

The Media, Ethics and National Interest

Macharia Munene

I. Introduction

In discussing this topic, it would be appropriate to examine the context in which the three concepts of national interest, media and ethics operate. The context is one of states or geographical territories having independent and sovereign political systems that are designed to safeguard the interests of the people within that political entity. Within that entity are rules and norms on how that entity is to preserve and protect itself from all types of threats and, as much as possible, advance its interests. In those rules and norms is what is perceived to be fair, decent, and respectable within that society. This is what constitutes ethics and entails a sense of basic honesty in what one does. Ethical behaviour becomes social cement for that society especially in the use of the many tools at the society's disposal. Among such tools are the educational systems through which the youth are taught, and their heads are inculcated with, that society's values, beliefs, traditions, norms and what it is that constitutes proper behaviour. Other tools include all the types of media available to that society to propagate and defend interests. The media, therefore, are not supposed to undermine the polity in which they operate. They are supposed to operate ethically in the defence of national interests that include promoting a sense of nationhood.

National interests refer to the well being of the country in terms of security from internal and external threats; well run economy, socio-cultural cohesion, good governance, and national image. Among the key instruments for advancing national interests are the media which are like conveyor belts through which information and messages are passed from one area or person to another. In this sense, different media are tools and as tools, they are innocent. Their importance is in the use to which they are put and by whom and for what purpose. And that is where journalism comes in. Theoretically, journalism is a profession whose purpose is to keep a public journal of events for public consumption and for public record. Other related purposes are to entertain, to educate and to empower the reader or the recipient of that information. As an agent of empowerment, journalism becomes very powerful.

Being very powerful necessitates journalism, as a profession, to be responsible but a question arises as to whether it has a philosophy to guide it. Given that for the most part journalism started as a craft, there are occasional doubts as to whether it has evolved from being merely a craft or technique of keeping records or journals. The distinction between technique and philosophy is important since there was a time when practitioners of journalism were thought to be failures in other areas.¹ A

¹Nasanga Garetti Linda, "The New Press Bills in Uganda: Implications for National Communication Policy and Press Freedom," *Africa Media Review*, Volume 11, Number 2, 1997, p.77.

philosophy of journalism would demand intellectual rigour, deep reflection, and self-questioning as to whether the discipline is moving in the right direction. It is that intellectual component, so argues Michael Kunczik, that would enable journalists to notice and understand an injustice when it occurs.² A philosophy for journalism, therefore, would involve a search for truth and the upholding of justice through the recording of public events and information and making that recording public in order to enable the public to make informed decisions on what is fair and just and what is in their national interest.

This makes journalism a custodian of public trust. As a custodian, it tends to refer to itself as the Fourth Estate, meaning that it is part of the elite power structure³ in any given place. It is not a constitutionally established branch of government as are the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary but it wields a lot of power and sometimes more power than the official branches and so it subsequently arrogated to itself that title. It is a title that was reportedly first used by Edmund Burke in the British parliament to refer to "three Estates in parliament" comprising 'Lords Temporal, Lords Spiritual and the Commons.' Burke had added that in the "Reporters Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all."⁴ Burke had given his endorsement to the American Revolution and it was in the United States where the current meaning evolved and then other countries copied the concept to imply media equality with the constitutional branches. Because of the power it wields, it too can be abusive and can be abused and it therefore needs to be checked. The danger of media abuse is particularly clear when the practitioners turn out to be unethical people who can be manipulated.

The need to have a mechanism to check on the power of the media is because over time, an air of arrogance crept into journalistic circles, implying that journalists are above the law. They, therefore, break laws that everyone else is expected to obey and do that in the name of "freedom of the press." Some go out of their way to bribe institutional or government workers to steal information. This way the media encourage and are involved in corruption which, argues Goran Hyden and Michael Leslie, is in the long run harmful to the media industry. Encouraging theft, they note, can "undermine the credibility of the media and legitimize a new form of bribery that sabotages any effort to make government as public institutions more accountable to citizens."⁵ By breaking the law, the media are not only unethical but they also lose the moral base that is needed to check malfeasance because they themselves promote it by corrupting government officials. Instead of challenging the exploitation of government workers, therefore, the media exploit the exploited workers by inducing them to commit the crime of corruption.

² Michael Kunczik, "Closing Remarks: Is there an International Ethics of Journalism," in Michael Kunczik, editor, *Ethics in Journalism: A Reader on Their Perception in the Third World* (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1999), pp. 257-258.

³ Philip M. Taylor, *Global Communications, International Affairs and the Media Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 62

⁴ Story and quote in Lucas A. Powe, Jr., *The Fourth Estate and the Constitution: Freedom of the Press in America* (New Delhi: Affiliated East-West Press, 1992), pp. 233-234, 260-261

⁵ Goran Hyden and Michael Leslie, "Communications and Democratization in Africa," in Goran Hyden, Michael Leslie, and Folu F. Ogundimu, editors, *Media and Democracy in Africa* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002), p. 12.

