Foreword

THE IMAGE, THE MESSAGE AND THE MEDIA: AN AFRICAN OVERVIEW


The paper starts from the premise that what Africans learn about the rest of Africa comes disproportionately from Western sources of information. African media (electronic or print) cannot afford to have their own correspondents in major African capitals, or war reporters in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. African media cannot send filming or taping crews of their own to meetings of the Pan African Parliament in South Africa or meetings of African foreign ministers in Banjul or Abidjan.

One of my favorite illustrative predicaments concerns my own country, Kenya. Kenya shares borders with five other African countries, each of which has had major convulsive breakdowns — Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, and even Tanzania if we include the convulsions of Zanzibar.

Therefore, Kenya is surrounded by major news stories across five borders. And Kenya has the best African news media for its size outside Southern Africa. And yet, most of the big stories that Kenya’s media have carried about its neighbors have relied disproportionately on Western sources.

Uganda’s worst political breakdowns occurred during the reign of Idi Amin and the second administration of Milton Obote. It was Idi Amin’s reign which drove me out of Uganda. A few years after I left Uganda, there was a big story about my old university in Kampala. The World Press reported that Amin’s soldiers had invaded the Makerere campus, raped women students, looted the Halls of Residence and offices, and even mutilated the breasts of some of their female victims; some were killed.

Although I was already based in the United States at that time, I happened to be in Nairobi, Kenya, when the news broke. My wife in North America was visiting Canada. She broke down when she heard the story on the radio. She then called me in Nairobi to check how I was taking it.

I told her that although I was devastated, I was also bewildered that all the Kenyan newspapers and broadcasts were quoting British sources, especially the British Sunday paper, The Observer.

Why were the Kenya media relying almost exclusively on a British newspaper for an event which had occurred next door in broad daylight, in the capital city of Uganda, on the campus of the country’s most distinguished educational institution?

Fortunately, I was scheduled to have lunch with Milton Obote in Dar es Salaam two days later. Obote, who had been overthrown by Idi Amin, was in exile in Tanzania.

At the lunch with Obote was the British correspondent responsible for the horrendous story, David Martin. I asked David Martin if he had been to Idi Amin’s Uganda to check out the story. He had not. He said he got the story from students who had escaped across the border.
Then Obote challenged me to telephone my friends in Uganda to verify. I said such a phone call about such a subject might, if overheard, endanger my friends’ lives under the Amin regime.

The story continued to be headline news in Britain, Africa and much of the rest of the world for another week or so.

We subsequently discovered that while Amin’s troops had invaded the Makerere campus, their worst atrocities were slapping people, kicking people, and intimidating everyone in sight. There were no rapes or murders authoritatively reported and certainly no mutilation of female breasts. The enormity of the original blood-chilling story shrunk to one more incident of African soldiers misbehaving themselves.

But the world had been ready to believe any brutal story from Africa. And even neighboring African countries had no sources of confirmation independently of the West.

At that time, African media consisted primarily of print, radio, television, and social institutions like churches and mosques.

Today, the Internet would facilitate more cross-checking between African neighbors. African citizens can send e-mails to each other, and African governments are not yet sophisticated enough to keep track. Idi Amin would have been none the wiser in the age of the Internet.

But external stories covered in the African media continue to depend disproportionately on the messages and images transmitted between the West and the rest of us. And those messages and images are influenced by seven biases of perception across cultures.

The racial bias tends to ensure that a train accident which kills four white folks is a bigger story than an overturned bus which kills twenty Africans. The gender bias focuses more on the achievements of men than of women. The elite bias rewards the famous with additional fame – and regards the powerful as newsworthy. The urban bias attracts reporters to cities and urban centers – and pays far less attention to rural folks. The generation bias pays more attention to older folks than to the young – unless the young are at the center of exceptional events. The exotic bias is attracted to female circumcision, rather than high school graduation; to African witchcraft rather than African brain surgeons. As for the bias of negativism, this almost always ensures that real bad news is bigger news than happy news tends to be.

Let us return to the Makerere saga under Idi Amin. The racial bias made most of the world credulous about any story of barbarism coming out of Africa. The gender bias in the Makerere story was about women as passive creatures and preeminent victims of the ruthless lust of macho men. The urban bias was the setting of the story in the capital city of an African country and in broad daylight. The elite bias was the obvious linkage with a university, the premier educational institution of a postcolonial African country. The exotic bias was Africa’s allegedly ruthless sexual drive – from promiscuity to rape. This time it allegedly involved Idi Amin’s lust-activated warriors.

