

THE INTERPRETATION OF CONFLICT CAN JOURNALISTS GO FURTHER?

THE CASE FOR LINKING THE TEACHING AND TRAINING OF JOURNALISTS TO CONSTRUCTING A PEACE-BUILDING ROLE IN THE WORLD

by Fackson Banda

Since the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, in the wake of the bombings of the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001, there has been even greater interest in understanding the role of the media in constructing interpretations of conflict. Although his analysis was concerned with the Euro-American context, the questions posed by Hamelink (2003: xxiii) are relevant to the African situation:

How did opinion-leading news media in the countries that initiated and supported the invasion assist the justification of the attack?

How can one explain media connivance with partisan propaganda and persuasion? (Here, one could just as easily ask why Rwanda's Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) connived with radical Hutus to broadcast hatred against Tutsis, moderate Hutus, Belgians and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda?)

Will media coverage be different during the next international armed conflict?

As Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (2002: 2) put it, 9/11 represented a period of "trauma" for journalism in the Western world, calling upon journalists to "assume a far broader range of tasks, none more important than contributing to the reconfiguration of identities, both individual and collective, that have been temporarily shattered".

Africa had already been brought face to face with media "trauma", largely because of the genocide in Rwanda. Referring to what she calls "a traumatised media industry", Marie-Soleil Fréré, in her book *The Media and Conflicts in Central Africa* (2007), makes the point that: "... the media constitute a two-edged sword. They can be the instruments of both destructive and constructive strategies, especially in societies undergoing change, destabilised by conflict, or in the throes of political stabilisation."

History provides us with a multitude of examples that show the ability of journalists, from behind the shelter of their microphones or pens, to incite hatred, provoke violent mass movements, voluntarily manipulate information in the service of war-mongering strategies, and, more or less consciously or perversely, create the roots of deep divisions within society.

It has thus become important to rethink the way the media's roles are defined in view of the pressing issue of conflict prevention and peace building. There is now an assumption that the media are critical to strategies aimed at conflict prevention and peace building. This assumption has thrown up a plethora of interpretation and intervention approaches to the role of the media, such as "peace journalism", "conflict-sensitive journalism", "proactive journalism" and "mediation journalism" (Fréré, 2007: 5; Loewenberg and Bonde, 2007).

The question that emerges is thus: Can or even must the journalist go further, by directing his or her professional practice toward supporting peace initiatives? If so, does such a commitment mean that the journalist

has renounced his or her role as neutral and impartial informer?

The view of a "committed" or "morally courageous" journalist demands extrication from the doctrine of objectivity that has generally defined the practice of Euro-American journalism. It is here that African journalism education requires a critical rethink of its epistemic and ontological foundations which, in the first place, are fundamentally inherited from the colonial past, and which continue to be influenced by Western debates about what constitutes good journalism. At the same time, African journalism education must address the double trauma the practice of journalism is suffering from by virtue of the public expectations of post-Rwanda genocide and post-September 11.

Although this is rarely acknowledged, 9/11 has had a profound effect on the context within which African journalism operates. For example, Uganda, following the US's enactment of the Patriot Act, has enacted its own Anti-Terrorism Act, whose maximum penalty for journalists found guilty of "terrorism" is death. But whereas national security is a valid concern, the state has often used it as a cover for stifling freedom of expression. The same is true of Zambia which recently enacted the Anti-Terror Act of 2007. These laws are a reflection of the general legislative trend in most Western countries which waged war against Afghanistan and Iraq. This is a subtle way through which Western legislative hegemony is perpetuated in the postcolonies. The only difference here is that such legislation plays into the hands of ruling elites across Africa who are only too willing to muzzle the press.

African journalism education is dependent upon the libertarian epistemic orientation, which works against the very human impulse towards being a committed or morally courageous journalist in this age of international terrorism. But, despite its western-dependency, African journalism is characterised by a dissociative tendency. And such a postcolonial impulse provides fertile ground for a critical rethinking of African journalism education, so that it can live up to the tenets of committed and morally courageous journalism.

The Western-dependency of African journalism education

The continuing dependency of African education on western systems of philosophy, and I use the word "philosophy" in its generic sense of knowledge, is uncontested, largely because of the imposition of colonialism and its postcolonial legacy.

