**1. Reinvigorating ‘Age-Old Questions’: African Journalism Cultures and the Fallacy of Global Normative Homogeneity**

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The scholarly pursuit of journalism and its inner workings vary considerably across the globe, yet its Anglo-American pedigree and defining canons are commonly applied with an underlying assumption of global normative[[1]](#footnote-1) consistency and homogeneity (Chalaby 1998; Hanitzsch 2007; Hallin and Mancini 2004). While there are unquestionable global similarities in professional values, the bureaucratic organisation of news organisations and the general routinization of newsmaking, it is equally true that these professional identities are shaped and colored by local factors. These local conditions have resulted in practices that challenge and throw into question the sweeping juggernaut and hegemony of Western professional ideologies, including the core principles and values that underpin the profession (Deuze 2005; Hanitzsch 2007; Waisbord 2013). Thus, while at the surface professional practices in the African press “typify the prevalent and somewhat universal professional normative ideals such as: balance, impartiality and fairness, a deeper analysis shows discrepancies that counter these established ideals” (Mabweazara 2011, 100). Consequently, the claim that professional journalists subscribe to the generic ideals of objectivity, professional routines and editorial procedures generalises what are, in fact, differentiated newsmaking cultures as journalists work in immensely varied and complex circumstances, which resist “any attempts to simplify them” (Mano 2004, 18). This scenario has resulted in an “arena in which [the] diverse professional ideologies struggle over the dominant interpretation of journalism’s social function and identity” (Hanitzsch 2007, 370).

The nature and form of these locally-defined professional cultures, especially as they emerge from the global South, remain heavily under-researched in mainstream journalism scholarship. This book thus revisits the subject with a view to offering fresh comparative insights and reflective material on journalism in Africa in the light of increased connectivity and regular journalistic traffic across different parts of the world (Waisbord 2013). Its primary aim therefore is not necessarily to break new ground but to reinvigorate and contribute to the nuancing of a well-trodden debate in journalism studies. It seeks to add to “an analytical grid” that maps out “diverse journalism cultures onto a set of universal dimensions of global variance” (Hanitzsch 2007, 371) through conceptual and exploratory case studies that provide material for reflection and analysis. In revisiting the long-standing debate on ‘newsmaking cultures’ in Africa, the book also throws into sharp perspective how we can possibly define conditions and rules of work in specific socio-cultural, political and economic settings. As Wasibord (2013, 13) aptly puts it, “[j]ournalism, its practices and ideals cannot be understood in isolation from a particular social formation” – it is an inherently *contextually-rooted* profession.

While the convergence of economics, politics, and technological transformations in the 21st century is shaking old journalistic cultures in unprecedented ways, we also need to remind ourselves of the fact that change has always been part of journalism, it is far from abnormal. Journalism is a profession that has never known anything but change – it is (and always has been) in a permanent state of flux in response to various contextual factors. We therefore need not necessarily obsess with questions of change, and, especially with apocalyptic claims of the ‘end of journalism’ (Waisbord 2013) at the expense of interrogating and keeping alive ‘age-old’ questions on journalistic cultures. Journalism may be under extraordinary pressure but longstanding questions on its manifestations across contexts linger, albeit with more prominence than ever.

Given that journalism as a social practice is permanently located at the crossroads of politics, economics and technology – we must therefore continuously ask how these factors recurrently shape and redefine its established canons. This book pursues this goal in the African context. It foregrounds the importance of examining how journalism practice in Africa is mitigated by localised factors – the intricacies embedded in local cultural factors, which collectively give credence to additional theoretical ways and modes of “repairing the longstanding neglect of journalism’s contradictions while attending to the flux of its territory” (Zelizer 2017, 193). A perspective from the South not only broadens and transforms our ways of thinking about the field of journalism, but also offers a useful point of departure for the exploration of similarities and differences (Waisbord 2013) in the normative identity of a profession that is permanently marked by internal contradictions and instability across the globe. It further provides “added value to a more comprehensive theorization of what journalism is” (Deuze 2005, 458), thus dispelling generalizations about the field.

It has to be stated from the outset, however, that by emphasising the notion of ‘newsmaking cultures in Africa’, this book does not attempt the impossible task of painting all 54 states on the continent with the same socio-cultural brush. Far from it. There is ample acknowledgement here that the African continent is a complex mosaic of cultures with equally varied socio-political, economic and historical experiences. There are marked differences and nuances between countries which have significant implications on the operations of the news media. Thus, while the focal point of the book is on Africa as a region, the enormity and complexity of the continent makes it difficult to paint the entire continent’s journalistic cultures with one brush. Nevertheless, the argument collectively advanced is about shared journalistic practices, values, attitudes, and beliefs across sub-Saharan African countries, which when contrasted with other cultures, especially in the global North, reveal a wide gap of differences and nuances that are qualitatively generalizable across a range of countries, despite the obvious differences. I return to this important point later, but first, for the sake of conceptual clarity, the conception of newsmaking as *culture* needs to be unpacked.

**Newsmaking in Africa conceived through the prism of ‘culture’**

A fitting starting point is to consider the slippery concept of *culture* itself, which often drags with it several meanings from diverse intellectual disciplines. Although a coherent and universal definition is difficult, Hanitzsch offers as a sound working-definition that sees culture as “a set of *ideas* (values, attitudes, and beliefs), *practices* (of cultural production), and *artefacts* (cultural products, text)” (2007, 369 emphasis original). This conception points to three basic human activities which underpin cultural practice as part of everyday life: “*what people think*, *what people do*, and *what people make*” (Tharp 2009, 3, emphasis added). While some critics see this definition as underplaying the structuring role of *politics,* (including the role of the state) and *economics* (material disparities), other researchers contend that *culture*, like all social elements imbued with a ‘cultural dimension’, is inevitably implicated in extant socio-political and economic factors, and cannot be narrow-mindedly subordinated to political or economic explanations. This understanding of culture can be stretched to the context of journalism. While the notion of *newsmaking cultures* is somewhat of a well-worn catchphrase, it highlights how particular professional values, attitudes and beliefs provide a set of orientations that influence myriad practical decisions and actions taken by journalists and their editors in their daily routines**.** As Nadler (2016, 9) explains:

Thinking of [news] production processes as *cultural* helps to point to a range of factors influencing the logic of production. News production, from this view can be examined as a set of practices informed by a host of *historical legacies and cultural tendencies*, from organisational routines to producers’ conceptions about their audiences to news workers’ stylistic preferences and assumptions about citizenship and political life (emphasis added).

