

# LIVING IN FEAR OF REPORTING THE TRUTH

THE CHALLENGES ARE STEEP  
BUT NOT INSURMOUNTABLE  
TO DEVELOP AN AFRICAN  
MEDIA THAT TRULY SERVES  
THE AFRICAN PUBLIC IN  
ITS NEED FOR RELEVANT  
INFORMATION AND, ABOVE  
ALL, TRUTH, ARGUES FAIR'S  
SECRETARY-GENERAL  
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In a previous *Rhodes Journalism Review* article, "Journalism in Africa: Modernity, Africanity", Francis Nyamnjoh calls African journalism a "journalism of bandwagonism, where mimicry is the order of the day, as emphasis is less on thinking than on doing, less on leading than on being led."

He observes that "African journalism lacks both the power of self-definition and the power to shape the universals" and blames this on the fact that journalism, perceived as an attribute of so-called modern societies or of superior others, is taught in Africa, to Africans by [outsiders] who know what it means to be civilised and to be relevant to civilisation.

"Aspiring journalists in Africa must, like containers, be dewatered of the mud and dirt of culture as tradition and custom, and filled afresh with the tested sparkles of culture as modernity and civilisation," he writes. "African journalists are thus called upon to operate in a world where everything has been predefined for them by others, where they are meant to implement and hardly ever to think or rethink, where what is expected of them is respect for canons, not to question how or why canons are forged, or the extent to which canons are inclusive of the creative diversity of the universe that is purportedly of interest to the journalism of the One-Best-Way."

As Africans we have not, or have only in a limited way, developed our own media even as an addition to the amount of information from outside Africa that is bombarding Africans. I feel that it is now critical for Africa to define itself in terms of its media and its image. Africa cannot be passive in the current global environment.

Media everywhere should define its own space, one that is empowered and self-sufficient, and able to face the world on its own terms, and there is no reason why African media should be an exception.

Defining African journalism cannot be done outside of parameters such as:

- the socio-economic and political environment;
- armed conflicts and political tensions; and
- famine, droughts and other natural disasters.

The challenges of African journalism today within this context are as follows:

## The citizen journalism trend

The ICT boom has dramatically changed the relationship between journalists and their audiences. Citizen journalism means that everybody can now report, record and publish. The problem arises precisely out of the word "everyone". Who is checking for news authenticity? Who verifies? In a situation where the work of trained journalists is often still considered wanting, the citizen journalist who has received no journalism skills, practice or ethics training at all is suddenly fashionable.

As African journalists whose mission it is to redefine and improve African journalism and African media, in the interest of the African audiences whose right it is to receive proper, tested and verified information of relevance, we need to ask ourselves "why this fashion?" Is citizen journalism a threat to 'real' journalism at a time when we need journalism standards to improve, or can it be converted into an asset? Can we incorporate citizen reporting in the journalism profession so that it enhances the quest of African media and African journalists to develop a functional, skilled, interesting and ethical journalism in Africa?

## Lack of investigation

A second challenge lies precisely in the lack of quality that is common in established African journalism. Our journalism is mostly reporting: it is the journalism of speeches and press conferences. If it is revealing, it is often of the kind that reveals only incidents of petty bureaucratic corruption. We need investigative reporting that questions society in all its aspects on a continuous basis.

## Low quality of technical skill

A third challenge lies in low quality of the technical aspects of journalism.

In the past five years, Africa has seen massive proliferation of media, especially in radio and print. But despite this growth, the media sector still faces, besides challenges of professional quality, also technical challenges.

The late Zakeus Chibaya, the secretary-general of the Cross-border Association of Journalists (CAJ), and a member of Forum for African Investigative Reporters (FAIR), identified the lack of equipment and infrastructure (computers, adequate newsrooms, landlines, fax machines, internet connections) and technical skills (IT illiteracy) as major obstacles. I concur with this. In certain African countries, some journalists not only lack computer skills – because there are no computers – but also still rely on old typing machines to build up their stories.

## Bad management

Low management standards are arguably even a more pressing problem. Some people entrusted to run newsrooms are not at all qualified to do that job. They lack leadership skills and often do not even have media backgrounds, having been appointed only because they happened to fill a certain racial quota, or because they have powerful friends in the right places. Such a newsroom editor does not care about the quality of the journalism generated in his newsroom, so why should the journalists who work there? The lack of inspiration, pride and aspiration, and the sad reality that one often gets ahead in the media environment by pleasing powerful friends, rather than through truthful and investigative reporting, has been identified by FAIR as perhaps the most heavy obstacle weighing down on journalism potential in Africa.

## Censorship and self-censorship

Connected to the above is the persistent lack of press freedom in many parts of the continent. With our nepotistic appointments and powerful interests reigning in newsrooms, journalism output is not created to serve the truth, but often to suppress it. Where there is no outright censorship, self-censorship suffices. We live in fear of reporting the truth.

A FAIR member recently reported that an article of his was rejected by his editor with the words: "There is WAY too much truth in this!"

## Journalists paid as glorified typists

Again connected to the low management and low quality standards in journalism, is the fact that journalists are not valued as much more than as simple conveyors of messages

from above. Of course, media bosses don't see why they should pay such glorified typists a good salary and, consequently, nobody who aspires to a rewarding professional career wants to be, or remain, a journalist.

In order to attract the right potential, it is important that the journalism profession is seen to be a career that *could* be rewarding, if one is good enough. Improving journalists' living and working conditions on the basis of good performance is therefore paramount.

On this note, allow me to quote once again Zakeus Chibaya: the most worrying problem is low pay. It is increasingly becoming a major cause of frustration for reporters. In many parts of Africa, hungry, underpaid and demoralised journalists cover their stories in quite hostile conditions. They often use only a motorbike for transport on the different reporting fields. This state of poverty and low morale leaves them vulnerable to corruption and ready to do whatever it takes to survive.

## The ethics of the hungry stomach

This, then, brings the (almost) last, but not least, question of ethics into the picture. A hungry stomach does not care much about ethics. The choice for many of us is either to stick with ethics and die a poor chap or girl, or side with the powers that be – be they government, private sector or international institutions. In all cases, the temptation to write what they want to hear in order to survive, drowns out any hope Africa might have of at one stage systematically producing home-bred, real journalism of quality.

## Access to information: the challenge for 2009

Having the right to access to information is routinely defined as the ability of the citizen to obtain information that concerns him or her, whether it is in the possession of the state or the private sector. Some states provide for access in their constitutions and laws; many, especially in Africa, do not. Even where access to information is nominally recognised in law, it is invariably subject to limitations: it often takes months for a simple request even to be merited with a response. In addition, states may impose fees, and require the payment of administrative costs before they start to process the request – if they process it at all.

As long as this is the case, and information is routinely refused to anyone seeking it, including journalists, the African public will not see its information needs met. One particular case I studied, of a South African-based journalist requesting information on the basis of PAIA, clearly shows what an arduous process it is to obtain it, even in the country with arguably the best access to information law on the African continent.

The access to information challenge, and the other challenges mentioned above, together cry out for sustainable and consistent funding for media in Africa, and innovative strategies to be employed by media-conscious professionals – journalists, editors and publishers – to develop an African media that truly serves the African public in its need for relevant information and, above all, truth.

*This was the keynote address at the FAIR Pan-African Investigative Journalism Summit.*