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# African Communication Research a peer reviewed journal



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Sciences and Communications at St. Augustine  
University of Tanzania, Mwanza, Tanzania  
for communication researchers of Africa.**

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<b>Newsroom Ethics in Africa: Quest for a Normative Framework</b> Bernadin F. Mfumbusa, St Augustine University of Tanzania	139
<b>The shaping of news values of young journalists in Kenya</b> Stephen Ogongo Ongong'a, Interdisciplinary Centre for Social Communication (CICS) at the Gregorian University in Rome, Italy; and Robert A. White, St Augustine University of Tanzania	159
<b>Self-censorship among news journalists in the Ethiopian state media</b> Terje S. Skjerdal, Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication, Kristiansand, Norway/ Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.	185
<b>Establishing Journalistic Standards in the Ghanaian Press</b> By Africanus Diedong, (FIDS) of the University for Development Studies, Wa Campus in northwest Ghana.	207
<b>Ineffective working groups' communication as a groupthink outcome: The effects of cohesiveness.</b> Jeremire M. Araka, St Augustine University of Tanzania	233
<b>Bibliography</b>	252
<b>Book reviews</b>	259
<b>Announcements</b>	266



# Newsroom Ethics in Africa: Quest for a Normative Framework

By Bernadin F. Mfumbusa

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## Abstract

Newsroom studies in Africa are peppered with tales of unethical reporting practices, conflict of interest, and corruption. These problems have undermined the credibility of the media and limited editorial autonomy. While some scholars call for a return to African ethical roots as a panacea; others hanker for greater professionalism in the African media industry. The two approaches underscore the Afro-centric values versus Eurocentric values debate that has characterized much of the postcolonial discourses. This study offers an overview of the state of newsroom studies since the mid-1990s when Francis Kasoma identified two needs in Africa, namely, for journalism ethics and for African ethics (Afri-ethics). Since then there has been a media ethics boom marked by scholarly articles, workshops and conferences. Yet a chasm between theory emphasizing objectivity, balance, truthfulness etc and practice marked by corruption and sensationalism persists.

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**Key words:** media performance, communitarian ethics, African ethics, professionalism, normative ethics

## Introduction

To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of media ethics scholarship 1977, *The Journal of Communication*, published an insightful article by Clifford G. Christians entitled, *Fifty Years of Scholarship in Media Ethics*. The article chronicled developments since 1924 when N.A Crawford's book, *The Ethics of Journalism*, appeared, which is widely considered as the pioneering contribution to media ethics studies. In Africa in 1977, media ethics as an academic discipline was largely a *terra incognita* in Africa. The development journalism paradigm, which was "committed, agitational, and political",

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encouraged a collectivist ideology characterised by civic advocacy (Abgaje, 1993, p. 459, cited in Musa & Domatob 2007, p. 323). Moreover, the media were part of what Bourgault (1995) called the African status quo, controlled and propagated by the single party systems, greatly undermining the emergence of a credible professional ethos. For example, the Tanzanian founding president, Julius Nyerere, argued at the time that African countries could not afford the luxury of a muckraking, adversarial press (Musa & Domatob, 2007, p. 324). Kasoma's (1994;1995) twin proposals for journalism ethics in Africa and for African ethics (*Afri-ethics*) are thus a broad invitation to go beyond the development journalism paradigm which puts emphasis on advocacy and the support of state policies. The proposals constitute a call for an ethical renaissance among African journalists. While few would question the need for such a renaissance, there is no consensus on the foundational norms and values needed to underpin it.

Since the advent of the print media in the eighteenth century, the vision of ethical journalism has been informed by an ideology of objectivity as well as norms such as independence and truth. In the liberal democratic framework, the role of the media has been traditionally conceived in terms of serving the public interest. However, the reality is much more complex. Media professionals in Africa operate in a context marked by "the politics and culture of the larger society that are essentially dishonest and corrupt" (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 86, cited in Ndangam 2006). Corruption has suffused the African media systems, assuming an air of weird respectability justified on the grounds of economic hardship. *Gombo* in Cameroon (Ndangam 2006), *mshiko* in Tanzania (Mfumbusa 2006), and "brown envelope" in Kenya are metaphors for kickbacks, tips, and freebees, now part of the quotidian journalistic parlance. The African media reality chronicled in numerous articles over the last two decades shows a gap between journalists' lip allegiance to values of objectivity and the practice characterised by conflict of interest. Merrill (2004) has suggested that the problem lies with "freedom-based, personal ethics" which is not working and called for "a more institutionalised community-based ethics." Afro-centricism - emphasising communitarian ideals and values (Traber ,1989; Kasoma, 1996; Moemeka, 1998; Christians, 2004; Igboanusi, 2006) offers one possibility of such a community-based ethics.

### Media Performance in Africa

Communication scholars concur that the performance of the African neo-liberal media leaves a lot to be desired. Recurrent themes in academic literature include lack of professionalism, preoccupation with poor reporting practices, corruption, and constraints on editorial autonomy (Ndangam, 2006; Kasoma, 2000, 1996; Grosswiler, 1997; Nyamnjoh, 1999; Ansah, 1996; Karikari, 1996; Traber, 1989). Some trace the deficiencies in media performance to “normative failure” which has been defined as an inability to evolve an adequate normative order out of the confluence between the African and Western values (Menkiti, 2001, p. 134). While African values are communitarian putting the society interests before those of individuals, western values are rooted in the concept of personal freedom anchored on what Bertrand (1993) has called “jungle individualism”.

The arrival of the print media technology in Africa presaged a break with the past. However, the “rupture”, as Ogbondah notes (2002, p. 68), has not been complete, resulting in the traditional values and norms interfering with what Mytton (1983:37) has called the demands of mediated communication. Sometimes the ethical dilemmas facing the African journalists are traceable to a conflict of loyalties between the prescribed standards of the western professional journalistic ethos (values of objectivity, conflict as news, competition, and sensationalism) and the prevailing cultural norms of face-saving, deferring to authority, and protecting the interests of the community (Musa & Domatob, 2007, p. 323).

As a result attitudinal studies have consistently shown a certain duality of views towards newsroom ethical conduct in Africa. In Uganda, Mwesigye (2004), found that, in addition to the “popular mobiliser” role of “giving the ordinary people voice and setting the political agenda”, journalists “highly value the journalistic functions of information, analysis, and investigation of official claims”. Similarly, Ramaprasad’s (2001) study concluded that journalists in Tanzania have positive views of the so-called western values of objectivity, balance, and detachment, while, at the same time, they consider the media as a means to further national development goals, peace, and unity.

A number of views account for the dismal state of media performance in Africa. One school of thought sees the abandonment of

African traditional norms and values as the source of functional and credibility problems afflicting the media (Kasoma, 1995; Traber, 1989; Okigbo, 1989). Hence, a return to the African ethical roots is touted as a solution to media performance problems. According to Moemeka (1998) communication in Africa has communal dimensions characterised by a number of values including religion as a way of life, respect for elders, supremacy of the community, and the usefulness of the individual. However, the Afro-centric thinkers have largely failed to show how such values can be enlisted to improve media performance. One of the main criticisms of the Afro-centric school comes from Tomaselli (2003) who noted a tendency to deify African values.

A second school of thought suggests that Africa's failure to fully embrace European values is at the heart of the African media performance problems. Since technology evolves in a value context, according to this view, adopting media technology as the African countries have done, without internalising the attendant western values limits its usefulness (Menkiti 2001). And the stance towards European values remains largely ambivalent. According to Ndagam (2006), the journalism fraternity pays lip-service to objectivity and autonomy while remaining committed to corrupt practices. What drives newsroom operations are norms and values based on what Hyden (2006, p. 73) refers to as "the economy of affection", namely, "investing in reciprocal relations with other individuals as a means of achieving seemingly impossible goals". Who you know is more important than what you know in the context of the economy of affection. Agency is also said to be dictated by 'the politics of belonging', which in Africa is often ethnic (Nyamnjoh, 2005). The politics of belonging encourages favouritism rather than meritocracy in parceling out jobs and assignments in the media industry undermining quality and editorial autonomy in the process.

A third school of thought points to the existence of gaps in journalism training as a major problem in media performance. Some studies show that scant attention is paid to professional norms in the existing curricula and often media ethics is taught as part of media law thus limiting its impact (Ndumbaro, 2008). Some have proposed that media ethics training go beyond codes of ethics to explore meta-ethical issues underlying the African media performance. This view echoes

Christians' (2004) call for a need to reflect on the fundamental norms on which "our codes of ethics and regulation are founded."

A fourth school of thought sees true media professionalism as essential to improve media performance. Merrill (2004) has said:

The only salvation... is to professionalise mass communication—to make journalism into a true profession. This would accomplish several things, all to the good: (1) it would give journalists considerable freedom *within their profession*; (2) it would assure responsible journalism by assuring *peer-pressure and self-control*; and (3) it would create a body of journalists with similar ethical standards and collegial pride in public service and serious journalism.

At the moment journalism remains a pseudo-profession devoid of enforced codes of ethics and entry benchmarks. So far the tendency has been to inculcate liberal values and norms through conferences, workshops and symposia without establishing any enforcement mechanisms. However, some critics have noted that the dominant liberal-democratic framework being imposed on Africa is not universally applicable and is not working (Wasserman, 2006).

### **Post-Colonial and Neo-Liberal Discourses**

To understand the contemporary African mediascape one must interrogate its colonial antecedents in order to appreciate what Eribo & Jong-Ebot (1987, p. x) believe are 'habits of mind' picked up during the colonial decades. Many current journalistic practices and values are readily traceable to the colonial era. The British, the French and the Portuguese adopted different media philosophies in Africa resulting in disparate media systems. The French discouraged the establishment of an indigenous African press in the colonies. Meanwhile, the press developed differently in the Anglophone West, East and Southern Africa (Mytton, 1983). In West Africa the media experienced limited white settlers' influence and was instrumental in mobilising people for political independence. According to Golding (1979, p. 301), "Nigerian journalism was born of anti-colonial protest, baptised in the flood of nationalist propaganda, and matured in party politics" (Cited in Musa & Domatob, 2007, p. 317). This is true of East Africa as well where the nationalist press evinced a certain militancy (Scotton, 1975; Scotton, 1978).

Scholars make a distinction between the early African press, which thrived in the 1930s and 1940s, and the nationalist press, which had an overt political agenda in the 1950s. The colonial press in East Africa was divided along racial and sectarian lines. The white settler press served the needs of the minority white community. It was pro-government and enjoyed a measure of autonomy. The African press was apparently anti-establishment, and regulatory instruments including bond requirements, education benchmarks for would-be publishers, as well as criminal sedition laws, were used to control and contain it (Sturmer, 1998; Konde, 1984). The main concern of the colonial authorities was whether the media would undermine the colonial rule rather than whether they would corrupt public morals. Ironically, statutory controls in the form of secrecy ordinances, sedition provisions and detention laws outlasted the colonial dispensation. The independence-era African rulers retained the same draconian legal tricks to control opinion. Chris Ogbondah (2002) has noted of Zimbabwe:

The government, which came to power in 1980 when the country established majority rule, took over the same state of emergency legislation that had been introduced during the tenure of Prime Minister Ian Smith's Rhodesian government to crush African nationalism. Like Ian Smith had done from 1965 to 1980, Robert Mugabe renewed the state of emergency every six months in order to restrict opposition viewpoints and other forms of criticisms of the state... (pp. 57-58).

Similarly, in Tanzania a Bill of Rights was not incorporated into the Constitution until 1984 under the pretext that it would hamper development efforts by inviting conflicts between the Executive and the Judiciary (Peter, 1997, p. 3). The rest of the Anglophone African countries had similar experiences of limiting individual freedom. As Ogbondah (2002, p. 56) has noted, the media were expected to propagate the views of the ruling establishment or keep quiet. Thus the media performance was dictated by imperatives other than media freedom such as a quest for unity and peace or national development. The dominant post-colonial paradigm - development journalism - encouraged journalists and national leaders to share the common goal of building a progressive and peaceful society (Musa & Domatob, 2007, p. 318). Furthermore, during the 1970s, the African media were influenced by the African humanisms expressed in different political and philosophical movements such as pan-africanism, negritude,

authenticity and *ujamaa* (or African Socialism). The movements encouraged the emergence of an activist media that had an ideological bent such as supporting socialist ideology in Tanzania.<sup>1</sup>

The three post-independence decades (1960s – 1980s) witnessed the African media suffering under a twofold form of control, namely, a draconian legal framework with roots in colonialism that allowed the media little wiggle room (Ogbondah, 2002) and the fact that the media workers were civil servants beholden to the state. As civil servants media workers had to take an oath of secrecy which was inimical to freedom of expression. For example, in Ghana, reporters had to contend with three oaths, namely, oath of allegiance, oath of secrecy and the official oath (Kumado, 2000). These controls impacted negatively on media professionalism, causing the media to attract negative sobriquets such as “muffled drums” (Hachten, 1971), “watchdogs in chains” (Sturmer & Rioba, 2001), and “silent media” (Tegambwege, 1990).

### Media Ethics Boom

Nordenstreng (2002) noted that in recent years there has been a worldwide “media ethics boom”. The boom in Africa has had three manifestations. One, scholars have attempted to articulate an Afro-centric normative vision based on a plea for a return to African ethical roots - defined as a “collective” approach to ethics (Moemeka, 1998; Kasoma, 1995; Okigbo, 1989). Ethnicity, sanctity of authority, and community are important dimensions of the African ethical landscape.

Two, African media scholars grapple with dwindling media credibility resulting from internal problems such as lack of professionalism, improper client-patron relationship, disseminating unverified news or partisan news, incitement to revolt against public authority, and libel (Kasoma, 2000; Nyamnjoh, 1999; Ansah, 1996; Senghor, 1996). These problems appear to have suffused most of the sub-Saharan Africa media systems as Ndagam (2006) has shown.

Three, scholars have explored the workings of the neo-liberal African media in a comparative framework (Mwesigye, 2004; Ramaprasad, 2001; Kunzick, 1999). The studies have shown that there are some elements peculiar to the African media systems like deference to authority as well as universal values like truth telling, accuracy and objectivity.

### African Media Ethics Scholarship

A 1998 UNESCO study noted a scarcity of journalism textbooks produced in Africa. Textbooks on media ethics are especially rare. An annotated bibliography of selected commonly used textbooks in Anglophone Africa compiled by the University of Tampere lists only two titles on ethics: Dayo Duyile's *Journalistic Ethics: A Book on Ethics of Journalism in Africa* (1989) and Francis Kasoma's iconic *Journalism Ethics in Africa* (<http://www.uta.fi/textbooks/angboo.html>, 03/05/2007). Similarly, Walsh's (1996) *The Media in Africa and Africa in the Media: An Annotated Bibliography*, has registered few entries on media ethics. Things are changing, however. A number of doctoral dissertations have addressed aspects of newsroom ethics over the last few years. These include studies on codes of ethics in Tanzania (Mfumbusa, 2006); on practicing journalism in a neo-liberal democratic culture in Ghana (Diedong, 2006) and on factors that influence the news values and practices of new/young journalists in Kenya (Ongongo, 2007).

Meanwhile, several books have emanated from South Africa where a vigorous media ethics debate is sustained by, among other things, an academic journal *Ecquid Novi*. The books include Kruger (2004), which has received critical acclaim as a useful reference book.<sup>2</sup> Others are works by Reteif (2002) and Oosthuizen (2002) focusing on the post-Apartheid era offering insights into legislative and policy framework, providing the basis for normative values under both the apartheid system and the current democratic dispensation.

Elsewhere, Francis Kasoma's 1996 article, "Foundations of African ethics (Afriethics) and the professional practice of journalism: The case for society-centred media morality", set forth a case for society-centred morality. The central thrust in the article is a call for the return to the African ethical roots. A neologism "Afri-ethics" was first used to describe a collective approach to ethics as quintessentially African. According to Kasoma (1996),

The yardstick for good acts is whether or not they serve the community – the whole community consisting of the living and the dead – either as a family, a clan or the tribe (ethnic group). When acts only serve to propagate or satisfy pursuits of individuals, they are not regarded to be as good as those that serve the family, clan or tribe and may be even regarded as bad acts if they are harmful to the family, clan or tribe (p. 98).

The world conjured up by Francis Kasoma may no longer be consistent with African newsroom realities. However, Kasoma's views echo Traber (1989) who said that the African media lacked grounding in the African reality. However, it is difficult to see how a mere return to African ethical roots would improve media performance. Still, scholarly interest in communitarian values has been mounting as testified by Christians (2004) and Merrill (2004) who have called for some form of institutional, community-based ethos as an alternative to the dominant liberal frameworks. Similarly, Moemeka (1998) has identified communitarianism as a foundational dimension of culture and Igboanusi (2006) has proposed the adoption of personalist approach "to overcome autonomous individualism in media practice". Communitarianism posits community as being ontologically prior to persons, hence an emphasis on order and mutuality as foundational principles.

On the descriptive side Karikari's book (1996), *Ethics in journalism: Case studies of practice in West Africa*, offers a survey of cases including Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal. The quality of articles is uneven. While some articles are empirical; others are descriptive. The central theme in the book is an indictment of the state of journalism practice in West Africa. Karikari (1996) observes:

The emergence of media pluralism and the entry into journalism by so many people lacking professional training, in several cases even of people with very low education, is one principal source of the generalised weak professional quality. The range of violations is wide, varying in form and content with many implications for media credibility, growth and expansion of media freedom, and for enhancement of the respectability of the profession. (p. 145)

Since the early 1990s, the African media industry has become a refuge for the unemployed, the academically disadvantaged, and those intent on venting pent-up emotions. Efforts to reverse the situation include Uganda's adoption of a Journalism Statute of 1995 that set benchmarks for entry into the profession. The statute was roundly criticised by both media stakeholders and media watchdogs in the region. Kenya enacted a similar law in 2007. And Tanzania has a bill under discussion since 2006 with similar provisions.

Another important contribution to the African media ethics discourse is Ronning and Kasoma's book (2002), *Media ethics: An introduction and overview*. This book was produced to meet two needs, namely, providing a text outlining key ethical concepts and to provide a training manual for journalists in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region.

Several studies on various aspects of media ethics have come out of Nigeria. These include Ebo's article (1994), "The Ethical Dilemma of the African Journalist: A Nigerian Perspective". His study cites a litany of problems facing the Nigerian journalists. Another valuable survey, though limited to the Nigerian context, is Cornelius B. Pratt's (1990) "Ethics in newspaper editorials: Perceptions of sub-Saharan African journalists". Meanwhile, Sunday (2007, p. 65), has accused the Nigerian media of multiple lapses including what he calls "Afghanistanism", the practice of writing about far-away issues while shying away from tackling the problems at home..

Other books have addressed media ethics issues in a wider scope. Michael Kunzick's book (1999), *Ethics in journalism: A reader on their perception in the Third World*, explored perceptions of ethics in journalism in the Third World. Two African case studies cited were Cameroon and Kenya where a widespread lack of professionalism was acknowledged (Kadhi, 1999; Nyamnjoh, 1999). Another attempt came in 2001 in the form of *A handbook of journalism ethics*. The work produced under the auspices of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) offers fifteen case studies from twelve sub-Saharan Africa countries exploring ethical dilemmas facing journalists in the neo-liberal context. The work is a kaleidoscope of issues and topics related to poor journalistic performance. The topics include: ethics and media law (Namibia), professional ethics (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Malawi), sensationalism in the media (Nigeria, Tanzania), and ethics and digital revolution (South Africa) among other topics.

Another work, *Press freedom and communication in Africa*, edited by Eribo and Jong-Ebot (1997) offers a glimpse of the state of African newsrooms' editorial autonomy. The work cites fifteen case studies chronicling media freedom related situations in countries from Ghana in West Africa to Tanzania in East Africa; from Egypt in North Africa to South Africa. The case studies suggest that the media operate under constriction both in legal and proprietorial terms. The central question addressed by the book is whether the media are independent, plural or

free. Some of the case studies like Grosswiler's (1997) article on Tanzania have shown that self-censorship is prevalent and poses a serious challenge to media freedom in the country. The main conclusion drawn by the editors is that the African media are a contradiction, as Eribo and Jong-Ebot (1997) show in the introduction:

Having been organised to serve the needs of the various colonial administrations, they became, at independence, ideological tools of the new African leaders, and were brought under state control and made to sing the praises of dictators in the name of national unity and development (p. x).

The legacy of draconian laws has hampered the evolution of a professional ethos. One attempt to address the problem of bad laws which have been said "to promote secrecy in the running of day to day business of the government"<sup>3</sup> has been to adopt "sunshine laws" in the form of Freedom of Information Bills (FIB). However, the efforts to adopt FIBs have been bedeviled by problems in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zambia, among others, where the bills remain stalled in a legislative limbo, in some cases since the 1990s.

### Normative Discourses: Three Views

At least three normative discourses have unfolded in the African context: as a call for the return to the African ethical roots epitomized in *ubuntu* communitarianism, as a call for greater professionalism in the media industry characterized by adoption of codes of ethics and independent media councils, and in the recognition of the need to anchor normative discourse on the postcolonial theory (Wasserman, 2006). These discourses arise out of the widespread belief that liberal frameworks based on "the dominant North Atlantic and patriarchal ethical frameworks" are not working (Christians and Traber 1997, p. viii).

According to Christians (2004), "a robust and visionary media ethics depends on the normative theory in which it is rooted". Some scholars believe the normative foundation should be the African ethical roots, which are communitarian (Kasoma, 1996; Okigbo, 1989; Traber, 1989). The assumption has been that agency and identity in Africa are constituted through the social realm. Christians' (2004) article, "Ubuntu and communitarianism in Media Ethics", has proposed

evolving a communitarian ethics of care based on *ubuntu* communitarianism. *Ubuntu* philosophy, defined as an ethic focusing on people's allegiance and relations in Africa, has been touted as a basic concept in shaping Afro-centric ethical thinking. This quest for African ethics, however, has been inspired by the assumption that the African context is homogenous. But as Hyden (2006, p. 81) says, "customary norms were never universal and were only confined to small-scale societies in Africa". In a word, there is no single African culture or single African reality such as the Afro-centric thinkers suggest.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, neo-liberal discourses laced with the rhetoric of freedom abound in Africa (Nordenstreng, 2007). These are characterized by a call for a greater professionalisation of the media industry. According to Merrill (2004), unless journalism becomes a true profession, the chasm between theory – expressed in conferences, workshops, and training – and practice, namely, actual journalistic behaviour, will continue. Increasingly, enforced codes of ethics and setting entry benchmarks for would be journalists are seen as necessary evils to clean the image of the profession.

