Global Media Journal
African Edition
2015 Vol 9(1):1-10

Digging for Transparency: How African Journalism Only Scratches the Surface of Conflict

Ibrahim Saleh

Abstract

It has become a pattern to find academics, professionals and students of journalism bragging with the scope, techniques and dilemmas of investigative journalism. But there is one gaping hole: nowhere was information collated about the heroic contributions, and often the sacrifices, that were made for the profession by African investigative journalists across Africa. Writing a history or complete account of African investigative journalism is outside the scope of this article. But I am trying to offer here a series of contributions – some current, some historical – on the topic of safety of journalists, that will, hopefully, lay the foundations for further research, and also lay to rest decisively the myth that journalism which exposes social problems and criticizes the powerful is 'un-African'.

Keywords: *Africa, transparency, investigative journalism, safety of journalists, risk societies, watchdog*

Introduction

This article is by no means an in-depth picture of investigative journalism in Africa; it is merely a series of snapshots of African journalists operating in conditions of risk and amidst coercive societies as they strive to attain the truth. There are certainly many more case studies and

incidents that demonstrate that the mission to seek out and tell compelling truths is still alive and well across the continent.

The task of the African investigative journalist is rarely easy. I have been struck repeatedly by the seemingly miraculous way in which reporters work with erratic (or no) computer connections and electricity, limited budgets, across long distances and often under surveillance and threat, and yet still manage to produce stories on a par with their far better-equipped colleagues elsewhere in the world. It is actually no miracle: it simply takes passion, courage and extremely hard work.

Journalists and other media workers in Africa are frequently attacked and killed simply for doing their jobs of seeking out and reporting the truth. Over 125 journalists were killed between 1996 and 2006 on the continent, most by shootings. According to Reporters sans Frontières (RSF or Reporters without Borders) (2013), the number of journalists killed in connection with their work in 2013 fell by 20% compared with 2012, but 2012 was an "exceptionally deadly" year with a total of 88 killed. The casualties were 67 in 2011, 58 in 2010 and 75 in 2009. The fall in 2013 was also offset by an increase in physical attacks and threats by security forces and non-state actors.

According to RSF (2013), there was a big increase in the number of journalists kidnapped (from 38 in 2012 to 87 in 2013). Most of the cases were in the Middle East and North Africa (71) followed by sub-Saharan Africa (11). These violations of freedom of information target news providers in the broadest sense, citizen-journalists and netizens, as well as professional journalists. In addition to the 71 professional media fatalities, 39 citizen-journalists and netizens were killed in 2013 (down slightly from 47 in 2012).

Reporting on war and conflict today increasingly puts journalists at risk as they rise to the challenge of meeting round-the-clock deadlines for voracious and highly competitive media operations. While some deaths in war zones are inevitable, many are avoidable. They happen because journalists are simply not equipped to work as safely as possible. Journalists, many of them young, are often not adequately trained in security awareness, provided with essential protective equipment or covered by insurance.

Women covering wars face additional hazards – protection kits are not designed for them, they may feel they have to take additional risks to prove themselves with male colleagues and there are reports of women journalists who have been raped. However, most journalist deaths in Africa happen outside of conflict situations. For example, in 2009, journalists were murdered while investigating local corruption in Nigeria and covering the political crisis in Madagascar.

Journalism is often seen as the rough first draft of history. It is the way many millions around the world learn about their world and about the conflicts that both plague and shape it. What we know about the conflict in Africa we know through the reporting of correspondents on the scene, or as near as possible to the scene, or through the analysis of politicians and experts as mediated through the prism of journalistic reporting (Rodgers, 2012, p. 157).

My argument here is: Can we trust and rely on news reported from zones of conflict –can that eye witness be trusted, or that person who produced that piece of video footage, or social media; how has the news been reported in relation to NGOs, institutions and politicians concerned?

These are all questions that need to be asked when reading, listening to or watching journalists' accounts of events and are particularly key when it comes to distant armed conflicts.

This article aims to unveil the potential of political values of openness and democratic accountability that go by the name of "transparency".[1] In fact, the metaphor of transparency stems from three separate political virtues, which often work together but are analytically distinct. These kinds include: informational transparency − knowledge about government actors and decisions and access to government information; participatory transparency − the ability to participate in political decisions either through fair representation or direct participation; and accountability transparency − the ability to hold government officials accountable either to the legal system or to public opinion when they violate the law or when they act in ways that adversely affect people's interests (Balkin, 1998).

