

Towards an African Journalism Model: A Critical Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Much of the scholarly literature regarding theories of journalism practice is premised on the tenets of the Western model of liberal democracy. To the extent that this model is held to be universal, it hinders the analytical theorisation of journalistic precepts which have evolved locally in most countries of the developing world. This article seeks to address this problem by exploring the evolution of what may be aptly characterised as the African journalism model. This model is grounded in oral discourse, creativity, humanity and agency. By comparing and contrasting these two models, this article seeks to challenge the assumption that African journalism is one of mere 'bandwagonism' informed by Western 'modernity' and 'civilisation'. In particular, by exploring the origin and transformation of journalism in sub-Saharan Africa before, during and after colonialism, this article contributes to the conceptual elaboration of alternative conceptions of the African model of journalism.

Keywords: *African journalism, liberal democracy, oral discourse, belonging, objectivity, news culture, civil society, public sphere, colonialism, post-modernism*

Introduction

This article takes as its point of departure the pressing need to critically interrogate the widely held perception in the West, albeit shared by some African media scholars, that there is no journalism practice in Africa informed by African values. While media scholars have often expressed reservations about the applicability of the liberal democracy model of journalism to African countries, there have been few attempts to adapt it to existing conditions and structures (Mafeje, 1995; Ronning, 1994,1995, Ansah, 1991; Sachikonye, 1995a; Obeng-Quaidoo, 1985; Uche, 1991; James, 1990; Akioye, 1994; Anyand' Nong'o, 1995).

This article is conceived as a contribution to the attempt by Hallin and Mancini in their groundbreaking book *Comparing Media Systems* (2004) to show that the Anglo-American model—the Western liberal democracy model—is ‘not the one that fits the rest of the world.’ Following Hallin and Mancini (2004), and Berger (2002), the aim of this paper is to demonstrate the manifest inapplicability of the Western model—the professional journalism model—strictly speaking to other nations around the globe, given this binary problem, and rethink the place of normative theory in journalism.

Cameroonian scholar Francis Nyamnjoh (2005), a leading critic of the top-down approach¹ in the application of this Western model argues that the precepts of journalism that currently apply in Africa are ‘largely at variance with dominant ideas of personhood and agency (and by extension society, culture and democracy) shared by communities across the continent, as it assumes that there is One-Best-Way of being and doing to which Africans must aspire and be converted in the name of

modernity and civilisation' (Nyamnjoh, 2005:3). According to him, African journalism lacks both the power of self-determination and the power to shape the universal concepts that are 'deaf-and-dumb to the peculiarities of journalism in and on Africa'(Nyamnjoh, 2005:3).

While recognising the presence of some important aspects of the Western liberal democracy model in journalism practice in Africa, this article seeks to problematize Nyamnjoh's 'bandwagonism' theory as an overstatement. Nyamnjoh's theory presupposes the non-existence of any journalistic precept unique to Africa. This claim frankly but problematically gives the impression that what obtains, or remains, of journalism practice in Africa, is nothing but a holistic replica of the Western liberal democracy model. Nyamnjoh's thesis raises questions such as: What can we say about the form of journalism that existed in Africa before colonialism? Which aspects of this journalism survived the colonial and post-colonial periods, and which did not? Whither African journalism? Modernity, Africanity, or a synthesis of the best of both?

In an attempt to provide a basis for the exploration of these questions, this article will proceed as follows. First, it will explore the history of journalism theory as it relates to journalism of belonging—journalism as public life—in pre-colonial and colonial sub-Saharan Africa in order to establish whether there was a form of journalism unique to Africa before colonialism. Next, it will examine its evolution in the immediate and late post-colonial period in order to establish which aspects of African journalism survived the colonial experience. Lastly, it will proceed to deconstruct key normative precepts unique to the African model of journalism in the context of the 'modernity'/'Africanity' binary. While the first two parts are largely exploratory and

empirical in character, based for the most part on historical accounts of the early phases of journalism on the continent, the final part is normative as it is based on the re-theorising of the basic principles of journalism in relation to the African model. Hence the context of this article is largely historical; it is only by appreciating the historical development of African journalism within the context of changing political circumstances can we properly understand the dynamics underpinning this unique strand of journalistic practice. Moreover, most of the literature on the history of journalism in Africa is dated; part of the aim of this article is therefore to update research in this area of journalism studies.

I will now explore the history of journalism in Africa in the pre-colonial period to determine how some of the basic theories of journalism factored in the process.

1) Journalism in the pre-colonial and colonial periods

The question as to whether there was any form of journalism in Africa before the colonial era may sound more journalistic than academic; it is a question worth pursuing nevertheless if we are to get a better understanding of the true origins of journalism in Africa. To better answer this question it is useful to explore the pre-colonial legacy of the media in Africa. By Africa here, I mean the whole of sub-Saharan Africa², with the exception of South Africa,³ stretching from the margins of the Sahara through the rain forests of Central Africa to the Southern edge of the Kalahari Desert.

Following Louise M. Bourgault, I will try to demonstrate in this section how ‘the pre-colonial legacy, especially the legacy of the oral tradition, has been very much part of the Black African media’ (Bourgault, 1995:2). I argue that there was a form of journalism as it where in Africa before the advent of colonialism. Journalism then took the form of oral discourse using communication norms informed by oral tradition and folk culture with communal story-tellers (griots), musicians, poets and dancers playing the role of the modern-day journalist. Here we see the concepts of ‘civil society’ and ‘public sphere’ very much evident as the oral discourse style of communication makes it possible for griots, musicians, poets to target different civil society groups as well as ‘general’ and ‘organised’ public spheres. However, as Bourgault puts it, ‘because most systems of mass media were introduced during the colonial period, analyses of these systems, historical or otherwise, tend to reflect only what has happened during this century. Communication scholars, like other social scientists, have tended to treat Africa at the onset of colonialism as a *tabula rasa*. Nothing could be further from the truth.’ Recalling Rubin and Weinstein (1974:10), Bourgault notes that ‘although governments change, this does not mean that older forms disappear. The same could be said for all forms of communication—the technological forms change, but the pre-existing styles of interaction may not (Bourgault, 1995:2).

