

Impartiality and Conflict Reporting: The Challenge for Journalistic Integrity

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A lecture given at the Nigerian Union of Journalist's workshop on 'Media Responsibility in Conflict Situations', held in Jos, the capital of Plateau State.

The first president of Ghana, the late Kwame Nkrumah made this observation about journalism:

'... the journalist ... is forced into arranging news to fit the outlook of his journal. He finds himself rejecting or distorting facts that do not coincide with the outlook and interest of his employer or medium's advertisers. Under the pressure of competition for advertising revenue, trivialities are blown up; the vulgar emphasised; ethics forgotten; the important trimmed to the class outlook; enmity is fanned and peace is perverted; the search is for sensation and the justification of an unjust system in which the truth or the journalist must become the casualty.'¹

As practitioners of journalism we must sadly acknowledge the truth of Nkrumah's evaluation. Nigeria has particular issues and structural impediments which actively conspire against good practice and it is against this background that conflict reporting takes place. Press partisanship is fuelled by incompetent reporting, subjective editorial policies, prejudice, ethnicity, etc.

We must also note that Nkrumah rightly sees the journalist as 'victim'. And let's face it, when other people around us also point out the shortcomings of our profession, rarely if ever, do they see journalists as casualties or victims. To be sure many journalists are to blame for their own incompetent reporting, subjective editorial policies, prejudices, etc., but others have their work and integrity abused.

The challenge for our profession is to work against those practices, prejudices and vested interests which undermine journalistic integrity and betray the public. The challenge is for each of us to work to higher standards, to pursue the truth in all our coverage of stories and to do so with due impartiality. That is always the task and calling of our profession in every situation – and particularly in the reporting and coverage of conflict. And a message I want to repeat often is this: ***trustworthy reporting, trustworthy information is an essential pre-requisite for any relationship-building in any situation ~ especially for conflict resolution.*** So good, honest, reliable and truthful journalism is a basic starting point for communities to create peaceful social structures. Too often inter-communal violence is triggered by wrong information, let alone deliberate disinformation.

Truth & impartiality

But before I go any further I want to briefly recap some of the things I said when here at a similar conference in Jos last October.

The pursuit of truth is the foundation of journalism. That is what we all share – irrespective of nationality, race or creed. And that's found in your own *Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists* which says 'Truth is the cornerstone of journalism and every journalist should strive diligently to ascertain the truth of every event.'

The challenges to every journalist's conscience are contained in these self-examining questions: Am I committed to the pursuit of truth? In my reporting am I doing everything I can to ascertain the truth in a situation? Does my work show others that I am trustworthy?

For any media institution the pursuit of truth is characterised by the accuracy and trustworthiness of its journalism. And again, that's backed up by your own Code of Ethics which says '*Factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust and confidence.*' This touches on another important issue at the heart of our enterprise: **impartiality**. '*Factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting*' cannot exist if we do not take due care to be impartial. In other words not take sides on any one issue.

Impartiality means 'balance in the choice and use of sources, so as to reflect different points of view, and also neutrality in the presentation – separating facts from opinion, avoiding value judgements or emotive language.'²

In order to do their tasks properly – to seek the truth, be accurate and fair in reporting - journalists are required to exercise a variety of skills including two I want to highlight briefly - 'objectivity' and 'scepticism'. Because if we are doing our job properly we will be asking the questions: What does it mean to be objective, when everyone brings their own bias to the reporting task? And when every human being has a number of personal allegiances such as religious faith, family, tribal and national identities, political commitments, etc., how does a journalist deal with the issue of 'partisanship'?

'Objective reporting has been defined as:

- Balance and even-handedness in presenting different sides of an issue.
- Accuracy and realism in reporting.
- Presenting all main relevant points.
- Separating facts from opinion, but treating opinion as relevant.
- Minimising the influences of the writer's own attitude, opinion or involvement.
- Avoiding slant, rancour or devious purposes.'³

It has often been argued that journalists can never be objective because every human being brings their own bias into a situation: for instance their own cultural, religious, political, social, linguistic backgrounds and values. This is a stance taken by some advocates of the so-called 'peace journalism' which I will come to later. But this to misunderstand what is meant by 'objectivity' and why it was adopted as a journalistic skill in the first place. So we must note that 'objectivity' as a requirement of journalistic reporting was developed precisely because we all carry some bias. In a book called *The Elements of Journalism* the authors note⁴

'When the concept (of objectivity) originally evolved, it was not meant to imply that journalists were free of bias. Quite the contrary. The term began to appear as part of journalism early in the last century, particularly in the 1920s, out of a growing recognition that journalists were full of bias, often unconsciously. Objectivity called for journalists to develop a consistent method of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work.'