Several Charters and Declarations adopted over the last two decades in Africa offer a vision anchored on liberal frameworks. The Banjul Charter of 1981, the Windhoek Declaration of 1991, the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa of 2001, the Johannesburg Principles of 1996 and the Abuja Declaration of 2000 all stress liberal norms such as independence, pluralism and freedom. Some are at odds with the communal values advocated by the Afro-centric thinkers that put societal interests first. Even though the Banjul Charter exhorted consideration of "historical tradition and the values of African civilization" in formulating the concept of human and peoples' rights,<sup>5</sup> it is largely silent on the nature of African traditions and values. The Charter brings what some call "a consensus on human rights".<sup>6</sup> A decade after the adoption of the charter, the Windhoek Declaration of 1991 reaffirmed "the principles of independence and freedom, citing censorship as a violation of human rights".<sup>7</sup>

### **Normative Research: Some Lines of Inquiry**

The ongoing normative discourses in Africa suggest a number of lines of research which need to be taken up more strongly.

One, there is a need to clarify legislative, policy, and normative issues underlying media performance in Africa. Often legislation and policies

lag behind rapid changes in the media industry. especially in the converging media environment. Hence, there is a need for a more systematic research agenda in this area.

Two, the African ethical roots need a deeper exploration now that the exploration of communitarian thinking is spiking interest (Christians 2004; Merrill 2004). Challenges like reporting terrorism, environmental degradation and civil strife call for more than simply “objectivity” in news reporting. The challenge is to come up with a communitarian framework that is sensitive to societal norms and at the same time friendly to individual freedom and creativity. Naturally, what Christians and Traber (1997) called the monumental challenge facing communication ethics, namely, reconciling “two contradictory trends of cultural homogenisation and cultural resistance remains”. The research efforts therefore ought to be directed towards finding theoretical models that would be both cross-cultural and trans-cultural.

Three, the research efforts should be directed at exploring how existing charters and declarations adopted by national and regional institutions across Africa since the 1990s like the Banjul Charter offer a possible normative foundation for broad-based communication ethics in Africa.

Four, the open remuneration (brown envelopes) that journalists get from political and economic patrons needs a more in-depth exploration. It is a prevalent practice, which is largely condoned in the African media circles. Some studies in this direction include Ndagam’s (2006) analysis of the Cameroonian practice of *gombo* cited earlier. The cavalier attitude towards corrupt practices in most African newsrooms while journalists pretend to be objective needs more critical analysis.

Five, the politics of belonging (Nyamnjoh, 2005) and the economy of affection (Hyden, 2006) need greater study in terms of their capacity to undermine journalistic performance. One form of the politics of belonging is ‘Afghanistanism’ which seeks to protect political leaders from criticisms by dwelling on far off issues to distract attention from pressing issues at home. There is a need for greater understanding of how the economy of affection works and hampers the emergence of a professional ethos in African journalism.

### Conclusion

The quest for an Afro-centric normative vision remains elusive. However, this is not a uniquely African problem, as a quest for a global

ethic has eluded both religious and political leaders. Some have called for 'a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitude' (Kung, 1995 cited in Cheetham, 2007, p. 19). But the basic consensus regarding cultural values is largely lacking in Africa. Some would even think that the ethical contradictions have the potential to endanger peace. In the name of freedom of expression some vernacular radio stations in Kenya, for example, broadcast hate messages in the November 2007 post-elections leading to violence. Some justified such broadcasts in the name of freedom of expression. Certainly, it is questionable whether a freedom of expression that breeds death and suffering is worth upholding.

So far, there have been feeble attempts to explore meta-ethical issues underlying journalism ethics in Africa. Most studies are descriptive and have failed to offer an alternative normative vision to the dominant liberal frameworks. A distinct dichotomy exists between the values imparted in journalism education based on the ideology of objectivity and a *laissez-faire* journalism culture emerging out of a newsroom socialisation that encourages sycophancy and conflict of interest.

Some have argued that these normative contradictions come from the tendency of the post-colonial state in Africa to justify its validity by appealing to respect for authority and order as foundational African norms. This practice has been extended to journalism where normative issues are often settled by appeal to authority rather than values and norms.

In this sense Merrill's (1986, p. 57) observation that media credibility and responsibility will be achieved through an ethical renaissance among individual journalists determined to act in responsible ways remains valid. The main question, however, is whether these noble goals could be achieved through a return to the communal ethical values, as Traber (1989) and Kasoma (1996) suggest, or through greater professionalisation of the media industry or both. In other words, how can an ethical renaissance be initiated and nurtured in a context where there is no fundamental consensus on binding values?

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### (Endnotes)

- <sup>1</sup> For details on the Tanzanian experiences, see Kaarle Nordenstreng and Nkwabi Ng'wanakilala (1987).
- <sup>2</sup> The book was reviewed by Anthea Garman and Pascal N. Mwale in *Equid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 27, 134.
- <sup>3</sup> This has been noted in the Stakeholders' Proposals in the Draft Media Services Bill, 2008.
- <sup>4</sup> This is the danger of reductionism cited by Keyan Tomaselli. See Tomacelli, K.G. (2003) Our culture vs foreign culture, *The International Communication Gazette*, 65, 427-444.
- <sup>5</sup> African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, 27 June, 1981, p.1.
- <sup>6</sup> Mutombo Nkulu. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights: An African Contribution to the Project of Global Ethics at <http://astro.temple.edu/~dialogue/Centre/mutombo.htm> 04/05/2008
- <sup>7</sup> Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African press. Windhoek, Namibia from 29<sup>th</sup> April to 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1991, p. 2.



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# The Shaping of News Values of Young Journalists in Kenya

By Stephen Ogongo-Ogong'a and Robert A. White

## Abstract

The present study of the formation of news values of twenty young journalists in the two major quality newspapers of Nairobi, *The Nation* and *The Standard*, found that their idealistic conception of the role of a journalist focused on helping lower status people in Kenya gain great political and economic power. The major influences in their news values come from the image of the role of the journalist in Kenyan society formed early in life during primary and secondary school. Neither the journalism training in university nor the guidance of editors seems to be a significant factor in their idealism. In spite of the difficult employment conditions and the resistance of editors to issues such as human rights and other social problems, young journalists say they learn how to get their ideas into the press mainly through feature stories

## Introduction

The experiences in the first year in a young journalist's professional work often mould the life-long personal values and commitments of journalistic practice. Outstanding journalists not infrequently give credit for their skills and ideals in life to the influence of a personal friend in the newsroom and the guidance of senior editors at the very outset of their journalistic careers (Bradlee, 1995). The criteria of "good" news stories—defence of human rights, exposure of social injustices, the need to inform and guide the public—are formulated and consolidated at the beginning of a life in journalism. The classic journalistic norms of accuracy, faithfulness to sources, avoidance of economic and political influences and critical loyalty to the news organization and to one's colleagues are consolidated in this initial introduction to journalistic practice.

Journalists in African newspapers are often accused of violating the canons of good journalism, especially the selling of their skills to political and economic interests (Kasoma, 1994). Given the low pay and authoritarian management practices in newspapers, journalists easily

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rationalise their lack of personal integrity. If this is true—and the present study questions this—it is likely that this justification of a “culture of dishonest journalism” begins at the initiation of the journalistic career.

The present article reports an in-depth study of the process of formation of the practices and news values of twenty young journalists in the first year of employment in two Nairobi newspapers, *The Nation* and *The Standard*.

### **The newsroom context in the professional formation**

The development of professional values in young journalists is far less planned than is generally thought. The consensus of researchers studying journalistic socialisation is that most of the organisational learning actually occurs incidentally or adventitiously, including through exposure to the opinions and practices of others also working in the same context (Josephi, 1999; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987; Goldstein, 1985). Little is written down, and even house codes of ethics are ignored. Each newsroom is different, and the normative practices are a series of precedents and accumulated routines learned from the “veterans” (Sigal, 1973; Josephi, 1999; Josephi, 2000; Josephi, 2001; Josephi, 2002).

It would be wrong to assume, however, that the lack of systematic training implies that young journalists are free to define their own professional norms. As Schudson (2003) suggests, a newspaper organisation generally has a well-established power structure shaped by the external economic and political factors of a nation and by the internal pressures such as proprietary interests, the socio-political policy of the newspaper and the standards dictated by the newspaper’s self-identity. The 1955 study of Breed, reprinted in Berkowitz’s (1997) collection of newsroom studies, has identified how power holders use various aspects of a newspaper’s organisational structure to exert social control over the staff practices, including the socialisation of young journalists.

Most influential is the institutional ownership that hires journalists and has the right to expect obedience from employees (Breed, 1997). Young journalists quickly learn not to be openly critical of the economic and political interests or other power connections of the proprietors. The most direct influence of this institutional ownership

comes through the senior editors who assign or vet news stories, shape the way topics are handled and punish violations of news practices. Editors are not simply the overseers of news production but are also accountable to management for the competitive position of their news product in the marketplace. As a result, editors and owners (or managers) develop guidelines that their reporters must follow in order to be successful and professionally respectable in their eyes (Bennet, 2002; Hanlin, 1994). Most newspapers hire on a probationary basis and new journalists are intensely aware of the need to conform to editorial guidance (Gans, 1980).

A second major socialisation factor—but also social control—is the informal guidance by senior staff. Many experienced journalists recount how they learned “the trade” from friendly veterans that they respected, admired and felt gratitude and obligation to for helping them make the right connections (Bradlee, 1995).

A third source of learning comes from reading the newspapers, observing what “gets in” and how the editors consistently shape stories. The daily evaluations of the good and bad points in the previous day’s newspaper quickly tell newcomers what is expected of them (Berkowitz, 1997). Along with this comes the informal comment on what stories made a big hit with the public.

A fourth influence to conform to policy is the observation of who gets promoted, praised and rewarded by the managers (Breed, 1997). Much of the gossip around the newsroom speaks of what kind of practice leads to improving one’s status in the newspaper.

Also influential are the situations of cooperation with other journalists in discovering sources, getting tips from colleagues on possible good stories or sharing moments of hilarity in the idiosyncrasies of some news event. The closest confidants of young journalists, the people one listens to the most, are other young journalists. This in-group subculture in a newspaper indirectly is also a source of conformity.

Finally, there is the rewarding experience of discovering good stories and good sources that a young journalist knows will gain the approval and esteem of senior editors. The rewards of being close to powerful political figures or meeting notables and celebrities are an excitement that highlights these encounters as sought-after journalistic practices. Equally important is the satisfaction of knowing that the carefully developed methods of searching for good stories and of cultivating a

good writing style are appreciated and are attracting attention of readers, especially more powerful and influential readers.

Although most of the research on newsroom socialisation stresses the social controls exerted by the power holders, a premise in this study is that young journalists enter the newsroom with their own sense of ideals and their own self-image of what a good journalist is. Gans notes the autonomy of journalists even in the most structured newsroom (1980, p. 285). Josephi, who has carried out some of the most extensive research on the socialisation of young journalists, says "A young journalist will always carry with him or her a set of values" (1999, p. 75). Weaver and Wilhoit also emphasise the importance of the journalists' personal perspectives (1996, p. 147). The newsroom socialisation is best seen as a process of *negotiation* between social controls and the young person's own convictions and insights. Ericson, Baranek & Chan (1987) found that newsrooms are not so tightly rule-bound as earlier research maintained. Journalists quickly adopt a variety of strategies for evading constraints when these do not seem to make sense. The young journalist soon learns that the most prized professional possession are news sources, people who want to say something to the public about a given topic. Also very personal are the hunches of the key information that the public wants to know. Central in journalistic socialisation is developing the imaginative capacity to be an interconnector between persons who want to say something to the public and the members of the public who are seeking information. The present study has focused on this more recent trend in the analysis of the socialisation of young journalists, namely, the process in which aspiring journalists learn to defend their personal values in a process of negotiation not just with the newspaper organisation but with the broader political-economic power structure of the nation.

### **What are the factors that shape news values of young journalists?**

Journalists generally see themselves as playing an important role in developing their nation, at least indirectly, by keeping the public informed about crucial issues, political decisions and new opportunities so that citizens are able to carry out the development of the nation. Underlying the journalist's perception of this role in the development of the local community, the city or nation is the personal concept of

what kind of society should be constructed. There is often the perception of the injustices, the violations of human rights, the huge gaps of power and wealth. The personal conviction of the journalist is that "This is not the society we want!" In this study we ask, "What kind of society in Kenya or Africa in general do young journalists want to construct and what are the factors which shape this ideal?"

There is considerable discussion in the literature on journalism ethics regarding the factors which shape the news values and the personal norms of journalists. Elliot (1986, p. 42) holds that "The bases upon which individuals develop value systems are unique and complex combinations of religious beliefs, education, family and cultural norms, individual rationality and consciously or unconsciously accepted conventions of the many subcultures in which one lives". Merrill and Reuss (1996, p. 47) say that life experiences, education and interactions with others or social experience are the basis of "values and the kind of ethical decisions" of the media people. Among these life experiences, citing the study carried out by Endres to find out what factors influence their professional values and attitudes, Merrill and Reuss (1996) would argue that the single most influential factor is the parents and early home life, followed by journalistic experience, colleagues' behaviour, religious upbringing, current family life, education and the behaviour of others. In the view of Patterson and Wilkins (1991, p. 1), "Most of us, outside of the church or parental teachings, have learned ethics by the choices we've either made or seen others make".

A good summary of these positions is made by Dorma E. Cordell, reporter and executive for 23 years for the Associated Press and former president of six community dailies in Dallas-Fort Worth. She identifies four major factors that influence the formation of a sense of ethics: (1) training as a youngster in the difference between right and wrong and the importance of doing right; (2) formal instruction, primarily by various journalism teachers, in ethics and specifically related to journalism; (3) role models, both supervisors and persons one admires; and (4) experience, the factor that contributes to the fine-tuning of the ethical sense (Fink, 1988, p. 4).

All of these studies are based on the study of journalists in the US where there is a more mature system of democratic governance, and ethics is defined more narrowly. It is likely that the ideals inspiring young journalists in Africa are much more related to the social context

of Africa: the problems of governance, the huge gap between a small governing elite and the poor masses, and the rampant denial of the most basic human rights.

### **Applying the research tradition of newsroom studies in Kenya**

Two different newspapers in Nairobi were chosen for the study in order to see the influence of newspaper organisation on the formation of news values. *The Nation* is a larger, more prosperous newspaper of some 250,000 circulation with a more focused editorial policy and a more structured, demanding orientation process for young journalists. *The Standard*, with only 55,000 circulation and, at the time of the study in 2002, struggling financially, is more permissive. Since these are the two largest newspapers in Kenya, it was easier to find in each a cohort of ten new recruits with varying backgrounds, education, age and gender and with less than one year of association with each news organisation.

The study followed the “newsroom ethnography” methods typical of other studies of newsroom culture with emphasis on life history and work history narratives, participant observation, analysing routines as “community rituals” and the semiotic, “meaning” analysis of newspaper texts.<sup>1</sup> All interviews with the twenty young journalists were conducted away from the newsroom in a personally relaxing and friendly atmosphere. Interviews began with a very open-ended general narrative of who they are and how they came to the newspaper where they work and then focused on a detailed narrative of their experiences in the newsroom. Only at the end of the series of interviews with each young journalist was a more structured questionnaire introduced, covering the major factors thought to be important influences in news values. The news values and practices which young journalists claimed to have were checked with the content of their news stories actually published in the newspaper.

Extended interviews were also carried out with all senior editors and veteran journalists involved in some way with newsroom routines and the orientation of young journalists. The interviews with newspaper staff and participatory observation served to corroborate what the young journalists said about their newsroom experiences. In addition, extensive consultations were done with a series of outside “key

informants" who knew very well these two newspapers and the media industry of Nairobi.<sup>2</sup>

### **What are the news values of young journalists in Nairobi?**

A good starting point in analysing the factors influencing news values is a summary of what those interviewed think are important criteria in seeking out stories or picking out the important aspects of a story. It is important to realise that these are the ideals of young journalists, what they would like to be able to do or are continually looking for opportunities to do. No doubt the orientation sessions of the newspapers for interns and new recruits tend to stress this. Young journalists tend to fraternise a great deal among themselves and exchange their ideas about what is good journalism. It is not always easy, however, to find stories or sources for a story that bring out these criteria. And, as we shall see in greater detail, the ideals expressed in stories are not always what editors will allow to go through. At times the value statements of young journalists sound like the official rhetoric of public life throughout Africa. Although these may be statements of sincere beliefs, the more critical question is how these news values are applied in concrete discovery and shaping of news and then how they are negotiated through the power structure of the newspaper.

#### *(1) Setting the agenda for personal and public decision making*

Young journalists perceive members of the public as living in a small, private world largely unaware of the issues that are going to affect their lives. They see themselves to be in a more privileged position scanning through the immense number of events in the city or nation and picking out those that are more likely to be of crucial importance to members of the public. They try to draw the public's attention to problems of ordinary people that need special attention by repeatedly highlighting issues and making it impossible for people to keep on ignoring these issues.

The most frequently mentioned role of the journalist (by eighteen of the twenty in both *The Nation* and *The Standard*) is this agenda setting, information role. This means that journalists have to choose events that are likely to be of greater concern and interest to the readers, try to show how an event is going to affect them and then use their rhetorical writing efforts to get them to act on these issues. Since

government in Kenya influences so much of daily life, journalists feel that they must keep the public informed as citizens responsible for monitoring and deciding on the actions of public officials. An important aspect of information is to point out the positive and negative aspects of every public event.

The ideal of many young journalists is to set in motion a public debate among political leaders and create discussion in the publics that read the newspapers or follow other forms of media.

(2) *Educate the public regarding their rights*

Young journalists come largely from lower-status sectors and are often acutely aware that the people they live with on a daily basis are treated with injustice by the powerful. The second cluster of values centres on the education of the public regarding their rights: women's rights, children's rights, workers' rights and the rights of many other minority groups. Since power is so concentrated in Kenya and is often exercised so arrogantly, this means encouraging people to defend their rights, for example, in the face of police harassment. These young journalists believe that people live in fear of public officials because they do not know of their rights to health services, education or housing. A particular emphasis is placed on raising awareness of HIV/AIDS. Several mentioned the importance of informing and educating people regarding the opportunities for education, for jobs or for small businesses.

(3) *Representing the views of the excluded*

A role that ranked very high (eight at *The Nation* and nine at *The Standard*) was the duty to be the voice of the voiceless. Young journalists considered it extremely important to report the thinking of ordinary people who are usually ignored while important national issues are discussed so that the less powerful can make their contribution. They emphasised the importance of encouraging organisations such as trade unions, human rights bodies, religious leaders, and opposition activists to express their views.

The Kenyan media were strongly criticised by the young journalists, who observed that the media tend to concentrate mostly on reporting the activities of leading politicians while totally ignoring the voice of lower-status people. Since young journalists are rarely assigned to cover very important functions, they, in fact, often cover the views of

less powerful people. This is facilitated by the fact that most young Kenyan journalists come from middle- and low-status families and live in middle-class estates or in the slum areas surrounding Nairobi. We also observed that most of the young journalists we interviewed like to spend their free time in places such as the bars where “ordinary people” gather to drink and listen to live bands performing. The bars have become unofficial forums where Kenyans discuss recent political events as they drink and debate.

An example of the need to incorporate popular views was the then important Constitutional Review Process. The respondents said that their task was to help the common people know what the Constitution is, what the Constitutional review is, the importance of participating in the Constitutional Review Process and where the Constitutional Review Commission was meeting people.

Young journalists see themselves as mediators between the government and the people. Since ordinary people don't have direct access to leaders, the journalists feel they have a duty to tell leaders what people think about policies. “For instance, we can say the schools in a given area are flooded, kids cannot go to school, and the government will be forced to react. We present such situations to the government, we are the people's advocate”, said one young journalist at *The Nation*.

The desire to be “the voice of the voiceless” was perhaps the most authentic news value of the young journalists because it reflected not only their own social class backgrounds but their excluded status within the newspaper. This value represented their protest against the criticism of the senior editors that their stories were not summing up the views of the powerful sufficiently. This value also showed the utopian and somewhat contradictory aspirations of young journalists who so desired to become part of a newspaper for the elite, but at the same time wanted to articulate the voice of the poor who more likely were listening to radio—or were part of the oral networks in the bars and on street corners.

#### (4) *Contributing to social and political reform*

A fourth cluster of news values (seven at *The Nation* and six at *The Standard*) centred around investigating claims and statements made by government and other public institutions. In spite of the difficulties of doing investigative journalism in Kenya—especially for young

journalists—because of the lack of budget and time allowed for it (they are paid by the article), this is still the dream of these young aspirants. Most of the young journalists still lacked the information sources for this, and it is extremely difficult to get such information because government officials are unwilling to provide information for fear of their superiors or as a way of hiding their own illegal actions. Yet, all young journalists are looking for the stories and sources that would force transparency and accountability on corrupt government officials, business leaders and others in positions of power.

Young journalists take very seriously their “watch dog” role, keeping an eye on all the activities of government and sounding alarm every time they noticed that the government was failing in its services to the public. This meant watching how government offices are managed, helping Kenyans have a better understanding of the roles of MPs, and informing about the powers of public officials,

Young journalists recognise that the single biggest reason why African governments are so ineffective is the mounting toll of inefficiency, illegal operations and openness to the bribery of contractors, importers or anyone else who has the influence or money to buy the favours they seek. Young journalists are, for the first time, moving into the glaring contradictions of high rhetoric and actual injustice, exploitation, bad governance and blatant misuse of enormous sums of money from donor agencies and taxpayers. Journalists know that this information will never be revealed in the routine events they are sent to cover because, as one journalist with *The Standard* noted, the “the truth is usually hidden behind the scenes, far from what is easily presented by official sources. It is therefore important to expose what is happening behind the scenes”.

