African Journalism: Playing an African Chord in a Cacophony, a Continental Dive through a Ugandan Path

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Abstract

This paper considers as its point of departure, the pressing need to critically interrogate the true meaning of African Journalism in the ever changing world. The tenets of "an African blend of Journalism" are brought to the forefront in a pool that is filled with a diversity of journalistic forms (cacophony) that have somewhat usurped the once considered African ways of communication. Whilst Africa has for so long been considered as a tabula rasa, research in this paper points deep into the roots of journalism in Africa and how it fairs in this changing climate.

Keywords: African journalism; Journalism; Uganda

Introduction

McQuail [1] summarizes five basic media functions namely; a) to inform about events, conditions and relationship to facilitate progress; b) to provide correlation by interpreting and commenting on information and events; c) to encourage continuity of existing culture and common values; d) to entertain by providing amusement and to entertain by providing amusement and relaxation and lastly; e) to mobilize support for social objectivies (p. 97).

It is from McQuail's argument that this paper measures the true essence of journalism, arguing for that 'lost glory' of TRUE African journalism in today's cosmopolitan world. 'What is Journalism?' It's this pertinent question that we so often neglect and forget in media activities today and ultimately allow other forces set agenda and drive journalism. Haas and Steiner [2] thus stress that Journalism neutrality is very vital as Journalists are seen as responsible members of the community with a full stake in public life (p. 31).

Drawing a sharp distinction between an African type of journalism and a western-centric form is an argument that has long existed in scholarly circles, with a section pushing that journalistic conventions, routines and practices. However, this should not obstruct the fact that there was already an established African form of journalism from the word go.

Journalists in Africa have continued to remain oblivious of the fact that they play their trade under a neo-colonialism media chain setting, steered by western centrism. A chain that is cultivated by the west (including the UK and Asia), and sold in Africa in order to project the cultivator's views.

Nyamnjoh [3] terms this as a 'Barbie doll democracy' that has in turn led African journalists being considered as liabilities than assets to the very Africans they speak to. Imagine having a Hollywood Barbie doll, you fit it with different color clothes and shoes in order for the doll to appeal to your liking. The crack in this action plan however, is that Africa is too a big and diverse to fix up like a Barbie.

Sure, many African journalists have been cornered into this though some have risen above the horizon. Consider the celebrated Ghanaian investigative journalist, AnasAremayewAnas who has continued to center his practice on Afro-centric values and problems. From reporting corruption in the judicial system, to going after the more deeply rooted African issues like Child sacrifices that still exist in the continent.

Through the Years

Under no illusion should one think that journalism and communication in Africa was started with the coming of colonialists. The practice long existed in Africa as backed by articles that this paper banks on. Though the notions of pre-colonial journalism may sound more farfetched than academic, the African Oral Tradition was endorsed with a strong system of communication.

Journalism took a form of oral discourse using communication norms informed by the oral tradition and folk culture with communal story tellers; musicians, poets and dancers playing the role of the modern journalists [4]. The oral tradition pitted Africa as a village square filled with a variety of customs, all intertwined into one.

Take an African village setting for example, any forms of relationship and interactions between any two parties can only be achieved after acknowledgement of the other's roots and ancestral heritage. The aspect of origin tracing served as a base of communication in the oral tradition thus the question of 'who are you?' is considered meaningless without the additional query of 'Of where and of whom are you born?' This projects and correlates with the African worldview of "Ubuntu" which is an ancient African ethic and cultural mindset that tries to capture the essence of what is to be human [4].

Eze's study [5] summarized the Ubuntu philosophy as:

'A person is a person through other people', which strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of another in his or her uniqueness and difference.

From an epistemological perspective, belonging and Solidarity are well embedded in the Ubuntu philosophy. "I am human because I belong, I participate, I share" [6]. Ubuntuism thus represents very intimate virtues of group, compassion, sharing and forgiveness, values that are deeply entrenched in the African setting (p. 341).

It is from the oral traditional form of communication that reality was constructed as presented by the story tellers and village historians, through whom people understood and used stories to recount the genealogies of people to tell their struggles, recount stories of Gods and impart moral lessons [7].

Enter Colonialism

Christian Missionaries pioneered newspapers in Uganda at the end of the 19th century, mainly for the purposes of evangelism. The first newspaper is believed to have been a church newsletter ran by Rev. A.B. Crabtree who was then working in Eastern Uganda, though there was hardly any information about it. However, the first newspaper on record is the 'Mengo notes' that started publication in 1900 owned by the Church Missionary Society, CMS [8].

