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EDITORIAL

Journalism and Foreign Aid in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces the Special Issue. The authors briefly survey the contemporary and complex relationship between aid and journalism and the role of foreign aid/development assistance in shaping African media systems. A call is made for greater research into the aid and journalism relationship and the impact these processes have on fostering independent national media sectors in Africa.

Keywords: development assistance; media development; journalism education; democratisation; post-colonial critique; journalism norms

This edition of *African Journalism Studies* is one of two journal issues resulting from a two-year long conversation about the relationship between journalism and international development aid. The second of these will be published by the *Latin American Journal of Communication Research* (JLACR)[1] and focuses on Latin America. This international dialogue has been facilitated by financial support from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and Department for International Development,[2] which contributed to seminars in 2017 and 2018 in the UK, Colombia, and Ghana, from which many of

1 https://www.alaic.org/revista/index.php/alaic/index.
2 This AHRC/DfID funded project was coordinated by Chris Paterson and Jairo Lugo-Ocando and titled Development Assistance and Independent Journalism in Africa and Latin America: A Cross-National and Multidisciplinary Research Network (AH/P00606X/1).

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the ideas in this essay are drawn, and most of the articles and commentaries in the two journal issues originate.

This effort has benefited from the commendable desire of the AHRC and DfID to critique international development aid, and to engage tools to do so that are not typically deployed in the development aid industry, such as forms of postcolonial critique or critical political economy. With their support, our UK-based researchers and colleagues from Ghana, South Africa, Chile, and Brazil, have been privileged to participate in our three seminars and other events and to witness a flowering of critical scholarship questioning the role of foreign aid in the context of public communication. We have also witnessed parallel and intensifying debates amongst the media workers in developing countries who accept (or depend upon) foreign funding, and amongst those funders themselves, who are increasingly reflecting on their objectives and what success in those objectives looks like.

This examination of the relationship between aid and journalism sought, from the outset, to generate new questions about, and critiques of, processes that have been taken for granted for decades. We hope to move beyond old dichotomies encouraged by reductionist indicators of press freedom and democracy and allow for multiple understandings of the role that the production of media can play in society. We also acknowledge that the journalism–democracy link takes various forms around the world, and that models that deviate from the dominant liberal model are not necessarily inferior because they are different. We hope as well to step back from the presumption that it is the proper role of media workers and institutions in the North to ensure their practices are emulated in the South.

Our project asks to what extent a flow of foreign money has affected the ability of developing regions to foster a critical and independent media sector. As Brownlee (2017) has recently observed, "foreign aid investment in the media sector has seen a visible increase in the past decade, given the potentials that the new information and communication technologies of the last generation seem to offer in terms of interrupting the state's monopoly over the means of information and offering citizens empowerment in contexts unfavourable to democratic values," but, "not enough rigorous research and scholarship exists about the integration of new media and information assistance by development actors (EU countries and US) as part of their democracy promotion programmes."

Any critique of media assistance is fraught. In the global context of journalists living and working in greater peril than ever before, with authoritarianism and a willingness to persecute journalists on the rise, who wants to be accused of being opposed to media freedom, to well-trained, well-resourced, and ethically astute professional journalists, and to a vibrant and courageous culture of journalistic investigation? Notwithstanding the risk that critique of the status quo gets confused with such opposition, the seminars of this project and these special issues have provided a space to get the conversation

underway. Our seminars have seen journalists fret, on the one hand, that the foreign assistance or travel they've received may limit the stories they can tell or influence the way they tell them and, on the other, that without foreign financial support critical journalism in their countries would be extinguished.

Our call for a fresh look at the aid–journalism relationship starts from the observation that, since the end of the Second World War, foreign aid has been substantially directed at disseminating a model of journalism practice and education that is aligned with the interests of (wealthy, industrialised, Northern) donor nations. At its core, this is a journalism that judges the world against an American benchmark, politically, economically, culturally, and ideologically. But the benchmark is not the United States itself (as Gans alludes to US reporters judging "other countries by the extent to which they live up to or imitate American practices and values," [1980, 42]), but a global order constructed by the United States and its allies which, under the umbrella of "modernisation," established industrialisation and US-style capitalist democracy as universals (see, for example, Escobar [2011]). The accepted mission of journalists discussing development, or living in developing countries, has been to pressure society in those directions.