At a very basic level, the term ‘newsmaking cultures’ invokes the social shaping nature of localised factors that influence “ways of thinking about and doing journalism” (Deuze 2005, 443) on the African continent. It draws attention to the ways in which journalism as a social practice is both socially constructed and reconstituted in the sharedrealities (values, beliefs and general way of life) of the context in which it is practiced. This view throws into sharp relief “the *culturally mediating* nature of news” and acknowledges the “diverse ways in which ‘culture’ variously conditions and shapes patterns, and forms” of news production (Cottle 2000, 438 emphasis added).

This ‘constructivist’[[2]](#footnote-2) approach sees societal structures as intersectingwith journalists’ exercise of agency in complex ways that challenge and resist the straitjacket of a ‘globalised professional’. It acknowledges that journalists are not only individuals who wield their own agency but ‘cultural beings’ socialized into thinking and acting in particular ways as both professionals and ‘ordinary’ citizens. Therefore, journalism as a social practice cannot be narrowly reduced to the practitioners and institutions that produce it. Journalists actions and decisions (individually or collectively) are inherently connected to the complex web of social connections – the whole *cultural milieu* that shapes and constrains actions from within and from outside.

In the African context, this cultural milieu, relates to the intricacies and influences of entrenched cultural practices and concepts that often filter into the practice of journalism. Indeed, despite Africa’s cultural diversity, “threads of underlying affinity run through the beliefs, customs, value systems, and socio-political institutions and practices of the various African societies” (Sesanti’s 2010, 347).The notion of *ubuntu*, for example, has recurrently emerged as an overarching cultural compass for understanding what ‘Africaness’ means (Shaw 2009). It is seen by many as a ‘cultural mindset’ that encapsulates what it means to be human in Africa, particularly that “[a] person is a person through other people” (Shaw 2009, 493), and one is human because, he belongs, participates and shares (Murithi in Obonyo 2011). As a concept, *ubuntuism* directs our attention to ‘culturally mediating’ foundations described by Nyamnjoh (2005) as the cultural orientation to communal values, which focus our critical lenses to the contingent social relationships and worldviews that permeate the context in which journalism is practiced in Africa. It points to the “defining and patently germane features of African cultural experiences that have implications for the practice of journalism” (Mabweazara 2015, 107) on the continent. As Hanitzsch avers notions of “social harmony and unity”, which underpin *ubuntu*, and are widely prioritised in many non-Western cultures, quite often “render ineffective” values and practices that may be deemed sacrosanct “in certain cultural contexts” (2007, 378).

Granted a blind adoption of ubuntuism and its assumptions of “a unitary and binding [African] cultural authenticity” (Banda 2009, 235) runs the risk of essentialising or “[freezing] the continent in time” (Obonyo 2011, 8), it, nonetheless, remains one of the most widely-referenced concepts for illuminating the intricacies of African cultural life, which have marked implications for journalism practice on the continent (see Faniran 2014). It constitutes the unquestioned background filter (Schudson 2005) navigated by journalists in their newsmaking routines. Indeed, this entrenched cultural notion can be invoked to explain some of the most distinct professional practices and cultures that relate, *inter alia*, to widespread practices of patronage, clientelism, political parallelism and partisan reportorial routines. (I discuss these in more detail later on.)

These newsmaking practices are manifest in the way news outlets and their reporters think and act, as well as imitate one another, quite often unconsciously, by sharing “a recognisable style and other identifiable characteristics, [including] how to define ‘news’ […] how the news agenda should be set, and the modes through which it should be presented” (Nadler 2016, 9). Nadler adds that accounting for cultural factors of news production “shows that news producers are not simply driven by ahistorical or ‘noncultural’ factors, such as economic imperatives […] or profit maximization” (2016, 10). Rather, the entire news ecosystem should be seen as immersed in a whole range of cultural factors that shape newsmaking in nondeterministic or linear ways. These factors are nonetheless adaptive to various structural influences and conditions, especially the structures of ownership and control and the broader ideological climate which shapes the thinking of journalists, editors and news sources alike.

As noted earlier, by highlighting the centrality of shared African cultural values that shape journalism, I do not take for granted the important differences between countries. Obonyo (2011, 5) reminds us that “Africa does not provide a clear picture that is easy to diagnose”. Thus, while the pressures connected to the local cultural orientations suggest a homogenous African landscape with a collective singular identity, this is far from it. The continent is culturally, politically and economically fragmented, and even notions such as “*ubuntuism* exists in various forms” (Mano 2010, 12). As Obonyo (2011, 4) explains, “[t]here are many Africans, both fitting stereotyping but simultaneously defying uniform description”. For Obonyo, North Africa is more closely aligned to the Middle East than to the wider Africa. “It engages less in scholarship terms with the rest of the continent” (2).

Consequently, conversations about Africa invariably consider Africa south of the Sahara. But even here disparities informed by “language and colonial experiences make it somewhat of a challenge to make sweeping statements” (2). There are wide discrepancies between Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone Africa and, indeed, within each of these regions.

We must therefore avoid the “reductive assumption that African countries, and the myriad array of cultures, religions and languages, can be prescriptively reduced to homogenous sets of continent-wide social and cultural [practices]” (Obijiofor and Hanusch 2011, 53). The enormity and complexity of the continent makes it practically impossible to capture the varied contextual influences “which [sometimes] lie outside journalism itself” (Conboy 2013, 149), but significantly influence how journalists do their work. Thus, an assessment of journalism on the continent “needs insight from both the practice of journalism as well as a general awareness of broader cultural trends” (ibid.).