The 1900's saw a significant shift in media in Uganda, not just in newspapers but also in broadcast. Radio in Uganda was established in 1953 by the British government with most radio content at the time, relayed directly from the BBC with only a handful of Ugandans employed [9, 10]. The 1970's remain epochal in the transformation of African journalism, a period of political pluralism as the continent experienced a surge of media privatization [11].

Change is always welcome as it more often or so projects modernization and opens up enormous opportunities, but when this change threatens alienation and attempts to extinguish a rooted African tradition, a forensic study is warranted. This paper thus advocates for the single chord that is lost in a cacophonic maze. Shaw [4] observes that the colonial powers introduced a new bureaucratic framework that oriented the African colonies outward towards the metropoles rather than one which fostered integration between and within African communities and people.

Whilst African Journalism centered on cultural values such as community participation and consensus building, Tayeebwa[5] argues that the western centric values put emphasis on ensuring a distance or detachment from the 'other', encouraging stereotypes that have restricted the perception of the African continent to one filled with poverty, political and ethnic strife off barbaric killers.

Understanding Africanity

'Africanity' is a term used synonymously with the projection of Afro-centric values in Journalism. To fully gobble down the term, one needs to find the simple answers to these simple questions:

'What is Africa?', 'Who is African?' and then the more centered question; what is an African story, if there is an 'African story'.

Is being an African, attributed to a birth-rite, identity card or skin color? Can you tell African stories without physically residing in Africa? Take examples of African born and bred journalists who have 'made it big' in western media like ShakaSsali, VicentMakori, Sophie Ikenye, Nancy Kachungira. It's not an understatement to say that these and many others have become the face of Africa in the glamorous western media but this has not derailed the ugly fact that the image of Africa has been continuously associated with problems of conflict, suffering and starvation.

Does one forget his/her roots once at the top? There is an African saying that goes; however tall you might be, you can never be taller than your father". However, this should not in any way imply that some seasoned African journalists that have worked to the betterment of Africa and her image.

Yes! Africa has over the years produced award-winning journalists who have been applauded for reporting African problems and shuttering records. Uganda's Solomon Serwanjja was the 2019 BBC Komla Dumor praised for exposing corruption in the country's health system; Kenya's Dorcus Wangira was handed the prestigious Michael Elliot award for her 'groundbreaking' piece on Female Genital Mutilation and how teen girls are trying to get back on their feet. On both occasions, the winners and nominees were fronted for reporting African stories. However, this raises even more questions. Does a story become an African story simply because it is about Africa? Or it is written by an African? Or because it exposes the problems found in Africa?

Some individuals and communities on the continent and elsewhere might claim Africanity or have it imposed upon them for various personal, collective, historical and political reasons. Nyamnjoh[3] however insists that it is not always straight forward to say which of these claims may be legitimate and why, especially as identity is not only how one sees oneself but also how one is seen and categorized by others.

Africa is endowed at multiple languages and tribes which make the continent unique as different cultures originate from the historic Oral tradition. The language of the varying media

in most of the Sub Sahara is tailored to serve their respective audiences. Looking at the success of a Ugandan Newspaper Bukedde, which not only relays information in an indigenous language-Luganda but also targets the more peasantry and illiterate as opposed to the urban elite. The newspaper has seen significant prominence in the country under its mantra, 'omuntuwawansi' which translates to serving the needs of the 'one' or the person down the chain.

Africanity is more than just reporting African problems and stories. For long, the continent has grappled with being shaped and reshaped (socially produced) by external actors. Parachute journalism has thus worked to the continuous devaluation of Africa's humanity. Journalism is both career and reality thus should never be about Humanity vs Creativity. There is need for a fundamental departure from the 19th century news culture, associated with American and British press to a more community oriented reporting.

The African Image

Franks [12] observes that when Sub-Saharan Africa is covered by the western media, it is uniformly as a tale of disaster and conflict. This is not to insinuate that Africa's image is only negatively portrayed by the western media. The local media has also done its fair share in preserving the 'dull legacy', continuously staying oblivious of the deeming lights through consciously or unconsciously tinting Africa's volatile image.

In a 2005 paper; Africa's Media Democracy and the politics of belonging, Nyamnjoh [13] found out that the media have assumed a partisan, highly politicized militant role where they divide citizens into the righteous and the wicked, depending on their party political leanings, ideologies, regional, cultural and ethnic belonging.

