



Barry Streek Memorial Lecture, 2022

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Saving Journalism and Engendering Trust through Activism

Why, I often ask myself, and I'm sure many of you with an interest in media probably do too, has trust in journalists and journalism eroded over the past decade or so? What is the real reason behind the decline which has also seen the demise of many newspapers? Most surmise it has to do with, among others, digitization and the impact of the social media tsunami as well as the ease of the resultant culture of clickbait, but also loss of public appetite for news and enhanced suspicion of those who serve the Fourth Estate. How, why or what has fuelled this antipathy to the extent that journalists are distrusted almost as much as politicians, is up for debate. So, let's do just that.

These are just some of the burning questions that the global journalism community grapples with as they forge a way forward in terms of trying to save and sustain good journalism, the press and its freedom, widely accepted as an essential pillar of democracy. But there are no easy answers. No silver bullets on the way forward. Still I'm fairly convinced – although I'm aware there are many purists among us who would vehemently disagree with me - that journalistic excellence combined with activism for truth and transparency could save the day.

It may help us to start with defining what are journalists and examine whether their role has changed along with the shifting media landscape. The dictionary definition of gatherer, writer and disseminator of news makes it sound so simple. But the craft is about much more.

Journalists, as distinct from reporters who probably best suit the uncomplicated dictionary definition, need a set of characteristics that are not easy to instill if the person doesn't have them already. It's trite but true to say it's not just a job for those intent on making a difference. They need to have integrity, an indomitable spirit, be well-read, brave, fair-minded, ethical, tenacious, caring, compassionate and committed to the job 24/7 because the news doesn't start at 8 and end at 5. They need to have good interpersonal and writing skills, a thick skin, and so much more. Indeed, as a non-journalist said to me recently, they need to be like giraffes, always sticking their necks out. Note I didn't list objectivity as a character trait, but we'll get to that later. Let me add that commitment has to be not just to the job, but to doing it in the public interest as best this can be interpreted. Certainly not in personal interest nor in the interests of those who have captured media houses for their own glory or political gain. Today, a journalist also needs to be prepared to fend off, in greater or lesser degree, the many

pressures – and not least of all state and private owners – who threaten to compromise their journalism.

All the above, I believe, combine to make up an inherent characteristic of activism – which again according to the dictionary definition, is the action of campaigning to bring about political or social change. It's not, as many may think, equivalent to in-the-streets protests, for that's not media's role. And while the reporter reports, the journalist goes a step further, not only writing or recording and editing, but also investigating. In the process, they provide, at least implicitly, analysis, context and meaning in their work which usually has the aim of digging deeper in search of the truth. This, I believe, meets the definition of activism. But there's room in media for both reporter and journalist: people not only need to know the time and venue of a municipal town hall discussion, but also importantly whether the town hall agenda will continue to turn a blind eye to local water resources being polluted by toxic factories in the vicinity.

The current crisis has impelled journalists to introspect about their role and practice of journalism which will need to adapt or die with new realities. What are journalists supposed to be in these increasingly polarized and dangerous times, exacerbated by a global pandemic, is the question many of them are now asking themselves and so too the public. It is clearly time for a fundamental rethink.

As I mulled my decades in journalism in my memoir, *Comrade Editor*, I was struck by the fact that in the 1980s on the sub continent, newspapers, especially independent ones like *The Namibian*, the *Weekly Post* in Zambia, the *Mail and Guardian* in South Africa and others elsewhere in southern Africa were in high demand. These publications regularly sold out and people were hungry for the kind of information provided by largely activist journalists taking on undemocratic governments and the pervasive propaganda of the then apartheid regime. In those years, during the fight to establish independent press in the face of state-domination of the media sector, it probably isn't an exaggeration to say this was journalism serving the needs of citizens, in search of the truth in a minefield of lies. Many of them were not simply names in a byline but known and respected personalities on the sub-continent and further afield.

My own foray into journalism as a young idealist in 1976, was fuelled by a strong desire to tackle the apartheid government, to eliminate systemic racism and oppression, and to use the pen as the means to do it. It's a journey still not done all these decades later because the fight for rights and freedoms, which are all interlinked, is never fully won, and the goal of social justice is as elusive as ever.

My odyssey culminated in the founding of *The Namibian* in 1985, when monstrous forces were closing in on all those who opposed the status quo. Our mission was firstly, to agitate for the decolonisation of then South West Africa in terms of the UN settlement plan. Also, to expose to the world the manifold civilian atrocities that were taking place under the guise of keeping southern Africa safe from the clutches of communism and terrorism. Thirdly, to establish a truly independent press accountable to no government, big corporate interest or political party.

