

**TOWARDS MEDIA OF AFRICA BY AFRICANS AND FOR AFRICANS**

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**Abstract**

It is possible to suggest that negative narratives about Africa were coterminous with the occasion of Western civilization. Europeans' idea of superiority created an image of Africa which was the perverse opposite of Europe's. The slave trade, colonialism and racism helped to fuel negative narratives about Africa in Western discourses. Whereas slave trade abolitionists saw Africa as a place of suffering because of war, disease, famine and poverty provoked by slave trade, anti-abolitionists opined that Africa was so forbidding, making slavery in foreign countries a positive escape. The perception of Africa as a land of beasts and cannibals was justified as the reason for colonialism which brought light – Christianity, Civilization and Commerce; according to Livingstone's dictum – to the Continent. The racial dimension supposedly explains African "backwardness" and 'savagery' as biologically predetermined. These lines of thinking have often influenced Western media African reportage. Although, the tendency in contemporary times shows that big global media appear to be moving away from this paradigm. But, what are African journalists doing in terms of reporting Africa for Africans? This paper discusses this all important media issue.

**Introduction**

"If Western Journalists get Africa wrong, who gets it right?" (Gathara, 2014).

Herodotus, who is regarded as the Father of History, relates in his book, *Histories*, a cautionary tale about what happens in Africa. Here, he says “Five Nasamonians – enterprising youths of the highest rank” – were off exploring southern Libya. After several days of wandering, they found some fruit trees and started helping themselves. Then, several ‘men of small stature’, ‘all of them skilled in magic’, seized and captured them, taking them for inscrutable and dastardly magic-dwarf purposes” (Gates, 2012). This crude perception of Africans as highlighted in a portion of this piece written by Herodotus, exemplifies the manner Western reports on Africa and Africans go.

Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans on August 29, 2005. The chaotic scenes that were captured on camera made Brig. Gen. Gary Jones, one of the commanders of the US National Guard to comment: “This place is going to look like Little Somalia.” Equating the scenes of devastation in the US with what supposedly obtains in Africa implies the negative perception the average Western citizen has about Africa. The Western disposition towards Africa seems to suggest, “if you are looking for the Bad and the Ugly, then look at Africa.” But the pertinent question is, are Africans so despicable? Is Africa really, the Dark Continent? Can the African media revolutionize African reportage?

### **Who is an African?**

Webster’s New World College Dictionary (2010) defines African as a member of an indigenous ethnic group of Africa, esp. sub-Saharan Africa. At the face value, this definition arguably states the obvious as to who an African is. But the qualification of the African by Bernard Law Montgomery, the erstwhile British field marshal, as “a complete savage” (New African, 1999) gives another identity of the African which has defined the perception of Africa and Africans by the outside world, especially the Western world. This echoes the suggestion by Taylor (2005) that when blacks are left entirely to their own devices, Western Civilization — any kind of civilization — disappears. The picture of who an African is therefore appears to be distinguished by race on the one hand and Western negative imagery on the other hand. It is the latter that causes a lot of concern because that is apparently how Africa and Africans are perceived globally.

### **Is Africa Unfortunate?**

Africa appears to have its own ‘fair’ share of problems. Now and again, we have disasters on the continent. Some are natural some are man-made. This appears to send the message of an unfortunate continent; droughts and famine have been endured for years in Ethiopia and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa such as Niger where millions were at the brink of annihilation in recent times. Civil wars and related conflicts that engendered genocides of some sort in Rwanda, some parts of the DR Congo, northern Uganda and lately North Sudan’s Darfur region. Africa appears a continent about to self-destruct. There seems to be an irony in the richest continent on earth in terms of resources having the poorest and most miserable people in the world, by Western account.

