

Why Journalism

Stories from News Reporters in Africa





Joseph Odindo

Joseph Odindo is a long-serving Kenyan journalist and media trainer. He was editorial director of the Nairobi-based Nation Media Group (2009-2014) and held a similar position at The Standard Media Group up to 2018. Years of overseeing newsrooms in eastern Africa gave him a personal experience of the struggle between the media and the state and the extraordinary sacrifices journalists make on the continent to keep the public informed. Odindo was the founding editor of the regional newspaper, *The EastAfrican*, which he headed for six years and served as managing editor of Kenya's *Daily Nation* (1999-2006). Educated at the University of Nairobi and the University of Wales, Cardiff, he teaches journalism and media leadership at the Aga Khan University's Graduate School of Media and Communication.

KAS Media Programme Sub-Sahara Africa

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is an independent, non-profit German political foundation that aims to strengthen democratic forces around the world. KAS runs media programmes in Africa, Asia and South East Europe.

KAS Media Programme Sub-Sahara Africa believes that a free and independent media is crucial for democracy. As such, it is committed to the development and maintenance of a diverse media landscape on the continent, the monitoring role of journalism, as well as ethically based political communication.

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Stories from
News Reporters in Africa

Edited by Joseph Odindo

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Christoph Plate worked as Africa correspondent for a German news magazine in the 1990s based in Nairobi, Kenya, then as Middle East Editor for the Sunday edition of *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in Switzerland.

Preface

We need good African journalism

There was a time, not so long ago, when children of journalists would also want to become reporters and editors. Whether in Africa, Europe or the US, countless hacks will confess to being drawn to a media career by the news stories their parents worked on. They recall the smell of ink in the printing press or the sheer excitement across the newsroom when an important story broke.

With time, however, media families are rare today. Opportunities have shrunk as journalism undergoes change. Newsrooms are under financial stress; editorial work demands ultra-modern skills and dozens of publications have closed down. As publishing models open journalism to anyone with a laptop or a mobile phone, the excitement of young people over a career in media has gradually diminished. If you know of any youngster who has grown up dreaming of becoming a journalist, then you've met an increasingly rare breed indeed.

In many media markets, grey-haired journalists who could share their expertise and pass on their enthusiasm have moved to greener pastures. Invariably they advise their children to become lawyers or bankers, rather than reporters, presenters or video editors.

KAS Media Africa, the media programme of the German Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, is working with editors and publishers across the continent to rekindle interest in journalism and strengthen media as a whole. Certainly better pay and working conditions would help, as would a less-punishing pace and volume of work. As would the sturdy protection of old-school publishers who defend their staff from external threats and vilification.

But serious journalism is under threat, not only from the traditional commercial and political forces, but from problems of the profession's own making. These include a lack of skills, sloppy editing and the lazy

journalism of those who would rather google content than talk to real people.

As a response, KAS Media Africa asked more than a dozen journalists from Africa to share their media experiences and how they entered the profession. We placed their recollections in the hands of our long-term collaborator, Joseph Odindo. The man is a fixture of the Kenyan media scene, and has 40 years' experience in East Africa's mainstream media. A subeditor, newsroom leader and now journalism trainer, he was at different times editorial director of Kenyan news giants, Nation Media Group and Standard Group.

The final 14 stories in this collection from as far afield as Ethiopia and Nigeria or Côte d'Ivoire are as different in the writers' reflections as they are in style, intensity and motivation. But they all underline the importance of journalism that makes a difference. They also acknowledge the contribution of those men and women who make extreme sacrifices to hold power accountable and keep audiences informed.

Christoph Plate

Director KAS Media Africa, 2017–2023

Johannesburg, South Africa



Frank Sanga is a Managing Editor at Azam Television of Tanzania. In 20 years of journalism, he has been a driving force in the success of two sports newspapers and was editor of *Mwananchi*, an influential Tanzania daily.

Sports and politics

a perfect mix

By Frank Sanga

The year 2010 was like no other in the decade I had been a journalist. I was living the dream of most sports reporters, covering the Fifa World Cup finals. It was an awesome responsibility, and doubly so because I was the only official Tanzanian journalist in South Africa, where the tournament was taking place for the first time on African soil.

I had to keep football fans back home up-to-date with the happenings at one of the most popular sports fiestas in the world. Right from the opening match between South Africa and Mexico to the final one, when Spain humiliated the Netherlands 1-0, I had filed stories. Every final whistle made me proud to be the source of the latest World Cup news for my countrymen.

Yet when I think back, I realise that the World Cup was not the biggest milestone of my career at the time. It was Nomsa. And that great moment when we met at the stadium's bustling eatery.

The hustle and bustle at the majestic Soccer City Stadium in Johannesburg had left me battered. The young lady distributing lunch at Delmond Food Service in the media centre did her best to cheer up customers with a bright smile. She looked my way every so often, but the smile went unnoticed. Focused on my assignment, I had no time for sideshows.

Four times the lady with the smile tried to speak to me in private, but I shrugged her off. I was shuttling from one stadium to another, juggling work between Cape Town and Durban, Polokwane, Port Elizabeth, and Pretoria to keep up with matches in the different cities and stadiums. Out of politeness, I told her I would find time for her but gave it little thought.

Two weeks later, when many teams had been eliminated and the crowds were thinning out, I found myself looking for her during a break. We found a quiet corner at the media centre for a chat.

Shy, soft-spoken, but courageous, the young lady had an amazing tale. She was born in Morogoro, Tanzania. When she was four years old, her father brought her to South Africa for a vacation and she never went back. For 20 years, she had not seen her mother and deeply missed her. But she remembered her name, Mariam Chimile, a Tanzanian.

“My father has always told me that she passed away, but I don’t believe it. I want to see my mother; I have not seen her in 20 years,” she said.

She also remembered that she had siblings.

“There were four of us – Mapenzi and Tatu had a different father; then there was my brother Nhandla, whom my mother called Magaya, and me.”

Nomsa was born in Mazimbu, one of Morogoro’s African National Congress (ANC) refugee camps. Her father, Lebonang Christopher Mpetwane, was a refugee from South Africa and worked as a doctor at a dispensary in Dakawa, Morogoro. Nomsa said he was popularly known as “Ndlela”.

She told me funny stories about her relatives.

When I returned to Dar es Salaam after the World Cup, I had a mission: to track down Nomsa’s family wherever they were in Tanzania. It turned out to be one of my biggest newspaper stories. In response to an appeal, almost all of Nomsa’s relatives in the country came to our office at *Mwananchi*, ready to reconnect with her. Mapenzi travelled to South Africa and stayed for almost three months.

Sadly for Nomsa, it was confirmed that her mother, Miriam Chimile, was indeed dead. According to Naomi Godwin, Miriam’s older sister, she died

in 1993 in Magole, Mjata, in the district of Mvomero, three years after Nomsa left.

I have been a journalist for 22 years. It was an achievement that my story brought together this family after two decades. That assignment was one of the unforgettable moments of my journey in journalism.

Touching lives. That is a milestone.

Ever since I can remember, I had always wanted to be a journalist. Despite the twists and turns, joys and pains, hectic schedules and risks, never have I regretted embarking on this journey of telling stories, chronicling events, exposing wrongdoing.

As a young boy in primary school and later an eager student at university, I dreamt of being a journalist. The first thing I did whenever I bought a newspaper was to look at the by-lines, imagining how my name would look on that page. I knew where I wanted to be – in the newsroom.

My dream came true in my early 20s when I was selected for an internship at Business Times Limited (BTL), which owned several publications. I wanted to join the sports section immediately and spend the month-long in-house training learning the ropes. From a group of 16 interns, only four of us weathered the pressures and stayed on. The rest left to take up other jobs in the public and private sectors.

My first posting at BTL was on the daily *Majira* and *Spoti Starehe*, a bi-weekly Kiswahili newspaper dedicated to sport. I knew I had to work hard to fit in the team of experienced reporters and help to counter the competition.

My investigative and exclusive stories soon attracted reader attention and I would receive praise from editors and some of the senior writers. I was getting noticed. In 2004, Mwananchi Communications Limited (MCL) offered me a job as editor of its new sports title, *Mwanaspoti*.

Mwananchi, which at the time had only two newspapers, the Kiswahili *Mwananchi* and *Mwanaspoti*, had just been acquired by Nation Media Limited (NMG) from Kenya. NMG's main interest in MCL was the mass readership daily. It also wanted to start a daily English newspaper, *The Citizen*. There was not much interest in the bi-weekly *Mwanaspoti*. An English newspaper seemed like a better bet to attract advertising and to generate income.

The new owners decided to give *Mwanaspoti* the last chance as it was not performing well. As the man now in charge, I had the unenviable task of saving the newspaper.

Mwanaspoti had no reporters of its own and I was told to make do with two correspondents borrowed from the bigger sister *Mwananchi*. Only one second-hand computer was made available to the newspaper, which was published on Saturday and Tuesday. Its printing had to be outsourced. We had a 10am production deadline to meet every Monday and Friday. How is that possible?, I asked myself. How do you produce a paper by 10am? It was biweekly, yes, but we needed premier-league updates. That arrangement was necessary because the press did not have the capacity to print two newspapers at night, so we had to give way to the flagship, *Mwananchi*, which went to press at 7pm.

It was a near-impossible mission. Had I made a mistake leaving my job at BTL? Matches ended on Sunday night. What sort of analysis and coverage could one do to meet the Monday 10am deadline?

It was time to think outside the box. We had our peculiar exclusives and investigative stories, a good number from our excellent sources within the leadership of Tanzania's top two football teams, Simba and Yanga. Some of the stories were analytical and were spiced up with background and statistics. Sometimes we would even predict the results of a match.

Stories about Yanga and Simba always sell in Tanzania. These are the biggest teams in the country, sharing between them a large fan base among the country's population of 60 million. We soon became the

go-to source of sports news. No sports press conference would start if a reporter from *Mwanaspoti* was not present.

Much to the surprise of many, in just a year, we were the best-selling newspaper, with more than 100 000 copies. Some readers would even pay in advance for their copy of the paper. Fans loved *Mwanaspoti's* analyses of big matches, especially those involving Simba and Yanga. Several radio stations would read our paper to their listeners as part of their bulletins.

Our readers were not just part of an audience. I frequently reminded my reporters that we were dealing with club members, not just readers, because of the passion they had for our newspaper.

Such was the drive to sell ever more copies that occasionally, when there were special events, especially those involving arch-rivals Simba and Yanga, I would write a front-page headline and tell my reporters to get a story to match it. And they would.

Looking back, I wonder at the magic of it all. How was it that whatever we did turned out to be right? We were a tightly knit and driven team and every member enjoyed it.

With each success, the team's determination grew. From two "borrowed" correspondents, in five years we had 12 fulltime reporters and our own team of graphic designers. Each member of the team had a new computer.

The success story of *Mwanaspoti* spread and triggered experiments across the borders. In Kenya, the Nation launched a sports newspaper modelled on *Mwanaspoti*, which did not yield the desired results. But it was a different tale in Uganda. The Managing Editor spent time at *Mwanaspoti* in Tanzania and went back to start a Luganda-language sports paper, which flourished. Later it was decided that we produce a *Mwanaspoti* Kenya edition to replace the failed Kenya sports paper.

With success comes growth and, with growth, change. From a bi-weekly, *Mwanaspoti* was now produced four times a week, then daily. Obviously, its performance would not be the same.

All good things must come to an end. The change wrought by digital disruption, which had for some years been wreaking havoc in the media industry, heralded the end of my amazing tour at *Mwanaspoti*.

In 2014, many senior reporters and editors left *Mwananchi* to join the newspaper's competitors. However, no reporter from *Mwanaspoti* joined the exodus.

In the reshuffle that ensued, I was made Managing Editor of the flagship *Mwananchi* newspaper. From managing a sports newspaper, I suddenly found myself in the uncharted waters of business, politics, and all kinds of general news. How would I manage politics just a year before a general election?

I like a good challenge, but during those first few months, my heart was still with the baby I had raised and the world of sports. We had spent a decade together and grown into a family. Some of my team members shed tears when they heard the news of my promotion.

At *Mwananchi*, everything changed for me even though I was still working in the same compound and newsroom. It was not going to be a walk in the park managing the company's flagship – a mixed bag of journalists and editors, some older than me.

To achieve my goal, I had to make some changes. I overhauled the newsroom and moved some editors. Many young reporters were promoted to the position of senior or assistant editors. This was a strategic move. I knew they would want to show that they were capable and would work hard to prove the naysayers wrong.

Building a strong and efficient team is a long process, but we were on track and making significant gains. Then the digital revolution hit us. Our circulation numbers shrunk while advertising was reduced to a

trickle. We had to find ways to survive. Convergence was the answer. All the company's editorial teams had to merge into a single unit, a giant newsroom that would cater to "digital first", the new slogan for news publishing.

Everything was changing – from the gathering of news to its dissemination, and even the newsroom sitting arrangements. There were training sessions, both in Tanzania and Kenya, to learn how to work in the new converged newsroom.

From being the Managing Editor of *Mwananchi*, I assumed the new office of Head of Content, a position that would see me overseeing content generation for all our papers and redistribution of the information to all the group's platforms.

Managing the flagship newspaper was a milestone. But the big office came with big challenges. As I had predicted, covering the 2015 General Election was not going to be easy. But it gave me some of the most memorable moments in my career.

One day, rumours were rife that former Prime Minister Edward Lowassa was on the verge of defecting to the opposition Chadema party after his name was removed from the list of ruling party CCM's nominees.

We had seen on social media that night a photo of his vehicle parked at a hotel where Chadema was holding a central committee meeting. This was going to be a big story but we had no way of proving it. No one was ready to talk.

Right up to 8pm that day and we had not confirmed the story, not a single fact about the meeting going on inside the hotel. This was an earth-shattering story, but it was past the deadline for going to press.

Nine o'clock came and went, 10pm, 11pm, and still no hope that we would get the milestone story. Chadema's top leadership was locked in a hotel room and no one was ready to talk. Here I was with a paper already three hours late. My reporters camping at the scene told me they

could see the former prime minister's car still parked at the hotel. They were sure Lowassa was in that meeting.

I constantly consulted with my executive editor that night, who by that time was already at home. He repeatedly cautioned me to be careful and get my facts right. I was the one in charge and would be accountable for whatever was published. After one final call, the reporters confirmed the situation at the hotel had not changed.

It was 1am, five hours after the deadline. Would we run a story about Lowassa defecting to Chadema without confirmation? We decided to bite the bullet. Our colour story, *Ameondoka Bwana* (He's gone), touched on the fact of Lowassa's car parked at the hotel, the attendants, and the photos we had received showing Lowassa in the meeting. We had a good deal of background and statements from other sources but none from the former prime minister himself.

We were late to the market but the paper had sold out by 10am. It was a record breaker, the highest number of copies sold since the newspaper was established.

It was a great relief to us when later that day, Chadema announced that indeed Lowassa had joined the party. The story was the talk of the town the whole week. It was the first time a former prime minister was joining the opposition. Truly big news in Tanzania.

The success of that story made up for the long night of worry, tension and lack of sleep. Later, I would still ask myself: what if my gamble had not paid off? What if the story had turned out not to be true? What if Chadema or Lowassa had denied everything?

As I said before, all good things must end, and after 16 years with Mwananchi Communications Limited, it was time to move on.

I decided to join my former CEO, Tido Mhando, who had taken charge at Azam Media Company, one of the largest electronic media houses in the country. Azam has several channels for sports, drama, and movies,

and had just started a new one called UTV for news, current affairs, documentaries, and political, social, and economic-related content.

It was the right decision, a refreshing career move. I needed the new work experience and the new culture to motivate me to succeed. It was a new beginning.

I have had 22 years in journalism since I first started as an intern at Business Times Limited. It has been a long ride, during which I have had difficulties and good times. There were times I failed to meet targets and others when I had extraordinary success.

There are some tasks I have undertaken with great enthusiasm and anticipation, but there is one assignment that I dreaded and detested, laying off fellow journalists, especially in these difficult times of digital disruption when media companies are instituting cost-cutting measures as they struggle to stay afloat. You will have sleepless nights as you try to figure out how to explain the situation to lay-off victims. A few will understand. Most will not. These are breadwinners losing their only source of income. Still, the letters have to be delivered because the board and the management are breathing down your neck.

I have worked with people from different generations but the most memorable have been the millennials, who represent the future of journalism. The young people of this generation seem to enjoy life in the fast lane. They come to work late and do not want to be told anything they do not like. Strong disciplinary measures do not faze them. They do not care because they still live with their parents. They do not seem to think much about work. You have to change your style of management when dealing with them. Sometimes it works; sometimes it does not.



Gisèle Kahimbani is the director of Elle FM, a niche radio station based in Goma, eastern DRC, dedicated to promoting women's rights. She has been a journalist for ten years and specialises in security and gender issues.

Colonel's death and a reporter's career

By Gisèle Kahimbani

The colonel died as he had lived: fighting to stamp out insecurity and terror from the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Mamadou Ndala's killers were purposeful and brutal. They laid an ambush a few kilometres from downtown Beni, one of the major towns in the strife-torn North Kivu and struck as the popular officer's convoy was snaking its way to the town centre.

The attack on January 2, 2014 was one of the most audacious by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) guerrillas, a rag-tag armed group with woolly political goals that brought together combatants from Uganda, DRC and other East African nations.

Ndala's assassination drew a ferocious response from the Congolese government. He was a decorated battlefield commander, having distinguished himself in the 2012-2013 war against the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23) rebels. As chief of the elite 42nd brigade of the Rapid Reaction Unit, he was widely credited with having liberated Goma from rebel control.

A speedy investigation led to the arrest and prosecution of the alleged murder plotters, who included the colonel's fellow officers in the DRC army and several individuals said to be operatives of their supposed enemy, the ADF.

As a correspondent for the popular Kivu Radio 1, which broadcast to most of the eastern region, I was assigned to cover the historic trial, which opened in Beni, a few months after the attack. Beyond the killing, the trial was expected to lift the lid on the shadowy ADF, which

had committed atrocities in eastern DRC since 1990. Witnesses were expected to shed light on the guerrillas' underground network. Who, really, were the ADF? Why did they exist? Why were they based in Beni? What was their motive in targeting Col. Ndala?

Fraught with emotion and danger, the assassination case was the biggest trial I had ever covered. The suspects were soldiers from the Congolese army in which Ndala had been an officer. They were accused of colluding with ADF rebels in killing their commander.

Security was part of my expansive beat as a reporter on Kivu Radio 1. I also reported on economics, politics, crime and justice. I had joined the broadcast station in 2009 after a chequered career, which had taken me first to a television station, where I learnt the basics of broadcasting.

My entry into journalism happened more by accident than design. I had always wanted to be a broadcast journalist, but had neither the opportunity nor the resources to do so. My hometown of Beni, one of three major cities in North Kivu province, had no college offering the course. If I wanted to be a trained journalist, I would have to move to a big city such as Goma or the capital, Kinshasa. Also, my family did not have the means to pay for college. There seemed to be only one career path open then: to pursue administrative and development studies at the local Higher Institute of Rural Development. But fate had a different plan.

During my first year at the administrative college in 2009, I happened to share a course with a young man who one day followed me out during break and commented on my voice.

"You have a beautiful voice, a radio voice," he said, adding that he hosted a cultural show on Radiotélévision Graben. I was surprised; I had hardly said anything in public. "I'd like you to join me so that we can host this show together."

It was a dream come true. This was a chance to fulfil my aspiration to be on radio. A door had just opened and I was not going to miss the

opportunity. So, without any hesitation, without even knowing precisely what it entailed, I accepted the offer. In any case, I had nothing to lose, I told myself. I would learn and adapt or walk away. At least I would have tried to do what had all along been my first career choice. And I was ready to throw my all into it.

It was not easy. It was a completely new field. However, I was determined to learn. Nearly a year later, I had mastered using the microphone and the art of speaking on radio and was ready to join the editorial team as a trainee. After a few months, I became a trainee news presenter and radio reporter. Without any formal training, I was well on my way to becoming a journalist, as I had always dreamed.

This was an important step. It brought me in contact with the people and enabled me to give a voice to the voiceless. It was fascinating providing information for the benefit of the abandoned, speaking and giving a voice to the forgotten.

From Radiotélévision Graben I became a correspondent for Radio Kivu 1, based in Goma a few years later. It was a decisive step. Everything changed positively and I found myself shouldering heavier responsibility. That is how I ended up being dispatched as a special correspondent to Beni, to cover the Ndala assassination trial.

Eastern DRC has been plagued by insecurity due to endless conflict between local and foreign armed groups and the national defence forces. One of the worst affected regions has always been Beni, a favourite staging point for militias. ADF had been active in eastern DRC for more than 20 years and was noted for violence and the brutal killing of soldiers and civilians – women, children, and the elderly – usually with bladed weapons.

I was tasked with covering Beni because I was from the region. It thrust me into many security stories, including massacres that started in 2014 with the killing of around 20 people and the displacement of thousands of others.

The assassination of Col. Ndala, who was posthumously promoted to Brigadier General, was ADF's first large-scale public attack against a Congolese army officer. After establishing themselves in the region in the 1990s, the militia had for years been active only in the forest and the countryside.

My coverage of the murder hearing started dramatically. The military court ordered my arrest on the very first day. Reason? I started recording the proceedings before receiving the authorisation to do so. I was paying for my ignorance of the fact that a military court has its own special rules, one of which stated that it must explicitly authorise coverage for broadcast and print media. Breaking the rule made you liable for punishment. It was my first arrest ever and even though my detention lasted only a few hours, it was a difficult experience. I was later released and allowed to continue covering the trial.

At the time, Radio Kivu 1 was popular and the vast majority of the population followed everything it broadcast. It was the only radio station in Goma city that had a channel dedicated to broadcasting the entire Mamadou Ndala trial live. The hearing, which lasted about three months, boosted the station's ratings, especially because Col. Ndala was a darling of the public.