Governments and agencies at all levels often lag in their degree of openness, raising concerns about citizens' access to vital information. The theory goes that increased transparency allows citizens to judge more accurately the performance of their government and thus reward or punish elected officials at the ballot box. But it's not just about elections and accountability; it's also about improving the quality of services (Hollyer, Rosendorff, Vreeland & Raymond, 2014).

Global governance implies a wide and seemingly ever-growing range of actors in every domain. Global economic and social affairs have traditionally been viewed as embracing primarily intergovernmental relationships, but increasingly they must be framed in comprehensive enough terms to embrace local and international NGOs, grassroots and citizens' movements, multinational corporations and the global capital market (Weiss, 2000).

Large parts of Africa have experienced state collapse, where leaders are no longer able to impose law and order. However, many media systems voluntarily or not turned a blind eye to the activities of their nationals who are fueling wars.

---

[1] This accountability can be direct accountability (for example, the ability to sue), indirect accountability (holding officials accountability to one's agents or elected representatives), or accountability to some other body that acts in the public interest, like a court of law.

According to Johan Pleleman (2002), a Belgian arms investigator:

You have situations, where states are collapsing or completely out of control. They invite the sort of investors that thrive on this lack of oversight, on this lack of control, on this lack of interest in the background of the investor.

Some African governments are little more than criminal syndicates, who sell diamonds and timber and oil onto the world market which requires foreign partners. The people doing the extracting, the bribing, and the arms dealing are a class of entrepreneur that operates beyond borders, often unaccountable to shareholders, and unfettered by the regulation they would encounter in their own countries. They have become influential political players in the countries in which they operate.

According to Peleman (2002), “You have presidents that then attract investors that are just out to make a quick few million, mostly at the expense of the local population or the long-term situation of that country.”

The situation in different parts of Africa might vary in details, but the main dilemma remains unresolved. African journalists on the ground are faced with many challenges when covering the story. Threats to news gathering and reporting usually come from the governments that protesters are seeking to depose, and include restrictions on communications, harassment, assaults and detention.

Such a chaotic and violent atmosphere certainly poses "enormous” challenges for journalists. For example, as stated by Elisabeth Witchel, there have been more than 450 attacks on journalists, including eight deaths, amid the unrest in Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq (Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], 2013). RSF (as cited in

File, 2014) reported that governments in the region had made “no concessions to media” and were engaging in “indiscriminate repression” (paragraph 2).

Scholars and journalists share a conviction that news media will be reporting on struggles within weak and failing states, where national economies, administrative systems, and physical infrastructure are collapsing, or have collapsed (Van Niekerk, 2002).

The vast majority of armed conflicts are happening within national borders, though they also happen across borders as armed movements seek to dominate territories that are not defined by traditional post-colonial boundaries (du Toit, 2014).

There are extreme conditions faced by journalists around the world. A recent report from the CPJ (2013) shows that the number of journalists killed in the line of duty "rose sharply" in 2012, with "internet journalists [hit] harder than ever." A staggering 67 journalists were killed in action in 2012, the highest number since CPJ began tracking deaths in 1992. While a large number of those deaths occurred in conflict in Syria, many of those that occurred elsewhere were retaliatory acts (York, 2012).

There is an urgent probing question of how difficult it must be for the reader, listener or viewer to get the most important facts right about news in Africa in modern times, and even why it was happening or whether it could have been prevented.

Reports on skirmishes, forthcoming acts of war, and impending massacres might catch the special public attention, but are otherwise of little interest to anyone. It would be naïve to think that journalists, reporters and correspondents in Africa would be able to prevent man-made disasters, by writing critical reports. For foreign correspondents are reporting for their clients in Europe or the United States, and even if they are writing for an English-language or French-

language medium, the warlords on the African continent could not care less what is being said about them in *Newsweek* or *Le Monde* (Plate, 2000).

Hence, all types of crises including epidemic break outs, or famine, is rife, or there is a massacre about which people begin to question the causes. The period prior to the disaster then becomes a news item or a background story. Reports in the media can indeed influence conflicts, but they can hardly ever prevent them. But politicians do not win votes for the cautious prevention of conflict. And advance warning and prevention of conflicts are incompatible with the way politics and the media seem to work today.

