

“How—and by whom—is certain information identified as news, especially with regard to Africa? And what role does the African press play in determining what foreign journalists regard as news—and in providing information for the African public?”

## Reporting Africa

STEPHEN ELLIS

We know that journalists report events differently in different countries. On any given day, newspapers and radio and television stations in the United States, Britain, and France are likely to choose dissimilar stories as the most newsworthy for their lead news items. Even if they were all to pick the same story—the death of Princess Diana or the election of an American president, for example—they are likely to approach it differently, according to what they presume to be the interests of their audiences. At the same time, most press reporting in what is sometimes called the “quality press” in these three representative countries is recognizably of the same genre; as one author has put it, their “readers . . . assume that [news stories] are attempts at representing reality.”<sup>1</sup>

In the case of the press and Africa, two central sets of questions arise when assessing the quality press’s representation of reality on the continent. First, how—and by whom—is certain information identified as news, especially with regard to Africa? And what role does the African press play in determining what foreign journalists regard as news—and in providing information for the African public?

### WHO COVERS THE NEWS—AND HOW

We should begin by noting which newspapers cover African affairs extensively. The relevant British newspapers that cover African affairs extensively

include *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Independent*, as well as the major Sunday papers. In France, the leading relevant papers are *Le Monde*, *Libération*, and *Le Figaro*, and in America they are generally considered to be *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. All these newspapers carry fairly regular dispatches on Africa and have some tradition of appointing their own correspondents to report African affairs. This last is an expensive business, but the maintenance of a large network of foreign correspondents is one feature that distinguishes the quality newspapers from their tabloid cousins, which report African affairs less extensively or not at all.

The foreign correspondents of the quality papers play a crucial role in informing European and American readers of events in Africa, although the great days of newspaper foreign correspondents may now be over, largely because of the growth of television reporting. In some respects, foreign correspondents working in Africa had a considerable degree of freedom until many of the continent’s one-party states were dismantled in the early 1990s. In the days of one-party states, correspondents were often troubled by poor facilities, such as lack of telephone lines, and by the attention of government “minders” or security officers who might take a dim view of their reports. Yet they also had considerable latitude to decide for themselves what would make good stories.

How did—and does—a foreign correspondent do this? Then as now, circumstances can arise in which a journalist in Africa is phoned by an editor in London or New York and urged to report on a particular story, in which case the determination of what is news is being made at an editorial desk rather than in Africa itself. This also applies to foreign desks that simply choose and publish a story offered by one of

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<sup>1</sup>See James Sanders, “A Struggle for Representation: The International Media Treatment of South Africa, 1972–9.” Ph.D. diss. (London: University of London, 1997), p. 18.

the international news agencies, such as Reuters. Left to their own devices, foreign correspondents are likely to use various sources in determining what stories to report for their papers. For example, a government minister's press conference or interview can be a ready-made source of a newsworthy story, or foreign correspondents socializing with one another can collectively decide what to report.

Of interest here is the relationship between foreign correspondents and African journalists, which has changed with the greater freedom of the African press. In the era of one-party states, a foreign correspondent's association with the local African press was often strained or almost nonexistent, since most European and American correspondents based in Africa believed that the local presses were poor sources of information.

An exception to this generalization is certainly South Africa, which has for 20 years been the most important base for foreign correspondents south of

the Sahara, due to a mixture of its economic and political importance, good infrastructure, and cultural familiarity to American and European reporters. Many British and American newspapers employed South African nationals as correspondents, and those sent from home countries often paid great attention to the local press as a guide to what was news. In the heyday of *The Rand Daily Mail*, the flagship of English-language liberal journalism in South Africa, foreign correspondents frequently would file a report on whatever was on the *Mails* front page. But correspondents based in Nairobi, Kenya, another favorite base for foreign reporters (largely because of its good communications facilities), could not easily do the same. Because of the restrictions inherent in single-party government, the Kenyan press was less free to report the events foreign correspondents considered newsworthy, which, combined with other factors, made the Kenyan press a less likely news source for non-African reporters.

#### ASSUMPTIONS AND FACTS

SINCE NEWS IS a representation of reality, it is crucial that it should be built from individually verifiable facts. The tradition of modern Western journalism was built on a respect for facts in the sense of empirically verified, observed items of information. The best facts are what journalists see themselves, or what has been confirmed in various ways, such as an on-the-record statement or a document of proven authenticity.

In this respect, a notable difference exists between various Western journalistic traditions. American journalists are generally more rigorous than their European counterparts in considering reporting as the assembly of carefully corroborated facts. Some American publications employ editorial fact-checkers to verify the information in journalists' reports, and editors assiduously demand corroboration of information. Journalism has even come to be seen in the United States as a profession comparable to the law or medicine, and it is taught in colleges, some of which publish academic periodicals in which the theory and practice of journalism are discussed. This makes American journalism highly accurate and self-critical within its own terms of reference, but it is often said to be affected by other problems, including the cult of the star journalist or the journalist as the hero of his or her own story. Newspapers and, especially, television stations compete to achieve high sales or high ratings by providing entertainment.

