

## TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES: PROMOTING 'ETHICAL' JOURNALISM IN AFRICA'S EMERGING DEMOCRACIES

(Workshop on 'Combatting Corruption: The Ethics of  
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Against all the odds, I believe we made our 'gamble' pay off. With sufficient prodding and coaxing, and just the right amount of reassuring informality, we succeeded in cutting through the usual workshop role-playing and let the Real World raise its ugly head. I, for one, am glad we didn't flinch and fall back in to the unproductive routines of conventional academic banter. We were able to look at the Big Issue head on and my reading of the proceedings was that participants were genuinely grateful for the opportunity to grapple with some of the home-truths and occupational hazards they normally only confront in the wee small hours between looming deadlines and the next blank page of their working lives as journalists.

As we'd anticipated, the opening discussion over the definitions and origins of corruption helped to disperse much of the 'smoke and mirrors' thrown by those who may have been hoping to play it safe and stick to the script of some non-existent Manual of Instruction. Of course, participants knew only too well what constitutes 'corruption' and they could draw a bead on it at a hundred paces, no worry. But Truth also involves Consequences, and it's the latter which preoccupies the minds of most journalists in Africa these days.

Yes, the concern was expressed by one of us that participants might be appearing to be 'obtuse' or somehow 'playing games with us'. But I'm convinced they were actually trying to be **realistic** and thereby holding truer to journalistic principles than outsiders who may be tempted to draw an artificially rosy picture of conditions on the ground on Africa's front line.

When 'poverty' was cited repeatedly as the major cause of corruption I think we can logically assume that speakers were referring to more than just cash-incomes or the absence of social welfare systems. It's endemic underdevelopment and skewed economic priorities they were talking about. So, we heard the usual stories about the policeman who hasn't been paid for months and resorts to extorting money from passing motorists to feed his family of eight. And then there's that nurse selling pilfered drugs from the hospital to help pay her kids' school fees. The tales are endless, but it doesn't take much reflection to realise they are all just symptoms of a much deeper system-wide malaise.

One participant said people in East Africa were coming to view corruption as the "only way to improve your chances in life, to open up new opportunities for yourself and your relatives." Well, maybe that's exactly how it does look to most people in Africa faced with inequitable development on all fronts and a seemingly unbridgeable gap opening up between the 'leaders' and the 'led'.

That Tanzanian Editor who told us how he regularly had to pay civil servants for access to routine official reports described his relationship with his sources as "a Gentleman's Agreement between two consenting adults." Okay, so we laughed to hide our shock and dismay. But then he went on to say "If I want to receive some service and the only way I can get it is to **pay** somebody – isn't that what we're told a free market is all about? Who could criticise me if they also claim the free market and commercial competitions holds the answer to all our problems?"

I talked to this Editor, later outside the conference room, and no, he wasn't pulling our legs or being disingenuous. He was calling our bluff. Trying to draw attention to a very real predicament he's found himself in, which he'd never previously experienced in his journalistic career. As he explained it, the civil servants involved were **already** being paid for similar access to official reports by other rival papers in Tanzania. Either he joined in this 'Gentleman's Agreement' or his readers would miss out on the news they expected to be provided with. He just wouldn't get the stories that mattered any more and he'd be put out of business. And, as far as he could see, no-one in authority had any intention of doing anything about this state of affairs. It was just "the New Way of Life in Tanzania".

When I suggested he write up this story he'd just told me – about the need to pay for publicly available information – he laughed wryly and said “So, then I'd get that one last story and say goodbye to my career as an editor in this part of the world.” Why hadn't he told the full version of this story in the conference hall? Because his competitors were sitting there and keeping mum. Dog doesn't eat dog in Tanzania – yet.