One of the "instrumentalities" used by the imperial nations to "civilise" the natives was education. Its cultural foundations were those of the imperial nations, uprooting the natives from their own histories, epistemologies and ontologies. African journalism education reflects, in almost every conceivable way, Western forms of journalism training and education.

In the study *Contextualising journalism education and training in Southern Africa* by Banda, Beukes-Amiss, Bosch, Mano, McLean and Steenveld (2007), it is clear that African journalism training and education continues to look to

the West for its legitimisation. African media trainers and educators have few or no resources to generate indigenised knowledge. Whenever such knowledge is produced, it has to be legitimised by Western institutions through funding, peer review, and other validation processes. While there is a case to be made about the globality of knowledge production, distribution and consumption, Africa does not seem to have attained the levels of economic self-sufficiency that are needed to assert its own epistemic and ontological independence and identity.

Largely as a result of the paucity of theoretical knowledge about journalism and media, most training and education institutions in Africa have tended to emphasise the practical components of their curricula. What little theory is taught is Western-oriented, usually uncritically packaged together with the journalistic skills imparted. This paucity of African theorising about journalism and media has implications for the kinds of journalists produced to deal with the complex, postcolonial continent that Africa is. Questions of electoral democracy, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, race, etc – are so complex that their potential to cause conflict cannot be underestimated. The very invocation of the slogan "global terrorism" assumes so many meanings that it requires a resurgence of the potential agency and creativity of journalists as committed and morally courageous human beings who have a sophisticated understanding of local and global issues.

Although journalism education in Africa does not seem to have caught onto the need to teach the subject differently, it is evident that the practice of journalism is itself rediscovering journalistic agency. Now, this agency can be creatively tapped into by African journalism training. After all, "it is no use encouraging journalism students to collect interesting theories as if they were geological or biological specimens, by way of a hobby. The responsibility is to give them tools to apply a critical self-awareness to *their own journalism* (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005: 228). To understand *their own journalism*, I turn to how African journalists seem to dissociate themselves from Western reportage of international conflict.

The dissociative impulse of African journalism

Emmanuel C. ALozie's analysis of the African online newspapers in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, demonstrates that the newspapers assumed an anti-war theme and orientation in the coverage of the political rhetoric that led to the US-UK invasion of Iraq. This critical trend was also evident in the privately-owned e.tv's broadcasts of the war. The state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was ambivalent in its reportage of the conflict (Buchinger, Wasserman and De Beer, 2004: 218). While the "minds" of African journalism educators seem captive to the West, the "hands" of African journalists seem to be moulding a revolt. It is time for journalism education to move at the same pace as journalistic practice.

I would like to suggest that African journalism education is now better placed to redefine itself than ever before. It has the raw materials to engage in a deconstruction of Western libertarian journalism and construct a more responsive journalism that resembles the realities of the African context. The revulsion against "embedded journalism" as a form of "tribalisation" (Tehrani, 2002) provides fertile ground for this. Let me suggest that such a reconstruction must take into account two factors, a deconstructive questioning of the Western epistemic and existential underpinning of journalism; and a reconstructive synthesis of critical forms of Western journalism and Afrocentric forms of journalism.

Towards a critical journalism education for Africa

The starting point of any effort at deconstructing the Western epistemic straitjacket African journalism education finds itself in is the epistemological-ontological debate about the fundamental philosophic and cultural issue of an individual's relationship to society. Stark (2001: 145) captures the issue: "Is the individual a product

of society, or is society the product of the individual? Who decides what is right or wrong? What ought to be the values and obligations of journalists? Only when basic and bold questions are raised will we begin to understand what constitutes a moral society and develop a coherent expectation as to what represents appropriate ethical journalistic performance. Such concepts as communitarianism ..., discourse ethics ... minority voices in society (eg indigenous peoples, immigrants and women) may seem far removed from daily journalism, but the need to understand these better has potentially important consequences for journalism and the pursuit of democratic principles.”

If these questions are being posed of journalism within the Western academe, it is high time African journalism educators and trainers started asking them. Journalism education in Africa must contend with defining a new academic identity for itself, extricating itself from dependency on Western-oriented models of journalism education and training. A less instrumentalist approach, and a more critical-paradigmatic approach towards journalism education (Hochheimer, 2001) is needed.