The generation bias in the Makerere story included negative and positive elements about young people. The Makerere students symbolized the youth as victims, but Idi Amin’s soldiers were themselves disproportionately young. These symbolized the youth as alleged perpetrators. The one or two students who escaped across the border to break the story to David Martin would have been heroes had their story not been so ridiculously exaggerated. They must have been pro-Obote partisan witnesses.

Finally, the overarching bias of negativism. Massively cruel stories – true or false – make bigger news than heart-warming stories of human kindness. The Makerere saga encapsulated all the seven biases of messages and images between the West and the rest.
The Media and Seven Functions of Culture

The Internet in Africa operates in the context of thee civilizations – Africa’s own indigenous legacy combined with the legacy of Islam, and both under the impact of Western culture. The *triple heritage* consists of Africanity, Islam, and the West.

The Internet and other media affect those three civilizations by influencing the seven functions of culture.

I. Culture as Perception

Culture is how we view the world and how we are viewed by others. The most objectionable portrayal of Muslim women in the world presents the women of Islam as *over-clothed*, with hijab and sometimes the veil.

The former British Foreign Minister has asked any Muslim visiting woman in his office to unveil: “We cannot meet face to face if one face is veiled.” *France* wants Muslim women to abandon the hijab when going to school. *Turkey* does not want women members of Parliament to wear a head scarf in the House.

On the other hand, the most objectionable portrayal of indigenous African women (non-Islamized) is when the women are portrayed as *under-dressed* – targeting such dress codes as that of the Nuba, or of the Maasai or of the traditional Tiv.

There is a big debate now on the campus of Binghamton University concerning an exhibition of photographs of nude African women taken among under-clothed African cultures in the 1950s. On November 9, 2006, on campus, the particular curators of the photographic exhibition confronted their critics. One of the speakers was a Maasai post-doctoral fellow on campus.

The media in the West revels in debates about over-clothed Muslim women and under-clothed indigenous African women. Nakedness is in the eye of the beholder.

II. Culture as a Spring of Motivation

How can we motivate African rulers to be honest, fair-minded, incorruptible and democratically accountable? One answer suggests the Nile Valley as the cradle of African civilization. The latest civilizing gesture from the Nile Valley comes in 2006 from a Sudanese-Egyptian benefactor – offering billions of dollars to motivate African rulers to be just and incorruptible, in exchange for $5 million in retirement, and more money later.

In the past, we thought we would try to motivate good behavior in our rulers by threatening impeachment and trial. This was motivation by the *stick*. Now the Nile Valley seeks to motivate African rulers by the carrot – a financial reward.

The media’s responsibility is to keep track of the performance of our rulers. The Internet’s role is to facilitate greater debate.

III. Culture as Means of Communication

Are the media aggravating the marginalization of indigenous African languages by concentrating on the Euro-imperial languages, like English, French and Portuguese?
Is the Internet widening the linguistic gap between users of Euro-international languages and users of African indigenous languages?

The cellular phone as an oral tradition is multi-lingualizing users of telephones across the world, but the Internet as a written tradition is held hostage by the dominant languages of the world.

Even in Africa, the Internet friendly languages tend to be the big indigenous ones, such as Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Kiswahili, and, of course, the Arabic language.

IV. Culture as a Basis of Identity

The breakdown of culture as a basis of identity is most manifest in Africa’s worst cases of instability.

The Somali people share the same language, the same religion, the same political culture based on clans and the same love of poetry. In the pre-colonial period, Somali governance was based on ordered anarchy. Then colonialism imposed on the Somali institutionalized order. Since then, the post-colonial period has eroded the artificial institutions and restored the old anarchy, but without the old order.

Was the absence of the mass media in Somalia one of the causes of the cultural breakdown? The Somali language remained unwritten until long after the colonial period. The Somalis could not make up their minds about the appropriate alphabet. Should it be the Arabic alphabet or the Roman, or a uniquely indigenous Somali alphabet which had already been invented?

A Somali military government subsequently chose the Roman or Latin alphabet in the 1970s. Would the Somali people have been nationally integrated better if they had had an alphabet for a mass media during their yesteryears as a people of ordered anarchy?