The oft-repeated citing of 'poverty' as the root cause of corruption wasn't as obtuse or trite as it may have sounded at first hearing. Once the subject had been broached, however obliquely, there was a distinct opening up on the part of participants. And that led us on to what, for me at least, was the pith of the problem – the much-vaunted 'Public Interest' that tends to be seen as the touchstone for so many assumptions in the developed world about combating corruption. This turned out to be a mirage in the view of most participants. Some quotes on the 'Public Interest':

- “People in this part of the world – even at the grassroots – don't take too kindly to stories about corruption. They feel these kind of stories reflect badly on them and the people they voted for.”
- “Public opinion has come to **accept** corruption. Now, they don't know anything different. Anyway, the corruption stories that **do** get printed never seem to lead to any action being taken by the authorities. Nobody ever gets punished for it. All the investigations seem to come to nothing. It seems to be just a big game. People wonder what's the point in making waves? They just don't see any way out.”
- “Corruption is viewed as a sort of **trap**. People don't necessarily like it or approve of it. But there certainly aren't any other **real** examples for running things that are being offered to them. There don't seem to be any realistic alternatives.”
- “Look at the new TV stations and the music on the 'free' media that's coming in. It's all gangster-rap, Mafia hoodlums, 'Big Men' always getting their way. The rich getting richer and who seems to give a damn about the 'Voiceless'?”
- “Corruption in Africa is what we call a 'Public Secret'. Everybody knows about it but nobody's going to make the first move to really try and stamp it out. When I started out in journalism, I really believed the media could help change the world and fight for justice. But now I realise there are **Monsters** out there I was never told about and they're out of control. I seriously doubt whether we journalists can do anything about fighting these monsters on our own, they're getting far too powerful for the **pen** alone to take on.”
- “Yes, the media can give the public **hope** about combatting corruption. But our importance in the long run can also take people's hope away. You can end up like a moth being drawn into the flame and it can just burn you up.”

In the face of this kind of disillusionment and expressions of helplessness, I fear that merely repeating 'centres of excellence' examples from the Olympian heights of the Financial Times newsroom in London left something of a sour taste in the mouths of many participants. What on earth is the point of telling journalists in Africa how Tony Blair's private office in Downing Street would never dare slam down the phone on a caller from the FT? That's just rubbing their noses in it. Of course they'd **love** to switch places tomorrow. They know only too well how lowly their status is in the eyes of politicians and other prestigious 'opinion leaders' courted so assiduously by outsiders and donor agencies. When an FT correspondent arrives in an African capital he can usually fix up a one-to-one interview with the Head of State within 24 hours – the same so-called 'Fathers of the Nations' who haven't talked to a **local** journalist in how many years – if ever.

Some more quotes from participants:

- “We’re just becoming our societies’ sacrificial victims. Even our Editors don’t usually stand up for us. Legal advice? Forget it. We reporters ourselves have to take up the initiative in seeking legal help over a story.”
- “In most cases I know of, there is no legal advice available. There’s no system of upward referral in most newsrooms, anyway.”
- “We hardly ever get to **see** our Editors, let alone discuss our stories with them. We just submit them, and if they **do** get past the gatekeepers and don’t end up on the ‘spike’ – well, if there **are** legal problems then the Editor just blames the reporter for making a ‘mistake’ and you’re likely to get sacked.”
- “Even Ben Mkapa the other day, a former journalist himself, when the Warioba Commission report on public Ethics was published and it became obvious none of the Fat Cats were going to be held to account – he turned instead on the Press and complained about ‘journalists’ incompetence.”

At one point in our deliberations, when I was on the verge of citing the difficulties faced by some of the pioneers of press freedom in the developed world – you know, the old faithfuls like John Leland, Tom Paine, John Wilkes, William Cobbett, Henry Thoreau – it suddenly occurred to me: Were any of these doughty campaigners ever assassinated, fire-bombed, had their arms or legs broken by hired thugs or state sanctioned hit men? Did they have their homes razed to the ground by arsonists, their families harassed in the street, their bank-accounts frozen or black ‘body-bags’ left menacingly at their front doorsteps? No, of course not. But all the above are regular occurrences in the lives of Africa’s long-suffering journalists. At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century many of them are still living in the Dark Ages as far as their roles and rights are concerned, and it really is high time the outside world recognised the seriousness of their predicament.