That we had a mission was clear for all to see. But this did not mean that our reportage was not in compliance with the foundational principles of journalism and ethical

standards of the craft, or that it was biased or propagandistic in nature. In fact, precisely because we were constantly at risk of being banned, firebombed, arrested, harassed and worse, we ensured rigorous adherence to journalistic standards and made the facts speak for themselves as the authorities would seek any flimsy excuse to shut us down. We were not unique. But like others, we were bold about what we stood for and our readers could largely identify. Those were the days when most independent journalists in southern Africa felt passion for their craft. Dubbed the 'guerrilla typewriters' as they tackled apartheid and one-party states on the sub-continent, most felt what they were doing was an act of public service, even if they were accused of being 'enemies' in the process.

The independent journalists of yesteryear took on undemocratic governments, spoke truth to power and tried to forge a better world. Journalism wasn't then, and still isn't today, a job for the fainthearted. Barry Streek was one such person. A decades-long parliamentary reporter, Barry was also an anti-apartheid activist and campaigner for social justice working to improve lives in rural communities, and this did not diminish his contribution to journalism. In fact, it arguably made him a better one because he truly cared about the people he served.

Journalists like Barry and others did and still do make a difference. In choosing to be activists for the truth through commitment to excellence, favouring transparency and accountability, many continue to put themselves at risk, and in the process, earn the trust and respect of readers.

As Namibia became independent in 1990 with a Constitution and a Bill of Rights providing for, among others, press freedom, it dawned on us as we reviewed our journalistic role going forward that the struggle was not over. The fight for political emancipation from occupation was in some ways easier than the daunting tests which awaited in the post-colonial era: of consolidating the gains of independence to ensure an equitable future for the black majority of the country who had been oppressed, marginalized and brutalised over many decades of cruel foreign occupation.

A strong and activist belief in the need for media to free itself from the shackles of government domination led to African journalists agreeing on the Windhoek Declaration in 1991 urging for recognition of a free, independent and pluralistic media on the continent. This put Africa in the forefront of the fight for press freedom worldwide and led to a more enabling environment as governments began to relinquish their grip on the media. By emphasising its pivotal role in democracy, journalists helped turn the tide and the Declaration set the stage for a global resurgence in independent journalism. The date of its enactment on May 3 was declared World Press Freedom Day by the UN General Assembly. And last year, the Windhoek+30 Declaration, later endorsed by Unesco member states, was adopted to highlight the value of Information as a Public Good.

Back in 1991, newspapers were good business and the mainly print independent editors and journalists who helped draft the Declaration were mostly held in high regard, at least by the public. Newspapers remained resilient even some years after the advent of the World Wide Web, but come the 2000s - and the popularity of social media made a huge dent in print, breaking forever the business models of old. With the media environment opened up via newfound freedoms and the onset of the digital era, people

became swamped with choices of news and information, much of it questionable. As the stampede onto sites like Facebook and others began, advertisers followed suit, and newspapers began to feel the pinch, impacted by dwindling sales, diminished income and slimmed-down newsrooms. In tandem with this slump came an increased distrust of journalists, helped along, without question, by the ascendancy of Donald Trump and his obsession with what he termed ‘fake’ news, and his labeling of the liberal media as the enemy. Populists and authoritarians in southern Africa have done their bit locally to amplify the distrust, and we should not forget the role of the infamous UK mercenaries called Bell Pottinger who were hired to discredit independent journalism in this country.

The current attacks on journalists also continue the challenges already posed in the early independence and freedom period.

The former liberation movements in southern Africa – like the undemocratic governments before them - were often irked by the probing eye of the media in holding power to account, especially with regard corruption and abuse of public resources which would phenomenally increase in the decades following freedom.

That there is today fault in the world of journalism is not in doubt. We are still overcoming blindspots on issues of gender, race, class and language amongst other things, and are not yet able to produce the most inclusive journalism – where audiences feel their stories and interests are part of the narrative.

We have also seen declining standards and sloppy journalism as competition with digital media gained momentum to capture the attention of audiences and as revenues decreased. We have seen proprietorial abuse of media properties that would have horrified Barry Streek, whose father, Frank, I believe, was part of the Daily Dispatch’s historic management that withstood many pressures to curb Donald Woods’ courageous journalism.

The days of journalists prescribing the public agenda are long gone. They have to get out of their newsrooms and engage communities to better understand their issues and needs, which will in turn build trust and may just be good business as well.

But that doesn’t mean that all journalists or all journalism should, even now, be tarred with the same brush. The credibility of many good journalists the world over is being unjustifiably attacked because of poseurs in our midst. But still we face a real challenge to re-engage with the people by raising professional standards, getting closer to our communities, prioritising quality and compelling journalism to combat disinformation. Also, to give context and background and to help forge public awareness of the roles and processes involved in the work we do. This would enable people to once again value accurate and reliable information, to become more discerning in that which they do access, and to be able to identify the most reputable sources in the process.