Even today, the Somali people are greater users of the cell phone (the oral tradition one to one) than of the Internet (the written tradition of collective accessibility). In Somalia, shared culture has continued to break down as a foundation of shared empathy.

There are other African examples of cultural breakdowns. Where in Africa has a shared language disastrously failed as a basis of national integration? One colossal example is Rwanda. The Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda speak the same native language – Kinyarwanda. Yet Rwanda goes down in history as the country which had the fastest rate of genocide in recorded history. 800,000 people died within three months. Did the radio in Uganda serve as a trigger of anti-Tutsi massacres? Indeed, did a radio program trigger the anti-Igbo pogrom in Northern Nigeria in 1966?

Where else in Africa has a shared language spectacularly failed to hold a country together? In Rwanda’s sister country, Burundi, with the same rival groups, Hutu and Tutsi, Kirundi has failed as a language of national concord. Have the media in Burundi fed into mutual ethnic massacres?

Where in Africa has a shared religion failed to avert catastrophes? Examples include the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Christian vs. Christian), Algeria (Muslim vs. Muslim), as well as Rwanda and Burundi (Christian vs. Christian).
In those confrontations, the international media has a mixed record. In Rwanda it had been good in covering the final catastrophe (the genocide) and its aftermath, but not good at covering the events which led to the explosion.

In Darfur the international media started covering the calamity mid-stream. The media hopes to avert the ultimate catastrophe.

V. Culture as a Ladder of Stratification

Has the basic stratification changed from who owns what to who knows what? Are computer skills creating new rank-orders? Is Nigeria’s North-South divide being digitized?

Although Northerners were historically the first to be pen-literate in Nigeria, are Southerners the first to be computer-literate? Are Igbo and Yoruba cultures more calculus friendly (numerophile) than Hausa culture? Are Indians of South Asia and Koreans of East Asia more calculus-friendly (numerophile) than Africans or African Americans? Are the Asians better at mathematics? Do the Bagarda enter the Internet culture more easily than do the Karamojong? Do the Kikuyu more than the Maasai?

Islam gets more blame for gender inequality than it gets credit for racial equality. Of the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), Islam has the best record in race relations.

But in modern history Islam may also have the worst record in gender relations. The U.S. doctrine, “Separate but Equal,” lasted until 1954 [Brown vs. the Board of Education ruling]. Islam has an implicit doctrine of “Separate but Equal” for genders, rather than races. Gender segregation was potentially more feasible with the advent of the Internet. Women can surf and work at home and eventually make millions – surfing their way to freedom.

On the other hand, the hijab may gradually become more rare, as dating on the Internet becomes more common among the Muslim youth.

VI. Culture as a Pattern of Consumption and Mode of Production

Much of Africa has borrowed Western tastes without Western skills. It has borrowed consumption patterns without production techniques. It has promoted urbanization without industrialization and has learned capitalist greed without capitalist discipline.

The media has been a major instrument for advertising consumption patterns, but not of stimulating new production techniques. On the other hand, the media is an instrument for exposing corruption and tracking excessive greed. In the West the media have become indispensable for implementing democracy. In Africa the struggle to democratize continues with the help of the media worldwide.

Seven Pillars of Media Wisdom

As we confront the subject of democracy, we are stepping into the domain of modern pillars of wisdom. The first pillar of wisdom in contemporary Africa is the imperative of liberation. Kwame Nkrumah captured “liberation” at its most optimistic: “Seek ye first the political kingdom and all else will be added unto you.”¹

In some respects, liberation is the means towards democracy. In other respects, liberation is the whole purpose of democratization. Where do the media fit in? The African quest for liberty should influence the selection of stories to be covered and should be a major guide to editorial policy. But liberation does
not really translate into democratization unless it is linked to the second modern pillar of wisdom—accommodation. The pursuit of liberty needs to be moderated by the principle of accommodating diverse and competitive interests. This second imperative is indeed accommodation. If African politics are ethnic-prone, how can African constitutions be ethnic-proof? The African media needs to address this dilemma in creative ways to ensure that liberation and accommodation are not antithetical.

The role of the media in African election campaigns is growing (especially the radio and newspapers and, less persuasive, television). Although the mass media have a long way to go before they become as decisive in African campaigns as they are in, say, U.S. elections, the African media have already become very important in African urban constituencies.