The biggest danger of all, I think, was summed up by the Kenyan participant who pointed out the high drop-out rate in the journalistic trade in her country – a relatively recent phenomenon. She said some journalists these days – even those who had entered the business with a good deal of training and a healthy awareness of the reality around them – were now lasting only a couple of years before fleeing into the safer environment of PR and Marketing careers. For many, it seems, the game is no longer worth the candle. Nobody in their right mind goes into journalism as a form of martyrdom, but increasingly that’s what it is beginning to feel like for many African fighting to survive in the news business.

And yet – the World Bank and other well-meaning international agencies repeatedly draw attention to the vital role of a free press in helping the combat corruption and in nurturing truly democratic societies. But where do they think these fearless Knights in shining armour ready to fight the good fight in Africa are going to be found in the immediate future? And what do they believe will motivate them? There are certainly no **material** rewards to be gained, unlike in the developed world where showbiz-style media ‘names’ can cash in on book and TV tie-ins and many media luminaries now have their own business agents to negotiate out-of-this-world contracts and appearance-fees linked to their journalistic efforts.

Neither, it seems, can honest journalists expect any social respect or recognition from their fellow countrymen. (At least the Church looks after its own!) I fear this last factor is too often overlooked by those who are concerned about the disturbing trend towards state ‘licensing’ of journalists in places like Uganda. It’s actually seen by some African journalists as the lesser of two evils. At least state recognition and academic ‘screening’ are better than no status at all, some might say.

Along that rocky road, of course, lies the total reversal of all journalistic principles. The sinister and shadowy new power networks and coalitions of greed that are replacing old-style socialism and state-sponsored capitalism will then have the field to themselves. The

alienation of public sovereignty will be complete and the spin-doctors and unregulated free-marketeers will rule the roost.

So where does all this leave our much-vaunted 'pillars of integrity' the World Bank and its allies profess to support? Dare I suggest there's an unwholesome measure of can and hypocrisy permeating the whole subject of combatting corruption in Africa's emerging democracies? I think that's precisely what our participants in Dar were trying to tell us, in their oh-so-polite and **African** way of talking about unpleasant realities.

More dedicated paper-trail chasing and web-searching and creative writing courses – let alone the absurdity of those suggested 'blank pages' which the FT itself would never countenance in a thousand years – just aren't going to make the slightest dent in the technoplated armour of the new African privateers who have learned how to 'play' the donors' tune. Now they've learnt they don't need to firebomb an independent newspaper- they can just pull the financial rug out from under its feet by taking over its bankers and then use their financial clout to call in loans prematurely. Editors grown used to expecting the heavy hand of authority on their shoulders don't notice the state sponsored lawyers preparing the writs, selectively unleashing the revenue men or 'tightening Constitutional safeguards' – for commercially sacrosanct confidentiality clauses and privacy-cloaked insider dealing. (See: THE CRIMINALISATION OF THE STATE IN AFRICA by Stephen Ellis, Jean-Francois Bayart and Beatrice Hibou. Published by James Currey, London 1998).

I think, by now, you'll have got the gist of my reading of the Dar Workshop proceedings. It was a salutary lesson for all of us present, I believe, and I know from private talks with participants that many were heartened to find they weren't alone in their predicament, despite apparent historical differences between their respective countries and competitive rivalries among their papers. But how best to build on these shared responses and stated commitment to try and keep soldiering on in the face of all this apparent gloom and – dare I whisper the dread word – cynicism? (Interestingly the original Greek 'cynics' who likened their lives to those of **dogs**, still went around the streets of Athens with lighted torches in their hands, saying they were just looking for 'an honest man!')

I have come up with some Pointers and Priorities to throw into the 'pot' for any future strategy meetings or training programmes the CPU, and other concerned organisations may be contemplating on the top of Press Freedom and Media Ethics in the newly-emerging democracies such as those in East Africa represented at the Dar workshop.