The African Oral Tradition: The African oral tradition resonates with the myth of the African ruler as a spiritual symbol of a people. Social values in pre-colonial Africa strongly stressed ‘group orientation, continuity, harmony, and balance’ (Bourgault, 1995:4). As Bonnie Wright reminds us, the question “Who are you?” was meaningless without the additional query “Of where and of whom are you born?”

(1989:54 cited in Bourgault, 1995:4). This brings to mind the African worldview of ‘ubuntu’ which is an ancient African ethic, a cultural mindset that tries to capture the essence of what it is to be human. ‘A person is a person through other people’(Tutu, 1999, 34-35). ‘I am human because I belong, I participate, I share’(Murithi, 2005: 341).

It is this *ubuntu* African world view largely based on group solidarity and belonging that informs the oral discourse style of journalism unique to pre-colonial Africa.

Walter Ong informs us that in oral societies the word also had great power because it made things come into being. He refers to the Book of Genesis (whose origins lie deep in oral history), which opens with “In the Beginning there was the word.” Words indeed did in the Bible have generative power, for “And the Word was made flesh” continues the story of creation. The same is true in Africa, and indeed other oral cultures, words were used to make things come into being. They were used to declare the unity of a people, or a state of war; they were also used in powerful incantations and healing rites (Bourgault, 1995:7 citing Ong, 1982:31).

According to Ong (1982) the oral tradition form of communication presupposes the construction of reality in a social context. And as Bourgault notes (1995:8) the way reality was constructed and presented by the bards, story tellers (griots) and village historians in the oral narrative was then the way people experienced existentially the events and persons depicted in stories. They used stories to recount the genealogies of people, to tell of their histories and their struggles, to recount stories of the Gods, and to impart moral lessons. They carry out these functions by conducting themselves as informers and entertainers, and sometimes as satirists depicting some of the hard

realities of society. However, the mistake is often made, even by well established scholars in mass media research in Africa like Bourgault to see the oral discourse style grounded in Oral African history as useful only in terms of its ‘oral praise poetry in creating personality cults in society’ but very poor in ‘fostering a critical spirit among its members (Bourgault, 1995:181). This assumption flies in the face of an acknowledgement by Bourgault herself in her same volume (1995:205) that ‘Griots, although employed as praise singers, were permitted to criticise their patrons provided the criticism bore the weight of group norms and values. Given the myriad of institutional and cultural regulations which guide the conduct of mainstream media journalists in their watchdog role, the existence of group norms and values to guide the conduct of griots (pre-colonial African journalists) in their criticism of their patrons and other societal members must not be taken to mean lack of watchdog role in their work. And yet Bourgault’s hugely problematic assumption seemed to have gained currency in the literature by the end of the 20th century even among African media scholars. Ghanaian scholar Wisdom Tettey (2001) notes that ‘the roots of democratic protest by the media can be traced to the colonial era (see Faringer, 1991; Randall, 1993; Takougang, 1995 Sandbrook, 1996)’ when in reality it goes as far back as the pre-colonial period as admitted by Bourgault.

The press in the colonial period

The classical liberal democracy media in black Africa are largely seen by media scholars as colonial inventions. The establishment of the colonial press in Black Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries was largely influenced by the policies of the metro poles towards the colonies. The colonial press, particularly that in British West

Africa largely owned by influential and highly educated Africans who had returned from overseas, played an important watch dog role in exposing the excesses of the colonial administration. As Asante (1996; 25) puts it, the whole notion of media development and use in Sub-Saharan Africa was basically premised on a largely liberal Western value-system that favoured a free and lively press, although this of course differed from one colonial power to the other. While British colonial policy favoured the thriving of a free and vibrant press in their African colonies, their French counterparts introduced policies that seriously discouraged its development. However, as Bourgault (1995; 153) noted, the press in both Anglophone and Francophone Africa shared common socio-economic problems: the difficulty in selling newspapers and therefore making money when readers are too poor to attract interest of advertisers.

Yet Tunstall (1977: 108) notes that British-style media were imposed on former British colonies in Africa. 'The press was established for the use of British businessmen, settlers, teachers, government officials and soldiers...' The colonial powers introduced a new bureaucratic framework that oriented their African colonies outward toward the metropolises rather than one which fostered integration between and within African communities and peoples. Part of this framework was the mass media which they introduced too late, and which, mainly radio, was used largely to serve the interests of the expatriates who run the colonies on behalf of the metropolises. Nonetheless, the press that emerged in British West Africa soon became very vocal, particularly so when African elites started to appear on the scene. The first newspapers *Royal Gazette* and *Sierra Leone Advertiser* in sub-Saharan Africa appeared in Anglophone West Africa in 1801, although the first truly African editor,

Charles Bannerman, did not surface until 1858; he produced his newspaper *Accra Herald* (later the *West African Herald*) by hand in his own handwriting (Ainslie, 1966, p.22). The functions of the West Africa press were to educate, raise awareness, and to entertain; in fact the Liberian⁴ papers were mostly concerned with political consciousness-raising. Ainslie (1966, p.2) points to three factors contributing to the health of the early West African press: the presence of relatively well educated Africans returning from abroad; the growth of missionary activity; and the absence of a white/European settler population in West Africa which might have slowed the press growth in the region as it did in other regions of the continent (Ainslie, 1966, p).