One of the accused was Major Viviane Masika Mupira, who was also quite popular in Goma. She was said to have played a key role in the assassination and her name featured prominently in the testimony. One day after a hearing, she threateningly accused me of reporting about her to a radio listenership which had not even been aware of her arrest in connection with the murder.

"Gisèle, I found out that you're spoiling my name on radio in Goma. My whole family is in Goma and they called to tell me that you were talking about me all day long on radio, presenting me as the main culprit in the colonel's death. I'm warning you: stop reporting my appearances to Goma. If you continue, you'll have me to deal with. Believe me when I tell you this. If I was able to kill Ndala as you say, then what about you?"

This was an overt attempt to silence me. It was the first direct threat I had ever received and it left me severely shaken for the rest of the trial. I was scared and never again looked Major Mupira in the eye. She was found guilty and was sentenced to a year of penal servitude.

For a long time afterwards I was worried about my safety. The soldier had boasted about having eyes and ears everywhere. I limited my movements and kept monitoring my surroundings. I was afraid of reprisal from Major Mupira's family and friends. But nothing happened, thank God.

On May 6, 2021, the Congolese government declared a state of siege in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri, where insecurity had become severe. The action was intended to enable security forces to curb violence and lawlessness spread by armed rebels, including M23 and ADF. Under the state of siege, civil courts were substituted by military courts and governors and provincial assemblies were suspended; military governors and police vice-governors took over their responsibilities. The declaration allowed for increased deployment of security personnel, monitoring and censorship of communications, restrictions on movement and additional powers to conduct searches, establish checkpoints and arrest those suspected of an intention to undermine national security.

The special regime led by the military and the police instead of civilians sought to restore security that had been deteriorating for decades. And with this restructuring, certain freedoms were taken away. Coming in the wake of the Covid-19 restrictions, the situation in the two provinces radically changed. The state of siege, initially said to be for 15 days, has been extended every fortnight and has now been in force for almost two years. Yet, despite the restrictive measures, the violence attributed to various armed groups has persisted.

In normal times a journalist's job is not easy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and particularly in the eastern region. It is even harder when you are a woman. Maintaining a reliable source on the security

issues that plague the eastern DRC is not easy. It is doubly difficult during a special period, such as a state of siege.

Most news in this part of the country is related to security. Despite the war situation, we strive to be professional in our reporting and to meet professional standards. At Radio Channel Africa's French-language service, for which I have corresponded for several years, and for any radio, television, newspaper, or news outlet worthy of the name, security information must meet certain criteria before it is disseminated. Facts must be verified and sources compared.

Reporters rely on the general population for information or alerts when there are killings, robberies, kidnappings, or ambushes. Sources from civil society or the local community are vital in confirming or denying such information. They often provide information on killings, kidnappings, looting, and when the military is affected in the clashes.

However, military sources are the most sought-after and would be invaluable in this case, especially because journalists cannot reach every corner of the region to report what is happening. That is why it is important to compare reports from different sources in order to get as complete a picture as possible before disseminating any news. But military sources do not communicate often. And in the rare cases that the army communicates, it does not do so in good time, with its comments always coming long after the fact.

Imagine that you get a tip-off about a story and you contact all possible sources – local authorities, civil society, local inhabitants – who all corroborate the information. However, you are unable to get an interview with the military representative, despite your best attempts to do so. These are the problems we face. Should we broadcast the story as it is? If we do that, we risk being accused of ill intentions and could get into trouble because of the state of siege. The many unanswered questions sometimes push journalists to censor themselves.

During an exchange with media officials in Goma, the military authorities made it clear that no information about the clashes and fighting should

be broadcast or published because it would demoralise the frontline troops. An army spokesman in North Kivu said the punishment would include prosecution.

Journalists were reminded about the state of siege and told they had a responsibility to pacify the region through what they wrote and broadcast. Will we help pacify the region by broadcasting the wrong information?, we asked. Will we help by withholding information or falsifying it? These are some of the questions I ask myself every day when dealing with any story to do with security.

An example is an incident from the war with the M23 rebels in Rutishuru territory. The Congolese military announced that it had captured two Rwandan soldiers on the front line. However, a few hours later, Rwanda denied the announcement, saying the people in custody were not from their ranks. They even claimed that they had routed the government soldiers and sent them fleeing.

Should journalists report such stories or not? These questions highlight some of the problems that journalists working in active war situations such as eastern DRC, which is riddled with armed violent groups, face.



Estacio Valoi is a freelance investigative journalist in Mozambique. Over the past 12 years he has broken major stories, many of them related to corruption and the abuse of power. He is also the founder of the *Moz24h* daily newspaper.

In gold mines, sleep with one eye open

By Estacio Valoi

Crime pays in many African countries. In my homeland, Mozambique, dirty deals often involve networks linked to the ruling party, Frelimo, and government officials, including cabinet ministers and army generals. Leaders and public servants behind some of the most heinous crimes are only transferred or appointed to other positions when their corruption is exposed.

What matters is their support for the ruling regime, allowing it to carry out what I call the 3D policy: disintegrate, destabilise and dissemble. In exchange for their loyalty, they are allowed to control the country's natural resources.

When I started off as a journalist, I had no idea where my journey would take me. I began in print, writing stories for newspapers. Now, decades later, I divide my time between broadcast and print, producing TV documentaries and taking photographs for local and international media outlets. I have worked for the SABC (the South African Broadcasting Corporation) radio and TV and local newspapers in South Africa. My stories, photographs, and broadcasts have appeared in local and international media outlets.

I branched into investigative journalism when I realised that such stories always had a bigger impact, exposing powerful people implicated in criminal activities. The ripples were bigger when the culprits were named and shamed.

Good journalism never goes unchallenged. I have come to expect harassment and threats from the perpetrators of corruption. My policy has always been to "follow the money". I do this wherever it leads me, despite all danger.

The extractive industry in Mozambique is typical of the sectors my investigations have focused on, exposing the corruption and lack of accountability that shroud the exploitation of Africa's natural resources.

The African Union created the African Mining Vision (AMV) in 2009 to ensure that the continent utilises its mineral resources strategically for broad-based and inclusive development. This sounds good on paper, given the fact that the continent's rich endowment of natural and mineral resources have over the years enriched only foreign companies and political powers, with little local benefit. My concern is how seriously these action plans will be taken in a continent whose leadership conveniently disregards the agreements and policies that hinder looting.

In Mozambique, the number of mineral concessions being approved is burgeoning.

My curiosity about the mining business was first pricked by an advertisement in which a person named Asghar Fakhralealii was promoting UK-based firm Gemfields, claiming that the company would bring new equipment and development to the Montepuez region in the northern part of Mozambique, to mine rubies. Fakhralealii was a partner of General Raimundo Pachinuapa in the company Mwiriti, which had formed a joint venture with Gemfields.

General Pachinuapa was an influential figure in the ruling Frelimo party and a former governor of Cabo Delgado province, where Montepuez is located. Fakhralealii claimed that local residents were stealing the rubies, undermining the company and its development efforts.

I decided to visit the minefields and see the situation for myself.

The only way to get inside the mining concession areas was with artisanal miners. That meant becoming one of them and being exposed to all the risks they faced – being shot at, beaten up, jailed and getting stuck inside the shafts.

The mining company had a network of informants. As soon as they became aware of my team's presence, they informed their bosses, who reported to the police.

We slept in the local village and reached the mines by different routes, by motorbikes and on foot, walking for miles through dense forest. Sometimes we would remain there for days, returning to the village late in the evening, like nocturnal ghosts.

Filming during the day was a challenge, though we had "protection" from members of the community and artisanal miners, who kept us informed about what was happening, including when raids were to happen. We even had informants among police helping us.

More than once we had to run away when we heard gunshots or hid in the bush as security officers patrolled the area looking for artisanal miners and our team.

The mining company had informants even on the roads. We would hide our car in the bush to reach places the security officers did not expect. Our driver always had his foot on the pedal, ready to roar off at a moment's notice. Police would drive up and down the main road looking for us. We once had to hide our car in a mining shaft.

Against many odds we managed to complete our investigation and the results were published and broadcast on different media outlets outside and inside Mozambique, including Al Jazeera.

Our persistence paid off. Gemfields later had to compensate the victims of human rights violations in their mines. This helped to significantly reduce the workplace abuses. A clinic, a school, and a water plant were constructed, along with a community radio station and a resettlement compound. School books were also distributed.

However, the main mining concession remained in the hands of the multinationals and local people still have no jobs. The cat-and-mouse game between the mining company and artisanal miners continues.

A key investigative assignment took me to Guinea-Bissau in May 2018, mainly to look into the smuggling of timber from the endangered rosewood forests. In October 2016, some 250 species of rosewood were placed on Appendix II of the United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to protect the tree from extinction. This was meant to allow sustainable and regulated harvest and trade of the timber.

However, the UN restriction did not stem the illegal trade and that is what took me to Guinea-Bissau.

I had read about a recent coup in the country, but when I asked my Guinean friends about it, they seemed not to be overly concerned. “No worries. Here, a coup happens inside the house. They just come in and take you away and you are gone – no noise. You see the army people going in. You just watch them go to get someone.”

Guinea-Bissau has many faces. There is the wonderful place of beautiful colours, islands, markets, and smiling people. There is also the Guinea-Bissau of men armed with machine guns and assault rifles who attack the presidential palace in the capital, Bissau. And then there is the country of expensive boats abandoned after their cocaine cargo has been seized.

On the surface, everything in Bissau seems calm and heart-warming. However, there is a rumble deep inside the land.

There were reports that some of the people implicated in the coups were involved in the trafficking of rosewood logs. A convoy of military personnel armed with heavy weapons, including bazookas, would arrive at a person’s legal concession, force them to abandon it and then proceed to cut trees for the logs. I had to do my homework. I needed to conduct geo-mapping and physical mapping, establish digital and data security, do my fact-checking, and, above all, pack my five spy cameras and make sure to use them properly. Any mistake could lead to death.

Timber trafficking in Guinea-Bissau is not significantly different from the corruption in Mozambique. Army generals and senior politicians, from ministers to secretaries and other members of the ruling party, PIAGC, are involved. They operate with Chinese associates.

After dropping off my luggage at the hotel, I went out to meet my sources. On the second night, we went to a disco, pretending to be interested in buying timber worth thousands of dollars. Some people became interested in our idea. We later realised that the disco hall was the meeting place for some of the Chinese smugglers and their Bissau friends.

We visited timber yards inside and outside Bissau and travelled to the forest where fresh wood was being cut. After meeting some sources days later, we realised that news of our presence in Bissau had reached the ears of the ring leaders of the plunder, senior military and government officials.

A meeting was organised for me and my colleague, who was originally from China but now lived in the US, at the Bissau military headquarters. We were led to a large wooden table around which sat members of the timber committee, a former general, a lobbyist, and several other people. Four of our spy cameras were rolling by the time the meeting started. My role was that of translator and adviser to my colleague. The meeting took almost two hours. We were interested not only in buying timber authorised for sale and which was already at the port in containers, but also fresh rosewood. The answer was: "No problem, we can supply it."

We learned that large volumes of the timber authorised for sale were not controlled by the Guinea-Bissau authorities, making it easy for traffickers to mix them with fresh illegally cut logs, which yield higher prices. The sale is carried out by the traffickers themselves and is primarily controlled by senior military officials.

It was becoming increasingly dangerous for us to remain in Bissau. One Saturday while we were at our hotel, the lobbyist called to say the president, José Mário Vaz, wanted to meet us on Monday.

I told my colleague it was time to leave. While meeting the president could be a scoop for our investigation, it could also be most dangerous because we would now be closely scrutinised and risk having our cover blown. Meeting the president was not worth risking our lives for.

I departed from Bissau on Sunday morning, heading home to Maputo. My colleague left a few hours later in the afternoon to return to the US.

It was time for a different type of war. On December 16, 2018, accompanied by Amnesty International researcher David Matsinhe and our driver, Girafe Saide Tufane, I set off from Pemba for Chitolo village in Mocimboa da Praia district. Chitolo was one of the villages that had suffered attacks by Al Shabab militia. Matsinhe was in the country at the invitation of the Centre do Jornalismo Investigativo de Moçambique (CJIMOZ).

Since 2017, the militia, whose name comes from the Arabic word for “youth” (no relation to Somalia’s Al Shabaab terrorist group), had been carrying out brutal attacks in Cabo Delgado, the nation’s northernmost province.

It was all linked to trafficking of drugs and other illegal goods. Heroin was transported from Afghanistan through Iran to northern Mozambique and onward to neighbouring South Africa, a major transit point for trafficking to Europe and the United States. Cocaine and illegally logged timber, wildlife products, precious stones, and gold were also moved through Cabo Delgado.

We were stopped by military personnel manning a check along the road and they demanded a letter of authorisation from the district police station to visit the area. We managed to get our authorisation letter stamped at the police station the following day and were allowed to

proceed. However, soldiers accompanied us everywhere, recording our interviews.

After our assignment we started driving towards Palma, but about 15 km before our destination we were stopped by 50 heavily armed soldiers who had blocked the road. They searched the vehicle and confiscated my cameras and laptop. Some of the equipment has never been returned. The military commander in charge of the group ordered his men to confiscate our phones to stop us from sending out messages about our situation. We were ordered to follow the soldiers in our vehicle to their temporary headquarters at Quelimane High School.

The soldiers demanded the codes to our phones and passwords to our computers while pointing their guns at us. "Here we take all your rights away. If you don't do this we can do things another way," was their answer to our protest.

We complied because we had heard stories of soldiers frequently executing people in this area. That night we only had three maca roots to eat and had to sleep in the back of our car.

Our detention continued the next day. We were constantly watched, even during visits to the toilet, and interrogated about the source of our funding and whether we were members of the Al Shabab militia group.

We were released as darkness was falling. We feared that we might be driving into another ambush, but we had no option but to leave. We drove to Mocomia district, where we were lucky to find a trader who sold us a cheap cell phone that allowed us to call our contacts to tell them where we were and what had happened.

The harassment continued even after we arrived in Pemba. State security forces were used to try to stop me from publishing the information I had gathered about terrorism and the war in Cabo Delgado, where mysterious disappearances, kidnappings, and arbitrary arrests of alleged terrorism suspects were a daily occurrence.

My sources, both inside and outside the state machinery, kept me informed about the orders to harass me. Police cars and other strange vehicles kept speeding past my house in Pemba. Some even came to my front door and from time-to-time elements of the Rapid Intervention Force even held their parades just metres from my house. I took note of the registration numbers and the people I saw. I improvised a surveillance system with hidden cameras and asked my neighbours to inform me if anyone came looking for me or if they noticed any sinister car drive past.

I slept with one eye and ear open, listening for any noise. During the day I would try to work from home while at the same time watching everything and everyone that moved. At night I moved from house to house, switching from one car to another. I was suspicious of everything.

I finally realised that I needed to leave Pemba. I disguised myself and drove five hours to the airport in Nampula, 400 km away. I managed to get past the airport police and had almost reached the departure lounge when a uniformed officer approached me.

"Aren't you the journalist who was arrested in Mocimboa da Praia?" he asked. I slyly replied that it was my twin brother.

It seemed like an eternity as we waited for the plane to arrive, but finally I flew to South Africa to meet with members of Amnesty International, the Centre for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ), and other institutions as well as colleagues from all over the world who had been supporting me.

Although I was not supposed to set foot in Mozambique, and especially Pemba, during my exile, I found it impossible to ignore the call to continue investigating. Therefore, I made several forays into my home country to follow up on several leads.

I once flew to the coal mining province of Tete and drove to the border with Malawi and Zambia to look into timber smuggling involving Mozambican political leaders and their friends. I later went back to Tete

to look into the condition of local brickmakers and the Brazilian coal mining company VALE.

After several months I could not bear it anymore. Despite the risks, I decided to continue working and living, so I returned to Cabo Delgado after two years of living in South Africa.

Although the military took our equipment and harassed us in efforts to intimidate us, David Matsinhe and I managed to produce and publish our investigation of the war in Cabo Delgado.

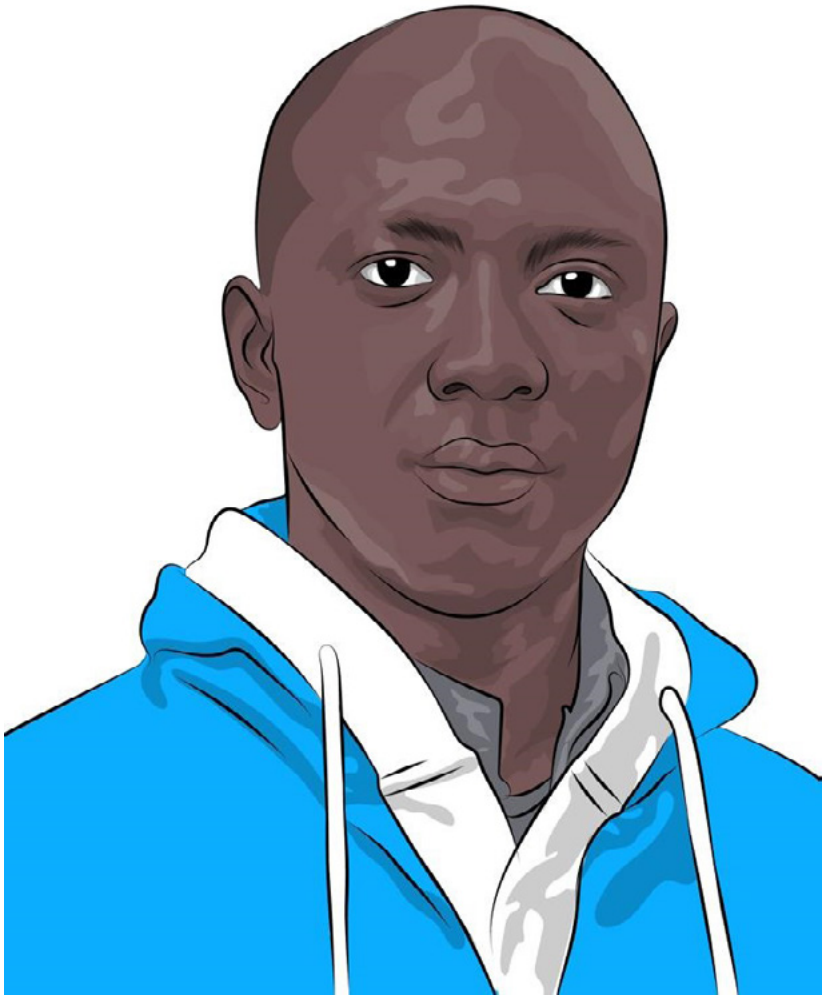
I have long acknowledged that it is my mission in life to expose wrongdoing, no matter what. I have been detained and have had to run away from soldiers. I have been forced to live in exile. I have worked as a freelancer, without money or resources. But I always find my way back to investigating. That is who I am, a journalist.

Endnotes

<https://100r.org/2016/05/the-blood-rubies-of-montepuez/>

<https://clubofmozambique.com/news/estacio-valois-detention-diary/>

<https://issafrica.org/research/southern-africa-report/the-genesis-of-insurgency-in-northern-mozambique>



Idris Akinbajo is Managing Editor of *Premium Times*, one of Nigeria's leading news publishers. His investigative work twice earned him Nigeria's Journalist of the Year award and he was part of the team behind ground-breaking stories at the defunct *NEXT* newspaper, a short-lived Nigerian daily.

Curse of the Brown Envelope

By Idris Akinbanjo

Some 20 people were gathered around a table at the headquarters of Nigeria's secret police unit on Saturday, 8 October 2016. Most of them were journalists, editors of major media organisations. They had all been invited for an exclusive, private briefing by Lawal Daura, head of the security agency.

Something unprecedented had happened the day before. In a coordinated late-night operation, the State Security Service (SSS), officially known as the Department of State Services (DSS), raided the homes of prominent judges across the country, including two justices of Nigeria's Supreme Court. At the end of the exercise, five judges were in custody and the nation was thrown into confusion. Not even during Nigeria's more than three decades of military dictatorship had the country witnessed anything of that nature.

The public response appeared not to be what the police and the government had expected, with many condemning the "Gestapo-like" tactics of the security operatives.

The Saturday meeting with editors was apparently an effort to change the narrative and win public support.

Daura walked in about 20 minutes after the editors and senior SSS officials were seated. With the arrogance of someone who knew his audience was eager to hear what he had to say, he recounted the police operations on judges' homes and explained why the media should help convince the people that the action was in the public interest.

The judges were corrupt, the intelligence chief said, "and we have all the evidence". According to him, police had video evidence of a Supreme

Court judge receiving bribes while hiding in a public supermarket, unaware he was under surveillance.

As expected, it was a news feast. After that briefing the media was awash with reports about the raids and corruption, quoting unnamed security sources. This led to a robust public debate on whether the crackdown was justified. While many argued the executive was trying to intimidate the judiciary, others saw nothing wrong with the police action if indeed the judges were corrupt.

More than five years later, none of the judges affected had been convicted of any crime. In fact, most of them were never taken to court. No video evidence of their alleged crimes was ever produced. In a written response leaked to media, one of the Supreme Court judges charged that he was being victimised because he had rejected a government minister's attempt to compromise him on a matter he was to rule on.

As the editor of one of the newspapers which ran stories from Daura's briefing, the incident brought home to me the extent to which security agencies manipulated the media. It also exposed the media's vulnerability to external influence. That was my first Nigerian experience of what the American and international media underwent in the run-up to the Iraq "weapons of mass destruction debacle" that led to an invasion of that hapless country in 2003. It turned out the media, in their thirst for news, were simply manipulated by the US government and its allies, to achieve their objectives.

That meeting with the SSS chief also brought out a little-discussed characteristic of the Nigerian media. Virtually all the editors present (about 15 of them) were men. I do not remember seeing any female editor in the room. It was the same for all the officials who accompanied Daura. The pattern is repeated in all media organisations, with women's low representation in media leadership playing out in all such meetings I have attended as an editor.

