

Dissertation

Introduction

How would you feel as a journalist if the president of your country says you and the publication you work for are “sell outs”? You are called sell outs because your reports carry views by people that differ from those of the President.

This is not an imaginary picture but politicians in Zimbabwe and I should hasten to add others throughout the world now use such contemptuous and sometimes blackmailing language in their quest to control what journalists write about their governments, leaders, and even about the conduct of the country’s military establishment. The common way used to control or even admonish journalists who write what the government does not want the public to hear is to appeal to their “patriotic” feelings. In a way this is some form of intimidation. In Zimbabwe the government of President Robert Mugabe refers to all journalists working in the independent media as puppets of western government. They are deemed and labelled unpatriotic because they give discerning citizens a platform to be heard and do not pander to the whims of the establishment.

In the United States the media there is partially blamed for singing to war with the government of President Bush, Doyle (2004). The US media is accused of being “too trusting of the establishment hand that feeds them - especially on stories of international peace and security. We saw this in their limp-wristed coverage of dirty wars of the CIA in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Despite their great merits, the U.S. media largely failed in their responsibility to explain the true nature of George Bush’s military adventurism in Iraq.” Doyle. (2004 P49). This failure is attributed to the patriotism of the big media houses that have become too close to the establishment and would not want to hurt their feelings and lose big business that comes with this close relationship. The media is also said to be wary of going against public opinion in the wake of a strong display of patriotism post 9/11. This will obviously cause loss of advertising revenue.

But where does this leave the journalist and their role to report objectively in the public interest?

In this dissertation I will draw on my experience, the experience of fellow journalists and research findings on patriotism and objectivity in

journalism. I should hasten to add that patriotism and objectivity in journalism are debatable. But I will highlight the main arguments with case studies where appropriate and also show the effects of patriotic driven journalism. I seek to show that journalist can be objective or try, honestly to be objective in their work or in the manner in which they do their work.

My conclusion will in a way chart the way taken by many journalists who prove that while philosophically speaking one can never be objective they can strive to be objective in their method of sourcing, verifying, balancing and reporting news.

In the words of Kovach (2002), “Are you an American first, or are you a journalist?” And applied to my context: “Are you a Zimbabwean first, or are you a journalist?” “My country, wrong or right”, are some of the issues I will explore and give some fresh thinking.

Defining objectivity and patriotism

For what is the media known as the fourth estate of the Realm? The answer lies in that journalists play a role of monitoring and reporting on the functions of the other three arms of government, the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. It is the journalists’ role to report and make sense of the activities of these other three facets of life, Keeble (2001). But crucially important is the fact that journalists should do their job objectively. In order to grab the public’s attention and interest in what they write, a journalist has to be objective. The journalist has to verify their information and be impartial, fair and balanced in their reporting.

But it is also recognised that the notion of objectivity is never attained in journalism because background, history and the journalistic processes involved in the news gathering process are subjective. However, irrespective of that the journalist should still strive to be objective in their method so as to find the truth Kovach (2003).

On the other hand, to be patriotic is to love one’s country, to show loyalty to one’s country. Reconciling patriotism and objectivity is often presented as a problem for journalists and often was a problem in the past when it should not be. Many war correspondents have been accused of being unpatriotic because they have reported casualties when their country is at war and their government condemns them. But, as many case studies show they are not unpatriotic, rather as I will show in this dissertation they are in fact more patriotic than the official who wants to

keep the information secret from the people to protect their own interests.

Understanding of the journalistic role, objectivity versus patriotism dilemma

The role of the journalist is to report issues, and events so as to help make sense of the world. The journalist does this in the interest of the public and their country. However, while this may seemingly be easy, Kovach (2002), says most journalists, especially those reporting conflict, war and in some cases corruption and other social stories are exhorted to be patriotic and be less critical of the execution of duties by officials of their country.

