



Towards a Culture-Centered Theoretical and Practical Framework for African Journalism.

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Journalism practice and the normative conceptualizations of the role of the news media in Africa has been underpinned by Western epistemologies and thought, and scholars have argued this makes it ill-suited to meet the needs of a transforming society such as Africa. This has prompted scholars to call for a framework for journalism and journalism practices based on African epistemologies. Declining trust in media across Africa, represents the perfect opportunity to re-orient African journalism to align it with African worldview and create authentic culture-centered Journalism that can foster trust in media. This paper sketches out a theoretical and conceptual framework for decolonizing African journalism using *ubuntu* philosophy as a foundation for developing and articulating journalism ethics, standards and news values that are in tune with African culture

Several factors have contributed to low media trust in Africa. These include: Misinformation and disinformation, media ownership (such as partisan outlets), media type (with social media being the least trusted), the rural-urban divide, and the institutional context such as weak governance (Cohen & McIntyre, 2025; Wasserman, 2018). Furthermore, media in Africa operate in fragile economic environments that make them more reliant on government and corporate advertising. This makes them vulnerable to external influence which in turn reduces their public credibility (RSF, 2025). Indeed Afrobarometer surveys carried out across 35 African countries showed trust in public institutions—including the media—declining over the period 2011–2023 (Bouraima & Diallo, 2025).

The 2025 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders points out that media in many

African countries operate in a politically hostile environment that undermines media freedom and independent journalism. Several authoritarian regimes have emerged in Africa and introduced press censorship. Such official censorship and the attendant self-censorship has reduced media credibility and trust. In other countries media ownership is concentrated among politically-connected individuals which often makes them partisan. This in turn undermines public trust (Business Insider, 2025)

Declining trust in media has implications for democracy as it makes it hard to access information and hold institutions accountable.

Research suggests efforts to address trust must include: strategies to protect journalism from political and economic pressures, promote media professionalism, address misinformation through media literacy programs, and encourage transparency and account-

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ability in media operations (Senftleben, 2025). This paper argues that these are elements that can be addressed using the Ubuntu philosophy.

The Ubuntu Philosophy

The ubuntu philosophy teaches that “a person is a person through other people where harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations with others.” A person is socialized to think of himself, or herself, as inextricably bound to others. Ubuntu ethics can be termed anti-egoistic as it discourages people from seeking their own good without regard for, or to the detriment of, others and the community (Ramose, 1999; Menkiti, 2004; Gaie, 2007; Dandala, 2009). Thus ethical actions are not just meant to benefit oneself but others as well. One’s attitudes are positively oriented toward the other’s good and include an empathetic awareness of the other’s condition and a sympathetic emotional reaction to this awareness. The cooperative behaviors include being transparent about the terms of interaction, allowing others to make voluntary choices, acting on the basis of trust, adopting common goals, and, at the extreme end, choosing for the reason that “this is who we are.” These specifications of what it is to commune or harmonize with others can ground a fairly rich, attractive and useable African ethic (Metz, 2015).

It is important to understand the meaning of the maxim “a person is a person through other people” which is at the heart of ubuntu philosophy and which some people mistakenly view as a subjugation of individuality. According to ubuntu philosophy, a human being achieves humanity through his or her relations with other human beings. But this understanding does not need to generate an oppressive structure, where the individual loses his or her autonomy in an attempt to maintain a relationship with an ‘other.’ Virtues to which a person in these societies is expected to aspire – such as compassion, generosity, honesty, magnanimity, empathy, understanding, forgiveness and the ability to share are passed on through socialization.

A realization of the subjective gifts (of humanity) we bear to each other motivates an unconditional desire to view and harness other people’s uniqueness and difference, not as a threat but as a complement to one’s own humanity. According to Christian African philosopher, J. S. Mbiti’s now classic phrase, “I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am,” captures a key feature of this kind of subjective formation through relation and distance. This does not prioritize

the community over the individual. The relation with the ‘other’ is one of subjective equality, where the mutual recognition of our different but equal humanity opens the door to unconditional tolerance and a deep appreciation of the ‘other’ as an embedded gift that enriches one’s humanity (UNESCO, 2015).

As African intellectual history scholar Eze puts it: A person is a person through other people” strikes an affirmation of one’s humanity through [a] recognition of an ‘other’ in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the ‘other’ becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am. The ‘I am’ is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance (Eze, 2010; 190-191).

Implications for African Journalism

1. Inclusive Journalism

In applying this moral theory to journalism practice, it is important to understand that under this communitarian worldview which emphasizes inter-connectedness and relationality, media owners and journalists, would be expected to provide their audiences with information that would foster such communal relationships in society between citizens themselves and between citizens and the state. “That means the media must help them by providing the truth about fundamental relationships, policies and institutions in society (news) as well as visions of alternate versions of them (opinion), so that they can make free and informed choices about how to live together. The familiar values of impartiality, objectivity, independence and the like follow in the wake of this reasoning” (Metz, 2015, p. 83). The media today amplifies our differences based on ideologies, policy positions, race, economic class, sexual orientation, party or tribal affiliation (Bonomi *et al.*, 2021). The inclusive journalism under ubuntu philosophy becomes a representation of diverse voices including those in the margins of soci-

ety and encourages journalists to think about the impact of their stories on individuals and communities.