Liberian-born journalist John Payne Jackson established the first Nigerian newspaper in English, the *Lagos Weekly Record* in 1891, which traded regular attacks against the excesses of Sir Frederick Lugard, then British Governor of Southern Nigeria (Bourgault, 1995; 153). But as Hachten (1971, pp.148-49) writes, the British colonial administration “exercised restraint in their treatment of such journalists and usually acted within the bounds of British common law”, adding that “no other area of Africa enjoyed as much comparative press freedom.

This saw the emergence of a lively, vibrant and outspoken political press in all Anglophone West Africa (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, Ghana and the Gambia), where leading journalists like Nnamdi Azikiwe and other intellectuals like Kwame Nkrumah established very radical newspapers that constantly engaged the colonial administration during the struggle for independence. The press thus became very militant, playing more or less a critical watchdog role, in dealing with the colonial administration. This witnessed a fundamental departure from what has been seen as

the predominantly ‘praise-singing’⁵ role of the pre-colonial griots, poets, musicians and dancers. However, the journalists who emerged during the colonial period inherited the oral discourse style of communication in identifying with their readers in raising public awareness on the excesses of the colonial administration, and in this way making a significant contribution in setting the agenda in the struggle for nationhood. Hence, although the first Nigerian Newspaper in Yoruba, Adebani (2004; 766, following Omu, 1978; 8) argues, , *Iwe-Iroyin* (translation: Newspaper), was published by a missionary, the Revd Henry Townsend, whose stated objective was to ‘beget the habit of seeking information by reading’, the paper’s demonstrable role was that of ‘ambitious political propaganda and (as an instrument for) shrewd manoeuvring for power in Egbaland’. ‘Thus, even from its supposedly pedagogic beginning’, Adebani adds (citing Agbaje, 1993; 459), the press was located at the very vortex of power, becoming ‘committed, *agitational* and, often, political’. And so the notions of ‘civil society’ and ‘public sphere’ were very much embedded in the African journalism landscape of the colonial era.

The situation in British colonial East Africa was pretty much the same except that here ownership of the press was largely in the hands of settlers. And as Mwesige (2004; 73-74) puts it, ‘the 1950s saw a proliferation of African-owned news publications in Uganda, which coincided with the peak of African opposition to the colonial establishment.’

The situation was slightly different in francophone Africa where colonial policy actively discouraged the development of the local press. The colonial government imposed a heavy tax on printing materials, and unlike the Anglophone colonies, there

was limited missionary activity in francophone Africa. The few African-based newspapers that existed served only the interest of the white settler population. Still, despite the harsh French regulations, two African-run papers *Le Cri Negre* and *La Phare du Dahomey* emerged in Dahomey (present day Benin) as early as the 1920s; both were said to have contributed to the growth of African political consciousness at the time. In a similar way, the 1930s saw the increasing contribution of the Senegalese political broadsheets as well as those in Cote d'Ivoire in sparking political consciousness by criticising the French colonial administrators and the native chiefs that collaborated with them. This wind of change soon spread across the other French colonies which saw the emergence in the 1960s of dailies in Mali, Guinea, Togo, and Niger; a weekly in Gabon; and a fortnightly in Central African Republic, all of which were very vocal in exposing the weaknesses of the colonial policies. (Bourgault, 1995;167-169).

Thus, we can see that in both Anglophone and Francophone colonial Africa, the press did not only entertain and/or praise sing, as is often claimed by scholars like Bourgault, but rather played a pro-active watchdog role that proved quite instrumental in the struggle for independence. Even when the African press occasionally demonstrated partisanship in their political discourse during the struggle for nationhood we observe a manifest employment of the oral discourse style of writing which made them to be in the forefront in engaging the colonial administration to hands off; thus the African journalists saw themselves as active, and not passive, participants in the struggle for change. As Agbaje (1992; 144) puts it, 'the press became so enmeshed in the struggle for political power that it found it virtually an uphill task to rise above the personal, political and ethnic acrimonies of the period'.

African Journalism and the 19th century American press

This attachment of the African press to the nationalist struggle particularly following the end of the Second World War, and their largely partisan approach, can largely be likened to the cultural approach to the news which characterised the 19th century American press. The central idea of the cultural approach to the news initially developed by James Carey (1989), and in more recent years by Michael Schudson (1995,1998) and others, is that the news expresses the structure of public life in another medium. Very much like the nationalist African press, the 19th –century news of the American press, and later of the British press, ‘tended to be reported by a great variety of people, often in the first person, and often through chronological narratives that stressed the participation of ordinary people’ Ryfe (2006;74). Going along with Schudson (1995), Ryfe (2006;62) affirms that ‘these conventions exhibit evidence of cultural norms according to which newspapers portrayed reality: norms which were part of a broadly shared sense that public life was for association, affiliation, and belonging.’ These cultural news conventions⁶ were used by commercial newspapers as well as those that had affiliations with political parties. The cultural approach to theorising news or public life can thus be seen not only in the academic context but also in terms of conventions adopted by design or by default by newspapers in the 19th century America.