The French press tradition, in contrast, stems from a more "literary" approach. Entire articles in such a distinguished newspaper as *Le Monde*, for example, contain personal opinion and interpretation that would not easily find its way past the barrage of editors and fact-checkers onto the news pages of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. It is not so much that French newspaper journalists take themselves to be stars as

that they aspire to cultivate literary talents, which means that entire paragraphs of a news story might be based on personal interpretation and unsourced reporting. Thus, while we may recognize that both *Le Monde* and *The New York Times* are built on a search for the truth through facts, to an American journalist *Le Monde* often appears shockingly subjective. Undoubtedly, to many French journalists a leading American daily might appear pedantic and lacking insight.

Since every culture identifies itself and identifies what is true and interesting partly by reference to genres of information it recognizes, one of the hardest tasks in moving from one country to another, even in such a relatively homogeneous area as Europe, is to feel at home with another country's press. For it is not just a matter of learning a language, but of learning the repertoire of genres and story-types proper to each culture. While news reporting is a fairly distinctive activity, it is related to much deeper narratives that are concerned with social ideas about complex problems, some of which might have only the most tenuous relationship to empirical facts, and which give a particular society much of its distinctive flavor.

We can gain some insight into this phenomenon by recognizing that two levels of human cognitive interaction with the environment exist. One is that which might be termed observable, commonsense, or everyday theories about events, such as that a car driven at high speed into a wall will cause injury to its occupants. This level of primary theory is remarkably similar in all human cultures. A secondary level of theory, which concerns the hidden underpinnings of the everyday world, differs far more. Just as each European country has its own repertory of cultural genres based in shared assumptions that underpin the banalities of daily events, and that are reflected in the way news is determined, presented and read, so do African countries. S. E. ■

## DETERMINING WHAT IS “NEWS”

But what, exactly, is news? At its most basic, news is an attempt to represent reality by those employed for that purpose by organizations of mass communication. These editors and journalists are themselves influenced by a wider circle of people with a professional interest in the matter. The latter include, notably, politicians and their immediate aides, who are often both the subjects and the sources of news and who attempt to influence the representation of reality created by journalists according to their own interests or points of view (now fashionably called “spinning” or “spin-doctoring”). The epitome of this is the presidential or ministerial news conference. If a minister summons journalists to listen to a statement, they can reasonably be expected to regard this as a potentially newsworthy event. A briefing by a ministerial aide, a government press release, or a press release by some other body or even by certain individuals, are also potentially newsworthy but are soon devalued by the multitude of press releases landing on a journalist’s desk.

The balance of influence between those two mutually dependent antagonists—politicians and journalists—is subtle and variable. Where a free press exists, politicians whose press conferences are dull or unremarkable will find their names slipping from the media when journalists discover they will not provide anything worth reporting.

When many African countries had one-party governments, the balance of power between journalists and politicians naturally lay with the latter, who could expect substantial or even total loyalty from a national press typically full of front-page stories like “President Meets Taiwanese Trade Delegation” or “Minister Urges Farmers to Work Harder.” Foreign correspondents saw this as non-news, which is one reason they did not regard most of the local African press as sources of “hard” stories. African politicians in one-party states generally considered their own press as under fairly firm control and reserved much of their persuasive talent for dealing with the foreign press. But the very dominance politicians had over domestic news management caused foreigners to regard news conferences and statements with caution. Instead, foreign correspondents cultivated the franker, more newsworthy exclusive interviews or off-the-record briefings.

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<sup>2</sup>See Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 62.

## WHO IS WRITING FOR WHOM?

Regardless of the source of an idea for a story, journalists write largely for each other, for their editors, and for their sources, all of whom they may expect to read and comment critically on the results. As historian Robert Darnton recalls of his days as a *New York Times* reporter, “We never wrote for the ‘image persons’ conjured up by social science. We wrote for one another.”<sup>2</sup>

An experienced journalist comes to recognize certain types of information as news according to whether it fits into categories that all successful journalists learn to identify and believe their readers will also recognize. Darnton recalls that journalists “simply drew on the traditional repertory of genres. It was like making cookies from an antique cookie cutter. Big stories develop in special patterns and have an archaic flavor, as if they were a metamorphosis of *Ur*-stories that have been lost in the depths of time.” These genres are passed on from one generation of journalists to the next. Readers of any literature, not just of newspapers, need to recognize the genre they are dealing with if they are to understand the texts they are offered.