The exhortation to patriotism is premised in the belief that if a journalist criticizes his government on issues that the government considers sensitive they are being unpatriotic. A typical example is when the country is at war and journalists ask details of casualties, the cost - monetary wise - and loss of equipment and the benefits of that war. Most governments do not want the details of casualties in a war to be revealed while it is still going on. So when journalists report on these issues they are accused of being unpatriotic and to be aiding the enemy. But will they be aiding the enemy?

Kovach (2002 p2), has come to explain the problem of patriotism versus objectivity by saying those who question the objectivity and patriotism of journalism do not understand the role of a journalist. So when citizens, media scholars, politicians and government officials ask: "Are you an American first, or a journalist?" It is because they do not understand the journalist's role. Kovach (2002) says this question would not arise at all if the public who are the major consumer of the information that journalists disseminate understand the role and the process which journalists use to gather information. The public need to know that a journalist is most patriotic when he is being skeptical and reporting on what the government has done or not done.

"A journalist is never more true to democracy – is never more engaged as a citizen, is never more patriotic – than when aggressively doing the job of independently verifying the news of the day; questioning the actions of those in authority; disclosing information the public needs but others wish secret for self interested purposes," Kovach (2002 p2).

There is an interdependent role between the journalist and the public. The journalist does his job in the public interest and the public wants to

know what the government is doing or not doing in their name Kovach (2002).

A journalist who reports on the excesses of his government towards its citizens is not being unpatriotic. Rather he is being patriotic in that they are trying to curb the abuse of power and respect for the constitution. What matters in the journalist's report is whether they have been objective in their report. This objectivity can be achieved by verifying information from sources, impartiality, balanced, fair and truthful reports. A journalist should make every effort to ensure that their report is accurate and that it is set in the right context so that they can maintain the interest of their readers or audiences.

Journalists cannot afford to produce unbalanced reports because they would lose the readership and the support of the public. The irony is that once they lose the public support they also lose their reason for prying into the business of the government which they do in the public interest.

Exiled Zimbabwean journalist Jerry Jackson agrees with Kovach's interpretation of patriotism and objectivity and says being critical of government policy and decision is the best example of being patriotic that journalists play.

In 2001, Jackson founded a new radio station broadcasting to Zimbabwe from London. Her case was that since the government of Zimbabwe had illegally denied her station, Capital radio, a license to operate and confiscated their equipment she could no longer operate a radio station in Zimbabwe. Together with nine other broadcasters from Zimbabwe, they set up SW Radio Africa. It broadcasts to Zimbabwe every day for three hours. The government of Zimbabwe banned the nine broadcasters from returning to Zimbabwe accusing them of being unpatriotic. "They will be welcome back," Justice Minister, Patrick Chinamasa told parliament in 2002. "Welcome back to our prison," he added (Daily News 2002).

Jackson is now in her fifth year of broadcasting in exile in London and believes that the reports of her station are very objective and not propaganda as alleged by the government of Zimbabwe. "There is no conflict at all (between patriotism and objectivity). In our case the situation was like the government had turned on its own people and we are simply reporting to the people what the government was doing to them. The government (of Zimbabwe) has no understanding of our role as critical journalist so they say we are unpatriotic," (1). She said

governments were elected to advance the will of the people that elect them and if they fail to do so it should be mentioned for the benefit of all.

Tererai Karimakwenda, a presenter/producer with SW Africa radio said journalists could be patriotic to their country and its people but not to a cause advanced by politicians pursuing their own interests. "My basic approach to the issue of objectivity is that we try to verify all the stories that we report in various ways. But in our situation it is very difficult if you are reporting a political story which requires input from the government. You cannot get that comment because the government banned its ministers from speaking to us but we will have tried to verify. Some people call us and say why is there one side and nothing from the government. But the government refuses to talk to us so we only report on what we know (2)." Karimakwenda said this made some people to say their reports were not objective because they were one sided but he believe they are because they always verify their reports with other sources whenever the government does not want to comment.

