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'OUR CULTURE' VS 'FOREIGN CULTURE'

An Essay on Ontological and Professional Issues in African Journalism

Keyan G. Tomaselli

Abstract / This article discusses debates on the freedom of the press in Africa with regard to professionalism, essentialism and citizenship. The article engages Francis Kasoma's arguments for an ethics which calls on the ancestors for guidance. It critiques the insistence by many African media academics that the media must exhibit 'African values', and it examines the role of authority in determining the way that the media are understood by communication students in some African countries. The deification of Afrocentricism, moralistic prescriptions and the notion that authority is beyond critique are questioned. The article argues for a greater integration of cultural and media studies with ways of teaching journalism in order to caution these kinds of essentialisms which assume that Africa has just one 'culture'. Some suggestions are offered on how to address these issues in course curricula.

Keywords / Africa / ethics / press freedom / professionalism

Significant shifts in the Southern African media in the 1990s were led by dramatic changes in South Africa in the context of the post-Cold War period as a whole. Media were also affected by political events, globalizing technologies and policy changes. Ownership, content, delivery systems, users and audiences/readers for a range of media services were thoroughly reconceptualized throughout the Southern African Development Community (Lee and Thomas, 2001; Tomaselli and Dunn, 2002).

African broadcasting traditionally has been considered part of the civil service. It is this unilinear understanding of communication in which governments speak 'to', rather than engage in dialogue with, their citizens, which is enshrined in orthodox communication systems and uses globally (Farndon and Furniss, 2000; Opoku-Mensah, 1998; Wedell, 1986). However, in the wake of democratizing and privatizing impulses, Southern African governments facilitated reregulation of the airwaves, permitting private satellite transmission via both encryption and free-to-air broadcasting, in addition to public service and commercial channels.

In print, state-owned newspapers are now in competition with commercial ventures, some of which are funded by global corporate and donor interests (see Kasoma [1999] for discussion on the latter). Yet, other than in South Africa, the inadequate advertising base for independent commercial media remains a serious impediment to media autonomy and growth. Kasoma would also argue

that scornful and disparaging journalism especially opens up print media to state interference (Kasoma, 2000).

In telecommunications, trends towards privatization are unfolding, while private cellular providers now offer parallel telephony services, often in partnership with parastatal landline providers (Horwitz, 2001; Teer-Tomaselli, 2003). Cellphone services such as the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)/Vodacom's NewsBreak, have not only opened up new markets in South Africa and Nigeria, but also contest entrenched political interests by providing dial-up news which often undermines state propaganda, as, for example, in Zimbabwe (see Sandison, 2001).

Malawi and Botswana introduced television services in 2000, while in all African countries issues of freedom of the press have been reignited by deregulation and reregulation policies, in concert with liberalization of national economies (see, for example, Mbay'o et al., 2000). The ensuing conflict between state and the private press is the topic of numerous articles (see, for example, Kasoma, 1997, 2000), a thread developed later in the article.

The theoretical literature on regulatory issues is often invoked by African cultural intermediaries to also imply the regulation of content, as well as notions of African morality, decency and virtue (Kasoma, 1994; Moemaka and Kasoma, 1994; Okigbo, 1994). This category confusion – between industry regulation on the one hand, and morality on the other – is underpinned with injunctions for the institution of content barriers to 'protect' Africans from the allegedly insidious influences of so-called (western) 'foreign culture', 'alien' genres of reporting (Kasoma, 2000: 85) and to ensure that Africans as an essentially moral society 'constantly strive to lead good lives so that their ethnic community can prosper' (Kasoma, 1994: xv). Embedded in this definitional conflation and essentialistic thinking is the utterly reductive assumption that the 54 African countries, and myriad array of cultures, religions and languages, can be prescriptively reduced to homogeneous sets of continent-wide social and cultural 'African values'.

This study offers a critical analysis of some of the common sense prescriptions about media content and reporting genres which typify perspectives offered in student essays and exams, in scholarly discussions on media freedom, and often in publication form also. These positions are often assumed by certain African media scholars to be the preferred norm (see, for example, Chinweizu, 1999; Kasoma, 1996; Ziegler and Asante, 1992).