When a journalist does get the evidence to bring out into the open something that public opinion could change, senior editors often find ways to quietly kill the story. A young journalist gave as an example, a story he had researched on the spread of HIV/AIDS infection in prisons. The story cited a prison officer who was admitting that drug abuse was promoting homosexuality in the prisons as many prisoners readily gave in to sexual intercourse with fellow prisoners who could offer them cigarettes or drugs. The prison officer was suggesting that the government should introduce condoms in prisons because of the increasing rate of HIV infection. Moreover, the prison officer was ready to go public about the problem. However, the article was not

published, because, as a senior editor explained, "(This) is a family newspaper which all family members should be able to read without feeling embarrassed... Moreover", insisted the editor, "the official stand of prisons in Kenya is that homosexuality does not exist. That's what the government says".

In this case, the young journalist went away angry with the refusal of the editor to agree to an article that would have contributed to even a minor step toward prison reform. This continued frustration with the editorial realities of newspapers illustrates the culture of protest among young journalists that can gradually harden into cynicism.

##### 5. *Providing information for critical, discerning voting*

The fifth most frequently mentioned role is to motivate the people to vote, understand the power of one's vote, to be aware of the major political issues so as to use the vote intelligently and, in general, to get involved with public life. This means trying to make clear to the public the error of the common practice of selling one's vote or giving in to the pressures of clientelistic political power structures. Many respondents said they had a role to play in ensuring that there are free and fair elections by monitoring the voter registration, nomination of candidates, the voting itself and the counting of votes. They also said they had the role of educating the public against violence during election campaigns. Since Kenya was moving into elections at the time of this study, voting was perhaps a more important news issue.

Closely associated with this is the importance of analysing complex governmental problems, breaking them down into simpler components and presenting them to the public in a way that is understandable (six at *The Nation* and five at *The Standard*). Part of this is to link a present event with decisions and problems that led to the present news and to indicate the possible consequences for different sectors of the public. One young journalist at *The Nation* explained that, "While it is important to inform the public, we have a duty of going beyond telling people what transpired. We need to synthesise, analyse, explain to the people (that) this is happening and it is wrong because of this and that so that they can come up with corrective measures". A young journalist at *The Standard* commented, "Unlike in the past when the reporter was just expected to write news and that's

it, we have to write and interpret the news or what we are writing". There is a general awareness that the bald facts are being presented by news in television and radio so that the role of the press is more one of commentary and interpretation.

### **The origins of journalistic ideals and aspirations**

In both *The Nation* and in *The Standard* eighteen of the twenty interviewed said they thought of becoming journalists when they were in primary school. Admiration for journalists was the most frequently mentioned motive. For some, this personal esteem came through contacts in family and friendship networks. Most were reading newspapers at an early age and admired journalists for being close to the centres of power but also for being able to make an intelligent, critical and independent analysis of all major public decision making.

The most cited reason for wanting to become a journalist (fourteen out of twenty) was the desire to bring about social improvements in society, help make people's lives better and fight for people's rights, especially the rights of the poor and of women. This strong sense of "public defender" pervaded the consciousness of young journalists in all of their newsroom activities in both newspapers. For some the glamour of the life of the journalist was attractive – meeting top people, travelling and leading an exciting, interesting life. Others noted the challenges and uncertain pay, but felt that the opportunity to express one's personal ideals was worth this limitation.

Throughout the study, it became apparent that the most important factor in the news values of these young journalists at both newspapers was this sense of professional identity as a person with greater freedom and influence for improving social conditions in the country.

Those at *The Nation* said that they were attracted to this newspaper because it has the largest circulation in East Africa, is the most respected and offers the best working conditions and pay. They were drawn by the quality of the journalism and the opportunity to get the best professional formation from editors and senior journalists at this early stage of their careers. One journalist at the nation commented that his former job at a pro-government paper left little opportunity for independent critical expression.

Although young journalists at *The Standard* recognised that it is "second place", they were attracted by the greater ease of getting in, the

general friendly familiar relationships with editors and the atmosphere of less pressure. They felt, however, that *The Standard* offers good Opportunities for good professional formation.

*The formation of news values in schools*

All of the twenty young journalists studied were under thirty, except one at *The Nation* who was 32 and one at *The Standard* who was 33. Ten were under 25. Both newspapers generally take only graduates of university or other tertiary level training institute, and they prefer that the candidates have some previous journalism training. Eight of the ten at *The Standard* had been trained in journalism or media studies and one had an MA degree. At *The Nation* eight of the ten had done journalism, media studies or journalism and literature, and of the other two, one had done education and the other literature. In fact, both newspapers employ staff who have had no journalism training but are taken on because of their flair for writing.

All of those in the study said that their journalism studies helped them in their news judgement, especially in the basic mechanics of journalism such as the concept of a news story, how to write a news story, the difference between a news story and a feature, and types of news sources. All felt that the previous journalism training had helped them move into the newsroom routines. Most, however, were quite critical of their journalism education in general and their lecturers in particular. Many said their teachers had never written any published articles in the mainstream media and had no idea of how a newsroom operates. Some complained that lecturers teach outdated issues, do little background research and have no idea of the contemporary journalism field in Kenya. The texts, references and equipment were archaic. They were especially critical of the lack of orientation on what is a good news story and say they were never prepared to come up with their own story ideas. They were never taught how to get a story, how to approach stories, how to find sources, how to carry out interviews and how to pick out what is important in an event.

The senior journalists at both *The Nation* and *The Standard* were also critical of the journalism training recruits had received. The news editor at *The Standard* said "there is no serious training of journalists in the country...Young journalists come in really handicapped – without the least knowledge of what is expected of them as journalists". Senior editors at *The Nation* were equally critical of the lack of capacity for

news analysis and news commentary. In their view new recruits lack the urge or instinct to go out and look for exclusive stories. Young journalists don't know how to establish and maintain news sources. The criticism is focused on the inability to detect what is important in an event in terms of the socio-political realities of the country. "When they go for instance to a press conference, they simply report on how it went, narrating how it started, what the people said first to what they said last...they really don't know what to pick from what was said. They lack ability to pick what is most important in a speech and write a story on it".

In general, there is little evidence that the training in journalism schools influenced the news values of young journalists significantly. One young journalist at *The Standard* said he was told by lecturers, "you'll be operating in big hotels, you'll be interviewing big people and such things, but in reality it is not that way. Most of the time you have to go to the slums to get news".

#### *The influence of aspirations to work for prestigious newspapers*

When a student or journalist working in another newspaper applies for employment at *The Nation* or at *The Standard* they already know from their reading the newspapers and from professional contacts what news values are expected of journalists. At the inception of *The Nation* in 1960 the Aga Khan announced that it would be "a newspaper rigorously honest and fearlessly independent within the political constraints of the day" (Loughran, 2000, p. ii). According to the chief executive Kiboro, *The Nation* has tried to be a newspaper "that would give the Kenyan people a voice, a paper that would enable them to talk and discuss issues relevant to their daily lives (Kiboro, 2000, p. iii). Both are self-proclaimed "independent newspapers". *The Standard* has ostensibly moved away from its dependency on Moi and has become one of the boldest newspapers in the country, the paper that gives the Kenyan government sleepless nights. Both newspapers give considerable priority to investigative reporting that has been revealing key aspects of the corruption and inefficiency of government.

#### *The influence of the newsroom orientation on news values*

Eight out of the ten at *The Nation* and five out of the ten at *The Standard* had no previous practical work experience in journalism. The two at *The Nation* and the five at *The Standard* had work experience at smaller newspapers, usually for one or two years. The newsroom training for most begins with the student attachments at the newspapers and even those with previous work experience feel as if they are learning everything from the basics. Journalism students make every effort to get an attachment at *The Nation* (usually a top choice) or at *The Standard*. Applicants are accepted after an interview with editors, and during the internship promising candidates are quietly earmarked for future employment by senior editors. A few had already written for the *The Nation* or for the youth supplement of *The Nation*, the *Young Nation*.

The orientation at *The Nation* is more formal, but at both newspapers the training focuses largely on the mechanics of composing news stories and the routines of the newsrooms. There is little evidence that the editors or senior staff inspire or shape the above-described news values of young journalists. Editors not only leave new recruits great freedom to choose news stories, but encourage them to come up with their own ideas. If anything, the editorial staff and newsroom routines tend to dampen and inhibit the idealism of young journalists.

### **Learning to exercise “self censorship” under pressure from advertisers**

The news editor at *The Nation* stated emphatically that they “never succumb to pressures from advertisers. The (*Nation*) group is independent. We are not going to compromise our editorial policy. If I’ve got a good story, and its bad for you (an advertiser), too bad. They’ve realised that there is a limit to how much they can push the editorial department”. The training editor, of special importance for young journalists, was equally emphatic, “We do not allow advertising considerations to influence our news values, our news judgements”. He gave an example of a local mobile phone company, a major advertiser, which was known to be overloading its servers and causing bad service to subscribers. “*The Nation* did stories on this”. He added that readers immediately see through your “writing nice things because they are advertisers. . . And if you start losing readers you’ll soon lose the very advertisers that you were trying to keep in the first place by

being nice about them. So I mean there are commercial reasons for having integrity, not only morals, I'm afraid". No doubt this official policy reinforces young journalists basic resistance and repugnance to compromising their news values in the face of commercial pressures.

But young journalists must also face the realities of the newsroom. All seven senior staff interviewed at *The Nation* said advertisers exercise a strong influence on the news coverage, and all senior staff at *The Standard* affirmed the same. One young journalist at *The Standard* observed that heavy advertisers want "their functions to be covered. At times they might not be newsworthy and the advertising manager would come (to the news room) and say 'You guys don't see that these are the guys who are feeding you?'" He added, "In every newsroom there is an endless war going on between the advertising department and the editorial department. The advertising department says we play a crucial role by bringing the money, but the guys in editorial say, 'no, advertisements are just a by-the-way'. What takes the readers to the advertisement is the stories that they've been reading".

A senior editor at *The Standard*, smaller and facing financial problems, noted that advertisers all the time threaten to withdraw their advertisements whenever there is a critical coverage about them. He added with emotion, "I mean all the time they do. It happens all the time, advertisers feeling that they've given you an advert, therefore they should have good press. . . The situation is quite demanding for a small newspaper which is cash strapped and wants to survive. . . When the advertiser threatens to pull out an advert, . . the owners and editors of a struggling newspaper are in trouble".

A larger, stronger newspaper such as *The Nation* faces problems precisely because they are part of a corporate group. As soon as *The Nation* criticises actions of some part of another corporate group, this is immediately taken as self interest and can affect advertising. Young journalists immediately learn what commercial activities are part of *The Nation* corporate group and are careful not to write anything seriously critical of those commercial interests.

In both newspapers emphasis is given to any positive news about major advertisers often provided by public relations departments—news of expansion and added employment, news of their humanitarian generosity, news of contribution to the national economy. This may cover up the economic inefficiencies, unjust exploitation of workers, or failure to serve the most needy part of the population, but young

journalists learn to use the right language of justification in terms of the supposed contribution to national development. The possibility that the failure to report objectively the distortions in the economy may contribute to deep social and political unrest cannot surface as a public discourse.

To preserve the official stance of objectivity and impartiality, young journalists learn not to give extensive coverage to anything negative about major advertisers or they use a softer set of adjectives to speak about them. As one senior staff member at *The Standard* said, "Occasionally the editors remind you that 'this is an advertiser, let us treat him carefully'". He added, "Stories about major advertisers who place colour, full-page ads will be checked and checked and checked and it will even be discussed before it is published if it is a negative story. But that does not mean *The Standard* will not run the story. . .but maybe guys will be careful with the wording". Young journalists soon learn that stories critical of major commercial interests will be rejected with the comments, "Not enough factual evidence, not really significant news, not well written, of no strong interest to readers".

A young journalist at *The Nation* summed up well the pressures felt, "You cannot be allowed to reveal issues that may present a negative image of our major advertisers. As much as you say that newspapers are there to give people the opportunities to express themselves, at the end of the day, the most important thing to a media house is the business or profit. The media house is a business, and they'll do anything within their ability to see that they stay in business...It is the money that they are after mainly, not to give people the opportunity to express themselves".

### **The influence of job insecurity and low pay**

Between 70 and 80 per cent of the journalists in Kenyan media houses are "correspondents", and these correspondents contribute 80 per cent of what goes into newspapers. Young journalists are in the correspondent category, without contracts, and are paid by the article. At the time of this study, young journalists were receiving between Ksh 2000-10,000 (US\$ 28-135 at the exchange rate then) per month depending on whether their articles are placed in the newspaper. Given the difficulty of learning how to get articles into the newspaper, young journalists usually have no income at all during the few

months. Young journalists have no set contract and no form of insurance coverage during working hours. If a journalist is injured or beaten up in the course of work, he or she must cover all of the costs involved. Journalists must pay all of their own expenses such as transport and meals during the time of news gathering. Most young journalists live with their families and most reside in the high density "slums" surrounding Nairobi.

The desperate economic plight of journalists is well known, and news sources and other friends of young journalists are quite willing to help if they can, expecting in a general way, of course, that the friendship will be met by equal friendship from the journalist. The press kits for press conferences usually contain some compensation for the expenses of the journalists. At times news sources that want to make news releases will invite journalists to their offices or to lunch and expenses are taken care of as a matter of fact. All of the young journalists in this study say that they accept this help and compensation, but quickly add that they never forget their professional norms and repeated warnings in newsroom training to be objective and impartial. Young journalists are aware that just by changing a few words, the meaning changes, but all contend that they try to resist this to the best of their abilities. If a news source insists on a particular slant and offers compensation, the young journalists usually accept the help but assume that their obligation to be impartial is known and then write the story as objectively as possible. If the source complains later that the slant or specified information was not in the published article, the young journalists simply say that only the editors have control over what is finally published. Young journalists are resigned to the fact that in the reporting of current news, regardless of what they turn in to editors, it is going to have the slant of the particular editor or of the newspaper in general.

The current political reporting is generally handled by more senior reporters, and young journalists much prefer to spend time on features where they can express their personal views in social-issues writing. In features dealing with general social problems where personal responsibility is less evident, there is less opportunity to be put under pressure by the powerful and the wealthy.

Attempts by journalists to go out of their way to get compensation were considered "contemptible" by those in this study. Examples were journalists who write up wealthy and influential people in a flattering

way to build a relationship of economic help. More senior journalists who were known to have compromising friendships with commercial or political interests were generally not respected.

The pressures to give sympathetic treatment are greatest in the case of political reporting and then the political stance of the newspaper enters in. *The Standard* is known to be pro-KANU while *The Nation* takes pride in its political independence. All young journalists in both newspapers were emphatic that they are politically independent and do not follow the position of the newspaper. In general, young journalists are rather cynical about all political leadership. Young journalists live poorly and, in their identification with the poor at this stage of their lives, they tend to favour the more marginal groups in their news writing.

In spite of the exploitation that these young journalists face in these quality newspapers, none reported the experience of physical threat by politicians, extortion, large cash payments, pressures of a tribal nature and other brutal treatment that is not infrequently the lot of many young journalists in Kenya, especially in the regions outside of Nairobi.

### **The influence of personal ethics, codes of ethics and religious affiliation**

These new newspaper recruits showed they were quite well versed in the classical ethical norms that are supposed to guide journalists. When asked to mention some of the common ethical dilemmas, the respondents in both newsrooms spontaneously listed the typical problems talked about in most journalism texts: (1) the norm of not publishing compromising information about persons in the news such as the cause of a death; 2) avoiding any form of political or other forms of influence in news reporting; 3) not to accept any form of compensation, freebies or other favours that might influence news reporting; 4) never to hide one's identity in news gathering; 5) never to publish a story with only one source or without checking the other side of controversies; 6) never to record without the interviewee's permission; 7) not to socialise with or make sexual advances to news sources; and 8) never to accept the condition of a news source to be shown the copy before it is published.

Most of the young journalists said that they had learned this in their journalism ethics courses in school and in the newsroom orientation

sessions. The most important source of learning of ethics, all affirmed, are the consultations with editors and senior journalists in the day-to-day decisions on how to draft a particular news story. All were expected to be familiar with house editorial policy and codes of ethics, and these might be referred to on occasion.

There is little evidence, however, that the study of journalism ethics and discussions on how to solve ethical dilemmas in the newsroom influences their news values and choice of stories for reporting. Young journalists in Kenya as in other parts of Africa tend to define ethics in the American journalistic tradition as related to issues of objectivity, accuracy, impartiality and general credibility. This conception of journalism ethics is related more to the viability of news enterprises and professional respectability. The news values of young journalists in this study are linked more to their understanding of the role of the media in the democratic nation-building process and the importance of the media in helping citizens participate in the democratic decision-making process.

The same observation holds for the religious identity and religious beliefs of these young journalists. All of them quickly affirmed their church affiliation even though only one or two of the twenty actually attended religious services regularly, alleging that their news gathering duties conflicted with church attendance. Virtually all of them affirmed their adherence to the beliefs of their particular denominations, some very strongly, but none related to their religious beliefs their strong commitment to defending human rights or protesting social injustices in Kenya. Religious beliefs for them were linked more with personal morality than with social morality.

### **The moments of triumph of young journalists in Nairobi newsrooms**

The greatest satisfaction that motivates young journalists and justifies the hardships involved is to see in print the stories they think the public should be aware of and take action on. To defend their autonomy young journalists tended to avoid the news desk where stories were more likely to be modified to reflect the paper's political stand or be subjected to the caution of editors and proprietors. They moved toward the features desk where they would have greater freedom to express their ideas. The feature articles they produce deal

with the extreme poverty of most Kenyans, unemployment, the lack of good medical treatment, lack of response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the poor state of public schools and high rate of school dropout because of incapacity to pay school fees, the inadequacy of public transportation, bad housing, lack of potable water and, in general the contrasts of poverty and wealth in the country. All of these stories implied the irresponsibility, inefficiency and corruption of ministers and other influential people. Editors generally recognised the truth of these stories, but were nervous about the anger that would reverberate through the corridors of power in Kenya and the possible vengeance by cutting advertising or access to information.

Since the stories had to be factual, young journalists looked for persons as news sources who could forcefully state their own arguments. Especially important were the specialised institutes and NGOs that have the exact information on a given problem. Most of the young journalists working in various newspapers were friends, and, if their own editor was refusing, they might share it for initial release in another newspaper. The fear of being scooped on an important story at times makes the editors let certain sensitive stories run. "It becomes embarrassing and the reader begins to question the moral integrity of your paper if the other papers have an important story but you don't", said a young journalist at *The Nation*. Some journalists liaised with readers who kept clippings on what was published or not published and wrote letters of complaint for the failure to publicise an issue. Another strategy was to pass sensitive stories to the international media for publication without a personal by-line. This put pressure on local media.

To the advantage of the young journalists is the atmosphere of open dialogue between the younger journalists, the senior reporters and the editors. They learn to argue from the stated editorial claims of honesty, independence and courage expressed officially by editors. Senior journalists have good ideas on how to negotiate with editors, and editors generally are willing to discuss and listen to the good reasons on why the article has important information for the public. One young journalist at *The Standard* explained how she worked to get acceptance. "As long as I'm sure the story is factual, well-written and balanced, I have to defend it at all costs. The editor can finally decide not to publish it, but at least he will be fully aware of my stand on the story and why I wanted it published".

Most never give up with the first reluctance of editors to publish politically or commercially sensitive articles. A young journalist at *The Standard* said every time the editor refuses to publish a story, "All I do is to ensure that I gather more information, keep on compiling comprehensive stories, get photos, and keep on handing them to the editor". They keep insisting that the stories are important information and truth the public should have. Another at *The Standard* said, "I don't want to be responsible for the public's misinformation, so I do my part which is to compile a comprehensive report and hand it to the editor. If he or she decides to kill or modify it, that is his or her problem. I wouldn't like to make it easier for the editor by not working on a story simply because I know the editor won't use it. Let the editor be responsible for killing an important story, not me".

### **Conclusions: what sustains the idealism of young journalists**

Becoming and continuing to be a journalist in Kenya—and perhaps in most African countries—requires a great deal of self-sacrificing idealism. The frequently cited image of journalists as essentially dishonest, lazy, incompetent and inefficient characters is not confirmed at all by this study. The journalists in this study working in two of the most prestigious newspapers of East Africa, admittedly, may be the cream of the crop, and the management may be much better than in most newspapers. These newspapers require that all of their recruits have a university first degree with high qualifications of writing and news gathering capacities. Most were carefully observed during attachments and were selected by senior editors, but in their first years they barely manage to survive economically. They can be and sometimes are dismissed at the whim of editors.

What attracted these twenty young persons to journalism is, in essence, the desire to play what they see as a key role in the process of building a more just nation. This desire began early in their primary school years inspired by their personal observations of journalists and their general perception of the importance of newspapers in the role of enabling the public to be informed in order to participate as citizens in the democratic process. They were generally readers of newspapers and followers of media news. They were more likely to be involved in youth leadership activities and to begin writing for newspapers even during secondary school and university. They perceived a life working

in the media as “exciting”, a chance to be close to people at the centres of power . But newspaper work also put them in the position of evaluating those in power, a position which put them, in their view, even higher than those in positions of high leadership in public life. Most come from much lower social status, even a background of poverty, so that becoming a journalist represents a process of relatively rapid upward social mobility.

Much depends also on the friendships they form with senior journalists in the newsrooms. Some senior journalists have a reputation among young journalists of having become part of the dominant commercial and political culture of Nairobi. They are seen as journalists open to influences and, if not actually taking bribes, as compliant with the structure of power reaching into the newspaper. The idealism of some of the young journalists is protected by their naivety about how political-economic power works and by their exclusion from the stable work force of the newspapers. Much depends on the influence of friendships of senior journalists and how these young journalists become part of the newspaper and part of the general culture of the newspaper business in Kenya. The senior editors and especially those responsible for the in-house training have, on the whole, created an atmosphere in which the idealism of these young journalists is “officially” an expected attitude.