The idea of Western journalistic agency is more effectively framed as journalistic autonomy. Journalistic autonomy can be understood in the expanded sense of *personal* and *institutional* freedom to practise journalism. In this way, it shifts responsibility to both individual journalists and media-institutional executives for decision-making about peace reporting as a possible genre that they could adopt. This kind of freedom can easily be reconceptualised within the context of African journalism. Hochheimer (2001: 110-111), reflecting on African journalism in particular, stretches this point in his conceptualisation of “journalism of meaning”. According to him, such an approach would embed journalism curricula within the students’ own historical, cultural and social experiences. The latter point agrees with Ali Mazrui’s concern that Western-based curricula, based on rationalist-scientific detachment, tend to uproot African students from their history and culture, making it difficult for them to engage in reflexivity and critique their own governments from the vantage point of engaged and constructive citizenry (in Murphy and Scotton, 1987: 18-20).

A second point to make is that African journalism education must be explicitly linked to the philosophical foundations of peace education. Page (2004: 5) suggests that peace education is underpinned by five ethical orientations:

Virtue ethics: an emphasis on the importance of the development of character.

Consequentialist ethics: that what we teach and how we teach have an important effect in forming the sort of society in which we live.

Aesthetic ethics: judgements as to what is beautiful and desirable. As such, if we believe that peace, that is harmonious and co-operative relations between individuals and societies, is beautiful – a valuable – thing in itself, then we should not be ashamed about having it as a stated objective within the curriculum.

Conservative political ethics: This approach is averse to violent social change and emphasises a strong and stable nation-state, both of which are critical to the notion of peace education.

The ethics of care: This approach is based on establishing and nurturing supportive relationships, rather than just insisting on rights and duties, as a way of promoting peace.

I would add to this list the *ethics of ubuntu*. The idea comes from the maxim “umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu”, which is translated to mean that “a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them” (Ramose, 2002: 231).

In this way, African journalism education would need to equip students with the existential and constructivist insights as to why journalistic autonomy should be directed towards peace-building. However, theorists would need to ground any reform “in an understanding of the actual working conditions and belief systems of journalists. But such a theoretical reformulation would need to contemplate three interrelated distinctions about

news production: journalism and the news media industry; autonomy versus objectivity; and autonomy as a resource for, or a barrier to, civic activation” (McDevitt, 2003: 161).

A reconceptualised view of journalistic autonomy as moral independence is therefore not necessarily in conflict with peace keeping, particularly given a situation whereby media are implicated in the moral decadence of profiteering, elitism, politicking, parochialism, and so on. Autonomy becomes that liberating force which propels the journalist to reflect upon his/her practices and disengage from the institutional and societal strictures of news reporting. It is emancipatory. It is human, humanising, and humane.

I can now confront the question posed by Fréré at the beginning of this article: Can or even must the journalist go further, by directing his or her professional practice toward supporting peace initiatives? If so, does such a commitment mean that the journalist has renounced his or her role as neutral and impartial informer? (Fréré, 2007: 5). Journalists, even if they proclaim a journalism of attachment, should not recant the discipline of verification. But, to pose the question differently: Can journalists be biased, as implied by peace journalism? I would like to answer the question guardedly. Firstly, the media *are* always biased in one way or another. The bias can be, or is a combination of all of the following:

Personal, when the journalist, wittingly and unwittingly, includes some story ideas and news sources and excludes others;

Institutional, when the institutional practices and culture enable or disable the journalist;

Systemic, when the extant media practices and codes of conduct influence journalistic practice; and

Societal, when the prevailing political, commercial and other societal pressures buffet the media practices (cf. Tehranian, 2002: 74-76).

Bias can entail a consciously-made decision to amplify the voices of the poor. It might involve a moral decision to counter messages of racial, ethnic or other forms of hatred. In my estimation, any such counter messages constitute *positive* bias. By implication, the media must not be biased against the poor, the hurting, the weak, the marginalised, the politically disenfranchised, and so on. But we know that the structured nature of the media, in times of conflict, results in all forms of marginalisation.

Much of what we do lies in the extent to which we are prepared to deconstruct what we know journalism to be. This extends to the classroom, to the ways in which journalism is theorised and taught. The normative nature of the media opens up avenues for negotiating what the media *ought to do* to deepen the democratic experience of both developed and developing countries. Given the normativity of media roles, it is possible to conceive of the place of peace journalism in the newsroom.

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