As Africa tries to grapple with the paradox of political journalism that exists side by side with pervasive poverty, journalists on the continent have been urged to provide necessary oversights so that commitments made by governments are kept.

Broadly speaking, a healthy media sector should: be free from any control; be supported by an adequate legal framework that ensures freedom of speech, freedom of expression and access to information; have plurality in its news sources; maintain professional and ethical standards; have adequate reach across the population; and should be propagating reliable, high quality information. The media sector should also be financially viable and capable of paying a competitive salary to media professionals.

As African countries strive for sustainable development, press freedom and the broader issue of democratization of communication have become primary concerns to stakeholders interested in improving African development and governance. Sustainable development here refers to the empowerment of people to seek not only their own self-improvement but also the improvement of future generations.

From this standpoint, information supports sustainable development when the majority of the people have access to the information they need to make informed economic, political, and social decisions. Freedom of the press helps reduce information asymmetry and create a transparent, accountable society (Roy, 2010). Adequate access to information furthers this goal by ensuring that the unbiased information flows freely and reaches the populace at large. Together, these two elements of a healthy media sector further the goal of successful democratization and strengthen the path of sustainable development.

For the African media to play its role effectively, it needs a cadre of young and aggressive reporters who understand the role of the media in demanding government accountability and transparency, who can uncover corruption and provide probing, sustained reporting that goes beneath the surface of critical issues. These new journalists must be equipped with the skills to obtain, assess and convey information from governments and work with the sources, documents and new technology that are necessary for investigative reporting.

Ultimately I am certain that democracy will never take root in Africa, unless people have the information they can rely on to make informed choices. But there will be no accurate and reliable information unless media staff can work safely.

References

Balkins, J.C. (1998). *How mass media simulate political transparency*. Retrieved from http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/jbalkin/articles/media01.htm

Du Toit, P. (2014). *Reporting atrocities: A toolbox for journalists covering violent conflict and atrocities*. Internews' Project on Conflict and Media during 2012-2014. Retrieved from

https://internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews_ReportingAtrocitiesToolkit_2014-11.pdf

File, P. (2014). *Journalists face challenges in covering revolution in North Africa, Middle East. International Press Freedom*. Retrieved from The Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and Law: http://www.silha.umn.edu/news/JournalistsFaceChallengesinCoveringRevolutioninNorthAfricaMiddleEast.html

Hollyer, J. R., Rosendorff, P., Vreeland, B., & Raymond, J. (2014). Measuring Transparency. *Political Analysis*. Autumn 2014, *22* (4). Retrieved from http://journalistsresource.org/studies/international/development/global-transparency-data-openness-hrv-index#sthash.0fk2ddKB.dpuf

Plate, C. (2000, September 30). Journalists' reports cannot prevent conflict. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 839. Retrieved from https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/57jqq6.htm

Reporters sans Frontières. (2013). *2013 World Press Freedom Index: Dashed hopes after spring*. Retrieved from Reporters sans Frontières website: http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013,1054.html

Rodgers, J. (2012). *Reporting conflict*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Roy, S. (2010). Media development and political stability: An analysis of sub-Saharan Africa. Retrieved from https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Media_Development_Politica_Stability_Sub-SaharanAfrica.pdf

York, J. C. (2012, December 22). *The new vanguard of journalism and transparency*. Al-Jazeera English. Retrieved from http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/12/20121222155259710309.html

Van Niekerk, P. (2002). *The business of war*. Retrieved from the International Consortium of InvestigatingJournalism (ICIJ) website: http://www.icij.org/project/making-killing/business-war

Weiss, T. G. (2000). Governance, good governance and global governance: Conceptual and actual challenges. *Third World Quarterly, 21*(5).

Witchel, E. (2013). *When Journalists Are Killed, Witnesses May Be Next*. Retrieved from: Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) website: https://www.cpj.org/2014/02/attacks-on-the-press-impunity-witnesses.ph

Author Note

Ibrahim Saleh, Centre For Film & Media Studies, the University of Cape Town.

Ibrahim Saleh is now a senior lecturer at the University of Cape Town.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ibrahim Saleh, Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, Cape Town, 7700, South Africa

Contact: Ibrahim.Saleh@uct.ac.za