The problem with patriotism and objectivity in a Zimbabwean context is government officials and members of the ruling party (ZANU PF) define patriotism to mean partisanship. In that context they do not want to be criticised and never think they are wrong. Davison Maruziva, editor of the independent weekly the Standard remarks that the government in Zimbabwe wants what he called "sunshine journalism" (3). He defines sunshine journalism as journalism that glorifies government policies and leaders of the ruling party. A journalist who criticises government policies is considered unpatriotic and a sell out.

The chairman of the Media and Information Commission (Zimbabwe), which licences journalists and media organisation Dr Tafataona Mahoso seems to subscribe to the thinking of "sunshine journalism". He believes that journalists in Zimbabwe have to be controlled and licensed primarily because he believes they are confused about press freedom. Mahoso said journalists are confused about press freedom because "the majority of them remain wedded to the myth: that somehow the whole world is moving toward a universal free flow of information ..." Mahoso (2005 p1). He further dismisses efforts by journalists in Zimbabwe to have their own code of conduct which they can enforce to ensure objective and balanced coverage of news with no need for statutory intervention. Rather he would have them controlled to protect what he called "the heritage of national emancipation, to protect sovereignty, local content, and culture." Mahoso (2005 p1) subscribes to the notion that journalists

in Zimbabwe are: “Zimbabwean men and women first before they are journalists.” As such they should conform to the demands of the government of the day’s interpretation of national interest.

Karimakwenda refuses to accept this interpretation. When asked whether he is a Zimbabwean first or a journalist he says: “I am a human being” (4)

However an interesting angle to this issue of whether one is Zimbabwean first or journalist is that one senior Zimbabwe journalist, Dumisani Muleya, news editor of the Zimbabwe Independent agrees with Mahoso in that journalists are first and foremost Zimbabwean and then later journalists. But he takes a different view when he says every person is a national of a country and journalism is their profession. It is the journalists’ loyalty to Zimbabwe which gives them the power to criticise those who have been elected to lead whenever they stop serving the interest of the country. “Obviously the issue becomes complex in that a government in power demands loyalty from journalists when certain stories are written but the journalist’s loyalty should be to the interests of the country and not a ruling party,”(5).

He argues that for example, in 1997 Zimbabwe sent its army into the Democratic Republic of Congo to help prop up the falling government of the late president Laurent Desire Kabila. The decision was very unpopular in Zimbabwe. An unknown number of Zimbabwean soldiers died in the DRC but the government has not made the figures public. Though Zimbabwe withdrew from the DRC the issue remains critical today because the majority of the people in Zimbabwe do not know how many soldiers died and what they died for. The government’s said that it went in on the request of the DRC government to help it maintain its sovereignty threatened by invading foreign forces. But there was no debate in parliament before troops were sent to the DRC. Rather parliament was informed in retrospect and the cost of that war to the Zimbabwean economy is still to be made public. A patriotic journalist would report this and show how venturing into unplanned wars affect the fiscus.

“Now the war is over and the business deals that were being done are failing. The South Africans have moved in and are doing business legitimately. The Zimbabweans are being eclipsed because there was no broader national vision mapped out before going into the war to exploit the economic potential of this military adventure apart from showing up the country’s ability to play a regional power broker,” Muleya said (6). He contends that’s why the press has to know and report so that people can know that it was an ill advised war by the government.

“It happened in Mozambique and its happening again, so it seems like the government will never learn?” Muleya said (7).

Although the government is yet to make clear what happened in the DRC, press reports have so far unveiled serious allegations of corruption and murky dealings involving the military and government officials. The independent press has mostly been responsible for uncovering these murky dealings and in that case they were being patriotic despite that government ministers think otherwise. The independent media exposed the intervention as ill planned and a drain on the fiscus. The economic malaise currently in Zimbabwe has shown that the press played its role effectively in informing both the government the public of the consequences of the intervention.

