

African journalism deformed at birth

Journalism, like medicine, the armed forces, or teaching, are considered noble professions. Although nobody chooses to join them in order to be poor, the main reason for choosing any of those fields was never material. Almost everyone who chose that path would say that theirs was a response to a calling, a higher moral purpose for his or her existence. In turn, society would reward those who took these kinds of career paths with respect and recognition. While this status is eroding for journalists globally, it never got a chance to set off in Africa. As a result, African journalism was deformed at birth.

A diagnosis of African media necessarily begins with the inconvenient truth that it was conceived to defend colonization and to counter nationalist ideologies of freedom fighters. For this reason, Africans couldn't value journalism and journalists were unable to transcend this colonial cradle that predisposed them to material considerations as primary motivational tools in what was supposed to be a noble profession whose primary reward was recognition. This compromised the quality of journalism. The passion simply wasn't there.

Consequently, a mercenary culture took over and usurped the nobility of the profession; surprisingly these mercenaries insist that they are entitled to respect. This culture invites the neoliberal argument that wealthy private investors who would pour money in the industry stay away because they fear government reprisal if they fund an independent media. However, this argument assumes that the wealthy donor has no agenda to push. The variant of this argument is that wealthy people should be in leadership because they are less likely to be corrupt. At some point, people were swayed by that argument

but hopefully not anymore.

Similarly, it is argued that in a small economy, like Rwanda, independent media doesn't get advertisements that they need to hire and retain competent journalists. Instead, their competent colleagues are often lured into working for the government as public relations officers, for instance. However, this is an own goal. An admission of incompetence cannot be a strong defence. If one is in journalism and concedes that the competent people have been poached by the government, then the conclusion from that premise is tantamount to self-immolation.

Purposeful independence

The aim of journalism is to protect public interest. This is the primary reason why journalists should be independent of any interest that may compromise the quest to carry out that task. However, the way "independence" is defined can facilitate or hinder the ability of journalists to achieve this objective. The credibility needed to hold leaders accountable emerges from the ability of journalists to get invested and advance what they perceive to be interests held in common by society – the national interest.

Western media prides itself in independence that allows it objectivity. However, they agree on limitations to that independence because they are invested in advancing what they perceive to be in the interest of the countries. In the geostrategic calculations of their countries, they are at the front line. When they are unsure about what those interests are, they accept to sit on a committee with government officials to ensure that they are on the same page and that their journalism will not compromise public interest in the aimless pursuit of unbridled independence. In other words, at issue is not independence per se; it is how independence is defined and pursued.

On 9 June 2020, the BBC published a story titled ["How Coronavirus has fueled China-US rivalry in Africa"](#) which was about a conference call that the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, had "with a small group of African and Africa-based journalists." The virtual meeting was aimed at shaping the thinking of these journalists on their coverage of Africa in a competition where "both China and the US are claiming to be Africa's strongest supporter," wrote Andrew Harding, who says he was one of those reporters in the meeting. I responded to the article raising questions of independence and objectivity, and Harding responded that this was a normal practice, "Er...no. Officials engage with journalists all the time and vice versa. It's part of our job." Mr Harding has the luxury to hold a view that an African journalist has to – or ought to – reflect upon more critically.

[In November 2019, declassified information emerged that the UK had in place a committee of media editors and intelligence where they would agree on what should and should not be published.](#) Members of our media were astonished by this revelation that a senior journalist tweeted in shock, "REVEALED: In UK, there's a D-Notice Committee where intelligence and security apparatus meets with the representatives of the media to decide what to publish or not. Any editor with a security scoop seeks permission from this committee before a story runs. WOW!!". However, none of this seemingly "unprofessional conduct" stopped the UK media from being perceived as "independent." How is it that an independent media can go to those extremes to collaborate with state agencies, and how does this relate to the perception of their relevance to British society? More pointedly, what lessons can our journalists draw from these two examples in order to address the most pressing challenge they face: independence and relevance.

Where the British journalists see complementarity, African journalists see a contradiction: the ability to get invested

in advancing the country's interests while holding leaders accountable. But most importantly, why isn't the kind of "independence" that the British journalists practise in their own country taught to African journalists during capacity-building seminars? And why are expectations that African journalists should pursue the aspirational heavenly journalism that is taught in schools when those who teach them embark on a practical earthly journalism? Isn't it jihadist that African journalists are strapped with detonators and incited into martyrdom whose reward is the seven virgins in heaven?

African journalists are right when they say that the media is essential to the functioning of any democracy and that governments should give them the space to carry out this function. But journalism will become an essential service in Africa only when it can conceive independence in meaningful ways as their Western counterparts do. This way, they will be able to agitate for this special status on the substance of merit and relevance rather than on the form of the "journalist" label. This is how to win relevance, respect and protection from the abusive governments. This failure to conceive independence in meaningful terms explains, in part, why when journalists are violently abused by the incumbent, the ordinary people don't come to their defence. The people don't see any value their brand of journalism brings to society.

African journalism is caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand is a corrupt, inept, and oppressive state that a conscientious journalist ought not to identify with; on the other, is a pull towards the colonial cradle that birthed a compromised journalism: to promote an imperialist agenda that still conceives Africa as suitable for exploitation. However, in between are emerging progressive and pro-people states around which a homegrown conception of media independence ought to be conceived and practiced.

Without this, African journalists will continue to be

mesmerized by the “mature” democracies of the West while ignoring the fact that their own maturity is needed in Africa’s pursuit of democracy. For the West, maturity is demonstrated by their ability to find independence within the existing space rather than seek to define independence outside it. Clearly, maturity and relevance are synonyms in this regard. For Africa, the aspiration of becoming a replica against an original that is pursuing homegrown independence is a dead end. This is a bitter pill to swallow: there are no universal boundaries for independence for relevant media. However, the borders of independence for irrelevant media are boundless. If there’s anything for African media to learn from their Western counterparts, it is how to pursue earthly journalism while the desire for heaven remains.