The absence of women in Nigeria's newsroom leadership has been well documented. It is variously attributed to cultural biases, women leaving newsrooms when they start having children, and workplace discrimination.

Although the *Premium Times* newsroom is touted as one of Nigeria's most progressive editorial workspaces, it has not escaped this reality. At the time I was appointed Managing Editor, less than 10 per cent of the editorial team were women (five female reporters had resigned at about the same time) and the newspaper had no female editor.

The *Premium Times* management accepted my demand for increased diversity, including better women's representation. We developed a gender policy and adopted UN standards on many women's issues, including six months of paid maternity leave.

The efforts are bearing fruit. Today about half of the editorial team members are women. However, more work needs to be done at the management level because women editors are still less than 20 per cent.

Some of the factors that have limited our success are cultural. Take the case of Jane, whom we hired in 2017 as an intern just after she left university, where she had studied mass communication. She had taken part in a training programme organised by our sister organisation, CJID, and had shown much potential.

We assigned Jane to the judiciary desk, where she grew and distinguished herself through her stories. She received many commendations and her performance review put her ahead of older, more experienced colleagues. Jane would become an editor very soon, we thought. She and I had spoken much about her job and career prospects.

Then everything changed when she got engaged. Her fiancé did not want her to continue being a journalist. Her family, conservative Muslims, agreed with him. So, Jane quit journalism to work in a government agency and is now "happily married".

After the meeting with the SSS chief, my editor-in-chief and I hurried back to the office. We had exclusive stories to write. We brainstormed about story angles and each one of us retreated to our desks to work. About two hours later we each received an envelope containing about N100 000. The money was from the security chief and was delivered by one of the editors who had attended the meeting. We promptly returned the “gifts” and called the sender to thank him and explain to him that we could not accept it.

Such “gifts” are not unusual. In fact, they have been a part of the Nigerian media scene for decades. Beneficiaries cut across the newsroom chain, from reporters to media owners. It has become so pervasive that many no longer see it as unethical or a form of corruption. As editor of *Premium Times*, I have had meetings with scores of senior public officials and business executives, either privately or with other editors. Only once was I not offered a gift. Most times it is money, but it comes in other forms as well – airline tickets, vehicles, and shopping vouchers.

Rejecting the gift can lead to negative consequences, as was my experience with a senior Nigerian lawyer in a matter involving an embattled Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN).

Walter Onnoghen was removed from office as chief justice by President Muhammadu Buhari through a process which was later condemned by the appeal court. He had been charged with corruption before a tribunal that many thought was biased in favour of the ruling party. A senior advocate who was his close associate reached out to me through a friend, an editor at another newspaper.

The lawyer wanted to speak anonymously to the media, particularly *Premium Times*, about the Chief Justice’s position on the matter.

My friend and I went to the lawyer’s office on a Sunday evening. We spoke for about two hours and agreed that he would provide me with more evidence to support his claims. We exchanged contacts and agreed to communicate through more secure channels (he was being watched by the SSS and his home and office had been searched).

After the meeting my friend briefly remained behind but caught up with me later. He tried to hand me the \$1000 he had collected from the lawyer.

“You know I never accept such offerings,” I told him. “You have to return it.”

“If you return this money, he will never trust you. He will believe you are working with the SSS,” was his reply.

My friend proposed a curious solution. “Let me keep the money. That way, you will not have collected the ‘brown envelope’ while he will believe you did, and so your relationship with him can continue.”

Of course, I found that unacceptable and insisted that he return the money. I also contacted the lawyer to thank him and tell him I had asked my friend to return the money. That was the last time he took my calls or replied to my messages.

The “brown envelope” and its impact on Nigerian media were the subject of my Master’s thesis at the University of Amsterdam. Bribery is rampant but is rarely discussed. Media has become a “dog don’t eat dog” society. I have argued before that Nigerian media is as corrupt as the Nigerian police, or even more so, but many of my colleagues disagree.

One of our reporters, I shall call her Zainab to protect her privacy, had an experience quite opposite to the one I had with the senior lawyer. At a news event, she was the only reporter in the room who rejected the brown envelope. The head of the information unit of the ministry that organised the event called her into his office to ask her why she had turned down the “gift”. She told him it was against her company’s policy. The man insisted on accompanying her to the *Premium Times* office to meet with the editors whose reporters were not accepting brown envelopes. He had been in the ministry unit for over 20 years and was about to retire. He said that, in all the time he had been in the department, no journalist had ever rejected a bribe.

Before his retirement he became a valuable source, tipping Zainab off on many stories because he considered her trustworthy.

I always bring up the issue of ethics in any media training sessions I facilitate in Nigeria because I want journalists to think about it. And in all cases the ensuing debate confirms my fear of how deeply rooted the problem is.

I was once invited to train about 50 journalism students at the Bayero University in Kano, North West Nigeria. Most of the participants were either in their final year or undertaking their Master's programme. Some of them were already practising as journalists. Kano is a predominantly Muslim state and the bulk of the participants were Muslims.

While discussing the brown envelope and its various forms, I asked the participants what they thought about journalists accepting Hajj sponsorship from politicians. Most of the students saw nothing wrong with it. It is a way of helping you to observe a religious rite and be closer to God, one participant said.

Anything that helps you move closer to God cannot be considered wrong, another one argued. I tried to make them understand that such gifts were unethical and a form of brown-envelope journalism, with evidently little success.

Bad as the brown envelope is for the integrity of journalists and the content they produce, I am not sure it is worse than the influence of advertisers on the news that Nigerians consume.

As an editor, I fully grasp how inimical advertising is to the production of credible news.

When I first assumed office as Managing Editor, I avoided having direct conversations with advertisers. I believed then, and still do, in fully separating the editorial department from business services. However, as my role expanded, I had no choice but to engage with some advertisers.

Because I always insist on editorial independence, many of my conversations with advertisers have not gone well.

I once had a lengthy debate – more of an altercation – with the spokesperson of a major Nigerian bank. He did not want us to report a robbery at one of their branches. Alternatively, he said, we should leave out the name of the bank from our story.

Frustrated by my refusal to budge, the manager burst out: “Why are you the only one trying to prove that you know journalism?”, he asked me. “All the other newspapers did not publish our name. Why must it always be *Premium Times* despite how we support you guys?”

He was partly right.

It is common to see or hear in Nigerian media stories about robberies or fraud in banks which are not named. Apparently, the banks, which are some of the largest advertisers, have agreements with media houses to redact their names from “negative” stories.

“Can you tell *The New York Times* to remove your bank’s name if they were the ones publishing the story?”, I asked the caller. He had the audacity to reply: “But we are in Nigeria, not America.”

The problem, however, cuts across all categories of advertisers.

During a conversation with the communications chief of one of Nigeria’s largest conglomerates, he threatened to withdraw all his organisation’s advertising from *Premium Times*.

“We cannot be spending all that money every year on you people and you cannot do us simple favours,” he said. “My colleagues wonder why I continue to support *Premium Times* despite the kind of stories you people write.”

Many advertisers make good their threats and withdraw business from *Premium Times* while others reduce it or simply refuse to pay after the services have been rendered.

Thankfully, the *Premium Times* management learned quite early not to rely solely on advertising revenue. We can afford to call their bluff and insist on what is right.

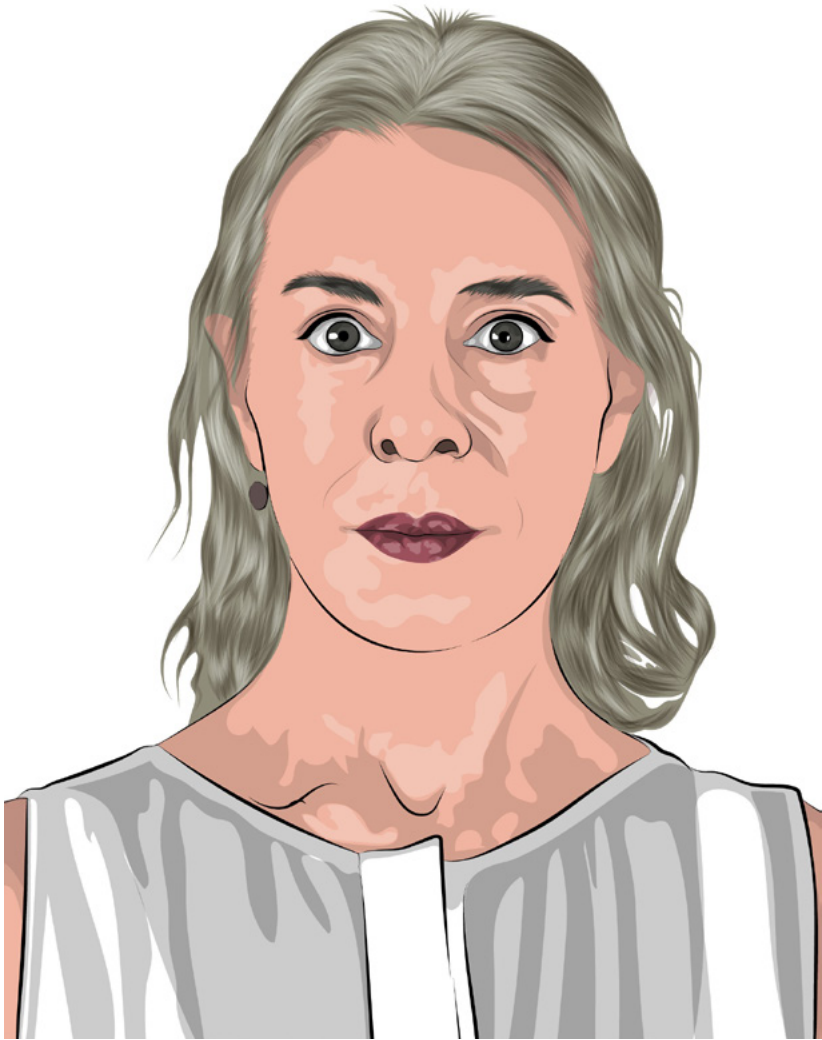
But while the newspaper's leadership and core staff remain largely ethical, the same cannot be said of our freelance journalists.

As a *Premium Times* pioneer, I have seen the newspaper go through different phases. It started with less than ten reporters and editors while relying heavily on freelancers for content. Before my appointment as Managing Editor in 2016, our freelancers were issued with company ID cards and paid every month end. We soon learnt that many of them were using their cards to enrich themselves by demanding "brown envelopes".

One of the changes I made was to pay freelancers only for the stories the newspaper had used. We also stopped giving them IDs. Anyone who needed a letter of introduction for a specific story would have to apply for it.

Not surprisingly, many of our freelance writers were furious. Some quit because they could not produce quality stories. I was accused of destroying their livelihoods. "I have been practising journalism for over 20 years," one told me on the phone from his base in North West. "How can you, just a small boy, say I don't write good stories? How dare you withdraw my ID card?"

We lost many of them, but the ones who cared for integrity and the media's reputation continued to write for us. They had to be ethical to continue publishing on our platforms.



Gwen Lister is a Namibian journalist, publisher and press-freedom activist. She set up *The Namibian* in 1985 at the height of colonial rule, was jailed twice and has won international awards for her work. She currently heads the Namibia Press Trust, which owns *The Namibian*.

Journalism

under a racist Jackboot

By Gwen Lister

Our newsroom erupted into ululation and excited shouting one day in 1986 when a grainy Polaroid photograph clandestinely came into our possession. Although hastily shot, it was unmistakable in its gruesomeness. It showed a Casspir armoured vehicle of the South African apartheid forces with the bodies of dead fighters of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) strapped to the sides.

At last, concrete proof and vindication of our reporting in the face of vigorous denials by the authorities that security forces regularly indulged in such cruelty in northern Namibia. The intent behind this practice by the military was both to put fear into the hearts of locals and to warn them of the consequence of supporting the liberation movement, which was fighting to win freedom from colonial rule for the country then known as South West Africa. It was with no small measure of trepidation that we prepared the next day's edition, with the proof of these atrocities magnified in black and white and emblazoned across the front page under the headline 'Parade of Death'.

There would be no credit for the photographer, a young Swapo activist who had put his life on the line to take the photograph. Retribution would have been swift had we done so at the time, but years later we would publicly acknowledge his sacrifice.

When that edition hit the streets, the action against us was swift and immediate in terms of a ban by the Publications Control Board in South Africa. Fortuitously for us, it was too little and too late. The newspaper had sold out, and there was no denying the authenticity of the image, although the authorities scrambled to try and explain away their barbarism.

This was just one of many similar anecdotes of life in a newspaper that had been started with the objective of advocating Namibia's self-determination from colonial rule and depicting the lives of citizens under the jackboot of apartheid. Our independent reporting put us in the eye of the storm, counteracting as it did the official propaganda in just about every edition. This earned me, as editor, and fellow journalists constant harassment, arrests, and intimidation. Our premises, too, were regularly targeted with fire-bombs, bullets fired at the windows and any number of attacks to stop the coverage of cruelties by the apartheid regime. For my team, this was not just a job, but a cause for the greater good.

My career as a working journalist had been rudely interrupted in 1985 when I became editor of *The Namibian*. I had started my journey about a decade earlier, in 1976, breaking the glass ceiling in the southern African newspaper world somewhat when I landed a job as a political reporter at the daily *Windhoek Advertiser*. It was not, by any means, a woman's world back then.

South West Africa, now Namibia, was a former German colony given as a mandate to South Africa by the League of Nations in 1915. When the mandate was terminated in 1966 and the UN General Assembly placed the country under its direct control, South Africa refused to hand it over. An armed struggle to liberate the country was launched by the South West Africa People's Organisation (Swapo) in the same year.

Young, idealistic, and somewhat naïve when I took on the post, I had grown up in a middle-class, liberal white South African family with parents who had insisted on a convent education. It was in this milieu that I grew up, conscious of the systemic oppression of black people and the evil that was apartheid. As a student activist at the University of Cape Town, I developed a strong resolve to do something about it, and I settled on journalism as the means.

When I applied for a position at the *Windhoek Advertiser* in 1975 – in the belief that change would come quicker in South West Africa than in the home country of the coloniser – I was not to know then that I would collide head-on with a maverick newspaperman in the person of JJ

'Hannes' Smith. Something of a legend on home soil due to his unique style of yellow journalism in the pre-tabloid era, he did not believe women either could or should be journalists. A baptism of fire ensued over the next few years, in which I was forced to work incredibly long hours in a largely abusive environment as I both learned the craft and tried to convince my homophobic boss that I was up to the task.

I was ill-prepared for what was to come. With no formal training, I was nevertheless equipped with an idealistic conviction that journalism could be the means of change. The only skills I brought were a love of the written word, a decent general knowledge and an obstinate determination to learn the job. It soon became a passion. Immediately thrown into the deep end, I cut my journalistic teeth on assignments covering mass Swapo political rallies in the black township of Katutura. Without provocation, police regularly waded in to cause chaos, beat up attendees, jail supporters without trial, and even torture those perceived to be supporting the armed struggle. And my reporting "from the other side", defusing official propaganda efforts, regularly incensed the political establishment.

It took several years before my editor finally acknowledged he could neither bully me into submission nor break my resistance. He grudgingly accepted that I could work as hard as any man and take the punches along the way. My political reporting, coupled with a weekly column, had in the meantime become increasingly critical of South Africa's occupation, its cruelty to those supporting the liberation movement, as well as attempts to impose an internal settlement on the country without Swapo's inclusion.

My reporting largely resonated with Smith's views. So, when new owners acquired the *Advertiser*, and as political pressure intensified on us to become more accommodating of South African plans, both Smith and I left the newspaper in protest. Only a few weeks later, together with two other former *Advertiser* staff members, we published – to public ovation – the first edition of the Windhoek Observer on 4 May 1978, a dark day on which South African military air and ground forces attacked

the Cassinga refugee and transit camp in southern Angola, killing an estimated 600 Namibians.

Things would escalate further in 1984, when Smith and I finally parted ways. The newspaper, started with his savings, had come under mounting financial pressures. Once he took a new business partner on board, it was decided that my political reporting had fuelled the hostility towards the Observer of not only the anti-Swapo political establishment but also the primarily white advertising community. The flash point came with my coverage of the failed 1984 Namibia independence talks hosted by Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, in which my “crime” was to portray the human face of those the apartheid regime labelled “terrorists” and “communists”.

Several editions of the newspaper were declared “undesirable” by the South African Publications Control Board and days later the Observer itself was banned. I had managed to source funding from abroad to appeal the ban, with Smith’s reluctant consent, and succeeded in getting it overturned, but the die had been cast. I was demoted as political editor and given an ultimatum to cease covering politics and write my weekly column. The staff rose and demanded my reinstatement, but to no avail. They were dismissed and I left the Observer along with them. We were out in the cold, but a new chapter was about to begin.

As I described that tumultuous episode in my recently published memoir, *Comrade Editor*, it felt like the walls had caved in. Our group was blacklisted when it came to other employment opportunities. Not only had my fast-growing passion for journalism been nipped in the bud, but there was a crisis on the home front too, as my marriage had fallen apart due to these pressures. At age 31, with a young son to support, and having to subsist as a freelancer, among others, as a stringer for the BBC’s Focus on Africa, I was despondent about the future.

However, I was not about to give up or give in to the political forces stacked against me, and soon I came up with the idea to start another newspaper: a free and independent one that would unequivocally advocate the self-determination of Namibia under a UN plan, which

would continue to be the voice of the voiceless, and to train young Namibians in a craft then largely occupied by expatriate South African whites.

I would need to get overseas funding to start such a newspaper but, on trips abroad, I met with only tentative moral support for the plan, which failed to translate into monetary assistance.

In December 1984, I found myself in a jail cell as a result of a top-secret communicate that had been sent to me in error. I had alerted the media to the interception order for all my incoming and outgoing mail. Labelling me a threat to state security, the letter addressed to the Postmaster General but delivered to me by mistake said I was regularly in contact with prominent leadership figures in Swapo. After several days, I was released under the condition that I report to the police weekly, my passport was confiscated, and I was confined to the Windhoek district. They dropped the charges against me months later.

It was clear I was under constant surveillance, so my lawyer friend, Dave Smuts, travelled to the UK to follow up on our attempts to find funding for the newspaper. This time, our efforts met with success. The European Community made funds available for the startup of *The Namibian*, through a UK-based organisation, Cooperation for Development.

We could finally get to work.

We set up the newspaper under the ownership of a trust, whose goals were the promotion of press freedom and access to information, as well as strengthening the independent press and excellence in journalism. It would take over two decades before I formalised the trust.

I was a reluctant editor but, in hindsight, this represented a significant step forward for women in the journalism world. I have been dubbed the first woman newspaper editor in southern Africa, but I think Ruth First – also a vehement opponent of apartheid – beat me to it when she was appointed to head the *New Age* in 1960. Either way, I had had less than ten years in the craft of journalism itself, scant expertise in the

fields of management or finance, and there were times I felt completely overwhelmed with the burden of it all.

I chose “Independence is Coming” as the slogan and a red masthead for the new, independent newspaper that was about to hit the streets. The authorities were incensed and put obstacles in the way at every turn. No sooner were our posters put up than they were torn down again. The South African-appointed interim government levied us with a massive deposit of R20 000 when ordinarily registration of a newspaper cost a mere R10. We paid the deposit under protest to begin publishing, and Smuts immediately instituted a court challenge against the government’s draconian approach.

A few dummy runs later and our small team finally had *The Namibian* out on the streets on 30 August 1985. The 10 000 copies of the modest first print run were sold out almost immediately, as did successive editions.

The next few years tested us to the limit. Fire-bombings of the premises, intimidation, arrests, constant death threats, and banning were just some of the litany of provocations that we faced.

Independence, when it came in 1990, did not translate to instant uhuru. Not then and not since. And those who thought we at *The Namibian* were now in from the political wilderness were proved wrong.

Swapo itself was unused to the ways of democracy and quickly an atmosphere of entitlement took hold, soon leading to a culture of greed and graft, especially among the comrades and the political elite. “It’s our turn to eat” was a commonly held slogan. Our journalism had a new role to play in holding the now-elected government to account, especially in the areas of human rights and corruption, and this led to controversies of a somewhat different kind. While we no longer faced the arbitrary imprisonment, constant harassment, fire-bombings and death threats of the colonial regime, quickly a newspaper that was often credited with helping bring Swapo to power was labelled anti-government. Founding President Sam Nujoma prohibited the government from advertising in or

purchasing the newspaper. The ban lasted ten years until his successor, President Hifikepunye Pohamba, lifted the embargo.

Meanwhile, there was another big development in Africa's media landscape in the mid-eighties. At that time, not only were South Africa and South West Africa in the vice grip of a minority white regime, which constricted media freedom, but further afield in Africa, one-party states were similarly antagonistic towards a free and independent press, and controlled most of the media. But journalists had begun to flex their muscles and alternative newspapers – later dubbed “guerrilla typewriters” – started to emerge on the continent. From *Pius Njawe* and *Le Messenger* in Cameroon to the *Weekly Mail* in South Africa, Fred M'membe's *Weekly Post* in Zambia and others sprang up, often in extremely hostile environments.

Unesco organised the “Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press” seminar in Windhoek in May 1991, where journalists from across the continent came together at a historic meeting. The seminar resulted in the adoption of the Windhoek Declaration on the Development of a Free, Independent and Pluralistic Press and, some months later, the founding of a regional media advocacy organisation, the Media Institute of Southern Africa. Not only did the UN General Assembly mark the date of the declaration's adoption, 3 May, as World Press Freedom Day, but it also led journalists in other parts of the world to similarly demand their rights. From the Alma Ata Declaration in Kazakhstan to the Sofia Declaration in Bulgaria and Sanaa in Yemen, a global movement had begun.

