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Marie-Soleil Frère

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OBITUARY



Marie-Soleil Frère

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The untimely death of Marie-Soleil Frère, the soft-spoken Canadian-born Belgian journalism and media researcher, who made a name for her long-standing commitment to empirically driven research in Francophone Africa, has robbed us of a gifted academic giant. She will be remembered by many for her kindness and willingness to support others, particularly African students and early career researchers. At the time of her death, she was a Senior Research Associate at the National Fund for Scientific Research in Belgium and Professor at the Université libre de Brussels, where she also held significant management roles.

Frère dedicated her career to improving our knowledge of Francophone Africa in the field of journalism and media studies, which many scholars argue remains strongly biased towards the Anglophone world. She introduced these Francophone realities to the English-speaking academia with several high-profiled publications, but among many, two of her highly influential books, *The Media and Conflicts in Central Africa* (2007) and *Elections and the Media in Post-conflict Africa: Votes and Voices for Peace* (2011), stood out. Frère, a long-standing editorial board member of *African Journalism Studies*, also guest-edited a special issue on journalism research in Francophone Africa. In her editorial introduction to this 2012 issue (volume 33(3), now available Open Access), Frère argued strongly in favour of “decompartmentalisation” of African journalism studies and invited “comparisons and exchanges between media environments, linguistic areas and research fields that certainly show differences, but also many similarities, and which too often ignore one another”. It was this bridge-building between different research traditions and areas of focus that characterises much of her work.

Frère gave many young African scholars, artists and journalists the opportunity to join her academic endeavours, supervising their doctoral and post-doctoral activities and guiding them in the writing of empirical contributions that highlighted important questions around media in general, freedom of press, and in her recent academic exploits, the role of the social media and digital communication. As such, she created a circle of African journalist friends and academic colleagues who will carry her legacy further. Despite her enormous academic achievements and scholarly accomplishments, she was modest. Always.

We honour Frère for her gentle touch, which enriched lives beyond academia. She believed in handing African students, particularly those from Francophone nations, a chance to showcase their academic talents. She would always take time to help them out, to discuss their work and find points of improvement. A discussion with her would always raise new questions and ideas. Many who crossed paths with her can attest to

that legacy of kindness and empathy, a rarity in modern-day academia. In a highly competitive discipline, she reminded us of the importance of supporting others, particularly those with little or no access to academic privileges that many in the West take for granted. She made academia a place where everyone was welcome. She also maintained this approach in her role as vice dean at the Université libre de Brussels, where she was responsible for international relations, a management position she held next to her research pursuits.

Her research focused mostly on Burundi and Burkina Faso, two countries that in recent years have tightened press freedom amid security concerns while allegations of persisting human rights violations, particularly in the case of Burundi, have gathered steam. In her work in these countries, she also demonstrated her activist side. She was never one to shy away from defending press freedom. We observed the uprisings in Francophone West Africa with her, including the unrest in Burkina Faso in 2015. There, she organised events that gave activists a much-needed voice while offering them a platform in the European media. She had total access to Burundi thanks to her network of contacts. Her approach was always to fight for justice and truth based on her observations in the field.

Frère was committed to seeing a prosperous Africa. She invested heavily in higher education in Burundi and Burkina Faso both as an observer and professor. Among colleagues, her approach was very personal, cordial and open, yet she demanded nothing but rigor particularly with regard to methodological inquiry. Her commitment to empiricism is exhibited in her books, journal articles and book chapters. She believed in being in the field observing and speaking with research participants. To her, that was non-negotiable. Despite her declining health, she never stopped working. Most recently, with Christian Agbobli, she wrote a trenchant contribution in the *Palgrave Handbook of Media and Communication Research* (edited by Bruce Mutsvairo, 2018), highlighting the postcolonial impediments facing media and communication research in French-speaking Africa. Everyone who worked with Frère will have nothing but admiration for her commitment to academic integrity, loyalty and selflessness that endeared her to many academics working in Africa, including those in a variety of disciplines including anthropology, history and sociology.

We will always miss her. Our deepest sympathies go to her family and friends across the world. May she rest in power.