Whether to break the law in the name of information gathering is a moral question for the journalists with a conscious and it is even a bigger one on whether to make that information public. Those who may not know that they are breaking the law when they do it can be excused as *ignorantes* who have no business in a serious profession. Those who know are either criminals or men and women of virtue willing to suffer the consequences of their acts. Such people essentially engage in civil disobedience in their belief that they are responding to a higher law than the one in the statutes. If that is so, they should then follow the advice given by Henry David Thoreau in his "Civil Disobedience" to be ready for the consequences if one is to defy an imposition called government.⁶ Journalists who break the law and are not ready to face the consequences should rethink their positions. They often turn out to be unethical individuals who actually are a threat to national interests.

It would be in the journalist's interest to be perceived to have broken a bad law because of a high public and moral good. When that breach of law is for ordinary reason, or in order to fix a particular group or entity, or to promote favoured groups or individuals, journalism becomes discredited as a custodian of public trust. It is in the interests of journalism to be above reproach economically, socially, and politically and it should not, therefore, be corrupt or be perceived to be corrupt, unethical, or to be a manipulator of news. The minute journalism is perceived to be unethical, it loses public confidence and whatever it puts out becomes questionable. The credibility of the journalist and the journal that he keeps is critical to national well being and national interests.

While the journalist as a person may have problems of credibility especially if he is perceived to be in the pocket of a potential source of news or the funding agency, the problem is compounded by the issue of publishers or media owners who dictate the kind of coverage that would be done and are noisy about freedom of the press. For them, "freedom of the press" often means "freedom for those who own the press" to do whatever they want, when they want, and as they want.⁷ Given that owners tend to have a symbiotic relationship with the political power elites and the economic power barons, that symbiosis forces editors and journalists to 'spike' stories that involve the interests of such power barons. This is especially so when there are interlocking interests, when the media house is part of a large business hydra. When the media owners or controllers have interests whose base is outside the country, their activities can be very destructive to national interests since their allegiance is physically, socially, culturally, morally, mentally, and politically located elsewhere. And the elsewhere can be in a hostile country. This is a phenomenon often found in Third World countries.

Media houses also behave unethically and undermine national interests by underpaying their own journalists who then become susceptible to inducements from news sources or from political and commercial public relations manipulators. In itself, underpayment is exploitation and exploitation is an ingredient of corruption and this makes media owners who underpay their workers corrupt. By underpaying workers, media houses lose moral authority to tackle the evil of exploitation. It is, therefore,

⁶ Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in Bernard E. Brown, editor, *Great American Political Thinkers: Modern America Since Civil War and Industrialism* (New York: Avon Books, 1983), pp. 145-164.

⁷ Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 27.

rare to see stories of how employers exploit workers, in part, because media houses are employers and by nature employers exploit workers. In advancing and protecting national interests, therefore, it would be advisable to investigate labour exploitation within the media because such exploitation weakens the ability of media workers to detect threats to national interests.

Other than underpayment, the pressure on an ill-funded, and often ill-trained reporter, to behave like the 'gutter press' is immense. A distinction is made between self-respecting mainstream media and the 'gutter' press that seemingly thrives on inventions of lurid stories or the adjustment of facts to suit certain predispositions in the tradition of William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer, and Henry Luce. While there is little surprise when the 'gutter' press invents news, the same is not expected of the mainstream media that are supposed to be ethical. The mainstream media lose credibility with occasional "inventions" and "creation" of news on things that never took place and yet are printed and presented as if they are reality. And if an event took place, facts are adjusted to give a predetermined impression.

The adjustment of facts, just like creation and production of 'news' to meet the editor's wish, is unethical as it undermines the country and its well being. This also implies that the editor is either grossly unethical or that he is not up to standard. Not being up to standard means that he lacks ability to discern what might be fantasy and what might be factual. The particular editor, like the 'creative' journalist, may also be a victim of under-funding and poor training which in turn makes it easy for unscrupulous people to manipulate editors and their journalists in order to achieve given political and social agenda. This helps to discredit the media and to make it difficult for them to claim that they have national interests in mind when what they present are 'cropped' pictures and fabricated stories.

The media lose credibility when they are perceived to be vindictive and to be pursuing an unreasonable political agenda. When this happens, there is a trend in journalism to be selective in the coverage of public malfeasance. Some people and institutions receive widespread coverage in part to make those associated with it unpopular while at the same time others appear to be sanitized. The ones being sanitized are often more dangerous to the national well being than those targeted for tarnishing. Negative stories on those to be sanitized are squashed and this gives the impression that there is collusion between media houses and particular offices and officers to cover up their public misdeeds. When that happens, that is unethical and an insult to those who consider media to be national assets in a particular polity. By displaying double standards, media houses lose credibility and standing in society.

The possibility of the media being used to settle scores brings up the possibility of journalists becoming captive to sleek political or commercial public relations operators in order to slant news. The trick is for the journalists to distinguish truth from fantasy that public relations people would like to have propagated. Failure to make that distinction raises doubts in the public mind; the impression that journalists are engaging in fantasy can be devastating to the media. Sometimes, journalistic fantasy occurs when there is over zealotry to catch someone, to promote a certain position or to discredit certain groups. When this happens, the serious work that the journalist

may have done gets buried in doubts of credibility. Journalistic fantasy, therefore, is a professional sin that erodes the media's ability to expose wrong or to promote and protect national interests.

