

## **Why should journalism curriculum be Africanised**

Baffour Ankomah

---

It was Henry Kissinger, that quintessential American icon, who once said: 'Oil is much too important a commodity to be left in the hands of the Arabs.'

Great, isn't it?

Well, Kissinger always reminds me of W.C. Fields, another great American icon of comedy and acting. It is said that a visiting friend found the great man on his deathbed reading the Bible. When the friend expressed astonishment at this, the great W.C. Fields is reputed to have replied that he was 'simply looking for a loophole'.

I am not going to look for a loophole this morning because, like Kissinger, I find journalism to be too important a subject to be left in the hands of the Western establishment. And it is the main reason why I think that the curriculum should be Africanised – so that African 'national interests' will be catered for under journalism education on the continent.

Why do I say so? It is because, while we were sleeping in Africa, journalism was slowly transforming from being merely a tool for information, education and entertainment, to one that looks after, and protects, national interest; a tool used by the power centres of the world for their own ends.

National interest is by far the most important factor influencing the coverage of news, both domestic and foreign. In 1991, Ronald Spark, then chief lead writer of *The Sun* (the newspaper with the largest circulation in the UK) made an amazing admission: 'Truth is sacred, but a newspaper that tells only part of the truth is a million times preferable to one that tells the truth to harm his country.'

Interestingly, you don't get Mr Spark's remarkable insight in any textbook. But if you observe the Western media close enough, you find some clues.

Sadly, national interest is a topic we don't teach in African journalism schools. At least, during my time at the School of Journalism in Accra, Ghana, (where I come from) it was not taught. I have come to know about it through living in a cold and damp London for 20 years, and observing at close quarters how the British media, and by extension the Western media, behave.

They are, as they say in Britain and the West, the 'fourth estate of the realm'. I love my dictionary; it is quite tattered, a mark of real greatness. The last time I looked at it, the *Collins English Dictionary*, it still defined 'Estate of the Realm' as:

An order or class of persons in a political community, regarded collectively as a

part of the body politic: usually regarded [in Britain] as being the Lords Temporal (the peers)[the House of Lords], Lords Spiritual [the Church of England] and the Commons [the House of Commons].

In effect, the media being the 'Fourth Estate of the Realm' is the fourth arm of the State. We all know the first three arms of the State – the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary – and the duties assigned to each arm by the State. But how many of us know the duties assigned to the 'Fourth Estate' by the State?

It is lovingly said that the Fourth Estate has a 'watchdog role'. They are like the Rottweiler or German Shepherd. They sit there watching the first three estates and bark at their infractions.

Yes, sometimes they do that. I will put it at say 30 percent of the time - they attack or expose governmental wrongdoing, and rightly so. But most of the time they are in league with the first three estates of the realm to look after national interest for the betterment of the State and the general good.

And how do we do it? By looking the other way when it is inconvenient to bark. When national interest will be harmed. In such instances, they refuse to publish stories that will injure national interest.

John Pilger, another quintessential icon, this time of good journalism, calls it 'censorship by omission'.

Pilger disagrees with what, according to him, is the oldest cliché - 'truth is the first casualty of war'. He says: 'Journalism is the first casualty. Not only that it has become a weapon of war; a virulent censorship that goes on unrecognised in the United States, Britain and other democracies; censorship by omission, whose power is such that, in war, it can mean the difference between life and death for people in faraway countries, such as Iraq.'

Pilger goes on: 'As a journalist for more than 40 years, I have tried to understand how this works... Such servility to State power is hotly denied, yet routine. Almost the entire British media has omitted the true figure of Iraqi civilian casualties, wilfully ignoring or attempting to discredit respectable studies... How many people know that, in revenge for 3,000 innocent lives taken on 11 September 2001, up to 20,000 innocent people died in Afghanistan?'

I always cut and keep anything John Pilger writes. There are three journalists in Britain that I respect most, and I cut and keep anything they write: John Pilger, Robert Fisk (the Middle East correspondent and specialist of *The Independent*) and George Monboit, a columnist for *The Guardian*. If we had 10 of them in the Western media, our world would be a better place.