2. Promoting Democracy:

For the state to honor communal relationships requires it to share political power with its citizens, that is, to be democratic. In the same way, communal relationships can be fostered beyond citizens and the state to include business conglomerates such as media conglomerates and civil society organizations. If we follow this ethical rationale to its logical conclusion, it leads to the vision Clifford Christian has for journalism: “the goal of reporting becomes civic transformation. The challenge for reporting is whether it serves to activate the polis” (2004, p. 249). This is especially critical given that one of the reasons for the declining trust in media is the emergence of authoritarian regimes in Africa which have limited press freedom.

In other words ubuntu journalism becomes the antidote to authoritarianism through civic transformation. Authoritarian regimes thrive on controlling information. This is hard to do in a society where the polis is activated.

3. Transformational Journalism

The media also have an obligation to present content that would enable citizens to improve the quality of their lives. For example, they could feature experts dispensing useful wisdom on areas of their expertise such as agriculture, finance, consumer affairs, etc. Or they could feature articles explaining to citizens how they could become homeowners. Some scholars have argued that if ubuntu ethics and philosophy guided the media in their work, the media focus would be on rectifying material inequalities and on the transformation of society” (Wasserman & de Beer, 2005, p. 202; see also Blankenberg, 1999, pp. 47-48). This is critically important given that around 35% of Africans live below the line of extreme poverty or on less than \$2 per day (WB, 2024). However, instead of engaging in development journalism or transformational journalism, the overwhelming focus of African journalism is on politics (Conroy-Krutz, 2020; Wasserman, 2011). That obsession with politics would change under the Ubuntu journalism framework.

4. Dialogic Journalism

Since nurturing communal relationships is at the heart of the ubuntu philosophy and ethic, that has implications for freedom of speech. That means jour-

nalists must be free to write any information that promotes the welfare of citizens and point out any threats to their welfare. By default, the state must not threaten that freedom since by so doing, it will upset its relationship with media and citizens. State actions that create disharmony in that relationship must be avoided. The media must be allowed to function to provide the public with information that would facilitate communal relationships.

In journalism education, journalism curriculum promotes Western values and principles, which are reflected in the news values used to determine what is newsworthy. Such news values include: timeliness, prominence, proximity, novelty, human interest, impact, and conflict.

Ubuntu news values would seek to prioritize stories that promote values of justice, responsibility, equality, collectiveness, relatedness, reciprocity, love (Kasoma, 1996). But here is something more profound: Ubuntu would not only re-orient the news values, but it would re-orient the journalism process. This is what Christian calls “authentic disclosure” – a more transparent form of reporting that subordinates the Western emphasis on “truth-seeking” in journalism to the dialogic quality of the process itself (Christians, 2015). This would also address the issue of transparency and accountability in media operations which was mentioned earlier as one cause of mistrust in media. Ubuntu journalism would be very similar to civic journalism, in which journalists are expected to spend less time covering prominent figures and more time in communities, reflecting their lived realities. Ubuntu journalism is liberatory and empowers citizens to come to agreement about social problems and find solutions among themselves instead of depending on the political elite or professional experts.

5. Community-Oriented Reporting

Ubuntu’s public service ethos re-orientes journalism from its Eurocentric individualism to a focus on the community. It is a relational approach to journalism.

The idea of journalism serving in the public interest was inspired by the 1947 Hutchins Commission on freedom of the press in the United States and its responsibilities. The Hutchins Commission recommended that the press has a responsibility to provide truthful coverage and putting the day’s events into a meaningful and comprehensive context. The media should also project a representative picture of constituent groups in society in unbiased and fair coverage

of people, views, and ideas in society. The Hutchins Commission also stated that the media should provide access to the day's intelligence and be responsible for the presentation and clarification of goals and values of society (Hutchins Commission quoted in Haas, 2007, p. 8)

Similarly, Fourie (2011) spells out the role of the journalist in *ubuntu* journalism with regard to community: "The journalist is a member of the community rather than observer or spectator. As such, the journalist is an active participant in the community and is involved in dialogue rather than assuming the role of neutral detachment and objective observer; the voice and views of the community need to be reflected, rather than the journalist/news media. The focus of the role of journalists shifts from gatekeeper and watchdog, as emphasized by liberal traditions of journalism, to that of mediator in community affairs in order to reach consensus; thus the journalist is a participant and negotiator (p. 38).

Furthermore, Fourie (2011, p. 37) argues that truth criteria or fact in Western culture tends to have little or no regard for cultural or social interpretations generated within a community itself. Under Ubuntu, whatever goes into print will be assessed from the perspective of the impact on the community; the community should have a say about the final product (Fourie, 2011, p. 37). A little context is important here. Africa is a communitarian continent. Western societies tend to be individualistic. News products are treated as items for sale. In communitarian societies, sharing and conversations are the order of the day. Working together to produce a product (whether on the farms or in the market) is part and parcel of daily life. The idea of communal journalism that is produced and shared together with the community fits in perfectly with the daily rhythms of life. In fact, an information ecosystem guided by Ubuntu philosophy tackles the issue of misinformation and media literacy effortlessly. This is because in individualistic western societies information is shared privately, but under Ubuntu philosophy with its emphasis on relationships, information would be shared, discussed and vetted in daily interactions.

Conclusion

Overall, *ubuntu* journalism puts the emphasis on the community and what is considered in the interest of the community as a collective. Emphasis is on journalism providing "a space for the concerns, ideas and

opinions of the community. The overall purpose of the media may be to play a developmental role in the sense of stimulating citizen participation, community participation and consensus based on widespread consultation with the community" (Fourie, 2011, p. 37). Consequently, the public interest in *ubuntu* journalism becomes an assessment of the value of the media/news report to the community.

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