

Western Media and Conflicts in Africa

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Abstract: There is a prevailing notion that the Western media tend to seek the aberrational rather than the normal as the main criterion for the news selection. In doing so, they portray Africa in their coverage as a continent filled with violence, famine, crime, and many other appalling African conditions. Indeed, it is right that conflicts in Africa be covered by the media because people have the right to know and be informed of what is happening within and outside their communities. The exposure of conflicts in Africa is important simply because it enables the international community to render the required assistance in helping Africa resolve their problems. After all, Africa is a part of the global community; and that, the conflicts which occur in Africa may one way or the other affect other parts of the world. What comes out of this analysis relates to a question of whether the Western and the African media cover objectively conflicts that occur in Africa. The theory of objective reporting stipulates that for the media to be objective, they must produce their news coverage in a balanced, fair, and in an accurate manner. To many critics, this notion of objectivity seems not to apply to the coverage of conflicts which take place in Africa. It is in this context that, this descriptive study attempts to explore the coverage of conflicts in Africa, both in the Western and African media, in regard to the concept of media objective reporting based under the libertarian philosophy.

1. Introduction.

Through the years, the central component of coverage in Western media have focused on portraying Africa as a continent that embodies conflicts such as civil wars, corruption, malnutrition, and diseases. This portrayal to the outside world has painted Africa as a place of despair where Africans have little to advance socio-economic development in order to better their lives. Because of this trend, it has been suggested that when those of the Western world read a newspaper or listen to radio or watch television, they may adopt the belief that Africa is not a place to visit or live. The rationality here is quite obvious in that much of what is written is more about conflicts than positive achievements of African people. Of course, coverage of conflicts in Africa needs to be written; however, the coverage lacks balance and accuracy. The word, balance in this discussion means fair. Critics point out that because of the lack of balance and accuracy, the Western media coverage in regards to conflicts in Africa tends to be half-truths, which result in distortion and bias. This seems to fit in what Pember (2003) calls as the "abuse of privilege" in news reporting. His proposition stipulates that the privilege can be destroyed if the story, in question, is not fair and accurate or a true report of what took place. Pember further elaborates that if, at a public meeting, for

instance, people attack and defend an individual, then the story should reflect both attack and defense. A story that focuses just on the attack is not fair; and in that case, the privilege would have been abused. What Pember suggests here is that each side--positive and negative or good and bad, for instance, must be reported accurately and balanced in order for the coverage to be objective.

This discussion brings us to the issue of how accurately and fairly the Western media covers conflicts in Africa. What seems to be apparent, as earlier stated, is that Western media are focusing more on negative news stories as they set the news agenda for public discourse. For example, recently a Nigerian-American born college student was asked about visiting Nigeria in order to see and learn about his homeland. The student responded by saying that he has no interest in visiting Nigeria because he is afraid of contracting diseases or being killed. This may be contributed, in part, by the portrayal of negative media coverage about Africa. The response by the student can be analyzed, for example, through the agenda setting theory of the press. According to this theory, Littlejohn (1999) explains that mass communication is the process whereby media organizations produce and transmit messages to large audiences and the process by which those messages are sought, used, understood, and influenced by the

audience. In other words, the media set agenda by establishing the salient issues or images in the mind of the public. It is in this context that agenda setting theory of the press occurs in that the press must be selective in reporting the news. The news outlets, as gate keepers of information, make choices about what to report and how to report it. What the public knows about the state of affairs at any given time is largely a product of media gate keeping. Within this theoretical framework, the media agenda is established by some combination of internal programming, editorial, managerial decisions, and external influences from non-media sources such as socially influential individuals, government officials, commercial sponsors, and many others. It is in the analysis of the agenda- setting theory that this study attempts to explore Western media coverage of conflicts in Africa in regard to the theory of objective reporting. Before we examine the Western media coverage of conflicts in Africa, it seems appropriate to discuss the theories of the press, and the concept of censorship in the media. These variables are critical because they provide a theoretical framework of understanding how media operate in different societies.

2. Press Theories.

2.1. Authoritarian/Communism Theory of the Press.

The modern history of freedom of the press began in England during the 16th and 17th centuries as printing developed and grew. At that time, there were no laws that governed what could or could not be printed--individuals were free to print what they wanted. This freedom did not sit well with the British Crown simply because the printing press made communication fairly easy to large audiences. It gave considerable power to small groups or individuals who owned or could use a printing press. The printing press developed during a period of great religious struggle in Europe; as a result, it became an important vehicle for effectively transmitting information rapidly to the masses (Pember, 2003). Seeing its power being diminished by unrestricted publication and printing, the British Crown enacted controls over the printing press. In fact, the printing press broke down the Crown's monopoly of the flow of information. It has been said that information is power and that those who have it control the flow and content of information that people receive. In this

context, they exercise considerable control over the recipients of information. In his discussion, Pember (2003) points out that because there was dilution of powers, the government devised and used several ways to restrict the press. The first method used by the government to restrict the press was the creation of seditious libel. This law was applied to punish those who criticized the Crown whether or not those criticisms were truthful. The second method was licensing law that required printers to get prior approval from the government before publication was printed. Finally, printers were required to deposit a bond--large amounts of money, which were forfeited if material published offended the government. All of these controls were intended to make the press curtail criticisms of the government.