I was immensely proud to chair the seminar which came up with the Windhoek Declaration, along with my Cameroonian colleague, Njawe, not least because Africa was at the forefront of change in the world media environment. Ten years later came the African Charter on Broadcasting, which did for radio what the Windhoek Declaration had achieved for print. In 2021, Windhoek would again host World Press Freedom Day, where the Windhoek +30 Declaration was adopted, this time with a focus on the digital realm.

However, although African journalists were at the forefront of major media changes over the decades, press freedom on the continent has mostly been marked by a one-step-forward, two-steps-back approach.

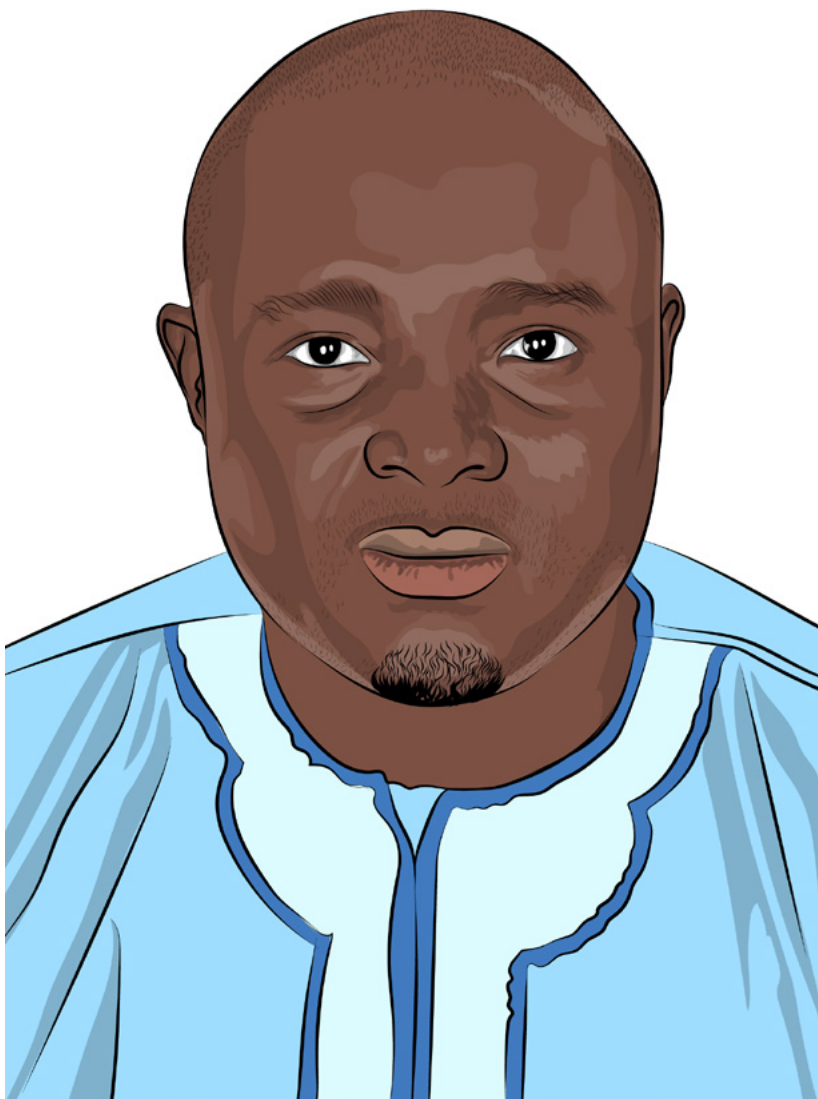
After 26 years at the helm of *The Namibian*, I finally made good on a promise made decades earlier to appoint a black editor of the newspaper. This I did in 2011, after which I began the work of setting up the Namibia Media Trust (NMT) foundation.

This was not an easy decision to make and, again, as I reference in my memoir, I was as devastated when I stepped down as I had been decades earlier when I was given the boot at *The Observer*. My passion for journalism has always run deep, and the adrenaline rush of the daily deadline has become part of my DNA.

Namibian journalists are more fortunate than many of their African colleagues; they work in one of the most free environments on the continent. Yet vigilance and advocacy work need to happen constantly to guard against erosion.

The Namibian remains a household name and continues the brave tradition of reporting established at its founding, with a focus on holding the government to account.

The landscape for legacy media – newspapers in particular – has irrevocably changed. Rising levels of distrust, combined with the tsunami which was the rise of digital media, mean that journalists have to substantially up their game to new levels of professionalism to win back their audiences.



Francois M'bra II is a broadcast and digital journalist in Cote d'Ivoire. He covers health, agriculture and environment issues and is Vice-President of the Ecowas Network of Agricultural Journalists.

Lone quest for justice and order

By François N. N'Guessan (M'Bra II)

On a hot Tuesday afternoon, I stood on the patio of a building in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, looking down at the town and its surroundings spread out before me. The horizon was darkened by tall buildings and the chaotic traffic near the busy North Station bus terminus. I suddenly got the urge to put things in order. I cannot explain the feeling of urgency that came over me, but I felt that to correct matters, I needed to get hold of a pen, a microphone or a camera.

Perhaps it was the sense of nostalgia that came with thinking about Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire's administrative and political capital. Perhaps it was the mental effect of comparing that sassy town of a thousand possibilities to Abidjan, the country's de facto capital city. The contrast between the two was striking because Yamoussoukro was practically my home, because Sahabo was only 7 km away. Abidjan, on the other hand, is a coastal city located hundreds of kilometres away.

The patio had become my counsellor. This is where I had been sleeping since moving from the living room that was transformed into a bedroom at night. These were my circumstances since I came to Abidjan in 2005 to join the University of Cocody, which later became Félix Houphouët-Boigny University. I had to move out of the living room because it had become difficult to continue sharing the small space with my two nieces, one of whom was pregnant.

It is on this patio that my adventure began.

Later that year, I found myself climbing the stairs on the Kenya building, located in the densely populated Selmer sub-district of Abidjan for a job interview at Radio Amitié.

After waiting for more than an hour, I finally met the creator of *The Best Speaker*, a magazine programme promoting the English language in Cote d'Ivoire.

Noel Natty greeted me with my college nickname, Kansoiré, and welcomed me. It was another nostalgic moment as I was reminded of the young student leaders I had known in 2005, the year I began my studies at the university's English department. I got the nickname Kansoiré during the English Golden Girls competition at the Culture Palace of Abidjan to celebrate young girls who loved the English language.

After an interview that lasted well over an hour with the radio station's manager and director of programmes, I accepted a job offer to join the magazine production team. My role was to produce information in English during the broadcast.

I did not have any initial formal training in news presentation or journalism, but learned on the job and ended up working for the radio station for the next five years.

My career took a different direction when I met Dr Fatoumata Traoré-Diop in October 2012. She was a doctor in plant and food production science and technology. She worked as the chief of staff of former Prime Minister Guillaume Kigbafori Soro, while he was the state minister of communication.

Soro led the Patriotic Movement of Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI) in the September 2002 rebellion against then President Laurent Gbagbo, triggering the First Ivorian Civil War. Soro is also a former director of the country's broadcasting authority, Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne (RTI). Dr Traoré-Diop was the sponsor of Radio Phénix, located in Bouaké, in the central part of the country.

She offered me a job at her radio station. The assignment involved setting up a new programme to promote the African diaspora in the US through a partnership with Ogow Sow, a Senegalese media man

living in Atlanta, Georgia, as part of his programme, the Ogow Sow Communication Network.

I moved to Bouaké, the main city in the Gbêkê region of Bandama Valley district and became the producer and main presenter of a broadcast that had a wide scope.

My first show was on 12 November 2012, and I had great hope that my mission was on the right track. However, I was in despair two weeks later. The programme was supposed to be presented from two locations on Saturday afternoons, but this was not possible because of a bad internet connection. That is when I came up with *Temple du Savoir* (Temple of Knowledge), a debate programme centred on local development issues while at the same time promoting English. The programme became extremely popular, streaming even beyond the borders of Côte d'Ivoire and involving several other Africans from the diaspora.

Although I was one of the top personalities on the local radio scene, my pay did not reflect this fact. My monthly salary of 40 000 CFA or \$80 was not enough to cater for my family, which at the time included two children. I had to come up with another source of income to meet the high cost of living. In addition to radio, I decided to invest in farming, growing cassava for sale on my farm in Sahabo.

So, I became a presenter and a farmer. I took advantage of my situation to produce radio magazines dedicated to farming. The programme was heard in primary schools and, later, reached university lecture halls.

Every fortnight during the weekend, I went to the village, 113 km from Bouaké, to work in the fields and produce the farming magazine programme.

I was the laughing stock of almost all my friends and even my parents, who felt that I had given up university to waste my time on the land. One of my uncles even called my career “dangerous” because I had abandoned Abidjan to go back to working the land in the village. It is true

that, at first glance, my career appeared to be at a dead end. However, I felt that I had to stay the course, overcome the highs and lows, and reach the end of this thorny path.

At the beginning of 2014, the press officer at the US embassy in Côte d'Ivoire, Travis Murphy, paid us a visit in Bouaké as part of an exchange mission with the local media.

I was best placed to cover the American emissary. I conducted a successful interview in the presence of Dr Traoré-Diop. The interview opened the door for visits by several other American diplomats to my studio. They all commented on my abilities and urged me to redouble my efforts to build a successful career in journalism.

The meetings and interviews with the American diplomats, directors of civil-society organisations, non-governmental organisations, and local authority officials helped me to sharpen my skills in journalism and leadership.

My efforts were rewarded when the American embassy selected me to participate in the Cultural and Leadership Exchange Programme, also known as the International Visitor Leadership Programme (IVLP). It made available all the resources required for an experience-sharing and immersive trip in media and leadership for development. So, on 27 October 2014, I set foot in the United States for the first time.

We had the opportunity to visit six states – Washington, New Mexico, Georgia, Alabama, Texas, and New York – during the programme.

We started off at the office of the Voice of America (VOA) in Washington DC, where we met many senior managers, including those responsible for Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. The practical aspect of the programme focused on the organisation of editorial conferences. Although I am a French speaker, my curiosity pushed me to incorporate English writing in preparation for future collaboration with English-speaking media. The first few hours were difficult because of the language barrier, but I was able to follow the course.

We met famous international broadcasters and journalists, including Jacques Aristide and Roger Muntu. Their advice that journalists should specialise led me to focus on issues to do with health, agriculture, and the environment.

The legendary Robert Upshur Woodward, better known as Bob Woodward, was one of the star attractions of our visit. During our meeting at the *Washington Post* offices, he gave us a first-hand account of his role in exposing the Watergate scandal, which brought down an American president. His talk aroused the investigative instinct in me.

I also met politician and former governor Susana Martinez, who spoke about the management of the state budget and her views on abortion and gay marriage.

We visited the offices of CNN, *The New York Times*, and BronxNet.TV. Our tour of three of the biggest dailies in New Mexico – the *Albuquerque Journal*, the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, and *The Daily Times* – enlightened us on the steps they were taking to transit from the traditional press to digital media.

We also toured the Mass Media Department of the University of Georgia and the offices of Human Rights Watch. Our discussions with eminent personalities connected to these institutions taught me much about journalistic practice and leadership. They helped to solidify my belief in journalism that offered solutions and which is a key to development.

My training continued back home with Radio France Internationale (RFI) and France 24, this time as part of a programme to produce magazine broadcasts on social cohesion. The programme gave voice to people from all levels of society to help strengthen social cohesion, especially after the political crises that had rocked the country in recent years.

The monitoring and evaluation phase showed that the programme had a positive impact on reconciliation in the country in general and the Gbêkê region in particular.

As an independent investigative journalist working with the national and international media, I see clearly how useful the training was in shaping my career.

For a long time my career seemed to be moving along smoothly. Then everything changed. For about 18 months from mid-2017, I came under siege, getting attacked seemingly from every direction.

The night of Sunday, July 8, 2017, was almost disastrous for me. As I was returning from investigating suspected clandestine gold mining in Yamoussoukro, out of the blue, a soldier attacked me with a knife. I was able to fight him off, subdue him, and take him to the city police station.

Barely a week later, thieves broke into my home in Bouaké and cleared the house. Luckily, they could not get into my bedroom. All the other rooms were swept clean of any valuables. Only the furniture was left.

In Bouaké, the second largest city in the country, motorbikes are the most popular means of transport. The Gbêkê region, of which Bouaké is the main city, has more than 5000 motorbike taxis. Each family owns at least one motorbike. All my three motorbikes were either stolen from my home or wrested from my hands in armed attacks.

The last straw came on December 6, 2018, the day before the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the death of the founding president of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. There were thousands of visitors that evening in Yamoussoukro, preparing to participate in the special mass the next day at the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace, which the Guinness Book of World Records lists as the largest church in the world. I was there to cover the event. At around 8:40pm I was trying to buy credit for my phone, a short distance from my hotel in a wealthy residential neighbourhood, when two men on a motorbike approached me, asking for directions to a certain house. As we were talking, two other men appeared from behind and ordered me not to move. I was suddenly surrounded by four knife-wielding assailants. When I asked them what they wanted, one answered, "You'll know in a moment."

I went on the offensive and attacked them first in the hope of escaping. I managed to neutralise one of them, using his own knife to stab him in the hip. The reaction of the rest of the gang was swift. They set upon me with blades and stabbed me in the thigh, heel, and back. They left me lying in a pool of blood and fled. I woke up the next day in hospital with a battered face and knife wounds all over my body.

The enduring stress of that period left me severely demoralised. I became paranoid, wondering if I was being specifically targeted by criminals.

The civil disobedience launched by the opposition parties the day before the presidential election in Côte d'Ivoire in October 2020 and the violence which broke out over the results of the poll deeply affected the population of the autonomous district of Yamoussokro.

As a journalist and native of the region, I chose this locality for two main reasons. First, a good understanding of the area. Second, fearing potential clashes in Bouaké, my whole family had moved to Yamoussoukro before the day of the presidential election.

My connections and contacts in the area facilitated my work in the field and I received swift updates on the first day of the troubles. However, matters changed when protesting youths lynched a policeman who was in a group of a cabinet minister's bodyguards that tried to force their way through barriers that protesting youths had set up to block the road.

For inexplicable reasons, I was blamed for the problem. It was claimed that my reporting had helped to incite the violence. Suddenly, I became persona non grata in the surrounding villages, including my home area, and had to go into hiding. I was only able to return six months later when order was restored.

I suffered psychological trauma, which was not helped by my quarrel with the editorial boards of the radio I worked for, which abandoned me during my crisis.

More often than not, journalists are blamed for difficulties which arise as a result of their work. However, experience has shown me that journalism that helps the community is always appreciated. I call this the journalism of solutions or impact, or constructive journalism. It intervenes to establish a certain balance, focusing on the glass being half-full rather than half-empty, and aims to show that the outlook is not totally bleak, that something can be done to improve the situation. I say this because my journalistic activities have helped to bring infrastructure improvements to several localities that I have focused on. I have contributed to their well-being.

Journalism might have changed, evolving to suit modern times, but it will never disappear.



Stella Mbuh is a multimedia journalist and fact-checker based in Cameroon. She works as the North West Regional correspondent for broadcast station Equinoxe Television, which is based in Douala.

Through the fog of war and poverty

By Stella Mbuh

As I looked at the walls of the unkempt structure in which I was detained, I asked myself again how I had landed in this mess. I had just been shouted at, roughed up, had rifles pointed at my head, accused of spying for the Ambazonian separatists, and been threatened with prosecution before a military court.

To say I was scared was an understatement. I was alone. Anything could happen to me at this abandoned hospital and in the hands of these soldiers and nobody would ever know. Despite the dire situation in which I found myself, the irony of it all did not escape my droll sense of humour. As I child, I had always wanted to work in the medical field in order to help, especially the poor people in my native Cameroon, rural people who had no hospitals and no roads to ease transport to good facilities. And in a roundabout way, that ambition had led me to this point in my life.

My ambition had been inspired by a tragedy my family suffered when I was a child. My father, a poorly paid state agent, was tossed from one assignment posting to another. Most of the time, he found himself working among communities that lacked the most basic of amenities, which others elsewhere take for granted, such as roads and healthcare facilities. It was during one such “punitive” transfer to Njikwa in Momo Division, Northwest of Cameroon, that my kid brother, Elvis, fell ill. He could not be saved because the community not only lacked a hospital but had no motorable road to enable my parents to transfer him to Bamenda, the northwest regional headquarters, where there were better health facilities.

I saw many more children dying in that community because of a lack of adequate healthcare facilities and services. That is when I resolved

to become a medical practitioner. In my childish ambition, I was determined to prevent people from dying due to a lack of medical attention.

Thus, for a long time, my life's ambition was to join the medical field. This is what brought me before a medical board that was interviewing prospective trainee doctors.

I passed the written part of that examination with flying colours. Then came the oral interview, and that is when things changed. The panel asked me the name of my sponsor and I had no answer. Because, coming from my kind of background – poor and without connections – of course, I had no sponsor. At that moment, I could not help but see the truth in Wole Soyinka's oft-quoted question from his play, *The Swamp Dwellers*: "Is it of any earthly use to change one slough for another?" And just like that, my childhood dream of becoming a doctor in order to save lives was cut short.

It was my father who saved me from the disappointment of letting go of my life's dream. As a consolation, he tried to make me see that there were other ways for me to achieve the same objectives; he convinced me to take up journalism. Through this career, he told me, I could still help to effect policy changes to help the people who needed it the most, especially in hard-to-reach and underserved communities.

That is how I found myself on this fateful day, March 20, 2022, stuck between a rock and a hard place. Armed with my new Lumix G85 camera acquired with the assistance of the management of Equinoxe TV, where I had been the northwest regional bureau correspondent for the past six years, I boarded a rickety township taxicab to Bamenda. The vehicle, whose colour was anything but the yellow prescribed for township public transport vehicles in Cameroon, must have been as unroadworthy as it looked. But if you know how to go about things in Cameroon, you can find your way around.

It belched clouds of smoke as it chugged along, emitting a grating sound every time the driver changed gears. I prayed for the moment

I would be off the vehicle and, after an hour's drive, my prayers were answered and I alighted at my destination, Mile 5 Nkwen Bamenda, the site of the referral hospital whose construction was supposed to have been completed four years ago. The facility was supposed to have been operational way back in 2018.

Then Prime Minister Philemon Yang had announced the construction of the Bamenda Referral Hospital on February 27, 2017, during a political rally of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) in the area. The hospital, Prime Minister Philemon Yang said, would serve as a teaching hospital for the University of Bamenda. Construction works were launched by the then Minister of Public Health, Andre Mama Fouda, on 3 May 2017. The minister announced that the construction would take 18 months. It would cost CFA 15 billion (French francs, approximately \$23.7 million) – CFA 10 billion (\$15.5 million) for the building and CFA 5 billion (\$7.7 million) for equipment.

The government had not kept its promise. Like many public projects, it had stalled and the construction site had been abandoned. I was on a mission to find out when the work would resume so that the hospital could become operational to save the lives of the people of Bamenda, who were in sore need of a functional specialised facility.

Right from my reception at the gate, I knew I was in trouble. I found myself being subjected to an interrogation that disturbingly reminded me of the time I had attempted to gain admission into medical school. Only that this time around, my interlocutors were not a row of neatly bow-tied three-piece western-style suit-wearing university lecturers, but rather stern-looking men in sunburned military outfits. Without even bothering to allow me to identify myself, they bundled me into one of the haunted-looking rooms of the abandoned hospital, accusing me of trespassing on a restricted military site.

My attempts to explain to them that I was a journalist on assignment from Equinoxe TV only further incriminated me, as they now accused me of using the cover of journalism to spy on them for the separatist Ambazonian fighters. They said I was going to be detained and charged

before the military court for spying for the “terrorist” fighters. I was afraid that I would be gang-raped or simply eliminated by the mean-looking soldiers, especially because no one knew where I was. I managed to send a short SMS to my news editor in Douala without the soldiers noticing and before my phone and equipment were confiscated. I signalled to him the mess I was in.

I spent three hours in the detention room but it felt like 12 long hours of real hell. It took time before my employer could persuade the top military leadership at the Bamenda regional headquarters to ask my captors to let me go. In the meantime, the soldiers were passing their time pointing their guns at my head and threatening to pull the trigger if I did not confess that I was on a spying mission. In those three hours, I was face to face with death.

This had become a common occurrence since the outbreak of the Anglophone minority conflict in the two English-speaking regions of Northwest and Southwest in 2016, when activists and separatist fighters engaged government forces in deadly battles with the hope of creating an independent state for the minority English speakers called Ambazonia. I often found myself wondering what my life would have been like if I had managed to join the University of Dschang for medical studies in 2010, as I had planned.

But it did not happen, so I took up the challenge of chiselling myself into becoming the journalist I am today. And since I started practising journalism, I enjoyed it, forgetting the many mishaps on the road to my infantile dreams of becoming a life-saving medical practitioner.

The Bamenda incident was just one of many life-threatening incidents endured daily by the few journalists still operating in the two English-speaking regions of Northwest and Southwest Cameroon that have been engulfed in war for the past six years.

In 2020, I found myself in another precarious situation, but this time round accused of spying for the opposite side. I was on a mission to Njinikom Catholic Hospital, some 47 km from Bamenda, to compile

a report about a teenage mother of triplets who had walked for days from her home in Bafmen, some 11 km from Fundong, the capital of Boyo Division, to give birth at the Catholic hospital. The life-threatening delivery had damaged her health further and her babies were also not doing well. Villagers who were concerned about her brought her case to my attention with the hope that she would be assisted.

I hid my recording equipment and pretended to be going to visit a relative at the Njinikom hospital. On the highway, I came across rebels manning roadblocks. They questioned me to try to gauge my intentions. It did not take them long to start accusing me of being a spy sent by the government military. It was only thanks to the fact that the motorbike rider who was carrying me was a regular on that road that I was let off the hook.

