

COVERING LOCAL CONFLICTS: ARE WE PARTNERING OR COMPETING WITH THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA?

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Preamble:

Nigeria has found itself in the midst of crucial national security challenges - terrorists confronting the nation in the North Eastern Region, militants holding sway in the Niger Delta areas, ethnic and religious gaps getting wider in different parts of the country, increasing sense of fear and insecurity amongst the people, generally resulting in reluctance by the international community to feel safe in our midst. More disturbing, these are coming on the eve of a national election that many view as potentially more challenging and perhaps contentious than previous ones. As the nation faces these challenges head on, the media, both local and international are also faced with the task of keeping their audience informed of the unfolding events, truly, accurately and fairly. Should the local media compete or partner with the international media in dispensing this onerous task?

Journalism Today:

Whether local or international, journalists covering security related issues work under serious stress.

On average, more than 30 journalists are murdered every year, and the murderers go unpunished in nearly nine of 10 cases. Hundreds of journalists each year are attacked, threatened, or harassed. Many are followed or have their phone calls and Internet communications intercepted. More than 150 are behind bars at any given time, some without being charged with a crime. The whereabouts of at least 35 journalists are unknown. In Nigeria, thoughts about Tunde Amao, a Daily Times reporter pierced in the heart by a terrorist arrow in 1982, Dele Giwa, co-founder of Newswatch murdered by a parcel bomb and Eneche, a

Channels Television reporter killed by the Boko Haram in 2012 always come to mind whenever discussing the dangers journalists are exposed to, in the discharge of their legitimate duties.

Throughout the profession, journalists face emotional stress whenever they cover stories involving pain or loss of life, from the sexual abuse of children to terrorist attacks against civilians.¹

Competing or Partnering:

To enhance our understanding of this discourse, let us define these critical terms in their simplest forms. First our understanding of competition, which could simply be termed as ***the activity or condition of striving to gain or win something by defeating or establishing superiority over others.***²

Of course, every journalist wants to break the news before others, he wants the breaking stories heard first on his media before others. Hence, they may be competing for control of the information machinery. However, while media practitioners are competing to be the best, there is actually little basis for competition between the local and international media. Though the world is today a global village, we still address different audiences to a large extent, our technological capacities and financial wherewithal are also far apart, making competition an absurd expression. Also journalism like other professions, has a universally accepted and respected ethics and values which regulate its practice. Therefore, competition within this perspective, means improvement in the quality of practice, because while the media are competing for supremacy, the application of such ethics like clarity, objectivity and fairness takes precedence over other considerations.

Partnership:

On the other side, there is more room for partnership and collaboration between the international and local media, in the coverage of conflict and other security challenges. Partnership can be seen as ***an arrangement in which parties agree to cooperate to advance their mutual interests.***³

The local and international media have lots to benefit from partnership in the performance of their responsibilities.

¹ Journalists Security Guide

² Wikipedia Encyclopedia

³ Online Dictionary

Already, some local media organizations are partnering with various international media organizations, and are enjoying some benefits. Freedom Radio for instance, is partnering with Deutsche Welle, the Voice of Germany in the areas of rebroadcast of programs, joint recordings, public enlightenment for the local populations, media education programs. Freedom Radio is enjoying certain benefits as training for its staff both at home and abroad, internships for its staff in Bonn which exposes the staff to international standards of broadcasting, local training of staff in-house, grants and equipment donations. Such partnerships are particularly helpful to the journalists in the area of widening their horizons and expanding their professional contacts for lifetime access.