## 1. **The Role Of The Media Within National Integrity Systems**

The problem of corruption isn't limited to governments and institutions alone, as too often implied in the prescriptions for improvement by major international donors and development agencies. Mere opposition to existing authorities makes a poor recipe for respecting others' rights to free expression. Corruption may well have stemmed from heavy-handed authoritarian structures originally put in place by the colonial era 'divide and rule' tactics of control, but it has since permeated all levels of society. In Africa, there is a real danger of further moral disintegration among people who have experienced a sort of mass-brutalisation of society – seen best in the way people continue to vote relatively freely for gangster-governments in a kind of creeping protection-racket that thrives on public ignorance and despair.

The World Bank and the IMF **seem** to be recognising the dangers of relying on a mainly monetarist and free-market approach for opening up repressive regimes to democratic accountability. Wolfensohn's publicly expressed concern about the need for **police retraining** in many developing countries is a good start. But maybe there is a need for these societies to be sensitised root-and-branch to the rules of the game in a freer, more democratic environment? It took democratically-based economies hundreds of years to go through this difficult and tricky process and it's still a bit of a balancing-act at the best of times.

The 'pillars of integrity' model proposed by the World Bank and Transparency International is fine as an ideal to be aimed for. But in the meantime how do we prevent one of the key components in the model – the Media 'pillar' – from crumbling to dust under the pressure its currently having to bear? Most of the other 'pillars' may be prospering and looking fairly solid in each other's eyes, all enjoying their own networks of influence and patronage. But the imminent collapse of the local African Media? Oh, that's just the workings of the free-market and you can't interfere with that!

**If** the Work Bank and other well-wishers really believe in promoting the 'pillars of integrity' model for sustainable development, then why not go about in a more scientific fashion, with a bit of lateral thinking and full-blooded communications-theory thrown in for enhanced credibility? In plain English, you'd have to think about setting up 'feedback loops' to link the various components in the model, for sending and receiving stimuli and response signals. The individual 'pillars of integrity' need to be able to communicate directly with each other all the way **up** from the base (the 'People' in the model) to reach to so-called 'National Integrity System' ('Democracy'?) while still speaking in the same coherent Voice, or singing the same Tune, or whatever other metaphor you're choosing to use. Otherwise each of the separate 'pillars' is liable to end up distorting and fragmenting the original unified message or signal emanating from the source. They'll end up working in opposition to each other, cancelling out their competing claims to be the **lone voice** of what was an harmonious chorus.

I'd go even further and suggest that the Media should maybe not even be viewed as one of the 'pillars' in this model. Instead, they'd be more suitably envisaged as the actual **feedback-loops** between the 'pillars', those missing links whose absence from the model could be jeopardising the viability of the entire communications process. It's possible that this is the reason why the Media keep taking such an unwarranted hammering from the other components in the model: maybe they don't belong there, among the vertical 'pillars', all struggling to put forward their own solo versions of the People's 'Voice', without a Conductor holding them all together.

The fragmented and entirely **linear** construction of the current model for a 'National Integrity System' only exacerbates the potential for conflicting elites and sectoral schisms to end up working at cross-purposes with each other.

Back in the real world: while we were holding out Dar workshop on Ethical Journalism there was another workshop simultaneously going on across town, in which Tanzanian Police Officers were being 'sensitised' to the need to respect the dignity and human rights of suspects and witnesses in police stations. Apparently this workshop ran into serious trouble when the local Press learned about it and gained access to some of the proceedings. Some senior Police Officers attending the workshop were named in subsequent newspaper reports which quoted them discussing in graphic detail the grim physical conditions and violent goings-on in police stations, as well as training inadequacies and lack of supervision to prevent intimidation and bribery.

When the top brass in the Police Commissioner's HQs read these reports in the Press they hit the roof and ordered all the cops at the workshop to hold their tongues and say nothing further which might reflect a negative image of the Police. The workshop duly degenerated into the usual travesty of tight-lipped participants just going through the motions of a public-relations exercise.