But I was not out of the woods yet, because on our return trip we found fierce fighting under way and had to flee the area for safety. As we dodged bullets from both sides, I remembered a hitherto long-forgotten childhood dream I once had of flying aeroplanes. I never imagined that I would one day have bullets flying over my head instead.

Each time I get embedded with the military on the battlefield and I come back to air my report from a human-interest angle, I am usually accused by the military top brass and Anglophone politicians of being an “Amba journalist”, meaning I work for the separatist fighters. And this because my reports normally do not reflect the official views of the authorities.

My stories often highlight the results of the conflict, the atrocities committed against the population by both the state and non-state actors. My resolve to uphold the virtues of fairness and balance in news reporting, especially in the escalating conflict in the two English-speaking regions, usually leaves me suspected by both sides in the conflict. Each side sees bias in any report that does not favour it and in any objective reporting that does not reflect their points of view.

The situation is even more complicated for a female journalist like me. Living and working in a conflict zone, some colleagues and news

sources think I must or ought to exchange sexual favours for exclusive information to further my investigative reporting. More times than I can count, I have been denied access to vital information for the simple reason that I failed to “cooperate” with the news sources.

Journalists covering the conflict between the government forces and armed separatists are always just a step away from catastrophe. Even the language one uses invariably puts the journalist on one side of the conflict. Unlike in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, where the dispute is over land, the one pitting Anglophones and the Francophone-led government in Cameroon, once a British and French colony, is both over territory and the people who inhabit it. Both the government forces and the separatist fighters see bias in journalists’ reporting.

All too frequently, journalists find themselves in the awkward position of being unable to please any side. The deadly and escalating conflict in Cameroon is giving journalism a bad name.

Perhaps the most daunting of challenges and tasks I have faced in the course of my career has been to reassure the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced and vulnerable persons who, each time I appear in front of them with my camera and microphone, become hopeful of a possible solution to their problems.

It leaves me anxious that I might let them down. I quietly pray that my reporting will make the powers that be understand the dire situation of all the people who have been displaced, both internally and externally, by the raging conflict.

Before I did my first report in early 2018, about 47 people seeking refuge in an old woman’s house in the Mile 3 Nkwen-Bamenda neighbourhood, the government of Cameroon had insisted that there were no internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Northwest and Southwest regions. Even the mayor of that district, Fonguh Cletus, claimed he had no idea there were IDPs in his community.

In my dogged determination to get their stories out and influence policy change, I took up the challenge to travel to the distant Befugeh island in Bambalang, a fish farming community in Ngoketunjia Division of the Northwest Region, to get the stories of the vulnerable communities cut off by the conflict. I resolved to also go to neighbouring Nigeria to meet IDPs wallowing in poverty and total abandonment, wondering if they would ever see their homes again.

My reporting unmasked the humanitarian situation and the number of displaced persons, both internally and externally. This led to a follow-up by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which came up with initial estimates of over 5000 IDPs and about the same number of refugees in Nigeria. Initially, the Cameroon government dismissed the figures as a fabrication by local and international NGOs trying to muddy the waters so as to obtain funds from foreign donors. Territorial Administration Minister Paul Atanga Nji threatened sanctions against Equinoxe Télévision and its staff, as well as other local NGOs. He suggested that the departure of the OCHA director for Cameroon to the United States was probably because he realised that his organisation was feeding the international community false information about the humanitarian situation in the two regions. According to the government, there was no cause for alarm. Mr Nji wondered aloud and mockingly why anyone would want to “cry more than the bereaved”.

However, the media reports had the desired effect. The government of Cameroon bowed to growing local and international pressure to open up secure humanitarian corridors. The Yaounde authorities reluctantly put together a humanitarian assistance plan and announced that it would target internally and externally displaced persons to the estimate of 17 000, a figure considerably higher than the initial estimates given by both OCHA and local non-governmental organisations. This did not stop allegations by influential members of the government and security services that my reports were biased. They conveniently forgot that it was only thanks to the overwhelming evidence in my various reports that the government accepted to not only open up humanitarian corridors

but, more importantly, went on to draw up the Presidential Plan for Humanitarian Assistance for the Northwest and Southwest regions and also for the Far North Region, affected by Boko Haram incursions. This has not been without risk to my life and that of my family, the threats coming from both the state and separatists.

Practising journalism in Cameroon is dangerous. There is no legal framework protecting the rights of journalists, especially in conflict situations. Many reporters living and working in the conflict zones have simply opted out or decided to be moderate in order to avoid reprisals. The case of the Buea-based journalist Samuel Wazazi is still fresh in the minds of many. He was picked up by security agents, accused of aiding terrorism activities and died in detention in 2019. Such threats have forced journalists into “self-regulation” and self-censorship.

I operate in a community where poverty and bad governance are the order of the day and laws are used to shut up journalists. News sources keep their lips sealed and rumours reign supreme. Whether you live or not is never in your hands, no matter how careful you are. Journalists who dare to do their work objectively are regarded as enemies of the state. There is no freedom of information law, or a parliamentary oversight or complaints committee where journalists can take their grievances.

Yet despite all this, I want to continue being a standard bearer for journalism.



Berna Namata has been a journalist for more than ten years, mostly in Rwanda. She works in the capital, Kigali, for the Nation Media Group's regional weekly newspaper, *The EastAfrican*.

Folly of trusting public officials

By Berna Namata

A friend travelling from Kigali sent me a message asking why Rwandans were not being allowed to cross into neighbouring Uganda, at Gatuna border point. I forwarded the message to a trusted source in the security services. "Is this true? What's happening?" I asked.

He didn't respond immediately. I understood his hesitation. It takes time to verify allegations of that nature. After all, border crossings are a security matter, I told myself, as the wait stretched to four hours. His response, when it came, was curt and dry. "It's not true, the border is open."

I took his word for it and reassured my friend that there must be some misunderstanding. My source had dismissed the report, I told him. The friend did not believe me, demanding that I reveal my source because he believed I was being lied to. Of course, I couldn't share that information. In journalism sources are sacred and must never be disclosed. Offended at not being believed without question, I advised my friend to speak to immigration officials at the border.

That was on February 28, 2019. Within a day, however, Rwanda announced that it had closed the Gatuna border station, ostensibly to allow for the completion of a one-stop customs and immigration facility, which had been delayed for two years. It also issued a travel advisory against Uganda. The Gatuna post, one of the busiest transit routes in the region which serves travellers to and from Uganda, Kenya, and even South Sudan, ended up being closed for three years.

I still struggle to understand why the source, a trusted government official, misinformed me on such a public matter. I felt embarrassed, stupid even. Then the internal recriminations started: How could I have

missed the biggest regional story at the time? Why didn't I rush to the border to verify for myself what my friend was alleging? Why did I trust the public official?

In retrospect, that experience made me appreciate why journalists are trained to be sceptical, always interrogating and trying to verify information with multiple sources. As former American President Ronald Reagan would say, "Trust, but verify."

Learning never stops in journalism. Every day is different and you must never let your guard down, however experienced you may be.

This wasn't the first time I was being misled by a public official, but the border story rankled because, after more than six years on the job, I thought I was experienced enough to sniff out a lie.

Cultivating sources is a tricky task. You want to be close enough for mutual trust yet sufficiently detached not to be manipulated by them. Don't take anything for granted – everyone, including your trusted sources, are driven by self-interest. The Journalists' peculiar duty is to benefit from their self-centered motivation in order to serve the public interest.

Every good journalist must be prepared to defend what he or she publishes. You can only do this successfully if your reporting is factual, fair and provides context.

I was part of a team which investigated an influential Rwandan businessman suspected of land grabbing. After we had gathered all our information, we contacted him for comment but he refused to respond. After the story was published, the man turned around and accused my colleague who had contacted him for remarks of asking him for a bribe. Fortunately, the conversation between the two had been recorded.

Governments are sensitive, and you will not escape censure even if you get all aspects of your story right. It can be a "misleading" headline, never mind that the headline is written by somebody else, and in the

case of *The EastAfrican*, by editors based in Nairobi. I have lost count of the number of times officials have demanded that we pull down a story simply because they didn't like the headline.

In some instances sources want you to take sides. Usually, there are consequences to rejecting such overtures. My colleagues and I were once excluded from high-profile news events because we refused to write a one-sided story. Journalists should always be objective and fair. Eventually, it pays off because; once you establish a reputation for professionalism, sources will be willing to speak to you.

Not infrequently, members of our Kigali-based team are contacted by exiled Rwandan opposition figures with news tips that we cannot ignore. Government agents are infuriated when we publish stories with opposition voices or comments from members of civil society. Our team was branded "opposition", "opposition mouthpiece" and sometimes "activist" simply because we insisted on presenting balanced stories.

We were dragged into opposition politics a few years ago when Nation Media Group decided to shut down its radio operations in Rwanda for economic reasons. But David Himbara,¹ an exiled member of the opposition based in Canada, tweeted that "the Kagame government has shut the last independent media in Rwanda".

Before joining *The EastAfrican*, I worked at *The New Times*, Rwanda's pro-government, English daily. I had started off as a correspondent based in Kampala in 2004. My experience as a cub reporter working alongside experienced journalists deeply shaped my professional values and attitudes. In particular, I learnt a great deal covering Uganda's Parliament and the regional East African Legislative Assembly.

My stay in Uganda came to an end in 2008, when I was transferred to the business desk at headquarters in Kigali. I was scared to death because I had never liked numbers. Would I survive?, I asked myself.

Determined to succeed, I decided to educate myself. Reading up on business and the economy helped me to write better stories. My proficiency improved in step with my confidence.

In late 2010, an opportunity presented itself that I could not turn down. The Nation Media Group (NMG) was looking for a correspondent based in Kigali. Micheal Wakabi, my mentor and former editor in Kampala, Uganda, recommended me for an interview. The thought of joining East Africa's largest media house was both exciting and frightening.

As a beginner, I had followed the journalistic works of Charles Onyango-Obbo and Andrew Mwenda in the Daily Monitor and Capital FM. Their influence and popularity was inspiring. Conversely, stories about journalists being tortured and killed because of their work filled me with dread.

I joined *The EastAfrican* in February, 2011, as a correspondent based in Rwanda. Three editors – Nick Wachira, Peter Mwaura and Pamella Sittoni – helped to mould me into the journalist that I am today. They were rigorous in their professional standards and patient as trainers.

Working at *The EastAfrican* has enabled me to grow professionally and exposed me to an unparalleled regional and international audience.

Nation Media Group's approach to journalism is a model for many professionals in Rwanda.

Rwanda rarely makes newspaper headlines,. Its politics is sedate and much of the government's energy goes into economic management and security maintenance. Unlike neighbouring Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, Rwanda's opposition figures seldom compete with government officials for media attention. Reporters struggle to find alternative voices to balance their political stories.

One of the biggest political stories we ever covered was the process that led to the amendment of Rwanda's constitution and not only granted

President Paul Kagame a third term but also allowed him to extend his presidency infinitely.

A few years before the referendum in 2015, our bureau had been accused of peddling “lies” and “speculation” when *The EastAfrican* reported that influential members of the ruling party were plotting a third term for the president. The subsequent presidential election of August 5, 2017, vindicated us.

More recently, we extensively covered the high-profile arrest of Paul Rusesabagina in August, 2020, which attracted international attention. His family insisted that he had been illegally arrested and flown to Rwanda.

Rusesabagina had gained international fame in 2004 for his lead role in the Oscar-nominated Hollywood film *Hotel Rwanda*, which depicted his brave actions in providing refuge to over 1000 people inside a hotel he managed during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. His trial, conviction and subsequent sentencing by a Rwandan court to 25 years’ jail on terrorism charges attracted international attention. The ability of *The EastAfrican* to cover such stories in detail and show how issues affect the region makes the publication an invaluable source of information for decision-makers.

As the leading independent newspaper in Rwanda, *The EastAfrican* enjoys a relatively high degree of freedom compared to other media outlets. Our journalism has become more important in this age of information technology, where untruths and distortions are distributed at the speed of lightning

Nation Media Group’s editorial strength lies in the competence of its journalists and the primacy of its editorial policy.

Every aspect of our work comes under scrutiny, both from the government and assorted media consumers across Rwanda. With good reason. Media played an ignoble role in the 1994 genocide against the

Tutsi, inciting ethnic attacks and denigrating the victims. Some 28 years later, the country's journalists are still haunted by the past.

For all its problems with media freedom, Rwanda is one of the few African countries where it's relatively easy to get an interview with prominent figures.

I've had some widely discussed interviews with notable personalities such as President Paul Kagame, Christine Lagarde, head of the European Central Bank and formerly managing director of the International Monetary Fund; Dr Donald Kaberuka, former president of the African Development Bank; the late Bob Collymore, who was chief executive officer of Safaricom PLC; Muhtar Kent, the chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola and Pascal Lamy, then director-general of the World Trade Organisation.

To my mind, it was relatively easy to get the interviews because of my journalism's focus on business and economics. Rwandan politics doesn't lend itself to dramatic media coverage. Officials describe its peculiarly dry tenor as a "homegrown" quality, one which prioritises consensus among political parties over debate.

Specifically, while Rwanda has a multiparty political system, most opposition parties operate in a coalition with the ruling dominant party – the RPF. This makes it difficult to get an alternative view or criticism about the policies pursued by the ruling party.

This is not to say that only political stories can be controversial. I have written some small non-political stories that have turned out to be a headache. One day in September 2016, we published a story on *The EastAfrican* website about a directive that was abruptly issued to advertising firms to bring down billboards opposite Kigali International Airport which left them counting losses as some had long-term contracts.² Police later summoned us to demand that we reveal our sources. They cited what they termed as inaccuracies in our story. After more than five hours of interrogation, we were released without charge.

The media sector in Rwanda has benefited a great deal from the goodwill of government. There have been favourable policy decisions, including the establishment of a self-regulatory body, the Rwanda Media Commission, in September, 2013, and most recently the decriminalisation of defamation.

However, challenges remain. Many talented journalists live from hand to mouth. While studying at a British university in 2019, I watched countless times as UK public officials, including the Prime Minister, were grilled by journalists. What struck me was the respect leaders had for media.

Rwandan media's biggest problem boils down to relevance. It struggles with coverage of day-to-day issues that interest local audiences. Rwandans are not different from media consumers elsewhere – they care about their tax bills and how their money is spent. They want to know whether their health insurance contributions are being remitted to the Rwanda Social Security Board. They care about reforms in education and how school changes will benefit their children. All these are under-reported stories. For Rwandan journalism to win local appeal, it needs to tackle issues which matter to the public.

The country's airwaves are dominated by entertainment. There's not enough critical debate and discussion, which are necessary for the country to achieve its ambition of being a knowledge-based economy by 2050.

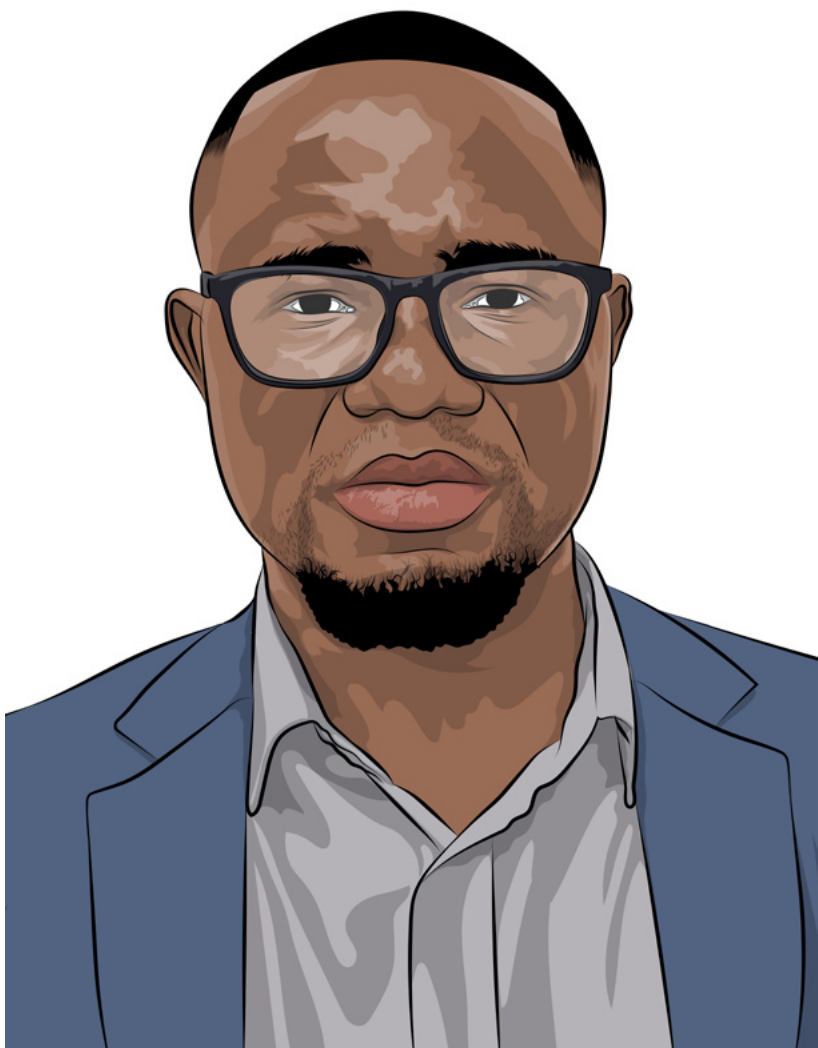
A proliferation of online media outlets operate without any editorial policy or input from professional journalists. Some spread misinformation. Many still turn to foreign media for news analysis and insightful content about their country.

There's a clear gap waiting for Rwandan journalists to fill. The onus lies with us to do better by demonstrating independence and insightfulness in a way that promotes accountability and long-term survival of our sector.

Good pay is desirable, but that should not be the end goal for journalists. They should, instead, aspire to make a difference in their society by telling compelling stories.

Endnotes

- 1 https://medium.com/@david.himbara_27884/in-kagames-rwanda-the-only-genuinely-independent-media-has-shut-down-3b5eb481b218
- 2 <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/business/Advertisers-cry-foul-Kigali-bans-billboards-along-airport-road/2560-3375146-r4khlq/index.html>



Albert Sharra is a Malawian journalist with a decade's newsroom experience. Currently involved in media research, he has worked in investigative and solutions journalism and has headed diverse editorial-content teams.

From bush war to fighting graft

By Albert Sharra

The village was silent and shrouded in darkness. Not that there was no electricity in Mujiwa, a small village on the border between Malawi and Mozambique, or that there were no inhabitants. No. This was the norm on many a moonless night. That is when the enemy usually struck, wreaking havoc on defenceless folk, helpless villagers left at the mercy of marauding gangs of Renamo bandits from across the border in Mozambique.

At around 10pm my uncle Joseph crept back into our one-bedroom house, wheezing and looking petrified. He placed his index finger on his lips, warning me and my brother Grey to be quiet. He made us lie down on a mat spread on the floor and blew out the paraffin lamp.

Catching his breath, he gave us the news: "I just escaped being shot."

This was the lot of villagers living along the border with Mozambique. Although the civil war had officially come to an end in October 1992, with the signing of the Rome General Peace Accords between the government of Mozambique and Renamo rebels, attacks were still taking their toll on Malawians. No one could risk keeping valuable items, including food, at home during the night. Guerrillas from Renamo, the military wing of a movement opposed to Mozambique's independence party, would take whatever they wanted.

On this day, my uncle nearly lost his life trying to hide a sewing machine in the bush. It was one of the valuable assets my family had brought when we moved back from Zimbabwe.

Our village is sandwiched between Mount Mulanje, the highest mountain in Malawi, and Milanje Mountain in Mozambique. The mountain is part

of the southern boundary between the two countries. The border that the Portuguese and British colonialists drew exists only on paper. In reality, when there was fighting between rebels and the Mozambican government, their bullets did not respect any borders.

For about five hours, lying on that mat and waiting for the safety of daylight, I felt vulnerable and wondered if anyone cared about us. When would Malawian journalists get back to work and play their watchdog role, highlighting the plight of people like us, living along Malawi's border with the war-torn country?

The few stories airing on state media only harped on how the government was supporting refugees from Mozambique. The country's two major media outlets, Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) Radio One and the Times publications, which Malawi's founding president, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, had purchased and turned into state media, only churned out pro-government propaganda.

The watchdog function of media in Malawi had been dealt a death blow right from independence in 1964, when Banda effectively abolished private media and promoted tightly controlled state media. Dissenting voices were locked out. Anyone who tried to criticise the president and his government was inviting trouble. Many were arrested and dozens of others were forced into exile.

Due to my exposure from childhood, I was aware of what was going on in politics. I had spent my earliest years in St Mary's Township in Chitungwiza, Harare, in Zimbabwe, where my grandparents lived for over four decades.

Then there was Uncle Joseph, who cultivated in me an interest in the media. He was one of the top football left backs in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s, playing for Premier League teams like the Tornados. My uncle loved the news and our home was always well-stocked with newspapers and a radio.

We would listen to news about the government's economic policies that had repositioned Zimbabwe as southern Africa's economic hub. There were also reports on other issues, such as crime and safety. I still remember one story about a man who was hacked to death outside a drinking hovel in Harare. The journalist cited it as evidence of insecurity in the city.

Even at that tender age, the political and social context in which we were living coupled with the differences I noticed between the media in Malawi and Zimbabwe provoked me to think about the role of the press. While lying helplessly on a mat on that dark August night in 1994, thoughts raced through my mind. I wondered why our struggles did not feature in the news, like the story of the man who was killed in Harare.

This was one of the rare nights we spent in our house. Usually, when darkness fell, villagers moved to higher ground, seeking safety from the vicious Renamo bandits. With good reason. A few days before our night on the mat, they had broken into a shop about 500 metres from our house and killed the owner. Now lying helplessly on the floor, waiting for gunmen to storm our house and kill us all, I made a decision. I would be part of the generation that would use a pen, not the gun, to protect vulnerable people, by publicising their plight.