This points to the need for a more broadly encompassing approach that takes into account the complexities of the socio-cultural context in which African journalists operate, and avoids the trap of homogenising practices by overlooking important cultural differences that shape our identities as ordinary, everyday people and as professionals. It is therefore important to look elsewhere for critical insights that can enrich our understanding of (African) journalism, and there is no better way than invoking insights from Western journalism scholarship, in particular, *the sociology of news*. This is particularly important given the very fact that journalism as a ‘field’ of study, has its roots in the West, chiefly in the US and the UK. In this sense, our attempt to understand journalism in Africa should not be an isolated undertaking. As Livingstone advises us, we should not underestimate how much we can learn “from *different cultures* or what can be achieved [through] the combined creative intelligence” of diverse but related scholarship, sharing “insights and energies” (2003, 481, emphasis added). Hanitzch echoes these sentiments in his view that we can only “speak of journalism culture […] if we assume that there exist other […] cultures to which the former could be compared” (2007, 370).

 **‘Cultural approaches’ to newsmaking: what we learn from ‘the sociology of news’**

While journalism studies as a discipline generally lacks coherence and largely relies on occupational values steeped in Western empirical experiences (Deuze 2005; Waisbord 2013), all conceived and developed in splendid oblivion of experiences in non-Western contexts, we still can glean some useful insights, especially in terms of the connections between journalism and its cultural context of production. ‘Cultural approaches’ to news production as advanced mainly by American journalism scholars rooted in ‘the sociology of news’[[3]](#footnote-3) such as Mark Fishman (1980); Michael Schudson (2000) and David Ryfe (2006, 2012), among others, can illuminate our understanding of how African journalism, as elsewhere, mirrors the complexities of its dialectical relationship to the broader social field.

The approaches open up useful insights into the nature of news production by providing frames for “understanding journalists’ vague renderings of how they know ‘news’ when they see it” – the elusive sacred knowledge underpinning “news judgement” and “news values” (Schudson 2005, 188-189). This understanding, as Schudson further explains, broadens the scope of news production analysis to include complex social issues beyond organisational and professional spheres, which journalists do not entirely control or anticipate. These wider social issues “transcend the structures of ownership or patterns of work relations” (2005, 187), which largely constitute the default focal point in most journalism research, by acknowledging that “journalists live and work within an encompassing social and cultural context that powerfully and implicitly informs their attempts to make sense of the world” (Ettema et al. 1997, 44). Analyses that transcends the structural constraints of media ownership, its political economy and organizational contexts shifts our attention to

the specific social realities […] where news sources, news reporters, news organisations, editors and the competing demands of professionalism, the market-place and cultural traditions collect around specific choices of what news to report and how to report it. (Schudson 2000, 175)

Schudson adds that “the central categories of newsworkers themselves are ‘cultural’ more than structural” (2005, 188). Culture in this case, “serves as a template, guide, or map to action” (Ryfe 2012, 17) for journalists, and the professional routines they go through “exhibit evidence of cultural norms” which are “part of a broadly shared sense that public life [is] for association, affiliation, and belonging” (Ryfe 2006, 62).

In this sense, the *cultural* *approaches* to news reinforce the fact that the filter through which news is constructed is “the cultural air we breathe, the whole ideological atmosphere of our society, which tells us that some things can be said and others had best not be said” (Hoggart 1976, x). This *cultural air* constitutes “the unquestioned and generally unnoticed background assumptions through which news is gathered and within which it is framed” (Schudson 2005, 189). This understanding brings to the fore the fact that, “among the resources journalists work with are the traditions […] they inherit from their own cultures, with a number of vital assumptions about the world built in” (Schudson 2005, 190). Journalists therefore

breathe a specifically journalistic, occupational cultural air as well as the air they share with fellow citizens. [Their] ‘routines’…are not only social, emerging out of interactions among officials, reporters and editors, but literally emerging […] traditions. (Schudson 2003, 193)

 In this light, journalists seek to maintain and ‘repair’ their social relations with colleagues and their broader social context. The “reality [they] manufacture” in news works to maintain their cultural image as journalists in the eyes of the wider world (Schudson 2005, 190).

News production therefore lies squarely within the social relations and interpretive processes that sustain it. This argument is further explored by Fishman (1980, 141) who posits that news is constructed out of “an amorphous world of happenings” and that there are different traditions beyond the confines of news institutions, which journalists draw upon in performing their duties. These traditions and shared values, in the words of Sigal (1973, 3), are not simply limited to “the personal political predilections of newsmen themselves”, but include “attitudes widely shared among reporters and editors in the news community, attitudes which might properly be called *the journalist’s creed*, or ideology” (emphasis original). Deuze concurs with this view but adds a critical caveat by maintaining that while it is possible to “speak of a dominant occupational ideology of journalism on which most newsworkers base their professional perceptions and praxis, *[it is important to remember that this] is interpreted, used and applied differently among journalists across media*” (2005, 445 emphasis added). The latter point offers deep insight into the news media. It suggests that while traditional boundaries of journalism exist, they are *never stable*. They are in constant negotiation with “the dominant sensibilities of […] public culture” (Ryfe 2012, 18) and are challenged and redefined by social changes, including technological developments as “journalism finds itself dancing to the tune of an increasingly networked world” (Ryfe 2012, 18-19).

What we deduce from this is that media globalisation does not always lead to identical journalistic approaches. While there may be similarities in news values, reportorial formats, and the bureaucratic organisation of news institutions, there are significant differences and nuances in journalistic cultures, all pointing to the fact that “[t]he globalisation juggernaut doesn't crush local cultures” (Wasibord 2013, 195). Journalism as a “norm-dependent institution” is therefore “in constant need of boundary maintenance” and “[s]uch border patrol behaviour works continuously, regardless of structural changes, and transforms the norms and myths of the profession” (Eide and Sjovaag 2016, 4-5).