This press era in England is analyzed by scholars in reference to the authoritarian theory of the press. The theory stipulates that the media are vehicles for supporting policies of the state even though they are privately owned. The assumption behind this theory is that the media are powerful and that they need to be controlled in order to advance government agenda. In colonial America, for example, newspapers such as Benjamin Franklin's "Public Occurrences" printed in the front page "Published by Authority," which indicated that there was a relationship between the government and the mass media (Jeffres, 1986).

In line with what has been stated, Siebert, et al (1956) explain that Plato conceived the ideal society as one which the state established and enforced the unity of political and cultural goals. That idea meant imposing rigorous control of opinion and discussion. To a large extent, Plato wanted to coordinate the life of the citizen under a strict cultural code that banned all modes of art and even of opinion not in accord with his own gospel. Subscribing to the notion of authoritarian principles is Machiavelli's implicit writings, which centers on the proposition that patriotic grounds justify strict control of the method of discussion and mass dissemination of information as the basis for political action. The stability and advance of this state are paramount; individualistic considerations of the citizen are subordinate.

Thus, Siebert and his associates point out that there is a common thread that runs through all authoritarian theories of the governments--from Plato to Hitler. This common thread was based on a system for organizing society under which the mass media

were assigned a specific role and were subjected to controls in order not to interfere with the achievements of ultimate ends of the state. Within this approach, the content had to be tested and evaluated against its contribution in realizing state goals. It was not the function of the media either to determine or to question the government's goals. That responsibility was reversed for the individual or group that exercised political power.

Indeed, an authoritarian approach was derived during the Marxist political theories, which were modified to take into account the Industrial Revolution and the problem it created. For example, to accomplish its aim, Communism teaches the necessity of setting up a dictatorship of the proletariat through the Communist Party. This dictatorship conforms in theory to other historical types of absolutism in which the media of mass communication have the duty to support the state. The media achieve their own ends by assisting in achieving the ends of the state. It is in this analysis that Communism theory, as a modification of authoritarian, suggests that the media are government-owned and it is their duty to paint a good image of the government and party leaders. These theories provide a critical analysis of media operations in some African countries, such as Tanzania, which have amendments in the Constitution that the government can use to stifle freedom of the press.

2.2. Libertarian/Social Responsibility Theory:

Having discussed authoritarian and communism theories of the press, it is fitting to analyze libertarian and social responsibility theories. Both of these theories are significant in exploring the concept of contemporary Western media in regard to conflicts in Africa. To a great degree, libertarian theory of the press stipulates that the functions of the mass media are to educate, inform, and entertain. In the cause of executing their duties, the mass media would help to discover the truth and assist in the process of solving political and social problems by presenting all manner of evidence and opinion as the basis for making decisions. Essentially, the ingredient embedded in this proposition is that the media must be free from government control or domination. In this analysis about libertarian philosophy, Siebert et al (1956) explain that man is a rational animal and is an end in himself. The happiness and well-being of the

individual is the goal of society, and man, as a thinking organism, is capable of organizing the world around him and of making decisions which will advance his interests. It has been suggested that the important contributions of liberalism, where the insistence of individual importance, the reliance on his powers of reasoning, and the concept of natural rights--freedom of religion, speech and press--became part of the philosophy.

Within this discussion, it has been pointed out that libertarian theories assume that out of a multiplicity of voices of the press, some information reaching the public would be false and some opinions unsound. Nevertheless, the state did not have the right to restrict that which it considered false or unsound. If the state did, it would inevitably tend to suppress that which was critical of the state or which was contrary to the opinions of government officials.

The alternative procedure as espoused by the libertarians was to let the public at large be subjected to a barrage of information and opinions, some of it possibly true, some of it possibly false, and some of it containing elements of both. Ultimately, the public could be trusted to digest the whole, to discard that which is not in the public interest, and to accept that which serve the needs of individuals, and the society of which he is a part (Siebert et al, 1956). This approach is known as "self-righting" process, which is more informal type of control in place of state supervision.