In trying to understand the culture of 'censorship by omission', John Pilger, now directly addressing fellow journalists, has said:

In reclaiming the honour of our craft, not to mention the truth, we journalists at least need to understand the *historic task* to which we are assigned – that is, to report the rest of humanity in terms of its usefulness, or otherwise, to 'us' [meaning the West], and soften up the public for rapacious attacks on countries that are no threat to us. We soften them up by dehumanising them, by writing about 'regime change' in Iran as if that country were an abstraction, not a human society.

Without 'softening up the public', George Bush and Tony Blair could not have taken their countries to war in Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else. War is now fought on two fronts – a soft war and a hot war. The 'soft war' is about 'softening up the public' to acquiesce in the 'hot war'. And the 'softening up' is the job assigned to the Fourth Estate of the Realm.

Just last week (6 October 2008), Adam Boulton, the *Sky News* political editor came out with a new book about the Blair years, titled *Tony's Ten Years: Memories of the Blair Administration*.

He tells how, in his own words:

for the first couple of years of Blair's Downing Street tenure, the press office and the media seemed to have an almost symbiotic relationship... There was little public concern for close scrutiny of the government; instead the media often merely relayed what New Labour was saying and doing.

Boulton refers to Peter Mandelson - the man with nine lives who has just been appointed minister for the third time in 11 years and is credited with the rise of the Labour Project and the Labour Party winning power in 1997:

While the media had previously been viewed as suspect and kept at arm's length, Peter Mandelson instigated personal contracts at the highest possible level between the Labour leadership and journalists. For example, he took Neil Kinnock [the former Labour leader] to lunch with *The Sun*. Mandelson and [Alastair] Campbell [Blair's press secretary] also cultivated personal relationships with journalists on the political beat. They regularised the flow of routine information and began to use the distribution of exclusives as a means to reward or punish correspondents. They persuaded, cultivated and co-opted those they could, and attempted to bully or undermine those who were judged to be hostile. Individuals and [media] organisations that proved susceptible to pressure would be revisited again and again. The *BBC* offered particularly fertile ground. In opposition, Mandelson himself, as an old friend of the director general [of the *BBC*] John Birt, knew which buttons to press (he was even employed as a *BBC* consultant prior to becoming an MP).

Boulton continues:

Only the *BBC*, and to a much lesser extent other regulated broadcast news outlets, could be influenced so directly. British newspapers and the journalists they employed were unruly and partisan...[But] when a politician or party was deemed to be powerful, as New Labour was during its rise, print journalists and their proprietors could easily be curbed by threats and blandishments. Once Blair became leader, Mandelson was determined not to repeat any mistakes. This time the party found it was pushing at an open door. Even *The Sun* endorsed Blair in 1996. New Labour's leaders were astonished at the ease with which they could influence the media during the 1990s...

As opposition leader, Blair dined enthusiastically with proprietors and publishers such as Lord (Vere) Harmsworth, Sir David English and Rupert Murdoch – and *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Times* all backed [Blair] in 1997.

Boulton's conclusion hits the nail right on the head:

It was perfectly possible not to get pressured by either arm of this pincer movement [meaning Blair, Mandelson and Alastair Campbell] and to still maintain a professional distance, but most print journalists did not resist, either rolling over to be tickled or cowering at the power of New Labour. It was certainly not comfortable for those who were judged to be against 'the project'.

This is what is called 'looking after', or 'protecting', national interest.

And who decides or defines national interest. In Britain, the House of Lords ruled in 1964 that 'the government of the day decides national interest'.

I know some Africans have a problem with this. 'How can we allow Jerry Rawlings to decide national interest in Ghana?', a Ghanaian PhD student asked me when I gave the same lecture at Birmingham University some 10 years ago.

I replied by asking her a counter question: 'So who do you think should decide national interest in Ghana?'

She answered by asking me a counter question: 'I don't know,' she said. 'But do you really think we should leave Jerry Rawlings to decide national interest in Ghana?'

Jerry Rawlings was by then serving a second term as president of Ghana, heading a legitimately-elected government. But, according to this lady, who, today, incidentally is a lecturer at the School of Journalism at the University of Ghana, insisted that Ghanaians could not allow Rawlings and his government to decide national interest in Ghana.

In the end, on that cold evening in Birmingham 10 years ago, we agreed to disagree. I held firmly to my belief that, in Rome, you do as the Romans. It was the British (or the Europeans) who handed down to us the current nation states we have in Africa. So when it comes to deciding national interest, we must do as they do.