My discussion in this article draws on published literature, on my experience as an external examiner at African universities, and on my own impressions of the underlying assumptions which drive debates on freedom of the press in various African forums – student, professional and especially academic. Pertinent among the issues to be addressed are:

1. The way many African journalism students and academics tend to deify essentialistic Afrocentric approaches;
2. Media freedom issues in relation to cultural and moralistic prescriptions; and
3. The popular notion that those in authority are above and beyond critique.

What Can We Learn from our Students? What Can We Teach Them?

Discussions on 'what is news?' are crucial, but often absent, in many African communication curricula, though the level of discussion on training is itself often quite challenging and creative (see Greer, 1999; Nwosu, 1987; Uche, 1987; UNESCO/UNDP, 2001; UNESCO, 2002). Often taken for granted more generally, however, are simplistic perspectives when it comes to criticizing politicians, presidents, chiefs, the state and the paternal social assumptions that these officials are the God-given custodians and guardians of a nation's morals, and therefore, are above criticism. An interrogation of this tension in student writing, and even among professionals, is identified as the need for 'respect', the value of 'oneness' and nation-building vs journalism practice as (partly) adversarial, and as being largely unpatriotic. This position is often opportunistically legitimized under the rubric of 'development journalism' and/or the erroneous conflation of the procedure of democratically organized elections with the practice of democratic government. Governments are not inherently democratic, though they might be elected by democratic means. Too often, this crucial distinction is forgotten as majoritarianism suppresses minority critique. A crucial point made by Kasoma (2001) is that democracies are as much about minorities as they are about majorities, a nuance often lost on African governments.

Much debate within media and government circles in Southern Africa has centred on the ways in which journalists construct news: in terms of their motivations, their ethical considerations, and their awareness of the agenda-setting potential of the information that is printed or broadcast. Two schools of thought, discussed vigorously by press columnists, seem to have cohered. The first believes that Southern African media should adhere to the principles of a free press as these are understood internationally. This classic libertarian perspective is most apposite in relatively homogeneous societies with highly developed social, economic and technical infrastructures. For Mandla Seleokane, the challenge facing Africa is to construct legal frameworks which encourage openness rather than restriction. In its application, expressive freedom, as with all other rights, would be mediated by cultural factors, and a sensitivity to the norms and standards of the societies in which they are embedded (see also Okigbo, 1994). In the same vein, Ghanaian media activist and academic Kwame Karikari notes the reality of ignorance: that the African masses are either not informed at all, or are abjectly misinformed about the manner in which they are governed.¹

The second position coalesces around ethnocentricity. Here, the freedom of the media, as well as private ownership, is curtailed according to the cultural, political and socioeconomic priorities of (supposed) development needs, as articulated by (often corrupt) ruling elites of developing economies (see McQuail, 2000: 155). This position holds that there is something specific about the needs of contemporary African 'society' which demands that the ethical and normative standpoints of African journalists ought to be different – embodied in the notion of 'African values', African 'virtues' and African 'morality' (see,

for example, Chinweizu, 1999; Kasoma, 1994, 1996; Okai, 1999). This argument, for the media as nation-builder, usually assumes that the media, both press and broadcasting, should be supportive of the 'national interest' and not adversarial.

The media should be more of a 'guide dog' than a 'watch dog', and its content interpreted from above by those in power (see Kasoma, 1999: 3). The 'watch dog' function, according to Kasoma (2000: 41), involves duties and responsibilities in probing government to ensure public accountability, not in misusing press freedom by going wild and 'barking at, charging and biting everyone in sight, including those who have not provoked it' (Kasoma, 1999: 3). It is lamentable, argues Kasoma (2000: 41), when the press abrogates these responsibilities and its reporting is based on 'hatred or dislike for those in government'. It is not unusual for African government spokespersons to accuse critical and dissenting media of being unpatriotic: 'hatred' being their most favoured epithet.

A third position, sometimes critical, more often not, which addresses an integration of the preceding, is found in attempts to indigenize journalism (and business) concepts and practices though discourses such as *ubuntu* (humanism, the individual in relation to the community) (see Kamwangamalu, 1999). This position often totally succumbs to the prescriptive and generalized discourse of pan-African values. Some scholars, however, have fractured the opacity of the concept of *ubuntu* in theoretically compelling ways, balancing community-individual relations in less confining interactions. Couching her argument in Freirean (Freire, 1970) terms, Ngaire Blankenberg (1999: 59) argues for a normative, liberatory theory of the media, in which the community 'asserts itself as active citizens rather than as passive consumers'.