Thus, within libertarian principles, there developed a refinement of the function of the press as a political institution. The press was charged with the duty of keeping government from overstepping its bound. It is in this context that the chief instrument of control is the judicial system in liberal democratic societies. In this system, the courts are paramount since they not only apply the law of the land to the press, but also determine when the other branches of government are overstepping their authority in imposing restrictions, which might contravene constitutional protections. Therefore, courts protect freedom of the press as guaranteed in the constitution of liberal democratic governments such as United States or Great Britain. Freedom of the press is a significant part of the libertarian philosophy that discusses about the relationship of a man and a state; and that relationship is about freedom of information. In this reference, the libertarians opposed

government monopolies of the avenues of communication.

They argued that anyone who had inclination should have their unrestricted opportunity to own and operate a unit of mass communication. It was assumed that mass media would operate in a capitalistic society in which free enterprise was a guiding principle. This suggests that the press would be privately owned and would compete in an open-market place of ideas. Based on this, individuals were opposed to government domination of the media and wanted the media to be free from restrictions. This freedom of the press did not come easy, for example, in colonial America. According to Pember (2003), there were laws in America that restricted freedom of the press for almost 30 years before the first newspaper was published. As indicated earlier, these laws that restricted the press included seditious laws, taxes, and licensing. In fact, authorities' quest to control the press amounted to censorship in which the printers and the publishers disagreed with the state.

This disagreement became a reality when the government tried an immigrant printer, John Peter Zenger, under the Seditious Libel Act for publishing in the New York Weekly Journal stinging attacks against the unpopular colonial governor, William Cosby. There was no doubt that under the 18th century, British seditious law, Zenger was guilty. As a result, he was jailed in November 1734. Cosby, the governor, surmised that by jailing Zenger, he could silence his critics. Later, Zenger appealed and his attorneys were able to convince the jury that no man should be imprisoned or fined for publishing criticisms about the government that were truthful and fair.

Indeed, this was a case about censorship that the authorities intended to curtail freedom of the press. The acquittal of Zenger in 1737 by recalcitrant jury ended the threat for publishers to be tried under seditious libel; and in turn, it enhanced the freedom of the press as espoused by libertarian principles that cherished freedom of information for all. It is quite obvious today that the most persistent problem facing democratic society is to determine proper limitations to freedom of expression in the mass media, which operate in the principles of libertarian approach. As pointed out by Siebert and his associates, all libertarian philosophers agree that freedom of

expression is not absolute but limited.

The issue at hand though, is what restrictions in a liberal society can be imposed within the framework of democracy without violating liberal doctrine? For example, during the two world wars and the recent Gulf War, the media problem was to establish the principles to govern the dissemination of expression, which might interfere with the immediate objective of the government.

The libertarian doctrine made no provision for the cataclysmic effects of the worldwide war or, for that matter, a local war. Indeed, a significant contribution arising out of wartime experiences was the attempt, for example, by the Supreme Court of the United States to define the limits of free discussion in a democracy. Members of the Court recognized that under special conditions such as a major war, the traditional freedoms of individuals must yield to the immediate objective --winning the war. Under this discussion, the U.S. Supreme Court took the position that if there was a reasonable tendency for discussion to obstruct the war effort, such a discussion could be declared a crime and its participants punished (Siebert et al, 1956).

Of course, liberals and scholars critically disputed this line of thinking and thought the Court had departed from traditional libertarian principles. The position of the Court became a reality in Charles Schenk's case. Schenk published pamphlets protesting the U.S. involvement in World War I. In those pamphlets, he urged young men to resist the draft. Schenk was arrested, tried, and convicted of violating the Espionage Act of 1917, which was a crime to interfere with the War efforts.

He appealed, citing that the publication was protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution, which protects free speech to all U.S. citizens. The Supreme Court denied his defense by ruling out that Schenk's publication presented a "clear and present danger" to the United States. This formula, according to the Court, restricted freedom of the press and speech during national emergencies. The Supreme Court's creation was an attempt to provide a principle, which would determine the balance of free discussion on one hand and the restrictive powers of government on the other. Since then, under the American constitutional system, the courts are obligated to determine the limits of free speech during national emergencies.

Libertarian principles, which embrace free expression stress the superiority of principle of individual freedom and judgment, and axiom that truth, when allowed, free rein will emerge victorious from any encounter. Its strength has relied on the self-righting process and the free-market place of ideas.

In fact, libertarian has been an integral part of the great march to democracy, which has resulted in the stupendous advancement of the well-being of humanity. And for that matter, libertarian has been a guiding principle of Western civilization that is being transported to other parts of the world. This theory is the basis for the creation of social responsibility approach to the press. Social responsibility rests on a major premise; and that is, freedom carries concomitant obligation, which makes the press responsible to society for carrying out essential functions of mass communications in contemporary society. In this sense, if the press recognizes its responsibility and makes them the basis of operation policies, then it will have satisfied its obligation for society as outlined in the libertarian principles. On the other hand, if the press does not assume its responsibilities, some other agency must see that the essential functions of mass communications are carried out.