Irrespective of that all that the press reported turned out to be true, the have been labelled unpatriotic and called “sell outs”. In Zimbabwe the word “sell out” originates from the period during the liberation struggle. People who spied and informed for the colonial government on the movements of guerrilla soldiers fighting for independents were burnt to death using melting plastic paper. The punishment was meant to instil fear to like minded characters and curb spying. So the formula seems to be the same with journalists although no-one has been burnt with melting plastic they have been caricatured.

So when the government put that label on the independent press in Zimbabwe it means they are treated as an enemy of the state and of the people. Now the problem is that to be patriotic is a euphemism for partisanship in a Zimbabwean context. Muleya (8) says it is the interests of the state, the country which the journalist should always think of and not the ruling party or government of the day. Objective journalism should serve the interests of the country and not the ruling party of the government leader of the day. Zanu PF supporters can be partisan but journalists cannot, even those journalists who support ZANU PF cannot be partisan when they are reporting. They should be objective in their reports.

It is not only in Zimbabwe that journalists reporting on a conflict are labelled unpatriotic. Greenslade (2004) plucks an example from history to show that even when reporting that your country is loosing a war when the war is going on it is being patriotic in a context. New York Herald Tribune correspondent, Marguerite Higgins reported the Korean War in a critical manner which invoked the wrath of the American general, MacArthur to say journalists were aiding the Koreans as

opposed to being patriotic by waging a psychological war. Greenslade said Higgins refused to conform reasoning that: "It is necessary to tell the hard bruising truth ... to tell graphically the moments of desperation and horror endured by an unprepared army, so that American public opinion will demand that it does not happen again," Greenslade (2004 p6) said. Higgins's argument was logical in that although she was being viewed as unpatriotic she was actually the most patriotic of the lot because she was protecting the interests of America by telling the people what was happening to their sons and daughters so that it does not happen again.

Knightley (1989) also shows that William Howard Russell's expose of the poor medical situation of British soldiers in the Crimea war resulted in the public donating loads of goods and money towards their upkeep. This was despite that Russell was facing absolute hostility from senior officers for his reports which showed the war effort was badly managed. The government resigned and Greenslade (2004) said although some of Russell's reports turned out to be inaccurate the substances of his stories were correct.

But objectivity may mean different things to different journalists. Evans (2004) says Christiane Amanpour; the CNN correspondent defines objectivity as not meaning treating all sides equally. Rather it means just giving all sides equal hearing. "Objectivity does not mean drawing a moral equivalent for all sides. I refuse to do that because I am going to report honestly" Evans (2004 p. 38-39). Evans (2004) says Amanpour was popular with the Bosnians refugees because of her reportage and she also concedes there was no way one could have been neutral in that war. "In this war there is no way that a human being or a professional should be neutral. You have to put things in context," Evans (2004 p38-39). Was Amanpour objective in her reports considering that she agrees that she was not neutral? Her editor gave a qualified yes. "Her editorialising was not wilful. Any good reporter caught up in a big story will occasionally go a step too far. That is why everybody needs an editor," Evans (2004 p38 - 39)

In a way this shows that the issue of objectivity cannot be pinned down to a few concepts and following a few procedures. Any situation has to be treated differently but the ultimate aim is to ensure that the reporter produces a report that is fair and balanced and does justice to the subject. What is also clear from this situation is that objectivity cannot be taught in school rather it is a skill which journalists acquire due to the manner in which they treat different subjects.

More recently in the case of the war in Iraq debate has heated up within journalistic circles worldwide who accused American journalists of being uncritical of their government in the run up to the Iraq war. In short, for lacking objectivity in their reports. There are some who think the war could have been avoided if the American press were objective and had shown that there were no link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda and that there were in actual fact no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq Doyle (2004), Freedman (2005). The American press had failed in its role before the Iraq war because it was “often spineless in the face of government bullying, terrified of getting on the wrong side of the public opinion, and thus was cheerleading from the sidelines as the nation charges into war.” Doyle (2004 p47). The result has been 1 897 American soldiers killed (by Sept 9 2005). A rise in world insecurity and American and British insecurity in fear of terror attacks.