In practice, however, media systems in developing countries still qualify as 'authoritarian' (McQuail, 2000: 155). A more positive 'spin' on this is a media ethos which focuses on national and developmental goals, as well as the need for autonomy from major news purveyors and solidarity with other nations in similar situations, in which social responsibility comes before media rights and freedoms. A responsible press is essential in any democratic society, regardless of its level of development. The needs of the public interest clearly demand unfettered information, and a space in which the interests of ordinary citizens are promoted. The 'public sphere' is an arena between the power of the state or government on the one hand, and the power of the commercial and industrial base on the other. In this 'public sphere', people come together as citizens, rather than as political players or motivated solely by commercial interests. In this sense, the media act as a contemporary public sphere in which information affecting their lives is freely available. 'The media facilitate this process by providing an arena of public debate, and by reconstituting private citizens as a public body in the form of public opinion' (Curran, 1996: 82). In this model, emphasis is placed on receivers as citizens, not only as voters or consumers. The central importance of the mass media in the functioning of political and social life comes about as a result of the decline of other fora for interaction, particularly that of the political meeting.²

Insulting vs Respectful Journalism

The democratic dialectic works best when journalists critique politicians, presidents, state agencies and the corporate sector, for corruption, incompetence, non-delivery, misbehaviour and so on. There is no reason why such reporting should be seen as inherently disrespectful. The politician by virtue of his or her *position* might command respect, but the *behaviour* of the person in the position might not, and call for criticism and debate. Position and personality are not the same. Public critique, often belittled by presidential spokespersons as abusive and insulting reporting, is one of the *raison d'être* of journalism in open societies, and a key driving force in maintaining the dialectic in any society, by facilitating robust dialogue between civil society and its political representatives. The use by the Zambian press of 'childish', 'immature', 'criminal', 'scoundrel', etc., to describe its head of state, may have been disrespectful of the individual, President Chiluba, but it does not automatically condemn the position which was itself abused by this president (see Kasoma, 1997: 301). Recognition is *owed*, as distinct from how respect should be *earned*. If presidents fail to earn respect there is no reason why they would be a priori owed it.

The demands for 'respect' (of authority), as articulated by so many African governments is not a traditional cultural inheritance. The idea of 'respect', however, is given populist legitimacy by one particular, somewhat uncharacteristic, article by Kasoma (1996) on Afriethics. The logic, as idiosyncratically internalized from Kasoma's commentary by Swazi mass communication and journalism students, is as follows: '[our] culture' (e.g. Swazi [African], authentic, besieged, defensive, bordered, national) = (the King's) authority, who is the sole unimpeachable custodian of African cultural values, the Final Authority/Law and embodiment of Right Reason. Swazi 'culture' says that the King cannot be gainsaid. Deification is the first problem relating to students' reading of Kasoma's (1996) diatribe on ethics. Communalism (often articulated as common sense [in Gramscian terms]) is considered discursively hegemonic, legitimately censorious and above question.

Kasoma does not discuss the notion of 'respect' or 'press freedom' in relation to either normative theories of the media, or with regard to issues of censorship, though he generally assumes a mixture of libertarianism and social responsibility theory, which would protect the rights of all concerned (see Kasoma, 1999). In his 1996 article, however, as interpreted by Swazi students³ the final discursive authority, 'culture', subsists in myth, as that taken for granted to reside in culture, seen to be embodied in the position of the King as Authority/Law/God,⁴ it is an utterance without an utterer. Culture, known only by 'us' becomes the Ultimate Arbiter; wrote one student: press freedom 'according to culture does not happen, there are some things which cannot be told to the public'. Another stated that 'Swaziland in particular regards the King as a symbol of authority. All he says is regarded as the truth.' Another stated: the King 'is the mouth which tells no lies'. Any journalist disagreeing would learn that they are not 'credible' among readers if they do not write 'stories in accordance to cultural norms and values'. Projections are made by students and Kasoma (1997) to readers' responses, irrespective of the actual situation,

evidence or reception analysis. If readers are, in fact, able to distinguish credible from incredible reporting, why the fuss? Because, we are told, readers want entertainment, which degrades the public sphere and destroys personal reputations. Some students appeal the literal reading by Kasoma on Afriethics to argue that to question authorities is to write 'bad things'. If this is the logic propagated by students, then it is in terms of these discursive assumptions that the wider literature on press freedom and media ethics theories needs to engage.