Although it notes a decline in news interest in a number of countries, the Digital News Report 2021 of the Reuters Institute, does offer some hope. The pandemic has spurred audiences to turn to more trusted brands, while the gap between the ‘best and the rest’ as well as between news media and social media has grown. “The challenge for media companies is how to re-engage that interest without dumbing down or resorting to

sensationalism, which in turn can damage trust”. The trust deficit on the continent is confirmed by an Afrobarometer finding that overall people care less about press freedom now, a reverse of the situation a decade or so ago. This is hugely concerning. Of one thing I have no doubt: people in general need to care more about press freedom and the lifeblood of good journalism or watch as democracies crumble and their own much-cherished rights to free expression begin to dissipate.

Most chilling is the fact that, as trust in the media declines, so does accountability on the part of governments – and not only undemocratic ones - in which secrecy and corruption are allowed to thrive. How comfortable they must feel in the knowledge that citizens are turning the other cheek when it comes to their excesses; how easily the dominance of the so-called fake news agenda allows them to carry out nefarious acts with impunity. Corruption, mismanagement and abuse of resources takes a real toll on the poor, and leads to a more, not less, unequal world. Where would we be without the whistleblowers and the journalists who uncover the rot, who bring light into the darkness? And what, ultimately, would the effects be on even established democracies the world over if all the journalists are gone and power is left unchecked? I shudder to think of the consequences.

Even at a time when newsrooms in Africa are increasingly struggling with cash shortages and rising threats to press freedom, the level of investigative journalism that emerged from sub-Saharan Africa in 2021 has been remarkable. There are many such stories which have been great reveals. Where would we be without South Africa’s Guptagate exposé, the Fishrot scandal in Namibia, the cross-border Panama Papers probe that blew the lid off global tax evasion, the exposés of Facebook’s flaws, and a lot more besides. And if there was ever any doubt that this kind of journalism isn’t born of activism, we should quickly disabuse ourselves of that thought. Ask any of the tireless scribes engaged in such work about the personal cost of laying bare such crimes against the public interest. Why would they put themselves at risk if they didn’t feel passion for what they do? Journalists the world over are still being harassed, jailed, even killed for simply doing their job. In 2021 alone, 55 of them were killed around the globe, mostly in countries not experiencing armed conflict, and impunity for these crimes remains widespread.

Being a journalist intent on revealing truths where they are hidden, does not mean they are not in search of the facts or doing solid journalistic work. Yochai Benkler of the US’s Berkman Klein Centre has this advice: “Professional journalism needs to shift away from the way in which it performs objectivity. The critical move needs to be from objectivity as neutrality to objectivity as truth-seeking. In a propaganda-rich system, to be neutral is to be complicit.” For how can one be neutral in the face of crippling poverty, spiraling corruption or violence against women and children, for example?

There are opposing views on journalism activism, mainly, I believe, because the word “activism” is misconstrued as being incompatible with the craft.

The popularity of SA-based media like the Daily Maverick, whose slogan is Defend the Truth, and the impact of the Continent, for example, as well as M&G and New Frame, among others, show that those transparent about their ownership, funding and income sources, mission and policies, have not lost public appeal. The Daily Maverick’s covenant with readers promises to deliver high impact, independent public

service journalism against the background of what they refer to as an internet-fuelled revolution which has brought onto the streets the ‘blood of truth, trust and accuracy’.

On the other hand, there are also what a colleague has described as tabloid, flip-flop publications both in the sub-continent and elsewhere, with no coherent editorial position or consistency and those which operate with sinister agendas. Neither will bring about trust, and rightfully so. They aren’t credible, and distrust will mount because people don’t know what the outlet stands for, and so the relationship with the audience suffers because the personality and the conviction has dissolved and taken the trust with it. The difficulty is the extent to which they actively drag us down with them.

On my own part, I’ve never been a believer in the traditional journalism concept of objectivity, because subjective judgement plays a role in selection and treatment of stories, even when adhering to standards of fact-checking and verification and ethical considerations. Yet journalists must be independent, fair, ethical and transparent. Every piece of reporting — written or spoken, told in text or in images — is the product of choices. We *choose* what to focus on, what to amplify, what to investigate and examine. There’s no getting away from that.

And more and more news media have therefore been giving up the age-old concept of objectivity in favour of impartiality or accuracy, which better reflects their role. Impartiality, however, does not mean equal treatment for lies and truth, nor does it mean that fairness excludes favouring the afflicted rather than the comfortable, giving voice to the voiceless rather than simply amplifying the already powerful.