Why couldn't workshops or training seminars be conceived and set up from the outset aimed at **obliging** the various 'pillars of integrity' to meet as equal partners who will have to share equal loads of responsibility in a democratic society? On a reasonably level playing-field they may even find they have some common interests and could even be of **use** to each other now and again, through forging coalitions of mutual concern rather than reverting to the old adversarial reflexes inherent in previous

sectorally segregated encounters. In other words, training for democracy needs to be set in a democratic environment – for starters. What can realistically be achieved by bringing only one ‘pillar’ at a time into an encounter with their own interest-group? In the nature of such one-sided gatherings the temptation will always be to gang up defensively against those who aren’t present, the useful scapegoats.

I seriously doubt whether the Media would continue to be treated with such contempt in Africa if it was brought home to a Government Minister, or a High Court Judge, or a Company Executive, or a UN agency boss, or even a Police Chief, that nobody would even have **heard** of them, let alone pay their wages, if it wasn’t for the Media telling the broader community what they actually do or make for a living. They take the Media for granted, mostly because it’s never occurred to them to stop and think what things would be like without them. I’m suggesting a carefully structured series of Media Encounters with all the various ‘pillars of integrity’ in any particular country, aimed at providing all the various components in the World Bank model with the missing feedback links so they can actually learn something about each other, swap ideas and maybe even indulge in some good old fashioned bartering for power and influence. Even that would be preferable to the currently fashionable travesties of competing Popular Fronts for Democracy too busy queuing up outside the donors’ offices to spare the time for listening to the public!

And if these proposed ‘encounters’ with the Media are judged by officialdom to be too impractical (or controversial) to be set up and run on a real-time in-country basis, then what’s to stop some individual organisation(s) actually running such encounters on a **simulated** basis, in a hypothetical ‘Freedonia’ style setting that can be easily videotaped for replication and comparison?

## 2. On-going Training Workshops for Journalists – the ‘Ethical’ Dimension

Most existing training modules and textbooks (for novice journalists and more experienced practitioners of the craft) tend to be maddeningly vague and “wishy-washy” when it comes to so-called ‘investigative’ journalism. Newcomers might imagine that all they have to do is ‘get it right’. But there are a host of other problems, strategies and tactics to be borne in mind in the real world – especially where Africa’s concerned. One of the worst things for a journalist is to stumble on them unawares and un-prepared. The media, which claim the right to hold authority to account, are themselves increasingly being held to account – in a mostly defensive strategy by those who usually have most reason to fear them. It’s actually this pressure on the media throughout the world that’s led to the relatively recent phenomenon of media self-analysis and the codification of Ethical Working Practices, never previously considered necessary.

I’ve yet to come across a Journalism course or textbook which offers any really practical advice to a reporter who finds his or her Editor persistently practising unwarranted censorship. Suggesting they resign and seek a job on another paper is hardly sensible advice in a country – like many in Africa – where maybe only one or two newspapers are published. There **are** a few subtle ‘tricks of the trade’ still theoretically available for getting around the “spike” – but employers and their ‘gatekeepers’ don’t usually look too kindly on them and they’re invariably mentioned only among colleagues whose integrity and trustworthiness is beyond doubt. Teamwork, in such cases, is a prerequisite for survival in the newsroom. But how often is **that** subject ever touched upon in most training routines? In real-life ‘investigative journalism’ into major corruption stories there are never any ‘lone rangers’ in the newsroom.

Historical aspects of media training often concentrate exclusively on the emergence and growth only of the **mainstream** media giants, overlooking the constructive role of ‘alternative’ or ‘underground’ media. But these latter have always shadowed and gnawed at the heels of the ‘big guns’ in the business, keeping them on their toes and exerting a healthy radical influence on behalf of the broader public interest and

thereby extending the media's reach and responses to the wider social reality in any country.