In his analysis of the American newspapers of the 1830s, Ryfe (2006) found out that these cultural news conventions span across all of them thus making the distinction between associational and commercial news, contrary to Nord's (2001) claim, rather blurred. Nord (2001) is for example struck by William Lloyd Garrison's inclination to open the pages of his newspaper (*the Liberator*) to the voices of his readers. Nord argues that though the newspaper was popular for its utterly vivid invective, perhaps its most remarkable characteristic was its devotion to the participation of readers through correspondence and to the exchange of news and views on important issues of the day. Extrapolating from Nord's analysis, Ryfe (2006; 62) identifies four primary conventions for associational journalism:

1. Eyewitness accounts make for the most newsworthy and authoritative stories
2. A news story ought to be reported in the first person, or, where appropriate, in the third person.
3. The more first-hand accounts of events a newspaper provides its readers the better, even if some of those accounts contradict the political views of the editor, or of one another.
4. Events ought to be reported chronologically, as they happen in real time.
 - a. The distinctiveness of events is determined by the numbers, kinds, and behaviours of the crowds that attend them.

And as Ryfe notes, these conventions continue to feature in the *Liberator* at least through the 1860 presidential election. While Garrison openly articulated his

views in the countdown to that election, views such as ‘the party system was corrupt, the Constitution a sham, and the only recourse for a moral person was to entirely reject the political system,’ other opinions in the form of speeches, letters, and news from a great variety of people found their way into the *Liberator*. For instance, on September 21 of the same year, the *Liberator*’s front page story included the following: ‘two speeches given at a John Brown meeting; an excerpt from the pro-South Augusta (GA) True Democrat titled “The True Allies of the South”; an extract of a speech delivered by Carl Shurz in St. Louis on the distinction between free and slave labour, and an excerpt from the New Orleans Picayune reporting one of its citizen’s experience during a recent spate of violence in a small Texas town’(Ryfe, 2006; 62-3).

Ryfe notes that most of this news was written in a chronological style, often in the first or third person, constantly using personal pronouns such as ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘we’ ‘our’ ‘us’ etc. giving the narrative a sense of conversational quality that evokes at best the journalism of association, affiliation, and belonging. This was also true of the mid-Victorian British press in the 19th century where newspapers ‘contained leading articles propounding the official ‘line’, verbatim transcriptions of important speeches, strictly informative (not to say accurate) advertisements, and little else’. Views, rather than news, were the main preoccupation of this mid-Victorian press (Hampton, 2001; 217).

The point I am trying to make here is that this form of 19th century American and British journalism which focused more or less on public life based on a strong

attachment to the people which in a way inhibits the notion of objectivity, the hallmark of modern day American journalism, was no different from the African journalism of belonging that we saw in the pre-colonial, colonial, and the immediate post colonial periods. And as we saw in the example of the critical articles written in the *Liberator* of 1860 by Garrison, coupled with others written in the form of letters and opinions from readers participating in the news discourse, the 19th century American and British press also served as watch dog of society, although some of them, particularly the partisan ones, demonstrated a strong attachment to political parties as political communities. And as we can see in the previous and coming sections of this article that the pre-colonial, colonial as well as the immediate post-colonial press in Africa performed a watch dog role while at the same time exhibiting a strong element of journalism of association, affiliation, and belonging. And so there is a huge problem with the claim by Bourgault (1995) that African journalism is inherently partisan and that it is good only in its praise-singing role.

2) The press in the immediate and late Post Colonial periods

The immediate post colonial period

The euphoria which greeted the African press largely thanks to the wide latitude of freedom it enjoyed during the colonial period suffered a monumental setback in the early years of the post-colonial period. While the press in Anglophone Africa, particularly in West and East Africa continued its “watch dog role” despite this time having to contend with state repression, at least in some countries, its

counterpart in Francophone Africa reverted to the “praise-singing” or propagandist role somehow typical of the pre-colonial communal story-tellers.

In the case of Sierra Leone, for example, the development of the press was for instance seriously constrained by the high handed regulations such as the 1965 Public Order Act which criminalised defamatory libel. Press freedom violations, unknown during the colonial period, were thus used by the new African leaders to cow their journalists. A notable example was Kwame Nkrumah, who four years after leading his country Ghana to freedom, ironically initiated the decline of the free press in Africa when he in 1961 introduced a series of authoritarian directives against the *Ashanti Pioneer* of Kumasi, including demanding the paper’s editor to submit its copy to his minister of information before printing. Nevertheless, Anglophone West Africa enjoyed the healthiest free press in Africa with the most experienced African journalists who had absorbed the British free press tradition. This was also the case in the press in the Eastern and Southern Africa.

In her groundbreaking book *Mass Media in Sub-saharan Africa*, Louise M. Bourgault (1995) explains that the francophone countries in Black Africa inherited little in the way of an information press. ‘The party papers favoured exhortation and propaganda,...there were few trained francophone journalists at independence working mostly for state papers. Little wonder that these journalists quickly developed a culture of ‘propaganda journalism’ associated with the African oral discourse style of communication. Bourgault claims that this African oral discourse model of journalism, ‘like oral praise poetry, is very useful in creating personality cults in society’ but ‘very poor in fostering a critical spirit among its

members. She argues that ‘praise-singing’ (propaganda), which according to her, the post colonial African journalists inherited from the oral discourse style of the communal story-tellers, quickly crowded out opportunities for developing critical discourse in the African media. It is in this context that Congolese social analyst Andre Badibanga (1979) describes the sycophancy of the press in Africa. Using a quote from Cote d’Ivoire’s national daily, *Fraternite Matin* (Oct. 18 1977), he decries that what passes for journalism in this article is a piece of flowery praise for the country’s president Houphouet Boigny, appearing as part of a holiday commemoration (cited in Bourgault, 1995):

On this blessed day, our prayers rise from our hearts, prayers for you and your family, for all who are dear to you, for yourself, so that we can know that you will be near to us, unequally and totally preoccupied by our continuing improvement and the development of our dear country. (Bourgault’s translation , cited in Badibanga, 1979, p.42)