I doubt there is anyone in this room who would term themselves objective, and if they did, they’re not being honest with themselves. We are all subjective, but we can still be fair – and we can respect the guidance of objective conventions of journalism that make it different to propaganda, fabrication or even poetry. Barry Streek knew well when he was doing journalism and when he was doing poetry.

Journalistic advocacy is to practice the quiet activism of good journalism based on conviction - standing up for campaigns for civil rights, for press rights, for racial justice, for gender equity and against economic inequality. These are different times which require journalism to adapt. Society evolves and journalism must surely do too in order to help ensure the changes are for the better.

I doubt that journalism as activism is what is killing the craft or fuelling public distrust, as some may believe. But it still begs the question as to why support for media freedom across the African continent, once strong, is now in freefall. The latest round of the Afrobarometer survey I already referenced, conducted in 34 countries in all regions of the continent, raises a red flag for free-press advocates: Popular support for media freedom – a majority view just three years ago – is now in the minority.

It is difficult to know what to do to turn back the tide and foster belief in journalism once again, but for us it must always be about covering the story and giving people both facts and voice, then allowing them to make up their own minds. Several surveys show that people are consuming less news and increasingly see the news agenda as a ‘negative’ one, and so solutions-based journalism should be expanded to show readers there is a purpose to it all, and hopefully it will spur them on to turn their backs on the

instant gratification that is social media in the main. We need to hone the unique value add of reliable news and informed analysis in a world where voice is cheap and ubiquitous, but facts are scarce in the face of opinion and entertainment, and trustworthy sense-making is hard to find.

The whole of southern Africa is hurting and our democracies are fragile. There's been no Uhuru post the apartheid and one-party state era. In Namibia too, the gap between rich and poor is ever-widening, unemployment has reached frightening levels, corruption is eating national resources, and the electorate has begun to turn against the liberators. The list goes on. So, the choices of what and who and which issues to cover are pretty clear to us as is the priority to get closer to communities and continue speaking truth to power, exposing excesses with more vigour than ever before.

I don't have the answers, but a gut feeling that if the trust is restored in the freedoms so hard fought for, and which people can see as inextricably part of their own, then our democracies will be healthier for it and the media sustainability problem will be taken care of by the support of the audience.

Activism in journalism is just another phrase for passion. Passion to do the right thing and forge a good society through journalistic excellence and by giving people the factual information they need to make the right choices as citizens participating in their own development and to forge knowledge-based societies.

We can topple authoritarian leaders; we can get the world to pay attention to climate change; we can expose the excesses of the rich and powerful; reduce or even eliminate gender-based violence and poverty and help turn back the tide of disinformation – all through quality journalism. And to do so is not about propaganda, bias or partisanship. Such accusations are not even close. It's about morality and what the world needs now to counter the rising tide of voices of hatred, bigotry and prejudice. All of this is possible when journalism is the best it can be and it earns the people's support.

In a speech shortly after independence I summed the situation up as follows: “The Namibian was unashamedly opposed to South African occupation and said it was up to the people to choose. It covered Swapo rallies broken up by teargas and rubber bullets. It reported on mass detentions, and gave a human face to what the government called the terrorist movement. Its reporters were jailed, harassed, threatened and denied passports. Our offices were firebombed, shot at and set on fire. Looking back on those times, we can perhaps claim to have made a contribution to achieving a peaceful settlement for our country”.

I believe many journalists are doing what the late great Archbishop Desmond Tutu penned in the foreword to The Namibian's 25th anniversary magazine: “It is quite crucial, especially in Africa where democracy is fragile, that we become used to asking the awkward question ‘but why?’ The work of the journalist is to help us become more aware of the issues, and those who govern must come to expect they will always be held accountable and be kept on their toes by a critical public made aware by a vigilant, vigorous and free press”.

That much was achieved with activist journalism. And today The Namibian continues to tell it like it is. The Foundation of the Namibia Media Trust which publishes the

newspaper promotes the ethos on which it was founded, and is currently in the process of expanding its work in strengthening journalistic professionalism and press freedom advocacy issues across the continent.

To be an activist for independent journalism is nothing that needs to be denied. On the contrary, journalists should cherish and assert this conception of what we do, both to our detractors and to the public at large.

There are still no easy answers to the major questions facing journalism decades later in 2022: What kind of journalism best serves the needs of citizens, and how to regain the public trust and push back against the array of interests that continue to discredit us in so many ways. We do need journalism to make democracy work, so it is imperative that we turn the tide once again and get back to the days when we didn't have to do much to convince people to believe the saying 'Trust me, I'm a journalist'. Too idealistic? Maybe. But why not?

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