Having set the context for a general understanding of journalism as a ‘culture’ and what Western journalism scholarship says about this, the next section demonstrates how ‘cultural’ context shapes some of the most distinct elements of newsmaking in Africa. The aim here is not to present an all-inclusive socio-historical account of contemporary journalism practice in Africa, but to provide an overview of some of journalistic practices, values and beliefs that standout on the continent. This clearly is not an easy task given the multifaceted nature of the continent as discussed earlier. In general, newsmaking cultures in Africa can loosely be summed-up through the complex dialectical connections between three interrelated elements: ‘*power distance’*, ‘*market orientation’* and ‘*interventionism’* (Hanitzsch 2007), all pointing to the multifaceted conditions in which African journalists operate.[[4]](#footnote-4) These conditions spawn news production cultures that are radically different but equally similar in many ways to established global practices and norms.

**African journalism cultures: A complex mosaic of practices, traditions and ‘power play’**

Although the 1990s saw most sub-Saharan African countries adopting multi-party politics, leading to the liberalisation of the media landscape in countries such as Zambia, South Africa, Kenya and Ghana, among others, most of these governments have since rescinded on this liberal agenda (Faniran 2014). The inability to control the news agenda in an increasingly sophisticated media ecosystem has prompted the tightening of the media environment. Skjerdal (2014, 89), for example, highlights how Ethiopia’s semi-authoritarian regime has instituted “numerous measures that serve to restrict rather than encourage a vibrant” media environment. Similarly, Moyo (2009, 60) writes about the curtailment of “basic civil and political liberties such as the freedom of expression, opinion, association, and information” in Zimbabwe. These constraints not only result in “self-censorship” but also engender localised “innovations that borrow from and build on global developments” (Mudhai 2014, 123).

In terms of the political economy of news organisations, the scene in Africa is equally diverse. It stretches from the well-developed and technologically advanced beacons of journalistic excellence in South Africa and parts of East Africa to fledgling media operations in much of the continent (Hyden and Leslie 2007). South Africa, in particular, stands apart from the rest of English-speaking Africa; its media infrastructure is predominantly well-funded, with excellent newsroom infrastructure. It “shares a number of characteristics with Western countries: such as their organisation of the media and standards of journalism practice” (Verweij and van Noort 2014, 100). “No other country on [the] continent has such a well-developed and sophisticated market infrastructure. What is happening there [...] has no direct parallel elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa” (Hyden and Leslie 2007, 19). However, even with this level of development, social divisions between the rich and the poor remain prominent “because of the social deprivation of the bulk of its citizens” (Verweij and van Noort 2014, 100).

Pointing to some of the distinct conditions in which African journalists operate, Kupe (2004) highlights the poor salaries and significantly limited resources that most journalists have to endure. Similarly, Obijiofor and Hanusch (2011) note that the majority of African journalists are beset by a number of challenges, including lack of appropriate skills; prohibitive costs and inequitable access to relevant technologies; job instability; tight legal and regulatory frameworks and complex political tensions. These conditions, among other factors, coalesce to shape and constrain how journalists conduct their business on the continent. Patrimonial relations and clientelist associations, for example, are some of the most prominent journalistic cultures directly linked to the social context in which African journalists operate. In the sections that follow I discuss these and other key elements of African journalistic cultures in detail.

***Politics*, *‘power distance’ and relations of patronage***

While ‘patrimonialism’ is widely deployed as a catch-all concept for the political ills that engulf the African continent[[5]](#footnote-5), it nonetheless offers useful insights into journalistic cultures on the continent. In its generic use, it characterizes structural relations in which the political elite pervert and twist formal channels for the benefit of their loyal ‘clients’ (Sneyd 2014). In the context of journalism, these informal patron–client relationships involve “the discretionary use of public resources by political officials to strengthen personal and/or partisan power” as well as “favor allied news organisations” (Waisbord 2013, 154). While the complexity or specific characteristics of media patrimonialism in Africa, cannot be captured in “universal explanations” (Waisbord 2013, 156), it is, however, firmly rooted in entrenched post-independence cultures of corruption, generally known to undercut professionalism (see Muhammad Jameel Yusha'u’s chapter for detailed discussion of corruption.)

In these contexts, news organisations tend to be bound up in networks of patronage that envelope state structures and institutions. Patronage relations between officials and journalists “as well as tight-knit linkages between political patrons and business owners” (Waisbord 2013, 159) filter into the newsmedia’s agenda, redefining and shaping ‘news judgement’ and ‘news values’. In countries like Zambia and Zimbabwe, for example, patrimonial relations and strategies have seen the continued imposition of senior editors in state-controlled media institutions. Writing about the Zambian context, Chirambo (2011), observes that the relationship between the former President Kaunda and the controversial British businessman, Tiny Rowland catalysed a number of developments which ultimately influenced editorial transactions at one of Zambia’s leading daily newspaper, the *Times of Zambia*.In Zimbabwe, senior editorial appointments at the state-controlled Zimbabwe Newspapers Group (Zimpapers) have often been associated with ‘political correctness’ or an individual’s alignment with the ruling party (ZANU-PF) political patronage networks. These patrimonial connections tend to invert the balance of power by placing journalists under the manipulative control of government officials with obvious consequences for professionalism as journalists are ‘held to ransom’ in the patron-client relationship.

In the same way, some working conditions force journalists to yield to “intrusive publishers who use their [media outlets] to attain personal or political goals" (Ibelema 2008, 30). It is not uncommon, for example, for stories to be withheld in order to appease advertisers or government officials (Robins 1997). Similarly, stories of governments attempt to control the private media by refusing to place lucrative state advertising with news organisations seen as ‘disloyal’ are also commonplace. In Uganda, for example, the *Daily Monitor*, a privately-ownednewspaper was denied advertising from the government and state run companies for much of the 1990s (Balikowa 1995). This approach has persisted to date, with some companies in the private sector avoiding any association with the critical private press, preferring only to advertise with the government-controlled daily, the *New Vision.* This is also the case in Burundi and Rwanda where privately-owned newspapers are intentionally denied advertising by government affiliated institutions (see Fielder and Frere’s discussion of this in Chapter 6).