All, however, soon become aware of the double standard of the official “we are never diverted by advertising and political influences” and the real compromises that are made in the everyday work of the newspaper. They learn to negotiate between their ideals and the demands of commercial viability of the newspaper and the limits of what power in Kenya will permit. Far more than they may realise a tendency toward self-censorship is beginning to set in. There may even be the beginning of a sense of fatalism about bringing change to Kenya. Many are still single, and when the realities of family life and the education of children sets in, they may be strongly tempted to “move beyond” their present idealism to the realism of falling in line with what will simply improve their professional and financial status in the media world. Regardless of these dark clouds on the horizon, these young journalists are clearly committed to informing and inspiring the public toward a more democratic society in Kenya.

One of the most striking aspects of the young journalists’ commitment to social justice in Kenya is their sense of personal

independence and persistence. They are persistent in trying to get editors to publish articles which are touching sensitive social and political issues and their published articles show that their persistence has some success. All of the young journalists are self-consciously proud of their independence in the face of the political and commercial pressures coming from proprietors down through the hierarchy of editors. Some came from other more politically compromised newspapers because they were seeking an atmosphere of greater freedom to express their ideas. This sense of autonomy comes in great part from the personal identity that drew them to the journalist role, but it is sustained by the newsroom culture in these newspapers, especially the leadership of the central editing staff. A major support of this independent commitment to personal values is found in the friend groups of young journalists. They frequently come together to relax from the tension and disappointments and to share their struggles to get something in the newspapers. Here they also share and reinforce their personal commitments

When one compares the factors that shape the idealism of these young journalists with what is said about factors influencing the ethics of journalists in the US, it is evident that these young journalists in Kenya have a far greater social orientation. Family upbringing, religion and schooling seem less important than in the US. A major factor is that these young people live in a post-colonial society which is ruled by a small governing elite. Many in this elite group come from families that were favoured in the period of British colonial rule and many are still linked with an imperial-global culture and international socio-political structure. There are enormous differences in wealth between the "Westlands" elite areas of Nairobi and the slums of Nairobi, reputed to be some of the most wretched living conditions of the world. Many of these young journalists live in what are considered slums or socially not distant from the slums. These young people share much of the resentment of the poor in Nairobi, but a resentment somehow transformed into a belief that social and political change is possible and that journalism can make a difference.

These young journalists work with print media. A quite different culture that merits another study are the young journalists in radio and television broadcasting.

The central question which we would like to follow up with further research is where these young journalists are in their careers ten years

after this research was conducted. Are they still working in the journalist occupation or have they moved on to other employment? If they have stayed with journalism, are they still with the newspapers where they started or have they taken jobs in to other forms of media? Have they solved their financial problems or are they still struggling economically? Have they maintained their idealism, or has it become tempered beyond recognition? A very important question is how they perceive the causes of the socio-political explosions that rocked Kenya following the fraudulent elections of 2007. What do they think has been the role of the media, and what role did they play, if any, as journalists in informing the public and mobilising the public to rebuild the political organisation of Kenya?

In short, our question now is, "Can young journalists maintain their idealism and commitment to informing the public on issues that the public should act on to bring social change?"

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**(Footnotes)**

- <sup>1</sup> Consultations with Beate Josephi, at Edith Cowan University in Australia, and with David Boeyink of Indiana University, who had done similar studies, were particularly helpful.
- <sup>2</sup> Those who may be interested in a more detailed account of the methods of data gathering and data analysis may contact the author at [steveogongo@hotmail.com](mailto:steveogongo@hotmail.com)

# Self-censorship Among News Journalists in the Ethiopian state Media

By Terje S. Skjerdal

## Abstract

This article documents self-censorship practices in three state-owned media institutions in Ethiopia: Ethiopian Television, the Ethiopian News Agency and the *Ethiopian Herald*. The data from in-depth interviews with 34 reporters and editors reveals that self-censorship is an everyday activity in the newsrooms, but is particularly prevalent during times of tension and in political coverage. The article discusses how self-censorship routines are internalised and reinforced among new candidates for reporter jobs. It is argued that the journalists take on certain "ethical rationalisations" (or pseudo ethical reasoning, if one prefers) to justify the practice. Four principal rationalisations are identified: liberties normally accorded to editing practice; transferring ethical responsibility from the individual journalist to the institution; confidence that the audience will counter-read the news; and self-censorship as a support for the supposed benefits of development journalism.

**Key words:** development journalism, editorial censorship, Ethiopian media, press freedom, media ethics, newsroom ethics, self-censorship.

## Introduction

Contrary to public perception, official censorship is not very widespread in the African media – but self-censorship is. All across Africa, from Ghana (Tettey, 2006) to Tanzania (Berger, 2007); from Egypt (Ramaprasad and Hamdy, 2006) to Zimbabwe (Mano, 2005), journalists practice self-censorship. The reasons for the practice vary, but it is always caused by perceived external pressure which leads the journalists to alter media content in order to avoid personal reprimands and stay clear of accusations of inciting social or political tensions. The type of self-censorship which has received the most attention from press freedom organisations is self-censorship caused by political pressure, and that is also the focus of this study.

### Autobiographical note

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While there is much documentation – for instance, by press freedom organisations – that self-censorship exists in the African media, there seems to be much less evidence and investigation of the processes that actually lead to the self-censorship practices as seen from the journalists' own perspective. Of special interest is how professionally trained journalists justify the practice, and whether they view self-censorship as a threat to their commitment to truth telling which is the foundation of their professional identity. It is also interesting to know where they draw the line between self-censorship and editing, and at what point they feel the practice has turned them into puppets for the owners or other stakeholders. These are questions that have guided this particular study.

The research has taken the Ethiopian state media as a case study. Three organisations were analysed: Ethiopian Television (ETV), the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) and the *Ethiopian Herald*. All three are important media institutions in Ethiopia, both in terms of status and the size of readership/viewership. It is also vital for the research that the chosen media institutions are state-owned, since journalists under the auspices of the government are thought to be constrained by the expectations of government leadership in their news reporting.

Since the focus of the research is on professional practices and attitudes towards self-censorship, the main methodological tool was the in-depth interview. A total of 34 reporters and editors were interviewed in the period from November 2007 to May 2008; 18 from ETV, 7 from ENA and 9 from the *Ethiopian Herald*. In terms of the methodological approach, it is important to emphasise that the informants were not queried directly about "self-censorship" unless they brought up the term themselves. This was done to avoid prejudice in the data collection. Rather, the journalists were asked generally about satisfactions/dissatisfactions/constraints in their work situation so as to discern whether self-censorship was more prominent than other types of professional restraints. Only then was a more detailed conversation entered into in order to untangle and understand the intentions behind potential censorship practices.

The aim of this article is twofold: to verify the presence of self-censorship among news journalists in the Ethiopian state media and portray their differing perceptions of the phenomenon. Then, on the analytic level, to identify the ethical justifications for self-censorship in the reasoning processes of the journalists. The second aim is seen as

particularly interesting because it sheds light on newsroom ethics and whether self-censorship seriously distorts the flow of information important for citizen decisions.

Before presenting the results of the interviews, it is necessary to provide some background on the major features of the Ethiopian media.

### **The Ethiopian state media – background and overview**

As in many other African countries, the media in Ethiopia are largely state-owned. It is estimated that there are 1300 journalists in the state media and 300-400 in the private or “independent” media. Most journalists are employed in the broadcasting media, which consist of large media institutions and are the only media with nationwide coverage. The largest institution, the Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency (ERTA), employs about 512 journalists in television and 560 in radio (Desta, 2007). A fair number of the radio journalists work in regional departments. The Ethiopian News Agency is located in Addis Ababa and has 125 journalists in total (Teshome, 2007, p. 1). The agency is essentially a wire service and serves as a hub for media information flowing in and out of the country, with exchange agreements with international news bureaus. The agency is also actively used by the various government departments to disseminate information to the public in news formats, both in the form of print and radio/TV programmes, and to a limited extent through the Internet.

The state-owned print media have four outlets: *Addis Zemen* (Amharic), the *Ethiopian Herald* (English), *Bariisaa* (Oromiffa) and *Al-alem* (Arabic). The circulation of each paper is relatively limited, with *Addis Zemen*, the largest averaging a daily print run of 18,000. (MoI, 2008), distributed largely in the capital city Addis Ababa. The state-owned newspapers are all published under the umbrella of the Ethiopian Press Agency (different from the Ethiopian News Agency), and have approximately 120 journalists (reporters and editors) (Nebiyu, 2008, pp. 27-28),

Ethiopia has 58 commercial newspapers (as of April 2008), and recently also two radio private stations, but these have a much smaller staff of journalists. Because of financial constraints, few commercial institutions have survived for more than ten years (Shimelis, 2000; 2002). Some commercial newspapers, such as *Reporter*, could be said

to have influence among policy-makers, but in a nationwide perspective the state media are the main source of information for Ethiopians.

The professional associations which might work to develop the ethical standards of journalists in Ethiopia are relatively weak and divided. Those working in state media belong to the Ethiopian Journalists' Association (EJA) or to the Ethiopian National Journalists' Union (ENJU), while private journalists belong to the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists' Association (EFJA). None of them have any formal contact with the International Federation of Journalists and none have significant programmes to improve the ethics of journalists in Ethiopia.

Despite rumours circulated by such groups as the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists in Exile, the state media in Ethiopia are not run by journalists who can be considered to be government cadres. Although the management largely consists of political appointees, the journalists – both reporters and editors – are for the most part appointed on the basis of merit and professional values. The initial appointments are usually competitive and entail a practical test covering various aspects of professional competence. The screening ends with a personal interview. "People think the interview is designed to check your political affiliation", says one journalist, "but I think it is rather a test of how you argue logically". There are nevertheless signs that the closer a position is to the top management, the more likely is it that political preference is taken into account when the appointment is made. Even so, there are top editors who are clearly opposed to the EPRDF government, although they may not use the media organisation as a pulpit to express their opinions.

The state media in Ethiopia are also *government* media, in the sense that they give prominence to official government views in their publications and broadcasts. This is reflected in the editorial policies of the institutions, which instruct the journalists to report on the policies of the party in power (ENA Editorial Policy, 2003; EPA Editorial Policy, 2003; ERTA Editorial Policy, 2005). The editorial policy documents make clear, however, that the state media are for the general public (not just for members of particular political followings), and that "the foremost aim is to serve the public". Interestingly enough, the media institutions in question are accountable to the House of People's Representatives (the parliament), not to the House of Ministers (the government). The respective boards are accordingly appointed by the

parliament (Desta, 2007; Gebremedhin, 2006, p. 10), and are formally more detached from the ruling party than in many other countries where the board of the state media is appointed directly by the government through the Ministry of Information. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian state media evidently have close links with the government both in terms of organisation and content production.

The journalists themselves tend to use the term “government media” rather than “state media”. Although this may be a “habitual term”, it illustrates the journalists’ perception that the media in question are closely linked to the government of the day. Both the audience and the journalists see the media as reflecting current government policy.

It is important to note that there is a high level of dissatisfaction among the employees of the state media. A recent survey of journalists in the Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency (ERTA), Ethiopian News Agency and Ethiopian Press Agency, conducted by Amanuel Gebru (2006) revealed that only 8.2% of the journalists were satisfied, 89.6% were somewhat dissatisfied and 2.2 % were very dissatisfied with their work conditions. The reasons range from low salary and poor technical equipment to more professional complaints such as lack of liberty in reporting and constant interference in news production from management. The awareness of the habitual violation of professional commitments because of continual self-censorship is an important dimension of this dissatisfaction.

### **Identifying self-censorship among the journalists**

Given the role that the state-owned media are expected to play in governmental functions, it is no surprise that self-censorship is part of the work practice in the Ethiopian state media. Official censorship was abolished with the 1992 Press Proclamation and the 1995 Constitution, but the government was by no means ready to lift the ban completely and self-censorship entered the newsroom as a means to avoid tensions with the government. Although many of the 34 interviewees refrain from using the term “self-censorship”, they all affirm in various ways that this is routine in the newsroom. They are very aware that they work for a state media organisation which induces habitual constraints on their professional practice. Typically, they will refer to unwritten laws which “are just there” and guide them on the limits of free reporting. An editor in ETV explains how the selection of news is done:

There are criteria on how to select a news story based on news values. But sometimes – like after the 2005 elections – there are also unwritten rules. They are not always used, and not intentionally used, but it happens. Maybe it is because of the political aspect of the institution. (ETV editor, November 2007)

Other informants affirm that the self-censorship practices are not an exceptional activity, but belong to the daily routines of news production. An editor in the *Ethiopian Herald* was emphatic: “As a government newspaper, you can’t say a lot of terrible things about the government. There are a lot of gaps. You can’t be extremely critical of the government”.

The self-censorship practices that the journalists refer to are almost always seen in relation to the government or government offices. Although some informants also mention the “ruling party”, it is the “government” that stands out as the authority which provokes self-censorship.

Regarding the sensitive topics, Nebiyu Yonas (2008) found that self-censorship also affects reporting on social, economic, cultural and religious issues. Some reporters, however, think that they have far more individual freedom in shaping the content on social problems than do political reporters. “Since I mostly write on social issues, the question of censorship is not that much emphasised”, says one print reporter. An editor with broad background from both Ethiopian Radio and ETV describes the disparity between different topic areas:

When it comes to sensitive areas like policy issues, we are not giving complete information to the audience. But we’re giving good information in areas like HIV/AIDS, environment, and economic issues. We produce balanced information in these areas. (ETV editor, November 2007)

It is significant that journalists tend to talk about “information” rather than “news”. This indicates that journalistic processes such as synthesis and interpretation are downplayed in the treatment of the news material.

Self-censorship also comes to the fore with issues concerning national unity. These are sensitive questions in Ethiopia with its history of ethnic conflicts. Interestingly, the 1992 press proclamation had a clause prohibiting the media from publishing defamatory material

directed towards any nationality/ethnic group, but the clause is absent in the newly passed media law of 2008. This hardly means that the media are suddenly free to openly discuss ethnic conflict, but assumes that self-censorship will take the place of specific laws.

When some respondents also mention religious issues as an area where they exercise self-censorship, they often refer to interests of national unity. This is illustrated by a quote from a journalist in ENA:

I practice self-censorship in all reporting, for instance on religious issues. When celebrating a religious ceremony, I usually write the article addressing all Ethiopians. I think that if there exists some elements in the article that spoil the unity of Ethiopians, I would avoid or omit that part of the story. (ENA journalist, quoted in Nebiyu, 2008: 28)

The caution of journalists extends also into the music departments. In an investigation of music censorship practices in Ethiopian Radio and FM Addis 97.1 (both state-owned), Gezahego Teji (2007) found that while official censorship was absent, self-censorship practices regarding anything remotely touching on political issues were common among managers of the stations, journalists, DJs and music editors. If it were likely that political leaders would be disturbed by lyrics with supposed political, religious, sexual or ethnic innuendos, these were taboo.

### **Sensitive political coverage**

Self-censorship is particularly prevalent in sensitive political stories, especially during elections. The national elections in 2005 is a case in point. The media management, which usually keeps out of the daily news production, got directly involved in the news-making process. There were urgent phone calls from the general manager to top editors. The editors had to consult the management if there were stories considered politically controversial. In these contexts, to avoid confrontations, journalists typically become careful in the daily reporting. One reporter from the *Ethiopian Herald* explains how superiors intervene in sensitive issues:

The officials will contact our bosses, not ourselves directly. Fearing this, we self-censor. Over time you learn how to write, how to entertain. You cannot write against the ruling party. You don't criticise the policy of the government. (*Ethiopian Herald* reporter, November 2007)

An editor in the same newspaper supports this and explains that there is no editorial freedom left on issues which are considered to be of national importance: "When it comes to special events, like the Eritrea and Somalia conflicts, we are completely powerless. Our hands are tied. We say more or less exactly what the government wants".

Self-censorship is well established among both junior and senior workers in the organisation, and does not stand out as a censorship activity since it is routine and the limited framing of each news item can usually be justified within the concept of journalistic liberty in the Ethiopian context. Journalists know what news they are expected to cover, who to interview and how to present the item to satisfy the editors. On particular issues of national importance, when the editor-in-chief is likely to be involved, the censorship is much more conscious and evident. This explains why some informants assert that self-censorship is only an extraordinary activity within the organisation. However, the same informants see their media organisation as an institution which is expected to have a particular concern for government activities. Thus, bias is implied in the routine reporting as well. It is clear that self-censorship is not only an unusual activity in moments of national crisis, as is often claimed, but is a work practice which permeates the entire organisation. The processes which take place here may be described as an imposed collective consciousness.

#### **The role of unwritten rules**

Journalists frequently justify self-censorship by referring to the editorial policy as a source where the intentions of the media organisation are stated. Most, however, have only vague knowledge of the actual contents of this policy document. Some informants claim to have been informed of the policy during the first few weeks in the organisation, while one editor from ETV says he had to look it up by himself. When asked about the contents of the editorial policy, a senior editor with 10 years of experience in ETV has this to say:

I'm aware of it. It is pro-government. It assumes you only work in favour of the government. You can't present any negative news about the government. You can present some negative news about the *woredas* and *kebeles* [city and suburb administrative levels], however. (ETV editor, November 2007)

In fact, the stated editorial policy – which is largely the same for ETV, ENA and the Ethiopian Press Agency/*Ethiopian Herald* (2005, 2003, 2003) – does *not* instruct journalists to report positively or negatively on the government or other political activities. On the contrary, it commands journalists to report objectively, truthfully and in a balanced way. How can this contradiction exist?

The answer is that reporters and editors know well *the unwritten rules* of how to cover the news. These have been established in the news organisations through the years and are reinforced as they are handed over to new generations of senior reporters, deputy editors, and others involved. All are aware of the rules of the political milieu and the formalities of Ethiopian culture. Signs from the politicians of the ruling party EPRDF are a powerful incentive to cement the tradition of uncritical reporting on the government. Journalists who have tried to report openly on government actions or policies soon learn that they have broken the silent rules within the media organisation.

A senior editor from the English-language broadcasts in ETV tells of the reprisals when he reported on the draft press law in 2003 which had been criticised by the international media community. The then information minister Bereket Simon invited international representatives to Ethiopia, and tried to convince them that the press law was upright. The minister convinced nobody. All representatives that ETV journalists spoke with were critical. Faced with the facts, the editor allowed the sound bite ‘The draft press law is restrictive’ in the presentation on the evening news.

Two days later he was called to the minister’s office, which is located in the same building as ETV.

He tried to be furious at me, but I was really confident. I didn’t lose eye contact with him. He was surprised. “Why did you do that?” he said. “I tried to balance the story. They all believed [the press law] was restrictive. I had to air their views. I balanced the story,” I said. He really started to argue. “This is not an issue of balance. It is the government media, so you have to promote us!” he said’. (ETV editor, November 2007)

This incident illustrates how the perception of ETV as an official channel for the government is well established in the public offices.

Even if the editorial policy demands balance in reporting, the journalist is expected to compromise when he is caught in the conflict between professional standards and expectations from the owner. Professional ethics are indeed present among journalists in the state media, but it is sometimes a courageous task to actually live by these ethics.

### **Active and passive self-censorship**

Interviews with Ethiopian journalists reveal an awareness of a distinction between active and passive self-censorship. Active self-censorship is censorship practices where journalists withhold or alter information already gathered because broadcasting or publishing could lead to unwanted tensions of a political, social or cultural nature. Passive self-censorship, on the other hand, occurs when the journalist or the news desk decides not to cover an issue or begin the collection of certain information. From an ethical point of view, journalists are more troubled by active self-censorship because it puts them in a position where they can easily be recognised as censors openly violating professional norms. Active censorship imposes more responsibility on the journalist, while passive self-censorship is easier to justify because it comes out as an act which is collectively decided by the news desk.

Journalists in the state media also see serious problems with passive self-censorship. An ambitious journalist who has just left ETV regrets that the station purposely avoids many potential stories: "Are there ever stories you can't do? Lots of them. You want to do them, but you can't even ask [your bosses] because you know the response." Passive self-censorship thus prevents reporting the whole picture and is a major factor in the increasing dissatisfaction among journalists.

### **Adopting the unwanted practices**

The interviews confirm that reporters and editors adopt routine behaviour that frequently collides with their view of professional journalism standards. Characteristically, the informants will indicate that the adoption of the state media's way of doing journalism comes "naturally" as they enter the organisation. Several informants recall an initiation period of a few weeks when they were tutored by older journalists. One informant who has climbed the ranks in ETV explains how new journalists are introduced to the organisation:

On the first day in the station, they don't even try to let you know how ETV works. You just learn from seniors, from colleagues. They attach you to a senior reporter and you'll go with him for a week. The coming week you go alone. [...] When you do something wrong, something that is against the editorial policy, only then do you read the editorial policy. (ETV department head, November 2007)

The trainee period in the *Ethiopian Herald* is similar, according to one informant who has had various reporter and editorial positions in the newspaper and in ENA:

When you start, you will be given stories to read. For some weeks, months, they simply tell you to read. It gives you an idea on how stories are written. You follow their steps. (*Ethiopian Herald* editor, November 2007)

Interestingly, both these informants have later become tutors for new junior reporters who come into the organisation. Hence the routines are reproduced and arguably reinforced.

Warren Breed, in his classic social control theory of the newsroom (1955), suggests that news production is governed by a complex set of social factors and that journalists are adopted into an established news production culture as they enter the particular organisation. Breed argues that the socialisation process in the newsroom is usually covert and that the adoption of routine behaviour results in cultural patterns that can be traced in the newsrooms. There are then certain factors which prevent the "potentially intransigent staffer" from performing acts of deviance, which Breed sees as a more moral route for the journalist. All of the six factors Breed identifies are present in the Ethiopian news room, but institutional authority and sanctions are a major influence in the culture of self-censorship. The fear of such sanctions is prevalent and is a restraint in itself.

It is important to note that journalists in the Ethiopian state media are not only members of a society where the government has an active role in all facets of public life but also members of a professional association. This may be one of the reasons why the journalists continue to work in a media organisation where the government monitors the content, even if they fervently disagree with this practice from a professional perspective. One can detect a simultaneous socialisation into the state media culture and also a socialisation into their professional association upholding their normative view on how

journalism should be performed if the environment were conducive. This constant contradiction adds to the deep sense of dissatisfaction among Ethiopian journalists.