The third modern pillar of wisdom is the imperative of communication. Do the African media need to strike a balance between indigenous languages and Euro-imperial languages in their choice of story coverage and pictorial images? Should the media simply follow the priorities of the government in language policy for the country? Or should the media have its own linguistic priorities and act on them?

Many Africans who have learned to read only in an indigenous African language (e.g., Kiswahili in Tanzania) often need regular access to a newspaper in that language if they are to maintain their literacy at all over a long period. Minimally educated Africans can easily relapse back to illiteracy if there is no appropriate and interesting reading material to keep them reading day after day. The print media help to preserve the hard-earned ability to read.

As for ordinary folks who need to be kept informed about local, national, and international affairs during each week, there is nothing to compare with news bulletins in the local language on the local radio. All these elements are vital in promoting a relatively sophisticated electorate among the emerging African democracies.

The fourth pillar of wisdom in the media is androgynization in the sense of the imperative of gender-balance. This would require a constant effort to balance stories about men with stories about women and to balance male imagery with female.

Some years ago I was graciously invited by The Guardian newspaper in Lagos, Nigeria, to give their annual Anniversary Lecture at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. The newspaper assigned me a topic. I was to lecture on “The Black Woman.” I agreed to give the lecture provided it was chaired by a woman. The Guardian agreed and also invited Mrs. Maryam Babangida, the First Lady of Nigeria, to be the Distinguished Guest at the lecture.

In my opening remarks I thanked The Guardian for the gender-balance.2 I added these words: “Since this year you have invited a man to speak about ‘The Black Woman,’ I hope next year The Guardian will consider inviting a woman to speak about ‘The Black Man.’” Until then no woman had ever been invited by The Guardian to give the annual Anniversary Distinguished Lecture. I would like to believe that my 1991 lecture helped to trigger a re-evaluation of the gender-balance in the editorial and public relations policies of The Guardian.

But the changes did not come fast enough to spare either The Guardian or myself from such Nigerian feminists as Dr. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, who had at that time just resigned from the University of Ibadan to depart for a visiting professorship in the United States.3 She launched an attack in an article entitled “Beyond Hearsay and Academic Journalism: The Black Woman and Ali Mazrui”.

The fifth modern pillar of wisdom is ecological balance. The African media should be more sensitized to issues like desertification, population growth, the green-house effect and global warming, and the relationship between the ecology and the human condition. The electronic media may have already begun to respond to the distinction between the ethics and the aesthetics of environmental concerns.
Television documentaries about wild animals, the wonders of the sea-bed, the organisms of the deep, the wonders of the reefs, already abound. They concern the beauty of the environment (ecological aesthetics). The African media should close ranks with Al Gore, former U.S. Vice-President, in producing documentaries about global warming, the risks of population growth, deforestation and the depletion of the ozone layer (environmental ethics). Although television as a visual medium is more effective with such documentaries than either radio or the print media, there is already a lot of scope for environmental coverage in all the media.

The sixth modern pillar of wisdom is more purely economic, balancing production, distribution, and consumption. The African media has begun to be effective in covering economic calamities such as draught, famine, devastating floods, and large-scale fires. Progress is also being made in covering the work of economic organizations, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and the emerging East African Community (ECA). But the media also needs to play a more active role in stimulating and guiding investment and supporting agricultural festivals and livestock exhibitions.

The seventh and final modern pillar of wisdom is eternal vigilance in pursuit and support of the truth. This would also include the verification and clarification of each story and a defense of honest variant interpretations of the truth.

Conclusion

The pursuit of the truth includes a readiness to blow the whistle when things are going seriously wrong, either in our own society or among our neighbors. We have mentioned earlier the increased readiness of the press in Africa to expose corruption in high places. But the African press should also be ready to tackle even higher crimes and misdemeanors, both within our countries and elsewhere in Africa. The African press has been much slower than the Western press in blowing the whistle about ethnic cleansing in Darfur, or the atrocities of the Lord Resistance Army in Northern Uganda, or the endless civil wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

NEPAD and the African Union encourage peer-review between African states – checking on each other on economic performance and the ethics of governance. But there should be peer-review also at the level of the Fourth Estate. The press in each African country and the press between each country should help to raise the alarm about impending or unfolding calamities in our African region.

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ENDNOTES