The phrase, 'against our culture', recurs in student, academic and populist talk, and totally misunderstands semiotic processes of legitimacy construction. This kind of conundrum lies at the heart of journalism ethics. Perhaps this is what Kasoma is trying to unpack in his 1996 article, which resonated positively across Africa with conservative traditionalists. But Kasoma is as inclined in this particular 1998 article to essentialism as are students (see also Murphy, 1998; Ziegler and Asante, 1992). It might be better to examine Kasoma's seminal article in comparison with a critique of it, than to simply discuss it on its own, as supportive of one's cultural common sense. In fact, in its presentation, the paper falls foul of every technical criticism Kasoma himself makes of unprofessional media.⁵

That which makes 'African ethics' different from the ethical criticism of 'northern' commentators is assumed to lie in African conceptions of religion, in which the ancestors play some sort of noumenal (scientifically unknowable) policy role. Kasoma is arguing via Afriethics for a communal alternative to an existing dichotomy made up of authoritarian (state) controlled media, on the one hand, and completely individualistic news-writing (bordering on pure invention of often salacious and insulting stories) on the other. That is, his argument is that African journalists fail to take the word of traditional authority (not community) as truth.

Much of African society is still rooted in non-literate social structures. Print journalism is a fundamentally literate exercise. Non-literate (which does not correlate with illiterate) society tends to work on relationships of personal authority, using an equivalent of the genetic argument to justify this authority (lineage, relationships by marriage, patronage and so on). Such societies are not based on record-keeping, and their transition into literate societies always involves a struggle between that which is true by virtue of an authority, and that which can be verified or criticized on the basis of an expanding archive of records. A transition like that presently facing most of Africa, and much of the world, therefore entails a tension between social stability based on communities held together by authority, and social stability based on rules which develop from the record of social development and instability. The judgement as to what constitutes stability is not based in any single community, therefore, but in the growing record of how a variety of communities deal with actions or ideals which may have seemed at the time to have prevented new generations of the communities from inheriting a working social system. *Kasoma thus makes the classical conservative error of locating ethics in the act itself, and not in the conceivable ends of an indefinite variety of acts.* If, as Kasoma postulates, the end of African ethics is to restore customary relations of deference and respect as a property of journalism, then he cannot make an argument for a literate

society governed by the rule of law: he must call for a non-literate society of people who, while educated to be able to read, are permitted to write and read only what an 'authentic authority' deems fit for reading. The implication of this kind of argument is that Africans are incapable of producing a generation of literate people who can define the possible ends of action so that they can judge for themselves what is either (or both) individually or collectively achievable. If this is what Kasoma actually suggests in his 1998 study, then it seems that, as was the case under Empire (and Apartheid), Africa can have no stability or development without censorship.⁶

In all his papers, Kasoma divides journalism into 'bad' and 'good'. What one person or reading community/constituency considers 'bad' may be considered 'good' by another. But there are limits: among the Seven Deadly Sins of Media Vandalism identified by Chinweizu (1999: 368–70) in Nigeria are 'lies-papers', 'junk', 'quisling', 'payola', and 'guerilla' journalism, and 'freedom-mania'. That these kinds of practices and 'scornful journalism' may negate dialogue is accepted, but satirical journalism and irony test the boundaries of critique – these genres, which have their own internal rules of logic and narrative, are therefore fundamental to debates in democracy. Perhaps 'bad' journalism is also a kind of genre – especially in our postmodern world where conventional rules about 'Truth', a recurring exhortation in Kasoma's studies (see Kasoma, 1997: 299), no longer apply quite so absolutely. If journalism is a 'factual form of realism',⁷ and readers/audiences are understood, at least, to be co-determiners of meaning, then what is good and what is bad becomes quite difficult to assess. Nowhere does Kasoma provide examples of this kind of writing, though he claims that it is endemic.