But first a disclaimer: Some people mistake national interest for 'government interest'. The two are not one and the same. 'Government interest' is basically the interest of the government of the day. 'National interest' is broader than that. It is the interest of the whole nation, it is something more profound and permanent, something that affects and benefits the totality of the population, something that puts the country in good stead, that affects the future of the country in a positive way. Governments come and go, but the national interest remains.

In fact, that evening in Birmingham 10 years ago, I said that sometimes, as a journalist and citizen of any country, we don't even need to be told what is national interest. It should come naturally.

For example, it is not my job as a journalist to write a piece telling the world that my national army consists of 10 AK47s, two bazookas and one helicopter.

Let the Americans come and find out for themselves. If they succeed, good for them, if they are caught, we treat them as spies. At least, they would have paid hotel fees for their accommodation or filled the pocket of some local official to give them the information. Either way, our economy benefits and it helps the national interest.

In 2001, *The Daily News* of Zimbabwe got hold of invoices about one defence procurement from China by the Zimbabwean government and ran the story on its front page. It raised hell in Harare; and *The Times* [of London], with an axe to grind with Mugabe on behalf of British national interests, applauded *The Daily News* by photographing the front page and re-printing it whole in *The Times*.

But if *The Times* had got a similar story about British defence procurement or defence sales, it could not, and would not, have printed it – in the interest of British national interests.

Putting America aside, Britain is the second largest arms seller in the world. How many times have you seen anybody publishing a story about British arms sales to South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria or any other country for that matter?

In Britain, there is something called the D-Notice Committee (of Defence Notice Committee) that censors, even as I speak today, information on defence, intelligence and such matters.

The most interesting aspect of this committee is that its membership also includes editors, media owners, intelligence gurus, government officials and people like that.

Imagine editors and media owners sitting on a committee to censor their own work! But it does happen in Britain! It is a wonderful place, Britain.

If a newspaper comes across sensitive material about defence and intelligence matters, like *The Daily News* got in Zimbabwe, the rule of thumb is that its editor must call up the D-Notice Committee and clears it first. If the Committee says you can't publish, the newspaper can't publish. That is called national interest. And it still happens in the UK today.

So *The Daily News* did something in Zimbabwe that *The Times* could not have done in London. The difference is that *The Times* understands what is called national interest and *The Daily News* did not! This is one major reason why the curriculum must be Africanised!

Let me tell you a personal experience: On 13 April 2005, I went (accompanied by our photographer) to a little place called Widbrook near Bradford on Avon in the southwest of England, to interview a man called Harold Smith and his wife, Carol.

Mr Smith, now 81, an Oxford graduate, joined the British Colonial Service in 1955 and was posted to Nigeria as a labour officer. At the time he was 29.

Nigeria was then being prepared for independence by Britain, which reckoned that losing Nigeria would be a mighty blow to the Empire. So while independence will come alright, Britain will have to exercise some control over Nigeria.

As the then British defence secretary put it at a cabinet meeting in London on 11 September 1958: 'The strategic importance of Nigeria is sufficiently great to justify us making every effort to retain an enclave of territory under our own sovereignty.'

As such, the British decided to rig the independence elections to put their friends in the North in power, who would look after British interests in Nigeria after independence.

In fact, rigging elections was a routine business for the British as they retreated from their colonies.

Three weeks ago, Harold Smith bought me two volumes of four books published in 2000 and 2001, based, according to the editors, 'overwhelmingly on hitherto unpublished material from the records of the Colonial Office, Foreign Office, Commonwealth Relations Office and the Treasury, as well as from those of the Cabinet and its committees, and the Prime Minister's Office'.

The volumes are titled *British documents on the end of empire* series. Together, the four books cost a cool £500 to buy. Each book is 825 pages long, and *Series A Volume 4*, titled *The conservative government and the end of empire 1957-64* (made up of two fat books) contains 583 official British government documents on the end of empire.

They were researched and edited by Dr Ronald Hyam and Roger Louis, who are said to be 'two of the world's pre-eminent historians of the British Empire'.

In one document, the minutes of a brainstorming meeting that took place in London on 14 December 1959, one British official called R.S. Hudson, made the following startling revelation”:

Parliamentary democracy has failed in countries which are so varied that if there is a common cause, it is at least as likely to be found in the system as in the peoples. My own doubt is centred in the relationship between the Executive and Parliament. In the Westminster model, Parliament is the matrix of the Executive. When this model is exported to dependent territories, we [*meaning the British*] are forced in the transitional stages to modify it in the interests of strong and stable government. This we do by rigging the parliament through official majorities, a restricted franchise and so forth.