When we were living in Zimbabwe, I was attracted to football because of my Uncle Joseph. I made a name for myself as a scoring machine on the dusty playgrounds outside our yard. Some people called me Diego, after the Argentine legend Diego Maradona. My mother loved music and she would leap to her feet and dance to any song by the gifted Leonard Dembo or John Chibadura. I once had dreams of becoming a musician or a footballer, but they were erased by the traumatic experience of living on the war-torn Mozambique border.

In high school, teachers encouraged me to pursue science subjects because I was good at them, but my mind stayed in journalism. My cousin Leonard Sharra, who had worked for over a decade at Malawi's top newspaper company, Nation Publications Limited (NPL), repeatedly advised me against going into journalism. His pleas fell on deaf ears. My

family was so set against my choice of career that no relative supported me during my undergraduate studies.

My favourite newspaper was NPL's *Weekend Nation*. Grey, who was also inspired by Uncle Joseph to follow the news, bought a copy every Saturday. Then suddenly the person who used to distribute newspapers in our Satemwa neighbourhood stopped. But I was undeterred. I would walk more than an hour from our Satemwa Tea Estate home to the National Information Centre library at the Thyolo district offices to read the day's newspaper.

I persuaded my former primary school classmate, Laston Segula, to accompany me. His presence made the long, dusty walk seem shorter. Laston wanted to pursue law, but our library visits and the stories we exchanged on the way swayed him towards journalism.

I was always in arrears on my college tuition fees and would miss lectures for long periods. This pushed me into freelancing, trying to sell stories to NPL to make money for college fees.

Being a freelance journalist in Malawi was not easy. And getting your story published by a top media house like NPL was even more difficult. It took me many years to break through. Sylvester Namiwa, who was freelancing for the Times Group at the time, and I once covered a boxing match at the Lilongwe Community Centre. We both wrote our stories, his going to the Times Group and mine to NPL, the only national newspapers.

Namiwa liked working with me because I could type fast. This was cost-effective as we were using an internet café. We would draft our stories on a piece of paper and rush to the cybercafé to type them out and email them to our editors. After reading my story, Namiwa remarked in our mother tongue: "*Fumu, store iyi mwalembatu*" (Chief, this is a well-written article. Reading it is like watching the boxing bout live again). I felt proud and hoped the sports editor would be equally impressed. No chance. That story joined my growing pile of unpublished articles.

Lady luck smiled on me just when I was so frustrated and was thinking of trying my hand at something else. Out of the blue NPL editor Rebecca Theu called to ask if I had a good photo for one of the stories I had submitted. The story appeared in Saturday's *Young 'n' Free* section. But even this did not persuade other editors to recognise my work.

Two other incidents made me consider quitting. Rita Marley, reggae legend Bob Marley's widow, was coming to Malawi in November 2012. The organisers had engaged me to cover the event. I did my work with the help of my bureau chief, Mabvuto Banda, and submitted the story on time. It was not published. Our competitors had it on the front page.

Another time I wrote about a seven-year-old girl who was raped at the age of three and left with a wound the doctors could not treat immediately. They said the surgery would be done later when the child's body was more developed. So, for four years the girl lived in agony, releasing stool and urine through the same passage. It took weeks for the editor to publish the story, but when it came out it was noticed by South Africa-based retail giant Mr Price, which contacted NPL, asking to support the girl.

Arrangements were made for the girl to have surgery at a private hospital. I submitted four follow-up stories on the surgery, but none were published. The sponsors were angry. They had paid for my expenses to accompany the girl and write the stories.

I came to learn that main obstacle to my being published was newsroom politics. Editors were under instructions to work only with full-time employees. I quickly learnt the trick and focused on stories that the newspaper's employees could not get. I targeted neglected groups and fast-moving news. My tally of published articles quickly improved and at one point I was earning more than a full-time reporter, as my payment was tax-free.

Then in 2012 I got a rare opportunity to interview Malawi's Official Hostess, one of the most powerful figures during the presidency of Kamuzu Banda. It was the first interview Cecilia Tamanda Kadzamira had

granted a journalist since she left State House in 1994. NPL published a special supplement because of the story.

However, Kadzamira was not happy with the final product. She did not like how the editors had played around with her responses, connecting them to the country's first president. All the same, the Editor-in-Chief of NPL was impressed with my achievement and offered me a fulltime job.

Now that I was employed as a reporter, things had to change. As a correspondent, you were paid according to the number of articles published. But when I became a full-time employee, the editors wanted quality work. This was an opportunity to write the type of stories I had promised myself to pursue, about neglected people and injustice in remote areas.

Three of my articles won prestigious media awards, both in their categories and the overall Journalist of the Year Award by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Malawi. I was the first journalist to win the overall annual award three times in four consecutive years.

I missed it in 2018 because I had spent the previous year working on my post-graduate degree in South Africa. The lone story I wrote that year won the UN-SDGs Best Journalist of the Year Award, whose prize money was \$2000.

In 2016, my winning story was about boys, some as young as 13, toiling to make half a dollar in order to procure cheap sex from prostitutes at a nearby shebeen, exposing themselves to HIV and STIs. The 2017 award was for a story that exposed the danger facing poor girls in rural Malawi who used banana sheaths during menstruation because they could not afford sanitary pads. Two years later, the winning story was about a child who contracted HIV in the playground while role-playing.

I had long encountered newsroom politics and some of its negative effects. The numerous articles I wrote and which were rejected when I worked as a correspondent were etched in my mind. Becoming a full-time employee did not shield me from newsroom intrigue. Except for the

UN award, the other prizes were all presented to me in absentia. I had a chance to receive one personally, but my colleagues colluded to deny me a chance to travel to the venue by selling my seat, which had been paid for by the company, to another journalist.

Another instance came after I resigned to pursue my PhD. I pushed for my articles to be included in the 2019 MISA-Malawi awards competition. However, the managing editor removed my entries, saying they did not qualify since I was no longer working for NPL. I had to submit them directly and my former boss was at the award ceremony, watching the entries he had rejected winning his company the overall award for the third time in four years!

I was not the company's favourite employee. For the seven years I worked as a full-time employee at NPL, my editor twice failed to keep his promise to give me a promotion. When I completed my Master's degree, the company had no choice but to bump me up five steps to match my academic qualifications.

As the assessments of the United Nations-set Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) approached, Malawi's then president, Joyce Banda, was at the forefront of publicising the fact that the country had managed to reduce the maternal mortality rate from 675 to 460 deaths per 100 000 births. I took the State House rhetoric with a pinch of salt and told my editor that I wanted to investigate it. In Khonjeni area, some 60 km from Blantyre city, I found that pregnant women had to walk over 20 km to get to a hospital, where they slept on the floor and gave birth on plastic sheets. The hospitals were understaffed and under-funded. Health workers lacked the most basic equipment and were treating patients without gloves. One facility's records showed that there had been three neonatal deaths and seven stillbirths in just four months.

I set out to debunk the government's propaganda but had more than journalistic success. My research and the story I came up with would become the bridge to my postgraduate studies, helping me to win the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Media Africa programme Master's scholarship to Wits University.

I have since partnered with KAS Media Africa and KAS Geneva to train African journalists. I run projects that donate print newspapers to schools and pay fees for girls from poor families.

Five months into my PhD, Wits University employed me as a sessional lecturer, a position in which I served from July 2019 to July 2022. In September 2022, while on a Commonwealth scholarship at the University of Edinburgh, I took up a post as a tutor.

Sometimes when I reflect on my life, I marvel at how the gunshot that missed my uncle challenged me to redefine my future. At such moments, I cannot help but wonder what direction my life would have taken if I had not dived to the ground and watched my uncle stealthily enter our darkened hut to whisper the news of his narrow escape from death.



Haimanot Ashenafi is a human-rights defender and journalist in Ethiopia. She has worked for international media organisations and, as a lawyer and human rights researcher, specialises in Horn of Africa issues.

Risk and adventure in an orange gown

By Haimanot Ashenafi

Journalism is not a popular career in Ethiopia. Many local journalists will frankly tell you that they would not recommend the profession to anyone.

Not only is it likely to put your life in danger, but it can also expose your family to jeopardy. In addition, there are hardly any benefits that can mitigate the risks and dangers attached to the profession; relying on your job as a journalist to earn a living is tantamount to accepting a life of financial hardship.

I had never imagined what my life would be like pursuing this career path. And yet here I am, a practising journalist since 2017.

It all started with a strange email from a newspaper that I had applied to for a position as an intern when I was still at university. I found it strange because it was replying to an application I had forgotten that I had made more than a year before, in 2016. At the time, I was on attachment at the Ethiopian Federal High Court as part of the requirements of my five-year undergraduate law degree.

Although I was deployed to a busy branch of the court in the criminal justice division, I had plenty of time on my hands after attending the daily court sessions. It was during one such break that I emailed my application to the *Addis Fortune* newspaper.

I later learned that my application had landed on the desk of Abel Wabella, the newspaper's Social Media Editor. Later, after we became colleagues and familiar with each other, he never tired of making fun of me, saying how disorganised my email was.

The newspaper company reached out to me long after I had forgotten about the application and had been working for a non-profit organisation for almost a year. I went through the extensive screening process, thinking that I was being considered for an internship. However, I was pleasantly surprised to be offered a job as a reporter even though I had no experience in the field. I was going to become a journalist.

My family did not share my enthusiasm for the new job and career. They expected me to be a lawyer, and I had trained for it. They were not afraid to question my decision to take a different path. Many of them said they did not understand how I would choose to wear an “orange gown” instead of a black one. They meant the outfit prisoners wore as opposed to lawyers’ “honourable” robes.

They had a point. They had seen many Ethiopian journalists and bloggers persecuted because of their work. Watching journalists in handcuffs being led into courtrooms to face charges of being or liaising with “terrorists and the opposition” was not uncommon. Journalists who dared to criticise the government and those at the top of the ladder were often severely punished.

I was blissfully ignorant about this new career and did not really know what I was getting into. Also, it seemed to be beyond my control since things were happening so fast. I only cared that I was one step closer to my passion and dream career.

I have always liked watching documentaries about journalists. In the shows screened on the government-owned Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, now rebranded as ETV, most members of the free press were painted as “terrorists”.

I still remember the documentary about the defunct *Addis Neger*. This was a popular but short-lived weekly newspaper launched in 2007 by six Ethiopian journalists. Although it closed barely two years later, with its founders fleeing into exile, claiming imminent arrest and prosecution, its legacy is still felt. In the documentary, the team that produced *Addis Neger* was termed an enemy of the state.

I can only imagine what the media industry in my country would look like if we had more journalists of the calibre of the professionals who produced that newspaper. Abiye Teklemariam was the newspaper's Executive Editor and also wrote the main features. He fled when the newspaper folded. He has a background in law and started as a sports journalist. He co-founded a magazine called *Meznagna*, which means entertainment.

The government closed the magazine when it started publishing articles about the controversial 2005 election. Abiye and his colleagues founded *Addis Neger* after that.

I learned a lot about *Addis Neger* from old copies preserved in the national archives. It had diverse contributions and content, and the issues they touched on are still relevant.

"You go anywhere and are told that you are a suspect of terrorism, and you argue that you are not; that is part of the process. Degrading you and making life difficult," Abiye once told CNN after the Ethiopian government threatened to have him and his colleagues repatriated and prosecuted.

Several other independent media houses that sought to pioneer agendas other than what was prescribed by the authorities have faced *Addis Neger's* fate: harassment of the employees and closure.

Despite this, many journalists continue to do their job and deliver valuable information that enables their audiences to make better and more informed life choices.

I am one of the lucky ones because I never faced any major harassment from the authorities. Before leaving Addis to work at the BBC office in Nairobi, I found my life as a journalist exciting and I enjoyed every moment of it. I think I was fortunate to have started in journalism at a time when change was coming to Ethiopia.

My career started at the peak of the Oromo protests. The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia and their homes surround the capital city, Addis Ababa. The protests were sparked by the federal government's attempt to enforce the Addis Ababa Master Plan, which sought to expand the city's boundaries deep into the surrounding Oromia Region. Farmers, who feared losing their land and being displaced, staged peaceful protests against the plan, but the demonstrations later turned violent and the plan was dropped.

As I was learning the ropes of the trade, there was a regime change in the country. I clearly remember the day I received news of the election of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister of Ethiopia on April 2, 2018. I was sleeping in my tiny studio apartment in Addis's outskirts. My phone buzzed at around 11pm and I found an alert announcing the election by the House of Representatives.

The change in the country's administration heralded a tectonic shift in the media landscape in the following two years.

Everything opened up. A year after his election, Prime Minister Abiy hosted the press freedom summit. Journalists and thousands of political prisoners were freed. The process of repealing repressive laws started. I attended most of the consultation meetings to reverse these laws, including the one used to detain the *Addis Neger* journalists and the anti-terrorism proclamation.

Not a single journalist was reported still in jail. The trend continued for weeks, which turned into months and years. It heralded a clear picture of hope for the future.

Even the way journalists work changed. On many occasions, I interrupted meetings at ministers' offices to get a quote. I even got a chance to report from the notorious torture chambers that were popularly known as "Meakelawi". Many journalists were among the thousands of people who were incarcerated there. They were eventually closed and we were told the building would be turned into a museum. The people of Ethiopia even dared to hope that the country's dark past was over.

That year Ethiopia jumped 40 places in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, ranking 110 out of 180, a most significant improvement. The media seemed to have regained its freedom.

The question on many people's minds was if this euphoria would last.

The bubble soon burst, prompted by the start of the two-year civil war in November 2020, after the Tigray People's Liberation Front attacked military bases. In 2021, Ethiopia plummeted more than 40 places in the press freedom index. When some journalists wrote a petition to complain about the shrinking media freedom space, they were accused of terrorism. And just like that, the battle for the free press was revived.

Another important moment in my life as a journalist came in September 2019. After attending a diplomatic lunch, I got a tip-off that a merger of the parties in the ruling coalition could be in the offing. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – composed of the ruling parties in Amhara, Oromia, the Southern Region, and Tigray – had ruled the country for almost three decades. It was a powerful entity that commanded support in every regional state. The political consequences and implications of a merger of the different parties were immense. It would mean a shift in how the country was governed. It could also be a potential catalyst for conflict, since not all the parties would agree with the decision.

I tried to verify the information with two of my most reliable sources. One was a friend who had a robust and reliable network in government circles, while the other was a state official. Their reaction to my questions indicated that the merger was a given: they said it was inevitable that the front would dissolve and become a single political party. That was my story for that week.

After it was published and went viral, I waited for a call. I knew I would be interrogated about my story. I was ready to face any consequences. But that did not happen. The story, which was an exclusive, was supposed to make us proud, as our newspaper was small and new, yet it was

thriving. But I was too worried about the possible consequences to enjoy my success. What if they come for us? What if the tip was wrong and my trusted sources did not get it right? These questions and many others were whirling in my mind.

We were vindicated a few days later when the Deputy Prime Minister announced the formation of the unified Prosperity Party. The party's manifesto and programme were later leaked by the online *Addis Standard*.

The second phase of my journey set in after the euphoria of the new freedom died down. I had no choice but to face some ugly truths about my profession. One was that practising journalism in my country could sometimes be as risky as a military posting in a ferocious war. Some people died and others were detained. This did not happen only once, but again and again. Another one is that what we consider to be the free press is often portrayed as an enemy of the state.

There were also challenges within the media industry itself, which is much less developed compared to other parts of the world. There are few incentives for journalists, most of whom start with a monthly salary of less than \$100 and it can remain the same for years.

Many women journalists face sexual harassment and have no way of complaining because they are silenced time and again.

There is an acute lack of diversity in our coverage. Most media houses are based in Addis and the big audience is in the city. Subjects such as gender equality, climate change, art, and other pertinent matters are often considered non-issues since the media believe the audience prefers politics.

That is when I started to understand the value of the work of journalists and the impact it can have on history, law, accountability, and improving lives.

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in mid-2020, my colleague, Tesfalem Woldeyes, and I decided to visit the eastern part of Ethiopia towards the border with Djibouti. Tesfalem is a former *Addis Neger* journalist who was jailed and fled into exile after release. When he returned home, he founded a media house.

The virus was rampant in the eastern part of the country and since it was on the periphery, there was no media coverage to expose how serious the problem was. We interviewed many people, including the Somali region leader.

In April, we visited a hospital for confirmation when we got information that the first Covid-19 death in the country had been recorded there. We followed up on the case all afternoon and late into the night. Months later, the victim's daughter reached out to thank us for covering her mother's burial, which was conducted by health personnel. No family members were allowed to attend except the reburial a few days later. She said the family got the chance to say goodbye through our reporting.

When we returned from eastern Ethiopia, I fell ill and had flu-like symptoms. I suspected I may have contracted the coronavirus as we had used public transport to reach our destinations. When I reported the symptoms, a group of health workers came for me from my apartment and took me for the test. I travelled alone in the ambulance.

I ended up spending a week in quarantine at the health centre, which was filled with ill people. We were guarded by police officers, who enforced restrictions. Disobedience was punished. There were unconfirmed reports of a man being shot as he tried to escape from a quarantine facility.

I did not know where I was and had not come prepared to stay. I decided to keep a diary about everything that happened every day. Eventually, I tested negative, but not before I had written a story about quarantine conditions in the initial stages of the pandemic and from an insider's point of view.

I found that journalism could be rewarding. It gives us a chance to learn and at the same time serve the public. Journalists make an impact, big or small, every day. We keep our audience informed, helping to improve the quality of their choices.

Another admirable characteristic of this profession is its ability to bestow second chances. You think you messed up today with one story? You will get a fresh start with another one tomorrow.

I will always remember my first big mistake as a journalist. I was still relatively new in the job when I was sent to cover a story in the aviation industry. I took my time and asked all the questions I thought needed to be asked. Back at the office, I had to work late, writing the story. This was not unusual. I spent at least four nights working late at the office every week. When I completed the story, I was confident that I had done a good job.

However, on Sunday evening, the son of the owner of the company called me to complain that I had distorted more than 15 facts in the story. I cried the whole night. Not because I would lose my job even before my probation period was over; I kept remembering how my editor, Samson Berhane, constantly reminded me how a slight mistake could have an immense impact. He often told us how what we write could ruin a business that people had spent their entire lives building. Not all things could be retracted, he said.

I was heartbroken, thinking I had ruined a multi-million-dollar business.

The owner of the company and his son came to the office to see my bosses on Monday morning. My editors looked stressed as they led the visitors into the conference room. That was the longest meeting I had ever seen.

I was summoned to the conference room after the visitors had left. Two of my editors, Samson and Fasika Tadesse, were sitting on one side of the long table facing me. Terrified, I broke into tears.

To my surprise, the two, who were often severe about minor mistakes, consoled me, saying mistakes sometimes happened and suggesting ways to make things right. My main blunder was that I copied the wrong date from other newspapers as I wrote the background to the story.

I learnt my lesson well. Subsequently, I clarified my facts repeatedly, which had the effect of delaying my reports and stories. I now understand that, due to the nature of journalists' work, it is easy to slip up. We are always learning something new and are expected to write like experts even when the subject is new to us. Today you are covering issues related to space; tomorrow you are writing about child mortality. And you are expected to sound like an expert. Yes, journalists make errors; but they get a chance to make things right.



Mohamed Ibrahim Bulbul is a journalist and press freedom activist based in Mogadishu, Somalia. He started off as a radio reporter in 2015 but now covers security, human rights and politics for Universal Somali TV.

Like a fish in poisonous waters

By Mohamed Ibrahim Bulbul

For a long time after the exit of President Mohamed Siad Barre, who was overthrown in 1991 in the midst of a civil war, Somalia did not have an effective centralised government.

The country struggled for decades to establish legal structures that would make a functioning government and nation. It lived through civil wars and terrorist attacks to slowly and surely build the foundation for a functioning state. These efforts finally bore results. The foreign-assisted and provisional Transitional National Government and Transitional Federal Government of Somalia gave way to the functional Federal Government of Somalia, now in its third administration.

Unsurprisingly, Somalia has had a troubled record where human rights are concerned. In fact, it was for a long time regarded as one of the worst humanitarian and human rights crises in the world. Violations have been frequently and widely reported since President Barre's 22-year-reign.

The disintegration of the state and the brutal civil wars that continued after his ejection were characterised by widespread atrocities against civilians. Almost three decades of violence waged by insurgent clan-based militias and Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Shabaab militants have shaped the history of human rights in the country.

It is against this background that I have been working in Somalia as a journalist and press-freedom activist since 2016. My focus has been on politics, conflict, including Al-Shabaab attacks, and corruption perpetrated by powerful people in the country.

When President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, also known as Farmaajo, was elected in February 2017, there was hope that his

administration would address the many outstanding human rights challenges in Somalia. This included disregard for the respect, protection, and promotion of the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media. However, these hopes were soon dashed when the new administration resorted to brutality, targeting journalists with the intention of suppressing media freedom and the right to freedom of expression.

Journalists were physically attacked, threatened, intimidated, censored, and bribed. According to statistics compiled by local journalist associations, 13 journalists and media workers were killed in Somalia during Farmaajo's five-year term, which ended in May 2022. Although the government consistently denied reports of its officers' involvement in the abuses and promised reforms to end impunity for crimes against journalists by Al-Shabaab and government forces, the situation continued to deteriorate.

The security forces targeted journalists covering national events, blast sites and the aftermath of Al-Shabaab attacks, and public demonstrations against government policies.

The bribing of media bosses was another challenge affecting the work of journalists. Government officials were accused of bribing¹ many of the main media outlets, their directors, and editors in exchange for positive coverage. Any negative stories were suppressed. This has forced many journalists to choose between two difficult options: either to stop any critical reporting of the government or quit their jobs.

I was sacked from two media outlets in 2017 and 2018 for refusing to censor myself. High-ranking government officials demanded that the newsroom manager fire me for my story that outlined a trend of growing insecurity in the capital, Mogadishu. The officials claimed that the story had criticised the government.