II

Media shortcomings and unethical behaviour that are threats to national interests are common in all countries. It is the centrality of the media as instruments of state that makes them either an asset or a threat to the survival of the people concerned. In various ways, some states are able to handle those instruments to defend and project their interests to other places. The question that arises is on the kind of states that have the ability to protect and promote their national interests. These would be the kind of states that are in control of key instruments of state like the educational and media systems that are used for indoctrination and domination.⁸

Those states that are in control use the instruments to safeguard themselves while those not in control end up being undermined by those very instruments. Strong states have the ability to control and guide and protect the instruments from external manipulation, which often are used to undermine the country from within; they actually use those instruments as agents of foreign policy.⁹ Those who successfully do that become *Master States*. Weak states allow these instruments to be controlled and manipulated by external forces whose interests are elsewhere. They become the recipients or importers of exported values in the form of educational systems and media ideologies from the *master states*. As recipients of foreign values, weak states are essentially *client states* serving the interests of the *master states*. Imported educational and media values, therefore, are instruments of foreign policy for the *master states*. For the *client state*, the imported values are evidence of a subjected people. They indicate a relationship between the strong exporter of those values and the hapless recipient.

Sometimes the external control is blunt but in most cases it is subtle and it is done through government officials and media operatives in the recipient or *client states*. Such officials and operatives are essentially sub-agents of *post modern colonialism* whose cultural temperaments were influenced by training in, and exposure to, the values of the *master states* at universities and other institutions. The training institutions in the Third World, Ali A. Mazrui asserted, were meant to be "a mechanism of a transmission of European culture in non-European parts of the world" and thereby to create a cultural attachment to foreign mental and material things, instead of the local.¹⁰ And given that such universities tend to be dependent on, argued Claude Ake, "foreign foundations", they end up "tailoring academic work to the agenda of the foundation". That agenda is dictated by foreign interests, the homes of the foundations, and when the foundations demand "retreat of the state in favour of the market," the universities comply.¹¹ When the human products of such indoctrination become government

⁸ Michael A. Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education* (Buckingham, UK: Opm University Press, 1996), pp. 9, 12, 15, 22; Olatunde A. Oladimaji, "War Without Missiles: Need for Effective Propaganda Machinery in Africa," in Jerry Domatob, Abubakar Juka, and Ikechukwu Nwosu, editors, *Mass Media and African Society* (Nairobi: ACCE, 1987), pp.251-267.

⁹ Taylor, *Global Communications*, pp. 61-13, 209.

¹⁰ Ali A. Mazrui, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), p. 260

¹¹ Claude Ake, "Academic Freedom and Material Base," in Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani, editors, *Academic Freedom in Africa* (Dakar: Codessria, 1994), p. 24

officials or powerful media functionaries, some of them are ideologically tuned to despise their own countries as they seek to please the *master states*. And such people are easily induced to become unethical, to undermine their countries, and to give unauthorized national data to foreigners.

In that kind of development, the place of the media in the concept of *master state/client state* relationship is important and is at two levels. First, the media in the *master states* promote and advance the national interests of their countries. Second, the media in *client states*, by depending on the media in *master states* become susceptible to inducements to undermine their own countries. While in general, the media in *master states* are national assets, those in *client states* have the potential of being national liabilities. These two scenarios can be understood by examining how the media behave, promote and protect national interests in *master states* with the United States of America leading the way, and how they perform in some *client states*, mainly in Africa with Kenya as an example.

Media, the Master States and National Interests

In his penetrating book, *The First Casualty*, Philip Knightley argued that the first casualty in any war or conflict was truth. And the media in each side are instrumental in ensuring that truth is the casualty.¹² In the process, the media become instruments of demonizing, throwing ethical behaviour out of the window, all in the name of the national interests. There may be some differences within the master states on how to interpret national interests and this would explain a semblance of debates within the media on how to project national interests but there is rarely any debate on national interests.

The United States leads the way in setting media standards and it is there that debates on national interests have had fluctuating fortunes. Although Americans are very nationalistic, they tend to be offended by the nationalism of other people if that nationalism is not perceived to be in American interests. In this attitude, the American media are in league with the American 'political elite' in treating the rest of the world as 'lowlife'¹³ As lowlife, the practice of democracy in those places is to be limited to what the United States can control in order to avoid 'democracy' in such places being against perceived American national interests. This position was well articulated by Samuel Huntington in 1975, as he claimed that a "value which is normally good in itself is not necessarily optimized when it is maximized There are ... potentially desirable limits to the indefinite extension of political democracy."¹⁴ Limiting democracy was a view shared by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger who believed that 'irresponsible' voters in a country should not be allowed to jeopardize American interests.¹⁵

Debates on how to deal with the lowlife started at the beginning of the American Republic with mainly blacks, Native Americans, white women and poor white men

¹² Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero & Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, 3d ed.; (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2004)

¹³ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Hyperpower Exceptionalism: Globalisation the American Way," *New Political Economy*, Volume 8, Number 3, November 2003, p. 314.