### **Who Reports Africa?**

The Western media have been shaping people’s opinions and thinking. Their reports apparently do more harm than good, since they give what is arguably wrong perceptions of Africa and its people. Western media reports portray Africa as a tragic and helpless continent unable to fend for itself. They depict the continent with a major chunk of its inhabitants dying of hunger,

AIDS and war. The developing world in general is described with stories related to crime, violence, and terrorism, ethnic conflicts, fundamentalism and other forms of uncivilized backwardness. Particularly, Western media news about Africa is a dump of negative material related to disease, savagery, plague, war, famine, despotism, primitivism, poverty, and everywhere images of children, flies in their food and faces, their stomachs inflated, grand-propaganda campaign aimed at suppressing, blacklisting and condemning promising African governments, peoples and tribes. In theory, western media champion objectivity and fairness in journalism. The impression is that whereas there is press freedom in the West there is little of it in other parts of the world. In practice, the highly regarded Western media appear to deal out unfair and less than balanced reporting on issues pertaining to the developing world.

### **What makes African News?**

The popular images of Africa in the West include the “dark continent” characterized by primeval irrationality, tribal anarchy, civil war, political instability, flagrant corruption, incompetent leadership and managerial ineptitude, hunger, famine and starvation as well as rampant diseases, especially AIDS (Franks, 2005).

Africa is seen as comprising of uncivilized and heathen peoples who are culturally, intellectually, politically and technically backward or inferior; who are incapable of governing themselves, or at least embracing democratic principles of governance (Hago, 2000). The African continent is depicted as the “dependent Africa”, “crisis driven Africa and “hopeless” or “pitiable Africa”. Without exception, the images have been negative and then sensationalize the “dark” side of Africa. What makes news in the eyes of the Western media is the bizarre which often paint the picture of a troubled continent. It is a fact that many regions of Africa have experienced various forms of violence, ranging from “tribal” clashes, armed conflicts, and civil wars to genocide. Be it the crisis in Sudan, rebel activities in northern Uganda or the Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria, the Western media place a high premium in news stories that verge on the bizarre.

While it may be difficult to achieve total objectivity in media reports, it is not lost to many observers that reports in the Western media about war and conflicts in Africa are often crisis-driven in such a way as to imply that Africans are naturally savage, warlike, violent and steeped in primordial tribal feuds. The perspectives taken by the reporters, the kind of headlines, pictures, statistics, and the language that they use, all point to a picture created to serve certain interests and agenda. A lot of information is usually omitted (sometimes added) to give the Western audiences and governments what they want.

### **What Should Make African News**

Obviously, any media has every right to report Africa's problems to the world. But if the reports are focused mainly on the negative, it is not fair; it is simply a disaster. And what the western media report about the developing world in general and Africa in particular tends to be disgustingly skewed and ever focused on the negatives.

Western media never mention Africa's incalculable natural wealth, which is hardly available to its indigenous populations; and her ecosystem is dying out because of voracious Western consumption (Pieterse,1992). The Western media presents almost no view about the successful and promising African countries. They give no attention to the notable progress, and achievements of typical countries. They never show African countries who are tirelessly fighting to guarantee their food security; to fend themselves. Nor do they address issues about developing

countries whose people and government believe in the principle of self-reliance because such determined principles and policies are not for the interest of the West.

There are several good news items that are intentionally disregarded or go unreported. There are countries in Africa enjoying committed governments working for the common good of their people. Many other African countries have been achieving steady economic growth and improvement in their national reconstruction processes. In the eyes of the West, the good things are not reported. Moreover, Africa has a number of countries which are quiet and peaceful; the most attractive incentive for tourists who want to visit the wonders of Africa. And the reasons maybe that stable working African countries are of no real appeal to the Western media. Rarely do they report national progress achieved by some hopeful governments. Moreover they never positively address a courageous leader who is committed for the development and prosperity of his/her people and country.

### **Reshaping African Reportage: What Role for African Journalists?**

The vast African continent appears not to be receiving the best coverage possible in the Western media. It seems evident that there is the need for African journalists to make greater contributions towards the coverage of their own continent in the Western media? The African journalist can concentrate on reporting development which often times is not the priority of the Western media. This brand of reporting implies development journalism. Wimmer & Wolf (2005) represents development journalism as an intellectual enterprise in which the journalist should form a kind of free intelligence and should critically examine the aims of national development and the applicable instruments in a rational discourse and solve them by reasonable criteria free of social constraints. Accordingly, development journalism has the following tasks:

- to motivate the audience to actively cooperate in development; and
- to defend the interests of those concerned.