This ‘back-door’ control of press operations by governments is not unique to East and Central Africa. In southern Africa, advertisements are sometimes used by politicians to discourage critical coverage. In 2011, the South African government spokesperson announced that government had approved a communications plan to reward media “which put a positive spin on what government was doing”. He further qualified his statement thus: “Clearly the media I am going to focus on is *where I have a base to reinforce my message*. *How can I advertise in a media that doesn’t carry my message?”* (de Waal 2011, emphasis added). These sentiments have also been echoed by South Africa’s Arts and Culture Minister, who equated advertising in newspapers critical of government and the ruling party, African National Congress (ANC) to “feeding a crocodile and stand[ing] next to it hoping that it won’t attack you” (Hans 2017). This indirect state control of the press has forced some private news organisations to sharpen their “survival instinct” by pursuing alternative revenue streams and adopting “aggressive marketing strategies to win over more readers” (Balikowa 1995, 607) and thus remain afloat.

Beyond the foregoing ‘soft control’ of press operations, journalistic cultures have also been shaped by overt government strategies to muzzle the press. The reluctance to liberalise the broadcast sector, especially the registering of private radio stations, by several governments in Africa is also part of a coercive pool of patronage strategies that linger in the African media scene. Some are registered, but not allowed to broadcast news as seen in the Zambian context where radio broadcasting licenses are mainly granted to religious and community stations on the grounds that they would not meddle in politics or air political broadcasts (Cammack 2007). Chirambo (2011, 48) observes that licences are “granted selectively to applicants, with the bulk of licenses directed at applicants of Evangelical Christian persuasions [thus] further limiting the participation of alternative religions and voices in the political public sphere”.

The cultures of patronage are also conceived as sustained by local cultural traditions such as *ubuntuism*, discussed earlier, which generally encapsulates what it means to be human in Africa, especially the orientation to communal values and belonging in which respect for elders and authority is an inherent constituent element (Bourgault 1995; Sesanti 2010; Shaw 2009). Through foregrounding “the supremacy of the community”, the “sanctity of authority” as well as “respect for old age” (Faniran 2014, 152), *ubuntu* is seen as giving “form and stability to the way people communicate” (ibid.) in Africa. Writing about the immediate post-independence leadership’s desire to control the press as a way of promoting unity and respect for authority, Bourgault (1995, 177) observes thus: “they believed that an emphasis on the promotion of unity was *far more in keeping with African traditions*. *Africans were after all traditionally respectful of authority, and the divisive critic had been customarily viewed as irresponsible and somewhat ‘unsocialised’*” (emphasis added).

The immediate post-independence conception of a “free and unbridled press” as “particularly pernicious” and posing danger by advocating “anarchic political action” (Bourgault 1995, 177) has lingered on. Countries like Zimbabwe have promulgated stringent laws such as the 2002 Public Order and Security Act (POSA), which restricts the publication of false statements deemed prejudicial to the state or undermining the authority of the President.[[6]](#footnote-6) This desire to control the press has often been associated with the personalisation of state business by political leaders who equate the criticism of government to a ‘personal attack’ or ‘disrespect’ (Bourgault 1995). It is a mind-set that shows the persistence of what Kenyan historian Atieno Odhiambo refers to as the ‘ideology of order’ in which ideas that contradict the interests of the state are interpreted as ‘dissent’ or ‘sedition’ (see Chapter 14 and 15 for a detailed discussion of this).

These localised experiences have led to arguments for ethical orientations that are tailored for the socio-cultural context served by African journalism. Francis Kasoma, in particular has been most vocal in arguing for the contentious concept of “Afriethics”, in which “[t]he individualism and divisionism that permeate the practise of journalism in Africa should be discarded [as] not only unAfrican but also professionally unhealthy” (1996, 93). He argues that African journalism should have an inbuilt self-regulatory “mechanism that facilitates journalists counselling one another” and strives towards a “journalism with a human face” (ibid.). This approach has, of course, been criticised for its underpinning idealism and doctrine of African exceptionalism, which overlook the complexities of a globalizing African media context (Banda 2009).

***Material deprivation, clientelistic practices and economic aggrandisement***

Beyond the constraints shaped by political authorities in their exchange of patronage for support, journalists in Africa are also widely caught up in chains of “clientelist networks” (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 59) through ties to managers, business executives, and other centres of economic power, which weaken their professionalism. Thus, while ‘state-based clientelism’ is pervasive, the widespread conditions of material deprivation and poor salaries have created environments in which journalists are confronted with real survival challenges that make them vulnerable to “pecuniary gestures” (Frere 2007, 244). Most journalists in sub-Saharan Africa are consequently faced with the ethical dilemma of accepting gifts at the expense of key ethical tenets of the profession. Some are brazenly corrupt, with “coverage bought and sold like tomatoes in […] markets” (Robins 1997, 129) as journalists supplement their meagre salaries.

Writing about the challenges faced by journalists in the war-torn region of Central Africa, Frere (2007) observes that because of the disruption of the economic structures that sustain media institutions (particularly because of economic embargoes), journalists in both the private and public media sectors are lucky to receive any salary at all. This scenario has left many journalists in the region susceptible to the dominant clientelisticpractice of ‘brown envelope journalism’[[7]](#footnote-7) – the widespread acceptance of cash, freebees and other forms of payments from sources in return for positive coverage. (Terje Skjerdal offers a more nuanced conceptualization of this phenomenon in Chapter 8.) Although clientelist relations in journalism are predominantly underground, in his earlier work, Skjerdal (2010) observes that there are several examples of instances were brown envelopes are openly handed over to reporters at public events. He notes that in Tanzania “it is customary for reporters to […] queue up and sign a form to receive a ‘sitting fee’ from the event organizer” (Skjerdal 2010, 370).