My boss did not even bother to hide the fact that his actions were dictated by external forces. He told me a senior official from the office of the president had instructed him to fire me because I was "too critical of

the government". He justified his actions, saying he could not afford to turn down the money offered in return for my sacking.

I did an investigative story on the resurgence of Al-Shabaab, whose influence had been considerably reduced when it was removed from the capital, Mogadishu, eight years before. My story, published on September 9, 2019, showed how the militant group was extorting money from local businesses. It had ordered a local company constructing the national stadium in Mogadishu to cease operations and withdraw its staff and equipment from the site. The firm had refused to pay extortion money, known as "Zakawat". It had withdrawn its staff and equipment for fear of attacks by the militants.

A day after the investigative story was aired on Universal Somali TV, where I work, the Somali government denied it and even dispatched Deputy Prime Minister Mahdi Mohamed Guled, accompanied by several ministers, security officials, and the mayor of Mogadishu, to the scene.

Information Minister Mohamed Abdi Hayir claimed that my report was false and warned journalists against spreading fake news about security matters. That was not the end. President Farmaajo and his intelligence chief, Fahad Yasin, were not happy about my report and soon threatening phone calls poured in. One caller who had concealed his identity told me he was a member of Al-Shabaab and that he would kill me. He added that he knew my home address and family members.

My boss told me that he received several phone calls from the offices of the president and the head of intelligence. My colleagues informed me that security officers were looking for me and warned me to remain vigilant. I went into hiding after changing addresses several times. As the pressure mounted and as the threats spread to my family – especially my father, who received death threats – I had to flee the country.

My father told me he had been summoned by an Al-Shabaab court in the Lower Shabelle region. He was told that his son was being prosecuted. He was commanded to come to the court and not to tell anybody where he was going. I was worried. Did they want to kill him? I wondered.

“What did you do?”, my father asked. I explained to him about the fact-finding report on Al-Shabaab’s role in the stalled construction of the stadium. The story had angered both Al-Shabaab and the government.

The next morning, October 10, he called me again and told me he was on the way to Toorotorow. When he arrived at the court, he was asked to reveal the source of my information. He said he did not know my sources and was ordered to call me on his cellphone and put me on speaker. I told him that I could not reveal my sources and pledged not to pursue the matter any further.

My accusers were not happy about my obstinacy and informed me that my father was under arrest. I was devastated. I called my family members to inform them of the arrest.

The Al-Shabaab regional officials who were present in court were interested in knowing the identity of the individuals who had given me the information about their dealings with the stadium contractor.

Fortunately, my father was released two days later after the traditional elders from my clan went to plead with Al-Shabaab. When my father arrived in Mogadishu, he called me, my two brothers, and my mother and warned us of the danger I was facing.

My mother was in tears. She pleaded with me to flee. “Leave this country. Don’t allow me to suffer [if you are harmed]. These people [Al-Shabaab] are capable of anything. They can harm you. You don’t know who can kill you and who your friend is. I am praying for you, my son.”

I decided to heed my parents’ pleas and leave the country. I slowed down on my work and started preparing for my journey to Turkey, thinking that I would be safe there.

I fled from Mogadishu on March 14, 2020. After three months in Ankara, I decided to move to Greece in search of a better life. I endured ten days of hardship on the journey crossing the Greek border. We lived in the forest and were beaten and tortured by the smuggler, a Syrian. At

last, we arrived in Salonica, the second-largest city in Greece, only to be arrested for interrogation.

I spent four days in detention and the police informed us that Greece was not taking in any more refugees. On my release, I went to Athens, the capital city, still trying to seek asylum, but it was the same bad news; Greece was not accepting any new refugees.

I had to move on and decided to go to Serbia with a group of Arabs. The experience was terrifying. It took us 12 days of hardship to arrive at a camp in Serbia near the border with Macedonia. We slept rough, drinking dirty water and eating leaves and herbs from the forest to survive.

In Serbia I lived under bridges in Belgrade, the capital city, for a month. It was horrible. I regretted fleeing my home and leaving my family. I tried several times to cross into Romania in a bid to reach western Europe, but border police detained me several times. They beat me and sent me back to Serbia. I decided to go back to Turkey, thinking it would be easier to reach western Europe that way than passing through Romania.

After spending nearly a year in Turkey and Europe, I decided to return to Somalia and reunite with my family. I was ready to resume work as a journalist at home and to face the harassment that I was sure would continue. So, in November 2020, I started working for the popular Universal Somali TV in Mogadishu. It was not easy because officials still remembered me as a critic of the government while the Al-Shabaab threats against my life still stood.

It came as no surprise to me that the security forces detained me² and my colleagues³ after we covered street protests against President Farmaajo's attempts to extend his term in office in January and February 2021.

During my journey in journalism, I have seen the level of abuse state security forces in my country are capable of. Apart from illegal detentions and physical assaults targeting journalists and harassment

of people belonging to minority communities, they also cause enforced disappearances.

On June 26, 2021, Ikran Tahlil Farah, a high-ranking official in the country's National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) went missing in Mogadishu. This resulted in accusations and counter-accusations, as well as allegations of a cover-up, as investigations into her disappearance faltered. There were allegations that she had been abducted and murdered by her own agency, NISA, which appeared reluctant to investigate her disappearance or allow other government teams to try to uncover the truth. Instead, and without any evidence, it accused Al-Shabaab of abducting and killing the intelligence official, an accusation the terror group denied.

After I interviewed Ikran Tahlil's mother, Qali Guhad, I received death threats from security officers who were angry to see that my story had given her the chance to speak out about her daughter's disappearance. She blamed NISA Director-General Fahad Yasin. Soon after Ikran Tahlil's disappearance, Prime Minister Mohammed Hussein Roble sacked Yasin for failing to present a report on the investigation. However, President Farmaajo promptly reinstated him.

The threats scared me. I stopped walking about and visiting some places in the city and started hiding out and being more vigilant.

Throughout 2021, government officials and security forces continued to silence journalists through threats, intimidation, and targeted attacks. However, a few of us have continued to cover protests and the activities of the leaders of the opposition, despite the crackdown on the coverage of anti-government activities.

Cases of physical assault, intimidation, and threats against journalists jumped to new heights, with a total of 39 incidents being reported. Some 14 journalists were physically assaulted while on duty, according to a Somali journalist syndicate. Most of the attacks happened in Mogadishu and were committed by security personnel.

The safety of journalists in Somalia is a major concern. We work under difficult conditions, constantly living in fear and under pressure from both the Somali government and Al-Shabaab militants. There are times I cannot help thinking that journalists are like fish living in poisonous waters.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/somalia-killings-corruption-and-censorship-besiege-media-freedom/>
- 2 <https://hornobserver.com/articles/710/Somali-police-detain-three-journalists-in-Mogadishu-confiscate-equipment>
- 3 <https://cpj.org/2021/04/somali-security-forces-detain-and-assault-journalists-and-raid-media-outlet/>



Simon Allison is a foreign correspondent and editor from South Africa. He is the co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Continent*, Africa's most widely distributed newspaper.

Bloody cost of seeking truth

By Simon Allison

Journalism saves lives, but I never expected it to do so quite literally.

It was October 26, 2017, and Kenyans were heading to the polls for the second time in that year. The results of the first presidential election had been annulled after the supreme court found serious irregularities in the vote, and now the entire exercise had to be repeated.

This time, however, the vote was being boycotted by the main opposition party, led by veteran politician Raila Odinga, who said there was no chance that the re-run election would be credible.

I covered the election for South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* newspaper, where I was Africa Editor. On voting day, I was in Kisumu, Kenya's third-largest city and the centre of Odinga's support.

The atmosphere was tense. Hundreds of heavily armed riot police had been trucked to the city from other parts of the country, and it was unclear whether they were there to stop fights or to start them. Opposition supporters – all young men armed with clubs and machetes – had set up their own roadblocks to enforce the boycott.

The roadblocks worked. I did not see a single person cast a vote in Kisumu that day. Instead, I witnessed running street battles between the riot police and the opposition. Dozens of people were injured in the fighting, and at least four people were killed. It could have been five.

I was in a car with two other journalists, and we were driving slowly down the city's main road. It was a little before noon. As we passed a side street, some movement caught our eye and we stopped to take a closer look. We saw a police van that was crowded with prisoners – all

young men and presumably all opposition supporters. As we watched, a policeman removed one of the prisoners from the van, threw him to the floor, and raised his boot to deliver a savage kick.

But the prisoner sensed an opportunity for escape. Before the beating could be delivered, he leapt up and made a break for it, sprinting directly towards us. Calmly, the policeman raised his rifle and took aim.

In the vehicle, I suddenly found myself looking down the barrel of the gun, and I ducked below the window just in case the car was hit by a stray bullet.

But the tell-tale crack of a gunshot was not forthcoming. Slowly, I peered out of the car. I saw that the policeman had lowered his rifle, and he was glowering at us as if we had just ruined his day. At the last moment, he had seen the big 'PRESS' stickers that we had plastered all over the car.

The policeman did not mind killing a man, but he did not want to do so in full view of international media.

The prisoner escaped. Never again would I doubt the power of the press.

I come from a family of journalists. My mother worked for the now-defunct South African Press Agency, a wire service, before the advent of the internet. She recalls the thrill of being on night shift when the telex spat out news of a major breaking story. At that moment, she was the only person in the whole country to know the news, and it was her job to tell everyone else.

My father started as a sports reporter for a local paper, and then a junior sub-editor at the *Rand Daily Mail*, the celebrated English-language newspaper that was eventually banned by South Africa's apartheid government for its fearless reporting. When it closed, most of the paper's journalists faced a stark choice: join *The Citizen*, a government mouthpiece, or leave South Africa to find another job.

My father chose the second option and ended up at the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong, where I was born.

As soon as I was old enough, I spent every summer at his side in the newsroom. He started me off on business briefs, but slowly gave me a little more responsibility. In July 2001, he was in Bangkok with *Asia Times* – where he later became Editor-in-Chief – and he gave me a special assignment. “I’ve been hearing a lot of chatter about this guy called Osama bin Laden. Find out what you can and put it all together for me.”

Two months later, the planes flew into the World Trade Centre. I saw my words on the front page of an international publication. I was hooked.

I thought then that journalism was the most interesting thing that anyone could do with their life. I still do. It is a front-row seat to everything exciting that happens in this world. It is a licence to question all the world’s most interesting people. At its best, it is a chance to take on the world’s most powerful institutions and hold their feet to the fire, armed with nothing more than a keyboard and a camera.

In my father’s newsroom I also witnessed the enormous toll that journalism exacts on its practitioners. His great skill was to turn rough raw text into world-class copy, and his most successful collaboration was with a Pakistani journalist called Syed Saleem Shahzad. Shahzad was a brilliant, fearless reporter, who relentlessly exposed the deep linkages between Pakistan’s government and military and the terrorists they were supposed to be fighting.

But Shahzad was not a strong writer in English, which was not his first language. Sometimes, it would take my father days to turn a first draft into a publishable story – but the result was a series of powerful articles that rocked Pakistan’s ruling establishment to its core.

On May 31, 2011, Shahzad’s body was found in a canal near a small town outside of Islamabad. It showed signs of having been tortured. For months prior to his murder, which has never been formally solved, he had been receiving death threats from intelligence agents. According

to his friends, they had told him to stop reporting on sensitive security matters – or else.

My father was devastated. He wondered what more the publication could have done to protect Shahzad; what more he could have done. As an editor now myself, I have realised that these questions never go away, that journalism, when done right, is an inherently risky business. I was not yet a journalist, but I was about to become one.

There were only four passengers on the British Airways Boeing 747 bound for Cairo International Airport. I was one of them. The Arab Spring was in its early days, and the plane was en route to evacuate nervous foreigners. No one else, except for the odd journalist, was heading to Egypt.

As a teenager, I spent three years in Egypt's second city, Alexandria. I went to school there, and I learnt to speak enough Egyptian Arabic to get by. I knew the country well. If ever there was a story that was going to get me out of my dead-end communications job and into journalism proper, it was this one.

Before I left, I emailed and phoned all the media outlets I could think of, asking if they would commission me. Everyone ignored me – fair enough, given that I had very little track record – with one exception. *The Daily Maverick* in South Africa said they would be happy to run any stories I produced, provided the quality was good enough. But they had no money to pay and, when I asked, categorically ruled out the prospect of a job in the future. No matter. I had some savings, and I knew that the only way to become a foreign correspondent was to go somewhere interesting and start reporting.

When I arrived in Cairo I booked into a hostel not far from Tahrir Square, which was the epicentre of the anti-government protests. Until this point, these protests had been very peaceful. I walked to the square with my camera and my notebook and spent the morning with hundreds of thousands of other people in what was a carnival atmosphere. There was music and dancing, and poetry readings, and fiery speeches that railed

against President Hosni Mubarak and his corrupt regime. People kept offering to share their food with me.

I spoke to dozens of people, all of whom had different reasons for being there. Some were being persecuted for their religious beliefs. Some were angry at the lack of economic opportunities. Some were demanding free and fair elections. There was one opinion shared by everyone: Mubarak must go.

In the early afternoon the mood changed. Gathering on all the roads leading into the square were groups of pro-Mubarak thugs, many of whom were prisoners, released on the condition that they fight on the president's behalf. They were armed with knives and swords and Molotov cocktails – homemade petrol bombs – and some were riding camels and horses.

The protesters were entirely encircled – there was now no way out – and slowly the attackers tightened the noose. When they arrived at the square, they encountered the makeshift barricades erected by the protesters, who had broken up the pavement and armed themselves with stones. A vicious, bloody battle ensued, in which 11 people were killed and more than 2000 injured.

It was not a carnival atmosphere anymore. I kept taking notes and pictures, but inside I was terrified. What was I doing here? Would I make it out alive? I saw other journalists there, but they were all experienced and prepared: they wore flak jackets, or they had rented rooms in the expensive hotels on the square itself so that they could watch from safety.

As the sun set and even as those Molotov cocktails arced through the night sky, there was a lull in the fighting. I managed to slip out through a side street. I found a taxi to take me to a different hotel (my hostel was no longer accessible, as that area had become a staging ground for the pro-government forces).

But I was not yet in the clear. At an army roadblock, my passport was confiscated and a soldier started to aggressively question me. It was dark and I was shaking. Some foreign journalists were being arrested and assaulted, and I felt sure that I would be next. Suddenly, a plainclothes security official – who I assume was with Mubarak's intelligence service – came to the window with my passport in his hand.

“You are from South Africa?”, he asks me in Arabic. I nod. “In Egypt, we love South Africa. Hosni Mubarak, Nelson Mandela, they are brothers.” He returned my passport to me. “You may go.” I was not so sure that Mubarak and Mandela had very much in common, but I was not about to argue.

I published my account of that day on the *Daily Maverick's* website. Several months later, they offered me a full-time job.

In late May 2018, a source within the African Union (AU) contacted me. “You know that story you did?”, the source said. “Well, Paul Kagame just marched into the chairman's office with a copy and slammed it on his desk. He's not happy.”

The story in question had been published several weeks earlier. It was the biggest story of my career, one that demonstrated both the power of journalism and its limitations.

Within the AU Commission, a group of women said they were being sidelined professionally because of their gender and then targeted personally when they dared to complain. They had the documents to prove it.

I had been covering the AU for several years by that point and had a good network of contacts within the organisation. One of them reached out and introduced me to the group. I flew to Addis Ababa to meet them – meeting late at night at out-of-the-way hotels to avoid being seen by anyone else – and the stories they told me were deeply shocking: it was clear that there was nepotism, fraud and corruption at the very highest levels of the AU commission.

And anyone who complained about it was being sidelined. In fact, at least two of the women who spoke to me were ultimately forced out of the AU for daring to speak up.

After doing all the necessary background checks and verification, I published the story in the *Mail & Guardian*. It sent shockwaves through the continental body. Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who was the chair of the African Union at the time and trying hard to push his reform agenda, was furious with Moussa Faki, the chair of the AU Commission, for allowing that agenda to be undermined.

Under pressure from heads of state, the AU Commission established a panel of enquiry to look into the allegations. Their final report has never been made public, but I was able to obtain an official summary which was even more damning than my reporting. The report named at least 40 individuals who were implicated in cases of sexual harassment, gender discrimination, nepotism and corruption, including Smail Chergui, then the Peace and Security Commissioner.

This, I thought, is how you hold people to account.

Except nothing happened. The full report has never been released. No action has ever been taken against the alleged perpetrators of the offences. Chergui was allowed to complete his term and leave office with full benefits. I started to doubt whether all that hard work and all that risk – both to myself and to the whistleblowers – had been worth it.

Several years later, I received a call from someone in the AU's communications office. They were putting together a prestigious new fellowship for African journalists, under the auspices of the AU, and they wanted me to be a mentor on the programme. I was shocked: I did not think I was particularly popular within the corridors of the AU Commission headquarters. But I was wrong. "I don't think you know how impactful your reporting has been," they said. "There is a big group of people who work here who want the AU to be better. Your reporting gave them hope."

In April 2020, just as the severity of the pandemic was becoming apparent, a few colleagues and I launched *The Continent*. It is a new kind of newspaper: published as a PDF and distributed primarily via WhatsApp, it is designed to recreate the feel and reading experience of a printed newspaper but in a digital format.

In two short years, we grew from nothing into Africa's most widely distributed newspaper – reaching over 100 countries around the world, with an estimated weekly circulation in excess of 100 000 readers. This is partly because of the distribution model, which meant that we could get each edition to readers far more easily and cheaply than a printed newspaper. But it was also partly because of our content, which was produced almost exclusively by African journalists for an African audience.

It turned out that there was an enormous appetite for this kind of news from African audiences who wanted to know more about the rest of the continent. There was equal demand from the African diaspora, who want to stay in touch with everything that was happening back home.

In the process, we have worked with more than 300 African reporters, investigative journalists, photographers, cartoonists, illustrators and designers. One thing we can conclude with absolute certainty is that there is no shortage of talent.

There is, however, a shortage of opportunity. As the media landscape has shrunk – a global phenomenon – so has the availability of journalism jobs. The few remaining are often poorly paid. This makes it hard to attract people to the profession and even harder to keep them. In many cases, young African journalists can make significantly more money if they transfer their skills to the NGO or the private sector.

There is also a lack of institutional support. A young western journalist who works with an established newspaper such as *The Guardian* or the *New York Times* will receive multiple layers of editing for each story they produce, each enhancing the story's readability and legitimacy. Few African publications can offer the same level of support, which makes it

likely that stories will be published with errors, eroding trust in individual journalists and the profession as a whole.

Our mission at *The Continent* is to provide more opportunities for African journalists to do the thing they do best – journalism. And to make sure that they receive the institutional support necessary to do so. We hope to fight fake news by keeping people better-informed to ensure that our leaders and decision-makers are being held accountable for their actions.



Dennis Okari is an investigative journalist in Kenya. He was Special Projects Editor at the Nation Media Group's television NTV and also worked at the BBC and Nairobi-based KTN broadcast stations.

Chasing after men who bite dogs

By Dennis Okari

“When a dog bites a man, that’s not news. But when a man bites a dog – that’s news.”

That was my introduction to journalism, as it has been for many a reporter.

Listening to our lecturer at the Kenya Institute of Mass Communication (KIMC), Mr Kamau, paraphrase that famous aphorism in our first news writing lesson in 2001, I had no idea it would define my entire career as a journalist. His instructions transformed my perspective of news, turning me into the tenacious pursuer of unconventional stories that I have become – seeking out the unexpected, the corrupt and the bizarre.

Chasing after men who bite dogs became the hallmark of my career, fuelling my drive to uncover stories that matter.

It led me to career-defining and emotionally wrenching stories, such as the Westgate Mall terrorist attack of September 2013, when heavily armed Al-Shabaab terrorists invaded the Nairobi shopping mall and indiscriminately shot shoppers. At the end of a four-day siege, the Al-Qaeda-affiliated terror group had killed 67 people.

The attack was one of my most challenging experiences as a reporter. I remember the day like it was yesterday. It took everyone by surprise. I was called from home on my free day and had to plunge into a live broadcast with little information about what was really happening.

In the beginning, no one had any idea about the gravity of the situation. There were reports of gunshots and everyone assumed it was a botched

robbery, until the calls from some of the people trapped inside the mall described the horrific scenes.

This was not my first major assignment as a journalist, but I must confess that covering a terrorist attack was not part of my training. Many of us local journalists had to learn hurriedly on the job. The lessons included the importance of having the proper equipment for the task, in this case bulletproof jackets and helmets.

Nothing could have prepared me for the long hours of live TV coverage that followed. We were at the scene for three exhausting days, providing updates on the situation as it unfolded.

Another challenge we faced was reconciling journalistic ethics and reporting guidelines with conveying to our audiences the full horror of what we witnessed. Unavoidably, some of the accounts and images we sent back to the office were graphic and distressing and demanded careful sifting by editors.

In our rush to be the first to break the news, we made mistakes. We aired live interviews with individuals trapped inside the mall, inadvertently pinpointing their locations to the Al-Shabaab militants who, unbeknownst to us, were following the local news on mall TV screens as they hunted down their victims, floor by floor.

Additionally, we were under pressure from the government to only report the official version of events. The Interior Minister even questioned the patriotism of news people when they refused to cover up blunders by policemen and soldiers, some of them fatal.

We also had to ask ourselves some tough questions. For instance, was our coverage inadvertently serving the terrorists' propaganda agenda? It is a question we continued to ask as terrorist attacks in Kenya soon became a regular feature of the news.

The experience was both physically and emotionally draining. We witnessed the worst side of humanity and saw the impact of terrorism

first-hand. It was a stark reminder of the power journalism holds and the importance of telling the stories that matter, even in the face of danger and adversity.