Of particular interest here is the use of the pronouns “our” and “we” by the author of this article to make himself one with the audience as he heaps praise upon the president, very much like the associational journalism or journalism of attachment styles used by the 19th century American and British press. This journalism of belonging or partisanship was not unique to the Ivory Coast press; it was very dominant, and for all you know still very much alive in the press in other sub-Saharan African countries. Writing about the Cameroonian press, Menang (1996:327) for instance notes that there is little respect for balance or neutrality, as excessive enthusiasm ...and downright cynicism...seem to dominate the press scene’. And as Bourgault explains, the lack of distancing of the journalist from the audience, or in

some cases from the subject, makes it difficult or impossible for them to assume a critical, neutral posture in their reporting. Thus the reporter, subject and audience end up forming a larger whole. 'Objectivity as it is understood in the Western sense becomes impossible. But of course large elements of the 19th century American and later British journalism based on journalism of belonging and subjectivity have survived to this day as examples of subjective reporting in Western 'objective' journalism abound.

Development Journalism: According to Bourgault ,development journalism, which became the buzz word in promoting good governance in the 70s and 80s, was forged out of a compromise between “nation building” and “a free and unfettered press”. Taking the cue from American ideologues Lerner, Schramm and Everett, proponents of this notion assert that ‘media becomes a tool for exhorting positive social change by encouraging and promoting development initiatives sponsored by local and foreign governments and international organisations. Thus, the role of the press as government watchdog is overshadowed by its role as public cheerleader for development efforts’ in areas such as health, agriculture and education, steering clear of politics (Bourgault, 1995, p173). The aim was to shift focus from ‘spot’ or ‘sensationalist’ news to identifying and covering otherwise less obvious socio-economic and political processes with a view to helping communities understand and influence them to their advantage (Romano, 2005; 1; Aggarwala, 1979;51). This happened as a matter of course with the rise of electronic media –radio and television—being much better at covering breaking / spot news than their newspaper counterparts. But as Bourgault argues, many Western analysts felt the

concept of development journalism was another ideological instrument used by African governments to exert control over their presses.

Late post-colonial period (80s and 90s)

If the 70s and 80s are remembered as the decades of developmental journalism, the 90s is recognised as the decade of 'democratic journalism' in Africa for the important role the private press played in forcing autocratic African regimes to bulge to the democratic wind of change that swept across the continent. Most African journalists, including their hitherto 'propagandist' Francophone colleagues, quickly reverted to their watchdog role in calling for national conferences to determine their collective political destiny. Thus, their use of the typical African journalism model of oral discourse in engaging their subjects and audience in their reports and editorials with the constant use of pronouns such as "our", "we", was very much evident.

After independence, Berger (2002) explains, much academic writing on Africa, including on African media, was focused (functionistically) on development concerns. It was not until the 1990s, when the democratic wind canalised into mass street protests which forced the word democracy on the political agenda that this topic began to register significantly in scholarly analysis of the media's role on the continent. And yet, Berger argues, 'only a small body of writing emerged which theorized the 'democratization decade' in ways outside the liberal pluralist paradigm, although still drawing on concepts ready-made from Western theory'. These writings go beyond the simple holding of free and fair elections to ongoing political participation processes involving other actors of society other than professional

politicians. Civil society actors formed themselves into interest groups, mostly along ethnic, tribal and regional lines; some going the extra mile in constituting themselves into community groups or political parties. For instance during the period of multi-partyism in Africa in the 90s, most political parties were polarised along ethnic lines, although there were constitutional restrictions in some countries like Cameroon. And according to the Cameroon Tribune editor-in-chief, the press followed suit. He noted that newspapers such as *Le Messager* and *Le Patriote* among the very first papers to embark upon the defence of ethnic causes, closely followed by *Challenge Hebdo*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, *Le Temoin*, *L'Harmattan*, *The Herald* and more (Nyamnjoh, 2005; 236).

Nyamnjoh notes that 'this polarisation or ethnicisation of the press is best understood within the framework of the politics of belonging, whose emphasis on *'autochtonie'* and *allogeneite'* have subverted liberal democracy and its narrow focus on a homogenous civic citizenship informed by electoral politics where individuals are seen and treated as autonomous and disembedded units' (Nyamnjoh, 2005; 237, see also Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Bayart et al. 2001; Socpa 2002). Thus while the African model of journalism lays emphasis on the community (civil society), or communities (civil societies), the Western Liberal model emphasises the individual. And what is even more interesting, according to Ebssiy Ngum of CRTV, the public in Cameroon preferred partisanship to level-headed analysis. This meant that the middle ground position, or objectivity, that is unique to the Western liberal democracy model, was, and still remains, an unpopular option. This polarisation was reinforced by the adoption of a new constitution in January 1996 that promised state protection for minorities... The more critical sections of the press however dismissed this as a

trivialisation of the notion of ‘minority’ accusing the government of embarking on the politics of divide-and-rule (Nyamnjoh, 2005; 237). Again here we see that views critical of the establishment still feature in the press with all the journalism of affiliation or attachment to communities. Hence rather than spending all their time praise-singing as Bourgault (1995) would want us to believe, most African press outlets were polarised along ethnic/party lines; and so it is the question of either you are with us the (ruling party) or against us (the opposition party).