### **Differences between print and broadcasting media**

Of the three media institutions under scrutiny, the *Ethiopian Herald* seems to enjoy more political liberty than ETV and ENA. As a newspaper it is more likely to be compared with the private media outlets, and the *Herald* is, after all, an English-language newspaper with very limited circulation among the Ethiopian public. It may also be that the *Ethiopian Herald* is partly aimed at the international community and attempts to be a showcase to the outside world. However, the Amharic sister paper to *Ethiopian Herald*, *Addis Zemen*, also appears to uphold a journalistic tradition of greater freedom than ETV and ENA. The editor-in-chief of the *Ethiopian Herald*, who sarcastically calls his newspaper a “mere government office”, claims that there is not a single party member in his publication. He claims, however, that in state broadcasting there are “a lot of cadres”.

The editor-in-chief of the *Ethiopian Herald* conveys the impression that he demands high journalistic quality in the articles published, always verifying facts and telling the truth. He openly admits, however, that his publication is a government outlet and that people read it as such. He has still allowed himself on a few occasions to be critical towards the government in his commentaries on page three, and maintains that he has not received any negative feedback for that.

Journalists, however, continue to refrain from critical coverage or commentaries on the government because they “know what type of reactions to expect”. Interviewees say that this is simply part of the adaptation process as they learn how to write and report in the government media. They develop a gut feeling which helps them to edit and select the news in ways that make it less controversial for both owners and audience. The editing and news selection, they argue, are actually not primarily aimed at promoting the government directly, but used to prevent conflict and give the impression of national progress.

“The pressure on me is ‘indirect,’” says a senior editor in the *Ethiopian Herald*. No instructions come from the general management directly, but editors find them out from their immediate superiors. Self-censorship is thus executed on many levels, from the editor-in-

chief, through his deputies and down to the reporters' level. A senior reporter indicates that even an official who is interviewed will execute some type of self-censorship by filtering the information according to government expectations. The news dissemination process is permeated by self-moderation; it is a culture of self-censorship.

Self-censorship practices "exclude the unexpected". The result is often news reports which are predictable and uninteresting to the viewers/readers. The news is staged and the pre-production of the news is sometimes staged as well. Informants tell about ministerial press conferences where reporters are given lists of pre-prepared questions from the editors. The questions actually come from the ministry which sent them out in the first place. A reporter from the *Ethiopian Herald* recalls a press conference in the Ministry of Transport, where a ETV reporter had already asked his prepared questions. To save the situation the *Herald* reporter made up his own questions. The minister was surprised that someone was not following the script. "I could read from his face that he was not happy," the reporter recalls.

### **Discourses of retribution**

Journalists typically explain self-censorship as fear of retribution if they allow stories critical about the government. The retribution they fear ranges from losing their job to getting a salary deduction. When asked if this has happened to anybody in their news organisation, they will typically confirm: "Oh, yes." However, when asked to be more specific, they get hesitant. They fear even to talk about it.

An editor from ENA began saying that "a lot of journalists in the organisation have been fired because of their beliefs". When being asked to tell about ENA journalists who were fired, he began to back off:

Uhm. In terms of the journalists, the organisation doesn't react like that. Sometimes they penalise a few. I think one or two during the elections [were penalised]. When it comes to firing, it doesn't apply directly. (ENA editor, January 2008)

Warning letters are another form of retribution that is mentioned by several of the informants (although only experienced by one), but one senior editor in ETV points out that oral warnings are more common. The warnings will carry a message of potential retribution if the

incident recurs and make the institutional expectations clear to the journalists.

The actual incidents of retribution seem to be few, but the discourses of retribution are many. The persistent talk of retribution and penalties among the journalists probably contributes to cementing an editorial culture which stimulates journalists to be on the safe side rather than challenging the status quo.

### **Ethical justifications for self-censorship**

If the individual journalist rejects self-censorship as unethical, what is the reasoning process that in the end seems to justify the practice or at least enables one to live in peace with one's conscience. The interviews make clear that Ethiopian journalists esteem a professional truth telling identity, but also indicate four ethical justifications of self-censorship practices (Skjerdal, 2008).

#### **1. Freedom within the space of editing**

Many have difficulty distinguishing self-censorship from editing. One interviewee said, "It is a way of checking and cross-checking what has been written or produced before it is published or broadcast". Another suggested, "It is better to call it a very strict editing". Another said, "For me, self-censorship means to save oneself from making any mistakes", (quoted in Nebiyu, 2008: 22).

The blurred boundaries between self-censorship and editing suggest that the censorship practices have been internalised into the news production processes. The type of self-censorship that the informants refer to is thought of as less serious than leaving out vital facts or directly misleading the public. Journalists adopt pragmatic strategies to get around institutional constraints while at the same time staying within the limits of acceptable journalism ethics. Often, the principle of balance or fairness leads to leaving out sharper criticism. At times, the demands of objectivity or sufficient evidence is a type of editing justification.

Avoiding excessive controversy in situations of political instability is another justification. "We don't lie, by the way," says one senior editor in ETV who is critical of the self-censorship in the station. "But we hide facts". He would not allow criticism from the opposition to be aired and would justify this in the name of editing. A typical example is the refusal by ETV and ENA to report objectively an opposition political

rally during the 2005 national elections. The number of participants was thought to be up to 2 million, while the state media reported the number as between 1.2 and 1.5 million. For some this is a lie, but as a journalist with the *Ethiopian Herald* said who was asked if they sometimes publish lies: "No, actually not. But we quote official sources".

## **2. Responsibility removed from the individual to the institution**

In a state media organisation the selection tends to be made by the institution rather than the individual. Many do not necessarily personally subscribe to the established reporting practices of the institution. This makes it easier to justify unethical practices such as the customary self-censorship.

One senior editor from ETV described how the institution gets forced into positions "They (the managers) are not driven by cheap propaganda. But the system, you know, forces you to get involved in that". He suggests that the editors are not in agreement with what the system allows, but in front of the organisation, they must concede to the "system".

This opens up the question of dissidence by individual journalists working in the state media. Although journalists would prefer to oppose political corruption, avoiding confrontations with superiors is obviously more convenient. Helge Rønning (2005, p. 172) proposes that journalists around Africa believe there are far more limitations to critical reporting than is actually the case. The interviews suggest that the false assumption of opposition from editors and managers or false fear of reprisals from politicians leads to self-censorship.

## **3. The audience's critical reading of the state media**

Journalists working in the state media assume that readers know the bias of state media and are not fooled by the evident self-censorship. An ETV editor said rather nonchalantly, "When we cover politics, people consider it as in the interest of the government". In this view, every medium has its philosophy and its bias, and the journalists accept to be part of this. The public accepts it in order to see the different political perspectives in the media.

Although this study does not include audience research, there are good reasons to believe that the Ethiopian public regard the state media

as little more than a mouthpiece for the government. This is particularly true during tense times such as in the aftermath of the 2005 national elections when the government made heavy use of security forces and ETV brought clearly filtered news. Badeso Haji's (2008) reception study of ETV programmes among Afan Oromos found that the audience satisfaction is generally low. This is partly because the audience see the programming as purposely politicised. In another study of ETV, Daniel Bekele (2008) revealed that state television has little knowledge of public satisfaction, and fails to deal with audience responses and complaints. Ethiopian journalists accept all this rather fatalistically.

As Ellen Mickiewicz (2000) argues in her studies of Russian media, the public in authoritarian societies has the ability to read between the lines when interpreting media content. There is no reason to believe that the Ethiopian public is less critical.

#### **4. Self-censorship as an ingredient of development journalism**

Ethiopian journalists also justify self-censorship as part of development journalism. Seifu Seyum, head of the programme department at ETV and one of the central leaders in the institution, refers to development journalism when being asked about his view of good journalism: "Good journalism should reflect the reality of society. That is the philosophy of development journalism. Fairness. Respecting and serving the public".

One editor in ETV had the opportunity to go to China for two months to receive further training, where he was also briefed in development journalism.

I had the opportunity to see how important good media are. All media in China are government-owned, of course, but they are good. They take part in shaping the society, contributing to development, international relations, moral issues. I could see how development journalism can contribute. If the institution conducts good journalism, it is possible for government media to be good.

At the same time, development journalism is a debated activity in Ethiopia and has been criticised for paving the way for sunshine stories and uncritical reporting. An ETV producer was sharply critical of development journalism programming which he called "simply paraphrasing, not reporting".

Development journalism is widely debated in Africa (see Wimmer and Wolf, 2005; Banda, 2006), and it opens up to all the practices of self-censorship: slanted editing, biased news selection, and uncritical acceptance of government handouts. One reporter expressed a preference for development journalism and maintains that the most important issue for the state media is to promote peace and development. When asked if promoting peace is more important than reporting the inefficiency, poor services and corruption of the government, he says: "Sometimes". If a journalist adopts this line of ethical rationalisation, self-censorship can gradually be justified as ethically permissible.

### **Conclusion**

The interviews with this sample of journalists working in state media in Ethiopia reveal a relatively widespread passive acceptance of the news distortion in self-censorship. Moreover, the professional associations do not seem to be taking any significant measures to correct this. This study aims simply to document the newsroom practices, but it is still useful to take a broader view and ask how serious a threat self-censorship is for the role media are expected to play in the development of societies respecting human rights and greater wealth distribution.

It is often assumed that self-censorship practices in the newsroom lead to a less informed or ill-informed public and that African citizens do not have the information they need to govern the nation (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 72; Van der Veur, 2002, p. 90; Eribo and Jong-Ebot, 1997). There is much evidence to support this. At the same time, the practice always seeks a type of double-effect justification such as national unity or support of development goals. Journalists seem to justify, under the circumstances, passive self-censorship, but reject open active self-censorship. Much more attention needs to be given to the forms of distortion of information which this is causing.

The deeper problem may be the inadequate systems of governance not only in Ethiopia but throughout Africa. Philip Ochieng (1992, p. 20) notes that editors and journalists always have to step back from saying the truth because of direct or indirect reprisals. This built-in injustice spreads throughout the society, and the developing resentment can be the cause of explosions such as occurred in Kenya in 2007.



In a broader perspective, both geographically and historically, it is interesting to read what Louise Bourgault wrote in a 1993 analysis of press freedom in Africa:

According to L. John Martin (1983), most of the censorship in African news media is self-censorship. Self-censorship happens for the same reasons it happens everywhere else – fear: fear of loss of livelihood, loss of liberty, and sometimes, loss of life. But self-censorship occurs in Africa all too easily for another good reason. There is no tradition of Press Freedom on the continent. (Bourgault, 1993, p. 69)

In light of the present study of self-censorship in Ethiopia, it is evident that the ‘fear factor’ plays a central role as a motivator for the practice. However, the study also reveals that the *discourses* of fear are more important than fear in itself, and that the journalists can name only a few examples of significant punishment after all. It may therefore be argued that the lack of a press freedom tradition is still a major reason for self-censorship, at least when it comes to the Ethiopian state media. At that point it is easy to blame the existence of the unwanted practices on the overall organization, politicized as it is, but it is only appropriate to ask whether the journalism community also contributes to reinforcing the practices by not engaging in a stronger resistance based on professional journalism values.

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*Note: Ethiopian references are listed according to Ethiopian name tradition, i.e. the first name is the primary reference and the father’s name is added for clarification purposes.*



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**(Footnotes)**

Institutional authority and sanctions; feelings of obligation and esteem for superiors; mobility aspirations; absence of conflicting group allegiance; the pleasant nature of journalistic activity; and the fact that news becomes a value in itself



TERJE S. SKJERDAL

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# Establishing Journalistic Standards in the Ghanaian Press

By Africanus Diedong

## Abstract

This article documents how journalists worked to improve the journalistic standards in Ghana in the years from 1980 to the late 1990s in the face of the attempts of the political leadership in Ghana to manipulate and repress press freedom. The major premise of the research carried out in 2005 is that the improvement of ethical standards of journalists begins with the decisions of committed journalists in the daily routine of the newsroom to make the press a support of democratic governance and defence of human rights. These efforts move from personal values to establishing a professional culture through professional associations, the socialisation of young journalists in newsrooms, involvement in the training of journalists in academic institutions and in-service workshops, and working with government regulatory and complaints commissions. The research began with newsroom observations of two leading newspapers, interviews with leaders in journalistic reform and then finally focused on in-depth interviews with a sample of four journalists widely reputed by colleagues to be noteworthy in establishing standards. The interviews used life-history and professional history methods to permit these journalists to describe how they defined ethical norms in the process of routine news reporting.

**Key words:** journalistic standards, newsroom ethics, professional journalist associations, media ethics, codes of media ethics.

## Introduction

The 1960s to the 1990s were crucial times in many African countries for establishing professional standards of journalism. All of the institutions of the nation-state were being established, and the press, both government and private, was emerging as an important actor in establishing patterns of governance. The “profession” of journalism was coming into existence in the news institutions, but especially with the establishment of journalistic training institutes and, in some cases, academic degree programmes. There were moves to introduce professional associations with their codes of ethics, media councils and other institutions of regulation and self-regulation.

### Autobiographical note

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Although virtually all African countries introduced constitutions of democratic governance, in most cases this became some form of neo-patrimonial state: one-party government, dictatorial presidents or, often, very repressive military governments. In this context journalists often became the “voice of the people” protesting against the many forms of denial of human and civil rights. This confrontation between journalists and centres of power became the crucible in which journalistic standards were formulated in many national contexts.

The informal and formal professional associations played an important role in establishing journalistic standards. It is the thesis of the present article, however, that the central actors in creating guiding principles of journalism ethics adapted to African contexts are journalists making decisions in the daily routines of newsrooms. Especially important are journalists of outstanding professional character who provide leadership in the news organisations and influence what events become matters of public discussion. Some of these leading journalists may get to key editing or managing positions and some proprietors play a key role in setting journalistic standards, but often the “ordinary” journalist has considerable freedom, especially in the African newsroom context, for deciding what is to become news and how it is to be presented. Ultimately, it is the individual journalist making personal decisions about journalistic values who provides leadership for the collective decisions of professional associations, codes of ethics and the ideals of journalistic training.

#### *Ghana as a case study of establishing professional journalistic standards*

Although all African countries have had their own historical process of establishing a collective professional culture of journalism, Ghana is a particularly interesting case. The Gold Coast of Western Africa has had a long and active history of newspapers beginning in the nineteenth century (Anoka, 1997, pp. 8-11). The press in Ghana played a relatively important role in the independence movement and in establishing a national political culture. The University of Ghana established an academic degree programme in journalism and communication studies very early after independence, and graduates with a professional identity began to be active in the newspapers and broadcasting institutions in the 1970s.

The capacity for developing standards of journalism was certainly present in Ghana by the end of the 1970s. The catalyst was the repressive measures against the press by the Rawlings military government from December 1981 to May 1992 (Anoka & Osei-Mensah, 1986; Anoka & Salwen, 1988; Anoka, 1997; Boafo, 1985). The absence of overt political parties opened a space for the press, especially at the very end of the Rawlings regime. In the view of Clement Asante, the fact that the opposition political parties boycotted the national elections in 1992 and 1993 meant that the press became the unofficial voice of opposition defining the kind of democratic governance Ghanaians wanted (1996, p. 112). That the two leading national newspapers, the *People's Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times* alone, not to mention the many other smaller newspapers, had a combined circulation in the mid-1990s of 230,000, suggests the relative importance of the press at least in the major urban areas (Asante, 1996, p. 125). The lifting of the ban against private media in 1992 permitted the emergence of dozens of small newspapers which were often little more than an angry, irresponsible use of a sudden new freedom. The excesses of this scurrilous press showed another extreme to be avoided (Koomson, 1996). Many of the practicing journalists in Ghana formed their standards during and especially at the end of the period of the Rawlings military government. This was the period when journalists in Ghana were trying to understand what press freedom with social responsibility might mean in the Ghanaian context.

The Ghana Journalist Association (GJA), organised in the early 1980s, incorporated most of the practicing journalists at the time and developed a code of ethics that all members were expected to follow. In 1985, at the height of the most repressive period of the Rawlings regime, the GJA initiated the annual "Award of Distinction", the "Journalist of the Year" and citations for excellence in different genres of journalism (Koomson, 1996, p. 58). The GJA introduced an Ethics Committee, and the presence of this committee helped to formulate a discourse of what is good journalism. The GJA published in 1992 a strong public condemnation of the worst violations of responsible journalism when freedom of the press was re-introduced. The former president of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA), Kabral Blay-Amihere, is credited not only with improving the professional training and socialisation of young journalists, but with revitalising the

Association to “provide a bulwark for the defence and promotion of democracy and development” (Hasty, 2005).

Very important in the formation of a professional ethos among journalists in Ghana were the contacts with international agencies such as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Nieman scholarships at Harvard University in the US, and visiting lecturers in the universities or in short workshops.

Also of some importance was the Private Newspaper Publishers Association of Ghana, which has a code of ethics, an ethics committee and from time to time deals with public complaints against a given newspaper or against the industry as a whole (Koomson, 1996, p. 62).

The National Media Commission (NMC) was introduced as a formal measure of the Constitution of 1992 to defend press freedom. The idea of an independent body to protect press freedom, especially for journalists working in the state-owned media, was first adopted in the 1979 Constitution, but the NMC was formally inaugurated only in 1993 by an Act of Parliament in compliance with Chapter 12 of the 1992 Constitution. The NMC has a full-time secretariat and a Complaints Settlement Committee, and in its first two years of operation dealt with one hundred complaints (Koomson, 1996, p. 61). The NMC issued a series of public reprimands of offending media, and the reports of the formal hearings of the complaints were also publicised.

Giving energy to all these efforts to improve standards were the efforts of individual journalists. Some of these, such as Paul Ansah, were very well known internationally, but many were quite typical journalists of Ghana at the time. The premise of the present study is that establishing a journalistic culture must begin with the decisions and actions based on the values and character of individual journalists. Most outstanding journalists would never be aware that they might be raising standards. They simply do what they think is right and what they enjoy with the zest of life in the routine work of the newsroom. The norms come out of the preferences in selecting news stories, defending personal convictions before editors in the newsroom, calculating the possibilities of reprisals from the powerful and writing in a way that will mobilise public opinion in support of one's news values. The present study has carried out in-depth interviews with journalists who have a reputation of journalistic leadership in order to discover how they established what they considered important standards of good journalistic practice. Never was the question of

journalistic standards mentioned, but as they told the stories of their journalistic lives they touched on what they considered significant journalistic achievements. When these were mentioned, the interviewees were invited to recount in much more detail these experiences in order to analyse the elements of journalistic standards implied in these experiences.

Before giving more detail of the methodology of the study carried out in 2005, it is important to present the concept of the process of establishing journalistic standards which guided the interviewing and then was used in the analysis of the interviews.

### *The process of raising journalistic standards*

This study has focused on a central question: What moves a journalist to begin to want to raise journalistic standards and how does this personal motivation expand into collective action by concerned colleagues?

If one examines the lives of journalistic personalities who have often spent a good period of their professional employment or even an entire life trying to establish a journalistic culture that makes a significant contribution to a society, one finds at the core of their personal motivations a deep sense of compassion for those who are undergoing unnecessary human suffering at the hands of the people around them (Pippert, 1989). It is an entering into the suffering of others caused by greed, injustice, prejudice or any of a host of antisocial behaviours that could be controlled or changed. It is this sense of compassion, the ability to enter into the feelings and perspectives of others which contemporary moral philosophers such as Habermas (1990, pp. 162-168) say is at the centre of moral development. It is an awareness of the dignity of the human person that Clifford Christians (2008, pp. 16-17) and Herman Wasserman (2008, pp. 74-89) argue is the foundation of media ethics. Virtually all great moral philosophers—Kant would be just one example—have located the beginnings of the moral sense in the ability to put oneself in the position of those who are treated in an inhuman fashion and ask what I would feel and think if I were to be treated in that fashion. Those who were close to the Ghanaian journalist Paul Ansah noted that when he said, “I am going to go to town on what those people are doing”, this was coming from the sense of compassion that Ansah had for the suffering of people caused by the unjust actions of the powerful. The cry, “You can’t do this to human

beings”, sums well this the beginning of motivations of those who want to give journalism a strong ethical structure.

A second characteristic of journalists who define standards is having strong, unswerving convictions regarding one’s own values (Klaidman and Beauchamp, 1987). They are persons of independence of convictions in the face of pressures in the newsroom. They are also independent regarding the pressures of the powerful in the society, especially those who hold the state power of physical coercion, and they maintain sceptical independence regarding sources of information. They are persons of character, but, as James Q. Wilson observes regarding character, they are people of empathy, understanding others (1995, p. 5). Their convictions are not derived from their own self interests, but rather because they carry with them the constant image of the needs, suffering and injustices of the people. They are deeply aware of the contradictions of African societies which proclaim independence and justice for African people and yet have some of the greatest gaps of wealth and power in the world. In Africa people of conviction are people of proverbs, well-versed in the proverbs of popular culture but also of the great literary personalities and philosophers. People of conviction are aware of their communities of reference which may be ethnic origin, religious background, or professional associations (Appiah, 2005). They are slow to jump on every bandwagon, but give the impression of self-control because they tend to think of the long-term consequences (Wilson, 1995, p. 5; 1993. pp 79-98).

The process of questioning existing standards and beginning to imagine a different order of newsroom ethics is often likely to begin in informal conversations with close colleagues, especially age cohorts formed in the early years of entry into journalistic practice. Journalists know too much, suffer too much and live too much in an emotionally charged environment to open up except to the closest of friends. When one is “down”, the support comes from personal friends in the occupation. A third source of motivation to set standards are these moments of very personal sharing of intuitions. In the awareness of the contradictions of the journalistic occupation, a concept of what “should be” begins to be formulated. The pain of seeing editors proclaim honesty, truthfulness and independence and then see them so compromised by political and commercial interests comes out in these personal conversations. The single most important reason why

journalists persist in an occupation that is so badly paid, under such pressure from special interests and often so badly treated in newsrooms is the support of close friends.