To this end, donors have supported a form of journalism based on factual analysis rather than structural analysis (which was labelled as ideologically driven). This is one way in which aid has reinforced a particular way of seeing the world. If there are other forms, how will they find an audience—and enter the public debate—if media education and media investment clings to narrow conceptions of what qualifies as "journalism"? Harris (2017) quotes Downing's (1996) critique that early normative theories of the media "served to celebrate the superiority of the Anglo-American models […] while placing non-Western models and communist countries in the least favourable light." The US-originating model of "journalistic objectivity" is seen, and often taught, as a universal value, despite its emergence as a product of particular historical circumstances. As Michael Schudson (2008, 188) observed,

> Journalism is not something that floated platonically above the world and that each country copied down, shaping it to its own national grammar. It is something that—as we know it today—Americans had a major hand in inventing.

Skjerdal (2011) has argued that Western aid has resulted in an Anglo-American culture of journalism education which has proved impractical to implement in African countries with illiberal political regimes. Given massive change in the global news media landscape, especially in regard to journalistic practice, the collapse of familiar business models and the limited potential for genuinely independent "watchdog" journalism, researchers and practitioners need to reassess the relationship between external influences on local cultures and practices of journalism.

Despite its ubiquity, there has been little critical research to date concerning how international development aid in particular and development assistance in general has impacted upon journalism (Golding 1977; Segura and Waisbord 2016). Nielsen and Nielsen (2010, in Brownlee 2017), estimated Western media development assistance to have cost $645 million in 2010, and (as Meyers observes in her contribution to this issue), the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) estimated global spending on media development by member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2012 at $441 million (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil 2015). The actual amount being spent on media development annually is probably far higher, since many foundations are also funding media-development projects (such as the Thomson Foundation, which has contributed an essay to this issue).

Indeed, one of the complexities of analysing the sector is the intermingling of private and public interests. Major implementers of media-development projects, such as BBC Media Action or DW Akademie, are substantially funded by their home governments and influenced by foreign policy objectives, but may also collaborate with and accept funding from non-governmental entities. Funding isn't always transparent; for example in its otherwise useful listing of actors in the media-development sector, the CIMA lists the US National Endowment for Democracy as a "private donor," despite its funding coming from the US Congress.[3] While donor organisations conduct extensive research of their own, they typically struggle to define their own motivations and to establish, much less quantify, what constitutes success (Meyers 2014; Noske-Turner 2015; Price, Abbott, and Morgan 2011). Echoing debates over primary education in Africa (stemming from the Millennium Development Goals' preoccupation with quantitative indicators) where what often matters more than *what happens* in a classroom is ensuring *every child* is squeezed into those classrooms, some media-development efforts appear to measure success in terms of the number of journalists trained (or flown to the donor country "to see how it is done").

While the colonial powers of Britain, France, and Portugal still cast a long shadow over Africa's media (Paterson 2013), the United States and China have done the most recently to shape African media from the outside. While many foreign interventions are small—funding a single investigative news story, for example—some are massive. In the aftermath of apartheid, the United States Information Agency (the now rebranded US agency charged with communicating an external message), and the Federal Communication Commission (the domestic communication regulator), were actively engaged in overhauling and redesigning South Africa's broadcast legislation and structure (Paterson 1994). A 1990s programme of US aid funded policy studies that would serve as the basis for Zambian media law reforms and lead to the privatisation of the Zambian media (Ogundimu 1997, 51). The broader programme of US aid to Zambia at the time was tied to acceptance of those changes. According to Meyers (2014), $15

3 https://www.cima.ned.org/resources/media-development-organizations/

million of conditional US aid focused on the Zambian media sector included "legal reforms to abolish or modify restrictive press laws; the use of strong diplomatic signals as disincentives for using extra-legal measures to harass the press; the ending of state monopoly over media enterprises via privatization and commercialization exercises"; she notes this enormous project "set the pattern for other similar media support projects elsewhere in Africa." Harris's (2017) research tracked how a variety of foreign interventions in Malawi have worked to shape that country's media system. Building on the work of Harcourt (2012), she argued "countries, which are considered 'economically weak' are vulnerable to external pressures, especially in the areas of media policy making." Harris theorised a "forced liberalisation," whereby one sovereign state or foreign donor coercively forces another sovereign state to liberalise the media through foreign aid conditionalities.

