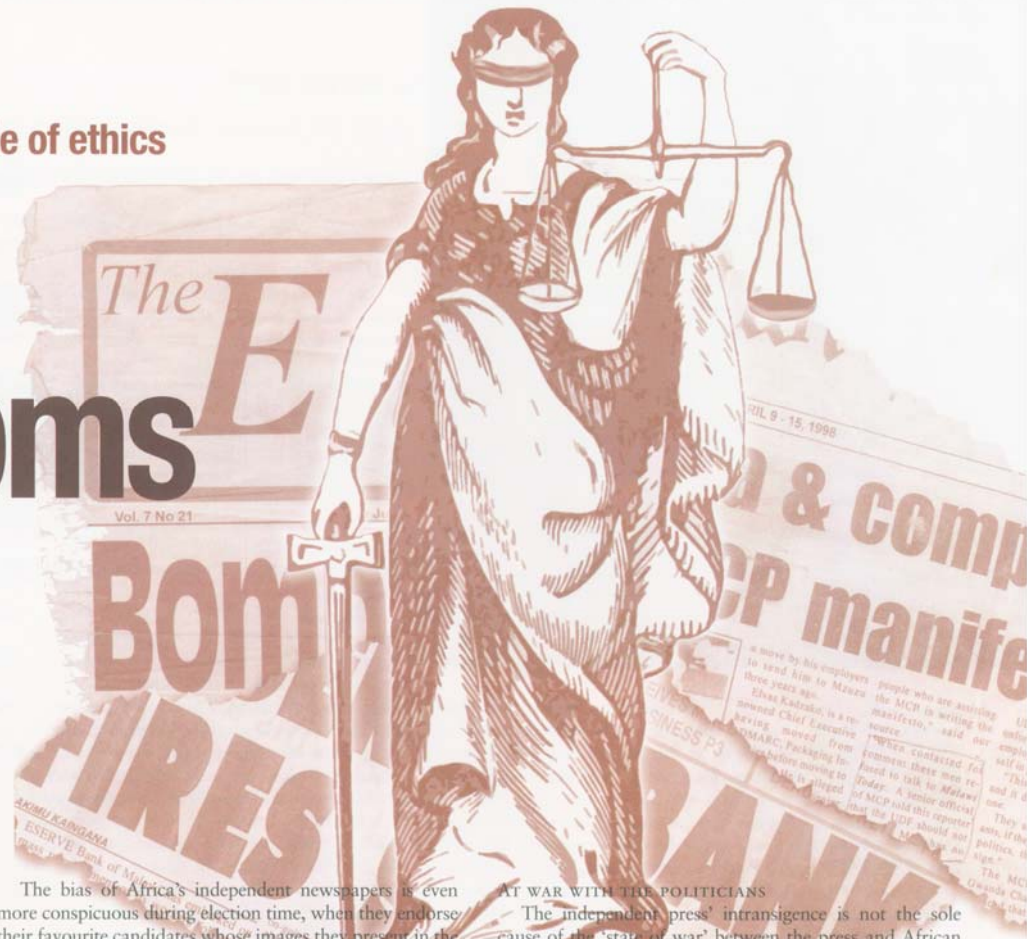


Why journalists need a code of ethics

# abused freedoms

Irresponsible journalism invites repression – which is why 'independent' journalists require more self-regulation, argues

Francis P. Kasoma...



The widespread unprofessionalism practiced by journalists in Africa's independent press is responsible for a large part of governmental action to limit press freedom. Some government interference is based on genuine concern that such freedom is being abused.

Unprofessional practices by journalists from Africa's independent press have included: (1) the use of newspapers as political opposition; (2) bad advocacy journalism; and (3) the overuse of anonymous sources.

## THE PRESS AS POLITICAL OPPOSITION

The degree of truth reported in African newspapers, particularly those acting as political opposition, is extremely low. These 'opposition' newspapers are full of exaggerations; base their reports on hearsay; make headlines 'cry wolf'; quote sources out of context; deny 'the accused' a fair hearing; print downright biased reporting; publish smear-campaign columns based more on the writer's emotions than on reasoned opinion; run illogically written editorials and so forth. Too many editors are prepared to publish a story based on one flimsy source without bothering to check that the information they are getting is factual. Numerous newspapers in Africa have committed many of these offences.

## ADVOCACY JOURNALISM AND SENSATIONALISM

Another common professional transgression by 'independent' journalists is practicing bad advocacy journalism, often accompanied by sensationalism. To journalists and newspapers involved in sensational reporting, nothing seems illogical: a single incident is universalised and a few isolated incidents are made to represent a trend.

Advocacy journalism turns sour when those practicing it ignore basic journalistic norms. When a newspaper constantly refers to a head of state as "childish", "immature", "criminal", "a fool" or "a scoundrel" – as the *Post* of Zambia has repeatedly done in describing President Frederick Chiluba – the newspaper's motives may not be honest and honourable. There is a big distinction between being critical of a head of state and insulting him.

The bias of Africa's independent newspapers is even more conspicuous during election time, when they endorse their favourite candidates whose images they present in the most slanted, advantageous manner to the electorate.

Africa's independent newspapers cannot behave in this way and still call themselves 'independent'. They should not cheat members of the public by posing as independent newspapers when they are, *ipso facto*, party newspapers. The independence of a newspaper is determined not only by its private ownership but also by its editorial policy.

A newspaper that has taken a permanent political side by uncritically supporting one political party, no matter what that party does, forfeits its independence. An independent newspaper that takes a political side consistently and uncritically without giving space to opposing information and views is but a dishonest political organ doing a disservice to democracy.

The watchdog role is not about the press propagating political vendettas against those in government which cannot be supported by facts. The majority of bad journalists are hiding behind the cloak of press freedom. Some even unashamedly claim that freedom of the press should also protect bad journalism.

## ANONYMOUS SOURCES

A third ill-conceived practice by journalists from independent newspapers is the misuse of anonymous sources, which has become very common in Africa. When pressed to name a source, journalists often hide behind the confidentiality argument. But they apparently disregard the often irreparable damage done to the reputations of the people against whom allegations are made. Such journalists are, obviously, happy that their political enemies have been 'fixed'.

The independent press in Africa seems to have thrown cardinal ethical norms to the wind. It is time African journalists started telling their sources that if they are prepared to make the charge against others, then they should be brave enough to prove their allegations publicly.

## AT WAR WITH THE POLITICIANS

The independent press' intransigence is not the sole cause of the 'state of war' between the press and African governments – far from it. Sometimes governments and ruling parties are to blame because of their overreaction to what the press does or is presumed to be doing.

Yet the serious conflicts between government and the independent press which have rocked Africa could be eased if journalists created responsible bodies to enforce journalism ethics. It is the absence of journalists' associations or the weakness of existing ones in many African countries that has exacerbated the situation and made governments want to impose journalistic regulatory bodies such as state-sponsored media councils. The contention by some African governments which have taken this path is that if the journalists cannot regulate themselves, they have to step in and regulate them.

Unless the press conducts itself responsibly and puts self-regulation measures in place whenever it makes mistakes, government has a duty to impose certain regulations intended to make journalists more responsible. Unfortunately, the measures that governments usually impose are harsh and often result in the reduction of press freedom. When this happens, the independent press in Africa should not so much blame government as blame itself for causing the mess by its unprofessional conduct.

In Africa today even the limited press freedom which many independent newspapers enjoy may be drastically curtailed if they continue to flout basic journalism ethics. When this happens, the irresponsible independent press will be as much to blame as the governments taking draconian measures to curtail them.

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