A fourth source of concepts of journalistic standards is a strong sense of democratic procedures (Hyden, Leslie & Ogundimu, 2002). Gans in his classic study of newsrooms, *Deciding what's news*, affirms that "altruistic democracy" is a central set of values in news making (1980, pp. 43-45), and he has continually evaluated news making in terms of its contribution to the development of democracy (2003). Young people interested in journalism are much attracted to an occupation that is active in the public sphere and is close to major societal problems, political decisions and debates in civil society. Good journalists generally have a stronger sense of due process of law and legal violations, a stronger sense of human rights, and a stronger awareness that, finally, the citizens are the ones to make the decisions of the nation. This fuels a desire to make elected officials accountable, transparent and honest. There is a strong awareness of the public's right to know and the need to bring the civil society into the news. The good journalist also is aware that the media have a role in redistribution of wealth as fundamental for a democracy.

If the major site of reform of journalistic standards is the newsroom and the ethos of the newsroom, then it is obvious that the good journalist has a life commitment to the welfare and ideals of the newsroom (Joseph, 1999). This entails a strong sense of disciplined loyalty to colleagues, editors, management and proprietary interests. One of the finest descriptions of how a newsroom functions as a team is Woodward and Bernstein's description in *All the president's men* of how the *Washington Post* built its case in the Watergate affair (1974).

A sixth source of motivations to raise professional standards is a strong commitment to the profession as such and to professional associations. Abbott, in his study of the sociology of professional codes of ethics (1981), shows that the leaders in professional associations and in the formulation of codes of ethics are almost always those who are exemplary in their exercise of professional ideals and those who are concerned about the general status of the profession. The leaders in raising standards are, not surprisingly, the recipients of awards for outstanding professional practice. They are concerned that the journalistic profession is so often looked down on by other professions and distrusted—even despised—by the general public

(Retief, 2002, pp. viii-x). There is a strong desire to raise the status of the profession because this will enable the profession to have higher regard in the local and national communities and to gain the public trust in the credibility of journalists. This concern for the profession often leads journalistic reformers to begin journalism training institutes, introduce practical workshops, encourage the development of academic degree programmes in journalism and support the organisation of media monitoring bodies such as press councils and complaints commissions (Boafo, 1988).

Finally, the very best of journalistic activity is often brought out in moments of major social, political and cultural conflict in a society when there is flagrant oppression and denial of human rights. The wrongs of the powerful become evident and the need to take a strong and clear public stand is much greater. In these moments pointing out injustices objectively, accurately and with vivid description becomes especially important. Using the rhetorical skills of good journalism to move public opinion to demand social and political change is particularly important. These historic moments are times when the norms of journalism are formulated and institutionalised (Evenson, 2005). This development of journalistic norms at times of political conflict is documented by Omu (1978) in his history of the development of the press in colonial Nigeria and by Ogbondah(1993) in his history of the confrontation of the media and the military in Nigeria from the 1960s to the 1990s.

### *The methodology of the study*

The focus of this study is a series of in-depth interviews with selected journalists, but leading up to the interviews was a series of stages from the most general level of observation of the decision-making process of journalists in newsrooms in Ghana down to the detailed account of specific episodes which revealed the journalistic standards.

The first stage was a participant observation of news-making practices in two newspapers considered typical of the quality "independent newspaper" which is the site of work of the journalists selected for personal interviews. The observations of the practices in the newsrooms along with the theoretical framework of the process of raising journalistic standards were a guide in the personal interviews and in the analysis of the data from the interviews.

The second stage was a narrowing of the focus to the life histories and practices of four journalists considered “leaders in setting standards” by many journalists in Ghana. The selection was based on observations in the newsrooms and on interviews with editors, but especially on a few confidential interviews with lecturers at the Ghana Institute of Journalism and with the director of the Ghana Chapter of Transparency International. To avoid personalistic influences in the selection, an important criterion was public recognition indicated in an award for excellence by the Ghana Association of Journalists. As with all outstanding journalists, however, not a few of the actions of those interviewed are debated by friends and foes alike. The interviews, carried out in a private context where the interviewees could speak more freely, began with general questions about their life as journalists. Questionnaires and interview schedules were not used so that the interviewees could structure the life histories in terms of what *they* considered important in their personal world views.

The third stage was a still more focused set of questions on (1) how they selected news stories and some examples of this, (2) how they find and relate to sources, (3) how they deal with issues of objectivity and truth telling, (4) how they maintain good relations with the media organisation, and (5) how they relate to their professional associations. These questions usually led into personal narratives of episodes which revealed their journalistic standards.

The fourth stage was to elicit, with the above-described aspects of the process of raising standards in mind, a detailed account of what the interviewees considered memorable achievements in their journalistic careers. It is important to repeat that they never considered themselves to be “raising standards” but, in fact, given the esteem of their colleagues, the awards they have received and their activities in drawing up codes of ethics or serving on evaluating boards, their personal standards do have a wider influence.

The interviews brought out a wealth of detail of journalistic achievements, but six accounts are presented here as a basis for more detailed analysis of the journalistic values implied in each episode. These are presented as an integral narrative within the life history of each interviewee to show how norms emerge out of the values, character and working context of a journalist. All interviewees agreed to the publication of these descriptions. From these episodes it was

possible to draw out the fifteen major dimensions of journalistic standards presented in the conclusions.

*The six case studies*

(1) Affirming personal autonomy and convictions in the newsroom in the face of editorial opposition

The first case was recounted by Yaw Boadu Ayebofo working in the government-related newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*. The context was the preparation for the coming elections after the constitutional reforms of 1992. In the process of re-establishing democratic procedures after years of authoritarian, repressive governance it was often difficult for the people of Ghana to imagine how responsible participation should be ensured. This was particularly true among personnel at the *Daily Graphic* which for years thought more of how to blindly support state power rather than how to encourage democratic participation, especially the participation of opposition parties. Ayebofo tells in a vivid way how he wanted to cover the story of the opposition parties and how he confronted this problem with the editor of the *Daily Graphic* regarding this issue.

The chairman of the interim electoral commission had said that political parties were not supposed to campaign until they had registered. I had a different opinion because I thought, "How can they get together if they do not talk".

The editor thought I was stubborn because I had already taken a decision on the issue. For one week I consistently brought stories on the issue to the editorial conference. The editor got very angry with me. He finally told me to go back to the electoral commissioner and find out whether my viewpoint was right.

I contacted the electoral commissioner and he said that, in fact, other newspapers had already discussed the same issue. I became convinced that not only was our newspaper afraid to support more democratic procedures, but that our newspaper was losing out to other newspapers because of our cowardice and subservience. I could not imagine myself being associated with such a newspaper. When I came back to the newsroom, I wrote a letter of resignation.

When the editor got my letter and read it, he wrote a response that is one of the best testimonials that I can take anywhere. The editor wrote, "Of all the senior journalists at this newspaper, you are the one that I feel so much confidence in. Even if I am not in the office, I know that you would do the right thing. So, if sometimes things get out of hand, you

should not take it personally. You should take it as a hazard of the tension of the work”.

Ayeboafoh then went on to explain the “philosophy of journalism” that has guided his life regarding good relations with his employers and editors, using in characteristic African style reference to his favourite cultural heroes and appropriate proverbs.

I do not believe that because I work for the government [the *Daily Graphic* is a government-owned newspaper], I should necessarily sing their praise. My fundamental belief is underlined by what Chinua Achebe said about the individual who owns the cock in the community. When it crows in the morning, it becomes the property of all. In Achebe’s words, “The cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household, but its voice is the property of the whole neighbourhood”. So my belief is that, regardless of who owns the cock, it serves the good of the community in which it is found. This is the core belief that I have canvassed and shared with the people. Their interests [of the people] are the things that should inform [us journalists] on the things we write about. The primary interest of every journalist must be the public interest.

It is good to be free. But as a journalist, how are you using the freedom to the benefit of the larger society? Are you using the freedom simply because it is freedom and therefore you [as an individual are free] or because you are free to do a lot of things for the people?

The first important aspect of character brought out in this case is the unswerving commitment to what one considers important personal values and the commitment to personal freedom to act on convictions, personal integrity and autonomy. But, secondly, there is a commitment to work with the media organisation with honesty, transparency and cooperation. The response of the editor revealed an important aspect of work in the newsroom, the absolute trust in the loyalty that the editor must have in all the journalists of the media organisation. This relationship must be one of collegial mutual respect. A third noteworthy aspect is the sense of the important procedural aspects of a democracy and the importance of educating the public, the government officials and even the political leaders as to what a democracy is about. A fourth aspect of the character of this journalist is that he has rooted his habitual newsroom behaviour in a philosophy of freedom for service, and he appeals to the authority of Chinua Achebe as an exponent of African values of communication. A fifth notable

aspect of the episode is the wonderful gentlemanly attitude of the editor who was demanding that nothing be published that is not fully verified but had the humble honesty to recognise the value of what Ayebofoh was insisting on.

(2) Discovering relevant human rights issues

Yaw Boadu Ayebofo recounted another episode which brings out another important dimension of the character of an outstanding journalist: a deep human compassion for victims of human rights violations. This case came in response to the question of how he discovers what he thinks are good news stories.

There was an issue about the “witches’ home”, which I saw as a violation of the rights of elderly women. We went to Bimbilla in the northern region of Ghana. In the night, I heard a gong-gong [drumbeats]. I wanted to find out the significance of it because I was excited.

The District Chief Executive of Bimbilla told me that there was a strange disease in Bimbilla, and they suspected that the witches were responsible. The gong-gong was beaten to call out all women of a certain age. They were to gather under a certain old tree to be sent to the witches’ home.

I was disturbed. He realised that I was developing some [sympathetic] interest on the issue so he decided not to talk to me. I tried to talk to a number of people and everybody was very evasive about it.

When I returned to the office in Tamale [the northern regional capital], I learned that there about three “witches” homes’ in the region. I asked, “What do they do there?” Everybody was reluctant to explain to me what goes on in these homes.

I did not have enough information to write a straight news report. I decided to write a feature article and compared what happened in the southern part of Ghana, where witches have to declare themselves as witches, against what I was seeing [in the North]—where people were pronounced “witches” just because they are old.

Two weeks after the story was published I received a call from the Department of Social Welfare in Tamale. They wanted to know where the “witches’ home” was located. I told them, “I do not know. I should rather come to you to find out about the location of the ‘witches’ home”. From this development they also started their own investigations.

Subsequently, the Catholic Relief Services decided to offer some material assistance for these so-called witches. Currently these poor

elderly women are receiving a lot of support as a result of the issue that has been raised in the public domain.

This case brings out, in addition to the sense of human compassion and an habitual awareness of human rights issues, the persistence in the face of resistance and insensitivity of officialdom that is necessary for investigative reporting in Africa. The agile switch from news reporting to the feature was effective because it eventually moved public opinion and moved the relevant agencies to act.

(3) How to critically evaluate presidents—and live to tell the story

In Ghana many journalists and editors have the reputation of being in the employ of political parties and make little pretence of being objective, fair, and balanced. This has damaged the reputation of the news media and the journalistic occupation in general. How politically independent journalists should be is a matter of some discussion in Africa. Some argue that model of the involvement of the press in politics in Africa is closer to the model of Mediterranean or polarised pluralist model that Hallin and Mancini propose as one of the legitimate modes of relationship of media and politics (2004). The polarised-pluralist model is said to be particularly relevant for Africa because it assumes the characteristics of low literacy, the strong role of the state, instrumentalisation of the press, clientelism and lower professionalisation of journalists. The majority of media theorists and journalists in Africa argue for a greater degree of independence of journalists with the press demanding greater accountability and responsibility from political leaders.

Ayebofoh has the reputation of being politically independent and is for this reason highly regarded in Ghana not only by fellow journalists but by many public leaders. During the military government of Rawlings the regime forbade all political reporting. Ayebofoh thinks that if many journalists fear to speak out about corruption and abuse, how does the journalist maintain a position of forthright criticism?

Generally, Ayebofoh noted, journalists cannot be apolitical.

However, we should not be partisan in the things we do. We should be very open and broad-minded. For example, at the peak of the repressive revolution [of Jerry Rawlings] in the early 1980s I wrote some articles

that were very critical of the government. I was never arrested by anybody.

When the then military leader of Ghana, Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings went to the Ghana Trade Fair Centre he spoke loosely and disparagingly about the Apino Soap products [displayed at the trade fair] because he assumed that the proprietor of the industry would use the profit to support an opposition political party. I felt it was unfair, and I decided to take on Rawlings. I wrote in an article that a head of state must be the first person to promote local industries. I criticised him for saying that people should not be buying Apino Soap because it belongs to a person of the opposition party. If that is the case, 'Why are we talking about the "Ghanaianisation" of industries? Rawlings' comments caused fear in people associated with the owner of Apino Soap and within a month after this remark by Rawlings the Apino Soap industry collapsed.

Ayebofoh emphasises that, in dealing with news sources, it is important for journalists to exhibit professional integrity. Again he bases his philosophy in Achebe as a major African thinker:

A journalist worth his salt should never allow news sources to corrupt him. Neither should they accept bribes in the course of their duties. I have read Achebe's *A Man of the People* and learned something from it. The so-called "man of the people" that Achebe writes about, paying off his followers all the time, is a very bad politician who does not do anything right. With journalists, the first thing after a news event, he makes sure that he gives some money to them and when they are going away he will tell the people, "You see these people? If I do not give them some money, they would write some nonsense about me". And the journalists accept it. That attitude of journalists was very wrong.

Boadu-Ayebofoh also considers the mutual support of journalists very important in sustaining their personal integrity. Prior to taking up the post of executive secretary of the Ghana Media Commission from 1999 to 2003, he was vice president of the Ghana Journalist Association. For years he has been an active member of the GJA, affirming that "membership in the GJA enables journalists to learn from each other. It also enables me to reach out to my colleagues because, as you interact with them, you are not regarded as an alien. The seminars and workshops organised by the GJA on pertinent topics are useful in enhancing the standards of media performance. Exposure to all these seminars has had a very positive influence on me".

Important for Ayeboafah also is doing what he can to teach young journalists. He is a part-time lecturer of journalism at the School of Communication Studies at the University of Ghana and at the Ghana Institute of Journalism.

The characteristics of the good journalist in Africa that this episode brings out are, firstly, the *courage* to state publicly that people with public service responsibilities are not living up to these responsibilities. This requires that a journalist have a very clear idea of what is public morality and a supporting moral philosophy, as Ayeboafah seems to have. Also required is the capacity to see when and how a statement should be made so that it will educate the public and raise the state of public morality in the nation. Secondly, Ayeboafah takes a firm stand against any form of bribery, as do all the four journalists of character in this study. He has a strong sense of solidarity with his fellow journalists and wants to act with integrity in order to raise the public respect for the journalist profession as a whole. Thirdly, the good journalist is active in the professional associations and, interestingly, participates to improve his own professional and moral capacities. Finally, Ayeboafah probably does not have to worry so much about his personal support because he is widely recognised as competent and *honest* and has many side jobs such as part-time teaching or is remunerated for a term in an organisation such as the Ghana Media Commission as executive secretary. It is likely that those who have a reputation for accepting bribes or the subventions of political influence—and they are known—will, in fact, be the poorest of the journalists because they are not recognised as competent.

#### (4) Providing needed information but also reinforcing public opinion

News media are constantly trying to decide what the public wants to know or should know, but they also constantly seek to reinforce opinions in favour of justice. Progressives follow progressive media or conservatives seek out conservative media in order to find foundations for their own values and opinions. The journalist who brought out this aspect of the journalist interested in improving standards is Kofi Coomson, the founder and publisher of *The Ghanaian Chronicle*, one of the leading private newspapers in Ghana. Earlier in life, from 1978-1979, he edited *The Nationalist*. In stating the philosophy of his newspaper, Coomson also indicated what line of opinion he intended to reinforce.

What I have brought to the *Ghanaian Chronicle* is the culture of investigative journalism and bold reporting. My four years of journalism experience in Nigeria from the late 1970s to the early 1980s influenced my penchant for investigative journalism. I came back to bring something of the Nigerian spirit of bravado, the spirit of investigative journalism to Ghana.

Coomson recalled the opening editorial of the *Ghanaian Chronicle* when it started in 1991.

I stated that the *Ghanaian Chronicle* was going to promote human rights, be a platform for investigative journalism and pursue corruption wherever it would exist whether in churches, boardrooms or in government. And we will be fearless and give voice to the voiceless.

To fulfil his journalistic mission, Coomson recognised the importance of getting in contact with other reputable journalists in Ghana such as Kabral Blay-Amihere and Paul Ansah. Paul Ansah was teaching and was head of the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Ghana and agreed very reluctantly to write for the newspaper when Coomson contacted him. After a thorough interrogation about the background of Coomson and the type of newspaper he wanted to publish, Ansah gave Coomson his word but with the most ironic proviso: "I will never write politics. In fact, if it is politics count me out. I have been worried about the standard of journalism now and I will be writing on the issue of standards". The irony of Ansah's proviso is that he became one of the strongest political writers in the history of Ghana. Indeed, Ansah became a master of rallying public opinion for a change of the dictatorial government of Rawlings, which came within a year of the founding of the *Ghanaian Chronicle*. Whenever Paul heard of a violation of human rights or some anti-democratic action of Rawlings or other public figure, Ansah's favourite response was, "I am going to go to town on that guy". This later became the title of the collection of some of Ansah's most noteworthy articles and editorials, *Going to Town* (1996). In the view of Coomson, Ansah and other journalists, writing for the *Ghanaian Chronicle* gave a new identity to journalism in Ghana which has continued to the present day.

Coomson said that his vision as a journalist and editor at the *Ghanaian Chronicle* "was that we should be properly independent in every sense of the word and publish the truth at all times regardless of

whatever political party is in power". This immediately brought him into confrontation with the repressive actions of the Rawlings government.

One of the serious violations of the Rawlings government was the prohibition of any public assembly, procession or demonstration - a right which later became important in the 1992 constitution of Ghana. In 1991, when students were protesting the merciless and illegal actions of the government, the disappearance of notable people and other increasingly violent measures, the police gunned down a female student of the Institute of Professional Studies (IPS) during a student demonstration. This was big news at the time, and public opinion in Accra was raised in opposition. Coomson thought that this was an occasion when the newspaper needed to support public opinion.

Nobody knew what the student's status was at the time. There was a news blackout. The government even said that people should stop looking for her. The student had been admitted to the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra. Coomson said that he wanted the public to know the condition of the student. So he went to the hospital and "misrepresented" himself as somebody who was coming from the "castle" and the nurses gave me access to the student. Coomson said he took pictures of her and published them in order to enable the public to know the condition of her health. People thought that she had been killed. The government came out categorically to say that the press should not have gone to the hospital to harass her.

Coomson's article was the only information about the condition of the young student, and the article was widely discussed in the city at the time as "good journalism".

In this case and in other important stories, Coomson said that he had to take risks in getting information that might be considered questionable, but he thought that was justifiable given the general government refusal to give sufficient evidence and justification of its actions. One of these cases was his means of getting the information about the young female student who was wounded in the demonstration.

When the story [about the student's condition in the hospital] was published, the government was angry and the Minister of Health at the time publicly lambasted me. The minister sent me a letter of protest. I responded, "Listen! I told the doctors and nurses that I was from the

'Castle' [The Christianborg castle at Osu in Accra, a colonial building which is the official residence of the president of Ghana]. They did not ask me which castle I was coming from. They just opened the doors for me. If they would have asked me, I would have told them that I was coming from the Elmina castle" [a former slave post in Cape Coast east of Accra]. It was a big joke at the time when the story was published.

Coomson recalled that on another occasion he paid for some documents in a major story. Regarding the question of ethical principles in obtaining public documents in this way, he thought seriously about the matter but his personal conscience led him to think that the government was hiding important information that the public should have. He felt that under the circumstances the action was justified.

I felt that it was important to expose a scandal at the Ghana Petroleum Corporation (GNPC) in 1999. Tsatsu Tsikata, the then-director of the GNPC, wanted to sell the national oil rig—a multi-million dollar asset of Ghana. Tsikata would never give any information to the press about the matter publicly. But I got people at the GNPC to give the information. I paid the people for it and published it.

And to take the matter up a step further, I was so determined to get the information that I actually went to court and sued Tsikata and the entire board of directors of the GNPC. For me the matter was so significant that I wanted to know how much they were going to sell the oil rig for and the reasons for the sale. I used my personal resources in fighting for a national cause. I wanted to get the information into the public domain and stop the sale of an important public asset.

Bribing public officials to get information, even when it is information the government should have given, is ethically a very controversial step. Coomson felt he was justified, and it is likely that virtually all journalists in Ghana supported him in this. Coomson has been a leader in the Ghana Journalist Association and was honoured with the GJA "Journalist of the Year" award in 1993. He received a Neiman Fellowship to study at Harvard University in the US on how to deal with issues such as the typical refusal of African governments to adopt a public information policy of open accountability. Getting information from African governments remains a very controversial ethical matter.

## (5) Defending human rights and peace

Ben Ephson, currently the managing editor of the *Daily Graphic*, a private daily newspaper, believes that “the media can make and unmake a country”. Like many of the more distinguished journalists in Ghana, he has close ties with the world of Anglo-American journalism. He was a correspondent for *West Africa* from 1982-1986, the BBC correspondent for Ghana from 1986-1996, and is currently an Associated Press stringer in Ghana. He is also a member of the Environmental Journalists’ Association in the US and the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) in the US. In 1989 he was honoured with an award from the NAJB for his outstanding work in journalism. He stresses the importance for journalists to read widely in world current affairs and takes advantage of fellowships for study abroad at the BBC or in America when he has the opportunity.

He has been writing for newspapers since he was a boy and as a lawyer he has a sharp awareness of how powerful people in Ghana are violating the law. He covered the Goka trial in the 1980s and reported on the series of tortures that came out in the trial.

One of the victims’ back was cut and given to another person to chew, and another person had his genitals cut and given to someone to chew. This was a clear case of abuse of human rights. No matter how guilty the person is, the case has to go through the due process of the law. I believe the tortures were abusing human rights.

In writing about the violation of human rights, I felt that it was my duty [as a foreign correspondent for the BBC] to let the world know that this was happening, but it is also important to make my country a better place to live in. I kept out the nasty details of the torture.

During the worst days of the Rawlings military government in the early 1980s, the government was setting up Citizen Vetting Committees (CVC) to try people who were alleged to have been involved in criminal activities, but in fact to control those in opposition to the abuses of the government.