And one of the elements of objective reporting is the discipline of keeping factual reporting quite separate from opinions – in other words cultivating a discipline of impartiality. And again, this is in your own *Code of Ethics* which states: '*In the course of his (or her) duties a journalist should strive to separate facts from conjecture and comment.*'

Of course this is self-directed. It's the journalist who should strive to keep his or her opinions out of the story. This requires each of us to be especially self-aware. To know exactly what our allegiances and loyalties are: and our prejudices. To create a sufficient distance from them to ensure they don't get in the way. It's a great skill and when acquired and practised consistently, and it becomes essential to our personal and professional integrity.

But I also want to highlight ‘scepticism’ as a valuable tool because this too is essential. If one of the characteristics of a journalist is an insatiable curiosity – so is the ability to be sceptical – that is the inclination to suspend judgement, and be given to questioning the truth of ‘facts’ and the soundness of inferences. We will listen to others, but always suspend judgement – at least for a time, while we question, while we gather more information, as we start to build the whole picture. But I mention it particularly, because when we strive to be impartial, not just to look at things from the point of view of our own party loyalties, we will need to be sceptical even of our own personal and cultural bias. Good reporting will not only reflect opinions from different sides of a story, but a good journalist will seek to put themselves in other people’s shoes, to see things from their point of view – in order to report their views faithfully.

Why is this all important to us at a conference on the role of the journalist in conflict management and peace building? Simply this: If journalists (and their media organisations) do not keep faithful to the core values at the very heart of our profession – to pursue the truth, then societies’ efforts at conflict resolution and peace building are betrayed from the start. Why? Because I repeat, *trustworthy reporting, trustworthy information is an essential pre-requisite for any relationship building in any situation ~ especially for conflict resolution*. So good, honest, reliable and truthful journalism is a basic starting point for building peaceful social structures. Too often inter-communal violence is triggered by wrong information, let alone deliberate disinformation.

The discipline of pursuing truth by objective reporting and impartiality are a crucial foundation of a community’s ability to work for peace. Partisanship of any kind is a threat to the pursuit of truth, and the understanding and reporting of conflict – even when the commitment of the journalist is to proactive peace-building and conflict resolution. Today, ironically, one of the challenges to impartiality is the emergence of so-called ‘peace journalism’. I want to examine the fundamental weakness of that approach but also highlight the valuable insights and journalistic tools which such an approach provides.

The weaknesses and strengths of ‘Peace Reporting’

There has been a great deal of discussion in the last few years about the role of the journalist in war and conflict reporting. Much of it has surrounded the issues of the traditional requirement for journalists to be ‘objective’, and arguments have been put which both question whether reporting can ever be ‘objective’. If it can’t then some argue that there is a moral commitment on journalists to search for, and advocate, ‘peace solutions’. To be more ‘pro-active for peace-building’. But as I have already argued this is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of ‘objective reporting’.

I am not an advocate of ‘peace journalism’. I do not believe there can be such a thing as ‘peace journalism’ or for that matter ‘war journalism’ – only good journalism and bad journalism.

In ‘peace journalism’ what is proposed is that reporters take sides – albeit on the side of peace. It calls for journalists to be involved in conflict resolution and not just conflict reporting. It sounds good – surely there’s nothing wrong with that?

At a round-table conference organised by the *Reporting the World* project, Melissa Baumann, president of the Media Peace Centre in Cape Town, South Africa, spoke about the world-wide movement now exploring conflict resolution roles for journalists, and their compatibility with existing responsibilities. She said that such efforts had in common,

‘A commitment to rethinking our roles as journalists in favour of being more pro-active and less reactive and more facilitative to peace building. A commitment to realising the harm you can do as a journalist by being aware of the impact. A commitment to help tell more of the untold stories, to challenge prevailing narratives ... for instance, challenging Africa’s relentless portrayal as the world’s basket case.’⁵

Now the first statement undermines the journalist's task to be impartial when she talks of 'rethinking our roles as journalists in favour of being more pro-active and less reactive and more facilitative to peace building'. But the other commitments she mentions are excellent – they fit the requirement of journalists to be sceptical – that is, to be continually questioning received wisdom and interpretations of issues and conflicts, to 'think outside the box' and for instance ask whose voices are not being heard in the story.

