

THE MARGINALISATION OF AFRICA BY THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

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This topic is so huge that no single paper can cover it. Nor is this the intention. The purpose is to stimulate discussions. The main observation I wish to make is that the world, including Africa, is constantly changing, and that the changes which have occurred in the last ten years have been radical indeed. We therefore want to situate our work in this changing context, both in terms of the trends emerging in journalism and the political shifts which have given rise to new interests at the expense of old ones.

Trends in news and features

The use of the word story, rather than news and features, is deliberate. The story form comprises both. News and features are no longer journalistic categories in the strict sense. They have begun to merge, at least in print journalism. Three tendencies can be observed: the featurisation of news, a trend towards quick information in bits and bytes, and a changing news discourse.

A number of reasons account for the featurisation of news. The first is the media environment in which the electronic media play a dominant role. Most people get their news from radio and television which, in turn, changed the role of the print media. The latter are now expected to supplement the electronic media by providing background analysis and in-depth treatment of news events, which, inevitably, they have to do in a feature style.

The second reason for the trend towards featurisation is the sheer complexity of many subjects. Take the environment. A news story is ill suited to inform readers about the complicated checks and balances which exist in nature to maintain an equilibrium, which at present is constantly threatened by human greed. Or take Rwanda, news reports can inform about the genocide that has occurred, and television can show the respective pictures. But the public wants to know why this has happened, and what the conditions might be for it to happen elsewhere.

Alternative (or democratic) journalism has had to adopt the feature form in order to report on ordinary people (rather than only on the politically and economically powerful, and 'stars' of entertainment and sports). Ordinary people's lives, particularly in rural areas, are in a state of permanence, where few 'events' happen. Even in 'established' journalism the rules are now changing. There are now more reports on women, children and manual labourers than there were ten or twelve years ago.

A fourth reason is the change in the journalistic approach of weeklies, not to speak of fortnightly and monthly magazines. They represent the main market for the services here present. Good weeklies and monthlies dealing with social and political affairs want to inform their readers about current trends and likely developments in the future. This is a radical change from rehashing the news of the past.

A second trend is the informatisation of news, or news in bits and bytes. The spread of electronic mail is now in direct competition with agencies providing hot news. In fact, the big news agencies are now developing services which give a quick overview of main events. They are news summaries, or merely the raw material for a news story. Information, or mere data in bits and bytes, is a whole new way of providing news.

Alternative news and features agencies can no longer compete in these circumstances, less so today than was the case five years ago. But they must be aware of these developments, and perhaps restructure their services to meet new and complementary needs.

A new task of print journalism:
featurisation of news

Supplementing electronic media

Give background information

News in bits and bytes

The language of news

A third trend concerns news discourse. News discourse is the professional language of news. News is a report of an event or development which is put into a meaningful story by a discourse (or specific use of language). The language of news partly depends on technology (hot-metal typesetting led to the story form of the inverted pyramid), partly on habits and conventions. For example, news discourse (particularly in the electronic media) constantly maps the limits of controversy, as much by exclusion as by inclusion. Each State and Church tries to define the limits within which free comment is allowed, limits which news discourse normally reflects. Multi-partyism in Africa has changed the news discourse, at least for the print media. An even more drastic change was introduced by alternative media and alternative news feature agencies: ordinary people and people's movements have become social actors by mobilising their lives, their hopes and aspirations, a development which goes against the established criteria for news.

What is of public importance is constantly changing

Stories (news and features) includes the notion of 'public' in three ways: they report on a public affair (event/development of public interest and importance), which is being made public or published (no news without a teller), thus creating a public or publics.

What is of public importance, significance and interest (a 'public affair') is slowly but constantly changing. In North Atlantic countries there is hardly any difference anymore between public and private affairs: the private lives of public officials come under relentless scrutiny. The public importance of Africa for the rest of the world has decreased substantially since the end of the Cold War.

Fragmented public(s)

The methods of making public, or publishing, are changing as well. We now live in a multi-media world, and, as indicated above, in a world of computer-linked cheap telecommunication.

The publics which media create are now more and more fragmented. Almost every British household listened to BBC radio - and nothing else - during the years of World War II. The nation was truly the BBC's public. Now there is an ever growing number of radio and TV stations, with programmes emanating from abroad, with many specialised services. The result is a multitude of fragmented publics. Publics, however, are not made up of equal individuals, but of groups with unequal sources of power, many pursuing their own special interests.

Public service or transnational business ventures?

The discussion of the changing public is important because of the media's traditional *raison d'être* of the provision of a public service. The mass media's primary accountability is to the public(s) for whose sake they exist in the first place. Such accountability becomes difficult if you no longer know your public.

The notion of public service is opposed to the view, now gaining ground everywhere, that mass media are primarily business ventures. The commercialisation of the mass media is now vigorously pursued by transnational companies which are offering a great deal of trivial content from the perspective of Western culture. (They argue, for example, that violence is 'understood' by every culture and should therefore be part of transnational programming).

The marginalisation of Africa by foreign, non-African media

An Anglo-Dutch Channel 4 production traced the reporting of the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s. Consuming Hunger came to the conclusion that the first extensive report on BBC television was purely accidental. The BBC had plenty of footage, but eventually decided to broadcast Michael Buerk's report because it knew that rival ITV had just sent a TV crew to Ethiopia.

Which country is important, which not?

Johan Galtung pointed out that mass media are subject to their own 'social cosmology'. News media, in particular, are inherently elitist. They have divided the world into important and unimportant countries and continents. There are 'elite' countries and 'elite' cities; the datelines Bonn or Tokyo are much more

attractive to news editors than Honiara (Solomon Islands) or Ouagadougou. The same principle applies to the African media. Their 'elite' countries are the homes of their former colonisers. Those who argue that proximity makes news should qualify their argument with the social cosmology of the news media.

