

How ‘brown envelope journalism’ holds back sub-Saharan Africa

Dominic Burbidge explores the corrupt links between political elites and mainstream media that suffocate genuine democratic debate in Africa.



Towards the end of [a book](#) detailing the inner workings of East Germany’s Stasi state, Timothy Garton Ash describes the paradox of critics: “we support the system by questioning it.” This is the unique contribution of journalists—more frequently captured by the phrase “speaking truth to power”—and whether we find ourselves on the comfortable sofas of the White House or among the bleeding children of Taldou, Syria, we call on journalists to stand on the side of truth.

This shining image of journalism does not always hold, and yet how rare it is that we read about the dark corners of it (except of course when it hurts celebrities). One part of the world where journalism consistently does dubious service to citizens is sub-Saharan Africa, the very place that most needs journalism to hold power to account. Talking to Free Speech Debate, Nqobile Sibisi, coordinator of Highway Africa’s Future Journalists Programme, explains how in South Africa “[the media is currently fighting a war with government](#)” over the [Protection of State Information Bill](#), termed a “[draconian secrecy bill](#)” by Amnesty International. Sadly, however, this war is limited to South Africa. The rest of sub-Sahara faces an altogether different problem.

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African journalism is pervaded by corrupt links between political elites and mainstream media houses. This suffocates genuine democratic debate. Terje Skjerdal, lecturer at Addis Ababa University, [notes](#) how “brown envelope journalism is rife in African media practice”. Although bribes take on different names in different countries (*soli* in Ghana, *gombo* in Cameroon or *mshiko* in Kenya), the practice is the same. Journalists are often given informal incentives, like money in a brown envelope, to publish or refrain from publishing particular stories. [One survey](#) revealed 63% of Ghanaian journalists admitting to taking bribes. In Tanzania, reporters often receive an untaxed “sitting fee” for attending the right press conferences.

While the prevalence of corrupt journalism is fairly obvious to most analysts of African politics, general knowledge of the situation is repressed for two reasons. Firstly, both Western governments and development practitioners are at a loss as to how to improve political performance in the continent, and so they turn to civil society as one of the last resorts for achieving accountability and good governance. Civil society—just like journalism—is an angelic concept: no one wants to hear about its shortcomings. The second reason corruption in African journalism is not exposed is that journalists themselves do not expose it. Perhaps part of the reason we have such a high opinion of the democratic role of journalists is because they have a convenient position from which to publish their virtues. If journalists are the watchers of the state, we would do well to ask with the Roman poet Juvenal: “Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”—“Who watches the watchers?”

How bad are the brown envelope links between political leaders and the African media? It is true that numerous media outlets act as platforms for African politicians across the continent, but this is not the worst worry. African media has also acted as tools for politically engineered crimes against humanity, such as Radio Rwanda and Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, which were key in inciting the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Many states in Africa are home to numerous language groups. This means the media can be used to stir up ethnic tensions. At the other end of the spectrum, established media tend to operate in the more international languages such as French, English or Portuguese, without regard for the less educated sections of the population who do not know these languages.

In terms of the money links between politicians and journalists, there is a difficult line to draw in any part of the world between editorial policy and political connections. In Africa the near impossibility of starting a domestic media group without the support of politically charged benefactors means freedom of expression generally takes the form of freedom to praise one’s financiers. Perhaps the strangest example of this is that since Kenya’s 2011 invasion of Somalia Kenyan newspapers have not reported a single Kenyan soldier’s death. Either the state has flexed its muscles within the media to make sure there is no public criticism of the invasion or the Kenyan military has achieved a perfect campaign and will no doubt soon be training the US army on how to conduct invasions.

If you walk the streets of Dar es Salaam, economic capital of Tanzania, it will not be long before you are invited to sit by the side of the road and share some black coffee with the old men (*wazee*)

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and discuss the politics of the day. The crisis of African journalism is that such street-level debate cannot penetrate the closed doors of the elites and hold them to account.

Nqobile Sibisi suggests that the lack of widespread internet access marks a key difference between the Arab spring north of the Sahara and the democratic vacuum south of it. Although it is true that 27% of people in the Maghreb use the internet compared with 11% of sub-Saharan Africans, increasing the debate online may be as ineffective as debating with the old men of Dar es Salaam if paid journalism remains in the pockets of a country's politicians. In a study of mainstream Zimbabwean journalists, Hayes Mabweazara [finds](#) that their take-home salary is so low that it "can hardly take you home". This means journalists have to play second fiddle to the political incumbents just to keep food on the table for their families. We can shout corruption on our unfollowed Twitter streams, and stamp our feet as we buy roadside coffee, but it is the separation of money-making journalism from politicians that is needed before we can say that we "support the system by questioning it" in Africa.

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