¹⁴ Quote in Michael Kearney, "Politics, Utopia, Emancipation: A Review Essay," *Critical Sociology*, Volume 27, Number 1, 2001, p. 133.

¹⁵ Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York, 1992), p. 290; William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*(London: Zede Books, 2003), p. 209

not being allowed to participate in 'democracy.' And sometimes those debates played themselves in the media. Alexander Hamilton, in the 1790s, for instance, sponsored the *Gazette of the United States* to project his views on what was best for the United States that included political elitism and close collaboration with the United Kingdom that was at war with 'egalitarian' France. For that reason, Hamilton publicized Edmund Burke's attack on the French Revolution mainly to discredit his opponents in the United States led by Thomas Jefferson. On his part, Jefferson's views were more egalitarian than those of Hamilton and he responded with the *National Gazette* that tended to be pro-French Revolution promoting white egalitarianism and so it gave space to Thomas Paine's response to Burke.¹⁶ Both claimed to be advancing *national interests* on how to handle the lowlife. Hamilton's federalists had the upper hand as they later imposed a reign of terror to tame the 'lowlife' in the name of national interests.

In the name of national interests, the media have also been instruments of aggression against other peoples and of promoting imperialism. In the 1840s, the media were in the forefront of promoting American aggression against Mexico in the name of what John O'Sullivan of the *New York Morning News* and *Democratic Review* popularized as "Manifest Destiny" of white Americans to beat up Native Americans and Mexicans and grab their land and spread 'democracy' for white people.¹⁷ In the 1890s William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, in their unethical competition, gave rise to the concept of 'yellow journalism' and helped to promote American imperialism by creating a war against Spain after which the United States acquired an empire both in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The Americans were encouraged to take up "the White Man's Burden" of ruling people who were not white, even if the rule was brutal,¹⁸ and it was brutal; and it was in the national interests of those ruling America. Taking the White Man's Burden, therefore, turned out to be an exercise in turning other people's lands into 'white man's country.'

The power of the media to promote perceived American national interests was glaring after World War II with the emergence of the Cold War. Journalists created and promoted the term Cold War to refer to the growing cold relations that the United States was developing towards the Soviet Union.¹⁹ The media helped to portray the Soviets and their communist ideology as evil which in turn justified anything done in the name of anti-communism. Henry Luce of *TIME* magazine, for instance, was very influential in convincing Americans to accept the myth that mainland China did not exist after 1949. The reports from Theodore White on what was happening in China were adjusted and doctored in New York to give the opposite picture.²⁰ The other media fell into place and helped to create a political hysteria known as McCarthyism that still lingers on.

¹⁶ Adrienne Koch, *Jefferson and Madison: The Great Collaboration*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 88-91, 116-141

¹⁷ Frederick Merk, *The Monroe Doctrine and American Expansionism, 1843-1849*(New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 74-80, 160-232; John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975 reprint), pp. 133-139

¹⁸ W.A. Swanberg, *Pulitzer*(New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1967), pp. 205-211, 246-255; Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp.248-258; Macharia Munene, *The Truman Administration and the Decolonization of Sub-Saharan Africa*(Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 1995), pp. 16-17

¹⁹ Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*(Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), p. 445.

²⁰ Joseph C Goulden, *The Best Years, 1945-1950*(New York: Atheneum, 1976), pp. 284-285

And in the name of national interests, the media initially promoted the Vietnam War that boomeranged on the United States, forcing it to reassess its global position with regard to Third World countries. The American mainstream media, or *The Powers that Be*, as David Halberstam termed them, had fully supported *The Best and The Brightest* of the United States to beat on the Vietnamese.²¹ It was only after the War filtered into the streets of the United States that some American media decided that the war in Vietnam was not in American interests. And the War in Vietnam led to Watergate²² and popularized investigative journalism just to find out who authorized burglarizing the offices of a rival political party. Watergate represented self-inflicted wounds in that Americans had started doing to themselves what they had been doing to others outside the United States, and that hurt. And the US appeared to lose on many fronts with a growing self-assertion by Third World countries.

One way in which Third World countries were asserting themselves was through a demand for a New Information Order that would reduce the monopoly that Western media exercised over information flow, gathering and distribution. The Western media and governments were hostile to the Third World idea of a New Information Order, promoted through UNESCO. Responding to this challenge to one of their power base, the United States and the United Kingdom cut funding for UNESCO for daring to suggest a 'democratic' way of gathering and distributing information. The message was that the control of information was a preserve of Western institutions because it was in the national interests of the Western powers who control global media organizations.²³

And the control of giant global media organizations became evident in the Iraqi War of 1991 and most recently, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003.²⁴ Knightley might have highlighted the claim that 'truth' is the first casualty in war but as John Pilger noted, journalism itself became a casualty.²⁵ In the name of national interest and security, the giant media organs with global reach were embedded to provide that news that was approved by the American or British military. News that did not go through the sifting sieve of the military was to be suppressed which explains the thoughts by George W. Bush to bomb Al Jazeera into silence.²⁶ And the giant media went along.