A pervasive thread throughout Kasoma's broader body of work, however, is his understandable exasperation with state interference in press freedom; because the press has brought this upon itself due to its own unprofessional and irresponsible behaviour (Kasoma, 1997: 295), or because the state fails to understand that the 'press is adversary but not an enemy of government' (Kasoma, 2000: 41). Lastly, Kasoma mentions the unprofessionalism of many journalists and editors, who unremittingly attack authority for the sake of it, or because of their unending 'hatred' of individuals or authority, or because of incompetence due to their lack of training. Kasoma's (1999: 14) fear is that this 'hate press' – salacious, sensational and disrespectful tabloids – which lie, invent and fail to check their sources and facts, open up the media as a whole to state counterattack, impacting on freedom of the media in general.

The question for us, however, is not necessarily why Kasoma diverged in his 1996 article from his previously much more careful academic presentation, but why it has such enthusiastic purchase among Swazi journalism students, ruling elites and others in authority across Africa.

Apart from its seeming populist genuflection to the discourses of authority and responsible journalism, is Kasoma's intriguing discussion of 'the' African 'ontology', in which the discourse of authority and the practice of ethics are located in the realm of the ancestors, who watch over and interact with their still living progeny. Okigbo explains this as follows:

African philosophy is a reflection of the natural habitat of African peoples for whom there is hardly any chance event in nature. The belief in teleological explanations to even the most common phenomena is a common characteristic of most African communities . . . events are inevitably viewed in deeply moral terms and evil is ascribed to the machinations of greedy selfish people. (Okigbo, 1994: 86; Schneider, 1981: 2)

This is a very powerful and influential popular discourse indeed, legitimated as it is by an ontology which sees the living and the departed interacting in the same social, cultural and religious realms.⁸

The discourse of ‘respect’, linked to those of responsibility, ontology and professionalism by students, offers a decidedly material mechanism by which the press and broadcasters can be dissuaded by ruling elites from offering robust analysis of government, policy and politicians, injunctions deemed ‘credible’, or so we are told, by the general citizenry. ‘Respect’, as it is common-sensically authored, finds its discursive legitimacy in ‘culture’. In semiotic terms, ‘respect’ is constructed as a myth – an utterance without an utterer, the General Norm, Right Reason, understood to have always been ‘true’ (see Barthes, 1972). It cannot therefore be contested, is the common sense assumption. But the notion of ‘respect’ and its associated social practices is just another form of discursive hegemony, in which the signifier is collapsed into the signified. This kind of totemistic discursive/‘cultural’ control of journalism and the media needs to be problematized in ethics and media law courses. The issue seems to go to the core of the conflict between the institution of journalism (i.e. the democratic realm) and the government/monarchy (administrative/ruling realm).

Student interpretations of, for example, freedom of speech issues, on how to report on authority in the persona of presidents and kings, and on moral and sexual issues relating to questions of ‘good taste’, allegedly offensive headlines, ethics, nudity and indecency, endlessly recur in responses I have marked in my capacity as external examiner in Zambia and Swaziland, though less so in Kenya. An obsession by the western media with depictions of sex and nudity is counterposed with proper media attention to issues of development in Africa (Musalika, 1994: 142). In studying these patterns of responses to recurring issues and questions, it seems that we need to rethink African journalism curricula where issues of ethics, morality and language are concerned. Below, I discuss the example of reporting on rape.

When is ‘Rape’ Rape? Good Taste Reporting

The western perspectives so easily imported by African departments of communication often lack any obvious connections with discursive structures which generate African students’ questions, and they lie largely outside any critique of essentialism. African students often start from the basis of essentialism, of making uncritical ontological assumptions about the need to respect ‘authority’ even when these contradict critical journalism practice and democratic good sense. For us, this is a common key question in what are usually presented as different courses: ethics on the one hand, and indigenous journalism on the other, both taught with little reference to media law.