### 3. Editorial "Creativity"

In transitional free-market economies and emerging democracies there's far more widespread ignorance and confusion about the basic rules of the game than most outsiders seem to be prepared to acknowledge. Objectivity and fair play don't necessarily mean that journalists aren't allowed to make a pitch for causes and concerns that impact on **everyone** – like free speech within the law, and other basic human rights.

But over-reliance on official spokesmen and corporate 'packaging' of social reality usually stems from the media's lack of resources. However, with a bit more creative thinking, it's still possible to promote democratic values without enjoying it's still possible to promote democratic values without enjoying a large budget for travel and accommodation. Apart from the news columns, there are also features pages and programmes to be filled. Feature-writers could examine more closely the routine workings for major social institutions and other public bodies, without having to risk naming names or specifying the details of corruption stories that won't stand up in court. They could look into these institutions' historical roots and relate the way they've been shaped and moulded by political and social processes, usually unknown to the wider public. They could show in what ways they differ from other countries' systems and conventions – and they differ from other countries' systems and conventions – and maybe even **why**? Comments and critiques can be solicited from those often-overlooked voices in the street outside the newsroom.

All too often, everyday reality is merely taken for granted by the most energetic of journalists attuned to the tyranny of the deadline. But social reality is never carved in stone as some kind of eternal headlines written on high, never to be altered or open to improvement. The best journalism is usually about the '**unexpected**' after all, and what was previously unknown.

What is 'news' after all, but something that wasn't known before? On a good day in journalism – unlike most other trades and professions – it's 'Any Other Business' which leaps to the top of the agenda.

When outside censorship is imposed, Editors can keep faith with their public by saying so – and telling them that their right to free expression has been interfered with and that they have been gagged.

And if everything else seems blocked and all the other myriad ways of getting a story out into the light of day have been tried and failed, there's always the oldest trick in the Editor's trade to fall back on: It's **never** defamatory to ask a question!

### 4. Resource Centres For Democratic Transparency and Freedom of Expression

This proposal should be pretty self-explanatory. There's a **drought** of epic proportions in Africa when it comes to accessing background research material on each country's relevant history and current affairs touching on its transition to democracy. And yet much of this information is readily available in any public library or through most Internet Servers in the developed world already. When are donor going to get **real**, when they hold up their models of the New Information Age in Africa's face but persist in providing so little in the way of the most basic Information Technology? Information **is** Power, and that – more than any other human resource – is what is lacking in Africa.

## 5. Yet Another 'Final Warning' – How to Give a 'Dog' a Bad Name!

I seriously doubt whether it's really possible to teach 'ethical journalism' – in any formal instructional way. Ethics, like the closely associated moral values upon which they're socially constructed, are more than just a professionally acquired skill or academic qualification. They can't be turned on and off as one enters the workplace or logs off the computer. Ethics lie at the very core of most adults' personality and psychological make-up. They're rather akin to that much-prized 'nose for news' which all good Editors used to look for in prospective entrants to the newsroom.

The very best that we can hope for is that those novice journalists who **do** come into the business with a predisposition to positive ethical values will receive sufficient encouragement and support from their Employers and Editors to make them feel they've chosen the right occupation and are putting their talents for honest-to-goodness communication to worthwhile end.

For anyone in the wide world keen to foster good journalism in Africa's emerging democracies, it may be necessary to first recognise what a **rarity** it is anywhere. It's a fragile flame at the best of times, flourishing only in the oxygen of fair play and social justice.

But in much of Africa, 'ethical' journalism is in real danger of being snuffed out for want of public recognition and the support of the international community – donor agencies especially. Above all, Africa's journalists are in desperate need of **allies** and a sense of personal security in the face of overwhelming odds. This will only be achieved if they're enabled to feel they're part of the 'bigger picture' and not just irrelevant fringe-players in a maligned and despised occupation that other members of society could well do without.

Right now, they're not even standing on the bottom rung of the social pecking order: they're clinging to their trade by their fingertips and losing strength fast. If they should lose their grip and fall prey to the predatory 'Monsters' they know are circling out there, waiting to devour them, the consequences for democracy in Africa are bleak beyond imagining.

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