²¹ See the two books by David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press edition, 2000). and *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Modern Library Edition, 2001)

²² James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 218-237; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 251

²³ Taylor, *Global Communications*, p. 49; Edward S. Herman and Robert W. McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism* (London: Continuum Paperback, 2001), pp. 25, 154.

²⁴ Murray Polner review of Philip Knightley's *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero & Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (3d ed.; Johns Hopkins, 2004) in *History News Network*, posted on Sunday, October 31, 2004, <http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/8255.html>; Helen Thomas, "Lao Dogs of the Press," *The Nation*, March 17, 2006, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060327/thomas>

²⁵ John Pilger, "The Real First Casualty of War," April 20, 2006, www.antiwar.com/orig/pilger.php?articleid=8877, accessed April 4, 2006.

²⁶ Mike Hume, "The Proof that Not Everything is a Conspiracy," *Spiked*, November 25, 2005, www.spiked-online.com/Articles/0000000CAE89.htm

The giant media houses go along with the wishes of the real rulers and policy makers in their respective countries because they consider themselves to be part and parcel of national interest apparatus. The American “media and political elite” argued Jan Nederveen Pieterse, tends to ignore the concerns of other countries as they insist on having their way and “to problematize all countries except the USA itself.”²⁷ The rulers are what Kodi Barth termed “mega capitalist nations” who have “elevated propaganda to an insidious art form” and are experts at manufacturing “political consent and economic demands” in order to force a certain kind of thinking on a people. They believe “that propoganda could be a necessary evil to run a country,”²⁸ and the world.

The rulers effectively use giant media as “new missionaries” for globalization or *post modern colonialism* and to sell and promote specific policies even if it is through adjusting facts. And the rulers actually protect, or try to protect, the ‘missionaries’ from competition²⁹ These protected ‘missionaries’ then operate through local media that are simply outlets for foreign media in their mission of manufacturing consensus to produce the desired thinking³⁰ in a particular country. “Public opinion can be mobilized ... through the media and motivation of influential groups,” wrote England based Sunday Standard Columnist Fred Mudhai, in order to “stir a revolution against the government.”³¹

The Media in Kenya

The one country in Africa in which the *master states* and their “missionaries” appear to be on a mission to elevate “propaganda to an insidious art form” is Kenya where they tried to create rumours that Kenyans are “fed up” with the Kibaki regime.³² There was deliberate effort to portray Kenya as being responsible for international terrorism,³³ being excessively corrupt, incapable of having “civilized relations” with *master states*,³⁴ and that it is a collapsing state that might need “international” intervention. “Objective” studies followed, among them being the one produced by the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, an American elite body that is good at engineering consensus³⁵ that proceeded to announce that Kenya was a failed state; and the local media took its announcement as if it was gospel truth.³⁶ The local media accepted what Moses Wetangula called ‘balderdash’ as truth in part because they seem to be subservient to the ‘missionaries’.

²⁷ Pieterse, “Hyperpower Exceptionalism,” p. 314.

²⁸ Kodi Barth, “Let Us Support Mutua’s Bid to Enhance Transparency,” *The Sunday Standard*, April 23, 2006.

²⁹ Herman and McChesney, *Global Media*, pp. 10-13; Susan S. Silbey, “‘Let Them Eat Cake’: Globalisation, Postmodern Colonialism, and the Possibility of Justice,” *Law and Society Review*, Volume 31, Number 2, 1997, pp. 219-222; Pilger, “The Real Casualty of War.”

³⁰ Kodi Barth, “Let Us Support Mutua’s Bid to Enhance Transparency,” *The Sunday Standard*, April 23, 2006.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Fred Mudhai, “Where Negotiations fail ‘Public Diplomacy’ Works,” *Sunday Standard*, October 26, 2005

³³ Mwangi, Makumi, “The Nationalisation of Terrorism: National Response to Terrorism Through National Legislation,” in Makumi Mwangi and Maria Nzomo, editors, *International Responses to Terrorism* (Nairobi: Heinrich-Boll/IDS, forthcoming)

³⁴ See Clay Interview with Nation TV’s Louis Otieno, in *Sunday Nation*, June 29, 2003.

³⁵ Inderjeet Parmar, “Engineering Consent: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and American Public Opinion 1939-45,” *Review of International Studies*, Volume 26, Number 1, January 2000, pp. 35-48

³⁶ Mwangi Githahu, “Report: Why Kenya is a failed State: US organization Underrate Its Economic, Political and Social Performance,” *Sunday Nation*, October 2, 2005

By being tied to these missionaries, the local media end up serving as sub-agents of *post-modern colonialism*. This may explain why there are times when the local media appear to be out to destabilize their own countries, in line with the possible wishes of the master states. This raises the question of whose interests are served by the local media that are foreign owned or under heavy foreign influence and control. With regard to Kenya, for instances, this question was glaring soon after the plane crash in Marsabit on Monday 10, 2006, as noted by Salim Lone two days later. Kenya's electronic media, he complained, virtually ignored the accident and concentrated on beaming foreign programs on television and radio instead of telling anxious Kenyans what was going on with regard to the casualties in the plane.³⁷ This happened because the local media are tied to foreigners, particularly the Americans and the Britons.³⁸ The Kenyan media are tied to CNN, BBC, VOA, SkyNews, Reuters, and AP and so if it is not a big story among the 'missionaries' then the Kenyan media behave as if it is not a big story. The 'missionaries' were looking after their national interests, the Kenyan media were not.