The functions of the press under social responsibility theory are basically the same as those under libertarian theory. Under both theories, these functions include, according to Siebert and his associates, servicing the political system by providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs; enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government; safe guarding the rights of individuals by serving as a watch dog against government; servicing the economic system primarily by bringing together buyers and sellers of goods and services through mass the media; providing entertainment and maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests.

All of these functions are crucial in that unsavory or merely incompetent deeds by the government can be concealed in corridors of buildings that house official documents. In fact, without a full-time corps of journalists for intensively analyzing the workings of governmental machine, people are helpless against

a bureaucracy that, however, well intentioned it may be, it certainly is not going to inform the citizens of its shortcomings. Hiebert (1999) explains that the press is an institution that publishes daily. Therefore, in the United States, for instance, it subscribes to the First amendment more often than do other institutions and individuals. As pointed earlier, the First Amendment, one of the Bills of Rights in the U.S. Constitution, has a provision that guarantees free speech. It is in this frame of reference, Hiebert contends that the freedom to publish is still a privilege that belongs to all Americans without which freedom of speech and the press would be meaningless.

As a modification of libertarian principle, social responsibility does embrace the analysis given by Hiebert. However, as a grafting of new ideas to traditional theory, social responsibility goes further in examining a sense of public responsibility and public service in the press. Within this theory, the main function has been to condemn and publicize questionable practices on the part of the press to investigate complaints, to seek redress if the complaints are justified and to reply to them if they are not. Social responsibility theory was born of several things.

One of those elements was the technological and industrial revolution, which changed the American way of living and which affected the nature of the press itself. This element, which created social change, had manifold effects on the press. For example, technological advances increased the size, speed, and efficiency of the old media and brought new ones--movies, radio, television, and the Internet. In fact, industrialization that accompanied urbanization made possible for the newspaper to have large circulation. Gains in education and in the number of citizens tremendously expanded the market for products of the press (Siebert et al, 1956).

Consequently, the press became a ubiquitous vehicle for instantaneous communication. It has been written that the theory poses social responsibility of the media as a safeguard against totalitarianism. It is being said that a great potential danger to freedom of the press lies in the appealing notion that the government can solve all problems arising from the complexity of modern society and from concentrations of power; unthinkingly, the nation might move toward totalitarianism if it relies

on the government to correct conditions within the press.

The point here is that the agencies of mass communication must control themselves in order to ward off encroachment from government totalitarianism. To this end, social responsibility theory, to a large extent, holds that the government must not merely allow freedom; it must also actively promote it.

The government should help society to obtain the services it requires from the mass media if self-regulated press and the self-righting features of community life are insufficient to provide them. It is in this perspective that as an offshoot of libertarian, social responsibility puts increasing emphasis on the responsibility of the press to expose objectively both pros and cons of issues in society. For example, if the press is one-sided in reporting, then it violates the principles of objective reporting, embraced within the doctrine of libertarian and social responsibility.

3. Censorship.

Central to theories of the press is the concept of censorship, which is defined as restrictions of transmitting or publishing material considered objectionable. In fact, the analysis of authoritarian and communism embraces the concept of censorship more than libertarian and social responsibility theories do. To a great deal, censorship seems more pronounced in the African media than the Western media because many African countries have amendments in the Constitution that stifle free press.

It has been suggested that in the United States mass media probably have more freedom than in any other country. Hiebert (1999) explains that even those countries similar to the U.S. in legal systems and political philosophies--such as Canada, United Kingdom, or Australia--have all adopted public policies that are more restrictive of the press and mass media than in America. For example, Britain and Australia have an "Official Secrets Act," which allows these governments to withhold information they deem threatening to security. This Act enables the government to prosecute the press if it publishes or broadcasts classified information. On the other hand, in the United States, there is "Freedom of Information Act," which carefully limits what the government can withhold. The Act forces the government to reveal information that citizens and the

press might want. In this U. S. Act, the media cannot be prosecuted if the press publishes or broadcasts information held legally by the government. In fact, the burden of responsibility to protect government secrets rests with the government, not with the press.

American mass media seem to be too free in that some propose that limits should be imposed on their actions. For example, there are those who want to set limits on the freedom of speech if what is disseminated disparages a particular group, especially if that group is a minority in society. It is in this context that the suggestion of imposing limitations on media actions amounts to censorship. In fact, long before the occurrence of colonial newspapers in America, individuals were fighting to remove official restrictions of what is to be published. Today, this notion to outlaw censorship is still an issue of debate in regards to freedom of expression.

Beham (1993) explains that either actively or passively censorship in one form or another seems endemic in human society. What seems apparent is that most of the recorded history of human culture is associated with authoritarian control of political expressions and artistic endeavors as the norm rather than the exception. He further elaborates that Chinese authorities, for instance, remained steadfastly dedicated to the principles of censorship, taking control of printing in the 9th century and burning books as late as 1776. This indicates an established record over a millennium and half of recorded government interference in curtailing freedom of expression.