Genres of newspaper stories, like any literary categories or styles, change over time. This change is usually gradual and hardly perceptible, but it can be sudden and vivid if a major story takes on a genuine mold-breaking role, like the Watergate revelations in *The Washington Post* in the early 1970s. These constituted an instant classic of journalism precisely because they challenged the established way of reporting national politics in America and were also recognizable to the public. Indeed, Watergate changed the way journalism was conceived in most of the world. Journalists came to see themselves increasingly as investigators and pursuers not just of information, but of justice. It sparked off Muldergate or Infogate in South Africa and Vouchergate and Squandergate stories in Sierra Leone, for example, among many other “gate” stories and scandals.

## THE REVIVAL OF THE AFRICAN PRESS

For many years, Africa was notorious for the paucity and thinness of its newspapers. According to a United Nations survey, Africa and its offshore islands had 220 daily newspapers in 1964, 169 of which were sub-Saharan. By 1977 the number of dailies was estimated to have fallen to 156, of which North Africa accounted for 35, Rhodesia and South Africa 24, and Madagascar and Mauri-

tius 30, with the remaining 36 states having only 67 daily newspapers between them. The majority of these were owned by governments or ruling parties and virtually all were subject to censorship. In 1980, for every 1,000 sub-Saharan Africans there were 12 newspapers. Even now most Africans do not read newspapers and are far more likely to derive their knowledge of current events from radio (domestic or international) or television, or by word of mouth. The latter, known in French as *radio trottoir* (literally translated, “pavement radio”) should not be underestimated as a source of news in Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Although in 1994 there was still only 10 newspapers for every 1,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa, the press has in many ways been transformed since the late 1980s. The unpopularity of one-party states that led to such sweeping and often spectacular political changes between 1989 and 1992 had perhaps its most remarkable and lasting effect on freedom of expression. Most African countries now have dozens of newspapers instead of just one or two (in 1997, there were 157 daily newspapers in sub-Saharan Africa). Typically, one or two dailies may now operate, often including the old government- or party-owned papers, and perhaps one reasonably durable independent daily or weekly. In addition, dozens of small newspapers are often published irregularly, appearing and disappearing with such speed that it is often difficult for an outsider to follow their progress or to establish who owns or runs which paper. Nevertheless, a relatively small pool of experienced journalists does exist and often passes from one paper to another, so that the analysis of the press becomes a case of follow-the-journalist as much as of follow-the-paper.

The flowering of the press is a major new element in African politics, but the freedom it enjoys should not be exaggerated. Whatever commitments governments may make to freedom of expression, no government enjoys being criticized, especially if it believes the criticism to be inaccurate or unfair. Governments continue to use various legal processes against the press, such as the many attempts to intimidate *The Post*, published in Zambia’s capital city, Lusaka, and the country’s leading independent paper.

<sup>3</sup>See Stephen Ellis, “Tuning in to Pavement Radio,” *African Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 352 (1989).

After the Movement for Multiparty Democracy had been elected to govern Zambia in 1991 in what was interpreted as an exemplary transition to democracy, its relations with the independent press soon became poor; to many it appeared that the new government and *The Post* were engaged in a feud. Between 1991 and 1996, *The Post* faced more than 100 actions for civil libel, some initiated by government officials. The paper was also subjected to legal action under more unusual legislation, some of it dating from the colonial period. In the case of *The People v. Bright Mwape and Fred M’membe*, senior editors of *The Post* were charged in 1994 with insulting President Frederick Chiluba by reporting that a deputy minister had referred to him as a “twit.” The penalty for this offense, under Section 69 of the penal code, is imprisonment for up to three years. In another case, the same two defendants and *Post* columnist Lucy Banda Sichone were found guilty in February 1996 of contempt of parliament by the Standing Orders Committee of the Zambian National Assembly—

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which is not a court of law—for publishing articles that criticized a parliamentary speech made by the vice president.

The speaker of the National Assembly then directed the inspector-general of police to arrest the three. Mwape and M’membe were jailed for a period, but released by order of the Lusaka High Court on March 27, 1998. The government has appealed this decision.

In many other cases, journalists who anger or embarrass a government may be subject to unlawful physical intimidation or worse. The number of reporters murdered or physically intimidated in sub-Saharan Africa has probably risen in recent years, partly as a consequence of increased press freedom. According to the United States-based Committee to Protect Journalists, 13 journalists were murdered there in 1999.