Let’s examine a non-political example. When is ‘rape’ rape? African media

students are often concerned about 'good taste', criticizing the use of terms like 'rape' in the news. Few students realize that a pithy headline not only grabs reader attention, but also encapsulates the unusual. If news is understood partly as reporting on events and circumstances which break convention, in terms of the public's right to know, then it becomes less easy to argue for euphemisms in reporting deviant behaviours like rape. Rape is rape; it is not 'defilement', as Swazi students so often suggest as an alternative in their exam scripts. 'Defilement' is too soft a word especially where a minor is concerned.⁹ If one of the roles of newspapers is to identify deviant acts – whether rape or corruption – softening the description may also soften the perception of the seriousness of the crime in the public's mind. The literal 'good taste' notion that because, as one student expressed it, 'the word rape is not in accordance with society's morals, then it (the verb) has to be changed' to, e.g., 'abuse' or 'defile', is an abrogation of journalism ethics. Softening the reporting does not change the reality, nor the need for the media to encourage decent law-abiding citizens to be angry enough to do something about the situation via legal means. The press has a duty to publicize the story in order to warn others about unacceptable behaviour in their midst. Students sometimes warn against headlines creating negative images, insisting that they should respect the 'public's taste'. Rape is a negative act, and by reporting it negatively, the subeditor and journalist make a positive comment – rape is against social norms and the law. By the same token, what is the 'public taste' which students refer to so often? Who is arbiter of this taste? How does a subeditor decide what is public taste?

Students often make the incorrect assumption that all societies are absolutely homogeneous in their conceptions of what constitutes 'good taste', and that there are few, if any, class, cultural, religious, generational, geographical, linguistic and gender differences in perceptions about taste. Culture and community are discursive reference points; they are not the custodians of deified discourses. As Blankenberg's discussion of *ubuntu* and the media warns:

History has shown that the dictates of the community can easily become stifling for individual identity. Once stifled, freedom of expression becomes an empty maxim, and genuine participation, which emphasizes a respect for others, is negated. An equal risk is that the attention of the community may become focused on questions of morality within the community, rather than examining the macro forces that are potentially impacting, to a far more serious degree, the autonomy and freedom of the community: (Blankenberg, 1999: 61)

'Good taste' reporting, linked to the discourse of (im)morality, in reporting on rape, thus serves to conceal the much more pervasive, structurally endorsed process of patriarchal violence which entraps entire societies.

'Uncivil' Journalism: Testing the Limits

How do journalists test the edges of laws and decrees which have censorship and repression as their prime intentions/effects? This is a key ethical question. It is students' and journalists' duty to question media restrictions, and to critique such laws. Ethics courses are not just about good and honourable behaviour (Kasoma, 1994), but about strategy, about democracy, about dialogue.

Another problem is students' general failure to move beyond the literal, the mechanical and rote learning. Few seem to think it necessary to question received wisdom (textbooks, lectures, lecturers), or to relate the theory to their own experiences. If journalists are supposed to report on society, then they must be encouraged to link the empirical to more abstract thought, in terms of processes, history and democracy. They need to penetrate the obvious, the superficial and the literal, to get to subtexts, the news behind the news, to be researchers in everything they do and write (Tomaselli and Caldwell, 2002). This is why good journalists are feared by corrupt governments and dishonest businesses. And, that is why a good journalist is possibly worth 10 parliamentarians. We need to encourage thinking students, who highlight consequences in relation to the givens. Journalism is about solving problems and reporting them in terms of journalism genres – and one of these genres is tabloid ('bad') journalism. The best journalists are those who can see beyond the rest of us, limited as we are by our parochial cultural, ideological and psychological horizons. Cultural and media studies provide a way for journalism students to understand the deeper contextual and societal processes on which they will be reporting when they enter the media job market (Teer-Tomaselli, 2001).

Protecting Culture?

Culture is mostly defined as a 'way of life' *to be protected* (at all costs) if we are to believe both conservative students and ailing presidents like South Africa's P.W. Botha and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe. The first part of the definition, so often parroted by students, derives from early structural functionalist anthropology. The part in italics I have added, as this is often the additional assumption of the majority of students. Similarly, Kasoma (1996) would appear to believe that unethical, sensational and unprofessional reporting is the home-grown part of the onslaught on African values. The phrase in brackets is the logical extrapolation of student arguments which then assume that 'culture' is a thing, which can be 'instilled' into people's beliefs. This takes us into the realms of authoritarianism and regressive nationalism. Such interpreters assume that 'culture' is static, unchanging and totally bounded, in a defence mode against 'foreign' culture, whatever that is.