In response to censorship, libertarian John Milton argued that censorship has no historical justification, has no redeeming social purpose, and is simply evil. He wanted the press to be delivered from the restraints with which it was encumbered. It has been documented that laws cannot restrict ideas; the freedom of each individual to know and with that knowledge to choose must be preserved.

This is the basis for democracy in which individuals exercise their rights to free speech. Yes, even though Milton discovered that there are limits to freedom of expression. In some sense, this search of historical background of censorship leaves us roughly where we began. Beham points out that censorship has existed throughout most of recorded history. In fact, it will, in all probability, continue to exist in one

form or another. For example, at times, political regulations have been excessive and extreme. At other times, even staunchest advocates of human choice and responsibility felt the need to exercise caution in what was published and what was not.

It is quite clear freedom of speech and press were intended to bar the government from exercising prior restraint. Despite the weight of such authority, the media, for instance, in the United States in the 2000's still face instances of pre-publication censorship (Pember, 2003). Today, the media face many challenges about censorship. Individuals live in a time when traditional values, roles, relationships, institutions, and even interpretations of history are under constant attack. Some activists attempt to forestall further inroads by eliminating all opposing views. And others are urging the total freedom of expression--but all too often ignore the equally important consideration of responsibility in expression. It seems rational to suggest that today's advocates for freedom, just as often, may become tomorrow's censors, comfortable in the newly gained freedoms and eager to enforce them upon others who do not share the underlying values and moral assumptions of censorship.

4. Media Coverage of Conflicts in Africa

It is suffice to say that the analyses of press theories and censorship are critical in discussing the performance of the media as they disseminate information to their targeted audience about conflicts in Africa. Indeed, scholars today continue to use traditional press theories in an attempt to understand and gauge how media fulfill their functions of informing and educating citizens of their own countries.

There is substantial literature that discusses the appetite for the Western media in their desire to cover conflict events in Africa. This appetite is sharpened by the argument that there is a special Western concept of news, which tends to oblige Western journalists to seek the aberrational rather than the normal as the main criterion for news selections. Western news agencies are, therefore, on the lookout for information concerning violence, civil wars, crime, disasters, corruption, and any other appalling African conditions. The resulting flow of this information systematically distorts international knowledge of the cultural, political, and economic

progress of the African people. In fact, the portrayal of information emphasizes on the negative aspect of events in the African context. Turow (1997) explains that Western journalists define foreign news in terms of conflict and tension; and as a result, people both inside and outside of Africa get views of Africa as bizarre, corrupt, and war-torn. Consequently, this portrayal of conflict hinders leaders of Africa in their attempt to unite their people, develop tourism, and entice investments from rich nations of the West.

Indeed, there are legitimate disagreements in which conflicts in Africa are covered by the Western media; however, it is quite rational that conflicts in Africa be covered so that people can be informed of what is happening around them. After all, Africa is a part of a global community, and what happens in Africa can affect the rest of the world. Without a question, Western countries have provisions in their Constitutions that guarantee freedom of the press. It is also equally true that many African governments have adopted the form of Western constitutional democracy in which there is a constitutional provision that guarantees free speech. As discussed under the libertarian and social responsibility theories of which freedom of the press is central, the press is supposed to be fair and accurate as it disseminates information to the public.

Being fair and accurate in news reporting, is, indeed, being objective in that information is balanced and accurate. Based on this description, it seems to suggest that, for the most part, news coverage of conflicts in Africa is not balanced and accurate. The Western media in its coverage of news about conflicts appear to have taken a direction that is very subjective. This is not in accordance with the principles of libertarian philosophy in which news coverage must be presented objectively. The theory of news reporting requires the mass media to be balanced and accurate as they disseminate news to the public. In this approach, it means that news coverage of African events must be balanced between positive and negative stories. African critics point out that there is disproportionate of coverage between negative and positive news being reported in the Western media. They argue that Western media dwell more on the negative side of African events than positive ones.

This approach towards the Western media stems

from the feeling, or at least, from the accusation that the Western media are principally responsible for distortion of conflicts in Africa. Foreign correspondents lack the understanding of the African people and their culture; as a result, their slant in news coverage seems always to be ethnocentric. According to Smith (1980), this situation perpetuates the colonial era of dependency and domination. It confines judgment and decisions on what should be known and how it should be made known based on Western culture of the media concepts. Indeed, in a situation where the means of information are dominated and monopolized by a few, freedom of few owners to propagate information in the manner of their choosing is virtual denial to the rest of the right to inform and to be informed objectively and accurately.

