

Media, Diaspora and Conflict

Ola Ogunyemi
Editor

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FOREWORD

In 1999, the former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in a speech delivered in Chicago, enunciated the doctrine of ‘liberal interventionism’ to justify Western intercession in the activities of states, such as Serbia, deemed by the international community to have crossed the threshold of lawful or ethical behaviour. At around the same period, the phrase ‘information intervention’ also entered the foreign affairs lexicon. It was coined by the writer and senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, Jamie Metzl, to describe the use of ‘untainted’ information to counter propaganda that legitimises human rights abuses. In a sense, these separate humanitarian advocacies were two sides of the same coin. One, a defence of hard power, the other of soft power.

What they also have in common, of course, is a defined Western-centric perspective. Take this comment from Metzl:

If voices of moderation, reason and objectivity aren’t adequate within a given society, then the second objective is to get news and information from outside that society into it, to create a baseline of objectivity.¹

Media and communications scholars may smile wryly at the un-ironic use of such contested concepts as ‘reason’ and ‘objectivity’, but the thought that violence and prejudice are incubated in societies where the channels of communication are restricted and, as the Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, put it, there is “the danger of a single story”, is of particular relevance to this study.² Metzl was writing

at a time when the Clinton-Blair axis of internationalism was dominant and assumed that Washington, London and a few other western capitals should be the preferred deliverer of news and information to regions and states embroiled in conflict. Now, ‘America First’ and Brexit are pulling down the shutters on Western engagement with troubled regions, so perhaps it’s time to give the media of the diaspora some serious consideration.

SIERRA LEONE

The Blair doctrine of interventionism was first put into effect in Kosovo and then, a year later, in Sierra Leone, where British boots on the ground helped end a conflict that had killed and maimed thousands during the previous decade. For at least the first seven years of the civil war, with no direct British or US interests seemingly at stake, Western media coverage was fairly sporadic. There was a brief flurry of media excitement in 1998 when Sandline International was accused of breaching the UN arms embargo by supplying weapons and mercenaries to the government of Sierra Leone but, that apart, it was left to diaspora journalists and campaigners to keep alive in foreign policy circles the issues dividing their homeland. And, as the diasporic scholar, Dr. Zubairu Wai, writing from Canada, points out, this they did with commitment:

The media and internet became part of the diasporic communicative spaces and avenues for networking. These spaces helped the diaspora articulate certain views and opinions regarding the conflict, while allowing them to keep in touch with events back home.³

According to Wai, the internet discussion forum, Leonenet, founded in 1991/2 at the start of the violence, helped demystify the origins and character of the rebel force, the Revolutionary United Front “at a time when information about the conflict and the insurgents was limited and misleading at best”.⁴ The online newsletter, *Focus on Sierra Leone*, published in the UK, where the largest expatriate Sierra Leonean community lived, was a valuable conduit for advocacy and lobbying for a negotiated settlement. And following the 1997 coup, two exiled Sierra Leoneans, who found refuge in neighbouring Guinea, set up a radio station, FM 98.1, as a mouthpiece for the government, which had been overthrown by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council.

The history of Sierra Leone over the last quarter century is a good example of how distance often lends a measure of clear-sightedness to reporting. When the decision was taken to hold the trial of the former Liberian President, Charles Taylor, in The Hague, rather than West Africa, a challenge had to be faced: how to ensure that the citizens of the conflict region, Sierra Leone and Liberia, could be provided with a reliable and regular account of proceedings. The solution was to establish a project run by the charitable/educational arm of the BBC, the BBC World Service Trust (since re-named BBC Media Action) to train and mentor a cohort of reporters from both states who would stay in The Hague for extended periods and provide daily radio packages, in English and Krio, from the court.⁵

These journalists were native to the countries they were broadcasting to but over the lifetime of the project became a temporary diaspora in the heart of Europe, and daily proximity to the international press corps gave them a different perspective than if they had been reporting from Sierra Leone and Liberia. It was a two-way process too. Some of the foreign agency staff covering the trial came to rely on the BBC team for their intimate knowledge of places where killings had happened and of the shifting political/military alliances of the war years. So, in a sense, the impact of diaspora media can be greater than the sum of its individual parts.