African journalists could through development journalism document the conditions within their countries so that the larger world can understand them. Foreign correspondents think from their own environment, their own society, what is news in their context; this tends to be politics and disasters and the like (Voordouw, 2010). Since foreign reporting often means disaster journalism - correspondents being "parachuted in", reporting, leaving, and possibly returning to do a follow-up piece (Cooper, 2007), African reportage tailored along development journalism can be used as a tool for social justice. African journalists can inform the rest of the world about important issues within Africa. Looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the African countries may help identify ways in which these nations can be helped. This brand of development journalism could serve as a tool for empowerment.

### **African Media for Africans**

Few African media houses are actually trying to cover the continent for the continent. Many have their hands full reporting (or not reporting) news at home and do not think of Africa so much as a story that needs to be covered, but as part of the rest of the world and take their cue on reporting it from the western outlets (Gathara, 2014 para. 4).

*Arise* Networks, founded by Nigerian publisher Nduka Obaigbena, publisher of Nigeria's *This Day* Newspaper and *Arise* Magazine, is an initiative which suggests a taking-the-bull-by-the-horns in creating an African media for Africans. *AriseTV* mission statement reads: "We are a

global media network reflecting the experiences of under-served communities, championing the voices of the African Diaspora across all continents and engaging citizens of the world” (Broadband TV News)

Only a healthy media sector can fulfil its obligations. If media publishers and broadcasters in both the public and private sectors lack financial resources and security, if they do not uphold professional standards, and if they use reporters and editors who are inadequately trained or experienced, they will fail to live up to the standards that underpin public confidence (Consensus Statement, the Fourth African Development Forum<sup>1</sup>).

A vibrant media and communication environment are critical to a developed and prosperous Africa. Development in the spirit of the MDGs cannot be achieved without sustained political will and the enthronement of a free and democratic environment in which the media can play an effective role in promoting sustainable development, fighting corruption and promoting good governance.

In the late 1970s, there were agitations by the developing world against what was perceived as the unbalanced information flow between the continent and the industrialized North and the negative image of Africa and Africans portrayed in the major news agencies of the world. As a result of this concern, the then Organization for African Union created the Pan African News Agency (PANA) in 1979 to “rectify the distorted image of Africa created by international news agencies and to let the voice of Africa be heard on the international news scene.”

As global concern gradually grew globally, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provided the forum for a vigorous debate on media development, culminating in calls for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) championed by countries of the Non-Aligned Movement. NWICO dwelt on problems of commercialisation, unequal access to information and communication, and media concentration, and made a case for strong national media to eliminate overdependence on external sources.

In the past decade there has been notable progress and a significant shift towards democratization and media diversity in Africa. Mainstream, alternative and new forms of media, such as community and privately owned commercial media have steadily emerged and grown in numbers and diversity of opinion. The growth is in large part as a result of the space created by the shift from dictatorial regimes to multiparty democracies and elections as well as the end of the cold war and internal calls for democratic reforms. In many African countries, as new media entities have emerged, state-owned media, equally important for the public interest, has stagnated in the face of competition and diversity.

In recent years, the digital era and the convergence of new technologies with traditional/conventional media have made more Africans able to access other forms of communications, such as mobile telephony and the Internet. This means that capacity for communication has been largely enhanced. To achieve the African media for Africans some critical challenges facing the African media sector today need to be addressed, these are:

- **Media Freedom:** As a result of efforts by media advocates and democratization in the last decade, most countries in Africa have constitutions that guarantee freedom of expression and information. The freedom of information bill has been passed into law in Nigeria,

paving the way for the media to hold the government accountable for good governance. This is the case for Nigeria, but in other countries like Zimbabwe, the press is still muzzled.