When in the late 1980s the Soviet Union collapsed as one of the world's two superpowers, the immediate problem of the USA was not Eastern Europe but Western Europe and Japan. Both were economically stronger than the US; what role were they likely to play in a new 'world order'? The war of early 1991 in the Persian Gulf settled that. The USA demonstrated its military superiority (NATO played no role), while Japan and Germany, non-participants in the war, together with Saudi Arabia had to pay a high proportion of the US's war bill.

At the same time, the world was redistributed according to spheres of influence and trade. The US claimed for itself the whole of the Americas and the Middle East. It stressed its 'leadership' role for Europe and Japan (plus the Pacific rim). Europe was assigned to look after Eastern Europe, the Balkans and, in particular, the Russian Federation (but not the Asian republics of the ex-Soviet Union). The US and Japan were to check on whatever imperial ambitions China might nurture, but clearly China was their market.

Two pieces are missing in this giant jigsaw puzzle: India and Africa. India is now up for grabs, because of its huge market potential (over 700 million people). Africa is now at the bottom of the heap and of little commercial interest, except for Southern Africa and Nigeria (and perhaps Zaire in the future). The US still feels obliged to show its leadership role in Africa, but at minimum cost for the US.

Another factor in the news interest and flow, which is usually overlooked, is the contributions that were provided by the Soviet agency Tass, the Chinese Hsin Hua and the Yugoslav Tanjug in their coverage of Africa. All three carried feature services and special reports. Tanjug has now become the mouthpiece of Serbia, and the Chinese and Russian services have now reduced their coverage of Africa to a minimum.

1994 - the Year of Africa

Despite what I have said about the Marginalisation of Africa by international media it is evident that there has been a great deal of high quality reporting on Africa this year. Two events account for this: the freedom of South Africa, and the genocide in Rwanda.

South Africa has become the super-elite country of Africa for most of the world's media. This began on 6 February 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released from jail. Ever since, Western media, and British media in particular, have paid very close attention to events in South Africa on an almost daily basis. During the April elections, BBC TV (one of the two channels) reported from South Africa live almost all day.

The end of the Cold War results
in a new social cosmology
of the news media

And Africa has become even more
marginal

A new South Africa

After St. Julius and St. Robert,
the time of St. Mandela

One of the reasons for this extraordinary interest is the personality of Nelson Mandela. For the left, he replaced St. Robert (Mugabe), who himself had replaced St. Julius (Nyerere). Even on the 100th day of Mandela's presidency, every quality newspaper in Britain carried extensive background reports, and once again television gave South Africa the fullest coverage.

The Rwandese genocide

South Africa's story is of course unique, and a success story due largely to one man. Another success story, Eritrea, did not make the headlines and has been reported poorly. It would be interesting to find out why this is so.

The genocide in Rwanda first produced shock, later genuine sympathy. It has been a highly complex story, difficult to cover and even more difficult to explain to readers and viewers. The British media certainly did a commendable job. In contrast to South Africa, however, there were hardly any talk shows on TV. One reason for this was that they could not find enough 'experts'. Background explanations were given by one single academic (Dr. Ian Linden). The media played a significant role when charities began their appeals for Rwanda. They collected more money for Rwanda in a week than they had collected in almost two years for Bosnia.

How can Africa become more newsworthy?

A new interest in Africa - a new deal
for African journalists and media

It is doubtful that Africa will in the foreseeable future regain the geopolitical position it occupied in the Cold War. Tourism won't do it. Africa's raw materials will always be of considerable interest to the outside world, not least Japan. Africa's oil reserves and its rare minerals will always be of interest for news reporting, as is the economic and political clout of South Africa.

Africa's cultures will retain their interest, provided they are on better display. Art, music, dance and other cultural expressions are highly valued, at least by young people in Europe and by a European and Asian cultural elite. 1995 will be 'the year of Africa' in London, with dozens of events, exhibitions, concerts and so on.

Finally, Fortress Europe is worried about African immigration. As poverty drives Africans from their continent (so far, mainly from North Africa and the Horn), European governments and the public will begin to panic. One can only hope that Africa's potential 'threat' will prompt the media to give more attention to the continent.

There are other, minor and often technical matters which make reporting in Africa difficult. For example, a single page of fax from Zimbabwe costs Z\$64, or approximately US\$17. Some governments charge special, higher rates for telecommunications if used by media workers. And many governments treat foreign correspondents like the local ones: they are merely a nuisance.

Report on life, culture and people !

In conclusion, my advice to African churches and to Africa's social actors is: do not concentrate on the news media, nor on the lack of coverage by the foreign press. Concentrate on life, on the work of, and with, your own people. Concentrate on the future rather than the past, your future plans for action on the continent. Press releases are a poor substitute for live action. If what you are doing and saying is meaningful and credible, at least the alternative news and feature agencies present here will cover your words and, even more so, your deeds.□

This report was delivered by Dr. Michael Traber, WACC, during a Consultation of News and Feature Services, which took place in Nairobi from August 23 to 24 at the AACC Communication Training Centre, with the participation of representatives of EMW, WACC and CAMECO. The deliberations focused on the improvement of collaboration, sharing in news gathering, training and marketing of common products.

Similar points of concern marked the discussions during the three previous days at the same venue, also with the participation of the above mentioned organisations, when African Ecumenical Communication Training Centres met to share experiences and concerns in media training within the continental context. A plan of action was elaborated to improve media formation in Africa. Main concern of the participants was the lack of resources and research as well as the insufficient self-reliance of the institutions.