, or citizens. Two issues are important here: regulators should be adequately funded, and they should be accorded independence from, say, related departments of information, communication or whichever might apply in each country.
- There should be stricter regulation. The driving motivation for regulation and granting of licenses should be the following: affordability, universal service and access, local content, public (not elite) interests, and service provision for underserved and unserved areas.
- There must be lobbying for increased public funding for public broadcasters. Increased funding for public service broadcasters will increase their ability to improve the quality of programmes and correspondingly, this will increase the enthusiasm and support from listeners and viewers.
- Related to increased funding should be vigilance against state or private control. While this may be difficult to implement, it is a central principle, and innovative ways should be sought that allow for public funding to ensure the independence of broadcasters from government.
- There should be a vigorous campaign against the liberalisation of the telecoms sector, particularly fixed line. Arguments for liberalisation, which are often based on the false promise of competition that will bring lower prices, should be exposed. Instead, existing operators should have clear delivery targets; and key performance standards for managers of these enterprises should include the extent to which they are able to deliver universal service, especially to under-resourced areas.
- The performance of operators will depend on the extent to which the public good ethos has been engendered into their operations. The only way to achieve that will be to reverse privatisation where it has already happened. The re-nationalisation of fixed line operations should be a major priority.
- There should be a campaign against the privatisation of signal distribution. In the case of South Africa, Sentech is a state enterprise operating along corporatist lines, which makes its services expensive. A campaign should be waged to

reverse this trend. If achieved, a more publicly-oriented Sentech will assist not only South Africa but also the region, given its strategic placing and capacity.

- The idea of SABC Africa and Channel Africa is a noble one. However, as it stands, SABC Africa is not a 'true African story'. SABC Africa's content and operations should be contested and improved, and should ideally reflect more content from within the continent. Stronger working relations between the SABC and other broadcasters and producers on the continent should be encouraged. One innovative way is for the SABC to continue being the financial backer and host for the two channels. However, in the same way that the South African state is hosting the Pan-African Parliament and the Nepad Secretariat while not having complete control over the two institutions, the two channels can be managed in a similar way.

- At a more general level, there should be increased monitoring of South Africa's investments into the region and the conditions, if any, should be met by South African companies. Elements that must be examined include taxation, labour relations, the so-called social responsibility obligations, and good corporate governance in general, and also the number of local staff members employed in each investment.

- The extent to which the investments contribute to real economic development and not simply narrow growth should be brought under scrutiny. In addition to the conditions mentioned above (universal service and access obligations) companies investing in the SADC should be made to adhere to the development goals of these countries.

Overall, the ideal should be to reduce dependence on South Africa wherever possible, and where investment from South Africa is unavoidable, there should be strict conditions and limitations placed on the companies that invest in the region.

The book was launched at a Colloquium organised by the Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, held from the 28th February till the 4th March 2006. The date for the launch in Johannesburg will be announced soon.

The book was researched and written by Console Tleane, until end of January the Head of the Media and ICT Programme within the FXI.

For more information on how to obtain the book, distribution, retailing and possible reviews contact Pinky Magau at (011) 403 8403