The widespread nature of this journalistic culture across Africa is evidenced by the profusion of localised code names for the practice of accepting ‘gifts’ from sources. Skjerdal (2010, 375) delves into the nomenclature of the culture, identifying localised names such as *mshiko* in Tanzania (Swahili term for ‘perks’), *keske* in Nigeria (informal offerings given to journalists by sources), *gombo* in Cameroon and Chad (a common expression for journalistic bribes), and *soli* in Ghana (derived from the term ‘solidarity’). He observes that, in some countries, a humorous touch is ascribed to the practice. For example, in Zambia it is called “ndalama yamatako”, literally translated as ‘money for the buttocks’, which means the contribution is “a ‘sitting allowance’ to ease the pain of sitting through […] press briefings” (Skjerdal 2010, 376). These localised codenames point to deep-rooted cultures of corruption outside journalism itself, which we must take into account when attempting to understand cultures of clientellism in African journalism. Writing about Cameroon, Nyamnjoh observes that “corruption is thriving and the elite few are swimming in opulence from embezzlement and kickbacks” (2005, 123). This scenario creates instability and unpredictability in governance, thus undermining a nation’s overall economic health.

Thus, in countries with strong traditions of clientelism such as Nigeria (see Chapter 9), journalists and their sources tend to cultivate ties that lead to the sacrifice of “investigative reporting” and core ethical values (Skjerdal 2010, 388) as journalists and sources respectively pursue mutual interests in *financial gains* and *status*. This state of affairs has sustained “unprecedented levels of […] state decay, especially through decline in the civil service and the delivery of social services” (Barkan 2006, 18), including the obstruction of processes of democratisation and a “weak demand by citizens for governments to be responsible” (Cammack 2007, 606).

The quest for economic survival by news organisations and their staffers has also resulted in economic and market orientations that largely follow a populist approach intended to attract readers and viewers. This partly explains the sharp rise in the tabloid press, and in particular, the growing tabloidization of content in the traditional ‘quality’ press across Africa (see Chama 2017, and George Ogola’s chapter in this volume), a development that has “challenged the dominant journalistic norms” (Wasserman 2010, 1). Writing about tabloids in South Africa, Wasserman notes that they are “driven by commercial agendas and the hunt for profits” derived from a readership largely seen by conglomerates as too marginal to constitute a viable ‘market segment’ (2010, 93). In related efforts to combat economic challenges, reporters exercise their individual agency by ‘moonlighting’ for other news organisations[[8]](#footnote-8) (see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of this practice).

Although the default approach to evaluating the above practices is to apply universal ethical approaches and norms that out-rightly condemn them as proscribed, alternative views argue that the “peculiar norms of African society” need to be assessed from an African normative position (Skjerdal 2010, 390) as Western journalism ethics are not in tune with the realities of African experiences. For example, the very idea of rejecting gifts and incentives is widely seen as incompatible with “the value of African hospitality or solidarity” (ibid.) or the communitarian sensibilities underpinning the spirit of *ubuntu* as discussed earlier. It is also for this reason that scholars like Kasoma (1996) have argued that the peculiarity of the contexts in which African journalists operate demand “a set of ethics that are essentially different from Western (‘universal’) ethics” (Skjerda2010, 391).

***Political parallelism, partisanship and ‘interventionism’***

One the most conspicuous features of journalism in Africa is its close connections to politics or the extent to which it typically “reflects distinct political orientations” (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 28) along party politics in its news content. While partisanship is not necessarily unique to journalistic cultures in Africa as Hallin and Mancini (2004) have aptly demonstrated in the European context, in Africa the polarization of the news media goes beyond party political lines to include identity politics as well as regional and ethnic belonging (Nyamnjoh 2005). Exploring the Cameroonian context, Nyamnjoh argues that “regional and ethnic tendencies in the media have affected their […] responsibility to act as honest, fair and neutral” (2005, 231) arbiters of the truth. Similarly, Frere reminds us that history provides several examples of how a media environment torn apart by ethnic identity politics can “incite hatred, provoke violent mass movements, [and] voluntarily manipulate information in the service of war mongering strategies” (2007, 1). Writing about Central Africa, Frere offers a number of examples of how polarised media in fragile states can foster divisions with catastrophic consequences. The 1994 Rwandan genocide, in particular is presented as a textbook case of how hate speech, especially on radio, can spark genocidal violence (Frere 2007).

Related to the above, the press’s brazen alignment to various centres of power across the divide of the state-controlled and the private press is a direct structural and normative legacy of the 1990s. It is closely related to the political economic history of post-independence states, especially the failure by post-independence administrative structures to support liberalised economies, resulting in most news organisations struggling to survive exclusively on advertising. For this reason, the media is tangled in a web of power structures along political, ethnic, and regional lines etc. with direct consequences for professionalism. Journalistic autonomy and a distinct “sense of social purpose” (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 38) are consequently compromised as journalists seek to please their allies.

The Zimbabwean media scene offers a good example of a brazenly partisan news media culture characterised by marked polarity between the state-controlled ‘public press’ and the privately-owned press (see Chapters 12 and 15). The former has championed a kind of reporting that functions as a means to spread government policy and supresses dissenting voices while the latter parochially gives space to dissenting voices and subjects government policy to heavy scrutiny and criticism. As Chari (2009, 10) puts it,

[t]he state media is unapologetic in its support for the ruling Zanu PF government while the private press seems to have signed a pact with the opposition to ‘hear no evil’, ‘speak no evil’ and ‘see no evil’ regarding its affairs.

As elsewhere on the continent, election periods in Zimbabwe are always moments of great tension and journalist are subjected to heightened pressure and manipulation along party political lines. The conflicting editorial thrusts characterising these two broad sectors of the press tend to mirror the political and ideological power struggles pervading public discourse in the country. As a result, “news reporting has become too predictable and readers are forced to read all the newspapers available in order to get [something approaching] the truth” (Chari 2009, 11).