This setting of news coverage about conflicts in Africa by Western media fits into the analysis of libertarian doctrine. Within this approach, it is assumed that out of a multiplicity of media voices, some information reaching the public would be false. Nonetheless, the state has no right to restrict free speech. Siebert et al (1956) explain that let every man who has something to say on public issues express himself regardless of whether what he has to say is true or untrue, and let the public ultimately decide. It is in this context that libertarians oppose government monopolies of the avenues of communication, and that mass media should exercise freedom without restraint. Based on this line of reasoning, one can see why the Western media act as they do in covering conflicts in Africa. Their guiding principles in reporting conflicts from Africa are based by applying the values and criteria stipulated in the libertarian doctrine.

While it is true that the Western media are guided by the principles outlined in the libertarian and social responsibility, their coverage about conflicts seems to be detrimental to African pride and values. Their targeted audience receives information that paints Africa as a continent faced with grim human conditions. The formulation of news coverage is one-sided, bias, and lacks objectivity and responsibility as it has been analyzed in the libertarian approach. Reporting on conflicts in Africa by the Western media is not accidental; in fact, it is a well-calculated move by the Western world to keep Africa's image distorted by providing information in a one-side approach.

This can be equated to a phenomenon of domination that dates back to the colonial period in Africa, where information trickled down--one way from the white rulers to the African people.

This approach tapes to other main reason for the coverage of conflicts in Africa by the Western media, which seems to relate to the economic gains for the West. Smith (1980) explains that communication networks grew up in Africa as one of the outcomes of an imperial system in which competing capitalist powers fought in order to operate a privileged trading system. In this system, the information network was a fundamental support for development of international capitalism itself. The systems of information were essential elements in the process of defining the relationship between Africa and the Western world by which the relationship advanced economic interests of the West. The structure of this system is still in place today. For instance, the coverage of conflicts about civil wars, as those that happened in Angola or Rwanda, make a lucrative business for gun manufacturers in the West to sell their products in war-torn African areas; the portrayal of diseases or famine also makes pharmaceutical companies or farmers pitch in to sell their products in Africa for profits. It is in this frame of analysis that as the Western media portrays conflicts in Africa, they function as vehicles of servicing the economic capitalistic system, primarily by bringing together buyers and sellers of goods and services through the channels of mass media. Therefore, the coverage of conflicts in Africa is a productive venture to the capitalistic world.

This discussion brings us to the idea of the new world information order. Smith (1980) explains that as far back as 1972, the General Conference of UNESCO drew attention to the way in which the media of the Western world were the means towards world public opinion. Members of the conference pointed out that unfettered flow of information and entertainment from the West to developing nations, led to decline of tradition in the developing world. At the core of the conference report was the commission's insistence that developing countries had the right to place national building as an objective of their media activities.

That meant government communication policies should guide the portrayal of national building in

different media. It was quite apparent that economic priorities and development needs of developing societies should take precedence over freedom of the media. Indeed, this proposition did not go along with journalists, politicians, and media executive in the United States and Great Britain. They countered that the invocation of a new world information order by developing nations was just another excuse to solidify dictatorial power over their people through control over news.

The United States and Great Britain disagreed with developing nations' proposal of a new world information order simply because it violated their cultural values that cherished freedom of the press under libertarian doctrine. To the West, freedom is essential in maintaining democracy in that the press has the responsibility to inform electorate about public issues without restrictions. The refusal of the West to accept a notion of new world information order is partly an economic reason as well as the reason for dominating developing countries.

It has been documented that for developing nations to develop they must emulate the West. Melkote (1991) explains that implicit in this idea was that Western cultures under libertarian constituted ideal examples of what a modern society should be. Developing nations could achieve the same results as Western countries, but this meant dismantling all developing nations traditional structures. One of the proponents of this line of thinking was Walt Rostow, who constructed a five-stage model of transition from a traditional economy to a modern industrial complex society -- traditional society, preconditions for take-off, take-off, drive to maturity, and the age of consumption. What this model suggests is entirely a dominant factor that the West through the media has propagated for years in making Africa look to the West for help. To that end, one can conclude that even today's one-sided coverage of conflicts in Africa has a prevailing notion that is tied to economic gains of the Western countries while creating a dependence factor for the African people -- the model has not anyway worked in favor of African development. Surely, freedom of expression is a significant variable that enables the Western media to generate wealth and sustain a vibrant economy for the Western world; yet, this freedom can, at times, be abused by the Western media as they cover conflicts in Africa. This abuse occurs simply because the coverage lacks balance and

accuracy of events taking place in Africa.

On the part of the African media, there seems to be more questions than answers when one examines the performance of the African media in regards to the coverage of conflicts in Africa. These questions range from the media being critical of some conflicts in Africa to not being critical of others. What this means is that when reporters choose to be critical, they tend to expose those who are not in power. But when conflicts involve people in power, reporters tend to skirt the issue for fear of retaliation from authorities. This is an interesting observation in that one would want to understand this dichotomy in the coverage of conflicts in Africa by the African media, where many African countries have embraced free speech protected under their democratic constitutional blue print. At this point, it seems appropriate to explore the development of media in Africa in order to understand the performance of Africa's media in covering conflicts in Africa.