As a reporter I had written that people were not tortured in the course of the trials. However, a month later somebody showed a reporter some evidence that people were beaten. I had to write that people who appeared before the CVC were beaten during the heady days of the

military government of Rawlings. As a result of the reporting, the committee stopped beating people who appeared before it.

Like many other journalists attempting to establish standards in Ghana, Ephson has continually reported on the bribery, corruption and inefficiency in the government. But he stressed that journalists must “investigate the issue thoroughly, and when you are ready with the facts, you publish”. But he stressed that often reporters’ hands are tied because journalists in Ghana do not have the legal right to subpoena documents or testimonies. If private documents of the government are somehow obtained, the agency will ask for the name of the people who leaked the documents and punish them. Journalists have to find indirect ways to reveal the illegal measures of high government officials. He cited the case of the revelation in the Ghana newspapers that high government officials were supposedly taking bribes for contracts related to the stadia rehabilitations. One journalist mentioned the names and was sued. Ephson had to be content with a front page headline, “President Kufuor, Open your Eyes on the African Cup of Nations Match 2008 Stadia Rehabilitation”.

Ephson believes that journalists must not only be independent politically, but it is necessary to avoid close ties with social organisations such as the Rotary Club or with particular interest groups of the civil society because “some day you have to do a story on a member of that organisation”. He is active in the Ghana Journalist Association and the Private Newspapers Publishers’ Association of Ghana but beyond this he maintains his independence. His commitments are to the law, the declaration of human rights and the right of free, open debate in society.

#### (6) Drafting and enforcing codes of ethics

Fritz Andoh is regarded as having played an important role in the development of professional journalism norms in Ghana, but in a less dramatic way than those who are actively confronting issues of government accountability and human rights. He was one of the key persons in the drafting of the code of ethics of the Ghana Journalism Association (GJA) in August 1994, was the former Vice Chairman of the Ethics Committee of the GJA, and is a member of the National Media Commission. He has been a resource person for many workshops organised by the Ghana News Agency, the GJA and the

Friedrich Ebert Foundation. He teaches at the Ghana Institute of Journalism and is involved in producing the *Media Monitor*, the quarterly magazine of the National Media Commission. For many years he worked with the Ghana News Agency in Nairobi. He has a chapter, "Ethics in Newsgathering" in Kasoma's book on *Journalism Ethics in Africa* (1994), still a widely quoted classic in its field.

Andoh helped the Lesotho Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to establish the Lesotho News Agency and served on the task force that developed the All Africa Press Service. Like so many of the other pillars of the Ghana media professionals, he has had many fellowships in international courses and workshops in Europe and America.

Andoh worked for many years in the Ghana News Agency and was a correspondent for the GNA in East Africa for some years. The routine input of a news agency does not provide much scope for major democratic reform, but Andoh does recall that his news story in the *Ghanaian Times* highlighting what he thought was the poor performance of the Ghanaian delegation at the Commonwealth heads of state in Lusaka, Zambia raised the ire of many in the delegation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, wrote back a note congratulating him on the honest report.

Andoh is representative of those journalism professionals in Ghana who think that the way to raise the standards of the profession is to quietly but steadily enforce the codes of ethics and norms of media regulatory agencies in Ghana. He is a devout Catholic (currently editor of the *Catholic Standard* weekly of the Catholic Bishops) and emphasizes the importance of fairness implied in the golden rule. He also emphasises an impartial distance from sources, but always maintaining a gentlemanly respect in all news stories.

Over the last forty years Ghana has emerged from a period of great political instability and repressive military government to become what many (especially the donor agencies) consider to be one of the models of democratic governance, more efficient administration and economic development in sub-Saharan Africa (Alhassen, 2004). One may be hesitant to hold up any African country as a model after the demise of other "models" such as Cote d'Ivoire and Kenya, but Ghana, also sitting on a powder keg of injustice, offers a somewhat better quality of life at present. The media, especially the press, led by the type of professional journalists described above, are reputed to have made a significant contribution to this development, although it would be

difficult to pin down direct lines of causality. The media policies and legislation in areas of ICT, community radio, and educational media are also highly regarded.

Ghana allows a relatively high degree of media freedom which opens a space for what many consider a disreputable, irresponsible multiplication of cheap tabloid newspapers and magazines (Hasty, 2005). Few notable people in Ghana escape the wild accusations and insinuations in this sector of the media, although many are probably more cautious about their behaviour because of this kind of journalism. One of the young journalistic protagonists of this area of media (name withheld!) made cynical remarks about the need to promote journalistic professionalism. "The license to write and publish does not belong to journalists alone because journalism is about the right to free expression. If you try to insist too much on professionalism you exclude a large part of the population from freedom of expression". He argued that the field should be left open to those who are ready to violate codes of ethics in the name of freedom of expression. And he might have added his support in the name of entrepreneurial endeavour.

*Fifteen dimensions of good standards in journalism*

If the premise of this study is correct—that the moves toward the reform of ethical standards of the media in a given country or region are established largely by people in the media occupations with clear values and ideals—then how would one summarise the major dimensions of "professional ethics" in Ghana? Standards are brought out by responding with unpremeditated idealism to immediate work demands in the newsroom context. For virtually all those interviewed the major context was the repressive use of power in politics, superstition rites, economic greed and other areas of Ghanaian life. The common self concept of these journalists was some form of moral leadership. The following fifteen notable characteristics could very likely be found among outstanding journalists in other countries of Africa:

- (1) Unswerving commitment to personal convictions of right and wrong;

- (2) Honesty, transparency and cooperation within the media organisation;
- (3) Commitment to the procedural aspects of democracy such as participation;
- (4) The grounding of personal convictions in traditions of African moral philosophy;
- (5) Mutual respect and esteem among colleagues, especially by editors;
- (6) Clear ideas of human rights and commitment to uphold them;
- (7) Basing every public statement on ample evidence and fairness;
- (8) The mastery of the genres and rhetoric of journalism, especially the narrative style which fixes responsibility;
- (9) Maintaining independence from all partisan interests in order to critically evaluate all;
- (10) Activity in professional organisations and teaching of young journalists
- (11) Courage in the face of threats of the powerful
- (12) Independence of all influences of sources, especially financial influence;
- (13) Strong awareness of currents of public opinion and ability to move public opinion;
- (14) Continually seeking further education in the profession
- (15) Belief in codes of ethics.

These fifteen characteristics are not a systematic textbook list of ethical norms, but they do describe what have become important dimensions of the normative culture of journalists in Ghana. These are the issues which have been important in the lives of many young journalists and these form the criteria for esteem of outstanding journalists in this particular country. In Ghana, at least, journalists tend to think of themselves as providing an important moral leadership in the country—and their self-concept seems to have considerable justification.

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# Ineffective working groups' communication as a groupthink outcome: The effects of cohesiveness

By Jeremire M. Araka

## Abstract

People work in teams everyday, whether it is in the workplace, the classroom, or in the community—we are all members of some team and we should all understand how they work, and equally important, how to optimize our experiences in them. Some research has suggested that working as a team is more productive and effective than any single individual. But it would be naïve to suggest that all team experiences are positive, and that all group decisions yield positive outcomes.

While research suggests that information processing is the central element in faulty decision-making, some scholars hold that members of a team will take part in more risky activities as a member of the team. Others argue that team members will be more conservative in their communication. Either way, a team is studied as a system and improper communication is explained as a negative outcome of team processing.

Groupthink, on the other hand, is the tendency for highly cohesive teams to lose their critical (objective) evaluative capabilities. In other words, groupthink takes place when the groups have low levels of cohesiveness, and consequently ineffective leadership. This is because an ineffective communication leader either fails in effort to make the group cohesive, or fails to ensure that information is critically evaluated. But in a cohesive group this won't happen because of their vested interests unlike teams that are experiencing groupthink whose members could care less about the group. The new theoretical framework tested in this study offers clear explanations of how and under what circumstances, groups experience groupthink. It offers suggestions about how a group can ensure high quality positive communication outcomes.

**Key words:** cohesiveness , effective communication, poor communication, conformity, team, decision making.

## Introduction

Why do working groups make bad communication decisions? Why are working groups blind when the correct communication solution seems obvious? Are team members too cohesive or are members of a working group afraid to speak up and voice their opinion? Do the

### Autobiographical note

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members of a working group feel like they have to agree with the leader? Why do working groups' members assume that they do not have to be accountable for the working group's communication decisions? Why do working group leaders allow bad communication to prevail?

People work in teams everyday, whether it is in the workplace, the classroom, or in the community—we are all members of some team and we should all understand how they work, and, equally important, how to optimize our experiences in them. Research has suggested that working as a team is more productive and effective than any single individual and that teams “typically outperform individuals when the tasks being done require multiple skills, judgment, and experience” (Robbins, 1995). It would be naïve to suggest that all team experiences are positive, and that all group decisions yield positive outcomes. With the prevalence of teams in today's society it is very important to understand that teams can make bad communication decisions. Having adequate knowledge of why bad communication decisions occur, however, serves to illuminate the available strategies that can prevent negative outcomes.

Communication theorists have attempted to explain negative experiences in terms of individual characteristics and identify specific negative individual consequences of being a team member in terms of groupthink or social loafing. Sorensen (1981) defines groupthink as the negative view that some people have of working in teams that can influence their active participation in group socialisation and team activities. Other communication researchers have claimed that negative feelings about teams and members can carry over to subsequent group situations (Sinclair-James & Stohl, 1997). Latane, Williams, and Harkins (1979) define social loafing as “a decrease in individual effort due to the social presence of other persons.” Both of these theories primarily investigate negative outcomes as a direct consequence of individual communication. Whereas groupthink and social loafing focus on negative individual communication consequences of being a team member, group polarisation and groupthink result in negative communication outcomes suffered by the entire group.

*Objectives*

1. Establish if low levels of cohesiveness within working groups engender ineffective communication leadership in groupthink situations.
2. To find out the extent to which ineffective communication operationalisation among working groups may be a consequence of groupthink.

*Research questions*

1. Does ineffective communication leadership better explain groupthink than high levels of cohesion.
2. To what extent is ineffective communication operationalisation among working groups a consequence of groupthink.

### **Theoretical framework**

Group polarisation and groupthink are two theoretical viewpoints that focus on the entire team as the unit of analysis. Rothwell (1998) defines group polarisation as "the tendency to make a decision that is more extreme, either riskier or more cautious, after discussion has occurred than the initial preferences of team members" (p. 86). McCauley and Segal (1987) suggest that members of a team will take part in more risky activities as a member of the team, while Levine and Moreland (1990) argue that team members will be more conservative in their communication. Either way, the team is studied as a system and improper communication is explained as a negative outcome of team processing. Groupthink, on the other hand is the tendency for highly cohesive groups to lose their critical (objective) evaluative capabilities. Psychologist Irving Janis (1972) defines it as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (p. 9). It's apparent that the basic tenet of groupthink - as originally conceptualised - is that getting too convivial, too much cohesiveness within a team is the primary explanation for why teams produce negative communication outcomes.

Janis cites over-ambition, closed-mindedness, and self-imposed uniformity as the three categories in which groupthink symptoms fall. He also identifies eight symptoms of groupthink.

1. *Illusion of invulnerability* – Members assume that the team is too good and cannot make bad communication decisions.
2. *Belief in inherent group morality* - The members act as though the team is inherently right, above reproach and therefore see no need to question their communication decisions.
3. *Rationalising unpleasant and disconfirming data* – Members internalise in themselves things that will make their decision acceptable and refuse to accept contradictory data.
4. *Stereotyping competitors as weak, evil and stupid* – Members refuse to look realistically at other groups. They will avoid communicating with people whose that are not part of their team.
5. *Self-censorship* – Members refuse to communicate personal concerns to the whole team and will only share information that they think is important.
6. *Illusion of unanimity* - Members accept consensus prematurely, without interrogating its completeness and assume that everyone in the team is in agreement.
7. *Apply direct pressure on dissenters* – Members refuse to tolerate anyone who suggestions that the team may be wrong. Through veiled communication, they will pressure team members to conform to their wishes.
8. *Self-appointed mind guards* - Members tend to surveil protect the team leader, and the team from exposure to dissenting voices. This supposes that if a team displays all (or most) of the symptoms of groupthink its members will perform their tasks collectively and the probability of communication failure is high (Janis, 1971).

Others scholars have studied groupthink and have identified faulty information processing as the antecedent of negative group outcomes. Schafer and Crichlow (1996) assert that the fate of a team's communication decision is already determined at the time information is being shared among the members. They identify five factors that lead to information processing errors:

1. Lack of a traditional, impartial leadership style,
2. Lack of tradition of methodical procedures,
3. Overambition of the group,
4. Closed-mindedness, and

5. Self-imposed uniformity (Shafer and Crichlow, 1996). Thus they argue that these five antecedent conditions are closely related to information processing errors, which in turn lead to faulty decision-making and ultimately poor communication among the team members.

While research suggests that information processing is the central element in faulty decision-making, it is also important to examine the team involved in the decision. In a study of groupthink and their communication systems, Hart (1998) suggests that it is impossible to have only one standard because there are many different types of teams, especially in the government and other large organisations. Though the intent of Janis was to develop a theory that would explain the negative outcomes of all teamwork, Hart suggests that there are primarily three different types of teams within the government and that they all view policymaking differently. Therefore, before a team can be labeled as experiencing groupthink, the objective of the team has to be examined, especially their governmental perspective. He identifies the three different policy making perspective views as:

1. Policymaking as problem solving,
2. Policymaking as value articulation and adjudication, and
3. Policymaking as institutionalised action (Hart, 1998).

It is clear that there should be more than one standard of measuring teams' communication outcomes when studying government groups. It is also reasonable to suggest that there should be multiple standards when evaluating team performance and their communicative ability, but the structure of the working group is also a factor in the type of decision-making that occurs within the team. If there is not a clear structure of how the working groups will make communication decisions such as Dewey's reflective thinking model or the revised model known as the Standard Agenda, a working group will be less likely to communicate effectively. Whyte (1998) agrees that if the structure of the working group is faulty, the team will more likely make a bad decision and communicate poorly. He also adds a faulty structure can be in the form of dysfunctional administration practices, the leader's perception of the working group and its goals, the track record of the working group or its individual members, and the fact that some members compete with one another in terms of achievements.

When working groups are interacting intensively and their members are working closely together on tasks, close coordination of activities is needed. This is best met by what Schermerhorn (2002) describes as a decentralised communication network in which all members communicate directly with one another. Even in situations when the members work on tasks independently, activities are coordinated and results pooled by a central point of control. Most communication flows back and forth between individual members and this centrifugal point. This creates a centralised communication network also referred to as the wheel or chain communication structure (p. 431).

While scholars debate the causes and consequences of faulty structure as it applies to different types of working groups, they also disagree about how cohesiveness is operationalised and how effective communication can be achieved. It is important to review the many different definitions employed by researchers when referring to cohesiveness which is seen as: "the psychological closeness a group's members feel toward one another" (Scheerhorn & Geist, 1997, p. 88). Shaw (1971) says three different meanings have been attached to explain cohesiveness. 1) morale, 2) attraction to the group, 3) coordination of efforts of group members (p. 213). Cartwright, (1968) says cohesiveness is "the resultant of all forces acting on all the members to remain in the group"(p. 92). Pavitt and Curtis (1994) see cohesive groups as having a "we-ness", a feeling of friendship, loyalty, and high morale (p. 63).

Some see cohesiveness as the "glue" that holds a group together (Lumsden and Lumsden, 1997, p. 125-126). Rothwell cites cohesiveness as "the degree of liking members have for each other and the group and the commitment to the group that this liking engenders, is the result primarily of attention to social relationships." (p. 62). Some scholars define cohesion as the ability to get along with other group members (Ellis and Fisher, 1994, p. 23). Still others operationalise cohesiveness as "the shared perception of and attachment to the group by its members" (Renz and Greg, 2000, p. 53). Conformity to norms is largely determined by the strength of cohesiveness, defined as "the degree to which members are attracted to and motivated to remain part of a team" (Schermerhorn, 2002, p. 429). Janis does not provide a specific definition of cohesion in his articulation of groupthink. However, he does refer to Lewin's definition of cohesion as "members' positive valuation of the group and their motivation to continue to belong to it (as cited in Janis, p. 4). Janis also refers to Leon Festinger,

Harold Kelley, Stanley Schachter, and other social psychologists in his work. Since the interpretation of cohesion is left to the person evaluating the group, it is difficult to say that all are using the same criteria and this tends to be the major flaw in Janis' theory of groupthink.

Groupthink can occur anywhere, from a military platoon to a two-member sub-committee. In fact, Janis ties a variety of well known historical blunders to the phenomenon, including the lack of preparedness of the United States' naval forces for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, the Bay of Pigs invasion under President Kennedy, and the many roads that led to the devastating United States' involvement in Vietnam. These were all picked as examples after negative outcomes had occurred. While this research does not question the presence of groupthink – intuitive evidence suggests that ineffective communication leadership and low cohesiveness (rather than high levels of cohesiveness) are likely to lead to groupthink.

There are many conflicting ideas about what really happens when groups make bad decisions or fail to communicate. There are several underlying themes about what needs to be observed when using groupthink, but these can be summed up into three categories:

- cohesiveness,
- leadership, and
- critical thinking.

This recasts the theory of groupthink and objective communication therein, as a consequence of ineffective leadership rather than cohesiveness. A new theoretical framework (see Figure 1) is presented that examines leadership, cohesion, and critical thinking, as well as both positive and negative outcomes. Cohesiveness, is not the problem, it is the direct result of effective leadership that produces optimal levels of critical thinking and solves the problem of groupthink.

Fig. 1: How cohesiveness and norm influence team performance

Team	High	Low performance Strong commitments to harmful norms	High performance Strong commitments to supportive norms
Cohesiveness	Low	Low to moderate performance Weak commitments to harmful norms	Moderate performance Weak commitments to Supportive norms
		<b>Negative</b>	<b>Positive</b>

## Alternative Theoretical Framework

### Leadership

One fundamental flaw of groupthink is the lack of attention paid to the leadership within the team. This Janis himself admits, "Sometimes the main trouble is that the chief executive manipulates his advisers to rubber-stamp his own ill-conceived proposals", he further adds that groupthink looks at a subtle form of faulty leadership (Janis, p. 3). Other scholars agree that leadership within the group has a direct effect on the group's actions. It is impossible to accurately evaluate a team's performance without looking at the leadership within the group. Not only is it important to look at the leadership within the group, it is important to look at how the leader gets put in that role.

All of the examples Janis provides when illustrating groupthink deal with the government in which all of the team leaders were appointed. When a team is put together, the leader needs to emerge from within. It is important to have emergent leaders because appointed leaders usually fail. Hackman and Johnson (1996) suggest that group leaders emerge and be selected by the method of residues. Poole (1983) argues that emergent leaders are more respected and have more leniency in the group than appointed leaders (p. 340). This is only logical, because people like to have a say in who they put in charge of the group.

When an effective leader has emerged within the group, the group is more likely to be cohesive. Leaders do not have to be emergent to be effective, however, it is unlikely to assume that all appointed leaders will be effective. When a group leader emerges, they have done so by proving to the other group members that they are capable of leading the group effectively. Once a group leader has emerged by the end of the forming phase, the group will be ready to move towards cohesiveness.

### *Cohesiveness*

In as much as groupthink relies heavily on the central element of cohesiveness it is appropriate that a more specific operationalisation of cohesiveness be employed. There are many different interpretations of cohesion or what cohesiveness is and that is even more problematic when trying to identify groupthink. If it is not known what cohesiveness is, how can we correctly identify groupthink?

This study offers the following definition of cohesiveness that can be used to evaluate a group's performance. Cohesive groups will have most or all of these 15 qualities to some degree:

- an effective leader,
- a genuine respect for each other and their opinions,
- an environment that is not intimidating,
- an environment where opinions are shared willingly and openly,
- equal power among team members,
- shared time outside of the team context between members,
- a "WE" atmosphere,
- usage of positive conflict management styles,
- a clear set of expectations of the team by each member,
- a common team goal,
- shared meaning of what the team is among all team members,
- each member realizes a personal stake in the outcomes of the groups decisions,
- each member is accountable for their actions within the group,
- each member is personally responsible for the decisions made by the group,
- there is an external threat (competition or deadline) upon the group.

If a group is evaluated using this definition of cohesiveness, it would be possible to call them "cohesive."

#### *Critical Thinking*

If critical thinking is not taking place, the question would be, is there really a decision that is being made or is it just an idea that someone got everyone to agree with?. What determines effective leadership is debatable, but it is asserted that the leader is responsible for making the group pursue an effective decision making process (Meyers, 1999). An effective leader however, will follow a systematic method of decision-making in group meetings. This will ensure that alternative solutions are posed and adequately considered. People with maverick ideas or out-of-the-ordinary proposals have to be tolerated and given room to operate. Those who advocate radical or different ideas must not be looked on as disruptive or troublesome (Thompson

& Strickland, 2001, p. 434). Groups will make good decisions if they are given a model to follow when evaluating information.

In effect, the leadership task is to create an adaptive, innovative culture that embraces the group's responses to changing conditions rather than fearing the new conditions or seeking to minimize them (Thompson & Strickland, 2001, p. 435). An effective leader will therefore consider the following before calling a group meeting:

1. Determine if it is necessary before setting up a meeting,
2. Have a clear agenda,
3. Maintain focus on the agenda throughout the meeting,
4. Listen to others,
5. Involve all participants.
6. If there is an established procedure for calling a group meeting, then the group will use a systematic process for evaluating information.

Perhaps the most notable model for critical thinking is Dewey's reflective thinking model (1910). Since its inception different modifications have been made, and one that is recognizable is the Standard Agenda, an efficient process to employ when evaluating information as a group makes a decision. When groups use a systematic procedure they can reduce the possibility of bad decisions.

Discussions that follow some systematic procedure tend to be more productive and result in better decisions than do relatively unstructured discussions (Hirokawa, 1985; Shultz, 1995). The Standard Agenda establishes six steps for a group to follow when making a decision:

- o Identify the problem,
- o Analyze the problem
- o Communicate among members and decide on best solution,
- o Suggest and share information among the members,
- o Evaluate the solution, and
- o Implement the solution.