Despite the challenges, I knew that I was in the right profession and felt a sense of purpose in being able to provide the public with accurate and timely information during a crisis. I had travelled a long road from rookie to the confident reporter who could be entrusted with telling Kenyans about Westgate. Diligence and experience thereafter landed me many other reporting and mentorship tasks.

The journey had started at a tender age with a burning desire to become a journalist. My passion only intensified with the passing of the years, manifested in my interest in a passion for reading and storytelling during my school days.

A suppressed dream finally came true when I landed my first job in 2009 as a newsroom reporter. I was a wide-eyed beginner, eager to hit the ground running. Much to my dismay, however, my initial duties entailed only carrying a camera tripod stand and shadowing senior reporters on their assignments. This was a far cry from the glamour I had envisioned for myself of being an on-screen news anchor.

When my frustrations reached boiling point, I asked for a meeting with the KTN Managing Editor, Mr Katua Nzile, who patiently listened as I poured out my frustrations. At the end of my tirade, while tucking in his shirt as was his habit, he imparted one of the most valuable lessons for a growing professional: “Dennis, you have to earn the respect of your peers and audience.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks. I realised that, in order to succeed in the wildly competitive industry, I had to put in a great deal of hard work, sweat and dedication to earn that trust and respect.

After several months, I finally found myself on air and soon realised that presenting the news was not as straightforward as I had initially thought. My mentor, Njoroge Mwaura, said news presentation was like acting. As

the final act involving a long chain of newsroom professionals, you could not help appreciating the importance of every individual in the process, from the drivers who went out with reporters to the editors who edited scripts and the producers who pieced together the stories. It underlined the true value of teamwork.

After spending some time working in TV news, I found myself yearning to return to my investigative roots in radio. Telling stories without the help of visuals was a unique challenge that required me to dig deep and exercise my creativity.

While the process of filing the story was relatively straightforward, since it was just audio, the real challenge lay in editing. I had to make sure that my story captured all the necessary natural sounds and arrange them in a way that flowed seamlessly with the story. It was a time-consuming but ultimately rewarding experience that helped me develop my hearing skills and creativity.

I have covered many investigative stories and won numerous awards but only a few stand out for me. *Foul Winds* is one of them.

In March 2014, I was cleared to travel to Somalia to cover the evolution of terrorism in East Africa and investigate reports that Kenya's military officers were involved in an illegal charcoal-selling business. I was embedded with the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) and had to don full armour.

KDF troops were serving in the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia. The soldiers first went to Somalia in 2011 through the *Linda Nchi* operation, meant to hunt Al-Shabaab guerrillas who were frequently attacking Kenya. The Kenyans were later absorbed into the continental peacekeeping mission in 2013.

We made a short tactical landing as we approached the Kismayo port city in the south. The flight was rough due to turbulence, and it was my first experience in combat landing. I felt sick to my stomach.

After a security briefing at the military base, where we were taken through the drill of what to do in case of an attack, we set off to conduct interviews. It was a long road trip, not because of the distance, but because the four armoured personnel carriers escorting us were driven slowly, with the soldiers constantly looking out for imminent danger.

I conducted some interviews and had a one-minute stop to do my piece-to-camera. The soldiers did not want the convoy to stop in case of an ambush, so I had only one chance to get it right.

The next day, I interviewed President Ahmed Sheikh Mohamed Islam (Madobe) at the State House in Jubaland. KDF soldiers later showed me an improvised explosive device (IED) they said had been found planted not far from where I had stopped the previous day to do my piece to camera. They told me Al-Shabaab had been targeting our convoy.

For the first time since I arrived in Somalia, I felt that my life could be in danger. And we still had one more stop to make – at Afmadow, a city in southern Somalia. The helicopter pilot flying us there noticed a pickup truck carrying a rocket launcher parked under a tree. He voiced his concern that it could be the Al-Shabaab militants planning to shoot down our helicopter. I regretted making the trip, but, thankfully, nothing happened.

The soldiers narrated to me horrific stories from the warfront. Kenya had lost many soldiers in the Somalia war. I felt fortunate to have returned home safely to tell their side of the story.

Stories are about people and sometimes those who protect us want their stories told as well. We did one such story after a police officer pitched the idea. The officer described the perilous conditions under which he and his colleagues were working at a police station in Boni Forest, where they were constantly under threat from the Al-Shabaab militants they were hunting. The forest was a known hideout for Al-Shabaab terrorists, who retreated there after launching attacks in Kenya and had for years posed a challenge to security agencies.

We journeyed to the station, expecting a one-day shoot, but instead found ourselves spending the night. The station was in a deplorable condition. Its walls were riddled with bullet marks. The officers said they felt abandoned by the government. They were expected to protect lives despite being ill-equipped, understaffed and exhausted from fighting a better-equipped enemy.

Communication with the outside world was limited, with only one phone hanging by a thread from a tree. The officers had to be on speakerphone while communicating with their families, allowing them no privacy. There was inadequate food supply and the station's only vehicle was faulty. The officers slept in foxholes, taking turns to keep watch.

Our stay at the station was the longest night of our lives. We even prepared a voice note on our phones in case we were attacked. The next morning, we quickly concluded our filming and left hurriedly when we learnt that Al-Shabaab militants were headed our way.

The documentary we produced got the government's attention and the officers were transferred to other stations. Network coverage was improved and a borehole was dug to ensure a reliable water supply for the station.

As a journalist, there is no greater reward than seeing your story lead to positive change. It takes courage to tell important stories. You must be willing to go deep and bring out the issues that affect people's lives. When those in charge are held accountable, lives can be changed.

Journalists are exposed to traumatic events in the course of their work. The Garissa University College terrorist attack was one such story, and it deeply affected me emotionally and psychologically.

I received a distress call at 5am on April 3, 2015, from someone who was at the scene of the attack, located 366 km away. I could hear gunshots and people screaming in the background. The university was under attack and all local newsrooms were committed in the capital city.

We quickly organised transport to Garissa. I was among the first journalists to arrive at the college. The horrific images I saw that day still haunt me. The students were killed running for their lives, some of them stark naked. The police and military massed outside the gates exchanged fire with the terrorists holed up inside the college.

It was three days of non-stop coverage, and I did not realise the effect it had had on me until I started scripting. As I went through the images of the victims, I broke down and cried. I had a hard time sleeping at night as the images kept flashing in my head.

I felt even worse when it emerged that intelligence reports said the attack could have been averted if some people in authority had done their work. I was angry and felt that someone needed to be held accountable.

The story was so consuming that I followed it up even outside working hours. I wanted justice for the young lives that were lost and I pursued it at the expense of my health.

The fast-paced nature of journalism can make it difficult to attend to one's mental health. News organisations must recognise the toll that covering traumatic events can have on journalists and provide resources for support and self-care.

Some news organisations have put in place mental-health programmes and resources for their staff, such as counselling services and mandatory debriefings after particularly difficult assignments. It is important for journalists to take care of their mental health in order to prevent burnout.

There have been significant changes in how journalism is practised. When I started my career, the internet had not yet undergone explosive growth. Social media and other technological advancements were in their infancy.

Our instructor in college always reminded us to possess a “nose for news” and make use of traditional news sources. But social media has completely transformed the landscape. Journalists no longer have to seek out stories, as our inboxes are inundated with leads, tips, and follow-up ideas from whistleblowers.

Unfortunately, this daily deluge of information can be numbing and overwhelming, as there seems to be no shortage of negative news. I almost missed one of my most impactful stories because of this. It was a message from a whistleblower who wanted us to meet to discuss the safety of the meat products consumed by the majority of Kenyans.

I almost ignored it because it did not seem high-priority. However, I decided to give the man five minutes of my time, and it turned out to be a decision that would have a profound effect. What I uncovered in the story, Red Alert, would become the topic of conversations throughout the country. The whistleblower, who worked in one of the major supermarkets in Kenya, demonstrated to us how his employers were using dangerous preservatives to keep the meat looking fresh for weeks. Unbeknownst to customers, the meat products contained high levels of carcinogenic chemicals.

The man was so scared of conducting the demonstration near populated areas that we had to drive out of town to a bush in a remote region.

For this story, I decided to take a different approach, focusing less on talking and more on the action and first-person narration. The result was a winner. The entire country was shocked. The Ministry of Health mounted raids on most of the supermarkets and impounded meat products. Tests conducted by the Government Chemist found high levels of harmful preservatives. As a result, the meat industry was shut down and standards were put in place to ensure the safety of consumers. There was a deafening outcry for the Kenya Bureau of Standards to take action and enforce the law.

This just goes to show that you should never ignore a story that may seem poorly pitched or underestimate the power of storytelling. This

story may not have had a significant budget, but it was one of the most impactful stories I ever worked on. In fact, it even won an award for Best Health Report of the Year.

Journalism is not for the faint-hearted. It comes with risks that could include physical attacks, intimidation and death threats. Journalists have been killed simply for doing their work. Despite the risks, journalists pursue stories that expose corruption and wrongdoing.

One of the highlights of my career was uncovering the Covid-19 millionaires' scam in which Ksh17 billion (almost \$130 million at current exchange rates) meant for purchasing life-saving medicines and other medical supplies to manage the pandemic could not be accounted for. Our investigation found that government officials, their families and other politically connected individuals had set up dummy companies, which were awarded tenders and ended up being paid for medical supplies that were either overcharged or were never even delivered.

My report detailed how these companies benefitted from the scam. The public was outraged. However, the companies listed in my report went to court and I was ordered not to do any follow-up stories or mention them in the future. I was receiving death threats by the second day and had to go into hiding for a few weeks.

Despite the challenges, the story took a life of its own as other news outlets picked it up. People were fired, others resigned, and Parliament took up the case. The President ordered an enquiry by anti-graft agencies and present a report in 21 days. Unfortunately, that never happened.

I have experienced ridicule and intolerance towards our profession. The next generation of journalists will have a hard time unless they are bold and courageous enough to stand up for the truth. It is our responsibility to continue pursuing stories that expose corruption and wrongdoing despite the risks.



Fasika Tadesse is a correspondent for Bloomberg news based in Addis Ababa. A former Editor-in-Chief of Addis Fortune Newspaper and stringer for Reuters, she covers politics and economics with a bias towards print and digital media.

Ordeal over a chat with the general

By Fasika Tadesse

Ever since I can remember, journalism has always fascinated me. Growing up, I never tired of listening to my father's stories about his unfulfilled dream of becoming a journalist. Although he ended up teaching English in school, I found it amazing that his passion for journalism never faded and he would often talk about this profession that had passed him by.

I admit that this inspired my career choice and played a large part in my decision to go to journalism school. Looking back now and seeing what I have experienced since that chilly morning in December 2013, when I first stepped into a newsroom, I am proud to say that I am living my Dad's dream.

I will never forget the day I began my journey as a journalist at the *Addis Fortune* newspaper. My heart was pounding with excitement and anticipation as I pictured a rather romanticised future in my new profession. I could not wait to dive into the world of reporting, crafting stories that would captivate the readers. I could almost feel the thrill of chasing down leads, conducting interviews, and piecing together fascinating stories.

I considered journalism not just as a profession, but also a calling. Joining one of Ethiopia's leading newspapers as a reporter, I felt as if I had finally found my calling. Looking back, I still feel the rush of adrenaline and pride knowing that I was embarking on a career that would allow me to make a difference through my words.

However, I had a reality check just a few days into my career. And these flashes of the unvarnished truth about the difficulties, risks, and dangers

that go hand-in-hand with my chosen profession have kept popping up at several points along my journey.

Shortly after joining the newsroom, I realised that it was not going to be easy to become a journalist. And as the days passed, the excitement that once filled me started to cool down, eventually being replaced by frustration. I soon realised that the knowledge I had acquired at university was theoretical and far removed from practical experience. And the process of learning was like a roller-coaster ride: everything seemed confusing and overwhelming.

I started questioning the career path I had taken, asking myself if I was chasing a dream that was not really mine, but rather something imposed on me by my upbringing. Many a morning, I woke up feeling drained and demotivated. The thought of going to the newsroom was daunting.

I will never forget my editors, who saw me through those moments of self-doubt. They dedicated their time, knowledge, and emotions in helping me to get back on track. They spent countless hours reviewing my draft stories, providing constructive feedback, and pushing me beyond the limits I had set for myself. They inspired me to become a better writer. I shall be forever grateful to them for their mentorship and their investment in helping me to achieve my goals.

When my first front-page story was published several weeks later, my excitement was palpable. I was on top of the world. It was a moment of pure euphoria, of pride and validation of my long-held belief that I was born to be a journalist. I told myself that nothing could drag me back. My passion for journalism was renewed. I knew that this was just the beginning of an exciting journey ahead.

I have come a long way from those first days as a cub reporter. In the 11 years I have worked in this field, I have published an impressive number of front-page articles, exclusive stories, and in-depth investigative reports. My dedication to uncovering the truth has led me to break numerous stories.

Like many journalists in Ethiopia, I have faced numerous challenges that have tested my strength and resilience. However, one incident stands out because it caught me completely by surprise as it was so unexpected. By 2019, I was the editor-in-chief of the newspaper. On the evening of 22 June that year, we were rushing to put the paper to bed. At about 7:30pm, as I consulted with the designer, the copy editor, and the reporters to finalise our product, I received a call from my boss, the managing editor, asking me to investigate reports that the president of the Amhara region, in the northwest of the country, and two of his senior officials had been killed in Bahir Dar, the regional capital city.

I found that the issue had gone viral on social media, with everyone talking about the “coup attempt”. I tried calling my sources in the state, including residents and government officials, but the calls were not going through and those that did were not answered. I could not connect with anyone.

It was clear that something significant had happened and I needed to know what it was. So, I decided to call the regional security head, General Asaminew Tsige, whom I had contacted before in connection with other stories. To my surprise, he answered after just two rings.

He denied the rumours of a coup or that the region’s president, Ambachew Mekonnen, had been killed, adding that such an occurrence was likely to happen at the federal level and not in the regions. However, he said his office was investigating a mass shooting in the city. He sounded his usual calm and stable self as he answered my questions. He was convincing.

I called back my boss and relayed to him the information from the general. He was relieved but cautioned me not to use the general’s response in our news story.

I wrote the story¹ using information I gathered from other sources and a government statement and it was published online. I did not understand why my editor was keen to exclude the quotes.

After sending the paper to press, I shared a few excerpts from my interview with the general on Facebook, then gathered my things and hurried out of the office at about 9:30pm. I was going to my hometown, Adama, for the weekend and I had a long drive of about 100 km ahead of me.

A few minutes later, a colleague called to inform me that the chief of the army had been shot dead at his home in the capital. I was taken aback. This was a major development that could have significant implications for the country's security and stability.

The news made me uneasy, worried, and anxious as I wondered what would happen next. My phone was constantly ringing, but I did not respond. I needed to focus on getting home as fast as possible.

I reached my destination almost at midnight and found more than three-dozen missed calls and many text messages on my phone.

The messages were mostly from my friends, who were concerned about my safety. They also wanted details about my interview with General Asaminew and whether I was sure it him with whom I had spoken. I had no doubt about this: I had used the number on which I had reached him before and I knew his voice.

I could not check social media to find out what was happening since the government had disconnected the internet in the region due to the instability. I called one of my closest friends, who informed me that the general was the prime suspect in the coup attempt and the assassination of three high-ranking officials, including the region's president.

He said I could be the last person the general spoke to before he fled. Police were now hunting him.

I was shocked when I learned that my Facebook post was being used to fuel conspiracy theories. I was shocked to hear that people were using my words to rally against the federal government and claim that the general was innocent.

The reality of the situation hit me and I knew that things could soon get even more complicated. I could not sleep all night. My mind was racing as I imagined getting arrested or kidnapped. It was surreal to think that something I had written on social media could have such a significant impact on public opinion and be used in such a divisive way.

Fear and anxiety weighed heavily on my mind throughout the next day. I tried to go about my Sunday routine as best I could, but it was difficult to focus on anything, knowing that danger lurked everywhere. I answered only a few phone calls, trying not to alert my family about my situation. Thankfully, I succeeded mainly because of the lack of internet and social media access. Tension remained high for me and every strange sound made me nervous. It was a long day filled with worry and uncertainty, and I wondered how much longer the ordeal would last.

I drove back to the capital early Monday morning and went straight to the office. Everyone was worried about my safety. I had a chat with my boss on how to deal with the situation in case of a government enquiry. We agreed that we would stick to the facts and explain that I had no ill motive when I posted excerpts from my interview with General Asaminew. The recording of our conversation on my phone was proof enough that the quotes I had attributed to him were accurate and not fabricated, I thought.

Later that day, the government announced that General Asaminew had been shot dead by police as he tried to escape.

My stress did not ease all week, and the situation was made even worse when some overseas-based social-media influencers started claiming that I had been arrested, kidnapped, and even killed by the security forces.

One of the international media outlets, DW Amharic service, picked up the rumours and reported as if my arrest was true, which only served to fuel the frenzy even further. There was no way to debunk the false reports and I felt helpless, completely at the mercy of the online world.

People I know kept calling me and the office number to verify the rumours. Others wanted me investigated and arrested because of my seeming connection with the murder of the regional officials and the nation's army chief.

The situation persisted for a few weeks but, thankfully, eventually died down.

It was a difficult time for me. I was constantly anxious and on edge, never knowing when the next threat would present itself. I struggled to maintain my composure and stay focused on my daily tasks. However, for a long time, I struggled with anxiety and fear because of the psychological trauma I had suffered.

It took me a long time to fully recover from the experience, and only with the support of friends, colleagues in the newsroom, and family members was I eventually able move past it.

Every situation we live through should teach us something. My case was no exception and I learnt valuable lessons in perseverance, courage, strength in times of adversity, and the importance of being prepared for anything my career throws my way. The road to success is never easy, and there are always numerous challenges that must be overcome.

Working for a newspaper that required a journalist to produce at least five stories a week was challenging. It meant that I had to be constantly on the lookout for interesting news stories and be able to produce high-quality articles within tight deadlines. To meet this demand, my colleagues and I often found ourselves working long hours, even staying overnight in the office at least twice a week. Despite the exhaustion, it was incredibly motivating to see our newspaper out on the streets of Addis Ababa on Sunday mornings.

As the new week approached, we had the opportunity to leave behind the hardships and challenges of the previous few days. It was a chance to start anew with a fresh perspective, renewed motivation, and eagerness for new, interesting, and impactful stories.

We knew that we were making a difference by providing important news and information to our readers. This feeling of purpose made it easier to push through the long hours and tight deadlines.

What I truly love about working as a journalist is how easy it is to forget the exhaustion and get ready for a new adventure. It is like hitting the reset button and starting fresh on a blank page. That is what keeps me coming back for more. I would not trade this experience for anything else. This profession has taught me the value of hard work and perseverance, and given me an appreciation of the power journalism holds to inform and inspire.

Five years down the line, I found myself in a position I never thought possible. I became the Chief Editor at the newspaper that launched my career. Looking back, I am amazed at how far I have travelled from my humble beginnings as an aspiring junior journalist to where I am now, writing for an international media organisation, Bloomberg News.²

It has been an incredible journey filled with challenges and obstacles, but it is worth it. I learned a great deal along the way and gained valuable experience that helped me to coach and mentor aspiring journalists who share the same passion for journalism.

There are countless exciting memories throughout my 11-year journey – from discovering new places and exploring new adventures to meeting new people. However, some of these experiences also come with an inherent level of risk. Whether it is covering public unrest, war, inter-communal conflict, or even just exploring a new city alone at night, there is always the possibility of danger lurking around the corner.

Journalism, especially in Africa, is filled with risks and challenges. One of the biggest challenges is access to information. Governments and corporations are more likely than not to try to limit or control the flow of information, making it difficult for journalists to uncover the truth.

Harassment and bullying, both online and offline, are significant challenges. I often receive calls from people who are not happy with my

stories and are ready to hurl verbal abuse and threats. The rise of social media has also given life to online harassment, where individuals can hide behind anonymous accounts and attack a journalist with hateful comments and messages.

Journalists are often under immense pressure from state authorities, and this can have a significant impact on their ability to report freely and accurately. The government can use a variety of tactics to control the media, including censorship, intimidation, and even imprisonment. The pressure can result in self-censorship among journalists as they fear retribution for reporting on sensitive topics or criticising those in power.

I was recently a victim of government censorship when my press card renewal was withheld for almost three months. Apparently, the officials were discontented with my reporting on the recent war in the northern part of the country between the federal and several regional governments.

Despite following all the necessary procedures and submitting all required documents, my application was delayed without any valid reason. This prevented me from continuing to report on the situation, fearing that I would land behind bars if I continued reporting without accreditation.

Despite these risks and challenges, journalism remains an essential component of a free and democratic society, providing citizens with the information they need to make important decisions about their lives and communities. It also plays a crucial role in holding governments accountable for their actions and uncovering wrongdoings that may be hidden from the public eye.

As a journalist, my job takes me everywhere. Every day is different, and I never know where I might end up. One morning, I might find myself at the Prime Minister's office, interviewing government officials about their latest policies and decisions. The next morning, I could be at the city's landfills, investigating environmental issues and how they impact local communities.

Despite the unpredictable nature of my work, I love being a journalist because it gives me access to places and people that might be out of the reach of others. Whether it is attending high-level meetings or talking to ordinary citizens on the street, I get to see things from multiple perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of how things work. This exposure helps me to develop my knowledge and understanding of various issues, such as politics, social, justice, and economic inequality.

Overall, being a journalist is a challenging and exciting job that takes me everywhere. It requires flexibility, adaptability, and a willingness to explore new ideas and perspectives and, of course, taking calculated risks.

In the end, it is all worth it because I get to make a difference in people's lives by reporting on important issues that affect them directly or indirectly.

I cannot see myself as anything else but a journalist. I am not just living my dad's dream; I believe I was born to be a journalist.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://addisfortune.news/attempts-on-the-lives-of-regional-president-attorney-general-fail/>
- 2 <https://www.bloomberg.com/authors/AVQgWR12Lio/fasika-tadesse>