While for example Cameroonian President Paul Biya was credited by *Le Patriot* for introducing ‘advanced democracy’, he was charged by *Challenge Hebdo* for presiding over ‘the delinquent state’ and by *Le Messenger* for ‘retarded mediocrity’. ‘And if to *Le Patriot* the opposition was nothing but ‘an embittered bunch of vandals thirsty for power’, to *Challenge Hebdo* and *Le Messenger* ‘the opposition are the way to salvation for the people’ (Ndongo, 1993; 168 cited in Nyamnjoh, 2005; 235). While some like *La Gazette* and *Fraternite* were going to bed with both the government and the opposition, not sure where to belong at any given time, those who opted for the middle ground like *Dikalo*, *La Détente* and *L’Effort Camerounais*, were hard to come by, and their reporters risked being treated with contempt by their colleagues of other newspapers.

3) Modernity Vs Africanity: Re-theorisation of key normative concepts unique to the African model of journalism

While Mansson (1999) sees civil society as different from the private press in Africa, Ronning (1999) thinks they are the same. Sachikonye (1995a), however, critiques the media in general and argue that ‘civil society’ must have their own media to ensure a favourable coverage of their activities. But it is not clear whether both Ronning and Sachikonye are calling for community-owned (as opposed to privately owned) media, reflecting the relative absence of this phenomenon outside South Africa and some West African countries (Berger, 2002).

While accepting the existence of some insights among these different shades of opinion, Berger goes on to identify nine problematic areas in efforts to re-theorise the concept of civil society (CS) within the context of African journalism: difficulty in separating state from CS; seeing CS as oppositional force; encouraging ‘state bad, ‘civil society good’ thinking; must see state and CS as partners; CS like media must have limits; press is peripheral to people; singling out govt.-media relationship; press insist they are independent and not necessarily oppositional; and they call for or oppose democratic change.

Berger sums up by suggesting that civil society raises a number of complexities when applied to African media and argued that this cannot be done willy-nilly without regard for historical conditions (Berger, 2002). In this regard we cannot help but agree with Nyamnjoh’s analysis that African journalists are called upon ‘to operate in a world where everything has been pre-defined for them by others, where they are meant to implement and hardly ever to think or rethink, where what is expected of them is respect for canons, not to question how or why canons are forged, or the extent to which canons are forged, or the extent to which canons are inclusive of the

creative diversity of the universe that is purportedly of interest to the journalism of the One-Best-Way' (Nyamnjoh, 2005).

In his analysis of the media in action in Africa of the 1990s, Nyamnjoh is, notwithstanding this huge challenge facing African journalists, upbeat about how they, 'both conventional and alternative, old and new, traditional and modern, interpersonal and mass, can, in principle, facilitate popular empowerment as a societal project.' He goes along with Philip Lee who notes that people can only come on board and make their views known if public communication is integrated into political democracy, which, he adds, to be effective 'demands a system of constant interaction with all the people, accessibility at all levels, a public ethos which allows conflicting ideas to contend, and which provides for full participation in reaching consensus on socio-cultural economic and political goals' (Lee 1995;2). While Lee agrees that the media can indeed have a huge potential to provide the knowledge and education which people need to make sense of what is happening around them, he notes that they can also be 'a vehicle for uncritical assumptions, beliefs, stereotypes, ideologies and orthodoxies that blunt critical awareness and make participatory democratisation difficult' (Lee 1995: 2-7 cited in Nyamnjoh, 2005;2). There is also the problem of inequality of access to media content and practice which varies from one society to another.

Hence Lee's claim of the 'illusion of democracy', which Berger (2003), and other realists, describe as a potential democratic deficit, is taken to mean that even in the most privileged countries of the West, quite often, 'political rhetoric about democracy denies the possibility of inequity, inaccessibility and marginalisation' (Lee 1995:10).

Putting it in a cultural context, Nyamnjoh admits that the media are victims of a top-down imposition of a hierarchy of national and world cultures, and also of the cultural industries that have opted for routinisation, standardisation and homogenisation of media content. This, he argues, has caused world views that do not fit the corporate-profit making interest of the media industries to be excluded or marginalised.

Nyamnjoh notes that ‘African world-views and cultural values are hence doubly excluded: first by the ideology of hierarchies of cultures, and second by cultural industries more interested in profits than the promotion of creative diversity and cultural plurality’. The fall-out, he adds, is ‘an idea of democracy hardly informed by popular articulations of personhood and agency in Africa’, and media whose professional values are at odds with the expectations of those they claim to serve.

Thus the nightmare journalists in such a situation are forced to grapple with is all too obvious: to serve the interests of liberal democracy, they are duty bound to ignore all alternative ideas of personhood and agency that are in tune with those of their cultural communities.

In a similar note, pampering to the wishes of ‘particular cultural groups risks contradicting the principles of liberal democracy, and its emphasis on the autonomous individual. Torn between such competing and conflicting understandings of democracy, the media find it difficult to marry rhetoric with practice, and for strategic instrumentalist reasons may opt for a Jekyll and Hyde personality’ (Nyamnjoh, 2005; 2-3). Thus, the failure to properly negotiate this individual/community binary is at the heart of the shortfall in the role of the media in democracy. This is however more evident in the 20th and 21st centuries’ Western media—with emphasis on the

individual— but not very much in the African media, which, with all the colonial influence, are, as affirmed above, still inherently community-based. This is where this article departs from Nyamnjoh's assumption that the African journalism model is essentially a carbon copy of the Western Liberal democracy that is not in tune with African agency and personhood. The fact that African journalists are often called upon, or expected, to follow set journalistic standards based on the Western Liberal Democracy model, should not be taken to mean that is what obtains in reality. Thus there is a need here to draw a line between rhetoric and practice.