Reinforcing this journalistic culture, the Internet has also facilitated what Kasoma (1996, 99) refers to as a “journalism of hatred, revenge, and dislike” by targeting personalities of members of political factions, especially in the state-controlled press. This journalistic culture can best be described as “activist journalism” (Chari 2009, 29) or “vendetta journalism” (Kasoma 1996, 99). These new tensions online point to the fact that we cannot eschew the transformative impact of digital technologies, particularly how the Internet is reshaping news production practices, as well as the relationships between news organizations and their audiences (see Chapter 16 and 17). The Internet culture of participation, sharing, openness has resulted in multiple online journalistic cultures that straddle the tension between the logic of professional control and the unfolding challenges of open participation (see Mabweazara et al. 2014).

In another journalistic dimension, conflict-ridden regions have also seen a surge in ‘interventionist’ journalistic cultures primarily oriented towards defusing tensions and ‘peace building’ (Frere 2007, see also Chapter 6). Critical to this journalistic culture is a reappraisal of traditional news values and the ideals of objectivity and neutrality on the grounds that the realities of conflict and violence in Africa demand “a different approach to journalism” (Obonyo 2010, 61). Describing the concerted efforts by the Kenyan press to publish stories that addressed peace-building following the 2007 Kenyan post-election violence, Obonyo writes:

following the botched […] elections Kenyan media marked a unique day in their history when on the first Sunday after the elections, and following days of […] violence, all the newspapers carried a similar headline: ‘save our beloved country’. On the same day at 6: 00 pm, in a 60 minute program the electronic media throughout the country […] implored the nation to return to its senses and restore peace. (see also Chapter 15)

Commenting on this example, Onyebadi and Oyedej point out that while it highlights the potential role of the media in deescalating conflict in Africa, it also fundamentally suggests that in the context of conflict, “reporters should be society’s moral witnesses; not ‘objective’ bystanders, who watch and report on the collapse of humanity” (2011, 215).

**Conclusion and summary of the book**

The professional cultures discussed above clearly abdicate “impartiality and evenhandedness and explicitly [stand] against ‘professional’ journalism” (Waisbord 2013, 2). They also point to the fact that “[m]edia globalisation doesn't [necessarily] turn local journalism into a replica of the standard professional model” (Wasibord 2013, 195). This illustrates the contested nature of “professional journalism as a normative horizon” (Waisbord 2013, 2) and the very limitations associated with examining African journalism exclusively through the normative lens calibrated to assess Western journalism. Indeed, we can conclude that a consensus position on what exactly constitutes professional journalism “for a world of diverse journalistic cultures and occupational ethics pulled in different directions by political, economic, and social forces” (Waisbord 2013, 9) is not easy one.

The rest of the book explores the themes discussed above in greater depth. It is organized into 5 interrelated sections, carrying theoretically driven studies that use a wide range of evidence and approaches to shed light on diverse issues implicating newsmaking cultures in Africa. The *first section* explores some of the topical issues and conceptual debates on journalism in Africa. Ibrahim Seaga Shaw’s chapter discusses explores the challenge of developing a journalism curriculum that reflects diverse national and regional journalism cultures in the light of the UNESCO journalism education model which has been adopted in several African countries. He raises questions on the blanket applicability of this curriculum in continent as diverse as Africa and argues that an imposed curriculum based on a Western liberal model will not necessarily work. For Shaw, there is need to consider the epistemological importance of divergence in ways that are sensitive to the specificity of ‘locale’. In contrast to the predominantly critical reflections on journalistic cultures in Africa, Robert White and Hayes Mawindi Mabweazara’s contribution takes a rather ‘optimistic’ approach that explores journalistic efforts to challenge entrenched personalistic and neo-patrimonial governance structures bent on strengthening the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the ruling elite. Using a range of examples, they argue that the press (in association with the civil society and media support organisations) has developed ways of unmasking the democratic pretentions of the ‘big man’ rule by foregrounding discourses of human rights, freedom of information, rule of law *inter alia*.

The *second part* of the book focuses on professional practices, cultures and journalistic ‘identity’. George Ogola examines tabloid journalism culture in Kenya through a close analysis of the phenomenal growth of *The Nairobian*, which points to a ‘professional cultural shift’ that has generated debate on Kenyan journalism. The tabloid’s popularity and success is intricately connected to its focus on ‘popular anxieties’, the banalities of everyday and the personal as well as ‘civic’ issues in sensational ways that can also be seen as ‘political’. Shifting to another popular professional culture, Hayes Mawindi Mabweazara’s focuses on how the Zimbabwean economic and political context has nurtured an environment in which journalists clandestinely incorporate extra paid work into their daily routines as a way of supplementing their poor salaries. This practice not only differentiate them from their counterparts in the economically developed countries, but also highlight how material deprivation subverts conventionalized notions of professionalism. Taking a comparative approach, Anke Fiedler and Marie-Soleil Frère explore how political unrest and instability impact on press freedom in the troubled region of the Great Lakes. Comparing the internal dynamics and intricate experiences of Rwanda, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of Congo, they argue that while in times of crisis and conflict, political interference influences press freedom, in periods of political stability other factors such financial bottlenecks emerge as prominent. Focusing on Uganda, Brian Semujju looks at how newsrooms in a polarized media environment cover contentious institutions such as the Uganda Electoral Commission. While pointing to heavy polarization, Semujju contends that there is no one factor that can singlehandedly explain newsmaking cultures in Uganda, especially when covering politically contentious issues.