THE CARIBBEAN MEDIA DIASPORA

The diasporic media eye has focused critically on Britain's post-colonial relationships with newly independent states in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. That much is to be expected, but it has also recorded and helped re-define the 'motherland's' often turbulent social interactions with a burgeoning immigrant population. Take the significant, if under-explored, role played by Claudia Jones, the Trinidadian founder of the first black newspaper in the UK, the *West Indian Gazette*. Having cut her teeth as a journalist-activist in the United States during the early phases of the post-war civil rights movement, and been jailed for her activism, she was deported to Britain in 1955. Three years later, shortly before race riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham placed relations between black and white on the political agenda for the first time, she founded a newspaper to represent views sidelined by the traditional press. "Into this

world was the *West Indian Gazette* born, like the goddess of mythology, fully armed, ready for battle.”⁶

Jones’s importance is that she straddled two worlds. As a West Indian expatriate, she acted as a conduit for future leaders, such as Norman Manley of Jamaica, Cheddi Jagan of British Guiana, and Eric Williams, of her own homeland, Trinidad and Tobago, to explain their aspirations and objectives to the British government. She also realised, perhaps sooner than any other Caribbean figure in the UK, that the West Indian islands, while nominally part of a federation, were divided by rivalries and needed an affirmation of collective distinctiveness with which to face the hostility of the host society. With her leadership, this took the form of six events held between 1959 and 1964, steel bands and calypso at the fore, which can be seen as the progenitor of the annual Notting Hill carnival that began in the late sixties.

Given its origins, it’s not surprising that the *West Indian Gazette* was the spearhead of a community fund-raising drive to help Jamaica deal with the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Flora in 1963. But perhaps only a diaspora figure like its founder-editor, a citizen of the world rather than one country, could have persuaded Caribbean readers to take an interest in the Katanga revolt in the Congo, which led to the murder of Patrice Lumumba, and the South African Rivonia trials. *The West Indian Gazette* was short-lived, dying when Claudia Jones passed away in 1964, but, in paving the way for newspapers such as *The Caribbean Times* and *The Voice* and, more latterly, *New Nation* and the website, *The AfroNews UK*,⁷ it has left a legacy in which seminal events, such as the murder of the black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, and the Brixton and Tottenham riots, can be scrutinised through a different lens from that used by the mainstream media.

THE DIASPORA AND DECOLONISATION

Early in 2017, a campaign called “Decolonise Our Minds” was launched at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), emblem of the academic diaspora in London. It caught the critical attention of the mainstream media because of the suggestion that the philosophy curriculum should no longer rely on the traditional canon—Plato, Locke, Descartes, Kant et al.—because they represent a Euro-centric view of the world. Out of 26 thinkers, recommended for study on one course in Political Theory, only two were non-European, Fanon and Gandhi. Both, of course, were major diaspora figures, influencing political

development in their native lands by long spells abroad, Gandhi in South Africa and Fanon in France and Algeria.

Frantz Fanon, born in Martinique, an overseas department of mainland France, honed his political philosophy while working in Algeria, and the long opening chapter of his classic anti-colonial text, *The Wretched of the Earth*, called “Concerning Violence”, justifies the taking up of arms by the ‘oppressed’.⁸ For Fanon and other supporters of liberation movements, violence was a form of communication, expressed in the slogan, “a bomb is a leaflet that goes bang.”⁹ Another son of the diaspora, the journalist and writer, Albert Camus, turned an unflinching existentialist gaze on the febrile relationship between his native Algeria and metropolitan France in his works, and many foreign correspondents who cut their teeth on the anti-colonial wars of the 1960s, from Algeria to Vietnam, sought out Camus as their moral compass—another example of the diasporic vision having a much wider ripple effect.

