

African Journalism Deformed At Birth – PART III

Rwanda's journalism has, time and again, decried the lack of support – usually financial – from the government. Similarly, complaints against government interference in the affairs of the media are often cited. However, it has to be an absurd irony that the media wants to be independent of the very government that it seeks empowerment from.

More absurd is that the media is ready to define such financial support as mere “cooperation” when it is unwilling to cooperate on how media independence should be defined.

It is not out of principle, therefore, that the media in Rwanda rejects cooperation and chooses the path of confrontation that camouflages political opposition as journalism, especially when it comes with a willingness to sacrifice relevance and the resources that come from it.

Consider the recent media coverage of Victoire Ingabire. Ingabire decided to launch a media campaign to “clear the air around all these allegations” regarding harbouring genocide ideology. She is within her right to do this.

However, it is how the media covered her campaign that failed to distinguish whether it was reporting or abetting it. In covering her this way, the media believed itself to be independent.

It didn't take long for the confrontation it had initiated to ensue. The President's Advisor on Media, Ms Yolande Makolo, tweeted in protest: “Appalling that The East African attempts to sanitize Victoire Ingabire, convicted for forming an armed group and minimizing the Genocide. Her political org is part of a terrorist coalition. Best to read for oneself the excellent, inclusive, UN Resolution 74/273,” she said with an

attached link to the document.

Makolo also attached an excerpt from the article underlining the part where Ms Ingabire was quoted in her authority as “a Rwandan political activist.”

Clearly, The East African didn't have to quote the article that Makolo referred to in order to prove cooperation. Neither did it have to rehearse Ingabire's statements in order to prove independence.

In other words, this confrontation is not about independence per se; it is how independence is conceived that undermines what was otherwise a story in the public interest. But the confrontation is unavoidable because Makolo is doing her job: she is correcting a misrepresentation of Ingabire as a “political activist” rather than a convicted criminal.

Moreover, the subject of her conviction has a direct relationship to the matter that was under coverage, meaning that the relevant expertise to this discussion was that of a person who has first-hand experience in the crime – as a criminal – rather than that of a political activist.

In other words, by referring to Ingabire as a political activist on the matter that resulted in her conviction is to imply that she was wrongly imprisoned due to her activism. If referring to Ingabire as a convicted criminal would have compromised the independence of The East African, then implying that she was wrongly imprisoned has to be an accessory to criminality at worst, or a rational decision to join her media campaign, at best.

It is, therefore, neither in the public nor professional interest to give a convicted criminal a media platform without telling the audience about that conviction or the crime that led to it, particularly as it relates to the subject matter.

Only a confrontational conception of independence that is, in

reality, a dereliction of responsibility can explain such an own goal for journalism.

The Chronicles also made itself part of Ingabire's media drive. "Ingabire says, amid laughter, that she doubts the prosecutors read the documents they were presenting in court to incriminate her on the charge of genocide ideology. The dossiers clearly have official government stamps and logos," The Chronicles writes adding, "during her prosecution in 2010 and following years, government prosecutors presented genocide dossiers of her parents as part of efforts to prove she had genocide ideology borne from her family...during the three years of prosecution, from arrest in April 2010, months before the presidential polls, Ingabire was presented with dossiers by Prosecutor General Martin Ngoga which showed her parents were involved in the genocide," the story reads before Ingabire herself is quoted: "These documents from the local government ministry were brought by the Prosecution as part of building the genocide ideology charge against me. I doubt they ever read those documents. If they had, they wouldn't have attached them because they actually exonerated my father."

I know Martin Ngoga and even his critics would never think of him as incompetent. So, I asked him whether Ingabire was really convicted on account of her parents. Here's his answer verbatim:

"Never! Her parents were never part of the case. You can even challenge me. Since the trial is over and the file is a public document The Chronicles would have even had access if they wanted.

The fact that her father could be having different files doesn't arise because she was being accused of the crimes she committed which are not hereditary. There is no prosecution that would be interested in knowing what the parents did. We were not working on the hereditary nature of her crimes.

Apart from the omission of The Chronicles not verifying, it is not even true. The charges against her, like any other criminal charges, were specific to her. We did not need to involve any other family member who had not been her accomplice in her own case. Her known accomplices were prosecuted alongside her and they are all not family members. So, the insinuations that Prosecution sought to include issues of parents in her case are just ridiculous," Ngoga says before delving into criminal procedure.

"Before the actual prosecution starts, the entire case file gets disclosed to the accused and her lawyers. That is a mandatory practice. Pagination is done to ensure no new insertions are made along the way. That means her two lawyers and herself had, and still have, the entire case file. Journalists should have sought to verify that with the Prosecutor's Office. Prosecution files are not kept in ministries, and she has it anyway. She can even share the entire case file. Why refer to MINALOC file when the prosecution file is available. Otherwise, that file is never mentioned in Ingabire trial, and The Chronicles should have verified that."

Although Ngoga sounded convincing, I had to contact the Prosecutor General, Aimable Havugiyaremye, with a request to verify Ngoga's claims. Havugiyaremye directed me to the lawyers who prosecuted Ingabire's case, Bonaventure Ruberwa and Alain Mukurarinda, whom I spoke to on the phone because he was out of the country at the time.