In part, the Kenyan media are unable to look after Kenya's national interests because they have what amounts to a *master-client* relationship with foreign media or 'missionaries.' That relationship is one in which Kenyan media tend to be recipients and conveyor belts of foreign values and interests in the name of news and programs but they are not supposed to project Kenyan values and interests in the home countries of the 'missionaries.' Subsequently, Kenyans are free to be inundated with propaganda from the *master states* through the missionaries. Citizens of the *master states*, however, are not free to receive broadcasts from Kenya and the Kenyan version of events. When in 2003 Raphael Tuju, the then Minister for Information, tried to open a Kenyan radio station in London, the British Government refused to permit him.³⁹ By denying Tuju a license, Britain was simply protecting its national interests from the truth as perceived by Kenyans and still expected its version to be accepted. This is exactly the same way it had protected Britons during the Mau Mau War in the 1950s when both in Britain and Kenya only the colonial version of the war was to be made public.⁴⁰

The British had tight control of the media during the Mau Mau War and in post-colonial Kenya that tight control was evident in the 1980s when Kenya became excessively repressive, torture became a norm and the mainstream media were cowed. The media were turned into tools of implementing what was essentially a *finbo* ideology through pressure from government and proprietors and their local representatives. Joe Kadhi, then Managing Editor of the Daily Nation remembers that whenever President Daniel arap Moi expressed anger because of a particular story, the Aga Khan would call from Paris to remind Kadhi that his letter of appointment stated that he should not do anything "to anger His Excellency the President."

³⁷ Salim Lone, "The Broadcast Media Let Kenyans Down," *Daily Nation*, Wednesday April 12, 2006

³⁸ Tom Mochoma, "Media Chiefs to Discuss Africa Stereotype," *The Sunday Standard*, May 15, 2005; Taylor, *Global Communications*, p. 43

³⁹ Charles Wachira, "Terrorists, Radio Waves and Africa's War Against 'Biased Reports'," August 5, 2004, *PanosFeatures*, www.panosorg.uk/newsfeatures/featureprintable.asp?id=1194 accessed March 21, 2005.

⁴⁰ Susan L. Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, the Media and Colonial Counter-Insurgency 1944-1960* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), pp.128-193

Journalists were thereby put in a three way fix involving the owner, the political power, and journalistic expectations.⁴¹

Many responded by accommodating the Moi regime in order to be politically in tune. The East African Standard, for instance became a promoter of the idea that some people were better *Nyayo* followers than others and that *Nyayoism* could be measured with some degree of exactitude.⁴² Hilary Ng'weno, the founder of the Weekly Review, noted the trend and given the Weekly Review's financial vulnerability decided to identify with Moi. Thereafter, as David Lamb, the then Nairobi correspondent for the Los Angeles Times later wrote in his book, *The Africans*, "President Moi was not going to have the same news judgment as editor Ng'weno."⁴³ In the process, the fire that had earlier distinguished the Weekly Review faded, and as David Makali, claimed, changed Ngweno "from a gadfly to a fly".⁴⁴ Another journalist who lost independence was Philip Ochieng, dragged into the *nyayo* net, and then received commendation from Kanu Organising Secretary Kalonzo Musyoka who, according to the FINANCE cover story of June 1989 on the 'Press in Kenya', described Ochieng "as a patriotic son of Kenya who chose not to operate the '**Nation**' way and moved to the present status to expose the machinations of his former employer."⁴⁵

The subservience of the Kenyan media in the 1980s when Kenya was under a repressive regime is in big contrast to the flourishing freedom that they enjoy in the prevailing environment and some of them have been a discredit to journalism as a profession and occasionally seems to be subservient to foreign forces. The number of media outlets have increased and the robust ways in which they operate, sometimes being wild, is unprecedented. They are eager to glorify foreigners, particularly *noise making* diplomats that are anxious to capture publicity by vilifying the country.⁴⁶ The practice of *diplomatic noise making* started in the 1990s as a pressure tactic that Western powers use to harass mainly African countries into submission, and it started in Kenya.⁴⁷

In the process, the Kibaki regime appears to have become a victim of an externally and domestically well orchestrated, and hostile, media enthusiasm to find fault and to ignore the positive. In Kenya, so argued Joe Kadhi, there emerged "a peculiar kind of journalistic liberty which has given way to writing commentaries that are not only partisan but whose 'facts' could be challenged. Hiding behind powerful godfathers, such writers seem to be able to get away with murder."⁴⁸ The godfathers are, in many cases, foreigners who tend to consider "nationalist leaders" upholding their own

⁴¹ Joe S. M. Kadhi, "Anglophone Africa: Journalists- Puppets of the Proprietors?," in Michael Kunczick, editor, *Ethics in Journalism: A Reader on Their Perception on the Third World* (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1999), pp.83-85; General discussions with Joe Kadhi at the United States International University in Nairobi, Nairobi.