The challenge, Berger argues (2002), is the need to opt for universally applicable concepts, which are applicable for media and democracy in Africa, and which identify broad processes and functions rather than specific institutions like parliament and the press. In this context, democracy functionally refers to a decision-making power by majority principle...as well as other important associated principles (informed participants, freedom of expression, right to access public information, rule of law, checks and balances on power, human rights, respect for minorities); while media in its more conventional sense (journalism) refers to the whole gamut of communicative signs that appear on a platform (like print, radio, television) (Berger, 2002:21-45).

This raises the issue of how journalism itself does not operate in isolation, but very much an integral part of democracy, although this relationship becomes problematic when applied to Africa without taking local values and factors into consideration. Based on this, it is difficult not to agree with Berger's view that this paradigm is problematic not only because it is itself challenged on its own 'Western home turf, but its suitability to Africa is questionable'(Berger, 2002:21-45).

Sachikonye (1995a:399,400) defines 'civil society' as the aggregate of institutions involved in non-state activities aimed at exercising all sorts of pressures or controls upon state institutions (civil society groups include business associations, tertiary institutions, churches, mosques, self-help associations and the private mass media etc. The public sphere concept attributed to Jurgen Habermas (1992) refers to a realm related to the democratic political discourse—a distinct realm where public discussion takes place (two types of public spheres-general: Individual-based; organised: Group-based).

Public sphere as it relates to civil society applies to voluntary and violence-free political behaviour. This explains Habermas argument that the public sphere needs institutional guarantees of a constitutional state with law and order, and a political culture in the broader society of a populace accustomed to freedom (Habermas, 1992, quoted in Mak'Ochieng, 1994, Berger, 2002). Habermas' public sphere was 'contingent upon a new conception of sphere of social life where citizens met to articulate criticisms of established authority' (Allan, 1997; 319). Going along with Dahlgren and Sparks (1991), Traber (1995) locates the public sphere between state and civil society.

Both models provide partisan voices (be they government or other interests) a realm in constituting a pluralistic public sphere. However, while the civil society perspective leans towards grassroots participation (as applied in Southern Africa), the public sphere model moves towards the liberal pluralistic situation where professional

politicians, bureaucrats and other elites dominate political discourse and direct the state.⁷

In summing up, Berger calls for the amendment of the two models—civil society and public sphere—in ways that would make for their realistic and relevant application to African conditions, taking into consideration of course the differences that exist across the vast continent. While sharing some overlaps, including some problems, Berger notes that they do certainly highlight different aspects of African journalism as it fundamentally relates to the liberal democracy paradigm. Perhaps the best place to start is to devise ways in which the typical African ‘oral discourse’ model of journalism can be adapted to its liberal counterpart in a way that will improve journalism on the continent.

Conclusion: A Case for re-thinking normative journalism theory and practice

Throughout this article I have tried as best as possible to debunk the widely held view in the West that all that remains of African journalism is nothing but a direct replica of the Western Liberal democracy model which places more premium on the individual rather than the community or communities. Nyamnjoh (2005) describes it as ‘a journalism of mimicry, bandwagonism and self-debasement, where African creativity and originality are crushed by the giant compressors of the One-Best-Way, as the Euro-centric assumptions and indicators of humanity, creativity and reality are universalised with the insensitive arrogance of ignorance and power’. This view sadly reinforces the dominant thinking among media scholars in the West that the liberal democracy model is the one that fits the whole world. However, while this article

recognises that some precepts of the Western model such as objectivity, detachment, propaganda, watchdog⁸, etc. are still very much present in the African journalism model, it exposes Nyamnjoh's bandwagonism claim as wanting by showing that the journalism of association, affiliation, and belonging that existed since the pre-colonial period survived the colonial, immediate and late post colonial periods through to the present day. Moreover, while this article agrees with Nyamnjoh's (2005) claim that the way forward is in recognising the ways in which Africans merge their traditional values with exogenous influences to create realities that are not reducible to either but enriched by both, its findings of associational journalism embedded in the African model dismiss his claim of an overarching dominance of the Western liberal democracy model as problematic.

And as Berger (2002) puts it, the challenge is to develop original theory based on African experiences precisely to explain these experiences more accurately—and to act on this to advance the cause of democracy on the continent'. He calls for the rethinking of concepts like 'civil society' and 'public sphere' as understood in the West to reflect the cultural structures of public life expressed in African journalism, taking into consideration of course the differences that exist across the vast continent. While sharing some overlaps, including some problems, Berger notes that they do certainly highlight different aspects of African journalism as it fundamentally relates to the liberal democracy paradigm. Perhaps the best place to start is to devise ways in which the typical African 'oral discourse' model of journalism can be adapted to its liberal counterpart in a way that will improve journalism on the continent.

This article builds on the research by Hallin and Mancini(2004) and Curran and Park(2000) who problematize the universal application of the Western model. In their chapter ‘Comparing media Systems’, Hallin and Mancini(2005) admit that ‘the literature on the media is highly ethnocentric, in the sense that it refers only to the experience of a single country, yet is written in general terms, as though the model that prevailed in that country were universal’. In fact Hallin and Mancini (2005) identify two other models of Western journalism in addition to the dominant Western liberal model, namely the polarized pluralistic model which developed in southern Europe (France, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy) more as part of the worlds of literature and politics than of the market, and the democratic corporatist model which developed in northern and central Europe (Belgium, Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden) more as parallel political and commercial press. The liberal democracy model for its part developed in the north Atlantic region (Canada, Ireland, the UK and the USA) more as commercial than political media (Hallin and Mancini, 2005). Hallin and Mancini note that ‘the liberal model has become the dominant model throughout the world: it serves as normative model for practitioners everywhere,’ although they recognise that they do not intend their framework of the three outlined Western models ‘to be applied to the rest of the world without modification’(Hallin and Mancini, 2005). The Hallin and Mancini argument largely reinforces the call by this article for re-thinking normative journalism theory and practice to reflect local conditions from one society to another.