The Rupert Murdoch owned Fox News is given as an example of unbalanced patriotism. Freedman (2005) said during the recently “ended” Iraq war Fox News referred to US troops as “our troops” and described their battle against “terror goons”. Furthermore, Freedman says most cable networks gave in to government demands that they should not air tapes by Osama bin laden, the man believed to be the leader of al Qaeda terrorists’ network. The result is that when Americans are attacked they often do not know why they have been attacked Higham (2002).

Former BBC director general, Greg Dyke (2003) said the American networks were losing their credibility due to what he said was “gung-ho patriotism” of Fox News. “If Iraq proved anything, it was that the BBC cannot afford to mix patriotism and journalism. This is happening in the United States and if it continues will undermine the credibility of the electronic news media.”

“We in (the BBC) are here for everyone in the UK, a trusted guide in a complex world. We perform this role best by exercising the freedom to air a wide range of opinion and to report the facts as best we can. In doing so, far from betraying the national interest, we are serving it.” Dyke (2003 p1).

But for all the efforts to be objective, journalists in this age often have to grapple with and overcome spin as opposed to media suppression. During the same Iraq war the coalition forces set up a ‘Hollywood’ media centre from which information was managed. Journalists who had

accepted to be embedded complained that they were often not sure of what was happening and relied on watching digital and cable television to understand what was happening. Hammond (2003). Their reports by virtue of being embedded with the coalition forces did not have enough information from the other side. But were they un-objective? Kovach (2002) said that is not the case. The issue is they would have witnessed what they reported and the objectivity would come out if all the reports coming out of Iraq were looked at as a comprehensive document as opposed to looking at one report. In other words, you cannot make a decision on the objectivity or un-objectiveness of an issue by looking at just one report. Rather it's more of a bigger picture that has to be examined.

Hammond (2003) says objectivity is lost on the part of the Americans in that they play along with their government. Rather than reporting the war in Afghanistan American media reporting was more aligned to hearing from the army officers why it was taking time to take over Afghanistan rather than reporting the war. Hammond (2003) further said in the case of Afghanistan getting an objective report from that country became even more difficult because the American government had bombed Afghanistan radio stations and controlled the movement of western reporters in the country. In place of Afghanistan radio stations they set up information centres in Islamabad, Washington and London. The result was that getting the story became difficult and even more difficult was verifying the truth and you cannot be objective unless you verify and report the truth.

For all the changes in technology and also the increasing number of correspondents covering conflicts, wars and interventions by foreign armies in other countries, Kovach (2002) said the objective of journalism has not changed in that it is to give citizens a credible and accurate account of events in society so that they can be free and self governing. So because of the need to provide this information, journalist have to report the information that they receive as long as they verify it and find it to be the truth or something near the truth. This means journalist will not be guilty of suppressing news just because they have been denied access by the government or other officials.

Effects of patriotic (read partisan) coverage

The overall effects are that lack of critical coverage stalls public debate about issues and with it the government ceases to play its role of governing effectively. Thanks to the so many news websites, the

internet and Zimbabwean newspapers published abroad the world knows about the bad governance, the human rights abuses by the police and ruling party supporters that a happening in that country. This will definitely influence the government of Zimbabwe to change its ways because they know the electorate knows the bad things they do and – the good ones as well, if they are any.

One reason which has been given for the continued winning of elections in rural Zimbabwe by the ruling ZANU PF in Zimbabwe is that the people in the rural areas do not have access to independent sources of news because they listen to state radio because there is no independent radio. They read state controlled newspapers which only glorify the government and do not report objectively. The urban dwellers who have access to the internet and can buy expensive independent weekly newspapers have long stopped supporting the ruling party because of bad governance.