Africa's modern print and electronic media developed as a direct or indirect result of contact with Europe. Few African societies had a written language, and in those that did, printing was either unknown or underdeveloped. Mytton (1983) explains that Arab traders brought literacy to West and East Africa, but the technology of printing came from Europe and America. This technology broke down traditional oral forms of communications, which played a central role in maintaining social and political order. There are about 53 independent countries in Africa of which each has radio stations, daily press, and television stations.

Their present media facilities owe much to their history. From historical perspectives, it has been documented that before independence in African countries, the press, for instance, in East Africa was a vehicle for the establishment of the culture and concepts of the British ruler. Under the principle of libertarian, the press in East Africa furthered free enterprise by disseminating information to Europeans about economic opportunities that are abundant in Africa.

Surely, one of the factors affecting liberalism was the emergence of the middle class. In most countries of Western Europe, according to Siebert et al (1956), the interests of developing commercial class demanded an end to religious disputes. It also required limitations on monarchical powers and on the

special privileges of nobility. Capitalist enterprise was incompatible with medieval notions of status and security. The free contract became the basis of economic liberalism, which the edge of expansion demanded. Truly, the establishment of the press in East Africa and elsewhere in Africa became the extension for exploiting wealth that bolstered the European economic prosperity.

The major newspapers of West Africa--Nigeria and Ghana--were organs of protest and political agitation. They became more militant and nationalistic in their coverage. The press in West Africa can be traced back many hundred years while in East Africa it can be traced from the middle of the 19th century. The establishment of the press in Africa proved to be a critical factor on the rise of African nationalism. The press opened eyes of Africans who, in turn, were united and began the march towards decolonization of their particular countries. What is important here is that the press forged links between people in advancing their common cause to attain independence from the colonizers. Despite their attempts to express opposition, the African press still looked to the press of Europe as models. For example, Mytton points out that some of the African press carried out accounts of the debate in the British parliament as well as reports on local games and leavened its rather serious tone with Victorian English jokes. The reliance of some of Africa's press for some of its light material on foreign sources continues today as can be seen in many African media outlets.

The pre-independence African press that campaigned for self-government knew what they were aiming for; their journalists, contributor and backers came from the new, educated elite united by common aspirations and interests. After independence, things were less clearly defined. What emerged was that in carrying out their functions, the media also charged with other responsibilities of fostering unity and development of the country. Consequently, this approach made some African countries nationalize the media and some other countries impose the restrictions on what is to be written or said.

In his analysis of the press theory, McQuail (1987) stated that the traditional theories of the press may still be adequate for classifying national media systems, but he points out that as the original authors

were aware, it can often be that actual media systems exhibit alternatives, even in consistent philosophical principles. Based on his discussion, McQuail added another theory known as development media theory. Under this theory, he explains that freedoms of the media and of journalists are subordinated to their responsibility for helping in national building. The collective ends rather than individual's freedom are emphasized. The West criticized this proposition because it simply aimed at stifling free speech within the libertarian principles. Critics point out that let individuals be the judge by sifting between truthful and falsehood in order to determine the facts, which can advance their interests.

Nationalization of the media, censorship, and some other forms of restrictions impacted a lot on the performance of the African media in covering conflicts in Africa. Established under the libertarian principles of advancing free enterprise and free speech, the press in Africa became a tool for praising leaders and their policies. This approach fits the analysis of authoritarian theory in that the press, as a privately owned institution, pays allegiance to authorities. It refrains from criticizing the government and paints a good image of it. Based on this proposition, the press in Africa walked a tight rope in order to prevent retaliation from the government. It is in this context that publishing conflicts that painted a bad image of African leaders was punishable, but publishing stories that pointed misdeeds of others was a patriotic duty to do so. Interestingly, many African countries have provisions in their Constitutions that guarantees the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press. Unfortunately, many African countries are not committed to it. As a result, the press developed a self-censorship mechanism that allowed it to skirt conflicts, which tarnished the image of authorities.

It is in this perspective that self-censorship of the press such as the one being practiced in Tanzania has contributed so much to the foreign press to cover conflicts in Africa that expose the misdeeds of African leaders. Foreign reporters, many times, do not understand the cultural values of indigenous Africans. As a result, their coverage is based on their subjective interpretation. Still, what foreign media do is worth doing for the sake of humanity and for the sake of exposing African despotic rulers who are corrupt and violators of the rule of law. Truly, if it

were not about fear of retaliation, African reporters might have been free to report conflicts accurately and balanced because they're well vested with local knowledge and history of their people. This would have been the right dosage to minimize the distortions and inaccuracies of the foreign media in covering conflicts in Africa; and that, the coverage of conflicts might have obtained validity because it would have been written by African reporters.