'Culture' is a concept which can be manipulated to mean anything essentialist, and the result is that students begin tilting at windmills with all sorts of vague charges, cultural prescriptions and high degrees of moralizing. The early anthropological definition used by students lacks specificity, and tends to suggest that cultures are bounded, singular and homogeneous in terms of, for example, a single 'Zimbabwean Culture', a recurring phrase even as this country disintegrates into political and economic chaos. The term 'culture', used in a static, overgeneralized way becomes essentialistic and something of a dog's breakfast, lapping up all in its path, and making the concept and associated processes it describes difficult to disaggregate conceptually, historically, geographically and linguistically. Most African towns, for example, not only evidence globalization in every street and street corner, but these subcultures also encompass vibrant and often brash articulations, disarticulations and

rearticulations of a variety of cultures, media (including the Internet) and political ideologies. These popular examples are not encompassed by early anthropological definitions of culture which assume a static state of social organization called 'traditional'. Some students, however, are implicitly aware of premodern, modern and postmodern jostling and cultural pluralism. Students and lecturers reluctantly accept that cultures change, but this approach to the study of culture incorrectly suggests that culture changes mostly by an internal social process of progression quite without reference to external influences, translations and negotiations. Students' responses reveal that they are largely unaware that culture is a constant negotiation (often a conflictual one) between generations, classes, genders, interpretations of histories, cultural values and social norms. These play out on a global scale.

Students need to be taught to *argue* their points, not just list a set of normative statements attributed to Authority/Law/God/Textbook. The Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies since the 1950s, for example, critically read the early, static, all-inclusive, anthropological and sociological definitions of culture against socialist-humanist historiography offered by E.P. Thompson (1968) and Raymond Williams (1961), among others. This approach, based on studies of the English working class and critique of the literary canon, initially argued that culture is a way of life *in a whole way of conflict*. The reason for students' resistance to 'foreign culture' is that they assume that *local ways* of life change negatively in response to external processes only. If resistance and conflict are now part of the definitional equation, then culture becomes a way of making sense (e.g. via media and messages), a way of coping (e.g. via social institutions and changing behaviour patterns), and as a means to negotiating through a variety of often competing and different meanings (e.g. interpretation, message-making, video and art production.) If this approach to the study of 'culture' is examined in relation to the static normative assumptions so repetitively cited by so many African journalism students and their professors, then students have a way of comparing different definitions, making sense of antagonistic theories and different kinds of conceptual frameworks, and seeing how diverse meanings emerge in different contexts at different times. Under these conditions, the notion of local 'cultures', for example, under siege from 'foreign culture' can be more easily debated and understood in terms of much more nuanced, less conspiratorial, theory.

The Mass Media are Traditional Media

The media are central to meaning-making, as most urban people now make sense of the world through television. However, television (like radio) is an oral medium. Residues of orality are identified in television anywhere in the world. John Fiske and John Hartley (1979) argue in *Reading Television* that television has taken over the bardic function of wandering minstrels of Medieval Europe (just as Nigerian and Ghanaian video 'films' have extended and rearticulated the narratives, reach and life of *griots* and Yoruba theatre, among other genres). Television and videos' reliance on the aural dimension of encoding makes it an oral medium. This kind of conclusion could be linked to the study of 'traditional

communication', which now lives on in the electronic (mass) media. The codes of these new media are conceptualized in terms of 'secondary orality', which incorporate the 'traditional' forms of orature, oral media and orality found in so-called traditional society and 'traditional media' (Ong, 1982). These different forms are connected, and should not be taught as if the one were separate from the other, as if the one were imperialistically dominated by the other, and as if the one were premodernistically 'passé' while the other is an indicator of 'modernity' and having 'arrived' culturally. Students need to learn how to make sense of where the 'traditional' fits into (and even modifies) the general mass and electronic media.