Hudson went on:

When the excitement of independence has died down, the successful government is brought face to face with the problems which faced us, for they are real problems such as lack of education and lack of nationhood. The new government cannot go back on universal suffrage but is as sure as we were that the parliament must be rigged, if government is to be at all possible... I do not pretend to be able to see more than a few bits of the problem, but a very tentative deduction, which I should like to see examined by those who can see the problem whole; is that in the sort of country of which we are thinking [and they were thinking about Sudan], the parliament must be rigged in some way or other. It might be a better and more lasting preparation for what always seems to follow if we [*meaning the British*], while we were able, adopted a different method of rigging and restricted the powers of parliament rather than its composition.

Hudson appeared to be a man who spoke his mind, and he went on:

For example, parliament must cease to be the matrix of the executive, which could then be created separately and made much more independent of parliament. Parliament might be made more a consultative body and less the source of the government of the country... If it is quite impossible to plan a different structure of government, and we must go on as we are, then possibly we should revise our ideas about party government. Do we perhaps over-emphasise the role of opposition in our system? In African territories, one-party domination, so far from being a lapse into totalitarianism, may be the best way without disrupting the constitution, of ensuring stable government for the period while the country is

developing true nationhood.

Hudson continued:

One-party government should perhaps be regarded with more sympathy as being the first natural substitute for the former benevolent colonial administration, an interim form of 'indigenous' democracy replacing our system of 'applied' democracy.

Hudson concluded by saying:

If the first alternative of changing the relationship between the executive and parliament proves impossible, I think that positive planning for one-party government might be more in accordance with the facts and might therefore help towards a more continuous and less jerky development.

His frank assessment was endorsed by the Assistant Under Secretary of State at the Commonwealth Relations Office, one A.W. Snelling. He wrote to his boss, the Secretary of State in these words:

I urged Mr Wallis to write up these notes on the Sudan constitutional developments because the lesson that the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy is not necessarily that best suited to African conditions is well brought out, and if ever we are to profit by it, the time is now... I have always felt that government on British lines was a non-starter in Africa.

These were British government officials thinking aloud in Whitehall that the British system of government would not benefit Africa in any way. Yet today, that is what we have in Africa – government on British or French lines! Any wonder that we still have problems with governance issues in Africa?

In fact, another official, M. E. Allen, reporting on the Colonial Secretary's view on the preparations for Nigerian independence, admitted, in another official document, thus:

The Colonial Secretary is certainly right in hesitating to assert that self-government will in Nigeria be good government... So far as the United Kingdom is concerned, it would appear that in the last resort, we must make sure that the government of Nigeria is strong, even if possibly undemocratic.

I have quoted this long background to show you how very vital was the information Harold Smith was sitting on, and why it was important that his story must be published.

The British pride themselves in having the 'Mother of Parliaments', yet as admitted by R. S. Hudson, they were rigging elections all over their empire, to make sure that compliant local politicians would look after British national interests after independence.

When it came to Nigeria, the independence elections were staggered: the first, on a regional level was held in 1956, and the second on a federal level in 1959. The British did the counting in both instances, and rigged it for the politicians in the North to dominate the country and look after British interests after independence.

But unfortunately for the British, there was one problem in the shape of the then 29-year-old Harold

Smith, the labour officer in the British embassy in Lagos. He decided that he would not take part in what he calls 'the criminal act' of rigging elections.

So when the order arrived through the chain of command (from the governor-general of Nigeria at the time, Sir James Robertson) to rig the elections, Harold Smith refused. And on top of it, he would not keep his mouth shut!

When I went to interview him in April 2005, he told me that Sir James, the governor-general, had called him to his office, and offered him various inducements to keep quiet. He refused, forcing Sir James to say:

“You may be under a misapprehension, Smith. I want you to know that I personally gave the order regarding [the rigging of] the elections, to which you objected. It was necessary... If you keep your mouth shut, I can promise rapid promotion and a most distinguished career elsewhere in government service overseas... You must understand that you know too much for your own good. If you don't give me your word, means will be found to shut you up. No one will believe your story and the press will not be allowed to print it. You will never work in a responsible position in the UK again. Be sensible and think of your own interests.