But a partisan approach to conflict reporting, even if it is on the side of 'peace', is fundamentally and fatally flawed. Journalism must be free to report, explore, examine and critique all parties in a given situation – even those who are working for peace. This recognises too that often there is no one peace strategy or conflict resolution on offer. The public deserve to have all explored and examined as part of the public debate. And there are also explicit dangers in such partisanship: for what if the resolution strategy adopted by a particular journalist is flawed, or just doesn't work, or is used (or funded) by one of the parties in a dispute, or actually creates injustice, or indeed marginalises certain individuals or groups, and so on? The media need to remain the place where open and informed reporting and debate takes place.

At the *Reporting the World* round table discussion where Melissa Baumann spoke, Jannine di Giovanni – special correspondent for *The Times* made this comment:

'I can see how it is our responsibility to report atrocities or genocide but I'm not sure it's my role to get the Macedonians or the Albanians sitting at a round table, I just think that really violates our role as reporters. It's enough trying to be objective and reporting fairly without having that extra burden, it just seems to be totally unrealistic.'⁵

My former boss, Bob Jobbins, (when Director of News at the BBC World Service), put it succinctly: 'conflict resolution is something on which I report, not something in which I engage'.⁵

'Reporting the World' checklist

Having said that, there is much to learn from the approaches adopted by the *Reporting the World* project which can help us become better at what we do in the arena of conflict reporting. The project describes itself as

'... a service for journalists striving to uphold values of balance, fairness and responsibility in their coverage of international affairs. More than two hundred editors, writers, producers and reporters have joined interested professionals from other related fields, to discuss how news can best inform and orientate readers and audiences in today's increasingly interdependent world.'⁵

Reporting the World began life as series of discussions held in the UK and a book arising from these discussions was published in 2002. Its aim was 'to formulate a broad-based agenda for reform in news, aimed at helping journalists to apply the best of traditional ethics and values to their work in a modern setting.'⁵

For our purposes, they have provided a useful tool for journalists engaged in conflict reporting. They have drawn up 'A practical checklist for the ethical reporting of conflicts in the 21st Century'.

Now you don't have to be a 'peace journalist' to see the practical value of this checklist. The checklist is a useful tool – at least in embryo if not in every detail, and I see it as an aid to responsible reporting and indeed the pursuit of 'objectivity'. *Reporting the World* says the checklist

'... offers clear and specific criteria for assessing the quality and integrity of international news. It is intended to strengthen the arguments for journalists to get the time, space and resources they need to provide the public service of informing us, in an ethical manner, about important developments in the world at large. It also addresses the need to promote journalists' own

emotional self-knowledge and psychological well-being, especially when covering conflicts, if they are to continue to perform this service effectively.’⁵

The *Reporting the World* checklist consists of four main 4 questions: How is violence explained? What is the shape of the conflict? Is there any news of any efforts or ideas to resolve the conflict? And lastly, what is ‘our’ role in this story? (What is the journalist’s role in the story?)

Without setting out all of *Reporting the World*’s subsidiary questions or going into each of them in detail, I want to focus on the second, What is the shape of the conflict?

Reporting the World asks two subsidiary questions:

- Is the conflict framed as ‘tug-of-war’ – a zero-sum game of two parties contesting a single goal?
- Or as ‘cat’s-cradle’ – a pattern of many interdependent parties, with needs and interests which may overlap, or provide scope for integrated solutions?

In addition to those questions which address the question of looking for the shape of the conflict itself, we can also ask what is the underlying nature of the conflict? Is the background situation one where, for example:

- Resources are scarce (relating to poverty, unemployment, housing, water, etc.)
- Poor or no communication exists between parties
- Parties have incorrect perceptions of one another
- Unresolved grievances exist from the past
- Power is unevenly distributed
- Etc., etc.