It is true that Africa cannot escape the structure of world capitalistic system in which the rich gets richer and the poor gets poorer. Capitalism, under democracy, has permeated the African way of life. For example, many African leaders have schooled in the West and on their return they have brought back Western values that they have been incorporated in their jobs. In addition, African countries conduct so much business with the Western world in that there is no escape from the capitalistic system. In the early 1990's, after the Berlin wall crumbled, the winds of democratization swept across Africa in which Western aid was tied to those African countries that embraced democratic rule. Indeed, many African countries have now amended their constitutions from one-party rule to multi-party political system. Based on what has been described, it appears to suggest that one would think that the press in Africa would operate under the values of the democratic principles of freedom. Yet, this is not the case in many African countries. For example, in recent years, Tanzania has seen some media organizations being closed by the government without due process because they offended those in power. Unfortunately, in Africa, there is constant violation of the rule of law by authorities. It is quite a mockery to hear African leaders complain about unfair coverage of conflicts in Africa by the Western media while they know well that they restrict or censor local media that might have presented a fair and balanced news report.

Ayittey (1999) explains that in Africa the flow of information is severely restricted. In fact, it is most bewildering that the press and general freedoms are restricted in those African countries that have embraced multiparty democracies such as Gambia, Zambia, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania. Of course, under both external and internal pressures to democratize, African despots resorted to various tricks and chicanery. For example, they embraced

multi-party democracy enthusiastically, but manipulated, controlled, or dictated the pace of transition to democracy. They used the press to their own advantage by shutting out the opposition from the state-owned media. All of these factors contributed greatly to the lack of robust coverage of conflicts in Africa by the African press, leaving the foreign press to cover conflicts in Africa based on their own narrow subjective interpretation.

The situation of covering conflicts in Africa by African press is also compounded with other significant factors. These factors include, for example, lack of resources such as new technology, finances, and equipment. As a result, the African reporters are ill-situated to adequately cover conflicts in Africa. The interesting part to this proposition is that many times African reporters depend on getting information from foreign correspondents in order to tell the story. According to Abba (1988), this is a setback in that the African mass media create an outlook and framework, which still promote imperialism and dependent capitalism. The other factor is a lack of well-trained African reporters to carry out investigative assignments about conflicts in Africa. Media organizations in Africa need to find institutions of higher learning so that reporters can be well trained and acquire knowledge and skills in order to master media professionalism.

It seems reasonable for the media organizations in Africa to open other communication channels in order to counterattack the negative portrayal of Africa in the Western media. This move is taking place, for example, in America where African Americans have print and electronic media organizations, which positively display the achievements of Blacks. It is worth noting here that, if African countries take this approach, it should in no way diminished the effort of African media in getting involved with the business of covering conflicts in Africa. On the other hand, in order for the African press to be objective in its coverage of conflicts, African leaders must respect and adhere to the rule of law; they must be committed and embrace freedom of the press; and the courts must see that the government does not overstep its authority by imposing limitations to free speech. It is through this approach that African press can avoid being one-sided that resorts in praising African leaders and their policies. If this happens, then the

African press will be able to cover objectively conflicts without fear of retaliation even if those stories expose the misdeeds of African leaders. In fact, what will happen in the end is that Africa will have achieved transparency, which is central to liberal democracy; and that, freedom of the press that embraces balanced and accurate media reporting about conflicts would have reigned in Africa.

5. Conclusions

It seems to suggest that both Western and African media do not adhere to the theory of objective reporting, which requires the media to incorporate the elements of accuracy and balanced news reporting. As suggested in this discussion about the coverage of conflicts in Africa by the Western media, it seems clear that the Western media seek the aberrational than the normal as the main criteria for news selection. While conflicts should be reported, the approach that the Western media take in reporting conflicts in Africa lacks objectivity. A reason behind this approach is that the exposure of conflicts in Africa seems to create economic opportunities for

Western producers of commodities. It has been documented that, in this context, Western manufacturers appeared to have seized the opportunities to expand their market to African nations during periods of conflicts. On the other hand, the African press, in some African countries, is equally unobjective in its coverage about conflicts in Africa. Indeed, unobjective reporting in some African nations is a result of amendments to the Constitutions, which restrain freedom of the press, impose severe censorship, and empower the government to close media organizations that criticize authorities. These elements seriously affect the concept of objective reporting in the African press.

To a large degree, freedom of the press means freedom to obtain and publish information that is presented objectively. This occurs simply because the press retains a balanced and accurate account of events--both positive and negative. As the Western media set the agenda for the public to think about conflicts in Africa, it is important for the media to embrace the theory of objective reporting that is interwoven in libertarian doctrine.

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