Moreover, following the cultural approach to the news developed by Carey (1989) and later by Schudson (1995), and drawing on my analysis in previous sections of this article, this article concludes that news expresses the structure of public life in the

pre-colonial, colonial, immediate and late post-colonial African journalism, at least as far as eye witness reporting, often through chronological narratives, often of the first person, that emphasised the participation of ordinary people was concerned, in the same way as did the 19th –century news of the American press, and later of the British press (Ryfe, 2006). As I have shown above, while I agree with Bourghault’s argument that there was indeed a form of journalism –African oral discourse—before colonialism, I challenge her assertion that this journalism, which she claimed to have survived colonialism, is inherently and fundamentally ‘propagandist’. Based on the findings of my analysis of the Cameroonian press, I argue that while the African model exhibits strong attachment to community values demonstrating a penchant for partisanship, there is evidence to suggest that most of the African media identify with either the government or the opposition while only very few oscillate between the two, or opt for the middle ground. One of the key findings of Nyamnjoh’s study⁹ for example is that the ‘media assumed a partisan, highly politicised, militant role in Africa’ (Nyamnjoh, 2005; 231). Thus we have both the praise-singing and the critical press, in fact often more of the latter, and so Bourghault’s generalisation is suspect. In a similar way, I argue that while the 19th century news of the American and British press was inherently associational and participatory in as far as expressing the structure of public life was concerned, there is evidence to suggest, as we saw in the case of Garrison of the *Liberator* of the 1830s, that it was both propagandist and critical.

Berbie Zelizer argues that ‘despite the prevalence of arguments for journalism’s universal nature, the culture of journalism presupposes that journalistic conventions, routines and practices are dynamic and contingent on situational and historical

circumstances' (Zelizer, 2005). For as Deuze (2006;275) notes, 'the emerging literature on participatory media culture as it relates to journalism heralds new roles for journalists as bottom-up facilitators and moderators of community-level conversations among citizens rather than functioning as top-down storytellers for an increasingly disinterested public'(see also Gillmor, 2004).

However, the mainstream Western mass media is deeply embedded in the liberal democracy model's myth of 'objectivity' and 'impartiality' that is more consumer than community-oriented (Allan, 1997; 319), fundamentally departing from the 19th century news culture of public life of the American and British press. And as Winston notes, post-modern theorists and other critics of this modernist world view of enlightenment have long attacked it as a 'dangerous orthodoxy' ...; 'a licence for rampant individualism and the enshrinement of selfishness' that at best 'values the ideals of the West above all others' (Winston, 2005).

But it is important to note that all is not yet lost as leading advocates of public journalism Haas and Steiner (2001; 140) argue that 'journalism inevitably involves more than neutral information transfer' and 'call on journalists to put a premium on ensuring that the interests of subordinate social groups are articulated—and heard'. Nonetheless, it is my view that because of the growing pace of globalisation the 'neutrality' or 'objectivity' convention of the Western model, albeit more normative than practice even in its home front as warned by Berger (2002), may in the long run completely override the associational and participatory values of the African journalism model if efforts are not made to preserve and adapt them to changing circumstances. That is why I want to conclude by calling, first, for more research in

this area, and above all on African journalists, with the help of policy makers of course, to seriously think about resorting to the use of popular African languages, particularly in the broadcast media, to put their messages across, and also for more training taking into consideration their various local conditions and experiences informed by the African journalism model of ‘oral discourse’.

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¹ This approach is informed by imposing cultural and professional values from above with little or no regard for local values

² Due to some political and cultural reasons, the media and journalism in North Africa is more often than not discussed in relation to the Middle East (e.g. see Ibelema et al., 2004; Najja, 2004). Hence this paper deals only with sub-Saharan Africa. Because of the well-developed status of the South African Press largely owned and run by the rich white class, it does not form part of the Sub-Saharan Africa media studied in this article.

³ Little is documented about the history of South African journalism before the 1960s (see for e.g. De Beer and Tomaselli, 2001:9-10) Because of the well-developed status of the South African Press largely owned and run by the rich white class, it does not form part of the Sub-Saharan Africa media studied in this article.

⁴ Liberia was not a British colony; this country and Ethiopia were the only countries to escape colonial rule, although the former was all but name seen as an American sphere of influence.

⁵ It is problematic to dismiss oral tradition as utter praise-singing since there is evidence to show that griots or story tellers in pre-colonial Africa sometimes went the extra mile to use sarcasms and satires

⁶ Ryfe (2001:62) defines convention broadly as a social rule for defining what is appropriate or legitimate to do in a given context. It tells individuals how they should act in a given social situation. Over time these conventions become a routine—a normal way of life—in a way that make them constitute largely unconscious, unreflective patterns of behaviour. ‘Garrison’s tendency to include reader voices in the news, for example, and to respond to his opponents, are conventions in this sense’ (Ryfe, 2006:62)

⁷ (For more on the similarities and differences between civil society and public sphere see Berger 2002)

⁸ Objectivity—a fair and balanced representation of facts by taking on board the views of all parties concerned; detachment—taking a distance from the people and issues being reported; propaganda—promoting a particular angle of the story to favour some people against others; watchdog—journalist holding public and private individuals to account.

⁹ The basis of his (Nyamnjoh) book (2005) ‘Africa’s Media: Democracy and the politics of belonging’, UNISA Press.

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