Challenges that Partnerships can Address:

The media, whether local or international, are facing considerable challenges in trying to cover politics, terror and conflict, that can be addressed through partnerships, particularly between local and international media. Some of them include:

- Commercial pressure influencing the media to focus on the immediate, most violent or dramatic incidents, at the expense of explaining the background and issues that may underpin the conflict.
- Inability of the media to operate freely and without interference, threat or intimidation limiting its capacity to report on all aspects of issues at stake. Government agents particularly in developing countries, still attempt to censor their media organizations, often through the use of force and intimidation. Information flow is also restricted in spite of constitutional guarantees.
- Absence of safety measures especially for local journalists covering elections and other forms of conflicts, with regards to providing both safety training, insurance, and pressurizing the relevant authorities to be aware of their responsibility to protect journalists in accordance with international protocols, and pursue those suspected of killing journalists.
- Lack of resources for the local media to hire or train specialized reporters or provide adequate remunerations for such specialists. This often leads to media organizations playing safe and sticking with the herd so that all the media focus on one issue at a time.
- The media often allows itself to become an actor in a number of the conflicts by taking sides. The practice of getting embedded with para

military groups, often limits their ability to present a balanced coverage of conflicts, because they only see what is arranged for them to see.

- There is also lack of professionalism among inexperienced local journalists. Journalists have a role to play in helping transform a violent conflict into the normal processes of peaceful politics. By reporting accurately the activities and opinions of people from different sides, journalists can help to break down misleading and potentially dangerous stereotypes.
- Intimidation by local authorities against international correspondents, especially in the areas of visa denials, limiting accreditation to areas that might not necessarily help the journalist, denial of access to information and subtle detentions.

Inhibitions to Partnerships:

There are certain factors that inhibit partnerships between local and international media. Though easy to address, such factors are often neglected, thus widening communication gap and making partnerships difficult. They include:

- Official suspicion by authorities, who at times see foreign journalists as covert spies. This suspicion often affect even their local guides, local partners and even experts and analysts that may be interviewed.
- Mutual suspicion amongst the journalists themselves, as the patriotic instincts of the local journalists spur them into withholding trust and friendship to the international journalists that may be working in their countries.
- A feeling of supremacy by the international journalists, some of whom regard themselves as 'masters' rather than colleagues of their local hosts.
- A feeling of insecurity by the visiting journalists, which deters them from open and wholehearted relationship with their local partners. The relationship in such a situation mainly remains superficial.
- Socio-cultural differences that often help to reinforce stereotypes and inhibits closer working relationships.

Making the Partnerships Work:

Partnerships between local and international media, especially in the areas of information sharing, joint programs, access to donor initiatives (trainings,

grants, equipment supplies and so on) will go a long way in enhancing both the capacity of the local journalists and upgrading the general standard of journalism practice. While the international organization is likelier to be stronger in its overall professionalism and technical resources, the local media will have the contacts and local insights that the internationals lack. The international broadcast media can also offer rebroadcast arrangements to boost local media. Tackling the inhibitions above, is the first major step towards establishing stronger, lasting partnerships. Other areas of partnership between local and international media includes:

- The international media should consider developing and sharing editorial guidelines about how to cover conflict, including such issues as embedding reporters in military units.
- The international media groups need to recognize the importance of nurturing a local market and local media capacity, through internships and other capacity building initiatives. The international media groups should also consider developing partnerships with local media to help develop and nurture local talent.
- Local media should come in handy in fostering professional professional partnerships, by providing relevant and detailed information to international media that may be unable to directly cover an event locally. Local media should recognize its responsibility for alleviating conflict by reporting accurately the activities and opinions of people from different sides.
- Local media should encourage collaboration over the use of expensive resources, such as printing presses, fostering co-production arrangements or rebroadcast arrangements with international media organizations.
- Local journalists should establish a unified journalist association for the purpose of collaborating with international media towards promoting high professional standards.
- Local media groups should consider how best to establish a mechanism of self-regulation to respond to complaints about misleading reporting or lack of professionalism.
- Journalists covering the same event can cross check doubtful facts among themselves, to ensure accuracy of information they disseminate to the public. This is particularly important when dealing with figures, names of persons, material values etc. such collaborations would

reduce the level of differences seen in events covered by different organizations.

- Journalists covering elections should establish designated press centers for the coordination, sharing and collation of credible information (such as election results) from diverse locations.

Generally, partnership would greatly enhance the quality of journalism and professional competence of practitioners. While competition challenges players to work harder, partnership encourages partners to explore further.

Thank You.

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