The *third section* addresses the ethical and professional challenges facing journalism in Africa. It begins with Terje Skjerdal’s overarching synthesis of research on journalistic bribery, which identifies two major interpretations: the *professionalist* approach, focusing on causes and remedies of brown envelope journalism and the *culturalist* approach, which looks at ethical issue as cultural practice. He criticizes both approaches for downplaying the distinction between journalistic practice and individual agency, which points to ethical awareness. The professional dilemmas posed by poor capitalization of the media in Nigeria is the primary focus of Muhammad Jameel Yusha'u’s chapter. He discusses corruption within the press and the implications of poor working conditions in detail and concludes with suggestions for alternative ways of financing the press in order to curb corruption. Admire Mare demonstrates how various pressures from advertisers, shareholders, news sources and editorial management militate against the institutionalization of ethical business journalism in Kenyan and South African newsrooms. He asserts that context-specific challenges negate the lofty ideals of professional autonomy and objectivity associated with the Western liberal-pluralist foundations business journalism. The section concludes with Ammina Kothari’s exploration of various stages of media evolution in Tanzania and their role in shaping ethical guidelines for the journalists. She suggests that media operating with limited resources and freedom such as in Tanzania require a hybrid ethical framework which combines established ethical principles with a close consideration of local circumstances.

The *fourth section* explores the complex imbrications between political actors and the media, and more generally the extent to which media reflects political divisions. Wallace Chuma, in *Journalism, Politics and Professionalism in Zimbabwe,* fleshes out the journalism-politics nexus in post-independence Zimbabwe, identifying key moments and sites where the matrix of influences has played itself out. Chuma also discusses the limits and possibilities for new media ecologies and practices in realigning the journalism-politics relationship in ways that enhance professionalism and agency. Taking a related approach, Letshwiti Batlhalefi Tutwane, discusses how the government of Botswana influences and controls the news agenda in Botswana’s public media through periodic instructions to journalists and the widespread culture of self-censorship and direct Executive interference. Abdissa Zerai and Fitih Alemu offer an Ethiopian account of political polarization and its influences on journalism. They examine how Fana Broadcasting Corporate, a state affiliated commercial broadcast organisation, reproduces the privileged worldview of the political elite while at the same time amassing popularity among audiences and remaining at the top of a ‘status hierarchy’ created by the disproportionate distribution of capital in the media. In unpacking the ‘interventionist’ press culture in the form of ‘peace journalism’ that emerged following the 2013 Kenyan general election, Denis Galava argues that this press culture undermined the normative role of the media by ensuring executive probity and accountability as media owners and the political elite collectively sought to protect their economic interests.

The chapters in the *final section* of the book examines new media and emerging professional cultures. Motilola Akinfemisoye interrogates how journalists in Nigerian print newsrooms appropriate new media technologies and ‘alternative’ media content in their everyday newsmaking practices. The chapter finds that although journalists in these newsrooms appropriate new media technologies and ‘alternative’ media content in their newsmaking practices, several contextual factors shape and constrain how these appropriations take place. Focusing on the coverage of the outbreak of Ebola in four West African countries in 2014, Mercy Ette’s exploratory study examines how Nigerian journalists are harnessing the potentials of new media in ‘domesticating’ the coverage of the 2014 Ebola outbreak as an international story. Ette comes to the conclusion that while these technologies offer journalists opportunities to broaden their professional capacities, they are yet to transform newsroom practices in meaningful ways.

In conclusion, it is important to note that while these chapters are far from providing a complete panoramic view of newsmaking cultures in Africa, especially given that the selection of themes and their angles can only naturally provide a limited sample for a continent as diverse as Africa, collectively they offer a rich overview of journalism in Africa. The strength of the studies is also hinged on the fact that they are in dialogue with theoretical insights from other regions, especially those from the global North. The book thus fundamentally underlines the necessity of a pluralist comparative approach that connects African journalistic accounts with wider normative and empirical positions. It is thus hoped that the book will be of interest to a broad range scholarly curiosities, beyond those simply passionate about global South issues.

While these chapters are far from providing a complete panoramic view of newsmaking cultures in Africa, especially given that the selection of themes and their angles can only naturally provide a limited sample for a continent as diverse and colorful as Africa, collectively the chapters offer a rich overview of journalism in Africa. Their strength is also hinged on the fact that they are in dialogue with theoretical insights from other regions, especially from the global North. The book therefore fundamentally underlines the necessity of a pluralist comparative analysis that connects African journalistic accounts with wider normative and empirical positions. For this reason, the book should be of interest to a broad range scholarly curiosities, beyond those simply passionate about global South issues.

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1. The term ‘normative’ as used here is interpreted generically to mean ideal standards and values that underpin and inform the social practice of journalism in terms of decisions and actions taken by journalists. These standards relate to the core social and production practices, and even the very nature of journalism. In the words of Duff, “at their best, norms crystallise cherished values and give us a viable social morality” (cited in Mabweazara 2013, 148).   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Constructivist* approaches take into account the social and cultural realities that impact on social practice, journalism in this case. They emphasise the ‘social shaping’ nature of practices within specific contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This body of research, emerging mostly from Anglo-American scholarship, broadly constitutes the standard against which inquiry into journalism has been evaluated and is referenced widely as the established beginning of journalism studies (see Zelizer 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These conditions include, weak economic structures tangled in complex political systems, failed economic policies, conflict, over dependency on foreign funding, and entrenched corruption and patrimonial relationships, among other factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It has often been seen by critics as reinforcing African exceptionalism which frames the continent as the ‘normative other’ relative to the economically developed regions of the North. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Several editors and ordinary citizens have been arrested and charged under this law. In 2003, *The Daily News’* editor, was arrested and charged under POSA for allegedly publishing advertisements insulting the president see: http://www.ifex.org/zimbabwe/2003/06/27/third\_editor\_charged\_under\_public/ [accessed 9 July 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The metaphor of the ‘brown envelope’ is not only used to capture the image of cash stashed in envelopes, but also the clandestine and informal nature of the underhand dealings, which often occur at a very personal level. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Moonlighting is, however, a much more wider culture in African news newsrooms, it is not necessarily restricted to journalists working for the privately-owned news organisations (see Chapter 5 in this volume). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)