If a group follows all six steps of the Standard Agenda they will be more likely to make a good decision. This is not to be confused with a positive outcome, though the probability is high that achieving such an outcome using a systematic process of decision-making will occur.

Effective group communication and decision-making requires an analysis and understanding of a problem before members search for solutions (Hirokawa, 1983). Effective decision-making groups normally

communicate creatively in nonformal, exploratory, even deviant, ideas during initial discussions. (Bormann and Bormann, 1988). When Janis chose his examples of groupthink, none of the groups exhibited the Standard Agenda model or any other critical thinking process to make sure that the group would not make bad decisions. This may not be the answer, but it does raise the question. However, it is important to keep in mind that just because a group follows a set of systematic steps will not automatically lead the group to communicate effectively. The quality of the messages rely heavily on the group's effort to communicating effectively (Gouran, 1982).

#### *Groupthink*

Recall that Janis (1972, 1983) originally defined groupthink as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (Janis, 1983, p. 9). This suggests a "deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment" in the interest of group solidarity (Gibson, Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1999, p. 210). Groupthink does occur within groups. However, it does not happen in highly cohesive groups. The original definition of groupthink would be acceptable if the word cohesive was eliminated. Groups who let their strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of actions are members who do not care about the group, or their consequences. In-groups can experience groupthink, but groupthink can only occur when critical thinking does not happen. All previous examples of groupthink fail to offer suggestive evidence that critical thinking occurs; therefore groupthink could be labeled as the cause of the poor communication. At the same time, Janis offered neither effective leaders nor a systematic structure of evaluating information in any of his representative examples.

#### *Outcomes*

Just because groups have effective leaders and use a systematic method of group decision-making does not mean they will always have positive outcomes. Furthermore, just as Janis notes, groups experiencing groupthink will not always have negative outcomes. It is highly probable that groups with effective leaders and high levels of cohesion will make decisions that provide positive outcomes. Likewise,

groups experiencing groupthink have a greater likelihood of making decisions that lead to negative outcomes. It is important to understand this concept because, though this study suggests what a group can do to make good decisions with positive outcomes, it does not guarantee that those practices will happen.

The theory of groupthink therefore offers one way to evaluate a group's decision, which will, more than likely, lead to negative outcomes. However, Janis did not fully explicate clearly the role of cohesion with respect to negative outcomes. This study therefore asserts that leadership and critical thinking are better predictors of groupthink than high levels of cohesion. Instead of citing cohesive members as the determinant of groupthink (and ultimately the cause of bad decisions) this study posits that groupthink occurs because of ineffective leadership and tests an alternative model that attempts to explain both positive and negative outcomes of group processing.

The following research hypotheses are advanced to test the alternative theoretical framework.

- RH: There is a positive relationship between effective leadership and cohesion.
- RH2: There is a negative relationship between cohesion and groupthink
- RH3: There is a positive relationship between cohesion and critical thinking.
- RH4: There is a negative relationship between groupthink and critical thinking.
- RH5: There is a negative relationship between groupthink and effective leadership.

### **Methodology**

The subjects for this study are 81 students enrolled in several small group classes at St. Augustine University of Tanzania, a moderately large urban university in the lake zone of northern Tanzania. The study consisted both the male and female students in their undergraduate programs with ages ranging from 18-40. Students were identified from all the four faculties. The participants in the study were selected from three different sections of the small groups each taught using team learning as an instructional strategy (Michaelsen, Fink, & Black, 1996,

Lane, 1996). Students were randomly assigned to one of the many groups by the instructor at the beginning of the second semester in February 2008. Students remained in their assigned team for the duration of the semester. The subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire at the beginning of class. The survey was conducted on the last official day of class for all of the students in June 2008.

Students were randomly approached by the two research assistants at the end of the semester. The students were expected to belong to one of the many groups during the duration of the semester.

In order to test the alternative theoretical model, the survey was designed to measure four major variables: leadership, cohesion, critical thinking, and groupthink. The subjects answered the survey using a standardized Scantron sheet. The variables were measured using a four point Likert scale corresponding with letters A, B, C, and D. Point values were distributed as follows: A=4, B=3, C=2, and D=1. Questions 1-5 were demographic to explain who was completing the survey. Question 6 was a single item scale measuring the group member's perceived cohesion. Questions 7-18 were a cohesion scale as developed by the researcher. Questions 19-23 were a psychological cohesion scale created by Koys and DeCotiis (1991). Questions 24-30 measured symptoms of groupthink present within the group. Questions 31 and 33 identified whether or not there was a clear leader present at all times within the group. Questions 32 and 34-37 measured leadership within the group. Questions 38-46 measured the critical thinking that occurs within the group. To eliminate response bias on the survey, questions 7, 12, 14, 25, 27, 32, 34, 37, 39, 40, and 46 were reverse coded.

Composite scales were created to measure the four major variables of the alternative framework model: cohesion, leadership, critical thinking and groupthink as shown below.

#### *Cohesion*

Three different cohesion scores were employed in the study measure cohesion: a psychological scale (questions 19-23;  $\alpha=.86$ ) developed by Koys and DeCotiis (1991), a single item (question 6) measuring the member's perceived cohesion, and an alternative scale (questions 7-18) was created by the researcher based on the new conceptualization of cohesion. Questions 7-9, and 13 were eliminated from the analysis to ensure the highest possible overall alpha for the new cohesion scale ( $\alpha=.86$ ).

### *Leadership*

The leadership scale (questions 32, and 34-37) was designed largely using qualities that an effective leader would exhibit to other group members. The resulting Cronbach's reliability coefficient was  $\alpha=.85$ . Two questions (31 and 33) were designed to evaluate the presence of one leader in the group. Reliability for the one leader scale was computed using Cronbach's coefficient alpha that resulted in a reliability coefficient of  $\alpha=.80$ .

### *Critical Thinking*

The critical thinking scale was derived from Dewey's reflective thinking model which The reflective thinking model is commonly referred to as the Standard Agenda. Questions were designed to tap the six steps that a group will go through when using the Standard Agenda. Ten questions (26, 38 - 46) were used in the final composite measure of critical thinking which yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of  $\alpha=.81$ .

### *Groupthink*

The groupthink scale was created by carefully examining the symptoms of groupthink as defined by Janis (1972). Questions were designed to determine if the symptoms of groupthink exist within the test group. Seven questions (24-30) were used to create a composite scale to measure the presence of groupthink symptoms within the group. A principle components factor analysis was computed to determine factor purity of the groupthink scale. Questions 25, 26, 27, and 30 were eliminated from the original set and the resulting 3-item groupthink scale produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of  $\alpha=.81$ .

## **Results**

The data supported the two research questions and each of the five research hypotheses. Hypothesis one confirmed a statistically significant positive correlation between leadership and cohesion [ $r=.513, p=.000$ ]. When effective leadership is present within the group, the group is more likely to be cohesive. Hypothesis two confirmed a statistically significant negative correlation between cohesion and groupthink [ $r=-.350, p=.000$ ].

Hypothesis three was also confirmed. A statistically significant positive correlation exists between cohesion and critical thinking [ $r = .464$ ,  $p = .000$ ]. Hypothesis four confirmed a statistically significant negative correlation between groupthink and critical thinking [ $r = -.253$ ,  $p = .02$ ]. Hypothesis five additionally confirmed a statistically significant negative correlation between groupthink and leadership [ $r = -.322$ ,  $p = .004$ ].

### Discussion

The new theoretical framework provides a better explanation of negative outcomes in small groups than does Janis' groupthink. It attempted to sort out factors that led groups to making bad decisions. The study provided empirical data that was statistically significant and showed a negative correlation between cohesion and groupthink. For years, researchers have agreed with Janis and have suggested that highly cohesive groups are likely to experience groupthink and make decisions with negative outcomes.

However, this study presents evidence to suggest that no such relationship exists between cohesion and groupthink. Janis' model of groupthink should be scrutinized and tested in various contexts—better yet, it should be replaced with the new conceptualization offered in this study. The new model offers a proper explanation of how a group will experience groupthink. It can now be argued that groupthink occurs only when two factors are present: an ineffective leader and lack of cohesion. At no other time can a group experience groupthink.

Groupthink will occur in groups where an ineffective leader is present. This is because an ineffective leader will do two things: 1) not make an effort to make the group cohesive, and 2) not make sure that information is critically evaluated. Groupthink could very well happen all of the time, only an ineffective leader would allow every group member to "agree" on a solution before critical examination of the problem has occurred.

If an effective leader is present within a group, s/he will ensure that the group experiences cohesion and that critical thinking occurs within the group. If, for some reason, a cohesive group does not want to use a systematic process to evaluate alternatives, an effective leader will terminate the process. This is seen in many instances in the classroom

and the workplace. If the group is not being productive, or group members are not willing to put forth the effort required to make a decision, an effective leader will give them a break, send them home, or do something to make sure that a bad decision is not made.

However, if a group is cohesive it is very unlikely that this will happen because of their vested interests in the group. When members are in a cohesive group, they realize that their personal actions have a direct effect on all other group members. This does not happen in groups that are experiencing groupthink, because those members care less about the group as a whole. Unless, the members of the group are cohesive they will not strive to ensure the group makes good decisions.

The results of this study suggest that groups with effective communication leaders will be more likely to participate in critical thinking. This study presents the Standard Agenda as one of many alternatives that would allow a group to critically evaluate information. Effective leaders have a strong influence on the group, but they do not have to do everything in the group. An effective leader will help other group members create a shared vision of the group and what it should accomplish at any given time. However, if the group does not sufficiently progress through a systematic process, it is the responsibility of the group leader to recognize the shortfalls and correct and communicate them before the group proceeds. This may result in extra work for the leader, but it is ultimately to the credit of the entire group.

This study also concludes that groups with ineffective communication leadership are of essence less cohesive. This makes intuitive sense because an ineffective communication leader will most likely have an ineffective communication. It is equally noteworthy to concede that just because a group has an ineffective communication does not guarantee that critical thinking and positive outcomes cannot occur. It is improbable that ineffective leaders will promote efficient group communication processing that will lead to a positive outcome; but it is possible. The individual members of the groups would have a direct impact on what communication processes manifest in the group.

The new theoretical framework tested in this study offers clear explanations of how, and under what circumstances, groups experience groupthink. At the same time, it offers suggestions about how a group can ensure high quality positive communication outcomes. Finally, this

study has developed several new scales to measure the different variables salient to groupthink. For all of the strengths of this study, however, there are limitations.

First, the sample consisted exclusively of university students. In Tanzania, university students belong to "have-made-it" strata of the population and this sample may not be representative of the larger African society, the results are applicable to all groups. A second limitation of the current research resulted from the small sample size (81 subjects out of an entire population of 4.000). Additional subjects would no doubt increase and legitimize the statistical power of the results. Overall, the study presents compelling evidence to recast groupthink as a consequence of ineffective leadership. Cohesion is not the problem. Cohesion is the solution to ensure critical thinking and positive group outcomes.

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## Book reviews – What is new and relevant?

### *Recent books on media ethics in African Contexts*

#### *Ethics Beyond Borders: A global Perspective.*

Stephen Ward and Herman Wasserman (Eds). Heinemann, Johannesburg, 2008. US \$ 32.90 (R295.95) (soft) pp 180.

#### *Media Ethics: An introduction to responsible journalism.*

Johan Retief. Oxford University Press of Southern Africa, Cape Town, 2002.

#### *Media Ethics in the South African Context: An Introduction and Overview.*

Lucas M. Oosthuizen, Juta & Co., Johannesburg, 2002, reprinted in 2008. (soft) pp. 204

These three books from South Africa each take a quite different and complementary perspective regarding media ethics and would form a useful trilogy for a course on communication ethics or as resources for teaching a course on media ethics. The text of Johan Retief is the template of the basic handbook of do's and don'ts of reporting. Oosthuizen provides, at a textbook level, a deeper explanation of the foundations of media morality and ethics, while the book of Ward and Wasserman deals with the issues of cultural policy, politics and globalisation.

### *An indigenous African media ethics or global norms?*

A common theme running through all the contributions to *Media Ethics Beyond Borders* is the debate regarding forms of media ethics much more congruent with the local African cultural, socio-political and philosophical traditions. This questions whether the highly Anglo-American libertarian ethic—individualistic, combative, appealing to empirical objectivity as the ground of consensus—is the best journalism for the peace and development of African societies. This reflects the tensions between the tendencies toward globalisation, localism and glocalisation.

The communitarian ethic, whether it appeals to the *ubuntu* world view or to other African communalistic traditions, subordinates individual ambitions to the progress of the community. The most common practice in this tradition is the expectation that the whole family will contribute to the education of chosen sons or daughters with the expectation that these will in turn use their higher income to help other young people of the extended family finish an education. Communicative deliberation in this tradition invites all to make proposals, not in a spirit of defending personal interests or representing personal distinctiveness, but rather to approximate and further a common consensus. It is a slower, more tolerant communication, opening a space of freedom for all, looking for the ground where all can agree. It is a reflection moderated by symbols of tradition, respected for their living incarnation of the community values and their leadership in more ritualistic contexts. The common ground is not objectivity based on empirical analysis of facts and abstract statistics, but common values.

A number of the chapters questioned whether the African communalistic culture is still sufficiently alive to influence the way public deliberation is carried on in the more modern context and in the mass media. The appeal to communalism is exploited by neo-patrimonial repression of alternative voices. Public deliberation is dominated by modernising elites operating in the name of traditional communalism and the solidarity of independence movements using the highly centralised state apparatus to exclude alternative voices, cover their own corruption and to impose their own ideologies.

Fackson Banda, speaking from a Zambian perspective, argues in his chapter that the tensions between the global universals and the African values results in a negotiated media ethics. "Zambia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-racial society—all of these factors go to compound the meaning of ethical journalism and constitute an important part of negotiating media ethics. It is possible to negotiate a conceptual middle ground between the universalising tendencies of libertarian utilitarianism and the particularistic traits of Afrocentric communitarianism' (p. 138). Journalists are negotiating between the ethical universals implied by their profession, the political culture of Zambia, the sensitivities of citizens and the moral aspirations of public institutions such as churches and civic organisations.

Gebremedhin Simon, Dean of the Faculty of Journalism and Communication at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, also suggests

that the ethical ideals of journalists are the result of negotiation between different sets of values. What is in practice in local and national contexts in Africa is that "ethics is an amalgam of various socio-political and cultural aspects...The research for a code of ethics. . .will have to address such a reality" (p. 168).

Shakuntala Rao, Associate Editor of *Journal of Global Mass Communication*, also sees journalism ethics in different contexts working through critiques of ethical divisiveness to negotiate a common human ground. "(M)edia practitioners can adopt both a Western theory of media ethics (for instance social responsibility) as well as theories from local traditions and religious life" (p 103).

Clifford Christians and Herman Wasserman, in their chapters, suggest that journalism ethics develops largely through their professional training and identification with their local professional associations. When there is a collective, concerted effort, journalists have a developed sensitivity to the violations of human dignity and human rights by local power holders. However, journalists in different cultural contexts appeal to the philosophical traditions of their national cultures or the African region to defend their value commitments.

Nick Couldry, professor of communication at Goldsmith College in London, sees the media practitioner not only as negotiating with particular institutions such as political leaders, but developing an ethics in conversation with ordinary citizens.

Together these authors are sketching out a new vision of media ethics as something evolved by committed media practitioners who are close to the sensibilities of the people who are their news sources but also the people they live with. They live the violations of human rights, the injustices and the sufferings of the people they are close to and develop norms to defend and celebrate these people.

#### *An ethics of credible journalism*

Johan Retief, lecturer in media ethics in South Africa, has adopted a methodology of journalism ethics much more adapted to the formation of a new democracy in South Africa.

Retief begins his text on media ethics by citing the fact that journalists as an occupation have extremely low respect and credibility. In a US poll in 2000 only 32 per cent of the public believe that the media get the facts straight. An alarming 65 per cent believed that media are often inaccurate.

In South Africa the local media are often accused of being biased, of having low standards and of being irresponsible. The Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa receives many verified complaints, and the seriousness of the complaints against the media are, in the opinion of Retief, appalling. The inquiry of the South African Human Rights Commission regarding racism in the media in 1998 showed that the media should be monitored for serious reasons:

- A blatant indifference to truthfulness and responsibility
- The sheer ignorance of media practitioners
- The lack of knowledge and adherence to codes of ethics
- The lack of ethics in the curriculum in journalism education.

Retief begins his text with the foundations of media ethics and reviews carefully the different legal prescriptions and codes of ethics that media practitioners should be aware of. The code of the press Ombudsman of South Africa is based on the principle of the public's right to be informed and to receive and to disseminate opinions freely. In short, the freedom of the journalist and the right to practice journalism is based on the rights of the public to be informed. On this basis Retief outlines the ethical duties of the media:

- Accuracy*, taking up issues such as how to get accurate information, quotations, avoiding plagiarism, having sufficient evidence, and the need for sufficient background for a news article;
- Truth and deception*, analysing the forms of deception, photojournalism and deception, and many forms of untruthful reporting;
- Fairness*, explaining why fairness is good reporting, how public relations and advertising violate fairness with analysis of numerous cases of "unfairness" reported to the complaints commissions in South Africa;
- Objectivity*, focusing on the frequent errors in constructing narrative accounts of events, the lack of impartiality and the principles of social responsibility in objective reporting;
- Confidentiality*, discussing the frequent errors in protecting sources;
- Conflict of interests*, taking up the typical clash between professional loyalties and outside interests, especially political and commercial interests;
- Invasion of privacy*, defining when information should be kept private and when information regarding public figures is public;
- Trauma* and the protection of victims of tragic events;
- Stereotyping*, one of the most common faults of reporting and one of the most damaging;

*Social responsibility*, taking up issues of blasphemy, obscenity, pornography, indecency, the need to protect children, and censorship.

This is a very useful text and a good source to develop media ethics courses. The scope of media ethics in this book, especially the treatment of social responsibility would be considered very limited, but this is a useful source for dealing with the guidelines of the most basic problems of accuracy that bring journalists into disrepute.

#### *The foundations of media ethics*

There is much criticism that most media ethics textbooks are little more than the superficial do's and don'ts to avoid the worst violations of truthfulness, but with little explanation of why these are moral violations or why they are important in terms of social responsibility. The book of Oosthuizen responds to that accusation and is a welcome complement to texts such as that of Retief.

*Media Ethics in the South African Context* has an introductory chapter on media ethics as a field of study with a discussion of theories of meta-ethics (teleological and deontological) and normative ethics. The discussion of normative media theories still is based on the long-criticised *Four Theories of the Press*, but there are some references to updates of that. The discussion of the foundations of public communication values and of professional media ethics is much more adequate for a textbook. The foundations in legislation and public policy are obviously based on the context of South Africa, but offer a good methodology for deriving similar sorts of analysis in other Africa countries. The discussion of problem areas of media ethics in the South African context is also quite good.

#### *What is lacking in all these texts?*

There are many who say that mass communication, especially the press, came into existence with the formation of the institutions of liberal democracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All arguments for different aspects of media ethics finally come back to the service of the needs of citizens in a democratic society. There is a growing consensus that media ethics are based on the demands of the institutions of a democracy. This needs to be brought more centrally into all discussions of media ethics.

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**New News out of Africa. Uncovering Africa's Renaissance.**

Charlayne Hunter-Gault

Oxford University Press, New York, 2006 US \$ 23.00 (Hard Cover)

pp 173

As all Africans know only too well, the Western media have often presented the worst image of Africa. Constant horrifying statistics of people dying in the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, pictures of emaciated cattle and children in areas of desertification, the desolate people of Darfur—these are the daily images splashed across European and American television screens. At its best, this 'journalism of despair' may try to create sympathy, but in fact it generally only creates confusion in the minds of people of the wealthy West. The author, an African American with more than 40 years of journalistic experience in Africa, begins with sharp criticism of the superficial news coverage of 'parachute journalists' who come with little real knowledge of the history and culture of Africa. The numerous awards she has received for her news coverage of Africa give her some right to evaluate the "news out of Africa" Back in the newsrooms of the West, the simplistic principle "if it bleeds, it leads" is too often the criterion of what gets on the nightly TV news or the front page of newspapers. For most of the people of the West, Africa is an endless line of cruel dictators ...and there seems to be no hope, nor do the media help the people of the West know who they might effectively cooperate with in Africa.

***Democracy is breaking out in Africa***

Hunter-Gault argues, however, that news out of Africa is beginning to be much better informed. One of the best examples is the image of people in post-apartheid South Africa working to bring about grassroots democracy. The news media have found an attractive image in Nelson Mandela and many of the other leaders in South Africa. South Africa's ability to attract major conferences and sports events is another new trend. South Africa becomes a kind of symbol of the new Africa. In the first three chapters she reviews the past of South Africa, the post-apartheid South Africa and the new beginnings in that part of Africa: Chapter One, "South Africa, then and now", Chapter Two, "Baby Steps to Democracy and Chapter Three, "Reporting Renaissance"

*The high points of the 'new news' out of Africa*

The good coverage of Africa's top athletes is something outsiders understand well. But most important are the news stories about the significant efforts of African doctors, nurses and volunteer health workers working to educate and treat people about how to deal with HIV/AIDS. Journalists are beginning to speak not just to the presidents but with outstanding "ordinary" people who reveal what Africa is really about.

Hunter-Gault's primary audience may be journalists from the West or Africans who are producing news that will find its way into the newspapers and broadcasting media of the West, but she also has some important messages for Africans on how to deal with journalists from Europe, America or other parts of the world in order to get them in contact with the "new news out of Africa".

An important argument is that all journalists have to understand the immense cultural diversity of a continent of fifty countries, home to close to a billion people. Above all, she has a message for all journalists on how to "enjoy" the people of Africa,

If there is any caution in reading Hunter-Gault, it is to realise that she is a very enthusiastic and hopeful person. The smiling face and dawning sun on the cover may make the task of establishing communication of Africa with the rest of the world seem almost too easy.

The book is an entertaining read, and it is a book that is to be recommended to all young journalists in Africa who want to learn how to present their homeland to the world in the most effective way.

Francis Xavier Ng'atigwa  
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