Uganda's Media is a textbook replica of this as journalists have not only become a mouthpiece of the urban elite whilst sidelining the low earners- the 'one' over the 'other'. Take instances of Uganda's two leading newspapers, the New Vision and Daily Monitor; aside from issuing pullouts lauding advertisers and owners, for example the new era (on china) issue in New Vision; newspapers have not only continuously framed news in support of the urban elite but also forgotten their heritage.

This is just a tip of the iceberg as African media has turned into a puppet of the rich and powerful who present as the main sources of income through advertising. Media is used as a lobbying tool for governments, NGOs hence losing the grit of representing the views of the 'one'.

Nevertheless, Journalists are considered urban elite and are constantly under pressure to act as facilitators and manipulators with respect to the state working to lobby foreign agencies and NGO's to provide wealth and livelihood [13]. Notions of objectivity and bridging the divide could not be any further from the truth. Shaw [4] regards this as a top-down approach in the application off the existing western model in Africa where media carries dominant ideas.

Africa is still paying the piper. Being a turbulent and fragile profession, Journalism in Africa cannot afford to act apprehensive on what to and what not to public. Without the funds from investors and advertisers, the practice would be hit a major blow. Journalists on the continent have since turned into 'lapdogs' from 'watchdogs'.

Nyamnjoh [13] thus asserts that African Journalism lacks both the power of self-determination and the power to shape the universal concepts that are 'deaf-and-dumb' to the peculiarities of journalism in and on Africa (p. 3).

Can African journalism operate in isolation? While the jury is still out on that, levels of serious journalism are steadily dropping on the continent as journalists have gone into 'puppet mode', failing to execute their cardinal role, that is, the fourth estate. Refusing to go into certain areas or touching certain things can not define the practice.

The Growing Pains From Within

African journalism continues to face a number of significant challenges. Though journalists have been empowered by international laws and declarations, many governments across the continent have over the years devised new ways to frustrate their fledgling media [11]. Woodringslightly moves from Ogola's findings by asserting that the relationship between media freedom and government behavior differs, depending on the level of authoritarianism or democratization.

The pains are dependent on the levels of democratization among the many regimes on the continent. Gambia has some of the harshest laws that frustrate journalists in the land. In 2013, the country's National Assembly passed the information and communication amendment act that historically saw more stringent measures imposed on journalists, targeting online speech, caricature, punishable by a 15-year jail term and or a fine of USD 81000.

Uganda has also fallen prey to this. From the state closure of media agencies, to the torture of journalists in the line of duty, state interference in journalism is blatantly visible. In 2010, local radio station, CBS was closed for allegedly spreading anti-government propaganda. The Daily Monitor newspaper was not spared either in 2013, the doors were closed for more than a week for publishing a letter revealing presidential succession plan of the incumbent YoweriKaguta Museveni. Several journalists have been clobbered by state security operatives for reporting on issues implicating state injustice as a crippled media council in the country watches on.

Moving Forward

Unless drastic measures are untaken to sell Africa in a positive image, the continent will remain painted with a dark shade as the western media has not spared any judgment. Factoring in the COVID19 (Coronavirus) pandemic that ravaged the world, weeks before even the first positive case was registered in Africa, the western media would continuously shift agenda by predicting 'eternal doom' for the continent.

The BBC on 5th March, 2020 ran a story with a lead "Africa is yet to suffer a major outbreak of Coronavirus. But if it did strike the consequences could be catastrophic…" Putting this in context, this was at a time when major powers of USA, China, United Kingdom, Italy and Russia had registered exponential numbers of confirmed cases and deaths.

To overcome the many huddles in African journalism, there is need for grounded reconstruction of journalistic structures straight from institutional training to the newsrooms and field operations. Mtwana and Bird [14] carried out a study in media newsrooms in South Africa aimed at establishing problem areas, and found out that cooperation between different media agency newsrooms has improved the quality of journalism in the country. Ogola and Rodny-Gumede [15] identified significant progress in Kenya after all major news organizations in the country became signatories to the journalism codes of conduct, penned jointly by the Kenya Union of Journalists (KUJ) and the Media council of Kenya.

Drawing from Phillip Lee's submission, people can only come on board and make their views through a public ethos that allows for constant interaction with people at all levels. This paper thus calls for a public sphere model, as attributed to German philosopher Jurgen Herbamas, where conflicting ideas can contend and allow for the revival of the lost glory of solidarity and listening to one another as opposed to the current top-down approach that has permeated African journalism.

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