DIASPORA MEDIA ADVOCACY

The desire to communicate and tell a story should be in the DNA of all journalists and applies as much to the expatriate as to the home-based reporter, the more so when it is unsafe to criticize a regime from within. A vigorous Eritrean diaspora media can now be found in cities such as Houston, Toronto and London. A news-sheet called *Selam* (Peace) formerly published twice weekly in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, is distributed once a month in Houston, Texas, as a means of informing exiled Eritreans of events and issues concerning their homeland. The editor-in-chief of what was once Eritrea’s biggest circulation newspaper transplanted his journalism to Toronto to publish a newsletter there, and Amanuel Eyasu, who, in a previous life, was a senior editor with the state Eritrean News Agency, used his skills and experience to establish the London-based website, *Assenna*:

Media is very important for countries like us to become civil and gain political maturity. We need lots of private media outlets representing a diversity of opinions and views. We’re not opposition per se; we oppose the government because it doesn’t allow any free existence of newspapers or things conducive to public debate.¹⁰

Supporters of the Eritrean government claim that the diaspora media, far from being dedicated to the free flow of information and public

discourse, is mainly interested in anti-regime propaganda. And, of course, diasporic journalists are just as open to the charge of partisanship as those who are home-based. News about Africa has always been susceptible to distortion and stereotyping, even more so in the internet age, which is why digital sites, such as BudgIT and Africa Check were established. The former aims to provide data about the Nigerian economy unmediated through ministerial press officers or news outlets affiliated either to government or opposition. The latter, a non-profit, set up in 2012, has editors in South Africa, Kenya, Senegal, and Nigeria, as well as London, and its remit is to:

...to promote accuracy in public debate and the media in Africa. The goal of our work is to raise the quality of information available to society across the continent.¹¹

CONCLUSION

We are living in an age where the line between fact, opinion and rumour has been blurred, often deliberately, and where untruths are being sanitised and redefined as “alternative facts”.¹² Serious, ethical journalism has been on the defensive from the free availability of unsourced information via the internet for more than a decade, but the implications for democratic accountability of this fresh assault on veracity hardly need spelling out. As war and poverty stimulate population movements and global access to channels of information proliferate, the need for rigorous academic scrutiny of the deliverers of news and comment has never been more urgent. By illuminating a little studied genre of reporting, this collection performs a valuable task.

London, UK
March 2017

Jon Silverman

NOTES

1. Mark Thompson, “Defining Information Intervention: An Interview with Jamie Metzl” in *Forging Peace: Intervention, Human Rights and the Management of Media Space*, eds. Monroe E. Price and Mark Thompson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 42.
2. It was title of her TED Global Talk 2009, 18.49, filmed in July 2009.
3. Zubairu Wai, “Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sierra Leone: The Role of the Sierra Leone Diasporas” in *When The State Fails: Studies on Intervention in the Sierra Leone Civil War*, ed. Tunde Zack-Williams (London, Pluto Press, 2012), 234.

4. Ibid., 234.
5. The project, under the umbrella title, “Communicating Justice”, ran for the length of the trial, 2007–2010. The author was the mentor/consultant.
6. Donald Hinds writing on the website of the Institute of Race Relations, 3.7.2008—www.irr.org.uk/news/claudia-jones-and-the-west-indian-gazette/ Accessed on 1.3.2017.
7. [http:// www.theafronews.eu/](http://www.theafronews.eu/).
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London, Penguin, 1967), 27–84.
9. Attributed to the National Liberation Front of Algeria which began a campaign of bombings in 1955.
10. Cited by Mohamed Keita in “For Eritrean expatriate press, intimidation in exile”, blog by the Committee to Protect Journalists, <http://www.cpj.org/blog/2010/06/for-eritrean-expatriate-press-intimidation-in-exil.php> Accessed on 2.3.17.
11. Africa Check: sorting fact from fiction—<https://www.africacheck.org/about-us/>.
12. This was the term used by Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the US President, during a “Meet the Press” interview on 22.1.2017.

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