⁴² Philip Ochieng, *I Accuse the Press: An Insider's View of the Media and Politics in Africa* (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1992), pp. 116-121.

⁴³ David Lamb, *The Africans* (New York: Random House, 1983), p.257.

⁴⁴ David Makali, "Hilary Ng'weno: From Gadfly to (just) a Fly," *The Nairobi Law Monthly*, January 1996, pp. 8-9, 22

⁴⁵ See Cover Story, "Press in Kenya," *FINANCE*, June 1989, p. 35.

⁴⁶ Gitau Warigi, "Western Envoys are on Ego Trips," *Sunday Nation*, November 6, 2005

⁴⁷ Macharia Munene, "Promotion of Democracy as a Goal of US Foreign Policy: African Responses," Paper presented at the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Conference on "Rethinking Global Security: An African Perspective," Windsor Hotel and Golf Club, Nairobi, 22 - 24 February 2006

⁴⁸ Kadhi, "Anglophone Africa: Journalists- Puppets of the Proprietors?," p.90.

national interests as “crazy.”⁴⁹ On its part, the Kibaki regime has blundered but the biggest blunder is its failure to have an effective public relations strategy or strategists. It is unable to respond at the level of the attacks and as a result, the regime has been the recipient of so much constant beating from the media that it seems to be under perpetual siege.⁵⁰ This kind of journalism, however, has led to a perception that the journalists are out get someone or to discredit the country at the behest of external interests.

The belief that the media are out to destabilise the Kibaki regime is not recent, is widespread, and is not good for media image. Kivutha Kibwana, Minister for Environment, is not alone in believing that the media went out of their way, right from the start, to vilify Mwai Kibaki’s regime and that it did this in cahoots with KANU and members of LDP “to demonise NAK reformers.”⁵¹ If Kibwana’s claim was taken seriously, and if it is correct, would this not explain the zeal with which Kenya’s media appear to rush to print stories that turn out to be incorrect or to have been induced by political mischief? Does it explain the ‘cropping’ of pictures and ‘adjustment’ of facts that is at times evident in the mainstream media? If in the 1980s the Aga Khan called from his European base to ensure that his organ treated Moi well, and it is unlikely that he has stopped calling, what kind of instructions is he giving on how to treat the Kibaki regime? The impression that the media wanted to fix the new regime at any cost and even at the expense of national interest tended to erode the credibility of the media.

The perception that the media have lost credibility simply reinforces the view that major institutions in Kenya have serious problems. Media credibility seems to be at the same low level as that of politicians, and that is negative for the media. The media and the politicians have a common desire to manipulate, influence and control the public in one direction or another and this desire is not so much to serve the public as to serve particular interests that have little to do with the interests of the country. It is this feeling that the media are like the politicians, that discourages people from buying newspapers because they do not want to pay in order to feel insulted by what is printed, in the same way that they feel insulted by crooked politicians masquerading as saviours and protectors of the public.

III

What is it that can then be done to ensure effective media involvement in the promotion of ethical behaviour and national interests. Media involvement is a necessity and starts from a moral position that media are key components of the Kenyan polity and that media functionaries are presumed to be ethical and to know what Kenya’s national interests are. In doing so, certain considerations arise. First, there is need to emphasise or develop a philosophy of journalism that would stress reflection on the nature of, and the dilemmas confronting journalism as a profession in the Kenyan context instead of the context of the *master states*. Excessive stress on the craft of journalism dilutes its value and ability to defend itself as a profession properly.

⁴⁹ Pieterse, “Hyperpower Exceptionalism,” p. 314.

⁵⁰ Frederick Kang’ethe Iraki, “Propaganda and Reporting on Government: Why Kenya is a Unique Country!” Paper presented in a Workshop for Journalists, Naivasha, March 23-25, 2006.

⁵¹ Kivutha Kibwana, “Constitutional Impasse: For How Long Does Wanjiku have to Wait?” Sunday Nation, March 28, 2004, p.15.

Second, the level and type of education and training accorded potential journalists needs to be reevaluated. A good education should produce an all round and well exposed critical thinker who may then specialize on a particular type of knowledge. Philosophical and ethical education should probably come before 'craft' training. Such a well exposed person is unlikely to hurt national interests by being unethical and committing moral blunders while practicing journalism. It would also eliminate a scenario in which journalists are ignorant of their rights,⁵² if not of the law. Knowledgeable journalists will be effective in protecting national interests as opposed to propagating the interests of *master states*.

Third, is the question of the prevailing political culture which is either conducive to honest governance or hostile to good governance. A democratic governing structure is conducive to effective protection of national interests and for this reason the media should guard against the erosion of democracy, without making the polity an adjunct of another country. It is not easy to expose the dangers to the national polity in a restrictive political climate. As happened in Kenya in the 1980s, only bold journalists would dare to expose malfeasance in a repressive regime. The end result was that Kenya plummeted deep into dependency on foreign interests and became a client state responding to the whims of the master states instead of national interests. With the prevailing sense of democracy in Kenya and media hyperactivity, the challenge to the media is to be ethical and to learn what Kenya's national interests are in order to minimize their perceived role as sub-agents of *post modern colonialism*.