The research network project that has given rise to this special issue has not conducted a broad survey of projects exemplifying the relationship between international development aid and local journalistic practice and training in Africa, but has identified three clear research foci which may broadly reflect the main categories of aid focused on journalism. These are a combination of (somewhat coordinated) efforts by Northern governments and foundations to support an institutional journalism that follows substantially American norms; efforts by specific governments, but mostly by foundations and NGOs, to promote specific messages or topics of news coverage; and quite different—even ideologically diametrical—Chinese media development efforts focused on the promotion of Chinese–African cooperation.

The rise of Chinese media involvement in Africa in recent years has foregrounded the often implicit normative assumptions underpinning Western funding and training initiatives. The establishment of Chinese media outlets such as China Central Television (CCTV, recently rebranded as China Global Television Network, or CGTN), the wire service Xinhua and China Radio International (CRI) in Africa has widely been seen as part of China's "going out" strategy to increase the country's visibility overseas. Exchange and training programmes between Chinese and African journalists, university departments and journalism students have formed part of these initiatives.

The very different normative model that informs Chinese media has caused some anxiety among journalists and commentators steeped in the liberal-democratic tradition with its emphasis on "watchdog" journalism. Chinese media adopt a more persuasive and generally positive tone and favour official perspectives while taking a critical view of the history of Western involvement in Africa. This approach (sometimes called "constructive" journalism) promises to present Africa in a more positive light than the stereotypical representations of the continent that have often historically characterised Western coverage (see, for example, Bunce, Franks, and Paterson [2017]). The perception among critics is that Chinese media exercise self-censorship, and that this model is a dangerous one to introduce in African countries where press freedom has often been

under attack as the public sphere has shrunk during recent democratic regressions on the continent. Research (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales [2018]) has, however, shown that the influence of Chinese media on journalists and audiences in Africa remains minimal, suggesting that fears about a major shift in normative frameworks may be overblown or premature.

The boundaries of what qualifies as African discourse worthy of external support have recently shifted, as some of the writers in this issue demonstrate. Both Workneh and authors from the UK's Thomson Foundation describe recent cases of long-term journalist education programmes in East Africa (in the latter case, from the perspective of a leading donor and project implementer). Writing as a researcher, but with the rare access of a media-development practitioner, Meyers shifts the focus to foreign grant aid for newspaper journalists, and the extent to which it has become indispensable in Nigeria. In her essay, South African journalist Mia Malan explores the complications of such dependence.

Kothari, Lemke, Amin and Emeka address processes that are consequences of the contemporary relationship between foreign aid donors and the practice of journalism in Africa. Lemke points our attention to how African journalists describe foreign aid, in the context of one West African country. Kothari examines the manner in which NGOs operating in Tanzania seek to influence the journalistic narrative about their efforts. Alhassan and colleagues similarly employ a political economy inflected analysis to critique the relationship between foreign NGOs and the local radio stations upon which they depend for message dissemination. Tietaah and colleagues explore the cultural diplomacy component of media aid, which sees many African journalists offered paid travel to Europe, North America, and China (especially), to observe or train in journalism in those places; he asks how these trips influence their reporting upon their return. Emeka provides rare insight into news production culture at some of the myriad Chinese news organisations operating across Africa.

While the commentaries and research articles in this edition address many important questions, there are ample avenues for new research to explore how foreign money shapes the African conversation. What, for example, has been the impact of other forms of foreign investment, such as that by corporate or religious institutions, on African media? How does donor funding of journalism research and consultancy work shape scholarship in the region? How do the public regard financial links between journalists and foreign organisations or governments? And how do we understand the risks that come from shunning aid—whether in the form of direct assistance to media and media education, or wider forms of aid designed to coerce change in a nation's media environment? Is media development an essentially neocolonial project or a vital component of peaceful and stable economic development?

It is our hope that this special issue and its Latin American sister publication contribute to a global critical research agenda examining issues arising from the intersection

between journalism, foreign aid, media development, public diplomacy and foreign policy, in their historical and current contexts. With the understandings such research may ultimately bring, we hope media producers and media users in developing countries will be better able to recognise and evaluate foreign media support, and that the citizens of donor countries will better understand the efforts made in their name.

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