Reports by the Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (MMPZ) reveal that when there is no objective reporting governments tend to be brutal because they know they can get away with it. It says reports of human rights abuse in Zimbabwe are only carried by foreign hosted radio stations. MMPZ says its calls for an “urgent need for additional alternative daily sources of information, including an independent national broadcaster was re-inforced by the government-controlled media’s censorship of the persistent human rights abuses in the country. As a result, those who rely on these media, which have become the main sources of information most readily accessible to Zimbabweans since the closure of the Daily News, are in the dark on such important matters.” MMPZ (2004).

American online news sites have lost their readership to British news sites due to perceived patriotic coverage of issues. Many Americans reportedly turned to the Guardian online for news reports on the Iraq war as they could not trust their media’s coverage of the war Hammond (2003). One of the results of poor reporting which is not objective is the rise in the use of blogging as people try to seek alternative authentic sources of news. To the journalists this has got many meanings one of which is the loss of readers. On a positive note it also means that the media is now aware that it is being checked.

Conclusion

Can journalists afford to be patriotic and objective at the same time? The answer is yes. I believe that the journalism and patriotism are two sides of the same coin. The difference between the two is due to what Kovach (2002) said is a lack of understanding of the journalistic role and processes in newsgathering.

When journalists are doing their job of covering the news reporting issues which the government feels they are putting it in bad light they will be pursuing their patriotic role as the fourth estate of the realm to ensure that the interests of the country are protected or are not abused for the benefit of a few politicians leading the country at that particular time.

The biggest threat to true patriotism and objectivity is found in the form of government information management system – spin - and commercial success of those who ride on the wave of popular sentiment disguised as patriotism.

The government, In case of American and British governments have information managers whose job is to refute stories – mostly true – that they do not like.

The Private Jessica Lynch story is an example of how the American military – by extension the American government managed to spin what was infact a military blunder into a ‘Hollywood’ type rescue operation by the army in order to assuage the feelings of the people in America that its soldiers would never leave any of their colleagues behind to be killed by the enemy. The press – British press – finally exposed that the rescue mission claimed by the Americans was infact not a rescue but a public relations exercise designed for the gullible media. It was two weeks later when the discovery was made but by that time it was too late because the public had already been misinformed.

How commercial success disguised as patriotism can affect journalism is exemplified by the success of Fox News and its biased coverage. Fox News has enjoyed a lot of success due to its pro-Bush coverage of the Iraq war from parents who have been made to believe that America is under attack and those whose sons and daughters are fighting the war in Iraq. Their reporters wore stars and striped lapel badges and reported on “our troops” fighting “terror goons”. The result has been alienation of the American population from the rest of the world. However, the problem is that advertisers love that and very few media houses would want to criticise certain government decisions on Iraq because their families back home would stop subscribing to their channels.

So how should journalists handle the issue of objectivity versus patriotism? It is a tricky situation but, except in the period of war journalists do not often have to justify what they write to be in the public interest. But in a war situation would it be in the public interest to show that 1 897 have died since the war started as in the case of American soldiers in Iraq. It is because people need to know the broader picture of what is happening to their children serving in the army.

However, to the journalist who reports on issues that need them to ask: “are you an American first or a journalist?” (Kovach (2002). The solution could be to treat each situation according to its on merits. This means that when a journalist is reporting a story that they believe to be true and which they have verified and made all the necessary check to make sure that it is true, they will be regarded as objective in their work. But reporting a story which they journalist does not know and has not ascertain to be true is not objective reporting.

End notes

1. Telephone interview with Jerry Jackson – founder and station manager of SW radio Africa
2. Telephone interview with Tererai Karimakwenda – producer/presenter of SW Africa radio
3. E-mail interview with Davison Maruziva – editor of the independent weekly the standard.
4. Karimakwenda op cit.
5. telephone interview with Dumisani Muleya – news editor of the weekly the Independent
6. Dumisani Muleya – op cit
7. Dumisani Muleya – ibid

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End