So Sir James pleaded with Smith. But Smith said he listened to Sir James' terms, and when he had finished, [I am now quoting Smith], he said: 'I looked at the portly figure of the most senior, the most powerful representative of the Queen in Nigeria, and very calmly pronounced two words: "No Sir".'

That sealed Harold Smith's fate. This was in 1960. As Sir James warned, Smith has not been allowed to work again in the UK. And so, as Smith puts it: 'I found myself permanently retired at 33 with no salary or pension. I had only graduated at Oxford six years earlier.'

Sir James had boldly told him: 'No one will believe your story and the press will not be allowed to print it.'

True to Sir James' words, no newspaper or radio or TV station in Britain, despite all their highfalutin claim to independence, freedom of expression, and of the media, has been interested in running Harold Smith's story – for 48 years!

Since he returned from Lagos in 1960, Harold Smith has consistently been battling - for 48 years - with the British media (the whole gamut of them, from *The Guardian*, *The Times* and all the way down to the *BBC*) to publish the story about how Britain rigged Nigeria's independence elections. And none has been interested to run the story!

When I went to interview him in 2005, Harold Smith and his ever-supporting wife, Carol, showed me a stack of letters and replies going back to 1960 that he had written, and received, to and from, the British media and MPs, trying to get them interested in his story, but none has been interested.

The most amazing letters in the pile were between Harold Smith and the late Hugo Young, one of the most brilliant journalists in Britain in his time who for a long time was a senior political commentator at *The Guardian*.

On 13 May 1994, Hugo Young, worn down by the sheer persistence of Harold Smith for *The*

*Guardian* to run his story, wrote to Smith:

I have not the least idea what *The Guardian* did or did not do about Nigeria long before I joined it. You seem to be in a state of demented obsession... This will be my last communication. Do not trouble our fax machine or our secretaries any more.

One year before this letter, on 3 June 1993, Hugo Young had written to Harold Smith, rationalising why the British media had not been interested in his story:

Perhaps there is a simpler explanation of why your story has not been published. Maybe in an earlier period, pre-1990 when the 30-year rule [*during which official documents are classified*] would have bitten, you had some cause to feel that the authorities were trying to suppress something and the newspapers were their allies – but I stress I have absolutely no knowledge of any involvement on *The Guardian's* part. Now, however, it is at least possible that the problem is journalistic. Is the Nigerian election of 1960, however corrupt, a story our readers will be interested in? I think one can make a cool judgement on that without being charged with begging for a knighthood.

Amazing, isn't it?

Even now, in 2008, five long years after the venerable Hugo Young had penned those words, the British media is still publishing stories about Adolf Hitler and some small bridge he couldn't take in Poland; and their readers and viewers and listeners are damn interested! And the war ended in 1945. Nigerian independence was in 1960.

The short of it all, is that Sir James Robertson, the British governor-general in Nigeria in 1960, an establishment figure, had told Harold Smith that the British media would not be permitted to run his story – in the interest of British national interest. And so, despite Smith knocking at their door, every year, for 48 years now, the British media will not run his story.

I have a simple rule. In the current globalised world, where all nations are fighting for a place in the economic sun, Africa must do as the other nations do.

If it is good for Britain and America and France and their media to look after British, American and French national interests, it cannot be bad for Africa and its media to look after African 'national' interests.

And we can't do this without changing the way we educate ourselves, especially in journalism education. A colleague in America, a young lady journalist called Tahir Mohammed wrote to me last week, saying: 'The media is a very powerful tool, and when individuals are not properly informed, it causes the masses to make deadly mistakes, a perfect example is the Bush "election" in 2000.'

We must Africanise the journalism curriculum to allow us time and space to deal with some of these issues in our classrooms.

As Malcolm Rifkind, one-time British foreign secretary, said (*BBC-TV, Newsnight: 2003-02-11*): 'Diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments.' I say, 'Journalism without a clear purpose is like diplomacy without arms.'

Education is vital. Africa is the only place where we continue to educate ourselves out of our own environment; where we continue to fashion our education after what we inherited from our colonial masters.

We must listen to our own Steve Biko. His words cry from the grave: 'The greatest weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.'

We must liberate our minds, and journalism must be a leader in this. And our journalists cannot do this without being taught systematically to do it!

I thank you.

### **About the speaker**

Baffour Ankomah is editor of the *New African*.