Fourth is the question of media ownership, monopolies, and conflicts of interests. The assumption that freedom of the press is limited to the freedom of media owners or their assigns to do what they want, when they want, and how they want without being accountable should be discarded. This is particularly the case when the media owners owe their allegiance to polities other than Kenya or are beholden to foreign operators. In such instances, freedom of the press means freedom of foreign manipulators to manipulate and decide vital issues for Kenya in ways that can be detrimental to Kenyan interests. The local media that are so controlled tend to promote national intellectual and material enslavement of Kenyans by those who have perfected propaganda into "an insidious art form."

Fifth, part of the conflict within the media, is that media houses tend to be bad employers and exploit their reporters. Journalists need to be well paid and well provided in terms of facilities to do their work properly. The norm in which journalists depend on the news source for basic needs creates a dependency that forces the journalist to slant news in favour of the provider. As a result, the expected 'facilitating fees' and 'brown envelopes' compromise the media. Compromised journalists are likely to 'adjust' facts or simply fabricate stories. Exploited journalists become unethical as they fall prey to external extortionists pushing agenda that may be harmful to Kenya's national interests.

Sixth, there is the need for media to acknowledge bias which can be personal, social, political, or what Christopher Meyers considered as "the effects of ideological indoctrination."⁵³ Such indoctrination can lead journalists into condoning attacks on

⁵² Makumi Mwagiru, "A Return to Basics: Media Rights as Fundamental Human Rights," *Africa Media Review*, Volume 11, Number 2, 1997, pp.88-104.

⁵³ Christopher Meyers, "Appreciating W.D. Ross: On Duties and Consequences," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, 2003, Volume 18, Number 2, p. 92.

Kenya's national interests or into over zealousness to fix ideological rivals. When this indoctrination is coupled with hefty 'brown envelopes,' media corruption goes into high gear and threats to national interests rise up. Professional and ethical behaviour requires one to acknowledge, and to make effort to minimize, biases in order to avoid interfering with journalistic objectivity. Unethical journalists and editors have been known to use the media to fight their perceived enemies through distortions and adjustment of facts.⁵⁴

Seventh is the question of the journalists being aware of the implication of decisions to either ignore or pursue a particular angle to a story. The awareness of the socio-political or security consequences of a particular story and the decision to go with it, however, should also be considered as a moral and ethical one. This is in the sense that the editor and the journalist involved have to weigh the likely damage of a given story to the people concerned, or to the country, and try to balance it with the likely benefits in terms of the public good. The question to raise is the extent to which such moral and ethical considerations determine whether or not to expose political, social, economic, international and ideological misdeeds. What is the responsibility of the media?

Eighth, is the need for a public watchdog on the 'Fourth Estate' as it watches the other three constitutional branches of government. Given that the media as well as the political leaders appear intent to manipulate the public by using their immense power,⁵⁵ there is need for an independent but effective Media Council, similar to the India Press Council, that is independent of both the government and media houses.⁵⁶ It is also advisable for different media to develop their own monitoring systems so as to enhance their professionalism in covering institutions like the parliament.⁵⁷ The strange thing is that the mainstream media in Kenya, after being involved in the drafting of the proposed Media Bill, to create an effective media council that would enhance professionalism, appear to have turned around and are fighting their own creation.⁵⁸ There must be a lot of awkward things going on within the media industry in Kenya.

These eight suggestions are likely to enhance the media's ability to enhance protection of Kenya's national interests. They are not the only ones but they cover many aspects that should be of concern to the media, the public, and relevant institutions. They would help to promote accountability, ethics, protection of national interests, and the course of democracy. Because of the power that the media wields in a place, many politicians and government bureaucrats would like to control the media.⁵⁹ At the same time, there are media houses that operate as if they are above or outside the law, end up running wild, and thereby give governments valid excuses to seek control in the name of national security and interests. This is the logic of the embedded American journalists supposedly covering the conflict in Iraq. The challenge, therefore, is for both media and governments to refrain from unethical behaviour that hurt national interests. This calls for an informed public that is aware of national interests to contain unethical activities by those in both the government and the media.

⁵⁴ Kadhi, "Anglophone Africa: Journalists- Puppets of the Proprietors?," pp. 85-87.

⁵⁵ Macharia Munene, "The Parliament, the Media, and the Public," Workshop of The Kenya Parliamentary Journalist Association (KPJA), Mount Kenya Safari Club, Nanyuki, January 22-23, 2004.

⁵⁶ P.B. Sawant, "Accountability in Journalism," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, 2003, Volume 18, Number 1, pp.16-28.

⁵⁷ Martin Mutua, "Challenges of Parliamentary Reporting," Workshop of The Kenya Parliamentary Journalist Association (KPJA), Mount Kenya Safari Club, Nanyuki, January 22-23, 2004.

⁵⁸ Discussions with Joe Kadhi, member of the Media Council of Kenya, Monday, April 24, 2006.

⁵⁹ Macharia Munene, "Historical Perspectives on Politics and Journalism" in Charles Okgibo, editor, *Reporting Politics and Public Affairs* (Nairobi: African Council for Communication Education), pp.41-52.