

A journalism of purpose

Nixon Kariithi says debate over the role of the media in Africa's democratisation places too much emphasis on the actions of the state and too little attention on markets, civil society and media institutions.

Half a century of political independence in much of Africa has produced remarkably little to be proud of. The clamour for political change that swept through the continent about 15 years ago recorded some modest achievements on the political front, but did little to offset worsening economic and social circumstances. Africa is still faltering under the weight of abject poverty, widespread underdevelopment, mounting foreign debt, and rising economic dependency.

This picture, while gloomy, is an essential backdrop for any substantive discussion of Africa's future. Indeed, Africa is currently faced with some of the biggest challenges in human history. Ironically, these critical times have barely caught the world's attention; and even where genuine concern is noted, it is often short-lived and superficial.

The lesson here – one which a number of African leaders now recognise – is the need for homegrown solutions and the involvement of African people in the design and implementation of such solutions.

This is a call for African media to rise up and claim their place on the high table of furthering national goals via a self-charted course. A second point here is that if Africa's solutions lie within itself, then African people and institutions possess the necessary wherewithal – ideas, manpower, goodwill and commitment – to change the deplorable conditions rampaging on the continent.

Consider African political leadership over the past half-century: it is now well accepted that the leadership was responsible, to a significant extent, for underdevelopment, debt burden and poverty in the continent, through the systematic plunder of national wealth and poor policymaking.

There is now a collective resolve to purge Africa of plundering, elitist political systems. In becoming 'our own world', we set our sights on the future and decide the most judicious way to get there.

We then appoint some among to lead us into the future, with clear expectations based on our specific circumstances. And we hold such leaders accountable for their actions, and especially their moral and ethical judgments regarding use of 'our' public resources.

As institutions central to the democratic process, media serve several critical functions:

1. Comprehensive accounts

They should offer a comprehensive account of the broadest range of events. By doing so, the media service the society with a corpus of information and knowledge sufficient for making informed choices.

2. Wide range of voices

The need is for media institutions to maintain a wide range of opinions and analysis of issues unfolding in society. Here, emphasis must be placed on debating issues exhaustively, while also maintaining relevant contexts. Media scholars have reiterated Karl Popper's thesis that "truth is not manifest", ie: truth does not exist in a pure, unquestionable form; instead, it is socially constructed through discussion, debate, negotiation and consensus building.

These media functions assist in securing tolerance, a critical prerequisite for social stability in modern multi-ethnic societies. Our recent social history – Rwanda, the protracted conflicts in the Democratic

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Republic of Congo, Somalia, Cote d'Ivoire and Western Sudan – is dominated by events that could have pertinently been reshaped by the broader inclusion of voices and an appreciation of other people's destinies.

3. National integration

Under this function, media institutions cut across social divisions at various structural levels – across nationality barriers between different ethnic groups, social classes, ideologies and geographical regions.

The critical point here is to identify and focus on national symbols instead of local or regional symbols, national interests, values and aspirations, instead of particularistic ones, to help create national identification and loyalties. A quick glance across Africa reveals many candidates for such mediation: South Africa, the DRC, Namibia, Sudan, and Cote d'Ivoire.

4. Watchdogs and advocates

The final major function of the media, one that is very close to the *raison d'être* of the Tunis conference, is to act as watchdogs and advocates on behalf of society. To achieve this, the media are charged with the responsibility of investigating and exposing abuse of power by those in authority in government, other national institutions and even in business. In this regard, the media should uphold the values of an altruistic democracy, and vigorously pursue stories about corruption, conflict, protest and bureaucratic malfunctioning. Other enduring values in the news must include reflective patriotism and responsible capitalism.

The reality of the market

Critical as they may seem, the above media functions remain distant ideals and pipe dreams. African governments have repeatedly acted against independent and critical media organisations. And the realities of the marketplace in many countries play right into this situation. Unlike Nigeria and South Africa, most sub-Saharan economies are small and activity is heavily dominated by the public sector.

The reality emerging from this oddity is that government departments and state corporations are decreed to support state-owned media or media that is overtly seen to "toe the government line". Independent media are given the tough choice of either toeing the ruling party position or getting into cahoots with wealthy opposition politicians.

A critical analysis of the debate over the role of the media in Africa's democratisation highlights one point: there is too much emphasis on the role of the African state and too little attention on the role of markets, civil society and media institutions.

The larger-than-life position assumed by the state presupposes that all else is peripheral and incidental to the state, its activities and its agents. Many studies have warned about the "corporatist" factor in African politics, defined by Julius Nyang'oro as the systematic incorporation of selected social groups into the machinery of the state.

This results in the creation of social hierarchies, with a minority select class reaping a windfall of government contracts, import licences and trade deals, while the majority public are conditioned through wage controls and education to serve as labour for

the owners of capital.

The tensions and conflicts precipitated by these blatant class divisions are often resolved through coercion of the working class by state apparatuses. The state moves away from open democratic processes and begins to operate through personnel and organisations which are not part of the governing mechanism.

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This paints a grim picture for the involvement of African media in critical national issues. Yet the strength of the African media is premised upon these very problems and challenges. African journalists have cut their teeth in some of the harshest conditions and contexts in modern history and done so with minimal resources. We need to recognise the immense wealth of knowledge bequeathed to us by history and use it to develop new ways of communicating media messages.

This calls for an embracing of what John Hochheimer, has called the "journalism of meaning". A journalism of purpose will secure for us a social connection with communities that are currently feeling underserved and tuning out. As African journalists we must reconstruct our practice based on own context and experiences, dialogues and life struggles. Such a reorientation could be the humble beginnings of a new consciousness.

Indeed, African journalists must demonstrate trust in their societies and their people as the key to transformation, and use their profession to create societies that celebrate and promote democracy.

Most important, the African journalist must always aspire to capture and highlight people's feelings, remain sensitive to media representations, and develop deeper understanding of media and society.

Essentially, the charity begins at home, by embracing purposeful living and creating social relationships based on purpose and trust. A journalism of purpose does not seek 'brown envelopes' or kickbacks and perks to do what is in fact its role in society.

This journalism paradigm aspires to cover issues and not personalities. It is proactive rather than reactive; systematic and strategic rather than erratic and episodic. It highlights processes that lead to outcomes rather than uncritically focusing exclusively on outcomes. The journalism of purpose promotes connectedness, understanding, community and dialogue.

Such purpose-driven media work cannot be done from the back seat. African media must rise up and claim their place on the high table of furthering national goals. This way, the public and ultimately the powerful elite themselves, would cease to perceive the state as the sole crusader for the nation's well-being.

An elevation to the national table of decision-making and governance would earn the African media that vital mileage it requires to secure its position as a national institution against the heavy counter currents of the political establishments that do not want to be held accountable for their actions. ■

Based on the keynote address to the Second Annual Conference of the Nigerian Guild of Editors in Abuja on 24 August.