I then contacted Ruberwa who said I could meet him at his office at the National Public Prosecution Authority Headquarters, Kimihurura. Once there, I asked him the same question I had asked both Ngoga and Mukurarinda.

Ruberwa began to search out Ingabire's file in an office cabinet, insisting that it was better to refer to the file for a thorough conversation.

"It's been almost 10 years, I have to look, but I'm sure it's in here," he said while flipping through different files. About 10 minutes into his search he managed to locate the file in question, along with the Supreme Court ruling.

He began to flip through the pages as he read out loud the evidence that was used to convict Ingabire.

"As you can see, I can give you a copy if you want, the crimes of her parents never arose."

I showed Ruberwa the MINALOC document that Ingabire had shown to The Chronicles and asked whether it was in the file. We looked together, and he said, "there are all kinds of information here, and I think that document is here too but I assure you we never used it as evidence in her trial. But there would be nothing unusual that a document on her family background is in here, as well as where she went to school, and the like. When the police are collecting evidence, they collect a lot of information, and it is up to us prosecutors to choose what we need for the purposes of prosecution. We have the final say on evidence," he said shortly before the document surfaced in the section of the file marked, "ingabire ni muntu ki? (who is Ingabire) just like he had predicted.

He then turned to the court ruling that outlined the evidence that was used to reach the conviction. Once again, the ruling doesn't mention Ingabire's parents in its decision to reach a conviction.

"You also won't find it in the High Court Ruling," he assured.

I asked him about the affidavit in which the Prosecution admitted to having "failed to find anyone who saw Ingabire's father involved in the massacre of Tutsi," which was covered in the news as "shocking information."

Ruberwa showed me other affidavits of witnesses in Kibirira commune who said that Ingabire's father was indeed involved in

the killings there, "It is how testimony evidence is collected; prosecution does not rely on just one person," Ruberwa said.

In other words, Ingabire was selective on what affidavits to reveal to, or conceal from, the media. Neither do the affidavits "exonerate" her father, as Ingabire falsely claims. Nor were they "submitted by the prosecution in Ingabire's charge of genocide ideology," which suggests that they were used as evidence to convict her, as reported.

"The same local government dossier confirms Ingabire's father was detained to prevent him from appearing on the list of MPs in 1996. Basically, some of these documents which Prosecutor General Ngoga and his team of prosecutors used in Ingabire's case, were undermining their case against her," These are not Ingabire's words in quotation marks; it is The Chronicles writing as a matter of fact!

After establishing that Ingabire's conviction didn't have a "hereditary" nature, I then perused the information about her parents just to see whether they were "exonerated" as Ingabire claims. Pascal Gakumba, her father, died before he was tried for genocide crimes.

Tereza Dusabe, her mother, was convicted in absentia and sentenced to life imprisonment by Gacaca in 2009.

"I can affirm with absolute certainty that no single mother was killed in that health centre during the time they claim the killing took place. None! All these allegations being peddled are total lies," Ingabire insists.

Yet, again the evidence that was used to convict Ingabire's mother is also a public record at the Prosecutors' Office and prove the opposite of what Ingabire claims. If they don't exonerate her or her mother as she claims and if her 2012 conviction never relied on the "hereditary" nature of her crimes, then Ingabire is simply being manipulative.

But the most cynical aspect was Ingabire's claim that she is defending her reputation because she "recently met young genocide survivors ('abana b'abacikacumu) who were at pains to know what was all about these things said about my parents."

Ingabire's conviction in 2012 is partly due to her claims that there was a double genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and she has embodied herself of the quintessential "activist" of the "unrecognized genocide" and a defender of its "survivors."

It should be obvious, therefore, who the young genocide survivors she says are "at pains" from "those lies [that] must stop today" are: survivors of the "unrecognized" genocide. It's an understatement to qualify this as genocide denial; it is a mockery of genocide survivors. It is the kind of activism that The East African has thrown its weight behind.

The Chronicles can be forgiven for partaking in Ingabire's media campaign because she somehow managed to manipulate them into taking her claims at face value without the due diligence of verification.

However, how is she able to manipulate a seasoned media house like The East African into promoting her views on the very crime she was convicted and sentenced?

If Ingabire didn't believe herself to be in a soft coalition with the media – informed by a warped view of independence – then she would have expected to be pressured into revealing the real reasons she is deciding to come out now; instead, she knew they would readily accept that her "From today" declaration was a result of an epiphany she had had the night before rather than a result of panic that things may be falling apart for her. It was the media's professional responsibility for journalists to interrogate her claim to sudden enlightenment and an inexcusable dereliction that they didn't.

After all, one of the central tenets in journalism is,

“verify, verify, verify”; an old adage that is particular to the field of journalism is, “if someone says it’s raining and another person says it’s dry, it’s not your job to quote them both. Your job is to look out the window and find out which is true.”

Verifying information is the very calling of any self-respecting journalism; however, the journalism at display here aims for tactical victory of “media independence” that comes at a greater strategic cost of dead-end journalism.

Read

PART

I: <https://panafricanreview.rw/africa-the-world/african-journalism-deformed-at-birth/>

PART

II

<https://panafricanreview.rw/africa-the-world/african-journalism-deformed-at-birth-part-ii/>