It is the journalist’s role to ask questions – penetrating questions. Tools such as the *Reporting the World* checklist provide critical questions and act as aid to the investigative process, and all of these questions are an exercise in thinking ‘outside the box’ of existing descriptions and stereotypes. It is too easy for journalists to take a lazy option of just making the story they’re reporting on, fit into an existing stereotypical framework. For instance to report on a conflict which may have specific cultural or ethnic roots, and for convenience describe it as a black and white, religious divide – Christians perpetrating violence against Muslims, or Muslims attacking Christians, when religion isn’t the a basis or the prime motive in the dispute.

The Conflict Resolution Network Canada

There is another approach from *The Conflict Resolution Network Canada* which also has a valuable tool for journalists to use. A different set of questions based on the classic basic formula of questioning well know to journalists: the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How questions.⁶

- Who:** Who is affected by this conflict; who has a distinct stake in its outcome? What is their relationship to one another, including relative power, influence, and affluence?
- What:** What triggered the dispute; what drew it to your attention at this time? What issues do the parties need resolve?
- When:** When did this conflict begin; how often have the circumstances existed that gave rise to this dispute?
- Where:** What geographical or political jurisdictions are affected by the dispute? How has this kind of thing be handled in other places?
- Why:** Why do the parties hold the positions they do; what needs, interests, fears and concerns are the positions intended to address?
- How:** How are they going to resolve this e.g. negotiation, mediation, arbitration, administrative hearing, court, armed warfare; what are the costs/benefits of the chosen method?

They have also added two further sets of questions:

Options: What options have the parties explored, how do the various options relate to the interests identified?

Common Ground: What common ground is there between the parties; what have they agreed to so far?

As I understand it, *The Conflict Resolution Network* does not advocate ‘that reporters attempt to mediate or resolve the conflicts they are reporting on, but journalists should develop a thorough understanding of the conflict and convey that understanding to their audiences in a way that reflects the truth of the conflict in all its complexity’.⁶

To my mind, the strength of their approach is that in answering these questions, ‘thinking outside the box’, and ‘by critically examining parties efforts to resolve the dispute, journalists provide their readers and audiences with a foundation upon which to make an informed judgement about the parties and perhaps their government representatives’ actions’⁶, they do not fall into the trap of ‘peace journalism’. But they do assist the public at large in their understanding of conflicts and by providing reporting which strives to be accurate fair and impartial.

Reporters & Editors

All of what I have said applies equally to reporters and editors, but editors in particular have additional responsibilities in covering major, ongoing stories: to ensure that reporters are doing the task appropriately and responsibly; and to look carefully at the overall coverage of the story as it unravels and seek to provide the additional information the public requires to fully understand the conflict – background, context, the key players, etc., which any one reporter’s story cannot do. Newspaper and broadcast editors have the means to pursue a multi-layered approach to stories from the day to day reporting, to providing context and background, analysis and reflection through small and large feature material.

The key question for conference participants is not will your journalism promote conflict resolution and peace-building? It is this – are you committed, with a passion, and whatever the difficulties, to pursue the truth in your work? For if you are – then the wider community will have the reliable tools to engage in the vital task of building peace.

Notes

1. Andre Linard *Law and Ethics of the Media* (Paulines Publications Africa 2002)
2. Dennis McQuail (2000) quoted in *Journalism: Principles & Practice* by Tony Harcup (Sage 2004) p. 61
3. JH Boyer (1981) quoted in *Journalism: Principles & Practice* by Tony Harcup (Sage 2004) p. 5
4. Bill Kovach & Tom Rosenstiel *the Elements of Journalism* (Guardian/Atlantic Books, 2001)
5. Jake Lynch *Reporting the World – A practical checklist for the ethical reporting of conflicts in the 21st Century, produced by journalists for journalists*. (Conflict & Peace Forums, 2002) www.reportingtheworld.org
6. Gordon Adam & Lina Holguin “The media’s role in peace-building: asset or liability?” presented in Colombia 2003, from ‘Media Support Solutions’ website

A version of this is published in the book **Pen & Peace: the Plateau State Experience** (2007) Eds. Abu Sabastine Saidu and Christina Best, a joint publication of the *International Centre for Reconciliation (Coventry Cathedral)* and the *Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies (University of Jos)*.