Finally, it is crucial to have courses which teach students how to interpret the media, how to read pictures, television, newspapers and discourses, whether of the honourable or tabloid kinds. What does each genre teach us respectively about the kinds of society on which they are reporting? Critical theory will hopefully help students to move beyond mechanistic stimulus-response, sender-receiver, theories. This will help them bridge between a formalist and functionalist communication studies and the much more open-ended constructivist communication theories of media studies. Literary and cultural scholars study representation; journalists and communication scholars study production and the doing. Those who do and make should be in a constant dialogue with those who read and interpret, taught via reception analysis. By explicitly incorporating cultural and media studies into the mix, a reading media course might well offer students:

1. A conceptual link between 'communication/s studies' and 'culture' in terms of their own subjectivities, personal/communal and frames of reference in both making and interpreting media messages;
2. Ways of engaging the international scholarly literature and intellectual debates from African perspectives;
3. A means to better internalizing information which otherwise might, on first encounter, appear to be somewhat alien to communications studies; and
4. Ways of actually applying their knowledge of both media theory and methodology.

A broader cultural and media studies approach, then, would introduce students to ways of connecting their local indigenous knowledge and traditional media and communication systems to the study and forms of international systems of communication and new media. One result could be a more integrated, conceptually holistic course which studies glocalization (the local in relation to the global). It is the university's task to educate, to teach students to *solve problems from first principles*, and to develop explanations for the phenomena and processes on which they are reporting.

Postscript

As is clear, the provocation for this article is one of Francis Kasoma's less characteristic, but nevertheless highly influential articles. It is with great regret that I

completed this article only after his untimely death in 2002. I was not, therefore, in a position to secure Kasoma's response to this article, as had been my original intention. The main corpus of his life's work has been bequeathed to us via his book, *The Press and Multiparty Politics in Africa* (Kasoma, 2000), published by the University of Tampere. This study is structured around his Finnish PhD, and republishes also a number of his key articles, but not his 1996 one. It seems to me that Kasoma's academic work is best described as a kind of academic crusading journalism, a well-known genre in the advocacy of specific causes – in his case, that of press freedom. Given the crucible that Africa faces, Kasoma's extensive life-long work remains a fundamental intervention in issues relating to the negative pressures impeding the development of public spheres in Africa. His work intensively and unremittingly challenges the powers-that-be on issues of press freedom. He has debated with presidents on television and Kasoma was a welcome thorn in the side of autocratic presidents all over the continent. His collected works are among the few to systematically chronicle African struggles over press freedom, and his work will underpin a generation of scholars to come. I was privileged to have been approached by a South African publisher to evaluate his most recent manuscript, which was a variation of his Tampere book, which he had completed a few months prior to his passing away. It was to my great disappointment that this publisher declined the book, notwithstanding my positive review. The 'market' – I was told – was insufficient in South Africa to make this book viable. Given the pressures now being faced by the South African media, and the public broadcaster in particular, Kasoma's final work would have provided a significant caution to those who wish to reinvent the hard-won post-Apartheid freedoms of the South African media as another His Master's Voice.

Notes

My thanks to Arnold Shepperson and Ruth Teer-Tomaselli for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1. Quoted in *Media Tenor South Africa*, 3(1) February 2002.
2. I am indebted to Ruth Teer-Tomaselli for this paragraph.
3. I was external examiner for this programme, 2000–2.
4. See Kasoma (1999: 15) who in this later article is clear that those in power are the ones who claim to derive their authority from God. This official/divinity discourse has been accepted by Swazi students without question.
5. More to the point, some conceptual problems identified by Arnold Shepperson of Kasoma's article are:
 - a. The citation of 'northern' critical media commentary on African media from before 1990, to describe African media after 1990. Thus critics who were referring to state-controlled media before globalization are mobilized to criticize later forms of non-state media.
 - b. Inadequate substantiation of asserted facts. The claims that African courts were inundated with lawsuits against bad journalism (Kasoma, 1996: 100) is not substantiated: which cases against what papers, in which countries, in terms of what legislation, and when? What were the bases of the actions instigated? Is the lawsuit not the preferred tactic of the state against media that criticize it? Why is this a problem? Is the statutory commission or press council also not a state tactic?

These problems are not evident in Kasoma's much better argued studies published elsewhere.

6. I am indebted to Arnold Shepperson for this response to Kasoma (1996).
7. Definition offered by John Hartley at the Fourth Crossroads Conference on Cultural Studies, Tampere, June 2002.
8. As intriguing is Kasoma's (1996) reliance on a single European reference, written during the height of Empire, for his discussion on African ontology.
9. 'Defilement' means sexual assault, short of penile penetration. Rape assumes penetration.

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