

# African Journalism Deformed At Birth – PART II

African society needs journalism. However, journalism has failed to demonstrate relevance to African society. Most honest journalists agree to this failure, albeit by citing the scarcity of financial resources as the main reason depriving them of independence and relevance. I argue that, important as the argument on money is, resources are a consequence rather than the cause of irrelevance. The real cause of irrelevance is the inability of journalism to conceive a practical definition of independence, which has blocked access to resources: relevance brings resources rather than resources bringing relevance. This aimless pursuit of independence represents a structural defect that runs counter to the aims of journalism.

For one thing, it is difficult to differentiate in substance the roles – and methods – of the media from those of the political opposition. This is because the media's understanding of journalism, similar to the politicians' understanding of opposition, is that to be credible they need to be confrontational in predisposition. Any suggestion towards cooperation is frowned upon as compromising independence and the status of credible media or a credible political opposition. This has unwittingly conflated the two societal functions, of journalism and political opposition, and produced a single redundant function. Crucially, the conflation has robbed both of relevance because it has disconnected it from the people whose aspirations they ought to be closely connected to, and the primary objective for both has become their own advancement rather than that of the people's welfare.

A solution can come from how the problem is framed. The media's framing of the problem of independence as constrained

by the lack of financial resources has attracted those with money to its rescue: usually, Western funding agencies whose mission is to promote democracy abroad. If the definition of “independence” had been presented as the problem, these funding agencies would not be attracted to African media because it would be unlikely that the outcome of such introspection would align with their interests. They would likely disagree on what constitutes independence, especially its role in the emergence of a vibrant media industry; similarly, there would likely be disagreement on the nature of independence needed to ensure competitive politics and contestation. However, if cooperation with the government compromises independence, then cooperation with foreign funders ought to compromise independence even more. What’s good for the goose ought to be good for the gander.

It follows that government’s instincts to both the media and the political opposition would be similar. In other words, if the media fashions itself in the replica of the political opposition, the two are one and the same in the eyes of the state. This is a confrontation that only the people can mediate. However, it is this very conception of politics and journalism that has detached the two – by a preoccupation that has no bearing on the people’s welfare – from their would-be defenders and has, in turn, exposed them to unmitigated state violence, as noted above.

The violence gets heightened during moments of crisis because when things get out of hand, the government whose back is against the wall is unlikely to make a distinction that only exists in form rather than in substance. It becomes difficult to distinguish between the politicians threatening to take power and the media that is merely covering events, which is chickens coming home to roost from the conflation of functions alluded to earlier. This is not likely to change until both the political opposition and the media rethink independence in their quest for relevance in African society, until they

conceive a definition that will win the hearts and minds of the people who will shield them from hostility, and earn the respect of the state.

For the African journalist and opposition politician, the question is whether they are prepared to step away from the radicalization of donors that conditions support on public incitement and discord and whether the support that compromises their ability to achieve their strategic aims is needed as a force of social change they are supposed to be and as a means of gaining the respect and recognition of their people.

If a progressive government can understand the usefulness of the Auditor General and empower them to enforce accountability, then such a government would tolerate and support a media industry that has reflected on what independence is and why it requires it.

The shortcuts have not worked out very well, either. Governments that have understood the need to craft a new African journalism have attempted to establish their own media houses. However, rather than take the opportunity to redefine independence and nurture the emergence of a new crop of conscientious African journalists in these media houses, have instead selfishly wasted it, misinterpreting their role by nurturing their mediocrity-reproducing sycophantic instincts with one eye in the journalism profession and the other eyeing political appointments. In other words, they have reproduced the existing problem in African journalism, except that they have done so in the opposite direction.

This is why African media – and opposition politics – is between a rock and a hard place.

**Read the first part here:**  
<https://panafricanreview.rw/africa-the-world/african-journalism-deformed-at-birth/>