

A rallying cry

From the editor's desk



Ninety journalists killed in five years – the death toll in just one African country, Algeria, where between 1993 and 1997 Islamic fundamentalists wreaked terror. Typing up 'les assassins' the other evening – name, date killed, place killed – felt like multiple inscriptions on some veiled memorial. In fact, Lazhari Labter's article (p. 21), against this background of deaths, is meant as commemoration.

It became startlingly clear in typing up these Algerian journalists' names: being a journalist in Africa is, for many, a matter of life and death. So that if we present an issue, as this is, on 'African Media Debates', we dare not stay in the realm of the abstract. We can champion the values of a free press, but must stay grounded in the realities of media ownership and political control in Africa. We can disparage self-censorship, but cannot claim we'd do differently if standing in the place of a journalist threatened with imprisonment or worse. We can chastise foreign media for their 'unfair' coverage of the continent, but cannot ignore the major structural obstacles to covering Africa well, or our own part, as local journalists, in its misrepresentation.

At the same time, we journalists covering Africa cannot resign ourselves to the status quo. We cannot continually blame our governments, our bureaucracies, our infrastructures, our resources, the foreigners or each other for mediocre or otherwise inadequate reportage. In this special issue of the *Rhodes Journalism Review*, for the most part, we don't.

The articles published here – authored by more than 40 journalists from 10 African countries – represent an uninhibited challenge to media and journalists across Africa. They are courageous, often confrontational – and rather than running down other members of the profession, most act as a rallying cry for journalists around the continent to 'push the envelope' of what's possible in

reporting Africa and revolutionising many of its newsrooms. The issue is framed by five areas of debate.

In 'Media and Democracy' we look at core concerns: the tensions between freedom of information and state security; the changing legal regime around press freedom, and the loopholes in the laws; questions around ownership and 'democratisation' of the media; covering elections and the democratic process; and the arguable need for a journalists' code of ethics. A recurring theme summons journalists to handle their 'freedoms' more responsibly.

'Women and Gender' makes a point that needs to be made again and again: women account for more than half of Africa's population, but are seriously underrepresented in the media, both in production and in the product. These articles not only document some of the 'sins of omission' and unhelpful coverage; they also suggest ways to better cover these issues, among them violence against women and traditional practices such as female circumcision.

Conflict is all too common in Africa, much of it deadly. 'Reporting Conflict' looks at the constraints we face in covering conflict here, but also offers new 'repertoires' for covering conflict more constructively. The question of intervening as a journalist in conflict is a central one. Other articles deal with the trauma that many journalists witness and experience in their reportage – and how to cope.

Africans are generally dissatisfied with the way the international media represents Africa around the world, and back to them. In 'Representing Africa' we look at some of the sources of this dissatisfaction, and some of the reasons for this particular production of images. We also consider how we do (and could) represent Africa to ourselves.

The Internet is upon us, like it or not. 'Africa in the 21st Century' looks at the current use and potential impact of the Internet

and other aspects of globalisation in Africa. Is such technology a 'Western imperialist threat' or a critical catalyst to launch us into the new millennium?

It means a lot to us at the Media Peace Centre in Cape Town to be co-publishing this special edition of *Review* with the Rhodes Journalism Department. For more than a decade we have been developing different approaches to covering conflict, drawing largely from the conflict resolution field. One of our current projects, 'Strengthening African Media', which runs workshops around the continent to improve coverage in particular contexts, will greatly profit from the learnings offered in these debates. We are also busy with a book on covering conflict, and hope to engage many of you – readers and contributors – in that endeavour.

This publication represents a remarkable collective effort. These voices from around the continent speak to the tenacity and thoughtfulness that many African journalists bring to their work. We have much to contend with in terms of political and material obstacles, and some much more than others, but Africa is also an opportunity. A continent in flux, it is a place to rethink our journalistic paradigms and approaches – to break new ground in reporting conflict, in restorying and reimagining Africa and in further redistributing access and power in its media.

– Melissa Baumann, Guest Editor
Cape Town

MELISSA BAUMANN is Co-Director of the Media Peace Centre. A journalist for more than 25 years, she has covered conflict in southern Africa, the Middle East and the United States. Baumann is currently working on a book on covering conflict and developing a documentary series on conflict resolution around the world. Email: melissabaumann@hotmail.com

Letters to Come

THE LAST EDITION of *Review* sparked some strong reaction. In addition to the *Sunday Times'* anger with our story on their coverage of gay issues (which they have declined to debate further with us), we had letters from Sam Kiley, *The Times'* African Foreign Correspondent, and Lizeka Mda of *The Star*.

Both letters are long and deal in detail with points raised by Charlene Smith and Ferial Haffajee in their stories. Because of the focused nature of this edition of *Review* (which is a collaboration with the Media Peace Centre) we will carry the letters in the next edition with a response.

Anthea Garman,
Editor

Cover Photo, Cover Art



JUDA NGWENYA of Reuters, Johannesburg, took an engaging photo of street traffic in Ougadougou, Burkina Faso. But for *Review's* purposes, we needed a 'media' aspect for the cover of this issue. Enter Geoff Grundlingh of the South African Centre for Photography, University of Cape Town. Geoff brought in the televisions with the face of the ubiquitous 'Big Brother' dictatorial politician on the screen – representing 'the powers-that-be' which all media in Africa must confront. We'd like to think that this doesn't count as 'digital manipulation' (see Angie Lazaro's article, p. 59) – we're coming clean about our 'embellishments'. Thanks to Juda, Geoff and graphic artist Tania Bester for a joint production.

Building African Partnerships

A CORE AIM of the Media Peace Centre and Rhodes Journalism Department's Africa media projects is to strengthen media throughout the continent and build lasting partnerships. Media is a critical force for change – for development, for democratisation, for building civil society. By drawing in programme makers, media workers and journalists from around Africa we aim to support a more open, assertive and constructive media.

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P.O. Box 23744, Claremont, 7735, Cape Town, South Africa