Governments may often have reason to feel aggrieved by the press. Most countries have some form of libel law that protects citizens from unfair or false slurs on their reputation, and no doubt many articles are published that are factually incorrect. In any system that ensures freedom of expression, some balance must be found and enshrined in law that allows the publication of facts and the airing of views while protecting indi-

viduals against certain forms of vilification. Many African governments, even in their new multiparty form, have not found such a balance. Moreover, a number of the new newspapers print scurrilous stories, and journalists often say among themselves that certain papers are unofficial mouthpieces of particular interests or politicians or are simply open to hire in the form of bribery by any faction, occasionally for the defamation of their rivals. A Sierra Leonean journalist, Amadu Wurie Khan, has described a phenomenon known as “blackmail journalism,” whereby journalists threaten to write derogatory and false accounts of people unless they are paid off; other evidence suggests that this and comparable forms of corrupt practice are widespread in African journalism. Freedom of expression, therefore, while perhaps the most lasting change introduced by the political reforms between 1989 and 1992, certainly does not guarantee democracy, quality of information, or the reasoned discussion of policy matters, despite the hopes of so many donor governments when they backed political reforms.

### NOT JUST THE FACTS

International aid donors frequently lament what they see as the lack of professionalism of African journalists, many of whom are capable of writing stories that are of dubious accuracy and that may not contain one verified fact of the type that is drummed into Western journalists in college or early in their careers. The usual donor response is to suggest training programs.

No doubt many African journalists would benefit from further training and better facilities such as computers, mobile phones, and transport. But that is not the central issue. As with all countries, politics in Africa is partly about the representation of events in a particular light, which is related to people’s fundamental ideas about normality, morality, and truth, which vary from one society to another. African governments, like their Western counterparts, struggle to put a favorable gloss on stories that enter the public domain, to encourage reporting of what they perceive to be their own triumphs, and to pass over their shortcomings. Opponents or other sectors of society may embark on similar endeavors, making information a crucial field of political action.

As with European and American papers, analysts can easily distinguish which newspapers in Africa are the most authoritative, even if those papers occasionally make factual errors. Western ob-

servers, including foreign correspondents, are likely to recognize the best African newspapers, and Western journalists may regard their African counterparts as colleagues in a similar endeavor.

Nevertheless, even courageous and skillfully produced African papers often contain stories that to a Western reader appear shocking, bizarre, or simply incomprehensible. For example, an account appeared in the Nairobi-based *Kenya Times* in June 1988 that described the appearance of Jesus Christ at Kawangware, a poor section of Nairobi. Jesus was said to have appeared, dressed in white robes and wearing a turban, and was immediately recognized by onlookers. “I am convinced this was a miracle,” said Job Mutungi, editor of the Swahili edition of the *Kenya Times*. “I saw a bright star in daytime thrice. This person appeared mysteriously in the crowd, and he had a light around his head and sparks from his bare feet.” According to eyewitnesses, Jesus pronounced a blessing in Swahili before leaving in a car driven by a man named Gurnam Singh. Jesus then descended at a bus terminal and vanished into thin air.

From the way this account is written, the journalists who produced it clearly did not consider it to fall in the category of the weird or bizarre (what is sometimes called the “man bites dog” story), but as a factual report of a remarkable event. The journalist and editor are presenting readers with a genre that exists in Kenya (and in most other African countries) but no longer in the European or American mainstream: the miracle story, based ultimately on a fundamental body of theory concerning what lies behind or explains events. Many similar examples could be given of reports published in respectable African newspapers, often concerning divine intervention in human affairs, witchcraft, or extravagant conspiracy theories. In many cases such stories are taken in deadly earnest by professional journalists and their readers.

Stories of this sort have long been a mainstay of *radio trottoir*; and in this sense Africa’s new press shares many characteristics with the oral form of communication. Both presume certain values commonly held by the population, just as *The Daily Telegraph* or *The New York Times* do in their own way; it is in terms of these values that a paper identifies news and arranges its facts to form stories intelligible to its readers. Western reporting may engage in genres that appear to many Africans to be highly implausible, especially when it discusses the ultimate causes of factual events. Similarly, some stories

that are favorites of the African press and that again appear incomprehensible in the West actually have a long tradition, such as the “heart-thieves” in Madagascar, who are believed to steal human hearts for the purpose of eating or selling them.

### OPEN TO MISUNDERSTANDING

Probably the greatest change in Africa’s political environment in recent years has been the growth of freedom of expression. Of course, this is by no means absolute, and journalists continue to run high risks. Not all African journalists are single-minded champions of truth, any more than are their Western colleagues. Like any profession, journalism has its fair share of incompetents or mercenaries. Significantly, however, the press has become a field of political struggle open to general view.

While this has somewhat weakened the grip politicians previously had over print and broadcast news, radio and television broadcasting remains under significantly tighter government control in most of Africa than does the written press.

Paradoxically, the opening of the press has increased the scope for foreigners to misunderstand. In all countries, the formation of news tends to conform to certain widely held views as to what constitutes appropriate genres. These vary from one part of the world to another, and can be quite different in Africa and Europe. Those who live outside Africa can find abundant information in the African press but, like the press of every country, it has to be read in the context of the prevailing culture if maximum information is to be gleaned from it. ■