- **Policy:** There is the need for a critical review and overhaul of the legal and policy environment in which the media operates across Africa. Of particular concern should be policies relating to issues such as defamation and the legal protection of investigative journalists attempting to inform on corruption, governance and accountability issues.
- **Capacity and standards:** The media, without adhering to professional codes of conduct, cannot effectively play its role in promoting good governance. There is the need for journalists, editors and media owners to work for professionalism. While many media support organizations have worked with media houses over the years to improve professional standards, it is acknowledged by many stakeholders that the long-term impact of these efforts has been minimal.
- **Sustainability:** Content, format and business models are critical to the survival and sustainability of the media. A lack of access to capital, poor financial practices and unstable business environments cannot ensure sustainability. With important but isolated exceptions, where effective infrastructure does exist it is under-supported, under-invested, and personnel are inadequately prepared for the practical business of managing media sustainably.
- **Lack of quality and diversity of content:** The ability to generate and package high quality local content that is relevant to local conditions and that offers ideological diversity is lacking, as is the financing to train practitioners. Economics and the requirements of sponsors and the advertising industry drive programming and format. In terms of diversity of content, there is little or no content analysis that monitors the proportion of content genres and reach.

### **How may all these issues that have been raised be addressed?**

In the area of media freedom, there could be active promotion, adoption and domestication by all African governments of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, as well as Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, on freedom of expression. Specific laws related to access to information, whistle blowing, protection of sources, etc should be formulated; plus the development of an awareness-raising strategy to promote better understanding within the media itself of national media laws, to educate the media on its responsibility to provide accurate information, and to educate the public at large on its rights to information.

In the area of policy and regulation, existing national laws and policies should be reappraised to identify poor regulation (such as incoherence between media laws and national constitutions) and promote the design and implementation of policies and legal frameworks that enable, rather than stifle, the growth of a strong, pluralistic and sustainable media in Africa. Emphasis should be on advocacy for the licensing of community media in all African countries and the transformation of state-owned media into public service media that operates independently from the influence of the state and political parties in line with internationally recognized norms and practices of African charter on broadcasting.

In the area of capacity building a comprehensive audit of existing media training in Africa should be undertaken to identify gaps and problems, and develop proposals to strengthen training. This will also help develop minimum standards for training of all kinds by advocating for and developing models for competency testing and academic recognition. In-house training policies for media houses that promote sequential and on-going learning should be promoted; as well as advocacy for on-site training as an important strategy for continuous skills building and knowledge acquisition. Links between the media industry and media training industry should be promoted as well as media exchange programmes within Africa as a value-added strategy for strengthening capacity.

In the area of sustainability, the African media needs funds, whether from private, public or community financing instruments. Public funding should be encouraged to ensure the development and sustainability of community, local, small and emerging media as well as media producing public interest content. There should be an assessment of the different models of media funding and co-ownership to inform strategies for economic sustainability of African media. Also, comprehensive research into the community media sector in Africa should be undertaken, as a means of identifying its reach and scope and strengths and weaknesses. On the basis of this research a strategy should be developed to ensure sustainable and effective community media in Africa.

In the area of professionalism and ethics, mechanisms to monitor the status of implementation of norms, standards and best practice related to ownership, editorial independence and public interest journalism should be developed. This would ensure that regional norms and standards on professionalism and ethics in the African media are widely disseminated and respected across the board. Professional networks (such as the African Economics Editors Network) should be encouraged and established to strengthen the practice of media in Africa. A Media Award scheme to showcase and reward outstanding media practice, entrepreneurship, innovation and public interest journalism should be established; while mechanisms to strengthen the organization of media practitioners to combat poor wages and working conditions should be put in place.

In terms of content, respect for and promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity as well as gender balance in Africa's media, and in particular support of the use of local languages should be ensured. This would make for the production and dissemination of content that reflects the diversity of interests, the opinions and the voices of different social factors, including the marginalized. Also, the use by media of ICTs to digitize and share content across Africa should be promoted

## **Conclusion**

Can Africa confront biased and unfair media reportage? Yes, we can. Western Media appears to have been disfiguring the correct image of Africa. African people need to discover themselves and get the world to know about Africa from Africans. The West appears to get pleasure reporting the dark side of the African continent. With a little more commitment Africans could recover the continent's correct image. Once the structures are put in place towards this goal, what will emerge in the final analysis is a media of Africa by Africans and for Africans.

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